



TO THE READER

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In the ancient world, before the Transition, there were “Study Bibles”: editions of the West’s sacred classic published with notes, maps, glossaries, and various explanatory essays by leading scholars in the field of religious studies. While the text itself was ultimately paramount, it was thought that these additions would deepen understanding and appreciation, making immediately accessible to the reader key insights from centuries of interpretation and research.

In providing an annotated edition of the *Icon*, we hope to do something similar. Looking to those ancient Study Bibles as our model, the Committee on Publication has assembled a diverse team of scholars for producing a new critical version (NCV) of the text. After years of collective labor, we are proud to begin presenting our efforts to the world.

Our editorial work stands in a long tradition of criticism. Before those Study Bibles already mentioned, there were, of course, the medieval scholastics at their commentaries; the Masoretes and rabbinic scholars compiling Mishna and Talmud; Buddhist bhikkus at Abhidharma, imams at hadith, etc. Reflection upon our cultural canons is something human beings do, it seems. And given time, these reflections accrete, one upon another, like mirrors mirroring mirrors—until reflection itself receives a frame: the “critical edition.” An interesting form, this text bound with its own history...

As General Editor of *The Annotated Icon*, it would seem that I stand at both the first and last stage of reflection. I’m tasked with introducing the final product, as though it were some single, deliberate thing (as though it were not a compendium of chaos). The challenge has been productive. Being put in such a position has got me thinking about this edition differently. I am forced to reckon with it as a whole, a distinct work in its own right, and not as a collection of disparate parts both compiled and analyzed through the ages.

In some ways, I am beginning to understand those “Bible as literature” scholars from the 20th Century CE, who bracketed the history and theories of composition to simply *read* the text *as* a text and see what happens. For instance, they knew full-well that the “God” of the Bible was stitched together from numerous sources—a Mosaic mosaic—and yet, regardless, approached him as a single character, inconsistencies and all. (For so people are, of course; we contain multitudes.) Biblical scholars had long been dissecting the text, seeking to reconstruct its history as an archeological artefact. But those scholars who read the Bible as literature simply took the text as it was, and in so doing discovered an *aesthetic* richness unappreciable by a merely historical approach. Oddly, it can sometimes take looking at a sacred text as *fixed*, as *static*, in order to appreciate its dynamism.

I’ve found this willed naïveté quite liberating, I must admit (especially as we continue to grow so overly-reflective). After years of overseeing essays, notes, and other supplementary materials for this New Critical Version of the *Icon*, such a holistic view offers a breath of fresh air. I invite you to a radical consideration with me.

What if this book you hold in your hands—not only the *Icon*, but all of its reflective notes, essays, criticism, etc.—were one, single, created work of literature? What if the historical world it presents were no more real than Tolkien’s? Its mythology, as invented as Blake’s? Its notes and commentaries, as contrived as Nabokov’s? What if *The Annotated Icon* were treated entirely as a single, deliberate, literary creation?

In some ways, this is the best thing a General Editor could hope for, I suppose. But while my circumstantial need to present the NCV as an entity of integrity occasioned this line of thinking, once begun, I’ve found it to be unexpectedly fruitful.

For instance, we all know the Christian Bible was written by numerous authors over a number of centuries. But what if it were written by Steinbeck? Or, more interesting still: the Study Bible, by Borges?¹

Before I utterly fail as a General Editor and lose all readers here, at the *To the Reader*, let me assure you that this is not just idle nonsense. The *Icon* and the tradition of creative spirituality inaugurated by its first book, *GOD*, actually *demand* this kind of silly thinking of us. How?

GOD, and the spiritual tradition it established, was designed to subvert and circumvent the traditional notion that sacred words, ideas, and images are the select purview of old, dead men posthumously canonized. Such thinking is precisely what allows the Sacred to ossify, grow cold, and die. The endless re-imagination of the divine is the project set in motion by and enacted through the *Icon*. Such a project demands that even *it* be exploded. (Blasphemy in this vein has always been the highest sacrament. Thus, to entertain the notion that our millennium’s sacred text was written by my neighbor, Mrs. Reed, is actually to stay quite true to the paradoxical spirit in which its Spirit is presented.)

Is it not more dangerous, after all, to think instead that you have *got* a hand on God? To assume that God can be fitted in a book so easily? Is it not heresy—idolatry—to look into the *Icon*, and think it any more than artifice, designed to point you past itself?

Imagining it as literature avoids this pitfall. In fact, imagined as a discrete literary production, *The Annotated Icon* itself could serve as a model for anyone, a specimen of what it means to take spiritual world-building seriously. For being human entails world-building; living meaningfully

¹ In footnotes of study bibles, after all, one reads that this or that book was pseudepigraphal. And yet, the reader might choose to imagine otherwise...



demands meaning-making. As a literary product, *The Annotated Icon* might only be one author's vision, but it *would be* a vision of a world—indeed, of a whole civilization based on and informing its writings! It would be as though a writer wanted to give the history of a civilization through its holy book—indeed, even to the point of a self-reflective development that it puts out a critical edition of its holy book. Could an author not do this? Simultaneously construct and deconstruct a whole civilization, a whole religion? Engage myth and science concurrently? Immediacy and reflection, synchronically? And in the process, craft a holy book, artistically, so that it is at least not laughably inadequate to the genre?

Perhaps this is where such a thought experiment runs afoul, though. After all, what sort of author is pretentious enough to declare their own work a “classic” from within the confines of their own work? (Not a very likable one, perhaps.) Praise ends reflection. Though, maybe we might grant this ‘author’ of *The Annotated Icon* some license—say, for the purpose of formal verisimilitude? or to setup certain relationships of certain texts to others, etc...?

Ah, but forgive me. I'm sure I've indulged this fantasy to the breaking. Surely, whatever we conclude about such matters, this peculiar interpretive lens *does* yield some interesting results. For instance, lest any fall victim to the old, God-embalming notion that, as a sacred text, the *Icon* somehow sets the limits to divinity for all eternity, be assured: it's just by Steinbeck. Don't like it?

Write your own.

For that is the real takeaway from such a thought experiment. What does it mean to write an *Icon*? How would *you* go about it? The very notion is an invitation to imagine a different world, a different future based on your own ideals. It forces you to give them definite shape, to see

them hang together in some coherent fashion, such as is demanded by the form. What does it mean to write a bible?

I'd say it challenges us, to meet the task of envisioning the Sacred for the world. To externalize a sense of what is meaningful, and thereby *change* the world. It offers up a model—even a model for having models, since having canons at all these days has grown considerably out of fashion.

As we continue to become more individualistic in our spiritual proclivities, what would an individual author's canon look like? What communities do we long for? What diversity of spiritual expression are we capable of? To ask such questions immediately puts canon outside the paradigm of orthodox dogma and out into a pluralistic realm of possibility. Perhaps others like and share your vision. Perhaps you will come together, form a community, start a garden commune—

Appropriately enough, it seems, such extremities of thinking about the *Icon* bring us right back to its origin (as the mystologues would say, *The circumference spirals back toward the center*). But let that be. It was, after all, only a thought experiment—and, in some ways, the worst thing a General Editor could say, if for no other reason than it discredits the many voices who have contributed so much to this great endeavor. But, to whatever extent we all are, in our concerted efforts, acting singularly, as one, allow me to speak with what authority is mine and say, *Thank you, Reader, and welcome*.

With that, I'll step aside, and let your gaze go—as far as it is willing—into the *Icon*.

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