The Angel that "More Feelingly Feels": A Theological Quest for Beauty

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Abstract: *This article explores a profound meditation on theology and aesthetics penned by Archbishop Stylianos Harkianakis of blessed memory. It navigates the constellation of ideas that frame this meditation and considers how theology and aesthetics unfold amidst the vicissitudes of human existence by reflecting on Harkianakis' poetry and Rainer Maria Rilke's Duino Elegies. What emerges from this juxtaposition is a theological and poetic portrayal of humanity's desire for theophanic experience and divine beauty that bespeaks a deep respect for the sacredness of the human body, its feelings and senses. The mysterious harmony between created and uncreated, and the liminality of the human person who is created from natures visible and invisible, establishes the preconditions for relationships not just between the humanities and science, but between all beings and phenomena. Building on the late Archbishop's meditation on the relationship between theology and aesthetics, this article argues that the true realm of aesthetics, where the spiritual senses and divine emotions of the human person come to dwell in the fullness of life, is the liturgical world of Christianity.*

For Archbishop Stylianos Harkianakis of blessed memory, the infinite importance of the Incarnation, the profound reality of the Divine becoming human—"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"[1]—is the hermeneutical prism *sine qua non* for exploring the relationship between theology and aesthetics. Christian aesthetics and metaphysics represent the fundamental desire to sanctify the sensorium and experience the beauty of life in the unfading light of Pascha; the uncreated light that knows no evening. Indeed, in a profound meditation on the theology of aesthetics, Harkianakis declared that this quest for divine beauty "reaches down to the roots of existence and comprises the

1 John 1:14.

unshakeable foundation of human well-being in diachronic perspective."[2] This paper explores the theological and poetic portrayal of humanity's desire for theophanic experience and divine beauty, arguing that we have only begun to unlock the significance of Harkianakis' contention that such an experience is impossible without feelings and senses, without the human body.[3] The mysterious harmony between created and uncreated, and the liminality of the human person who is created from natures visible and invisible, straddling the earthly and the heavenly realms, establishes the preconditions for relationships between "all spheres of beings and phenomena … not only under the spectrum of humanities but also of the scientific disciplines, whose ethos and poetic sensibility are increasingly stressed in recent years."[4]

Of course, the point of departure for Harkianakis' reflections on this topic was the ground-breaking research of his unforgettable friend, Hans Urs von Balthasar.[5] For Balthasar, who eschewed the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, there is a continuity between divine beauty and worldly beauty that is grounded in an Incarnational and classical notion of Being. This is in keeping with the Orthodox representation of the universe, which portrays creation as transfigured by the mystery of the Incarnation; an event that united human nature with the Logos, but also an event that was cosmically meaningful.[6] While the Incarnation is a revelation of grace, truth and beauty—"and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth"[7]—it is also a

2 Archbishop Stylianos Harkianakis, 'Theology and Aesthetics,' *Phronema* 17 (2002): 1.

3 According to Archbishop Stylianos, for Christian anthropology, "the body was no longer the Platonic grave but the temple of the Holy Spirit and the residence of God. 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." Ibid., 4.

4 Ibid.

5 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, trans. Erasmo Leivà-Merikakis, Andrew Louth et al., 7 vols (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, and San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982–1991).

6 See Romans 8:18-23.

7 John 1:14 (καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός,

manifestation of the divine dimensions of the cosmos.[8] The world and its beauty are a testament to its Creator and it is through creation that the human person can apprehend the Artist: "The high Word plays in every kind of form, mixing as he wills with his world here and there."[9] The encounter between the human person and the Divine is an existential event that can never be reduced to a cognitive process. It is "a movement of the entire person, leading away from himself through the vision to the invisible God" and is "the movement of man's whole being away from himself and towards God through Christ, a movement founded on the divine light of grace in the mystery of Christ."[10]

In order to navigate the constellation of ideas that frame Harkianakis' article and consider how theology and aesthetics unfold amidst the vicissitudes of human existence, I will reflect on a poem by a renowned author whom the late Archbishop read and admired: Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. Written during the trauma of the interwar period, Rilke's *Elegies* grapple with the haunting uncertainty and awful fallenness of the human condition that mark the dramatic beginning of the poem:

> Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic
> orders? And even if one of them suddenly
> pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength
> of his stronger existence.[11]

πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας).

8 John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 152-53.

9 St Gregory the Theologian, *To the Virgins*, PG 37:624, quoted in St Maximus the Confessor, *Difficulty* 71, translated in Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996), 164.

10 Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, 121.

11 *First Elegy*, 1-4. For the text of the poem, there are a number of good editions available: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, ed. and trans. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975); idem, *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston: Norton, 1977); idem, *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, 2009). For the most part, I have used the translation of the *Elegies* by J. B. Leishman.

Rilke reimagines the problem of mortality and the desire for immortality by invoking the magic of poetry to transcend this earthly realm and come face to face with the Angel that surpasses humanity with its power of feeling. Can the human heart feel like Rilke's Angel feels, or would it "fade in the strength of his stronger existence"? I will also consider how the relationship between theology and aesthetics unfolds in Harkianakis' own poetry. Finally, I will answer Harkianakis' call to unlock the significance of the relationship between theology and aesthetics by arguing that the true realm of aesthetics, where the spiritual senses and divine emotions of the human person come to dwell in the fullness life, is the liturgical world of Christianity.

