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An Iconic Theology of Beauty. Orthodox Aesthetics of Salvation

Abstract

In this article I will focus on the main aspects of the orthodox aesthetic soteriology. Icons belong to the identity of an orthodox spirituality. For this reason Orthodox Theology took the “iconic turn” a long time ago. What can we learn from icons as implicit theology of matter? How are icons connected with anthropology, soteriology and ecotheology? Can we speak about a pluralistic culture of symphonic diversity and beauty on the basis of on the plurality of icons? What are the most important aspects of the *iconic spirituality* in terms of its role as foundation of an orthodox ecological and liturgical Public Theology? Icons can help us to avoid fundamentalism, to learn about the apophatic nature of truth and to appreciate diversity as a meaningful expression of divine grace.



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1 Introduction

Orthodox Theology took the *iconic turn* a long time ago. Icons and their veneration belong to the historical and contextual identity of the Orthodox Church. Holy icons are an „expression of Orthodoxy in its totality, the expression of Orthodoxy as such“¹. Therefore the defeat of iconoclasm at the Council of Constantinople in 843 was proclaimed as the „Triumph of Orthodoxy“². This judgment against iconoclasm influenced decisively Orthodox liturgical practice, and every year this event of acceptance of icons is celebrated on the first Sunday of Lent³.

Why are icons so important and what is the meaning of an Orthodox aesthetics of salvation?

Icons are not just a decoration of the liturgical space but „windows on eternity“⁴, i.e. windows mediating the beauty of God and God’s Kingdom. The icon provides the richest insights for theological reflection on the dignity of matter⁵, first of all because of its ability to participate in and to irradiate the divine beauty. Icons are a vivid witness to the ability and vocation of

¹ See L. Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), p. 10.

² *Ibidem*.

³ See V. Candea, *Iconography*, in: M. Eliade (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 7, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1987), p. 2.

⁴ G. Limouris (ed.), *Icons – windows on eternity. Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, (Faith and Order Paper 147, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990).

⁵ I differentiate between a *protological*, a *christologic-pneumatological* and an *eschatological* dignity of matter.

matter to be and become a place of God's indwelling (ἐνοίκησις).

Iconic Theology is based on the *theology of the incarnation* and protects at the same time the truth of the incarnation. St. John Damascene said: „I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter“⁶.

Icons are beautiful not only because of the expressive success of the painter but also because they participate in divine grace and beauty. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar Christianity is „the aesthetic religion par excellence“.⁷ Needless to say that Balthasar was strongly influenced by Maximus the Confessor's „Cosmic Liturgy“ to whose theology of matter we now turn.

2 Iconic Theology as Cosmic Theology of Matter

Maximus the Confessor (580-662), one of the famous teachers of Christian spirituality⁸ and the real father of Byzantine theology⁹, was “the theologian of the transfigured cosmos”. In his thought the theology of matter is connected with *cosmic ecclesiology*. The whole universe has the internal vocation to

⁶ St. John Damascene, *On Holy Images*, translated by M. H. Allies, London 1898, p. 15f.

⁷ H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. E. Liva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 216; see D. B. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite. The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, (Michigan, Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2003), p. 16.

⁸ Ch. Schönborn, *Erzbischof von Wien, Vorwort*, in: Maximus der Bekenner, *Drei geistliche Schriften*, (Freiburg in Breisgau: Johannes-Verl., 1996), p. 7; see W. Völker, *Maximus Confessor als Meister des geistlichen Lebens* (Wiesbaden: Steiner 1965).

⁹ See J. J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine. 2. The spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974) p. 8-12.

become an icon of divine beauty, a church or a temple of the Holy Trinity. The material world can achieve the same level of transfiguration as the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. Thereby it can become a church, a space for God's indwelling and a transparent medium of divine love. *Creation is a holy sacrament of divine love*¹⁰, a vehicle of love, of dialogue between the Creator and creatures¹¹.

Maximus the Confessor, „a great figure in the Orthodox theology of creation”¹², is the “cosmic theologian”¹³ of divine rationality. For him the entire creation is based on God's thought and wisdom. Without divine thought there would be neither creation nor diversity in the world. As such, Creation represents an ontological becoming of God's ideas. God thinks and wishes a creation that has its model in the person of the divine *Logos*, who is the hypostatic, absolute reason. God is present in his creation through his *Logos*, i.e. through the *divine logoi of creation* who are coming into existence through the *Logos* and exist toward the *Logos*. The divine *logoi* are a radiance of the divine Reason, “mirrors” of the divine *Logos*¹⁴, which is why “the heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 18, 2).

This *spiritual vision of the universe* as existing on account of the divine architectural *logoi* is centred on the triune God as source of the beauty and the transcendent destiny (ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος) of creation. “Creation is brought forth into existence so that it

¹⁰ D. Stăniloae, Darul lui Dumnezeu catre noi, in: MMS 3-6, 1970, p. 266.

¹¹ D. Stăniloae, Creația ca dar și tainele bisericii, in: Ortodoxia, Nr. 1, 1976, p. 10f.

¹² E. Theotrikoff, Living in God's Creation. Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology, (New York: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2009), p. 31.

¹³ P. M. Blowers, R. L. Wilken, Introduction, in: idem. (ed.), On the cosmic mystery of Jesus Christ. St. Maximus the Confessor, (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), p. 17.

¹⁴ D. Stăniloae, Viata si scrierile Sfintului Maxim Marturisorul, in: Filocalia, II, Sfintul Maxim Marturisorul, (București: Humanitas, 2004), p. 21.

might reveal God and participate in the richness of his being"¹⁵. This richness of being is at the same time the richness of beauty, of communion and love. David Bentley Hart underlines the same idea when he says that "the Christian understanding of beauty emerges not only naturally, but necessarily, from the Christian understanding of God as a *perichoresis* of life, a dynamic coinherence of the three divine persons, whose life is eternally one of shared regard, delight, fellowship, feasting, and joy"¹⁶.

The Trinitarian God is beautiful and the source of beauty, goodness and truth. God is beautiful because he is the perfect and holy love. The entire creation considered as *creatio ex amore* is based on God's beauty and love. Creation is a beautiful act of the self-communication of divine rationality: "If the cosmos was created through the Logos and Logos means rationality, than the entire cosmos is based upon an immanent rationality"¹⁷. The inner structure of the universe is the rationality and beauty of the Trinitarian God: "The immanent structure of the cosmos is a reflection of the inner-trinitarian structure"¹⁸ and an intimate communion (κοινωνία) with the Trinity. God's grace indwells all material things and beings, so that everything participates in God. The divine logoi cannot be separated from the providential energies of God. That means that icons are able to transmit the divine beauty and rationality in the created world.

The core of an Orthodox theology of the icon is constituted by the idea of participation in and transformation through divine presence. The principal purpose of matter is to become a

¹⁵ D. Stăniloae, *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, Volume Two: The World: Creation and Deification*, (Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), p. 113.

¹⁶ D. B. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite. The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, p. 155.

¹⁷ Dumitru Popescu, *Esenta sintezei dogmatice a Pr. Prof. D. Stăniloae*, in: *Studii Teologice*, 35: 7-8 (1983), p. 584.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

vehicle of love, to be a transparent presence of God's grace. In the Orthodox tradition the inner rationality of creation is also a sign of *God's immanence*. Divine rationality of the world means at the same time the presence of the uncreated energies of God¹⁹. The divine logoi also express the efficient power of God who is working in the world from inside²⁰. From the outside God is acting as the ultimate telos and the attractive goal of creation. The creation can and should become an *oikos tou Theou*, i.e. more rational, more vivid and more transparent, if it is transformed through God's uncreated energies. Creation exists and becomes more vivid, more beautiful on account of these indwelling *uncreated energies* of God. The presence of the uncreated energies of God in creation is the source of life, of eternal life.

