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# “Overcoming Divide” as a Motif in Eastern Christian Liturgy

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“Before I built a wall I’d ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence.  
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,  
That wants it down.”<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

Few symbols are as psychologically powerful as walls. As limits to sight and motion, they can variously symbolize gathering, confinement, alienation, division, protection, or refuge, and evoke an equally broad spectrum of human responses. In principle these responses reflect the location of the observer with respect to the desirable and undesirable. A wall is negative if it separates us from what is desirable and positive if it unites us with the desirable or dissociates us from whatever is undesirable.

These values and responses can acquire a theological force if the wall is erected within the highly symbolic matrix of church architecture. Thus, as the outstanding example of a wall in Christian architecture, the Byzantine iconostasis represents a particularly polarizing symbol.<sup>2</sup> Canvassing criticisms of the iconostasis to the mid-

twentieth century, Leonide Ouspensky summarizes “the problem of the iconostasis” in these terms:

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The iconostasis has developed more or less “spontaneously.” It never has been a subject of ecclesiastical decree or regulation by any authority of the Church. Nor has it been given a theological basis or explanation, except in the broadest terms. Its role therefore has been quite obscure to many people.... We have reached the point that the high iconostasis, with its “incomprehensible heaping up of icons,” is now regarded as a hindrance to the full participation of the faithful in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Some contemporary Orthodox theologians see a direct connection between the iconostasis and the loss of the early Christian concept of the Church, the setting apart of the clergy in a special category, and the process which has transformed the laity from participants of the Sacrament into passive listeners who are simply present while it is being performed.<sup>3</sup>

Underlying these criticisms is the iconostasis’ role in preventing visual and physical access to the sanctuary, that is, of the desirable sacred.

Several twentieth-century Orthodox writers attempted to supply the iconostasis with this missing “theological basis or explanation.” The prevailing approach theologizes the iconostasis on the basis of the Byzantine theology of the icon and typologies whereby the nave and sanctuary correspond to the proximate and sacred distal respec-

<sup>1</sup> Robert Frost, “The Mending Wall,” in *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1969), 34, lines 32-36.

<sup>2</sup> For criticisms of the iconostasis to the 1960s, see the works cited and discussed in Leonid Ouspensky, “The Problem of the Iconostasis,” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 8.4 (1964): 186-89. Although Ouspensky’s survey is dated, these criticisms have not significantly changed since; see, for example, J. Walter, “The Origins of the Iconostasis,” *Eastern Churches Review* 3.3 (1971): 267.

<sup>3</sup> Ouspensky, “The Problem of the Iconostasis,” 186-87.

tively.<sup>4</sup> Pioneering this approach, Pavel Florensky's influential treatise *Iconostasis* affirms that the iconostasis can never be a detriment to sight since the icons on it are modes of revelation. As icon, "the iconostasis is vision."<sup>5</sup>

Because our sight is weak and our prayers are feeble, the Church, in Her care for us, gave us visual strength for our spiritual brokenness: the heavenly visions on the iconostasis, vivid, precise, and illumined, that articulate, materially cohere, an image into fixed colors. But this spiritual prop, this material iconostasis, does not conceal from the believer (as someone in ignorant self-absorption might imagine) some sharp mystery; on the contrary, the iconostasis points out to the half-blind the Mysteries of the altar, opens for them an entrance into a world

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closed to them by their own struckness.... Destroy the material iconostasis and the altar itself will, as such, wholly vanish from our consciousness as if covered over by an essentially impenetrable wall.... To speak figuratively, then, a temple without a material iconostasis erects a solid wall between altar and temple; the iconostasis opens windows in this wall, through whose glass we see (those of us who can see) what is permanently occurring beyond: the living witnesses to God. To destroy icons thus means to block up the windows; it means smearing the glass and weakening the spiritual light for those of us who otherwise could see it directly.<sup>6</sup>

Here, motifs of concealment and sight are inverted on the basis of the Byzantine theology of the icon.<sup>7</sup>

A variant of this approach works less from the general theology of the icon as from an interpretation of the specific icons typically included on the iconostasis. For

instance, Alexander Schmemmann identifies "the genuine significance of the iconostasis to the church building" in the fact that its "icons seem to take part in the assembly of the Church, they express its meaning, they provide its eternal movement and rhythm," with "'ranks'— prophets, apostles, martyrs and saints" ascending "to heaven, elevated and lifted up by Christ."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Ouspensky's own analysis indicates that the particular images on the iconostasis, when taken together, reveal "the meaning of each area [of the church], and the meaning of their combination into a single whole."<sup>9</sup>

The church building is a liturgical space housing a gathering of worshippers and symbolically including within itself the whole of creation. The iconostasis, on the other hand, presents the growth of the Church in time, sets forth her life from the beginning down to the Parousia. In showing the gradual fulfillment of the Church, step by step, from Adam down to the Last Judgment, the iconostasis reveals the significance of the temporal process by bringing it into conjunction

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with the extra-temporal act of the Eucharist. ... The iconostasis discloses the past and the future in contact with that "to which time is inwardly subordinated, as means is to end."<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, in Ouspensky's vision, "the purpose of the iconostasis is to make the temporal process comprehensible through the Sacrament," a purpose it fulfills through its icons. "If the Liturgy actualizes and builds the Church as the Body of Christ, the iconostasis demonstrates it, placing before the eyes of the faithful a pictorial expression of that Body into which they enter as members."<sup>11</sup>

Although each of these analyses has its merits, attempts to evaluate the iconostasis as icon cannot resolve every dimension of the aforementioned "problem." For instance, Florensky's treatment adequately addresses the issue of sight (a concern compatible with the visual character of the icon), but leaves the issues of obstructed

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<sup>4</sup> Various typologies fitting this pattern appear in Greek sources, including the bipartite church as a symbol of the invisible and the sensible world, Christ as two natures, and the human as body and soul (e.g., in Maximos Confessor, *Mystagogy*, 3-4 and St. Symeon of Thessalonica, *Explanation of the Divine Temple*). Florensky's *Iconostasis*, which develops the theology of the icon and applies it to the iconostasis, has helped popularize the scheme that identifies the altar and nave with "the visible and invisible worlds" (P. A. Florensky, *Iconostasis* [Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996], 60-63). Ouspensky, "The Problem of the Iconostasis," 210-11, assumes a "time"- "eternity" scheme.

<sup>5</sup> Florensky, *Iconostasis*, 62.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Quénot represents a nearly identical view, arguing that only the iconostasis situates "on our human, visual level" the "mystery perceived not by human eyes." Quénot explicitly identifies his approach as one of re-evaluating "the iconostasis ... in terms of the theology of the icon" (Michael Quénot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom* [Crestwood, NY.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1991], 47-48).

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachur (Crestwood, NY.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ouspensky, "The Problem of the Iconostasis," 211. Ouspensky also discusses the iconostasis in Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, vol. 2, trans. Anthony Gythiel and Elizabeth Meyendorff (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), 275ff.

