

Aesthetics of Deification & Postmodern Deceptions: Reflections on Monasticism, the Icon & Beauty

By Hieromonk Silouan

...God is the only Being that truly is—the only eternal and immutable Being—who neither receives being from non-being nor returns to non-being; who is Tri-hypostatic and Almighty, and who through His Logos brought forth all things from non-being...

Gregory Palamas, *Topics of Natural and Theological Science*, Chap. 21

The Beautiful is the principle of all things, as making cause and moving and holding together the whole by the love of its proper beautifulness, and limit of all things, and cherished, as final cause, since for the sake of the Beautiful all things come to be...

St. Dionysius the Areopagite, *Divine Names* IV.7, 704 AB

He who is deified through grace will be everything that God is without possessing identity of essence.

St. Maximos the Confessor, *To Thalassios* 22, *Ambiguum* 41

Monasticism actualizes the integration of the sacred, life and art. This unfolds in accordance to Tradition: the ever new, ever renewing life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.¹ The monk is a craftsman. Monasticism

¹ According to Lossky, "The pure notion of Tradition can then be defined by saying that it is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, communicating to each member of the Body of Christ the faculty of hearing, of receiving, of knowing the Truth in the light which belongs to it, and not according to the natural light of human reason...The dynamism of Tradition allows of no inertia either in the habitual forms of piety or in the dogmatic expressions that are repeated mechanically like magic recipes of Truth, guaranteed by the authority of the Church. To preserve the 'dogmatic tradition' does not mean to be attached to doctrinal formulas: to be within Tradition is to keep living Truth in the Light of the Holy Spirit; or rather, it is to be kept in the Truth by the vivifying power of Tradition. (footnote continued on next page)

is an iconography of the soul, the means of return to supreme Beauty. It is an oasis in a spiritual desert of self-deception, a finding of our grounding in divinity. It is a restoration of our divine likeness, a method leading to deification. The monk is a warrior. Monasticism is a spiritual war on the alluring idols of the spectacle of postmodernity. It is a return to the Real, the Archetype of man. As it has been said, "Beauty has to do with cognition."² Yet we look in the mirror and at each other's countenance, but fail to re-cognize our true selves. Meanwhile Creation groans, for in lacking self-knowledge, our blind intellects fail to re-cognize the Sacred in all things. But how does monasticism bring about integration, wholeness, beauty? And, what does the icon offer to the contemporary predicament?

Philokalia

We find the answer in the classic of Eastern Orthodox Hesychast

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But this power, like all that comes from the Spirit, preserves by a ceaseless renewing." As quoted in C. A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity: Orthodox Theology and the Aesthetics of the Christian image*, Ashgate Pub. Lim. Surrey, UK, 2013, pp. 64-65. All of this presupposes *participation* in the life of the Holy Spirit through baptismal *initiation*. The various sacraments, rites, and supports of contemplation in the Orthodox Church are life giving sacred symbols, and as such not arbitrary. That is, they arise from the *actualization* of life in the Spirit, their outward forms being a reverberation of divine energy. Therefore, although there should be no attachment to outward form or doctrinal formula (fundamentalism, legalistic formalism or phariseeism, etc.), given that they cannot exhaust the plenitude of the Mystery, nevertheless, this does not mean a willful innovationist or dismissive approach to the exoteric form should be cultivated. Nor does it mean allowance for religious syncretism. Tendencies that commonly arise from subjectivism and lack of commitment to the life of initiation. The form is not above the Church, she determines the form according to Tradition. However, She does this not merely as a "human authority," but rather as truly the Body of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, applying changes organically according to the pastoral needs and circumstances that arise. Yet, these contingencies always remain connected and subordinate to the immutable principles of Tradition.

- ² "The older view of art had been that the work of art is the demonstration of the invisible form that remains in the artist, whether human or divine; that beauty has to do with cognition; and that art is an intellectual virtue." Annanda K. Coomaraswamy, "Imitation, Expression, and Participation," in *The Essential Coomaraswamy*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana, 2004, p. 181.

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