Icons are an expression of divine beauty that occurs by the light of divine love. One can describe an icon as an *incarnation of divine love, wisdom and beauty*. Maximus the Confessor speaks about different *incarnations or embodiments of the Logos*. He mentioned for instance such an incarnation in the logoi of the world, in the spiritual meanings (logoi) of Scripture, in Jesus Christ and in the faithful²¹.

From an orthodox point of view the reality of the world has an iconic dimension and is based on the incarnation of the divine Logos. An *iconic understanding of reality* is an invitation to see the meaning of existence connected to the matrix of intersubjectivity and interpersonal communion. An icon is a beautiful communication with the transcendent beauty of God and an irradiation of the eschatological beauty of God's Kingdom, making visible the invisible beauty of the Kingdom.

¹⁹ D. Stăniloae, *Introducerea traducatorului*, in: Sf. Maxim Marturisorul, *Ambigua*, (Bucuresti: EIBMBOR, 1983), p. 29.

²⁰ See D. Stăniloae, *Viata si scrierile Sfantului Maxim Marturisorul*, p. 22.

²¹ Maximi Confessoris, *Ambiguorum Liber*, in: J. P. Migne, (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Patrologiae Graeca*, (Tomus XCI, Paris: : Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 1305B.

As memory of a historical event it is past-oriented. As the irradiation of the divine beauty it is future-oriented. An icon is a sensible memorial of the past and of the future and sustains as such a *culture of memory as culture of anamnesis and epiclesis*. An icon might be understood also as a prolepsis of the eschatological life. By the descent of the Holy Spirit (epiclesis) an icon becomes a transparent medium of the life to come.

The theology of icon involves a specific understanding of salvation. Orthodox soteriology has to do with aesthetics because salvation means communion and communication with the beauty of God. Humans and the whole creation can be transformed by divine grace and are able to participate in and to irradiate divine beauty in our historical world. Communion means free participation, while communication involves an individual contribution to this communion.

Dumitru Stăniloae, one of the most important translators and interpreters of Maximus the Confessor's theology, describes creation in its very beginning as a transparent matter, which reflects the divine life and divine beauty. Human sin was the reason why the creation lost its transparency and became more and more opaque. Opacity means the rejection of communion, the rejection of love and thus the rejection of life. If a biological system becomes more and more isolated from the others it dies. Life is and remains "communication in communion". Eternal life is participation in the "supreme structure of love", i.e. in the inner-trinitarian communion. Authentic communion can be experienced as an energy field of the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit and is an anticipation of the eschatological life. „L'Esprit du Christ ressuscité nous conduit de l'intérieur vers la Pentecôte eschatologique où il jaillira en plénitude du corps transparent du Christ, mais aussi de nos coeurs qui auront progressé en transparence par l'union avec le Christ"²².

²² D. Stăniloae, *Le Saint-Esprit dans la théologie et la vie de l'église orthodoxe*, in: *Contacts* 26 (1974), pp. 227-256, p. 248, p. 246.

The material creation has a spiritual dimension because it is the work of God, who wishes to indwell it. We can find a similar understanding about God's indwelling in Jürgen Moltmann's Theology: "God is restless in his Spirit until he finds rest in us and in his world"²³. The Orthodox Church cultivates a feeling of the sacrality of matter especially in the sacraments. The sacramental life is a restoration of creation, the medium for the experience of God. To see the creation in its relation with the creator means to rediscover the deepness of the world and its real sense. The Church in its cosmic dimension has to be understood as the anticipation of the new creation. The church involves the process of restoration of creation, because creation has the inner vocation to become church, i.e. space of the indwelling of the Trinitarian God.



(The Hospitality of Abraham, Benaki Museum, Athen, 14th century; source: Wikimedia Commons)

²³ J. Moltmann, *The Source of Life. The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, (London: SCM Press, 1997), p. 41.

The created world does not have its aim and fulfilment in itself: “Nothing that comes into being is its own end, since it is not self-caused (...). Nothing that came into being is perfect in itself and complete”²⁴. God is the τέλος of the entire existence and movement of the cosmos. The trinitarian God is the origin and the goal of creation. In his divine wisdom he creates all things visible and invisible *ex nihilo*²⁵. The creatures are “parts of God”, because they have the hypostatic Rationality of God as principle and cause. The existence and movement of creatures is for Maximus the Confessor a proof of participation (μετουσίᾳ) in God.²⁶ Each creature is allotted life, movement, time and. Everything is a gift of God. Life and movement are to be understood as participation in God, because the gift of life has its origin in God. There is no life without the Spirit of Life: “You take away their spirit, they expire and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the ground.” (Ps 104, 29-30).

According to Maximus the Confessor “everything participates in God, if they are created by God”²⁷. This idea of existence as participation in God’s rationality involves a new understanding of the human being and of creatures in their theological dignity. If we can grasp the ontological unity of the world with the Logos, then we can assume a culture of dialogue and respect for other human beings and creatures. This means that beauty is not only an aesthetical but also an ethical category.

The entire creation is penetrated by the energies of God, so that “the Holy Spirit is not absent in any creature especially those which have logos”²⁸. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17.28). Thanks to this Christological and

²⁴ P. M. Blowers (ed.), *On the cosmic mystery of Jesus Christ*, pp. 48-50.

²⁵ Maximus Confessor, *Questiones ad Thalassium*, pp. 1048A; see idem, *Ambiguorum Liber*, p. 1080A.

²⁶ Maxim Marturisitorul, *Ambigua*, p. 81.

²⁷ Idem, pp. 1079B-1080B.

²⁸ Maxim Marturisitorul, *Raspunsuri catre Talasie*, (Bucuresti: Humanitas 2004), p. 65.

Pneumatological understanding of the presence of God in creation, Maximus Confessor underlines the divine dignity and the positive value of physical and material world. The material world is God's intention, God's will and God's gift made by the creative Logos and the wisdom that transcends all wisdom. God "permeates all things and gives at the same time independent existence to all things in himself"²⁹.

Iconic ontology means that an icon needs the divine beauty in order to exist. The historical reality of the world isn't possible without God's grace, will, and love. This theological dependence of the world allows us a new perspective about the interdependence in creation. Soteriology has in this way a cosmic dimension. It means not salvation from the world, but with the whole cosmos.

The discourse of an iconic theology of beauty and of the orthodox aesthetics of salvation is based on the orthodox understanding of deification. From an orthodox point of view beauty is connected with holiness. Divine holiness is at the same time an expression of the divine beauty, love and communication. This is why the Orthodox Church has a special sensitivity with regards to the concept of holiness.

3 Iconic Soteriology - the christological and pneumatological Dimension of Holiness

Iconic Soteriology is based on the christological and pneumatological understanding of the holiness. Maximus the Confessor links holiness with the presence of Jesus Christ. H. Urs von Balthasar points to the fact that for him "ontology and cosmology is extensive Christology", so that the hypostatic union is to be understood as God's first thought about the

²⁹ P. M. Blowers, R. L. Wilken (ed.), *On the cosmic mystery of Jesus Christ*, p. 66.

world³⁰. Jesus Christ who lives in the cosmos causes his light to permeate the entire cosmos because he integrates all *logoi* of the universe. For Maximus the Confessor, the christological dimension of holiness is complemented by its pneumatological dimension. Christ carries the Holy Spirit due to the unity of the divine οὐσία, so that he can give him to the world. The sanctification of the human being and of the whole creation occurs by the architectural work of the Holy Spirit³¹.

