

My first encounter with Orthodox icons happened ten years ago, when I took a good friend of mine to an exhibition of Byzantine and Cretan icons at the Royal Academy in London. Neither of us knew very much then about the Eastern Church or its pictures. We stood in the entrance doorway and looked into the darkened gallery, with the icons shining out like stars under their spotlights. It was a moment to catch your breath.

From the doorway we could see many of the pictures, but down at the far end of the room, directly facing us, was a magnificent icon of Christ, larger than life, his eyes piercing, his hand raised in a gesture of blessing. Even at a distance of about fifty feet, the icon seemed to be addressing us.

My friend grabbed me by the arm, pointed and said: 'Look! It's Jesus. It's *him*.' We were frozen to the carpet. There we stood, two children of the Reformation, both convinced that we had just met—in a way we could not explain—the living Christ. Without expecting it, we had been drawn into the authentic experience of a tradition almost as old as the faith itself.

Eastern icons in a Western world

Any westerner who walks into an Orthodox church, with its icons, chanting and bearded priests, can immediately sense that he or she is entering a different world—the world of Eastern rather than Western Christianity. These two halves of the Christian faith split apart around the time of the last millennium, and for many Christians in the West, Eastern Christianity is a forgotten spiritual tradition which is only now being rediscovered. This forgotten tradition has been memorably described by Bishop Richard Chartres as 'the other hemisphere of the Christian brain'.

There are Orthodox churches in Syria, Egypt

Introduction

The former Russian Orthodox Patriarch stands in front of the Holy Doors, blessing the people. Leonid Ouspensky, the Russian iconographer, said that 'when the Royal Doors are opened during the liturgy, it is as if the heavens themselves were opened a bit, permitting us to catch a glimpse of their splendour.'