<sup>10</sup> Ouspensky, "The Problem of the Iconostasis," 210.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

movement and physical division<sup>12</sup> largely untouched. These omissions betray the

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fact that the iconostasis is not only icon but also “stasis,” wall, its iconography having developed as a secondary elaboration of an existing sanctuary barrier (the tem-  
plon).<sup>13</sup> As sanctuary barrier, the iconostasis stands par-

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<sup>12</sup> The premise that the iconostasis is inherently “divisive” finds a critic in Schmemmann, who dismisses “a division” between sanctuary and nave. Observing that “the Church’s liturgical tradition only knows the consecration of a temple and an altar table,” and not the “consecration of a sanctuary apart from the nave,” he concludes, “the *whole* church is thus ‘sealed’ as a sanctuary, a holy place” (Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 21-22). Thus, the doors into the nave— not the doors into the sanctuary— are the critical passage into “heaven on earth” and into the “kingdom”; in earlier centuries they were called the Royal Doors, and were the focus of the liturgical entrances (21-22, 59). These entrances, now fossilized in the Little and Great Entrance, once underscored the spiritual identity of the entire assembly: “the altar is the symbol of Christ and Christ’s kingdom.... The entrance, the drawing near to the altar, is always an *ascent*. In it the Church ascends to the place where her genuine ‘life is hid with Christ in God.’ She ascends to heaven, where the eucharist is celebrated.” (42) When, in later centuries, the concept of an “inner *sanctuary*” arose under the influence of myste-  
riological theology, the entrances came to be performed at the boundary of sanctuary and nave.

This model raises important questions about the degree to which one should distinguish sanctuary from nave in terms of “sanctity”; it also recovers “entrance” as a controlling theme of Byzantine liturgy. Nevertheless, it intentionally departs from the synchronic facts of the rite, partially disavowing the present arrangement and symbolism of the sanctuary, iconostasis, and royal doors (the latter term now used for the middle gates of the iconostasis, also known as the “Beautiful Gate”). Therefore, it has limited usefulness to a discussion of the modern sign value of all three. (For instance, Schmemmann’s lament that the repositioning and clericalization of the entrances “weakened the perception and experience of the ‘assembly as the Church’ itself as the entrance and ascent of the Church, the people of God, to the heavenly sanctuary” [59], betrays a shift in sign value.) Accordingly, our analysis cannot commit to Schmemmann’s model, but will work from the synchronic facts of Byzantine liturgy. It will assume, with most modern commentators, that the iconostasis establishes a true and controversial division between sanctuary and nave, in which the former is the privileged space. It is not necessary here to establish the degree to which the nave should be considered “sacred” or “profane” vis-a-vis the more privileged sanctuary. Such a discussion lies outside the scope of this paper and is rendered moot by the motif of “overcoming divide” developed here. The nave, whatever its status at the beginning of the liturgy, acquires a share in the sanctity of the sanctuary by the liturgy’s conclusion.

<sup>13</sup> For the evolution of the iconostasis, see: A. W. Epstein, “The Middle-Byzantine Sanctuary Barrier: Templon or Iconostasis?,” *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 134 (1981), 1-28; Walter, “The Origins of the Iconostasis,” 251-67; Robert F. Taft, “The Decline of Communion in Byzantium and the Distancing of the Congregation from the Liturgical Action: Cause, Effect, or Neither?,” in *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, ed. Sharon E. J. Gerstel (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2006); Sharon E. J. Gerstel, “An Alternative View of the Late Byzantine Sanctuary Screen,” in *Thresholds of the Sacred*, 135-62; Robert M. Ari-  
da, “Another Look at the Solid Iconostasis in the Russian Orthodox Church,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 52.3-4 (2008): 339-66;

allel to homologous obstructions found across the Christian East (e.g., sanctuary curtains, screens) and, with them, shares a basic set of problematic characteristics and effects: obstruction, division of the assembly, and so forth.

A shared problem calls for a shared solution. A common approach to these sanctuary barriers is needed— a model that broadly addresses their shared problems and distills their essential significance, but is flexible enough to accommodate the distinct qualities of each (i.e., their respective histories, nature, use, patristic interpretations, etc.). The theology of the icon cannot address the basic problems of sanctuary enclosure since it is rooted in a distinct feature (viz., the icon) of a particular barrier (the iconostasis); it does not speak to that general, and historically primary, phenomenon.

As an alternative point of departure, this paper will examine the use of the sanctuary curtain (or veil) in the West Syriac rite,<sup>14</sup> perhaps the earliest extant obstruction. The later discussion of sanctuary barriers in the East Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, and Byzantine rites will be undertaken in conversation with the conclusions reached after an analysis of the West Syriac rite. Especially in an effort to represent modern thinking on the issue of sanctuary obstructions and to highlight approaches to catechizing the faithful on the meaning of these barriers, this study will actively reference twentieth century, lay-oriented commentaries. Nevertheless, the patristic sources underlying these interpretations, as well as modern scholarly treatments of the same, will receive due (and in many instances, exclusive) attention.

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## II. The West Syriac Sanctuary Veil

By the fourth century, the West Syriac rite introduced into worship the use of a silk veil.<sup>15</sup> Images of the Spirit descending at the moment of consecration and accounts

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and the literature cited in each. These studies discredit attempts to establish the primacy of icons in the iconostasis’ development, such as Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> The West Syriac rite is chiefly represented by the Syriac Orthodox Church and its derivative communities: e.g., the Orthodox churches of India, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. The Maronite Catholic Church also preserves the West Syriac heritage.

<sup>15</sup> Taft, “The Decline of Communion,” 35, 49; see pp. 40-44 for a synopsis of patristic descriptions of curtained sanctuaries in late antiquity and a bibliography. A forthcoming paper by Michael Daniel Findikyan also extensively catalogues relevant bibliography on the use and history of the sanctuary curtain in various Christian traditions, especially the Armenian rite (notes 3-42 of “Hanging by a Thread: The Closed Curtain During Great Lent in the Armenian Church,” forthcoming in *St. Nersess Theological Review*).

of miraculous veilings of the altar by curtains of light likely encouraged its installation.<sup>16</sup> These images, in turn, echoed patristic descriptions of the consecration, and sacrament itself, as “awful,” “terrifying” and “fearful,” ideas that had taken particular hold in Syriac devotion of the period.<sup>17</sup>

The veil which hid the sanctuary during the eucharist in the Syriac churches is the natural product of this frame of mind. “Liturgy” is becoming the special function of the clergy alone, for their sacred character protects them in the “numinous” presence of the sacrament, charged as it is with “terrifying” power. The “profane” laity have no such safeguard, and therefore the veil was introduced, to hide them from it rather than it from them.<sup>18</sup>

In this concept, the sanctuary (or chancel) is identified with the sacred, which following Semitic modes of thought, is intrinsically dangerous to those who move in profane space.<sup>19</sup> Access to the mysteries is limited for those unprepared for the encounter.