“Then the Word of God wishes always to realise in all things the mystery of his incarnation”³². Matter has “the divine and ineffable honour of dwelling with God”³³. Life itself is an infusion of God’s grace. Matter has not only a Christological dignity due to the incarnation of the Logos but also a primordial dignity because of God’s vital inbreathing and the eschatological dignity on account of its vocation to be the house of God. The eschatological dignity of matter finds an expression in the icon of the resurrection. St. John Damascene says that God the Word “has deified our flesh for ever, and we are in very deed sanctified through His Godhead and the union of His flesh with it. (...) He rose in the plenitude of His power, keeping the flesh of immortality which He had taken for us”³⁴.

The resurrection exceeds the heavenly beauty because it entails the inexpressible *theosis* of nature by grace³⁵, i.e. the real participation in the trinitarian life of God. The grace of the Holy Spirit raises nature to its destined participation in the divine life, i.e. to understand the divine rationality and to see God face

³⁰ H. U. von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie. Das Weltbild Maximus’ des Bekenner, zweite, völlig veränderte Auflage*, (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1961), p. 204.

³¹ S. Maximi Confessoris, *Ambiguorum Liber*, p. 1281A.

³² *Ibidem*, 1084D.

³³ P. M. Blowers, R. L. Wilken (ed.), *On the cosmic mystery*, p. 94.

³⁴ St. John Damascene, *On the Holy Icons*, p. 25.

³⁵ S. Maximi Confessoris, *Questiones ad Thalassium*, p. 532.

to face³⁶. All creatures that make use of rationality participate in the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ, i.e. as the Spirit of the supreme rationality³⁷. The Holy Spirit gives us the light of knowledge that is rooted in divine love³⁸. The true knowledge of God signifies an ecstatic union with God³⁹. Love purifies reason, so that this irradiates the divine light. If reason unites with God by love and prayer, it becomes philanthropic and gentle⁴⁰. Consequently the icon, the church and the human being are holy only when they manifest the beautiful light of God's love⁴¹.

If Maximus the Confessor shows the church as an icon of the universe, he also underlines the fact that the holiness of the church cannot be separated from creation⁴². The *relational ontology* of the church discloses the fact that the church fulfils no end in itself, but exists for the welfare of the human being and of the world and has a cosmic dimension⁴³. We can understand this relational ontology also as the basis of an *iconic soteriology*. Iconic soteriology means that the ecclesiology and anthropology are iconic and cosmic at the same time. Through the created world God invites us to the dialogue of love. The material world is a field of dialogue between creator and creature as well as between creatures. Matter is not locked up

³⁶ See Walther Völker, *Maximus Confessor als Meister des geistlichen Lebens*, pp. 335-340.

³⁷ S. Maximi Confessoris, *Questiones ad Thalassium*, pp. 297-298B.

³⁸ S. Maximi Confessoris, *Capitulum de Charitate Centuria I*, in: Jacques Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Graeca* (Tomus XC, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1865), p. 963.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 963.

⁴⁰ S. Maximi Confessoris, *Capitulum de Charitate Centuria II*, in: Jacques Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Graeca* (Tomus XC, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1865), p. 1002.

⁴¹ S. Maximi Confessoris, *Capitulum de Charitate Centuria I*, 970: „pax Dei charitatem adducens“.

⁴² See S. Maximi Confessoris, *Mystagogia*, pp. 668-669.

⁴³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie*, p. 122.

as a barrier, but rather constitutes a bridge to love and communication.

Orthodox Tradition sustains a eucharistic world-view that contributes to the overcoming of the ecological crisis and promotes a culture of love, of reconciliation and of healing communication⁴⁴. A *eucharistic spirituality* emphasizes the meaning of an ecological world-view and contributes to a culture of reconciliation. The real aim of the world is the *koinonia* of love, the *koinonia* with the Holy Trinity⁴⁵.

The eucharistic world-view involves a culture of divine communion. In the centre of this theology of cosmic holiness of creation stands a liturgical world-view that promotes a culture of dialogue, of acceptance of the other as original/individual icons or expressions of God's rationality.

4 An Iconic Theology of Beauty as Public Theology

One could also speak about the missionary aspect of the divine beauty. An icon is a sensible public invitation to participate in the beauty of a creative and transformative spirituality. Orthodoxy means not rigid dogmas and canons but firstly vivid experience of and doxological joy towards the beauty of the resurrection. As sensible symbols, icons lead us to God and to the divine vision – *visio Dei*. Icons are bridges to God's Kingdom and Beauty. Orthodox spirituality is spirituality of seeing and of becoming transformed by the perception and practice of

⁴⁴ See Daniel Munteanu, *Christian Humanism as Paradigm of Healing Communication. Ecumenical Dimension of the Theological Witness*, in: I. Tulcan, C. Ioja (ed.), *The International Symposium of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, Arad, 6-8 June 2007, Accentes and Perspectives of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology as Part of Church Mission in Today's World*, (Arad 2008), pp. 191-206.

⁴⁵ See Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), p. 39 and p. 59.

beauty. Human beings are able to become a burning bush of the divine beauty. Led by sensible images and thanks to the graciously Kenosis of God we can receive communion with the divine light and become a historical and original source of this vivid and transforming beauty. The mystery of an icon is the mystery of the divine incarnation and inhabitation in the created world.

A theology of the icon leads to an *iconic anthropology*. Human beings are icons of God (imago Dei/„εικὼν καὶ δόξα τῆς Τριάδος“⁴⁶, partakers of God’s grace, clothed with divine grace and beauty: “Gloria Dei vivens homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei”⁴⁷ – said St. Irenaeus of Lyon. The inner longing for beauty is the longing for communion with God. Icons are an invitation to become “light of the world”, a source of spiritual and eschatological beauty in the world. Not only icons but also humans can become a *living doxology*, a window to the beautiful grace of God, a transparency towards the divine holiness. Humans are called to incarnate the divine beauty in their lives, “to transfer the beauty of the original to the likeness”⁴⁸.

The icon is an expression of the human being as homo religiosus and εἰκὼν καὶ δόξα τῆς Τριάδος. The human being is created by God and has a sacred, transcendental dimension. His own existence should be a hierophany. The icon is something dynamic and not static. As living icon of God humans are able to grow in the communion with his/her Creator. Homo religiosus is also homo symbolicus: “it is through a symbolic language that

⁴⁶ See D. Balfour, Saint Gregory the Sinaite: Discourse on the transfiguration, (California: San Bernardino 1986), p. 41: „ὁ ἄνθρωπος εἰκὼν καὶ δόξα τῆς Τριάδος”.

⁴⁷ Irenäus, Fünf Bücher gegen die Häresien, (München 1912), IV, 20.7, p. 66.

⁴⁸ St. John Damascene, On the Holy Icons, p. 42.

man attempts to express his perception of the mystery of life, a life which he tries to comprehend as something absolute"⁴⁹.

5 Icons as a Theology of Hope and Anticipation of the Eschatological Beauty

An icon is a testimony to hope, a witness in the world to the future fulfilment and end in the glory of God. Icons are a theology of glory and glorification, of divine kindness, love and beauty. Icons are a historical liturgy, a symbolical worship of God and a concrete witness to future salvation. Icons are a sign of the future as far as they transmit and make this future accessible to the present world. They are also a source of inspiration and orientation.

In this sense, Orthodoxy is an *optimistic culture of liturgical testimony* about the victory over death, suffering and illness by the future beauty of the divine glory (δόξα). Orthodox soteriology is iconic due to the fact that icons express an intentionality of communion. This eschatological orientation as longing and expectation is accompanied by the understanding of matter as God's creation. An icon is a "channel of divine strength and grace"⁵⁰ a eucharistic and consecrated grammar of interpersonal love, of perichoresis as reciprocal indwelling. Icons are channels of grace, divine beauty and holiness.

We can describe orthodox culture as a culture of sanctification and perichoresis. Humanity and creation can become a beautiful and holy place of God's indwelling. περιχώρεσις is the way to θέωσις as μυστική ἔνωσις (mystical union). "By assuming human nature, Christ impregnated it with grace, making it participate in the divine life, and cleared the way to

⁴⁹ J. Ries, Art. Immortality, in: Mircea Eliade (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, (Vol. 7, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1987), p. 144.