"Every angel is terrifying"

The deep affinity between theology and aesthetics may not be immediately apparent. As Harkianakis notes, when Christ tells the Samaritan woman that "God is Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth",[12] he evokes the very "limits of identity" and seems to preclude the potential for any relationship between theology and aesthetics to be consummated.[13] Harkianakis' 'Requiem for Poetry' echoes this theme in a lament for the elusive goal of *theopoetics*:[14]

> If there is any light left
> from our daily adventures,
> it would become sighs in a climate of wonder,
> sorrows which become verses.
>
> With such spells you struggle to postpone

12 John 4:24.

13 Harkianakis, 'Theology and Aesthetics,' 5.

14 The term *theopoetics* was coined by Stanley Hopper to describe the act of theological composition, the process of sensing images of the Divine. Such an act was a contemplation of God, but it was not simply a marriage of theology and poetry. It could be a literary, philosophical or artistic act. See L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), passim.

the death of beauty
by raising fireworks and sparrows
against the most unjust conspiracy
of natural laws.

But how much light and feeling
can words rescue?
Silently, they die too
leaving behind floating verses
in the dominion of silence,
flotsam of an undetected shipwreck,
still bearing witness
that the journey was made with faith.[15]

However, this noble desire and "existential thirst" of humanity to touch "the truth of the Sublime, the Eternal and the Good, which infinitely transcends all known or inferred images and potentialities" reveals the profound link between "religious restlessness and aesthetic quest."[16] The wellspring of this desire and thirst for the Divine may very well be the *imago Dei*, our participation in the Holy Trinity, but it is also the goodness and beauty of creation, which is "a call, beyond the here and now, to the original principle and purpose of the world."[17]

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has described the cosmic beauty of the universe and the creation of the human person as "a seamless garment of existence, a multi-coloured cloth, which we believe to be woven in its entirety by God."[18] Indeed, this cosmic beauty manifests

15 S. S. Harkianakis, *Fireworks and Sparrows*, ed. Sybille Smith and trans. Vrasidas Karalis (Sydney: Primavera, 1994), 10.

16 Harkianakis, 'Theology and Aesthetics,' 6.

17 His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 28.

18 'Remarks of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on Receiving an Environmental Award from the Scenic Hudson Association in New York,' November 13, 2000: https://www.patriarchate.org/addresses1/-/asset_publisher/66W3SwqyvI2z/content/remarks-of-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-on-receiving-an-environmental-award-from-the-scenic-hudson-association-in-new-york?inheritRedirect=false (retrieved 26 January 2020).

the unity of the earthly and heavenly realms, which St Maximus the Confessor so eloquently described:

> Ὅλος γὰρ ὁ νοητὸς κόσμος ὅλῳ τῷ αἰσθητῷ μυστικῶς τοῖς συμβολικοῖς εἴδεσι τυπούμενος φαίνεταιντοῖς ὁρᾷν δυναμένοις· καὶ ὅλος ὅλῳ τῷ νοητῷ ὁ αἰσθητὸς γνωστικῶς κατὰ νοῦν τοῖς λόγοις ἁπλούμενος ἐνυπάρχων ἐστίν.[19]
>
> For the whole of the spiritual world appears mystically imprinted on the whole sensible world in symbolic forms, for those who are capable of seeing this, and conversely the whole sensible world is spiritually explained in the mind in the principles which it contains.[20]

The significance of this unity becomes all the more apparent in the light of the Byzantine conflict over images. So critical was the defence of icons for Byzantine theology that, for St John of Damascus, it would either uphold or break every link in the great chain of images that began with the Creator of all images and Christ as the "image of the invisible God."[21] This "cosmology of icons" linked Creator and creation "through a comprehensive schema of images" and enshrined icons within a "hierarchical metaphysical reality" that included humanity, Scripture and typological images—such as the burning bush or Melchizedek—which prefigured what was to come in the history of salvation.[22] Although icons were the sixth and final link in this great chain of images, they were explicitly linked to the first five classes of image in such a way that the disavowal of icons was "tantamount to a rejection not only of one link but of the entire chain of images."[23]

19 *On Ecclesiastical Mystagogy*, chapter 2. *Maximi Confessoris Mystagogia*, ed. Christian Boudignon, CCSG 69 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 16.

20 *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 189.

21 Colossians 1:15. The Damascene's examination of the six links in the great chain of images appears in his *Third Apologetic Oration on the Holy Icons*, PG 94: 1337–1344.

22 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 175-81.

