Translator's Introduction

During the last century aesthetics became an autonomous discipline with its own technical vocabulary and, as such, detached the beautiful from the good. It was not always so. In the ancient and medieval worlds aesthetic experience pointed to a transcendent reality beyond this world. Plato posited an absolute beauty and goodness which is the eternal form that makes all things beautiful in our sensible transitory world. The aesthetic draws one towards this absolute. Morever, the aesthetic is not only visual; it also has a moral dimension that elevates the soul towards the source of beauty. Plato's philosophical successors built on these convictions. For Plotinus beauty is coterminous with ultimate reality, so that ugliness, which is the negation of beauty and goodness, is not just what is aesthetically displeasing but is the negation of reality itself. The beauty and goodness of the primary level of reality is not immediately accessible to us, but descends to us through the secondary and tertiary levels of Intellect and Soul. Our task in this life is to 'ascend again to the good, which every soul desires' and to become united with it.[1] The identity of the good with the beautiful cannot be demonstrated dialectically, says Plotinus. It can only be grasped intuitively through direct experience: 'Anyone who has seen [the good] knows what I mean when I say that it is beautiful.'[2] It marks the first step towards the vision of God.

This aesthetic was adopted by some of the Church Fathers, notably, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa,[3] who expressed it by

1. Plotinus, *Ennead* I.6.7, in Plotinus, *Ennead, Volume I: Porphyry on the Life of Plotinus. Ennead I*, trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library 440 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 253.
2. Ibid.
3. In the West Augustine was also deeply impressed by Plotinus' treatise 'On Beauty', which he read in Latin translation and quotes anonymously in *De Civitate Dei* IX.17 and *Confessions* I.18 and VIII.8.

the term *philokalia*, the 'love of the beautiful', and through them it entered into the Byzantine tradition. In one major respect, however, the Christian version of philokalia differed profoundly from the Neoplatonic. This was the value accorded by Christianity to the body. When God created the world, he pronounced it 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). When the Word of God became incarnate, he demonstrated in his own person the potential transformation of the whole material world, sealing this transformation with his death and resurrection. The human body has a divine destiny. Since Christ's resurrection, prefigured by his transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-9; Luke 9:28-36), the human body, resurrected and transfigured, has been understood as intended from the beginning to participate in the union of the soul with God. The beauty of the material world is thus not simply a pointer to absolute beauty, a pointer that will be discarded when we attain the vision of absolute beauty, but will itself participate in absolute beauty and will be completed and fulfilled in it.

In the modern Orthodox context, this understanding of philokalia, the perception of the world's beauty not only as pointing to a transcendent reality but as already filled with it, has been obscured by contemporary notions of aesthetics that disconnect beauty from the true and the good. Recently, however, there has been a renewed interest in theological aesthetics. 'By demonstrating an analogy,' Oleg Bychkov has said, 'and in the case of some thinkers even an essential unity, between aesthetic and other types of experience, theological aesthetics attempts to show the reverse, that is, that the aesthetic is actually indicative of some sort of core "truth".'[4] In her important book on the theophanic nature of the icon, Cornelia Tsakiridou goes further. 'The ability of an image to realize transcendent realities aesthetically', she maintains, 'does not lie with its beauty. It is *enargeia* [the quality of clarity, vividness, self-evident truth] that brings the image to a state of ontological plenitude and presence, and enables it to convey holiness or in the case of Christ divinity.'[5] Tsakiridou is referring primarily to the painted image, but she extends her remarks to apply also to the natural image and even to human persons such

4. O.V. Bychkov, *Aesthetic Revelation: Reading Ancient and Medieval Texts after Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), p. xi.

5. C.A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity: Orthodox Theology and the Aesthetics of the Christian Image* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 20.

as the Christian 'ascetic who converses with God, inhabits God or participates in divine being'.[6]

Chrysostomos Stamoulis moves within this environment, bringing into dialogue with each other the Marxist theorist Kostas Zouraris, the poets George Seferis and Georgios Themelis, the literary critic Zissimos Lorentzatos, the priest and liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemann, the dogmatic theologian Nikos Matsoukas, the novelist Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis, the ascetic elders Sophrony of Essex and Porphyrios of Mount Athos, and the philosopher Theodor Adorno – along with the Fathers of the Church, who are not simply voices from the past but witnesses to a living tradition. Some of these names are not well known outside Greece (a Who's Who is appended at the end of the book to help the reader) but each of them from a different perspective sheds a powerful light on the multiple facets of a fundamentally unified material world as the means by which we commune with God.

Stamoulis' discussion, despite some unfamiliar names, is rooted in the world as we actually experience it. It may be a Greek world – even a particular Greek world, the world of Thessaloniki – but Stamoulis is not speaking simply to his fellow Thessalonians, or fellow Greeks, or even his fellow Orthodox. Indeed, he protests vigorously against a narrowly defensive Orthodox theology. The dilemma *philokalia or aesthetics*, he says, may be a Greek one, but this is only because Greece has not yet become fully confident about its Hellenic cultural heritage except as filtered through Western European perceptions. In the course of discussing with his fellow Greek Orthodox how they can re-appropriate their patristic and Byzantine heritage within the context of modernity or even postmodernity, he also shares insights with the Western reader into a world shot through with divinity, a world that, if only we could see it with *enargeia*, with clarity, as it really is, would raise us, as he says, to communion with the whole of creation and through creation with God.

The insights of this theology are like the insights of poetry. It is not by intellectual analysis that we arrive at a perception of God but by an intuitive sense of his presence wherever we encounter beauty. In the English literary tradition we find something similar in Thomas Traherne or, in a more powerful and complex way, in Gerard Manley Hopkins. In the Greek tradition it is the focus on philokalia that foregrounds the presence of God in a world that is not just there for us to exploit but, if we have eyes to see, raises us to a vision of glory.

6. Ibid., p. 19.