

# THEOLOGY AND AESTHETICS

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**S**t Andrews Greek-Orthodox Theological College and the Department of Modern Greek at Sydney University decided to organise jointly this two-day international symposium, in order to examine, together with participants from overseas and Australia, an immense topic and one of ultimately decisive importance for the completeness and authenticity of human culture in general, irrespective of temporal or geopolitical parameters.

By definition the topic of the relationship between Theology and Aesthetics reaches down to the roots of existence and comprises the unshakable foundation of human well-being in diachronic perspective. This has nothing to do with any external, that is to say simply formal, connection and institutional collaboration between religion and art which usually is the product and the result of unpredictable overall historical circumstances. It is rather about the internal fundamental correspondences which contain already through their 'metaphysical' origin and beginning (a kind of, we would say, spontaneous motivation), both the phenomenon of religious quest and that of aesthetic emotion.

The fact that in both cases the tremor of the supernatural, which the German scholar Rudolf Otto respectively characterised as *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinosum*, is not restricted only to one sphere of the human psyche but takes over and dominates, even subconsciously, the whole human being is sufficient to designate their relationship which almost borders on identity.

Whoever attended or was informed about the themes we have examined, in the previous two International Conferences organised by our Archdiocese under the indicative term *Greek Australian Cultural Forum*<sup>1</sup>, will easily recognise the organic relationship between both conferences and the present International Symposium.

The theme of the first of those Conferences was the concept of the 'person', as it was expressed in the ancient pre-Christian literature on one hand, and on the other, as it had been formulated definitively, through the doctrine of the Trinitarian God, in all expressions of Christian life and spirituality. Therefore, it was natural to examine during the second Conference how and to what degree the uniqueness and the sacredness of the human person, as recognised through the Trinitarian doctrine, remained decisive in all human relations; especially when the person comes as a 'foreigner' from outside, in a previously unknown environment, when hospitality becomes the principal measure for the worthiness of both the person who offers and of the person who accepts it.

Through the nexus of such problems, the central position occupied by the relationship between Theology and Aesthetics becomes extremely obvious, since in both instances the concept of the person is primarily that of the responsible 'subject', which therefore should not be considered in the least as if it was an 'object'.

There is one more essential parameter of the present Symposium that should not be left without comment. It refers to the period during which this Symposium is convened, since time is perceived not without colour in its mathematical neutrality, but on the contrary quite concretely in the gravity it attains as *kairos* within the whole ecclesiastical liturgical year. As it is known, the week after Easter is called Bright-week by the Orthodox (and more literally the Week of Renewal). This term signifies both the renewal which is experienced in their personal existence in a redeeming manner through the worship of the Church by all those who during Lent are taught as 'enlightened catechumens' in order afterwards to be baptised and receive Holy Communion on the occasion of the Divine Passion and the Resurrection of the *Theanthropos*. On the other hand this characterisation signifies the general renewal secured for the whole creation by the Resurrection of Christ, after which, as the Church chants: 'everything

is full of light, the heaven, the earth and the underworld'. The experience of such fundamental transmutation of everything through the light of the Resurrection was able to purify all senses, so that, through a sharper and deeper sensitivity, they enjoy and perpetuate the miracle of life, both in its moral-religious and aesthetic dimensions. After these elementary remarks which had to be made as an introduction, we can now proceed in a more systematic investigation to our topic.

### **Delineation and characterisation of the cognitive field**

Many decades have passed since my memorable friend, the Jesuit Hans Urs von Balthasar, at his permanent seat in Basel, Switzerland, had definitively orientated his theological explorations towards the question of the relationship between Theology and Aesthetics which was then considered to be extremely serious and quite innovative. Indeed Balthazar succeeded, once again, to surprise the wider European intelligentsia in a series of volumes under the general title *Theologische Aesthetik*.

Certainly, the topic itself should not be considered as either new or innovative, and should not have surprised or even scandalised others. However, especially in the last centuries of European history, academic theology has been imprisoned, after the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, in a kind of monism which, either as Aristotelian Thomism or as Platonic idealism, was unable to perceive the mystery of Theandrisms as finally defined by the IV Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon employing the four known adverbs of the Hypostatic Union about the two natures in the one and indivisible person of God incarnate. As it is known, the four adverbs mentioned are the following: 'unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably'.

The balance and hence the integrity of the person of Christ with his double nature (divine and human) was not simply a theoretical matter of faith. It was and still remains a matter of life and death for all faithful throughout the centuries, as for all human beings, created in the 'image of God' (Gen 1: 26).