23 Ibid., 182.

While this mystical unity between the earthly and the heavenly—indeed, within the very fabric of reality—calls out to the human person from the amazing harmony and cosmic beauty of creation, this call is not always heard or answered. As Rilke intimates in his *Elegies*:

> …All of the living, though,
> make the mistake of drawing too sharp distinctions.
> Angels (it's said) would be often unable to tell
> whether they moved among living or dead. The eternal
> torrent whirls all the ages through either realm
> for ever, and sound above their voices in both.[24]

However, this call is an intrinsic aspect of Christian cosmology. It is often said that in the book of Genesis, in the Septuagint, when "God saw everything that he had made and indeed it was very good",[25] the Greek word for "good"—καλός—also means "beautiful." Etymologically, the verbal form of this Greek word—καλέω—means to "call." That is why theologians often reflect on how the beauty of creation calls us to encounter the mystery of God:

> The erotic fullness of life, and the "signifier" of that fullness we call beauty. As the perceptible starting-point of yearning, beauty "signifies" the fullness without ever being identified with it. "Since it summons (*kaloun*) all things to itself, it is therefore called beauty (*kallos*)." A summons to that relation and community of being which promises the "abundance" of life – it summons beauty to the longed-for life-giving participation, to the transcendence of death.[26]

Or as Harkianakis so eloquently put it in 'Deeper Communication': "Collecting shells on the beach / you shake hands silently / with the invisible."[27]

24 *First Elegy*, 80-85.

25 Genesis 1:31.

26 Christos Yannaras, *Variations on the Song of Songs*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005), 22-23.

27 Harkianakis, *Fireworks and Sparrows*, 27.

Perhaps the most famous declaration about the power of beauty is by Fyodor Dostoevsky: "Is it right, Prince, that you once said the world would be saved by 'beauty'?"[28] However, if beauty will save the world, for Rilke it is a mysterious and awesome creature that disorients human consciousness:

> For Beauty's nothing
> but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear,
> and why we adore it so is because it serenely
> disdains to destroy us. Every angel is terrible.
> And so I repress myself, and swallow the call-note
> of depth-dark sobbing.[29]

The existential prison of human consciousness constructed by the trauma of war suffocates the hope of transcendence, and the desire for heavenly bliss is quelled by the painful awareness of mortal finitude. Nevertheless, the *Duino Elegies* represent a quest to overcome this finitude and touch the angels. Rilke ponders whether children, heroes or lovers might serve as exemplars of how to transcend the limitations of the human condition. In the case of Gaspara Stampa, love becomes a source of poetic inspiration and a catalyst for transformation:

> 'Could I become like her!'?
> Should not these oldest sufferings be finally growing
> fruitfuller for us? Is it not time that, in loving,
> we freed ourselves from the loved one, and, quivering, endured:
> as the arrow endures the string, to become, in the gathering out-leap,
> something more than itself. For staying is nowhere.[30]

Harkianakis echoes this theme of transformation in 'Besieging the Ineffable', where he portrays poetry as "taking possession of the world … as you dream of it / in moments of wilderness: / in flashes

28 Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Alan Myers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 402 (Part 3, Chapter 5).

29 *First Elegy*, 4-9.

30 Ibid., 48-53.

of deliverance."[31] Encountering God is not a flight from this world or a betrayal of nature; it is a cosmic transfiguration. However, amidst a climate of despair and afflicted by the passions that darken the heart, the poet cannot bear the divine beauty that offers the gift of salvation. This is the "divine beauty" that, according to a hymn for the Sunday of Orthodoxy, is united with the image of God through the Incarnation, imbuing the human person with "ancient glory."[32]

In the *Duino Elegies*, an angel is a creature of paradox that causes the poet to ask: "Who are you?"[33] The answer blends elements of the earthly and heavenly realms, portraying angels as "seed of a blossoming god, / hinges of light, hallways, stairways, thrones, / spaces of being, force fields of ecstasy, storms / of unchecked rapture."[34] However, the Angel of the *Duino Elegies* is not a divine messenger. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the Angel is the poetic embodiment of a human person who has suspended the limitations of mortality:

> [The Angel's] feeling is unconditioned and unambiguous, whereas the human heart is capable of such feeling only in the rarest of moments. What is invoked here as the Angel, then, is a supreme possibility of the human heart itself a possibility never fully realized, one that the heart cannot achieve because the human being is conditioned in so many ways, rendering him incapable of a clear and total surrender to his feeling.[35]

When the poet tells the reader to sing a hymn of praise to the Angel, he warns the singer that a hymn which attempts to sing of the One who is beyond everything will not amaze the Angel:

31 Harkianakis, *Fireworks and Sparrows*, 44.

32 See the *kontakion* for the Sunday of Orthodoxy in *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (Boston: Faber, 1978), 306.

33 *Second Elegy*, 9.

34 Ibid., 12-15.

35 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue: Essays in German Literary Theory*, trans. Robert H. Paslick (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 157

> Praise this world to the Angel, not the untellable: you
> can't impress him with the splendour you've felt; in the cosmos
> where he more feelingly feels you're only a novice. So show him
> some simple thing, refashioned by age after age,
> till it lives in our hands and eyes as part of ourselves.[36]

It is in simple things, such as the scent of a rose, that a purified heart can scent salvation. It is in aesthetic phenomena that such a heart can experience the epiphany of the Divine. However, as Harkianakis notes, it is the perpetual light of Pascha that illuminates such divine beauty and sanctifies the sensorium:

> …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.[37]

Sensing the holy and feeling divine emotions may seem to be impossible for the one who dwells in the poetic world of the *Duino Elegies*, but for the faithful who inhabit the liturgical universe of Orthodoxy, they are the means "with which we who are able to touch partake of the untouchable, about which Solomon said, 'You will discover a divine sense.'"[38]

A Theological Quest for Beauty

The legendary account of the conversion of Russia, in which the imperial envoys return after their visit to Constantinople and tell Prince Vladimir about their liturgical experience, is a profound example of the theological quest for beauty:

36 *Ninth Elegy*, 53-57.