Even the earliest patristic references to the veil coordinate this sacred-profane distinction with a heaven-earth typology. Moses Bar Kepha (d. 903), who penned perhaps the most significant liturgical commentary on the West Syriac rite, “The Explanation of the Mysteries of the Oblation,”<sup>20</sup> refers to the sanctuary as “the holy of holies,” ascribing to it the biblical name for the celestial throne-room of God (cf. Heb 9:3, 7, 24).<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the veil represents the threshold of this

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space. Building on a seminal fifth-century Syriac commentary on the eucharistic liturgy,<sup>22</sup> George, bishop of the Arabs (d. 724), writes: “the veils, or curtains, of the sanctuary are a symbol of the screen which is between us

and the hiddenness of that heavenly place.”<sup>23</sup> In this system, the opening of the veil represents an opening of heaven to the earth, as in John Chrysostom’s Antiochene homilies: “when thou beholdest the curtains drawn up, then imagine that the Heavens are let down from above, and that the Angels are descending!”<sup>24</sup> Modern interpreters of the West Syriac Qurbana share this understanding.<sup>25</sup>

*Mutatis mutandis*, those within the sanctuary embody heavenly identities and roles, as in this passage from Bar Kepha:

The rank of deacons is the order of angels, for they perform the service of the cherubim, and of the seraphim which with their wings cover the altar {by holding” the *marvahtso*, the liturgical fans]: not that they may drive away flies, but that they may not suffer anything to approach it which is not permitted (to do so). For it is said: “The likeness of what is above are the things which are below.” ... And as the priestly Psalmist says: “He makes his angels spirit, his ministers (or deacons) burning fire”; and: “The ministers that do His will.”<sup>26</sup>

The theme of “likeness” proposes that earthly worship follows celestial patterns. In the thought of ancient West Syriac commentaries, a true correspondence exists between the heavenly realities and the structure of the church. Naturally, this corresponding set finds its summit in the priest, who, according to Bar Kepha, stands “in the place of Christ” as “a mediator between God and men,” consecrating communion as Christ did at the last supper.<sup>27</sup>

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## 1. Use of the Sanctuary Veil

Modern catechesis on the West Syriac Qurbana has established relatively fixed interpretations for every open-

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<sup>16</sup> Taft, “The Decline of Communion,” 40-41. A fuller discussion of these accounts occurs in Deroche, “Representations de l’eucharistie dans la haute époque Byzantine,” in *Melanges Gilbert Dagron, Travaux et Memoires* 14 (Paris: Association des Amis du Centre d’Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, 2002), 167-80.

<sup>17</sup> Gregory Dix, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1960), 480.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 479.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>20</sup> Baby Varghese, *West Syrian Liturgical Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 27-29.

<sup>21</sup> Moses Bar Kepha, “The Exposition of Moses Bar Kepha that is the Explanation of the Mysteries of the Oblation,” in *Two Commentaries on the Jacobite Liturgy*, trans. R. H. Connolly and H. W. Codrington (Oxford: Williams and Norgate, 1913), 67.

<sup>22</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, “An Early Syriac Commentary on the Liturgy,” in *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 391; pages 387-403 represent a full discussion of this source and its later influence.

<sup>23</sup> George of the Arabs, “An Exposition of the Mysteries of the Church made by a Certain Bishop Named George,” in *Two Commentaries on the Jacobite Liturgy*, 17. Bishop George incorporates material both from the anonymous fifth century commentary as well as from the *Ecclésiastical Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius (see Varghese, *West Syrian Liturgical Theology*, 23).

<sup>24</sup> Chrysostom, *Third Homily on Ephesians*; English translation in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, first series, vol. 13 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), 64.

<sup>25</sup> “The curtain hiding the sanctuary is the symbol of the sky separating heaven and earth. The Madbaha [sanctuary] signifies heaven and the unveiling of the Madbaha denotes the opening of heaven” (Mathews Mar Barnabas Metropolitan, *A Devotional Study of the Holy Qurbana of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church [India]* [Bellerose, NY: Indian Orthodox Church Center, 1999], 41.)

<sup>26</sup> Moses Bar Kepha, “Exposition,” 35-36.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

ing and closing of the sanctuary veil, with each corresponding to an event in salvation history.<sup>28</sup>

### **a. Pre-Anaphora**

The awakening rite of the West Syriac liturgy commences with the opening of the sanctuary veil to expose the altar in the sanctuary. This first opening of the veil symbolizes the descent of Christ into the world in his incarnation and birth:

When the curtain is drawn aside, it symbolizes the opening of heaven. The birth and baptism of our Lord are commemorated at this time. The priest says, "Mary who brought Thee forth and John who baptized Thee, shall be supplicants on our behalf, have mercy on us." This is followed by a hymn sung by the priest and the whole congregation. This reminds us of the song sung by the angels at the time of the birth of our Lord.... The deacon with a lighted candle goes in front of the priest. Here the priest represents Jesus Christ, and the deacon represents John the Baptist, the forerunner of our Lord. Marvahas are shaken to show the fluttering of the wings of the angels. In the song sung at the beginning of the Holy Qurbana, the mystery of the incarnation is described saying that without change, the Son became man, continuing His eternal glory and His position in the Holy Trinity,<sup>29</sup>

The sanctuary veil remains open throughout the first half of the Qurbana and the beginning of the anaphora. The prominence of the lessons and gospel throughout this portion of the liturgy evokes the public preaching of Christ and his earthly ministry.<sup>30</sup>

### **b. Fraction**

As the anaphora begins, the church enters into the mystery of Christ's passion.

<sup>28</sup> These will be explored with frequent reference to the lay-oriented liturgical commentaries of three Indian theologians and clerics: Mathews Mar Barnabas, former Metropolitan of the Northeast American Diocese of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (Mathews Mar Barnabas, *A Devotional Study of the Holy Qurbana*, 1999); Dr. Fr. K. Mani Rajan, whose work was approved by the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch (K. Mani Rajan, *Queen of the Sacraments* [Kollayam: Travancore Syriac Orthodox Publishers, 1991]); and Fr. Givergis Paniker Karachil, a leading theologian in the early decades of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church (Givergis Paniker Karachil, *The Holy Qurbano in the Syro-Malankara Church*, ed. Thomas Paniker [Kottayam: SEERI, 1991]). Additional reference will be made to *The Living Sacrifice* (originally published in Malayalam as *Jeevanulla Bali*), a pew book popular in Malankara Orthodox churches in India and the United States, and used at the Malayakurissu Dayara to train seminarians (c. K. Varghese, *The Living Sacrifice: The Holy Qurbanakramam*, 11th ed. [Pandalam: Thuruthel Press and Book Depot, 2011]).