The Church of the first and common millennium struggled through fierce battles to keep such balance and integrity intact in the light of the heresy of Monophysitism and Monothelitism. As we know, in that struggle,

St Maximus the Confessor (+580) emerged as the greatest of all theologians and Church Fathers, about whom Balthasar wrote the fullest and most lucid monograph, under the extremely poetic and indicative title *Cosmic Liturgy* (in French originally and then in German).

As Balthasar convincingly proved, St Maximus' main goal and achievement was to purify all texts of mystical theology written before him, and especially the works of Dionysius the Areopagite, which were long disputed, from the poison of the heresy of monism, that is of monophysitism, which was either latently or more obviously in the origin of both Aristotelianism and Platonism.

Thus, by combining and reconciling both extremities to their balanced golden middle, St Maximus succeeded in confessing the full measure of the grace of God incarnate and at the same time the extreme nobility revealed by the deification of the person redeemed in Christ. Now, the body was no longer the Platonic grave but the temple of the Holy Spirit and the residence of God.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, corporeality and the senses (which originate from and exist through it) comprise the basis and the presupposition of all aesthetics and are the self-understandable primary material for deification. Only according to such a relationship, could one accept without reservations the scholastic axiom *gratia presupponit naturam* of the Western tradition.

Given this metaphysically 'pre-established harmony', as Leibnitz would have said, between the created and the uncreated, it is obvious that the relationship between theology and aesthetics is by definition dictated in all spheres of beings and phenomena; and this not only under the spectrum of humanities but also of the scientific disciplines, whose ethos and poetic sensibility are increasingly stressed in recent years. Keeping all this in mind, without reservation one should consider aesthetics, not simply as part of the overall philosophy, together with ontology, ethics and gnosiology, but also as an integrating part of theology.<sup>3</sup>

A relationship so unshakeable by definition, which according to the cultural realities of Judeo-Christian tradition is a matter simultaneously of faith and experience (especially Worship!), colours naturally in an indicative manner all partial manifestations of Theology and Aesthetics. More concretely, this means that the alert human conscience - either in its gnosiological or in its ethical sense - becomes not only a source of

inspiration but above all a safety valve in every kind of theological and aesthetical association; for it is obvious that in such related activities and creations of the mature individual, we cannot comprehend either barbarous theology or irresponsible art.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, we must state categorically that only under the sign of theandric unity is it possible to talk about a real renaissance of the whole human being (as potential Theanthropos). Only then are all psychosomatic and cognitive-moral faculties of conscience developed equivalently, that is to say worthily, towards the ultimate goal of the divine Creator. Precisely this goal is in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where the Creator is confessed as Almighty Father and more specifically as the Pre-knower, Governor and Redeemer of all. With all that has been mentioned so far by way of introduction, the importance, the purpose and the amplitude of explorations, which our Symposium will try to locate, even in a probationary manner, start to become clear.

### **The most fundamental aspect of the topic: The Word of God and the word of man**

If we take as a starting point Christ's crucial statement to the Samaritan woman that 'God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth' (Jn 4: 24) we have to observe that the nouns 'spirit' and 'truth' have never been found before in such close relationship; a relationship that touches upon the limits of identity, especially when this is uttered by the Theanthropos himself. 'Spirit' and 'Truth' are unquestionably the ultimate goals of any noble quest for every human being endowed with logic, in all fields of knowledge, namely in the gnosiological, moral-religious and aesthetical spheres.

Furthermore, one should remember that during the Western Middle Ages wisdom, morality and aesthetics were intensely dominated by what was epigrammatically called *universalia* (Unum, Verum, Bonum). Within the framework of such connections and judging from the above-mentioned axiomatic statement of Christ, we understand that, while it could be considered as categorically excluding any relationship between Theology and Aesthetics, in reality it comprises the principal foundation of their deep affinity. No-one could ever deny, that even in their most imaginary

conceptions and creations of aesthetics, finite human beings are always possessed by an enthusiastic fever to approach - if not to touch with all their senses - the truth of the Sublime, the Eternal and the Good, which infinitely transcends all known or inferred images and potentialities.

Certainly it cannot evade our attention, that the fact of the existential thirst for these values is identical in both disciplines, that is religious restlessness and aesthetic quest. Precisely such identity in the thirst of the human soul is what in the final analysis marks out the corollary and not only parallel functions of Religion and Art. Such yearning is given in the same intensity, whether it is experienced on the established historical ground defined by the 'illuminations' of the Divine Revelation or to the ethereal reverie and the 'illusions' of artistic *daimon*.