⁵⁰ Idem, p. 73.

the Kingdom of God (...), the way of deification and transfiguration"⁵¹. Jesus Christ brought into the world not only the gift of immortality but also the divine beauty and glory. Icons are also a liturgical illuminative medium and doxological invitation to *mimesis*, i.e. to share and to enjoy the richness of grace and divine presence in the world. Participation in the divine life means participation in the divine beauty. This participation (μετουσίᾳ) leads to transformation, transfiguration and deification of the world by divine beauty and love. The cosmos can be transfigured by the force of divine grace and attain the incorruptible beauty of God's Kingdom. "True beauty is the radiance of the Holy Spirit, the holiness of and the participation in the life of the world to come"⁵².

In the Orthodox Tradition spiritual life is called *via illuminativa* – illumination (φωτισμός), i.e. vision of and union with God who is source of light, love and beauty. Matter can be illuminated by grace, so that an icon "portrays the divine beauty and glory in material ways which are visible to physical eyes"⁵³. An icon indicates, anticipates and participates in the holiness and glory of the world to come by representing and expressing "the reality which was revealed in the transfiguration on the Mount Tabor"⁵⁴. Icons are intimately connected with the eschatological reality of the new creation and irradiate into the world the holiness, the uncreated light, the glory and beauty of divine grace. Icons are also an invitation to an ascetic lifestyle of purification from sin by participation in the Passion of Christ. According to Orthodox Spirituality without the path of askesis there is no deification, i.e. neither vision of God nor participation in the beauty of the transcendent glory is possible. An icon is not an aim in itself but a participatory reality, i.e. a participation and invitation to a more intensive communion

⁵¹ L. Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, p. 187.

⁵² *Idem*, p. 190.

⁵³ *Idem*, p. 191.

⁵⁴ *Idem*, p. 192.

with the divine beauty. There is an eschatological tension in each work of art, in each theology and liturgy. We can find everywhere attempts to participate in the glorifying presence of the divine beauty. Iconic theology has at its very heart an ineffable desire. Each creative act is moved by an immanent longing of encountering with the transcendental beauty. This longing for communication is at the same time a longing for expression of this experienced beauty.

Christian truth and beauty are connected with life. Beauty needs to be expressed and this is the inner logic of the eternal life. Each icon supposes a *paschal vision of reality*. It has an eschatological orientation and irradiates the Paschal glory (1 Thes 4.14). It sustains the doctrine of deification in its structural significance for the Orthodox theology. Eschatological hope is connected with the cosmic restoration: „the creation itself will be set free from it’s bondage to decay“ (Rom 8,21).

Icons communicate to us the beauty of God's kingdom as perfect communion without suppression, a communion that is free of domination (herrschaftsfreie Kommunikation). They are a materialized Theology of Hope and a concrete theology of resurrection. Each icon emits an inexpressible beauty which is rooted in the coming beauty of the kingdom of heaven. The icon is a clear, charismatic presence of the divine beauty in the world, an anticipation of the new creation that becomes reality in Jesus Christ.

Icons are the visible elements of religion and the products of the spiritual life. An icon has not only a symbolic and cultural value of visual art. It is not only the expression of an artistic intention but also expression of a visible religiosity⁵⁵. Icons are the prism in which the orthodox *eschatological ethos* or worldview is encompassed. They are a sign and a symbol of the eschatological reality of the new creation. Icons contribute to

⁵⁵ See H. G. Kippenberg, Iconography: Iconography as Visible Religion, in: M. Eliade (Ed.), The Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. 7, p. 3-7.

the aesthetical transformation of reality. Orthodox theology of icon embedded also a transforming paradigm referring to social values. It reveals a “structural code”:

“There are basically two theoretical models that can be invoked to explain the meaning of pictures: images can be read as elements of a structure, and they can be read as models of social reality. The two main theories of symbols, namely those of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ernst Cassirer, are also used in the field of iconography. For Lévi-Strauss, the meaning of symbols are based on their own logical interrelationships, while for Cassirer, symbols provide a conceptual means to grasp reality”⁵⁶.

6 Public Theology as a New Paradigm of Theology

Public theology is today one of the most significant paradigms of theology⁵⁷. It results from the growing consciousness that theology must react to the needs and primary questions of contemporary society⁵⁸. Christian theology is always *public*⁵⁹ because of its basic values⁶⁰.

⁵⁶ H. G. Kippenberg, *Iconography: Iconography as Visible Religion*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ On 5 May 2007 a Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT) was founded in Princeton which should link up different research centres and research programs on the subject of ‘public theology’. See <http://www.csu.edu.au/special/accc/about/gnpt/>; <http://www.public-theology.de>; <http://www.publictheology.org>. See R. F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology. The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville, Westminster: John Knox Press, 1991); H. Cox, *Religion in the Secular City. Toward a Postmodern Theology* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1984); D. S. Browning, and Fr. Schüssler Fiorenza (eds.), *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology* (New York: Crossroad Pub Co 1992); W. Huber, *Kirche und Öffentlichkeit* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1973).

⁵⁸ See S. Kim, Editorial, in: *IJPT* 1 (2007), p. 1.

⁵⁹ See H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins Publ. 2001), p. 93: ‘Christ belongs in culture, because culture itself, without

Public theology is “the reflection on actions and effects of Christianity in public, in society”⁶¹. Each theology is based on “narratives of public circumstance, of action and interaction in public spaces” so that it never was purely a “private matter”⁶². The concept of “public theology” was introduced into the discussion by Ronald F. Thiemann and Max Stackhouse, as well as by David Tracy in the United States, by Duncan Forrester and William Storrar in the United Kingdom, by John de Gruchy and Dirk Smit in South Africa, by James Haire and Clive Pearson in Australia, by Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfgang Huber and Heinrich Bedford-Strohm in Germany.

All theologians who focus on the role of public theology point to the significance of Christian culture in the transformation of society. Always possessing a cultural dimension, public theology contributes to the positive changes in public culture through the values of the Christian worldview.

Ronald F. Thiemann, a leading theologian on the role of religion and ethics in the United States, has analysed the public role of Christianity in a pluralistic society⁶³. Thiemann understands public theology as “faith seeking to understand the relation between Christian convictions and the broader social and cultural context within which the Christian community lives”⁶⁴. “Theology rightly conceived is a communal, formative, critical,

‘sense and taste for the infinite’, without a ‘holy music’ accompanying all its work, becomes sterile and corrupt’; K. Rahner, ‘Die Kirche und die heutige Wirklichkeit. Theologische Aspekte’, in: *Universitas* 34 (1979), p. 813.

⁶⁰ See M. Heimbach-Steins, ‘Angst vor der eigenen Courage?’ *Theologie zwischen gesellschaftlich-politischem Engagement und ekklesialer Verbindlichkeit*, in: *Bulletin ET* 15 (2004), pp. 51-65.

⁶¹ See W. Vögele, *Menschenwürde zwischen Recht und Theologie. Begründungen von Menschenrechten in der Perspektive öffentlicher Theologie* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2000), 23-29.

⁶² M. Higton, *Christ, Providence and History*, pp. 1-5.

⁶³ See R. F. Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life. A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

and public activity”⁶⁵. Thiemann points to the connection between *identity* and *culture*. Identity would not exist without the influence of the “matrix of roles and structures that constitute a society”⁶⁶. This is the reason why it is necessary for theology to take part in the education of religious identity through a common, formative, critical, and public activity⁶⁷.