<sup>29</sup> Mathews Mar Barnabas, *Study of the Holy Qurbana*, 79-80.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

The first veiling of significance occurs after the consecration of the eucharist and

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before its fraction. Across Christianity, the breaking of the eucharistic bread is associated with the suffering and crucifixion of Christ, a connection suggested in the very words of the institution: "This is my body, which for you and for many is broken and given for the remission of sins and for eternal life."<sup>31</sup> Thus, Bar Kepha comments: "[the priest] takes some of the *perista* [host] in his hands. And whereas he breaks it in two, he shews that God the Word truly suffered in the flesh and was sacrificed and broken on the cross."<sup>32</sup> In the modern West Syriac rite, an intricate ritual, guided by prayers ascribed to Dionysius Bar Salibi (d. 1171), links descriptions of Christ's wounding to acts such as cleaving the host along the center and splotching with wine at five points.<sup>33</sup>

In line with this tradition, the veiling at the fraction symbolizes the gloom of the crucifixion, "when the earth was engulfed in darkness [Lk. 23:44]."<sup>34</sup> Tellingly, the congregation loses its sight of heaven precisely at the moment it loses Christ to death. If at the beginning of the liturgy the birth of Christ provided sight of heaven (represented by the opening of the veil), his death interrupts that access.

### **c. Commixture**

As in other Christian traditions, the consignation and commixture that follow the fraction corresponds to another moment in the Christ-event, namely, the resurrection.<sup>35</sup> As the separation of the emblems of body and blood is highly symbolic of death (i.e., the loss of blood), contact between the two represents a reversal of death,

<sup>31</sup> Anaphora of St. James. English translation: F. E. Brightman, *Eastern Liturgies* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2004), 87. A sampling of Western, Byzantine, and Syriac reflections on the fraction exists in Robert F. Taft, *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, vol. 5: *The Precommunion Rites* (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 2000), 371-73.

<sup>32</sup> Moses Bar Kepha, *Exposition*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Rajan, *Queen of the Sacraments*, 138-39.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 138. By veiling the chancel, the West Syriac rite restores an awareness that the crucifixion was not a seen event but one enshrouded by darkness. The irony of veiling the liturgical reenactment of the crucifixion cannot be understated. Among Christians, the crucifixion has an unrivaled visual power. The form of the cross (and corpus) is one of the most prominent motifs of Christian iconography and symbolism; furthermore, mental contemplation of the crucifixion plays a prominent role in (especially Western) devotion and mysticism.

<sup>35</sup> For Byzantine sources, see Taft, *The Precommunion Rites*, 421-25. For East Syriac sources, see Pauly Maniyattu, *Heaven on Earth: The Theology of Liturgical Spacetime in the East Syrian Qurbana* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogan, 1995), 257-58.

as in Bar Kepha: "Again, whereas [the priest] brings some of the blood and signs the body, he makes a union of the soul with the body; and he shews that after the soul of the Word was separated from His body, His soul returned and was united to His body. . . . as it is written: 'The soul of all flesh is in the blood [Lev. 17: 11].'"<sup>36</sup> At this point, the priest whispers the words "the third day He rose again

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from the sepulchre" while "raising the host to symbolize the resurrection."<sup>37</sup> The ringing of a small bell alerts the congregation on the other side of the veil of this moment.<sup>38</sup>

#### **d. Elevation**

At the conclusion of these prayers, "the veil concealing the sanctuary is withdrawn ... to symbolize the days before the Pentecost, when the resurrected Christ appeared to His disciples several times."<sup>39</sup> Christ is again manifest, restoring access to heavenly realities. The Lord's Prayer and Prayer over Bowed Heads are intoned. This time of vision is fleeting, however. A triple blessing with the mysteries recalls the "blessing that Christ gave His disciples before His ascension: 'and he lifted up his hands and blessed them. And it came about that while He was blessing them, He parted from them' (Luke 24:50, 51)."<sup>40</sup> The departure of Christ in his ascension is then symbolized in the elevation of the mysteries:

At this all look up to the mysteries with fear and trembling, they look upward as did the disciples when Christ ascended into heaven. The elevation of the mysteries is a type of the ascension of Christ. ... The two subdeacons holding candles on each side of the altar represent two men in white robes who stood at the scene of ascension (Acts 1: 10). During the elevation of the mysteries we witness Christ the High Priest entering the Holy Place with his own blood, securing an eternal redemption (Heb 9:11-12).<sup>41</sup>

#### **e. Communion**

In the ascension, the church again loses the immediate presence of Christ. Therefore, after a series of *kukilions* (cycles of hymns), the sanctuary veil is again drawn:

The priest turns to the west and asks for the intercession of the congregation, saying: "my brethren and my beloved pray for me." The veil is then pulled across the sanctuary to symbolize the age in which the Church awaits the second coming of our Lord.<sup>42</sup>

The curtain as the symbol of "the hiddenness of that heavenly place" is shut to represent Christ's entrance into heaven and subsequent hiddenness from humanity. It is this portion of the liturgy, then, that most directly corresponds to the present condition of the church—a condition marked by renewed absence, loss, and eager

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expectation of the second coming. Behind the curtain, this portion of the liturgy is characterized by the priest's consumption of the eucharistic gifts and their distribution to all within the sanctuary.

#### **f. Distribution**

After all within the sanctuary have received communion, the veil is again withdrawn, symbolizing the final, climactic revelation of Christ from the heavens:

At the shout of Hallelujah, the sanctuary is again unveiled as if the door of heaven is opened for the second coming of Christ. The holy mysteries are held up before the people. . . . It is a kind of solemn invitation to the people to approach the Table of Life for Communion.<sup>43</sup>

The priest then proceeds west in a procession which signifies the anticipated second coming of our Lord (from the East): "For just as lightning comes from the East, and flashes even to the West, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be" [Matthew 24:27]. ... The accompanying deacons with lighted candles, *marvahtso* [liturgical fans], and bells represent the tumultuous second coming of the Lord with trumpets and accompanied by the angels.<sup>44</sup>

At this point, the eucharistic mysteries actually traverse the boundary between sanctuary and nave, along which the veil hangs; in earlier centuries, they were even processed around through the church.<sup>45</sup> The boundary between heaven and earth dissolves at the reception of communion.

The faithful, previously in need of protection from the mysteries, now consume them. The terror of the sacred no longer threatens the congregation.

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<sup>36</sup> Moses Bar Kepha, *Exposition*, 68.

<sup>37</sup> Rajan, *Queen of the Sacraments*, 139.

<sup>38</sup> C. K. Varghese, *The Living Sacrifice*, 222.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 152

<sup>41</sup> Karichal, *The Holy Qurbono*, 64.

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<sup>42</sup> Rajan, *Queen of the Sacraments*, 158.

<sup>43</sup> Karachil, *The Holy Qurbono*, 66.

<sup>44</sup> Rajan, *Queen of the Sacraments*, 158.

<sup>45</sup> Karachil, *The Holy Qurbono*, 66.