In order to be able to follow the parallel and simultaneous epiphany of the Divine, as primarily an aesthetical phenomenon, we must reflect upon this even more radically - as much as we are allowed by the corruptible means of this world. But to radically reflect means posing questions that reach down to the roots. Such radical questions relating to our topic are mainly the following, though we only refer to a few of them as examples without at all exhausting them.

1. What does Divine revelation and its interpretation mean on the one hand and what does Nature and History mean on the other?
2. What does the incorporeality of God mean, that makes Him invisible, inaccessible, incomprehensible and uncontainable anywhere in relation to the corporeality referred to by the senses? What is the meaning of such God-given and inexplicable structural variety from which originates and through which is ascertained and enjoyed the aesthetic event, in the infinity of its multiplicity?
3. Within our present inquiry, what is the meaning of 'substance' (that is to say of depth) and what of 'form' (that is to say of shape and surface)? If we could formulate it in the language of philosophical secular learning, what is here the meaning of 'ontology' and 'phenomenology'?

All the questions mentioned above define wide areas of perennial theological quest and reflection. Especially in Christianity, such a perennial

quest and theological reflection are certainly conducted under the necessary presupposition of the divine Incarnation, that principal apocalyptic event of universal history. For this reason, faith in the Incarnation of God has proved to be a matter of life or death.

The crucial and unheard-of statement in its innovation and uniqueness of the Christian gospel that 'the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us' (Jn 1: 14) is the real and irreplaceable key towards an authentic study of the relationship between Theology and Aesthetics. However, in order to comprehend the unfathomable significance of the statement 'the word was made flesh', we must remember that even if we just called it 'unheard of in its innovation and uniqueness', this is not without conditions. On the contrary, we find the same statement already, although in a more general and comprehensive meaning, in the first pages of Genesis. There we see that for every different stage of the gradual creation towards the completion of the full picture of the universe corresponds the exact corollary statement, repeated as an introduction before every new beginning: 'and God said: Let there be ... and there was...' (Gen 1: 3).

The direct reference of the verb 'say' to the noun 'word' is not only conspicuous but also totally etymological. Furthermore, also unquestionable is the close relation of the whole creation in its corporeality with the special category of the living body which we call 'flesh'. After this cardinal correlation to our topic of the Old and New Testaments, at the very same origin of life we can now focus our attention on the noun 'logos'.

As we shall see shortly, *Logos* is programmatically and *a priori*, both in its general significance and in its more specific reference to the second person of the Holy Trinity, the most complete and dynamic concept in both fields of Theology and Aesthetics in general.

Analysing etymologically the Greek term *logos* in principle but also from the point of its historical usage, in all spiritual and cultural developments of Europe, we conclude that its translation unfortunately does not render into any other European language even half the content which it has in its original source, that is, the Greek language.

The verb *λεγω* from which the noun *logos* stems means primarily to 'collect', that is to 'con-gregate', to 'con-vene', to 'con-verge'. The nouns 'collection', 'convocation' and 'legion' directly originate from this verb.

Therefore *logos* is the force that 'co-binds', 'co-relates' and 'combines' everything that was previously or afterwards dispersed. Hence *logos* is originally the root that secures the unified existence in causal relation, but at the same time the organic presence and representation of everything. For this reason ancient Ionian naturalists were looking for the *logos* of being (*raison d'être*) in one of the known four elements, air, fire, earth and water. From such etymological origin we can easily infer that *logos* is the force which not only keeps together and maintains everything as their root, but at the same time is the only potential for the interpretation of beings and phenomena.

The father of the usage of the term *logos* in its omnipotent and mystical function is thought to be Heraclitus. For this patriarch of the Ionian philosophers the term *logos* does not only mean the necessary logical order which governs everything in their existence. At the same time it means the supreme harmony which secures the peaceful balance by the suspension of all oppositions. The power of *logos* as the reason not only of life but also of the dialectical harmony is the principal axiom preached by Heraclitus, in a uniquely convincing manner.