37 Harkianakis, 'Theology and Aesthetics,' 3.

38 St Athanasius of Alexandria, *On Sickness and Health*. My translation is from the Greek text in F. Diekamp (ed.), *Analecta Patristica, Orientialia Christiana Analecta* (Rome, 1938), 5-8: Ἔστι τις μετὰ ταύτας καὶ ἑτέρα ἕκτη αἴσθησις, καθ' ἣν τῶν ναφῶν ἐφαπτόμεθα οἱ ἐφάπτεσθαι δυνάμενοι, περὶ ἧς εἶπεν Σολομῶν. καὶ θείαν αἴσθησιν εὑρήσεις.

> …we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendour or such beauty and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty.[39]

The subject of the envoys' description was Hagia Sophia, which was a majestic embodiment of Byzantine aesthetics. According to the sixth-century descriptions of Hagia Sophia by Prokopios and Paul the Silentiary, its architecture reflected spiritual realities.[40] The holy ritual performed within this sacred space enacted divine transcendence through "the visual effects of vibrant and glittering materiality, reverberant acoustics, and thick and redolent incense", which sought to transport the faithful to "a space between heaven and earth."[41] Hagia Sophia was conceived as a cosmological image, a microcosm that bridged the earthly and heavenly realms by uniting them in the sacred space of the building and transfiguring the congregation's experience of beauty into a quest for divine reality.[42]

39 Samuel Hazard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, eds. and trans., *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 111.

40 For the Greek text (with German translation) of Prokopios' *Buildings* and Paul the Silentiary's *Ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia* and *Ekphrasis of the Ambo*, see Otto Veh, ed. *Prokop: Werke*, vol. 5 (Munich: Heimeran, 1977), 16–375. There is an English translation of the two texts by Paul the Silentiary in Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453: Sources and Documents* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 91-102. See also Mary Whitby, 'The Occasion of Paul the Silentiary's Ekphrasis of S. Sophia,' *The Classical Quarterly* 35:1 (1985): 215-28.

41 *Hagia Sophia. Sound, Space and Spirit in Byzantium* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 3. On the use of incense (and other fragrances) to evoke a paradisal atmosphere in Hagia Sophia (and other sacred spaces in Byzantium), see Béatrice Caseau, 'Euodia: The Use and Meaning of Fragrances in the Ancient World and their Christianization (100–900 AD)' (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1994), 289-92; Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2006), 65-98.

42 Taft, 'The Liturgy of the Great Church: An Initial Synthesis of Structure and Interpretation on the Eve of Iconoclasm,' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*

As the "material manifestation of beauty that stirs the emotions and occasions the experience of love," the aesthetics of Hagia Sophia could arouse a desire for divine beauty.[43] St Gregory of Nyssa suggested something similar in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, albeit before emperor Justinian's Hagia Sophia was built. For the Nyssen, the incitement of fleshly desire can astonishingly wield salvific power and lead the soul to a nobler desiring of divine things:

> ἐπειδὴ τοίνυν σοφία ἐστὶν ἡ λαλοῦσα, ἀγάπησον ὅσον δύνασαι ἐξ ὅλης καρδίας τε καὶ δυνάμεως, ἐπιθύμησον ὅσον χωρεῖς. προστίθημι δὲ θαρρῶν τοῖς ῥήμασι τούτοις καὶ τὸ ἐράσθητι· ἀνέγκλητον γὰρ τοῦτο καὶ ἀπαθὲς ἐπὶ τῶν ἀσωμάτων τὸ πάθος, καθώς φησιν ἡ σοφία ἐν ταῖς Παροιμίαις τοῦ θείου κάλλους νομοθετοῦσα τὸν ἔρωτα.[44]
>
> Therefore, since it is Wisdom who speaks, *love* her as much as you are able, with your whole heart and strength; *desire* her as much as you can. To these words I am bold to add, *Be in love*, for this passion, when directed to things incorporeal, is blameless and impassible, as Wisdom says in Proverbs when she bids us to be in love with the divine Beauty.[45]

Two centuries later, in the hymn *On the Consecration of Hagia Sophia*,[46] the Old Testament Wisdom[47] appears as the Logos who became flesh,[48] who was the "power of God and wisdom of God"[49] and whose "sojourn

34/35 (1980/1981): 47-48; Helen G. Saradi, 'Space in Byzantine Thought,' in *Architecture as Icon: Perception and Representation of Architecture in Byzantine Art*, ed. Slobodan Ćurčić and Evangelia Hadjitryphonos (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 103.

43 Nadine Schibille, *Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine Aesthetic Experience* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 191.