The One on whom fiery angels trembling gaze,  
That One as Bread and Wine upon the altar see;  
As angels clad in lightning are enflamed by Him,  
So those who eat them have their faces made as bright.<sup>46</sup>

The sacred has sanctified the profane by descending into it, and the earthly assumes the character of the heavenly: "Whoever eats of the bread of the Heavenly One will become heavenly without doubt."<sup>47</sup>

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## 2. Reflections

Any reflection on the liturgical significance of the West Syriac sanctuary veil must recognize that, within the drama of the Qurbana, the veil is an obstacle and undesirable. At moments of theophany, the veil is opened with joy. By contrast, the veil is closed at negative moments, instances of the loss of the divine, which intend to induce among the congregants a sense of blocked visibility of the gifts and altar, and yet also earnest anticipation of its reopening. When the congregants engage the Qurbana as a liturgical reenactment of the Christ-event, they recapitulate the grief and confusion of the apostles at each obscuration of Christ. The joyful climax of the rite is a final opening of the veil and the crossing of the eucharist into profane space.

Simply put, the sanctuary veil is not meant to be a permanent boundary. The discomfort and nuisance of an obstacle between the chancel and the congregation is, in the Syriac analysis, legitimate and appropriate. What is remarkable in the West Syriac rite is that this obstacle is triumphantly removed. Every celebration of the Qurbana is an attack on, and decisive victory over, the language of division. It is, as it were, a weekly tearing down of the iconostasis. The elimination of boundary is the entire drama of the Qurbana.

This drama is not one of humanity leaving behind the profane and receiving rights to cross into the sacred; rather, humanity's once profane sphere becomes sacred. The very element that makes one sphere sacred (the "terrifying" sacrament) moves into the other to make it sacred also, uniting the two. In that light, the drama is incarnational. Humanity does not leave the profane sphere to ascend into the sacred; rather, the sacred descends precisely to sacralize and integrate the profane. It

is God's initiative to overcome the divide, and God does so by "dwelling in our midst."

In this light, it is worth recalling that another of the names given the Qurbana in the Syriac tradition is "Access":

(It is called) "Access" because by it they that were far off and they that were near, and they of heaven and they of earth, have been brought near to one another; as Paul has said: "In him we both have access" [Eph 2:18]; that is, the People and the peoples, heavenly and earthly beings.<sup>48</sup>

This theme of "access" is aptly embodied in the climactic final opening of the sanctuary veil.

Given the intrinsic undesirability of the sanctuary veil within the West Syriac liturgy, one may find it surprising that the sanctuary veil exists at all. If Christ

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has made access possible, then why create a sanctuary with boundaries? Why repeat the victory over the sanctuary veil Qurbana after Qurbana? The weekly return of the sanctuary veil betrays a troubling fact: the congregation does not presently possess the access celebrated in the liturgy. However uncomfortable it is to admit, Christians live in a reality marked by the troubling absence of God (i.e., the "hiddenness of God" or "divine darkness" addressed by contemporary theology). This absence is commemorated in the liturgical reenactment itself; the time corresponding to the present day, that is, after the ascension but before the second coming, is a time in which the veil is closed, and which is marked by obscurity, loss, and anticipation. What the Qurbana also offers, however, is a brief encounter with realities beyond:

Sacred or liturgical time is the point where the horizontal and vertical time meet together.... Those who abide in the church enter into eschatology. The whole celebration is directed towards the glorious second coming of Christ when history and the cosmos embodied in and symbolized by the bread and wine will be enkindled. The Eucharistic time is thus divine human time, which on the one hand plunges down into the depths of the cosmos, into the sufferings and joys of humanity, and on the other hand soars up into the heavenly liturgy where the cosmos, pneumatized in Christ, comes to be transfigured by the mediation of the world's true history, the history of the saints.<sup>49</sup>

Unfortunately, this foretaste is brief. Once the liturgical celebration concludes, horizontal time resumes, leaving

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<sup>46</sup> Mathews Mar Barnabas, *Study of the Holy Qurbana*, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on the Nativity* 4:103. English translation: Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1989), 97.

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<sup>48</sup> Moses Bar Kepha, *Exposition*, 24.

<sup>49</sup> Karachil, *The Holy Qurbana*, 58-59.

the congregation to gaze again upon a closed veil with the same feelings of loss and anticipation.

### III. Other Eastern Rites Exhibiting the Motif

Interestingly, one can observe the four elements framing this motif of "overcoming divide" in other churches of the Christian East, namely: (1) the presence of a visible liturgical barrier between sanctuary and nave;<sup>50</sup> (2) a motif that casts the sanctuary barrier as undesirable in some respect; (3) the withdrawal or traversal

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of this barrier during the liturgy, especially by the minister bearing the sacrament at the distribution of communion; and (4) the positive reception of this action as a reversal of the negative sign value of the sanctuary barrier. Liturgies exhibiting these four elements manifest the drama outlined above, irrespective of whether they mark the boundary between sanctuary and nave with a veil, iconostasis, or another type of screen.

Many Eastern communities (including the Chaldeo-Indian, Coptic, and Armenian churches discussed below) have precedents for all four elements and, therefore, communicate the entire motif. However, certain traditions exhibit the first three elements, but do not seem to have developed the fourth (e.g., the Byzantine tradition). In these, the introduction of the fourth represents a novel development, but one faithful, even inevitable, to the logic of the first three: if the sanctuary barrier has a negative sign value, then its removal should have a positive value. Still, the most essential elements necessary for the drama (1-3) are in place in these traditions. Therefore, one can speak of a synchronic pattern in the use of Eastern sanctuary barriers; to my knowledge, no Eastern liturgy that employs the aforementioned sanctuary barriers, does not also withdraw or traverse them at some point.<sup>51</sup> On this basis, one may apply the above motif

<sup>50</sup> This paper addresses the vocabulary of division inherent in obstructive sanctuary barriers rather than in mere differences in elevation between sanctuary and nave, though its conclusions likely embrace the latter phenomenon as well. Where the two forms of sanctuary-nave distinction are juxtaposed, further study is needed to establish where the true boundary between sanctuary and nave lies, recognizing that the boundary may embrace both features (and perhaps does in most cases). Complicating such a study is the fact that some traditions join elevated sections of the nave with the elevated sanctuary (e.g., the Byzantine *solea*; see note 76). Insofar as this paper addresses obstructive sanctuary barriers alone, it also assumes a bipartite church layout, collapsing areas outside the obstructive sanctuary barrier (such as the "choir" of certain Eastern traditions) into the nave.

<sup>51</sup> Although this pattern of use has acquired theological significance in many communities, its origins likely reflect the constraints imposed by the boundaries themselves. It is only logical that if the laity will not

everywhere. In the interests of space, I have chosen to avoid an exhaustive survey of the use of sanctuary barriers in other Eastern Christian churches in favor of brief observations from five other communities.