Max L. Stackhouse is a member of the “Société Européenne de Culture” and author of numerous essays concerning the public relevance of theology.⁶⁸ He develops a public theology which stresses the role of “interculturality” in terms of the interdependence of culture, religion, family, and society: “Humanly nature is social as well as biological, moral as well as cultural, and spiritual as well as material”⁶⁹. His thesis is that “common life in a global era” needs “moral roots”⁷⁰. For Stackhouse, the real vocation of public theology is: “To form or reform the inner moral fabric of the globalisation process”⁷¹. Consequently, public theology embodies a culturally transformative power in the world because Christianity is a missionary religion that

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 167.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 169.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 170-173.

⁶⁸ See M. L. Stackhouse, *Public Theology and Political Economy, Christian Stewardship in Modern Society* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1991); idem, *Christian Social Ethics in a Worldwide Era* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995); idem, *Covenant and Commitments: Faith, Family and Economic Life* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1997); idem, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization and mission in Theological Education* (Foreword by D. W. Shriver, Jr., Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1988); idem, T. Dearborn, S. Paeth (eds), *The Local Church in a global Era: Reflection for a New Century* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2000).

⁶⁹ See idem, *Covenant and Commitments*, p. 3.

⁷⁰ Idem, The Moral Roots of the Common Life in a Global Era, in: M. Welker, C. A. Jarvis (eds), *Loving God with Our Minds: The Pastor as Theologian* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2004), pp. 50-61.

⁷¹ See <http://www.gordon.edu/ccs/usaspeakers/maxstackhouse>, 1.

brings the message of reconciliation and peace into the world⁷². Christianity can serve “as the decisive resource for the future”⁷³ because it contributes in history to a *process of civilisation*⁷⁴.

7 Orthodox Iconic Public Theology and Public Culture

How can a *public* and *iconic theology* become a field of cultural gravity⁷⁵ and contribute to the *transformation of society*?

In my opinion, the most important aspect is the fundamental cultural and spiritual role of public theology in society. Icons as sacred art are a means of communication. Icons constitute the basis of a theology of media or a media of sacred theology. Media, theology and sacred art are constitutive for a specific culture. Human beings are different from animals because of their highly developed culture,⁷⁶ i.e. through their “ability to use systems of communication”⁷⁷.

⁷² See M. L. Stackhouse, Reflections on How and Why We Go Public, in: IJPT 1 (2007), p. 427.

⁷³ See idem, Introduction: Foundations and Purposes, in: idem, D. P. McCann, S. J. Roels, and Preston N. Williams (eds.), *On Moral Business. Classical and Contemporary Resources for Ethics in Economic Life* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1995), p. 34.

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 30.

⁷⁵ See P. Bourdieu, *Zur Soziologie der symbolischen Formen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997⁶), pp. 75-84: he shows the connection points between the intellectual and the cultural force field.

⁷⁶ About the cultural identity see H.-O. Mühleisen, T. Stammen, and M. Ungethüm (eds.), *Anthropologie und kulturelle Identität. Friedemann Maurer zum 65. Geburtstag* (Lindenberg: Fink, Beuron: Beuroner Kunstverl., 2005).

⁷⁶ See W. H. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 157.

⁷⁷ U. Volli, *Semiotik. Eine Einführung in ihre Grundbegriffe* (Tübingen: Francke, 2002), p. 275. The complexity of human culture does not exclude, in my opinion, animal systems of communication. All

For Ernst Cassirer, culture reveals the whole reality of the human being. As *animal symbolicum*, a person needs culture as a system of production and interpretation of meaning⁷⁸. In the present “crisis of meaning” (*Sinnkrise*),⁷⁹ an orthodox iconic and public theology manifests the *real meaning of the human life* and contributes to its orientation. Icons contribute both to religious communication and to an eschatological orientation. For instance, the *orthodox iconic culture* is socially relevant because culture is a system of signs, of symbolic meaning in society. No society exists without culture and no culture without society. Culture, as the “totality of the sign systems and meaning structures in a society”⁸⁰ and as the “pulse of consciousness”,⁸¹ is the “grammar”⁸² or “substance of the society”⁸³.

No culture exists without social function. Furthermore, an iconic culture involves of such a function. Cultures and social systems embody different aspects of the same phenomena,⁸⁴

creatures have an ability to communicate and possess in this way an ontological communion with the Logos.

⁷⁸ B. Recki, *Kultur als Praxis. Eine Einführung in Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004), pp. 31-36.

⁷⁹ P. L. Berger, T. Luckmann, *Modernität, Pluralismus und Sinnkrise. Die Orientierung des modernen Menschen*, (Gütersloh: Kaiser 1995), pp. 9-23, p. 63: mention the “decay of culture”, the “estrangement of person”, the “inflation of sense in the society” and the “disorientation” of today’s human being.

⁸⁰ T. Aklemeyer, *Semiotische Aspekte der Soziologie: Soziosemiotik*, in: R. Posner, and K. Robering (eds) *Semiotik: Ein Handbuch zu den zeichentheoretischen Grundlagen von Natur und Kultur*, (3rd volume, Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2003), p. 2778.

⁸¹ B. Recki, *Kultur als Praxis*, p. 56.

⁸² C. Schwöbel, *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus: Studien zu einer Theologie der Kultur*, p. 263.

⁸³ U. Di Fabio, *Die Kultur der Freiheit* (München: Beck, 2005), p. 1, p. 21: Culture is an ‘identity sign of the society’.

⁸⁴ See F. Steger, ‘Einleitung. Kultur: Ein Netz von Bedeutungen’, in: F. Steger, (ed.), *Kultur. Ein Netz von Bedeutungen: Analysen zur*

which is why Geertz, one of the most famous American anthropologists, understood culture as “logical-sense-donating” and social system as “causal-functional”⁸⁵. Culture subsists as “the socially established structures of meaning” through which people communicate with each other: “Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations”⁸⁶.

Finally, we can consider an iconic public theology as a *symbolic source of light and orientation in the world*. In its eschatological dimension, as hope for the history of humanity, orthodox iconic public theology exerts a creative influence on society and promotes a *culture of public participation*.

Culture is communication, i.e. a sign system with public relevance.⁸⁷ Human thinking is basically “social as well as public”. Culture exists on account of “socially established meaning structures” which steer the behaviour of the person⁸⁸. The symbolic function of its language is universal because culture belongs to humankind⁸⁹. The symbols which constitute

symbolischen Kulturanthropologie (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2002), p. 12: The social behaviour is connected with the cultural selfinterpretation.

⁸⁵ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 145; see T. Aklemeyer, *Semiotische Aspekte der Soziologie*, p. 2778.

⁸⁶ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, p. 145.

⁸⁷ A. Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), p. 33.

⁸⁸ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 12: speaks about ‘socially established structures of meaning’; *ibidem*, p. 28: “Society’s forms are culture’s substance”.

⁸⁹ C. Geertz, Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture, in: Henrietta L. Moore, Todd Sanders (ed.), *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), pp. 236-245; see A. Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists’ Account* (Harvard: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), p. 98.

a culture are vehicles of meanings, so the symbolic, cultural judgments determine all social activities⁹⁰. “Culture is neither a particular kind of practice nor practice that takes place in a particular social location. It is, rather, the *semiotic dimension of human social practice* in general”⁹¹. Culture is a *semiotic structured universe which forms the practice*⁹².

Culture as “extrinsic information coded in symbols” is a condition of the survival of the human being⁹³. It plays a determining role in human life because a person needs the symbolic strength of culture to steer his behaviour: “Without orientation by cultural patterns – organised systems of significant symbols – the behaviour of the person would be virtually uncontrollable, a perfect chaos of aimless actions and eruptive feelings”⁹⁴.

The human being is “the animal most desperately dependent on such extragenetic control mechanisms, such cultural programs for ordering his behaviour”⁹⁵. The symbols-system is necessary for orientation, communication and self-control⁹⁶.

⁹⁰ A. Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*, p. 99.