44 Homily 1 in St Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 24.

45 Ibid., 25.

46 For the Greek text of the hymn, see Constantine A. Trypanis, *Fourteen Early Byzantine* Cantica (Vienna: Böhlau in Kommission, 1968), 141-47.

47 "Wisdom built herself a house and supported it with seven pillars." Proverbs 9:1.

48 John 1:14

49 1 Corinthians 1:24.

in the body" the inauguration of Hagia Sophia celebrated.[50] Beyond the Incarnation of the Logos and the dwelling of the uncontainable in the womb of the Theotokos, Hagia Sophia was portrayed as a sanctuary in which Christ could dwell.[51] Through liturgical performance, the church building of Hagia Sophia became a mediator between materiality and divine reality, and the space of Hagia Sophia revealed the beauty of creation.

Many centuries ago, and indeed today, the faithful were and are invited to experience this eschatological beauty through their senses and emotions. However, if we acknowledge that, unlike Rilke's Angel who "more feelingly feels", our senses and feelings will never experience the splendour and beauty of a cosmos that conceals yet reveals the Divine, then is it true to say that the sensorium and emotions of the human person can only grasp mere phenomena and feel what we have been culturally and historically conditioned to feel? Harkianakis answers this question poetically when he ponders the role of the senses in 'Things and Miracles':

> No joy is complete
> if it's not hailed by all senses.
> Visions are deceitful phantoms
> if you can't touch them
> listen to their rhythmic breath
> taste their blood and see
> that Christ is the Lord
> be intoxicated by their sweat
> at the noon of our brief life.[52]

At the beginning of his poem, Harkianakis quotes Dimitris Mytaras, a modern Greek painter: "We have turned down the gift to perceive things through our senses."[53] This quotation and assertion frames his

50 *On the Consecration of Hagia Sophia*, strophe 1. Trypanis, *Fourteen Early Byzantine Cantica*, 141-42. The English translation is my own.

51 Ibid., strophe 4.

52 Harkianakis, *Fireworks and Sparrows*, 43.

53 Ibid.

poem which, in a subtle way, contends that our senses are a divine gift that is only truly realised in liturgical life, through a eucharistic mode of existence: "taste their blood and see / that Christ is the Lord." For Harkianakis, the sensorium does not simply grasp the phenomena of the sensible world, it can glimpse invisible beauty, sense the intelligible and experience immaterial illumination.

While much has been written about the prayers, hymns, vestments and the physical design of the church building,[54] research on the senses, materiality and their effects on the liturgical experience is only beginning to emerge.[55] The spiritual senses—"the senses of the soul" (τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς αἰσθητήρια)[56]—of the human person undergo a curious journey in the history of Christianity.[57] However, as Harkianakis notes, it is often forgotten that the liturgical universe of the faithful opens a space of participation where sensual apprehension can glimpse divine realities. Nevertheless, the tension between bodily sense perception and the sensory powers of the soul that Rilke underscores in the *Duino Elegies* is

54 See, for example: Derek Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Self in Byzantium* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Bissera Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Warren T. Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon: Liturgical Vestments and Sacramental Power in Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

55 Béatrice Caseau, 'The Senses in Religion: Liturgy, Devotion, and Deprivation,' in *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages, 500–1450*, ed. Richard G. Newhauser (London: Berg Publishers, 2014), 89-110; Susan Ashbrook Harvey and Margaret Mullett (eds), *Knowing Bodies, Passionate Souls: Sense Perceptions in Byzantium* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2017).

56 St Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Songs of Songs*, 66-67.

57 For an overview, see Marcus Plested, 'The Spiritual Senses, Monastic and Theological,' in Susan Ashbrook Harvey and Margaret Mullett (eds) *Knowing Bodies, Passionate Souls: Sense Perceptions in Byzantium* (Harvard University Press, 2017), 301-12; Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (eds), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). See also the work by Paul Gavrilyuk and Frederick D. Aquino on the Spiritual Perception Project, and their forthcoming publication, *Sensing Things Divine: Towards a Contemporary Account of Spiritual Perception* (Oxford University Press).

not a modern phenomenon. The Christian understanding of this tension is apparent in the famous dialogue between St Macrina and St Gregory of Nyssa.[58] After considering the notion of the human person "as a kind of small cosmos", Macrina argues that the senses can "become interpreters of the omnipotent wisdom which is contemplated in the universe."[59] But she also warns that there are hidden things and by "hidden" she means "that which escapes the observation of the senses because in itself it can be known only by the intellect and not by sight." Gregory ripostes:

> Ἀλλὰ τὴν τοῦ παντὸς ὑπερκειμένην σοφίαν διὰ τῶν ἐνθεωρουμένων τῇ φύσει τῶν ὄντων σοφῶν τε καὶ τεχνικῶν λόγων, ἐν τῇ ἁρμονίᾳ ταύτῃ καὶ διακοσμήσει δυνατόν ἐστιν ἀναλογίσασθαι· ψυχῆς δὲ γνῶσις διὰ τῶν κατὰ τὸ σῶμα δεικνυμένων τίς ἂν γένοιτο τοῖς ἀπὸ τῶν φαινομένων τὸ κρυπτὸν ἀνιχνεύουσιν;[60]
>
> However, it is possible to carefully deliberate on the harmony and order of the nature of things, regarding the wisdom which transcends everything, through the use of both wise and skilfully arranged words. Who will be able to search out the knowledge of the soul through what is revealed through the body, regarding what is hidden, out of those things which are perceived by the senses?[61]