#### 1. East Syriac

The East Syriac tradition of the Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syro-Malabar churches employs an analogous heaven-earth church typology in its spiritual literature<sup>52</sup> and, historically, preserves the use of a sanctuary veil:<sup>53</sup>

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In Chaldeo-Indian tradition, there is an opaque veil, which separates the sanctuary from other parts of the church. Generally, the sanctuary is kept veiled. This brings to our mind the real nature of heaven, which is beyond our human perception. Only if and when the Lord wills can we have a look into the heaven.<sup>54</sup> At appointed times during the liturgy the veil is drawn aside and the assembly is given a vision and an experience of heaven.... According to the prescriptions of the liturgical books, at least during the celebration of the Solemn and Most Solemn Forms of the *Qurbana*, the sanctuary veil is to be used. People think very often that the veil is used to hide things; but in the Liturgy it is used to reveal the glory of God.<sup>55</sup>

The veil obscures precisely to occasion revelation.

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be admitted into the sanctuary to receive communion from the altar (as was still done in parts of the West in the latter half of the first millennium [Josef A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, vol. 2 (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1986), 374]), then the sacrament should be taken from the sanctuary and be brought to them. Other possible arrangements (e.g., whereby communion is distributed at the boundary, as is the case in the low altar rail of the West, which requires separate discussion) would have been eliminated by accidents of barrier construction and church design, e.g., the need to guarantee ease of access and movement.

<sup>52</sup> Maniyattu, *Heaven on Earth*, represents the most thoroughgoing discussion of heaven-earth typologies in East Syriac spiritual literature.

<sup>53</sup> The Assyrian churches preserve the sanctuary veil into the present. The Chaldean Catholic Church has reinstated the use of a sanctuary veil within its 2010 program of liturgical reform. Finally, although the veil has fallen into disuse in many Syro-Malabar Catholic churches, a number of Indian theologians have called for its full restoration, for example, Francis Kanichikattil, *To Restore or to Reform?: A Critical Study on Current Liturgical Renewal in the Syro-Malabar Church in India* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1992); and Varghese Pathikulangara, *Qurbana: The Eucharistic Celebration of the Chaldeo-Indian Church*, Chaldeo-Indian Liturgy 2 (Kottayam: Denha Services, 1998).

<sup>54</sup> Of note, *The Exposition of the Offices (Expositio)*, an anonymous 7th-11th c. work considered the most detailed commentary on East Syriac *Qurbana*, credits Nestorius with the association of the sanctuary with the highest realm of heaven, albeit within a tripartite church (*Expositio* I, 91; Syr. text, 113-14, cited in Maniyattu, *Heaven on Earth*, 110).

<sup>55</sup> Pathikulangara, *Qurbana*, 138-39.



Syro-Malabar theologian Francis Kanichikattil relates the concealing power of a sanctuary veil to the seminal theological vision of St. Ephrem the Syrian:<sup>56</sup>

For Ephrem, God remains hidden unless he wills to reveal Himself. The “hiddenness” is His characteristic. The human experience of God’s hiddenness can only be possible through His successive manifestations. God reveals Himself by His own ways and means. Both the Old and the New Testaments speak of God’s successive revelations in human history and humanity’s experience of it. The Incarnation is the specific moment where God most fully reveals Himself to humanity, though His divinity still remained hidden. These successive revelations of God can be considered as types and symbols, through which God reveals Himself to humanity. In every case they reveal something of what is otherwise hidden.<sup>57</sup>

Ultimately, God “will be fully revealed to us only at the end of time.”<sup>58</sup> This hope, coupled with the attention given to moments in the Qurbana when the congregation is able to “experience heaven” and see a “revelation” of God, establishes the desirability of moments in which the sanctuary veil is open. Similar to their West Syriac counterparts, East Syriac commentators, ancient and modern, have

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associated various actions in the Qurbana, including openings of the veil, with successive revelations in the divine economy.<sup>59</sup>

The drama of the East Syriac Qurbana, however, is not the mere sight of the heavenly; rather, it is union with the heavenly. Any divide is dissolved through the Qurbana, as the anonymous *Exposition of the Offices* suggests with reference to the Sanctus sung during the anaphora:

This means, Heaven and earth have been already made one Church; neither Heaven is Heaven nor earth is earth because the Time and Space composite have been dissolved; for Heaven is the Heaven of earth and earth is the earth of Heaven. Certainly, unless there was (might be) a Heaven above, there might not be an earth below, and unless there was an earth below, there might not be a Heaven above. Now that those above and those below are brought into a single

<sup>56</sup> A fuller discussion of Ephrem the Syrian’s typology appears in Maniyattu, *Heaven on Earth*, 42-63.

<sup>57</sup> Kanichikattil, *To Restore or to Reform?*, 103.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>59</sup> Maniyattu, *Heaven on Earth*, 91-103, provides a summary of Gabriel of Qatar’s interpretations, in which the Qurbana recalls events from the message of John the Baptist to the post-resurrection appearances.

Church, there is neither “above” nor “below.” And yet, God appeared on earth, and our nature ascended into Heaven; and when God descended to us, earth became Heaven; and when the Son of our race was elevated, Heaven became earth. Wherefore Heaven and earth have become one, and there is neither Heaven nor earth; and we were already constituted with the spiritual ones. It is their predication itself, “Holy,” that we recite as being perfected.<sup>60</sup>

Several East Syriac commentaries especially link the attainment of heaven with the distribution of communion: “our participation in the holy Mysteries is the symbol of our participation with Him in the kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>61</sup>

## 2. Coptic

In the Coptic liturgy, “the theme of the heavenly liturgy is far less prominent than in the other Eastern Rites.”<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, Coptic spiritual literature links the layout of the Egyptian church with the approach to heaven:

The Church, being a heavenly embassy, is the icon of heaven on earth. All Church rituals and symbols are an earthly representation of the heavenly world. According to the rites of the Coptic Church, the entrance into the church should be from the west so that when we enter we proceed to the East. The reason for this is that the west symbolizes darkness, the place where the sun sets, but the east is

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a place of light. Therefore, upon entering the church we are being transformed from the darkness of sin to the True Light which is Jesus Christ, our Lord.<sup>63</sup>

In this approach, the sanctuary veil<sup>64</sup> represents the human sin that must be removed: “The curtain at the front of the church represents the barrier of our sin; this is

<sup>60</sup> *Expositio* II, 55; Syr. text, 58; cited in Maniyattu, *Heaven on Earth*, 112-13.

<sup>61</sup> Anonymous’ *Interpretation*, 102; Abraham Bar Lipah’s *Interpretation*, 165; Yohannan Bar Zo’bi’s *Explanation*, 59, all cited in Maniyattu, *Heaven on Earth*, 105.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Galadza, “Liturgy and Heaven in the Eastern Rites,” *Antiphon* 10.3 (2006): 251.

<sup>63</sup> Bishop Mettaous, *The Spirituality of the Rites of the Holy Liturgy in the Coptic Orthodox Church*, trans. Laurice Saleeb, ed. Amanda Hanna, Orthodox Ebooks, [orthodoxebooks.org/node/78](http://orthodoxebooks.org/node/78) [accessed November 20, 2011], 19.

