Author's Preface

I am delighted that *Holy Beauty* is now appearing in English. Although written within the Orthodox tradition, the ecumenical implications of my work make an English translation invaluable, not to mention the growing Orthodox diaspora in the USA, the UK and elsewhere who will hopefully find it useful. My thanks go to Norman Russell for his translation, and to the Revd Dr George Karahalios Charitable Foundation for sponsoring the project.

It is a fact that in Orthodoxy the most important things are more often talked about than committed to writing. Thus, for many years it has been commonly held that in Orthodox theology there is no room for aesthetics on the grounds that Orthodoxy is the supreme realm of philokalia, the love of the beautiful. This thesis has been vested with such authority that anyone who has the audacity to think otherwise comes up against an impregnable wall of dogmatic opinion that leaves no margin for the discussion of any other approach.

Essentially, whenever the argument appears, it is used to present the picture of a dialectical relationship between aesthetics and philokalia. On the one hand, we have 'Western aesthetics'[1] and, on the other, 'the East's philokalia', two incompatible approaches that are in conflict without any possibility of communicating with each other; and everywhere and always there is the fear of the West.

Discussion of aesthetics has usually been conducted only within the field of the 'technology' of the ecclesiastical arts,[2] certainly not within

1. The term 'aesthetics' comes from A.G. Baumgarten, who introduced it formally into the field of scholarly discussion in 1750, with the publication of his book, *Aesthetica*. See A.G. Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1970).
2. Here the term 'technology' is used as synonymous with the term 'technique' and is clearly not identified with the broader use of the term,

the field of 'ontology'. This is odd, because technology and ontology are thus treated as incompatible truths, divided realities, alien to each other and each of them autonomous. 'They cut me and divided me into two', a poet has said to describe this state of affairs and, in order to show the result of the division of the body, the abrogation of its unity, which is nothing other than its consignment to non-existence, he continues: 'I cannot live or die as half a body, as a dream cut in two.'[3]

There have been indications of such an understanding in the form of proposals concerning Church art, from the painting of icons to singing and the building of churches, that emphasise the liturgical and ascetic character of these arts and reject any discussion of their aesthetic and artistic aspects. Thus, one was given the impression that for Orthodox art to be genuinely Orthodox it has to be an art that rejects the beautiful, that forbids the operation of the senses and protects people from the arousal of feelings and emotions, an art that militates against experience. The truth of the matter, as revealed in the Church's liturgical life, paints a different picture, a reality that, without denying the liturgical and ascetic character of the arts within Orthodoxy, constantly reveals the Church of Christ as a place of living experience, as the supreme realm of the encounter with the beauty that generates emotion, awakens the senses, and creates a powerful experience of the ecclesial event. In other words, the Church's truth is a truth that came in order to unify fragmented reality and reveal the catholicity of existence, a truth that knows no independent areas of sacred and profane, good and evil, sentiment and experience.

Of course, to be fair, one must at once admit that in many cases such objections to aesthetics were rational and necessary. Think of what Alexandros Papadiamandis and General Makriyannis have written about the 'antiquarians' and 'lovers' of Byzantine art.[4] The passion of

as interpreted within the context of contemporary culture. On this, see P. Tzamalikos, 'Hē thrēskeutikē ekphansē tēs technologias' [hereafter 'The Religious Version of Technology'], *Philosophia* 23–4 (1993–94), pp. 61–87.

3. G. Themelis, in K. Mylonas, *Historia tou hellēnikou tragoudiou* [*A History of Greek Song*]*: Volume 2 (1960–1970)* (Athens: Kedros, 1993), p. 156.
4. See Alexandros Papadiamandis, *Hē Pharmakolytria* [*The Deliverer from Spells*], in his *Complete Works*, ed. by N.D. Triantaphyllopoulos (Athens: Domos, 1984), Vol. 3, p. 309. Cf. General Makriyannis, *Oramata kai thamata* [*Visions and Wonders*], transcribed by A. Papakostas (Athens: National Bank of Greece, 1985), p. 163, where Makriyannis refers to the suppression of monasteries at the time of the Bavarian monarchy in