Macrina's response is insightful:

> Καὶ μάλιστα μέν τοι […] τοῖς κατὰ τὸ σοφὸν ἐκεῖνο παράγγελμα γινώσκειν ἑαυτοὺς ἐπιθυμοῦσιν· εἰ κἂν ἡ διδάσκαλος τῶν περὶ ψυχῆς ὑπολήψεων αὐτὴ ἡ ψυχὴ, ὅτι ἄϋλός τις καὶ ἀσώματος, καταλλήλως τῇ ἰδίᾳ φύσει ἐνεργοῦσά τε καὶ κινουμένη, καὶ διὰ τῶν σωματικῶν ὀργάνων τὰς ἰδίας κινήσεις ἐνδεικνυμένη. Ἡ γὰρ ὀργανικὴ τοῦ σώματος αὕτη διασκευὴ, ἔστι μὲν οὐδὲν ἧττον καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἀπονεκρωθέντων διὰ θανάτου, ἀλλ' ἀκίνητος μένει καὶ

58 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993).

59 Ibid., 34.

60 *Gregorii Nysseni. De Anima et Resurrectione: Opera Dogmatica Minora, Pars III*, ed. Andreas Spira. GNO 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 14.

61 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 37 (modified).

> ἀνενέργητος, τῆς ψυχικῆς δυνάμεως ἐν αὐτῇ μὴ οὔσης. Κινεῖται δὲ τότε ὅταν ἥ τε αἴσθησις ἐν τοῖς ὀργάνοις ᾖ, καὶ διὰ τῆς αἰσθήσεως ἡ νοητὴ δύναμις διήκῃ ταῖς ἰδίαις ὁρμαῖς συγκινοῦσα πρὸς τὸ δοκοῦν τὰ ὀργανικὰ αἰσθητήρια.[62]
>
> Don't you see [...] if we desire to know ourselves, in obedience to that wise precept, the soul itself teaches us well enough what we should understand about the soul, namely that it is immaterial and bodiless, working and moving in accord with its own nature, and revealing its movements by means of the bodily organs. For the same arrangement of the bodily organs exists in the corpses of the dead, but the soul remains immobile and not activated by the psychic power which is no longer in it. It is moved when perception resides in the organs and intellectual power pervades perception, moving the organs of perception along with its own impulses as it chooses.[63]

The ways of knowing for Macrina require a harmony of spiritual and physical senses, a harmony that is based on a Christian anthropology that viewed humankind as the midpoint between heavenly and earthly things.[64]

Similarly, Christianity portrayed emotions as a complex aspect of the human person. Emotions were not necessarily evil distortions of human nature; they could be good or bad depending on their use.[65] This conception of human feeling was based on a patristic view of Christ's

62 *De Anima et Resurrectione*, 14.

63 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 37 (modified).

64 See chapters 8 and 16 of the Nyssen's *On the Formation of the Human Being*. A critical edition of Gregory's *On the Formation of the Human Being* has been foreshadowed by the editors of *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*. In the meantime, see the Greek text in PG 44, 124-256. Although the title of Gregory's treatise, Περί κατασκευῆς ἀνθρώπου, is commonly translated as *On the Making of Man*, this is neither an accurate translation, nor a reflection of Gregory's main theme.

65 See Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, 'The Meaning of "Pathos" in Abba Isaias and Theodoret of Cyrus,' *Studia Patristica* 20 (1989): 315-22; Paul Blowers, 'Hope for the Passible Self: The Use and Transformation of the Human Passions in the Fathers of the *Philokalia*,' in *The Philokalia: A Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality*, ed. Brock Bingaman and Bradley Nassif (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 216-29.

emotions. St Cyril of Alexandria did not ascribe Christ's emotions to his human nature. When Jesus wept before the tomb of Lazarus, his "holy flesh" inclined to tears but in such a way that the "ever undisturbed and calm" divinity ensured the grief was not excessive and "taught [the flesh] to feel things beyond its nature" (τὰ ὑπὲρ φύσιν ἰδίαν διδασκομένη φρονεῖν).[66] The question of the Logos' emotions was a soteriological one:

> Ὥσπερ μέντοι οὐκ ἄλλως ὁ θάνατος κατηργήθη, μὴ ἀποθανόντος τοῦ Σωτῆρος· οὕτω καὶ ἐφ' ἑκάστου τῶν τῆς σαρκὸς παθῶν· εἰ μὴ γὰρ ἐδειλίασεν, οὐκ ἂν ἐν ἐλευθερίᾳ τοῦ δειλιᾶν ἡ φύσις γέγονεν· εἰ μὴ ἐλυπήθη, οὐκ ἂν ἀπηλλάγη τοῦ λυπεῖσθαί ποτε· εἰ μὴ ἐταράχθη καὶ ἐπτοήθη, οὐκ ἂν ἔξω ποτὲ τούτων ἐγένετο. καὶ ἐφ' ἑκάστῳ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνως γεγονότων, τὸν αὐτὸν ἐφαρμόζοντα λόγον εὑρήσεις ἐν Χριστῷ· τὰ τῆς σαρκὸς πάθη κεκινημένα, οὐχ ἵνα κρατήσῃ, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐν ἡμῖν, ἀλλ' ἵνα κινηθέντα καταργηθῇ τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ ἐνοικήσαντος τῇ σαρκὶ Λόγου, πρὸς τὸ ἄμεινον μεταποιουμένης τῆς φύσεως.[67]
>
> Moreover, just as death was brought to naught in no other way than by the death of the Saviour, so also with regard to each of the passions of the flesh. For unless [Christ] had felt cowardice, human nature could not be freed from cowardice; unless He had experienced grief there would never have been any deliverance from grief; unless He had been troubled and alarmed, no escape from these feelings could have been found. And with regard to every human experience, you will find exactly the corresponding thing in Christ. The passions of His flesh were aroused, not that they might have the upper hand as they do in us, but in order that when aroused they might be thoroughly subdued by the power of the Word dwelling in the flesh, the nature thus undergoing a change for the better.

Christ's emotions were ascribed to the one incarnate Logos. Similarly, the emotions of the human person are another instance of how God

66 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 7, on John 11:33, PG 74, 53A. The English translation is my own.

67 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 8, on John 12:27, PG 74, 92D. The English translation that follows is my own.

formed human nature as the midpoint between the earthly and the divine. Every emotion, when "exalted by the loftiness of mind" (τῷ ὑψηλῷ τῆς διανοίας συνεπαιρόμενον), can be "conformed to the beauty of the divine image" (τῷ κατὰ τὴν θείαν εἰκόνα κάλλει συσχηματίζεται).[68]

One of the most profound sensory aspects of liturgical life, which arouses the emotions, is hymnody. According to St Augustine of Hippo, sacred music is a quest for truth that embodies the beauty of God.[69] Music has the power to stir the emotions of the soul through "a mysterious inner kinship" between the various modes of chant and feeling.[70] Similarly, St Gregory the Theologian's poem *On His Own Verses* reflects on how the delight and pleasure of music and poetry could have a role to play in cultivating spirituality:

> Ὥσπερ τι τερπνὸν τοῦτο δοῦναι φάρμακον,
> Πειθοῦς ἀγωγὸν εἰς τὰ χρησιμώτερα,
> Τέχνῃ γλυκάζων τὸ πικρὸν τῶν ἐντολῶν.
> Φιλεῖ δ' ἀνίεσθαί τε καὶ νευρᾶς τόνος·
> Εἴ πως θέλεις καὶ τοῦτο· εἰ μή τι πλέον,
> Ἀντ' ᾀσμάτων σοι ταῦτα καὶ λυρισμάτων.[71]
>
> My verse could be for [youth] a pleasant potion,
> Leading them towards the Good by mild persuasion,
> Sweetening by art the bitter taste of law.
> Verse helps us to relax the tightened string,
> If we but will, even if it be no more
> Than lyric songs, musical interludes.[72]

68 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Formation of the Human Being*. PG 44, 193C.

69 See Augustine's *De Musica* (especially Book Six), ed. Martin Jacobsson, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 102 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017); trans. Robert Catesby Taliafero in *The Fathers of the Church* 4 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 169-379. See also Carol Harrison, 'Augustine and the Art of Music,' in *Resonant Witness: Conversations Between Music and Theology*, ed. Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 27-45, esp. 31.

70 Augustine, *Confessions* 10.33.49, quoted in Harrison, 'Augustine and the Art of Music,' 42.

71 PG 37, 1332.

72 The English translation is from Brian E. Daley, trans., *Gregory of Nazianzus*

Gregory goes on to say that, just as music and poetry were pleasant pedagogical tools for the ancients, Christianity could employ these tools to shape the hearts of young people and lead them to communion with the Divine:

> Ὡς οἱ πάλαι προσῇδον ἐμμελεῖς λόγους,
> Τὸ τερπνὸν, οἶμαι, τοῦ καλοῦ ποιούμενοι
> Ὄχημα, καὶ τυποῦντες ἐκ μελῶν τρόπους.[73]
> The ancients sang instruction in their verse
> Making delight the vehicle of beauty,
> Forming the heart by virtue of song.[74]

As Harkianakis boldly declares, the "epiphany of the Divine" is "primarily an aesthetical phenomenon."[75] He echoes this theme in 'The Affirmative Glance', suggesting the arts have the potential to be a divine-human activity:

> Poetry, the affirmative glance
> of God
> through the mortal eyes
> of humans.
> It evaluates the deeds of the Seven Days
> which in the beginning had no "blemish
> or wrinkle or any such thing"
> and grants them anew the remission
> to end as they began:
> *very* good indeed.[76]

Byzantine hymnody often evokes this transfigured cosmos, particularly during the feast of the Baptism of Christ:

> Εὐφραίνου, οὐρανέ, καὶ γῆ, ἐπαγάλλου·
> ἁγιάσθητε, πηγαὶ αἱ τῶν ὑδάτων·

(London: Routledge, 2006), 164.