The following Heraclitan saying postulates that *Logos* 'while differing from itself, it is in agreement with it' (Fragm. 51: T.M. Robinson); this means that *logos* is completed in its unity, when it fully develops all existing tensions and antitheses that can be found ontologically in its depth. Only then it reaches the 'supreme harmony', which, when hidden and mystical, is considered 'stronger than the obvious', according to Heraclitus. Such logical order which as an ontological axiom permeates the whole cosmic universe is reflected, according to Heraclitus, in all human spirits, in an almost automatic manner. Therefore 'logos' and 'logic' are called the syllogistic, intellectual and critical faculty of humans. For this reason, the *logos* existing internally and silently in the brain generates for us (from the Latin verb 'inter-lego') the noun 'intelligentsia'. When finally the *logos* existing 'internally' in the mind is expressed and articulated, i.e. when it is shaped in externalised form and proposition, then it is called 'oral *logos*'.



According to the above description about the immediate correspondence which the faculty of logos has with the cosmic universe, the intellect of humans, and the external articulation in words, all fundamental thoughts and judgments should then be common. For this reason the conviction prevailed that, between humans there exists a 'common-logic' and 'common sense'. However Heraclitus complains that such expected mental 'identity' between humans is unfortunately not always confirmed, since we do have our usual disputes, discordances and divisions: 'while logos is common most people live as if they have private understanding' (Fragm. 2, trans. Robinson).

Recapitulating the general theory about the omnipotence of logos according to Heraclitus, it suffices to recall his most astonishing fragment, which relates everything, even the most antithetical elements, to the Logos, by identifying Logos with God. However such absolute identification of opposites without any exceptions forces us to recognise a clearly pantheistic perception about the 'Logos' in Heraclitus' doctrine, according to which God is a 'day, euphoric (night) winter, summer, war, peace, satisfaction, famine'.

Almost the same spirituality as that of Heraclitus about the Logos was inherited and elaborated, as we know, in a purely moral-religious dimension, primarily by Plato and after him by the Stoics and later by Neoplatonism which reached the gates of Christianity. However for us Logos has no affinity to the pantheistic expansion in which Heraclitus interpreted the intellectual principle of everything permeating the universe. For us, Logos is the supreme conscience, the absolute person, as it was prefigured and later even described in an increasing vivacity, by the texts of the Bible, from the Sophiology of the Hebrew Bible until the Logo-logy of John and Paul.

Therefore, both the creative logos as 'dabar Yahweh' (a *voice* and a *thing* simultaneously) amongst the Jews, and the Logos as a balancing structural principle amongst the most enthused ancient Greek philosophers, comprised the 'ex-pression' of a supreme divine power, which secured the harmonious survival of the world. This is the reason why many called this principle 'spermatic word', or even in the plural as 'spermatic words', a theory invoked so passionately by early Christian Apologists in order to

deter the persecutions and the hatred against them by both pagans and Jews.

Such divine origin and nature of the spermatic word signifies its vital and creative force, which is expressed as wisdom and providence in the infinite variety of beings and happenings; but such sacred dynamism would have been totally incomplete, if we did not consider here the element of grace, which is the expression of love given out of ultimate goodness and in absolute freedom. Having thus delineated the central elements of the logical structure and function of the visible and the invisible world, we would be now justified to proceed in a more detailed study of the relationship and the difference between the 'word of God' and the 'word of man'.

From the outset, we must state that by saying 'word', we do not mean simply the formal phonetic unit (written or oral) as verbal potentiality but generally the 'ex-pressive' or simply the 'in-sinuating' disposition and motion of the 'prime mover' towards the energy we call epiphany, since the term epiphany could be considered as equivalent to the term 'a-letheia' (non hiddenance in Greek).

Hence in this context, Logos is used as almost a manner of manifestation and presence of something which was not yet known but tending in all possible means to emerge to the 'sur-face'. In this way, all manners tested for the expression of the invisible depth are in advance legitimate as equally welcome potentialities of communion between the uncreated creative principle and the created beings, primarily to their source and then amongst themselves.

Under such perspective human civilisation will always search through Science but also through Religion and Art, for the 'language of languages', that is to say for the proximity to the common goal, to which all signs look towards, as the ultimate cohesive value of everything signified. However, despite the requested collective communication in the horizontal and vertical axes which we just tried to describe between all powers (visible and invisible) of the universal world, we must always remember that the creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), this most fundamental doctrine of both Judaism and Christianity, does not allow confusion between the created beings and the uncreated Creator. For this reason, Chalcedonian

Christology of the two natures of Christ being united 'unconfusedly' and 'indivisibly' remains always implicitly the guiding doctrine for a correct and fair comparison between the 'word of God' and the 'word of man'. After the incarnation of God, theandric union in history does not in any way refute or cancel the ontological void between God and the humane.