these people for antiquities led them to a desacralisation of artefacts used in worship and their transformation into alien elements, that is to say, into visual exhibits and objects of commercial value, whose only occasion and perspective is confined to the realm of some kind of aesthetic worth.[5] Thus, as a direct response to such outbursts of aesthetics, utterly moralistic and pietistic attitudes and patterns of behaviour arose that rejected any aesthetic value and these contributed in turn to the division of the one body, with the generation of guilt-complexes and theories of purity as a direct result. The response to the absolute was another absolute, and to the ideological end in itself another ideological end in itself. There is no doubt that in both cases what was self-evident to the Church Fathers was lost: the operation of the 'both together' (the *synamphoteron*), the principle of multiple meaning and contradiction that transcends all dialectics and permits the operation of apparent antitheses. That is to say, it was forgotten that the melody of the chant, the aim of which is the underlining of orthodox doctrine, cannot but be – and this is a commonplace of patristic theology – pleasant to the ear and certainly not cacophonous. It was forgotten that the Church's icon, which is by no means a mere picture, is not bereft of aesthetic value, but expresses another aesthetics, the philokalic aesthetics of 'him who is beautiful in comparison with all mortals', the aesthetics, that is to say, of the incarnate Word, who in his own hypostasis united what until then had been separate and bridged the gulf between them, thus permitting humanity's transition from non-existence to life. Finally, it was forgotten that the great mystery of Christ's death had as its aim, through his resurrection, the rendering of the nature of all things beautiful, and the granting of grace to the entire universe.

There is no doubt that contemporary Orthodoxy's position on aesthetics is in no way a deviation but the confirmation of a rule that is applied to, and operates on, the boundaries of rupture, partition and subtraction. A clear example is the kind of comment made on the

Greece (1832–63), when that part of the patriarchate of Constantinople that lay within the then borders of the Greek state was turned into a state church, the Church of Greece, on the model of the Lutheran churches.

5. See N.D. Triantaphyllopoulos, 'Ho Papadiamantēs kai hē technē tēs Orthodoxias' ['Papadiamandis and Orthodox Art'], in *Phōta Holophōta* [hereafter *Light-filled Epiphany*] (Athens: ELIA, 1981), p. 179. Cf. A.G. Keselopoulos, *Hē leitourgikē paradosis ston Alexandro Papadiamantē* [hereafter *The Liturgical Tradition in Alexandros Papadiamandis*] (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 1994), pp. 164–65.

relationship between theology and culture, where in a facile and unfounded way contemporary theology speaks in many cases of opposition, incompatibility and conflict. Those who maintain this view claim support in the absence of a positive usage of the term 'culture' by the Fathers of the Church. Therefore, in order to be consistent with tradition, the confirmation of the same repudiation is obligatory. At this point, of course, a venerable argument is set out, adequately documented but certainly one-sided. It seems to be based pre-eminently on quantitative analyses and ignores, consciously or unconsciously, the dimension of qualitative analysis and the necessity in the end of examining the latter alongside the quantitative. That is to say, it ignores the fact that Christianity was not the product of culture and, indeed, much less was it born for the sake of culture. At the same time, it cannot but generate culture.

There are also, of course, those passionate voices that set out the tragedy, the falling away from the self-awareness of the body that is preserved in the life and monuments of the Church.[6] Indeed, sometimes these voices seem so anguished that they declare that by any denial whatsoever of the historical flesh of culture 'the Christian gospel is alienated and turned into a fleshless internationalist mental product',[7] or that, when Christianity cuts itself off from culture, taking culture as 'a holistic vision of God, man and the world', it 'either becomes "clerical" (religion not life), or betrays itself, "surrenders" to culture'.[8] That is to say, we find ourselves confronted with nothing less than the basic problem of the conflict between hesychasts and anti-hesychasts,[9] with