⁹¹ W. H. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 164.

⁹² *Ibidem*, 165.

⁹³ W. H. Sewell, Geertz, cultural systems, and history: from synchrony to transformation, in: R. M. Burns (ed.), *Historiography: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies* (vol. IV Culture, New York: Routledge, 2006), p.125.

⁹⁴ C. Geertz, Kulturbegriff und Menschenbild, in: F.-P. Burkard (ed.), *Kulturphilosophie* (Frankfurt: Alber, 2000), p. 221: Therefore, the culture is “a necessary condition of human existence”; see *idem*, The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man, in: B. A. U. Levinson, K. M. Borman, and M. Eisenhart (eds), *Schooling the Symbolic Animal: Social and Cultural Dimensions of Educations* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Lottlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), p. 26.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

Symbols and icons or images belong to the essence of the spiritual life⁹⁷. Iconic Culture refers to the integral reality of the human being as *animal symbolicum*,⁹⁸ as *homo significans*,⁹⁹ i.e. as a being that is looking for the meaning of his existence. Culture is a system of meanings and an “ensemble of symbolic systems”¹⁰⁰. Iconic culture is a semiotic system, a “map, sieve and matrix”¹⁰¹, of “socially agreed meaning structures”¹⁰².

⁹⁷ See Michel Quenot, *The Resurrection and the Icon*, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), p. 7.

⁹⁸ E. Cassirer, *Versuch über den Menschen. Einführung in eine Philosophie der Kultur* (trans. R. Kaiser, Hamburg: Meiner 1996), p. 51; see G. Hartung, *Anthropologische Grundlegung der Kulturphilosophie – Zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Ernst Cassirers Essay on Man*, in: H.-J. Lachmann, U. Kösser (eds), *Kulturwissenschaftliche Studien* (Kulturphilosophische und ästhetische Reihe, Band 6, Leipzig: Passage-Verlag, 2001), pp. 2-18; see H. Wahl, *Glaube und symbolische Erfahrung. Eine praktisch-theologische Symboltheorie* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1994); see J. Splett, *Realsymbol. Zur Anthropologie des Sakramentalen*, in: G. Oberhammer, M. Schmücker (eds), *Raumzeitliche Vermittlung der Transzendenz. Zur ‘sakramentalen’ Dimension religiöser Tradition. Arbeitsdokumentation eines Symposiums* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999), pp. 325-351.

⁹⁹ Chr. Schwöbel, *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus: Studien zu einer Theologie der Kultur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), p. 261.

¹⁰⁰ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Das Nahe und das Ferne. Eine Autobiographie in Gesprächen* (trans. D. Eribon, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1989), p. 15; P. Tillich, *Kirche und Kultur*, in: P. Tillich, *Gesammelte Werke, Die Religiöse Substanz der Kultur: Schriften zur Theologie der Kultur*, (Bd. 9, R. Albrecht ed., Stuttgart: Evangel. Verl.-Werk, 1967), p. 34: For Tillich theology is always „cultural theology“; see H. Tillich, *Das Neue Sein als Zentralbegriff einer christlichen Theologie*, in: P. Tillich, *Gesammelte Werke, Schriften zur Theologie, Offenbarung und Glaube*, (Bd. 8, R. Albrecht ed., Stuttgart: Evangel. Verl.-Werk, 1970), pp. 220-239; see E. Sturm, *Das absolute Paradox als Prinzip der Theologie und Kultur in Paul Tillichs ‘Rechtfertigung und Zweifel’ von 1919*, in: G. Hummel (ed.), *The Theological Paradox: Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Centre of Paul Tillich’s Thought: Proceedings of the V. International Paul Tillich Symposium hold in Frankfurt/Main 1994* (Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann, 74. Bd., Berlin: W. de Gryter & Co., 1995), pp.

Clifford Geertz¹⁰³ has strongly influenced our understanding of culture¹⁰⁴. For him, sacred symbols generate an ethos, an emotional tone and an ensemble of feelings¹⁰⁵. Therefore, Geertz views the human being as “suspended in webs of meaning”¹⁰⁶. He unfolds a “symbolic or interpretative anthropology”, which describes the human being as a cultural being¹⁰⁷. Culture is for him a “sensory connection” or a “sign

44-53: speaks about Tillich’s Theology of culture; P. Steinacker, *Passion und Paradox – Der Expressionismus als Verstehenshintergrund der theologischen Anfänge Paul Tillichs. Ein Versuch*, in: G. Hummel (ed.), *God and being: the Problem of Ontology in the Philosophical Theology of Paul Tillich: Contributions made to the II. International Paul Tillich Symposium held in Frankfurt 1988* (Berlin, New York: W. de Gruyter, 1989), p. 87.

¹⁰¹ C. Geertz, *Dichte Beschreibung. Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme* (transl. B. Luchesi, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2007), p. 9.

¹⁰² C. Geertz, *Primordial Loyalties and Standing Entities: Anthropological Reflections on the Politics of Identity*, http://www.colbud.hu/main_old/PubArchive/PL/PL07-Geertz.pdf.

¹⁰³ W. H. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 175.

¹⁰⁴ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 87-125; see M. Lambek (ed.), *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* (3rd ed., Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), pp. 61-82; see D. L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 233-244; see V. Samuel, *Die Religion in der Gesellschaft und die Weltreligionen*, in: Ralph Pechmann, Reppenhausen M., (ed.), *Zeugnis im Dialog der Religionen und der Postmoderne* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999), p. 203: ‘All religions are cultural-linguistic systems’.

¹⁰⁵ A. Swindler, *Geertz’s Ambiguous Legacy*, in: D. Clawson (ed.), *Required Reading: Sociology’s Most Influential Books* (Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p. 80.

¹⁰⁶ C. Geertz, *Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, (3rd edition, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ C. Geertz, *Kulturbegriff und Menschenbild*, p. 217.

system”;¹⁰⁸ he writes, ‘there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture’¹⁰⁹.

For instance, an orthodox iconic public theology promotes the education of the person as the *art of transformation*.¹¹⁰ The understanding of culture as a *cultivation*¹¹¹ underlines the role of education¹¹² in society. The crossing *from humus to homo*

¹⁰⁸ Clifford Geertz, *Available Light*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ C. Geertz, *The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man*, p. 28.

¹¹⁰ K. Jaspers, *Was ist Erziehung? Ein Lesebuch* (München, Zürich: Piper, 1977), p. 47.

¹¹¹ T. J. Gorringe, *Fathering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 4; see A. Wimmer, *Kultur als Prozess: Zur Dynamik des Aushandelns von Bedeutungen* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005), p. 14; see J. Hüllen, *Mensch sein – human werden. Grundzüge kritischer Anthropologie* (Frankfurt am Main, Bern, New York: Peter Lang 1985), pp. 41-49; see B. Malinowski, *Kultur und Freiheit* (Stuttgart: Humboldt, 1951), p. 143: “The consideration of education as a cultural process reveals us that this explains one of the most powerful tools of democracy. It’s cultural value lies in the fact that it removes prerogatives of birth and offers the extensive possibility to promote real talents.”; see W. Haubeck, W. Heinrichs, and M. Schröder (eds), *Mensch sein – Mensch werden. Impulse christlicher Anthropologie* (Witten: Bundes-Verl., 2001).