<sup>64</sup> The use of wooden doors in Coptic churches arose from a need to protect the mysteries in times of persecution. However, since attacks on modern churches are rare, some Coptic writers claim that “there is no longer a need for the wooden doors on the altar, and only a curtain should be used” (Tadros El-Bakhoumi, *Ritual Theology I*, Pope Shenouda III Coptic Theological College course text on Orthodox Ebooks, [orthodoxebooks.org/node/105](http://orthodoxebooks.org/node/105) [accessed November 20, 2011], 72).

why, as the priest pulls aside the curtain at the beginning of each prayer, he says, 'Have mercy upon us, O Father the Almighty, O Holy Trinity have mercy upon us, O Lord of Hosts be with us for we have no other supporter in our tribulations but You.'<sup>65</sup> Clearly in this schema the veil is an undesirable obstacle to human communion with God. For this very reason, the drama of the Coptic liturgy is the eventual removal of that barrier:

[The curtain's purpose within the Old Testament temple] was to show that there was enmity between God and the people (sin is enmity to God), there was a wall between heaven and earth.

However, when our Lord was on the cross, this veil and separation between heaven and earth was destroyed. This is why we have the curtain, so that when we open it we show that the people now have access to the heavenlies, to the holy of holies, as St Paul explained in (Ephesians 2: 16-18), " ... through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father."<sup>66</sup>

That the Copts "have the curtain, so that" they may "open it" is a telling point. Here, the dramatic removal of the barrier is upheld as the basis for originally erecting it.

### 3. Ethiopian

In the Ethiopian tradition, "the sanctuary (*Maqdas*), the 'holy of holies' ... generally has three entrances with doors and curtains."<sup>67</sup> These curtains are opened at the distribution of communion and traversed by the priest bearing the sacrament.<sup>68</sup> This movement visually embodies the newfound access celebrated in the

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following hymn, sung by the subdeacon and congregation before the distribution:

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<sup>65</sup> Bishop Metlaous, *The Spirituality of the Rites*, 19-20.

<sup>66</sup> El-Bakhoui, *Ritual Theology* I, 72.

<sup>67</sup> Christine Challiot, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition* (Paris: Inter-Orthodox Dialogue, 2002), 102.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 106-7. "The internal structure of the circular and octagonal churches consists of three concentric rings. The innermost part is the *Maqdas* or Sanctuary, also known as the *Qeddesu Qeddusan* or Holy of Holies, where the *Tabot* or Ark rests; only priests and deacons have access to it... The second chamber is the *Keddist*, which is reserved for communicants, who receive the Sacrament... Only those who feel pure, have fasted regularly and have conducted themselves blamelessly receive Communion. For this reason communicants are usually babes-in-arms, infants and the very old. The third division is the outer ambulatory which is known as the *Qene Mahlet* (the place of cantors)" (Belaynesh Mikael, "Worship in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," in *The Church of Ethiopia: A Panorama of History and Spiritual Life*, ed. Sergew Hable Selassie [Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1997], 65).

"The hosts of the angels of the Saviour of the world stand before him and environ the body and the blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Let us therefore come into his presence, and adore Christ with faith."<sup>69</sup> The experience of the celestial beings in the antitypical "holy of holies" becomes the experience of those receiving communion in the nave.

### 4. Armenian

One use of the sanctuary veils of the Armenian rite deserves special attention.

On the Sundays of Great Lent, the Badarak is celebrated with the altar completely hidden behind the great sanctuary curtain. The curtain remains closed even through the time of communion, in keeping with the practice of not offering communion to the faithful during Great Lent. As explained in the rubrics of the *T'ōnac'oyc`* (the Directory or Guide of Feasts): "And drawing the curtain, they shall conceal the altar after the example of the exile of Adam from paradise."<sup>70</sup> Here the drawn sanctuary curtain represents a negative symbol, consistent with the penitential character of the season, but temporary by design. On other Sundays, the sanctuary curtain is withdrawn at the distribution of communion, so that the priest passes through it to the edge of the bema. There, beyond the space once enclosed by the sanctuary curtain, the faithful receive communion.

## IV. The Byzantine Iconostasis

In contrast to the Syriac rites, the Byzantine rite adopted the use of a sanctuary veil late in its history as a supplement to the templon.<sup>71</sup> In recent centuries, the iconostasis has overshadowed the veil, and in many places displaced it altogether.

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For these reasons, it is more pertinent to address the function and significance of the iconostasis when exploring the use of liturgical barriers in the Byzantine rite, though the rite's sanctuary veil also fits the parameters of this study.

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<sup>69</sup> English translation: Brightman, *Eastern Liturgies*, 24.

<sup>70</sup> Cited in Michael Daniel Findikyan, "The 'Opening of the Door' Ceremony," in *The Serious Business of Worship: Essays in Honour of Bryan D. Spinks*, ed. Melanie C. Ross and Simon Jones (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 38, n.31. According to Findikyan, this use of the veil "comprises not an ancient custom, but the mutated descendant of an earlier ritual whose original function has been lost or forgotten" (ibid., 38, n.30).

<sup>71</sup> A history of the use of sanctuary curtains in the Byzantine rite appears in Thomas F. Mathews, *Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), 162-71; also Taft, "The Decline of Communion," 44-49.

Unfortunately, as noted earlier, any discussion of the symbolic value of the iconostasis is complicated by the iconostasis' relationship with the icon. When approached as icon, and imbued with the positive value thereof, the iconostasis is virtually unable to function as a negative symbol within the liturgical drama (as element [2] requires). Thus, in response to criticisms of the iconostasis, twentieth-century Orthodox writers such as Florensky and Ouspensky move towards the opposite extreme, providing wholly positive portrayals of the iconostasis as an aid to spiritual vision or symbol of the glorified church.<sup>72</sup>

However, when the iconostasis is analyzed as barrier, without reference to its iconography, it can represent an undesirable obstacle. Ouspensky's essay, though relying heavily on the theology of icon, approaches such an analysis in a passage discussing the legitimacy of symbols of boundary.<sup>73</sup>

Usually whenever the elimination or reduction of the iconostasis is being discussed reference is made to the rending in two of the Old Testament Veil, which is seen also as an abolition of the dividing line setting off the Holy of Holies. The conclusion is drawn that there should no longer be a wall concealing the sanctuary... What is usually overlooked here is the oversimplification involved. The torn Veil of the Old Testament is only a symbol of the fact that a way has been opened to man through the New Testament... into the Kingdom of God.... This Kingdom is in eternity, it is still "to come." But the Church dwells in time, although by its participation in Christ's glorified Body it also is a participant in eternity, in the eighth day of creation, i.e., in the Resurrection and life of the age to come, in the same way as the nave partakes of the sanctuary, and is for this reason called the Kingdom of God. The dividing line still actually exists. The Kingdom of God cannot be immediately manifested; Christ Himself revealed it in images and parables. It is revealed to us now in the image of the Bearers of this Kingdom, precisely at the line marking the edge of the Holy of Holies in the New Testament church.<sup>74</sup>

The iconostasis, as a boundary between typological "time" and "eternity," reflects the church's present and undesirable lack of full access to the Kingdom of God. However undesirable and negative this condition, it is authentically represented in a "dividing line." Even still, the church in time (i.e., nave) can "also" become a "participant in eternity" (i.e., sanctuary) by "participation" in the eucharistic body of Christ; "the nave partakes of the sanctuary." The essential elements necessary for the motif of "overcoming divide" are present in Ouspensky's treatment.<sup>75</sup> Since ancient times, the Byzantine rite laity have received communion in the nave, before the *solea*, which lies outside the iconostasis.<sup>76</sup> Thus, at the distribution, the celebrant brings the mysteries out of the sanctuary through the opened Beautiful Gate of the iconostasis, and by a withdrawal of the sanctuary veil, if one is present. Every visual barrier between altar and congregation is removed at this time.