6. See N.A. Matsoukas, 'Theologia kai politismos' ['Theology and Culture'], in Ch.A. Stamoulis (ed.), *Theologia kai technē* [Theology and Art] (Thessaloniki: To Palimpsēston, 2002), pp. 80ff.
7. Ch. Yannaras, 'Giati propagandizoume ton "plouralismo"' ['Why We Promote "Pluralism"'], *Kathēmerinē* newspaper, 26 January 2003.
8. A. Schmemann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann 1973–1983*, trans. by J. Schmemann (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), p. 225. Cf. *Journals*, p. 303.
9. [A hesychast is defined by St John Climacus as one who engages in the life of stillness either in solitude or in the company of one or two others (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 1 [*Patrologia Graeca* (PG) 88, 641D]). The major historical conflicts between hesychasts and anti-hesychasts occurred in the fourteenth century, when Gregory Palamas was attacked by Barlaam of Calabria on the grounds that his hesychast practices were heretical, and in the eighteenth century, when Nikodemos the Hagiorite,

the conflict between ideas and realities at the beginning of the search for a lost self-awareness, as expressed by the God-bearers, the friends of God, the saints of the Orthodox Church.

It is self-evident that such a line of thought does not confine the investigation of the problem to the confines of art, but goes beyond these in its search for the basis that might permit the development of such a self-awareness, which founds its kingdom on division and decline. In short, the gaze that one turns on art is not independent of the truth concerning God, humanity and the world. That is where it is founded and that is where it returns. It is an unbreakable relationship. That is to say, one's teaching on God cannot be Buddhist, on humanity Hindu and on creation Christian. Whatever kind of God one has, humanity, creation and culture follow. On the anthropological level, a division can only arise from a theology that divides, culminating in a doctrine of creation that divides, and vice versa.

I have said all this in response to the question that is often put when a dogmatic theologian declares that his concern is aesthetics. Most people ask: What has Orthodox doctrine to do with aesthetics? Let me be absolutely clear. There is no doubt at all that the division I have spoken of has influenced this sector too. The fields in which each of us works seem to be strictly demarcated and so fenced off from each other that any attempt that aims at the unification of the partial aspects of the one single truth appears to be impermissible. It is therefore not surprising that some refer to aesthetics only to identify it exclusively with the techniques and technology of the arts. They overlook its ontological dimension and do not consider that in reality aesthetics is nothing other than a forgotten path of the Church's dogmatic teaching that, like other paths, has been reclassified; and those who do treat of it do not even suspect its loss, and certainly not the significance of the loss, in anybody other than theologians. This, of course, does not mean that aesthetics belongs to dogmatic theology like a possession it owns, but it does mean that aesthetics belongs to dogmatic theology as much as it belongs to anything else.

I come now to the great problem, a problem that flows naturally from what I have said above, namely, what is aesthetics? I can say at once that there is no universally agreed definition of aesthetics. How could there be, anyway, in an age when definitions are tending to

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along with other hesychasts who formed a reformist group known as the Kollyvades, were officially censured as wilful opponents of ecclesiastical authority. Trans.]

disappear in the secular sciences as well as in theology? I have a feeling that theology is beginning, even if timidly, to rediscover its lost self-awareness, which is based on the acceptance of the end of certainty that is proposed today with especial emphasis by contemporary physics. Fundamentally, this concerns the self-awareness of the saints of God, which favours the subjective, that is to say, the utterly personal but in no way individualistic understanding of the mysteries of God, and at the same time excludes the precarious objectivities that abolish the person and facilitate the creation of impersonal institutional certainties of a totalitarian character. The Orthodox saint has always been insecure, uncertain and powerless, characteristics that lie at the opposite pole to the self-sufficiency that is 'the symptom of either spiritual paralysis or decline'.[10] Consequently, the resolution of the problem of what aesthetics is must be related to a description of all that one regards as being set within such a unity. These constitute the only possibility for the creation of a holistic image of life that permits the lifting of division, victory over all separation and the advancement of existence.