73 *On His Own Verses*, PG 37, 1332.

74 Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 165.

75 Harkianakis, 'Theology and Aesthetics,' 6.

76 Harkianakis, *Fireworks and Sparrows*, 64.

πάντα γὰρ φανεὶς ἐπλήρωσεν εὐλογίας,
πάντας φωτίζει τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀπρόσιτον.[77]

Heaven rejoice and earth be glad,
springs of waters be hallowed,
for by appearing [Christ] has filled all things with blessing,
he enlightens all mankind,
the unapproachable Light.[78]

As with the other liturgical arts, Byzantine hymnody transforms theology and ontology into aesthetics, embodying divine beauty in melody and poetry, and inviting the faithful to step into a liturgical universe, where intricate themes, biblical characters and the incarnate Logos dwell together in the sacred drama of salvation.

Concluding reflections

The poetic gaze of Archbishop Stylianos Harkianakis looked upon a cosmos illuminated by the light of Pascha and saw the miracle of life in the minutiae of everyday existence. If the salvific Passion of Christ inaugurates "a new heaven and a new earth",[79] then the faithful are called to sharpen their senses, renew their minds and sanctify their emotions, so that amidst the existential angst of a chaotic world, they can be comforted by the divine meaning and beauty of a kingdom of God that is within us,[80] and experience the gift of creation as a liturgical and eucharistic reality. While, for Harkianakis, this theological quest for beauty was coloured by the mystery of the Divine, for Rilke the seeker of God is burdened by the fear of mortality and the pain of homelessness. Yet, for both of these poets, the quest for God was never a question of ideology or logic; "it was

77 St Romanos the Melodist, *On the Holy Theophany*, strophe 17. Romanos le Mélode, *Hymnes. Tome II: Nouveau Testament*, ed. Grosdidier de Matons, SC 110 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1965), 258.

78 *On the Life of Christ: Chanted Sermons by the Great Sixth-Century Poet and Singer St. Romanos*, trans. Ephrem Lash (Sacred Literature Series: AltaMira Press, 1998), 47.

79 Revelation 21:1.

80 Luke 17:21

a battle, a painful, all-consuming contest breast to breast."[81] This vale of tears can paradoxically lead us to a deeper understanding of the Divine. Indeed, amidst the sombre mood that prevails in the *Duino Elegies*, there are also moments of hope:

> Earth, is it not just this that you want: to arise
> invisibly in us? Is not your dream
> to be one day invisible? Earth! Invisible!
> What is your urgent command, if not transformation?[82]

Art, poetry and theology share a common desire "to express the inarticulate", a yearning "to console the inconsolable" and a longing "to glorify the source of life and immortality."[83] However, as Harkianakis warns in his 'Hymn to the Anonymous', when we stand before the mystery of God, our awe should be escorted by silence:

> You are not Logic
> because it has limits.
> You are not Justice
> because it knows conditions.
> You are not Morality
> because you transcend both act and mind.
> You are not Freedom
> because it can be restricted.
> You are not Beauty
> because it can be exhausted.
> You are the Love which hasn't yet uttered
> the final word.[84]

What song is fitting for the God who loved us and died for us? And yet, the whole of creations sings to its Creator, glorifying him "with wordless voices" and "each of their songs becomes our hymn."[85]

81 Archbishop Stylianos of Australia, 'Prologue,' in *God's Struggler: Religion in the Writings of Nikos Kazantzakis*, ed. Darren J. N. Middleton and Peter Bien (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), xi.

82 *Ninth Elegy*, lines 68-71.

83 Harkianakis, 'Theology and Aesthetics,' 12.

84 Harkianakis, *Fireworks and Sparrows*, 6.

85 St Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 44.12, trans. Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of*

This paper began with the question of whether the poet can ever feel like Rilke's Angel feels and sought to argue that the true realm of aesthetics is the liturgical world of Christianity. After grappling with Harkianakis' reflections on theology and aesthetics, and juxtaposing them with the *Duino Elegies*, it has suggested that the theological quest for beauty means discovering the spiritual senses and blessed emotions that rest in our hearts. At the intersection of the personal and liturgical dimensions of worship, amidst the performance of the eucharistic mystery, the human person could feel emotions and sense things that could awaken the mind and move the soul toward divine passion. In the eloquent words of St Nicholas Cabasilas, the liturgy is capable of inspiring such holy feelings because it invites us not only to think about, but also to "see the utter poverty of him who possesses all, the coming on earth of him who dwells everywhere, the shame of the blessed one, the passion of the impassible" and "beholding the newness of salvation" (θαυμάσαντες τὴν καινότητα τῆς σωτηρίας), "let us enkindle in our hearts the flame of his love" (φλέξωμεν τὰς καρδίας τῷ πυρὶ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ).[86]

Nazianzus, 161.

86 *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, chapter 1, section 12. I have slightly modified the English translation in Nicholas Cabasilas, *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, trans. J. M. Hussey and P. A. McNulty (London: SPCK, 1977), 29. For the Greek text, see René Bornert et al., eds., *Nicolas Cabasilas: Explication de la Divine Liturgie*, SC 4 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1967), 66, 68.