¹¹² See M. Heimbach-Steins, ‘Bildung als Menschenrecht’, in: H.-E. Tenortz, M. Hüther, M. Heimbach-Steins, (eds.), *Erziehung und Bildung heute* (Berlin: Verlag der GDA, 2006), pp. 47-70; see idem, *Bildung und Chancengleichheit*, in: M. Heimbach-Steins (ed.), *Christliche Sozialethik. Ein Lehrbuch, Band 2: Konkretionen* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2005), pp. 50-81; see H. Bedford-Strohm, *Bildung, Gerechtigkeit, Teilhabe – Kommentar zum Beitrag von Gerhard Kruip*, in: M. Heimbach-Steins, and Gerhard Kruip (eds), *Bildung und Beteiligungsgerechtigkeit*, (Bielefeld: Bertelsman 2003), pp. 131-136; see H. Timm, *Diesseits des Himmels. Von Welt- und Menschenbildung. Facetten der Religionskultur* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1988); see Aristoteles, *Über die Seele, griechisch-deutsch*, (W. Biehl and O. Apelt (eds.), transl. W. Theiler, Hamburg: F. Meiner Verlag 1995), p. 3. The first sentence of Aristotle’s tract is: “All people strive from nature for knowledge”.

happens through culture or “cultivation”¹¹³. The values of culture¹¹⁴ can change the ethos of the society¹¹⁵ while becoming part of the public discourse. “This is what human culture can be – a transformed human life in and to the glory of God (...). The Christian life is cultural life converted by the regeneration of man’s spirit”¹¹⁶.

8 Icon as Public Theology

An icon is a public witness of the Orthodox Treasure of Faith! Each icon is part of the natural, material world and at the same time part of the transfigured universe, i.e. of the new creation. The transfiguration of the world occurred firstly through the resurrection of Christ and by the descent of the Holy Spirit. An icon is an epicletic reality, an irradiation of the beauty of the resurrected matter and as such a source of transforming power in our world. The icon is a living force of cultural, religious and sacramental life. Icons are signs and symbols of the vivid memories of the Church and of the vivifying presence of the Holy Spirit, i.e. anamnesis and epiklesis at the same time. Icons are part of the cosmos and hold cosmic significance: they are liturgical media of celebration of the world to come, imitation or visualization of divine wisdom, confession of incarnation, embodied presence of divine grace and beauty.

¹¹³ G. Hartmann, *The Fateful Question of Culture* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997), p. 172; see R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins Publ. 2001), p. 69: “Christ claims no man as a purely natural being, but always as one who has become human in culture; who is not only culture, but into whom culture has penetrated. Man not only speaks but thinks with the aid of the language of culture”.

¹¹⁴ See H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 34: “The world of culture is a *world of values*”.

¹¹⁵ T. J. Gorringer, *Furthering Humanity*, p. 48.

¹¹⁶ H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 196, p. 205.

9 Liturgical Spirituality – Principal Aspects of an Orthodox Iconic Public Theology

“The icon is an object of worship embodying divine grace and forming an integral part of the liturgy. Often and with good reason, the icon is called ‘theology in images’”¹¹⁷. Icons can be understood as an identity marker of the Orthodox Church. There is interdependence between Orthodox Spirituality, iconography and liturgical worship¹¹⁸. Each icon is part of the liturgy of the Church and as such an open window towards the eschatological presence of God in history. Icons allow us to participate in the divine eternal beauty of God. They belong to the specific space of an orthodox liturgy. There is no Orthodox Liturgy without icons and no Orthodox Church without an iconostasis. Therefore icons belong to the cultural and corporate identity of Orthodoxy. The orthodox liturgical space is marked by icons and the iconostasis.

Icon is both Liturgy and constitutive part of the Liturgy, i.e. of a eucharistic worldview. Icons call us to leave doxologically. In doxology we overcome all patterns of violence, self-centredness, idolatry and intolerance. Iconic theology is therapeutically because it helps us to overcome all patterns of violence. At the same time, iconic theology is ecological theology due to the light of the infinite beauty revealed in the historical and cultural context of an icon as résumé and as presence of the divine glory. Orthodox spiritual life is an iconic and liturgical spirituality.

The issue of liturgy is central for an orthodox understanding of public theology. Needless to say that nowadays a liturgical worldview tends to be treated as common sense in ecumenical dialogue. For instance, in order to emphasise the public character of theology, D. B. Forrester points to liturgy and

¹¹⁷ L. Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 10.

¹¹⁸ See M. Quenot, *The Resurrection and the Icon*, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 43ff.

describes “*liturgical anthropology*” as the basis of contemporary public theology¹¹⁹. He is not the only one supporting the idea of a *liturgical dimension of public theology*. D. Smit shows the connection between *lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, and *lex convivendi*,¹²⁰ while Thiemann underlines the link between “liturgy and public responsibility”¹²¹. In addition, Patrick R. Keifert argues that Christianity needs a *liturgical-cultural contextualisation* in order to renew the public dimension of Christian liturgy¹²².

Ion Bria, a world-famous Romanian-Orthodox theologian of the 20th century developed a public theology as *liturgical spirituality*. He described the Christian life as “*Liturgy after the Liturgy*”¹²³. Christian theology is based on an indivisible unity between *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*. The celebration of the resurrection remains at the centre of the Christian liturgy¹²⁴. Liturgy and resurrection are unified because Jesus Christ, who is resurrected and present in liturgy, is an open door to the

¹¹⁹ D. B. Forrester, *Theological Fragments: Explorations in Unsystematic Theology* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), pp. 95-97.

¹²⁰ D. Smit, *Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex (con)vivendi? – Oriënterende inleiding tot liturgie en etiek*, in: <http://academic.sun.ac.za/buvton/Navorsing/liturgie.en.etiek.buvton.doc>.

¹²¹ R. F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, pp. 112-128.

¹²² P. R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 52-59: The liturgical hospitality creates a public space that encloses the strangers.

¹²³ I. Bria, Celebrating life in the liturgy, in: idem, (ed.), *Jesus Christ – the Life of the World. An Orthodox contribution to the Vancouver theme* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), p. 85; idem, *Romania. Orthodox Identity at a Crossroads of Europe* (Geneva: WCC Publ. 1995), p. 23, p. 47; idem, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy. Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*, (Geneva: WCC Publ. 1996), p. 9.

¹²⁴ Idem, *Mari sărbători și praznice creștine, praznice împărătești. Meditații teologice* (Sibiu: Ed. Popasuri Duhovnicești, 2004), p. 7; idem, *Tratat de teologie dogmatică și ecumenică* (București: Ed. Romania Crestina, 1999), p. 284: “The Eucharist inspire a ‘liturgical spirituality’ and encourage towards a culture of solidarity, based on justice, peace, freedom and respect of creation”.

intimate life of the Holy Trinity¹²⁵. The theology of resurrection is fundamental to an orthodox iconic and liturgical public theology. It underlines the eschatological dignity of the entire creation, of all ecosystems that are going to become part of the new creation (2 Cor. 5,17). Each orthodox liturgy has as its centre the Eucharist and is, as such, a celebration or anticipation of the resurrection, i.e. of the new creation.

The eucharistic liturgy is “the best way of access to the heart of the Orthodox Church”¹²⁶. As a medium of communication with God and as a space for the highest intimacy with the Holy Trinity,¹²⁷ it is a synthesis of the fundamental elements of the Orthodox faith¹²⁸. Liturgy means a participation in the divine koinonia, a sacramental communication with the incomprehensible infinity of the divine truth, and an anticipation of the kingdom of God¹²⁹. There is no Christian identity apart from a liturgical community¹³⁰. Christian life is a life in communion, in dialogue with God, and in communion with the resurrected

¹²⁵ Idem, *Mari sărbători și praznice creștine, praznice împărătești. Meditații teologice*, p. 17.

¹²⁶ Idem, Celebrating life in the liturgy, p. 85: “If people would like to know what Orthodox Christian believe in, whom they worship and how they live, they should penetrate the form and substance of the liturgy”; idem, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy. Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*, p. 9: “The most appropriate way to experience and communicate the message is to celebrate the faith through doxological hymns and prayers and sacramental symbolism”.

¹²⁷ Idem, *Mari sărbători și praznice creștine, praznice împărătești. Meditații teologice*, p. 16.