I am persuaded by discussions I have had in the course of writing this study that the acceptance of everything I have said above is not an easy matter. That is to say, how could anyone accept a theology of the senses, or a theology of touch, as a detached portion of the one single truth that constitutes the Church's compassionate teaching on humankind, when the greater part of patristic texts relating to pastoral needs favours a somewhat guarded position with respect to the senses, and seems in this way to set the senses at the margins of their immediate concerns and, consequently, at the margins of the journey towards salvation? Nevertheless, one should not forget the relatively few texts where the truth of the matter shines out in a special way and shows that the 'rule' is justified only through the manifestation of this minority voice. Of course, the prevalence of this pastoral rule in the reality of our contemporary theological and ecclesial situation is such that not only does it marginalise the small minority but, in many cases, it ignores even its existence. To be sure, the question why some things were overemphasised and others remained at the margin – and indeed there are those today who battle to keep things exactly as they are, immovable and secure – has still not been answered. What does one have to fear from the truth of things? Does the truth no longer set you

10. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *We Shall See Him as He Is*, trans. by R. Edmonds (Tolleshunt Knights: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1988), p. 122.

free? Is it only fear that does so? Why is the Orthodox Christian called in many cases – fortunately not in all – to function, especially today, with only half of his or her truth, that is to say, to live the lie of an artificial image, of a fictitious reality? Is ignorance the only cause or are there other reasons? Finally, what are we to do about the fact of our being defined by something other than ourselves? For how long will the West be our only point of reference, the permanent reason for the weakness of Orthodoxy? Has not the time finally come for the self-definition of the body and for a properly functional discussion with the different, with the other?

These are some of the questions that the present study attempts to answer through the discussion of examples capable of revealing the image of contemporary Orthodoxy in all its dimensions. They are examples that reflect the present debates and highlight what is unavoidable and necessary in contemporary theological dialogue, a fact is forgotten or marginalised when we simply engage in parallel monologues. There is no doubt at all that contemporary theology must finally stop denying the existence of different tendencies and must honestly and frankly recognise them and incorporate them into the life of the Church. A sure point of reference in this process is not only biblical and patristic theology but also the attitude of outstanding people of our time, with whom the present tendencies are tested, compared and judged. Essentially, what follows is the presentation of an open dialogue, a round table at which the participants are Kostas Zouraris, Father Alexander Schmemann, Nikos Matsoukas, Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis, the Elder Sophrony of Essex, the Elder Porphyrios, St Dionysius the Areopagite, St Maximus the Confessor, St Cyril of Alexandria, St Gregory Palamas and many others.

I conclude with several clarifications. This study does not seek to scale the heights. It does not aspire to be some kind of magisterial theological statement, nor is it governed by soteriological aims – we have had a surfeit of those already. It only attempts to draw in voices which, according to Seferis and Lorentzatos, are able to reveal the other, the invisible. In reality, my desire is that it should serve as a notebook with wide margins in which readers can mark their agreement or disagreement, can jot down their own arguments and add their own voice, their own vision, their own experience, with the ultimate aim of communion, forgiveness, fulfilment and the 'churching' of uncertainty in love in the certainty of the Resurrection.

One might say that the aim of this study is an endeavour to repristinate the ancient stones with which homes and churches were built and are still built. This is the work that Pentzikis, known as 'kyr Nikos' in his

native Thessaloniki,[11] advises young writers to do, and which I feel to be absolutely right for our contemporary theology. He encourages them, then, 'to take a little jar of water and wet the stones':

> For how beautiful [he continues] are the stones, the little pebbles, on the beach! Yet when we pick them up and take them home, they lose their brilliance and their colour. When the stone is regarded simply as an object and is not viewed within an environment that is humanly more perceptible than the air, a spiritual state that corresponds to the water, then … Come now, wet the little stones with some water! That's it! That's what we young people must do – and, of course, I am the youngest among them …[12]

11. ['Kyr' (short for *kyrios*) used with the Christian name has since the Middle Ages been a friendly but at the same time respectful form of address – in this instance 'Mr Nikos'. The feminine form is 'Kyra'. Trans.]
12. N.G. Pentzikis, *Hydatōn hyperekcheilisē. Analekta* [*Waters Overflowing: Collected Studies*; hereafter *Waters Overflowing*] (Thessaloniki: Paratērētēs, 1990), p. 210.