When we apply this analysis, an alternative solution to the "problem of the iconostasis" presents itself. The existence of a wall between sanctuary and nave is not the "focal point"<sup>77</sup> of the Byzantine rite so much as the ultimate breach of that wall.<sup>78</sup> The climax and triumph of the

<sup>75</sup> Certain parallels are also evident in the interpretation of the openings and closings of the "Royal Gates" in Seraphim Slobodskoy, *The Law of God* (Jordanville, N.Y.: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1996).

<sup>76</sup> Mathews, *Early Churches*, 172; and Robert F. Taft, "The Order and Place of Lay Communion in the Late-Antique and Byzantine East," *Studia Liturgica Diversa: Essays in Honor of Paul F. Bradshaw* (Portland, Ore.: Pastoral Press, 2004), 145-46, 149. In *Theology of the Icon*, Ouspensky identifies the *solea* as the "dividing line" between sanctuary and nave (p. 278) insofar as it links the two and is intermediate to them. Although one may certainly associate it with that boundary, the *solea* is best understood as a feature of the nave in any strict bipartite scheme of the Byzantine church/temple. In ancient times, the *solea* represented a protected passageway for clerics ascending to the ambo in the middle of the nave or entering the sanctuary with the gifts, not always immediately attached to the sanctuary; see Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy: The Development of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite* (Crestwood, NY.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 49, 80. In the modern day, it continues to serve as the threshold and passageway in and out of the elevated sanctuary, but lies outside the iconostasis-protected sanctity of the sanctuary. For this reason, the position of the priest with respect to the iconostasis is critical to our analysis. That architectural feature is the true limit of the sanctuary, restricting lay access to the latter and visibly communicating the vocabulary of division.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Walter, "The Origins of the Iconostasis," 267: the iconostasis "became falsely, the focal point of the Byzantine church."

<sup>78</sup> One could also identify the Little and Great Entrances as positive breaches of the iconostasis, though the clerical character of these processions makes them of limited symbolic value for the laity. Even still, Orthodox interest in the theology of "entrance" anticipates certain aspects of our analysis— indicating the permeability of the wall and seeing traversals of it as moments of access or communication between nave and sanctuary. See discussions in Schmemmann, *The Eu-*

<sup>72</sup> If defenders of the iconostasis cast it as negative in any respect, it is usually with reference to particular examples that have become so massive as to enclose totally the sanctuary or that support a haphazard arrangement of icons; see Ouspensky, "The Problem of the Iconostasis," 187, 217; and Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 21.

<sup>73</sup> In addition, Ouspensky outlines principles common to sanctuary obstructions across Christianity ("The Problem of the Iconostasis," I 89ff.).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-12.

Divine Liturgy occurs at the moment when the mysteries cross into the nave and sanctify the faithful. The faithful, once “unworthy to approach, draw near to, or minister unto ... the King of Glory,” now see him traverse the divide alienating him from them, and “approach with

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the fear of God and with faith,<sup>79</sup> resolving issues of sight and physical access.<sup>80</sup> They “partake of the divine coal” and are thereby “inflamed and deified by the participation in the divine fire.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, the drama of the Divine Liturgy is divine condescension and human theosis:

In Christ nothing remains commonplace and profane, since we— along with the cosmos— are destined for glory, the assured victory that awaits us in the eschaton.... The liturgy, and particularly the sacraments— which are the... betrothal, pledge, and guaranty of humanity and creation sharing in Christ’s risen life—

bear testimony to the fullness of redemption for all who put their faith in him (Rom. 8:11-39).<sup>82</sup>

To its credit, this analysis can stand beside existing defenses of the iconostasis while leaving even its criticisms intact. It concedes that the wall may project negative meanings such as division, but demonstrates that its very use in the liturgy subverts these meanings. It thereby avoids becoming polarized toward the strictly positive or negative analyses typical of twentieth-century scholarship. The latter especially thrive when the iconostasis’ ostensibly divisive value is absolutized, as

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if the wall were a solid, static element of liturgy. The permeability and dynamic use of the iconostasis, however, point instead to a more dissonant treatment of sanctuary-nave division, and provide the basis for a deconstruction of its criticisms.

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*charist*, 49ff.; and Khaled Anatolios, “Heaven and Earth in Byzantine Liturgy,” *Antiphon* 5.3 (2000): 21-28.

<sup>79</sup> All quotes are from the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom; English translation mine. Notably, the priest who receives communion in the sanctuary also claims to “approach God,” paralleling the later advance of the laity.

<sup>80</sup> The issue of sight is especially important. Through this paradigm, it is possible to address the clericalistic Byzantine piety that once championed the use of sanctuary screens and veils as means of eliminating the “unsanctified glance” of the laity; see Taft, “The Decline of Communion,” 45-46. One can cautiously compare this piety with the Coptic understanding of the veil as a consequence of the “enmity between God and the people,” adding, however, that any such division is utterly removed by the sanctifying power of the liturgy. At the invitation “approach with the fear of God,” the Mysteries are shown to the congregation. Now even the laity share fully in the gift of sanctified sight and can sing “the Lord is God and has revealed himself to us” and “we have seen the true light.” Naturally, this approach does not resolve every difficulty presented by the medieval piety. It is still encouraging that modern Orthodox theologians have discarded the notion of “unsanctified glance,” and that several churches are attempting to provide the laity with greater visual access to the altar (see Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy*, ix-x, 175). Nevertheless, given the historical influence of this medieval piety and its seminal role in inspiring the development of the Byzantine sanctuary barrier, there is merit in a direct attempt to address and subvert its negative message. Positively, the end result incorporates the issue of sight into our analysis, consolidating St. Symeon of Thessalonika’s vision of “God with us, both seen and partaken” (*On the Sacred Liturgy*, 94 [PG 155.285]). An acknowledgement of the influence of this piety in the development of the iconostasis also reinforces the premise that the wall represents an undesirable element in the liturgy, against the views of Orthodox writers who treat its relationship with the laity in purely positive terms.

<sup>81</sup> John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 4:13; English translation in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, second series, vol. 9 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), 83.

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<sup>82</sup> Alkiviades C. Calivas, “The Liturgy: The Church’s Faith in Motion,” in *Essays in Theology and Liturgy*, vol. 3: *Aspects of Orthodox Worship* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2003), 14.