At this point we must mention that the original act of Creation as *ad extra* energy of the Trinitarian God through His word as an 'arm' (which is *voice*, that is to say message and at the same time crystallisation of the message into a thing, and therefore action) is the first 'kenosis', 'impoverishment' and 'binding' of God, actualised in time but timeless according to the divine will. So, God, who is independent and above every limitation, could not possibly be characterised any longer in respect to His energies towards the world from the purely 'ab-solute' and 'in-finite', since His relationship with the world is expressed in the dimensions of the relative and the finite.

According to such fundamental condition, imposed by the Creator of the universe, even the most sacred books of religion claiming to be products of supernatural revelation - as for example the Bible in the Judeo-Christian tradition -, when they call their texts sacred or the direct word of God, implicitly know that they are also the 'word of man' - a word attested in human language - while God, being incorporeal, does not need a mouth, syllables, alphabet or anything else to actualise His divine will. To the extent that such 'apocalyptic word' is human language, it is also an immediate object of Aesthetics. Precisely for this reason, we have different genres in the Bible while the same divine message is the immediate object of Theology.

### **Concluding remarks**

From the beginning of our talk we tried to make absolutely clear that by examining the relations between Theology and Aesthetics, we did not want at all to base our observations on products of these two related creations of human beings. Therefore neither theological treatises as concrete products of theology nor artifacts of any art and aesthetic activity could possibly have been the primary concern of our study. On the contrary the guiding-idea from the beginning was the conviction that the degree of

affinity between these twin-creations would be more convincingly proven, if it was rendered from the metaphysical source of the world and man, that is from the pre-established ontological double sensitivity, simultaneously towards the Sacred and the Beautiful.

It is sufficient for anyone to consider the central position occupied by the common Anglo-Saxon terms 'meaning' and 'sense' in every moment of conscious human life, in order to realise the depth of the affinity between the religious and the aesthetic quest. Remembering T.S.Eliot, there is no sharper presence of *The Wasteland* for the understanding of the orphanhood and the homelessness than that stated by the double indictment: 'it does not make sense' or 'there is no meaning'.

Consequently it is obvious that even for those who do not accept the fundamental Biblical doctrine of the creation out of nothing or the Christian truth about the Incarnation of God, the affinity and the deep relationship between Theology and Aesthetics remains firm and unquestionable. Irrefutable confirmation of such conditionless affinity is the fact that even in the concrete formations of both creative activities (Religion and Art), we discover four basic postulates overwhelming human beings, with the same unquenched yearning in both cases.

As we had observed in our essay on Religion and Art mentioned above, in their genetic sequence these postulates are the following: the apocalyptic postulate (to express the inarticulate); the Purifying postulate (to cleanse the blemished); the redeeming postulate (to console the inconsolable); and the doxological postulate (to glorify the source of life and immortality).



**NOTES:**

- <sup>1</sup> The first Conference was organised in Sydney, April 24-29, and in Melbourne, May 1-7, 1995. The proceedings of the Conference were published in *PHRONEMA*, volume 11, 1996. The second Conference took place in Sydney 7-11 May, Melbourne 12-15 May, Adelaide 16-18 and Perth 19-21, 2000. All texts of this conference appeared in *PHRONEMA*, vol. 15, 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> For a detailed elaboration of the sacredness of the 'corporeal' see my essay 'The Topos as a factor in the mystery of salvation' (in the forthcoming volume

for the 50th anniversary of Association of Chalki Theologians in Athens, Athens 2002).

- <sup>3</sup> A first attempt on my part to show this organic relationship and contribute to the exploration of the originary bond between Theology and Aesthetics was my essay 'Relations between ontological and aesthetic categories in John's Revelation' (see in journal *Nea Poreia*, issue 177-178 Thessaloniki, 1969).
- <sup>4</sup> How topical and critical is this axiomatic position can be appreciated only by the fact that it automatically demolishes the sacrilegious myth regarding the legitimacy and the moral justification of any 'holy war' (i.e., jihad) together with other religious fundamentalist ideas of any age, and at the same time the childish and irresponsible ideological constructs about the so-called 'liberation' of art, or about 'pure' art, without any non-artistic commitment and purpose, as it has been proclaimed from time to time by well-known slogans, such as 'love and do what you like' or 'Art for art's sake' etc.

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