¹²⁸ Idem, Aspecte dogmatice ale unirii Bisericilor creștine, in: *Studii Teologice* 1-2 (1968), p. 17.

¹²⁹ Idem, Celebrating life in the liturgy, pp. 86-87; idem, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy. Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*, p. 31: “Liturgy opens the horizon of the kingdom of God for all humanity in the midst of history”.

¹³⁰ Idem, p. 36, p. 87, p.74: “The divine communion determines the quality of the human community. (...)The community of the Holy Trinity (is) a reality which holds together human society and orders common life. The new life is life within community”.

body of Christ: “Here and now, on earth and in time, the liturgy inaugurates the eschatological community of the redeemed”¹³¹. Christ is the source of life because he communicates to us the divine life as well as his Spirit of Life. Thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit, the liturgy is a medium for the cosmic transfiguration of the world¹³².

The liturgy is an initiation into the glory of the kingdom of God and an anticipation of eternal life¹³³. This consciousness of God’s presence in the world contributes to an *iconic ecological culture*, which has its roots in a *liturgical worldview*. To understand the world in a liturgical and iconic way means to respect the theological dignity of creation.

10 Iconic Culture as Culture of Holiness

The Orthodox understanding of liturgy underlines the importance of a culture of holiness. There is no real icon or liturgy without *epiclesis*, i.e. without the transformative work of the Holy Spirit who opens the eschatological dimension of the new creation¹³⁴. Orthodox liturgical theology contributes to a culture “of unification and of sanctification”¹³⁵. A faith marked by love is the foundation of an ethos or a lifestyle connected

¹³¹ Idem, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy. Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*, p. 16.

¹³² Idem, *Dicționar de teologie ortodoxă* (București: EIBMBOR, 1994²), p. 100; idem, *The sense of ecumenical tradition. The ecumenical witness and vision of the Orthodox* (Geneva: WCC Publ., 1991), pp. 38-40.

¹³³ Idem, Introduction, in: I. Bria (ed.), *Martyria/Mission. The Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today* (Geneva: Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, World, 1980), p. 10.

¹³⁴ Idem, *La vie. Un avenir déterminé par le Salut du monde*, p. 197; idem, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy. Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*, p. 9.

¹³⁵ Idem, *Mari sărbători și praznice creștine, praznice împărătești. Meditații teologice*, p. 6.

with the “sanctification of the universe”¹³⁶. Christian culture is not only interpretative but also unifying, like the Christological synthesis¹³⁷.

One could understand culture as related like icons to “cult” (liturgy); culture and icons converge in the process of the transfiguration of the world.¹³⁸ Culture and icons are not a goal in themselves but means of participation in the divine life, a way of making the Gospel and beauty of Christ accessible in the world¹³⁹: “Culture is the ‘stylistic matrix’ of the good news, making it transparent and alive, able to enter the experience of the whole people”¹⁴⁰.

Christian culture is liturgical because the liturgy is the medium of sanctification for the human being as well as for the entire world. Liturgy involves immediate participation in Jesus Christ, the spring of holiness¹⁴¹. A Christian theology of culture is a theology of the Logos¹⁴², an iconic, sanctifying, apophatic, and doxological culture¹⁴³. Without liturgy, sanctification is impossible. The transformative element in Christian culture consists in its intimate union with Jesus Christ as the light of resurrection and the spring of eternal life. The resurrected Lord liberates matter from death¹⁴⁴ and his resurrection is an event of cosmic significance. On account of his resurrection everything is called to eternal life¹⁴⁵.

¹³⁶ Idem, *Romania. Orthodox Identity at a Crossroads of Europe*, p. 28.

¹³⁷ Ibidem, p. 30: “Culture (...) is a symbol unifying two realities in one”.

¹³⁸ Ibidem, p. 25.

¹³⁹ Ibidem, p. 37.

¹⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 31.

¹⁴¹ Idem, *Dicționar de teologie ortodoxă*, p. 325.

¹⁴² Idem, I. Coman 1902-1987, in: I. Bria, and D. Heller (eds), *Ecumenical Pilgrims. Profiles of Pioneers in Christian Reconciliation*, (Geneva: WCC Publ., 1995), p. 64; I. Bria, *Teologia Ortodoxă în România contemporană* (Iași: Trinitas 2003), p. 92.

¹⁴³ Idem, *Romania. Orthodox Identity at a Crossroads of Europe*, p. 38.

¹⁴⁴ Idem, *Mari sărbători și praznice creștine, praznice împărătești. Meditații teologice*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 29.

Liturgical culture can be understood as a path towards the sanctification and transfiguration of the cosmos¹⁴⁶. Through liturgy and liturgical culture the world becomes more and more transparent to divine beauty. Christian soteriology is cosmic and underlines the values of the material world in its liturgical and sanctifying communion with God¹⁴⁷. A Christian liturgical and iconic culture plays a crucial role in this cosmic soteriology because it is the medium of civilization and humanization of society and of the world¹⁴⁸. Liturgy, as an ecological, eschatological lifestyle, helps us to see the world differently, i.e. with receptivity for the new creation and for the inhabitation of God.

Orthodox iconic spirituality, with its sensitivity to God's immanence in the world, directly contributes to the overcoming of our contemporary ecological crisis and has, as such, a public dimension. It exhorts us to promote a culture of love in terms of respect and responsibility for God's creation. The entire world can become a cosmic liturgy in which the ecological crisis has been resolved through a green, i.e. ecological spirituality.

An orthodox iconic public theology involves a doxological dimension. It can be described as a "politics" of healing communication and as an attempt to sanctify the world. Iconic public theology allows us to rediscover and to practice a cosmic love, a "cosmic liturgy", by respecting the transcendental dignity of all creatures and of the whole world.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Idem, *Tratat de teologie dogmatică și ecumenică*, p. 286.

¹⁴⁷ Idem, Sanctification de la création, in: I. Bria, P. Chanson, J. Gadille, and M. Spindler (eds), *Dictionnaire oecuménique de missiologie. Cent mots pour la mission*, (Paris: Cerf, 2001), p. 315.

¹⁴⁸ Idem, *Romania. Orthodox Identity at a Crossroads of Europe*, pp. 42-43, p. 54.

¹⁴⁹ F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamasov* (New York: New American Library 1999), p. 309: "Love all of God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things."

We can understand icons as the basis of an *orthodox ecotheology* because they lead to an *ecological spirituality* accompanied by a eucharistic and liturgical worldview. An orthodox iconic spirituality contributes to the overcoming of the ecological crisis as a crisis of human culture, i.e. as spiritual crisis. An iconic worldview involves sensitivity for the immanence of God in the world.

In conclusion we can say that icons are a theology of beauty and a synthesis of an orthodox aesthetics of salvation. Beauty is both a duty and a central soteriological category in the Orthodox Tradition. "Beauty remains the symbol for salvation".¹⁵⁰ St. Gregory of Nyssa understands "divine love and salvation as beautification, which involve a change from darkness to brightness through the analogy of the refinement of gold".¹⁵¹ He said: "Although I have become dark through sin and have dwelt in gloom by my deeds, the Bridegroom made me beautiful through his love, having exchanged his very own beauty for my disgrace (Is 53:2-3; Phil 2:7). After taking the filth of my sins upon himself, he allowed me to share his own purity, and filled me with his beauty"¹⁵².

¹⁵⁰ M. S. M. Scott, *Shades of Grace: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa's Soteriological Exegesis of the Black and Beautiful Bride in Song of Songs 1:5*, in: *HTR* 99:1 (2006), pp. 65-83, p. 76.

¹⁵¹ *Idem.*

¹⁵² Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (trans. Casimir McCambley; Brookline, Mass.: Hellenic College Press, 1987), p. 60; see M. S. M. Scott, *Shades of Grace*, p. 73.