

I would recommend to the author to also translate this work into English, which would further facilitate and encourage inter-Christian dialogue, inviting theologians to a continuous analysis and deepening of the foundations of faith in the same Christ - the Savior of all humanity.

Rev. Prof. Dr. Ioan TULCAN

Chrysostomos A. STAMOULIS, *Holy Beauty. Prolegomena to an Orthodox Philokalic Aesthetics*, translated by Norman Russell, James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, 2022, 236 pp.

The English translation of the book *Κάλλος το άγιον. Προλεγόμενα στη φιλόκαλη αισθητική της Ορθοδοξίας* as *Holy Beauty. Prolegomena to an Orthodox Philokalic Aesthetics* represents a major academic event in the English speaking Western theological world, Orthodox and non Orthodox. Through this translation, the book fits in the academic frame where naturally it belongs, building bridges between the Eastern and Western Christianity around the topic of beauty. After a great impact in the Greek and the Romanian theology¹, it promises to stir a debate in the Western Orthodox and non Orthodox world with its fresh vision of how holiness and beauty may relate in a postmodern culture and time.

Such a relationship is promoted by an original theologian and thinker. Although Chrysostomos A. Stamoulis is a professor of Dogmatics, he is as well a reputed musician. He teaches Dogmatics at the Faculty of Theology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, holding the chair of the renowned professor Nikos Matsoukas. The author is a lover of beauty: conservatory

¹ Hrisostom STAMOULIS, *Frumusețea sfințeniei. Prolegomene la o estetică filocalică a Ortodoxiei*, trans. Nicușor Deciu, Basilica Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011. In this book review I will resume a few thoughts on the book published under the title “Frumusețea teologiei sau în căutarea unei viziuni a unității”, in: *Orizonturi teologice*, no. 2/2011.

graduate, choral and orchestral conductor, with an impressive recording oeuvre including musical compositions to his own lyrics (*Metamorphoses* - 2007, *Song of the Bittern* - 2007, *And in Their Eyes you Read: Cappadocia* - 2005, *My Mother and the Blessed Virgin Mary* - 2000). The musician is doubled by the rigorous dogmatist, with an equally valuable theological work (“*What’s the Fox Seeking in the Fair*”? *Essays on the Dialogue of Orthodoxy with Politics, Culture and the City* - 2016; *As if I were a Stranger and a Wanderer, Or, Incarnation: The migration of Love* - 2011; *Eros and Thanatos. Essay on a Civilization of the Incarnation* - 2009, *Lot’s Woman and Contemporary Theology* - 2008, *Theotokos and Orthodox Dogma. Research on the teaching of St. Cyril of Alexandria* - 1996, 2003, *On Light. Energies of the Person or of the Being? Contributions to Contemporary Theology on the Holy Trinity in the Orthodox Space* - 1999).

The book benefits from the excellent translation of Norman Russell, himself a leading translator and author of Orthodox theology. According to *Translator’s Introduction*, Chrysostomos Stamoulis brings into dialogue with each other “the Marxist theorist Kostas Zouraris, the poets George Seferis and Georgios Themelis, the literary critic Zissimos Lorentzatos, the priest and liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemmann, the dogmatic theologian Nikos Matsoukas, the novelist Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis, the ascetic elders Sophrony of Essex and Porphyrios of Mount Athos, and the philosopher Theodor Adorno – along with the Fathers of the Church”².

Holy Beauty aims to investigate the inner springs of the Orthodox Tradition, life and spirituality, on the basis of which an original concept and, why not, a new theological discipline called “Orthodox aesthetics” could be articulated. The starting point of the book is the discussion in Greek cultural circles on the relationship between Orthodoxy and beauty, between Byzantine-Orthodox heritage and Western culture, between one’s own spiritual identity and that of the West. If for a number of Eastern thinkers the correlation of the two terms (Orthodoxy and aesthetics) is a natural, almost tautological one, for others it is impossible, being an oxymoronic construction, a contradiction in terms. The latter category

² Chrysostomos A. STAMOULIS, *Holy Beauty. Prolegomena to an Orthodox Philokalic Aesthetics*, translated by Norman Russell, James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, 2022, p. XI. The next quotations from this book will be indicated in parentheses.

associates *aesthetics* with the ugly and the elusive, with the Western way of perceiving beauty (including its negation), while reserving for Orthodoxy the epithet *philokalic*, considered as diametrically opposed to Western aesthetics. The basic polemic, that between pro and anti-Westerners, allows the author to address much broader issues, such as the relationship between Orthodoxy and secular culture, between the Church and the world, between the dynamics and the permanence of Tradition.

In this discussion, Chrysostomos Stamoulis offers answers based on the Fathers of the Church, ancient and contemporary, classic and new to the questions raised. But his solutions also come from his own confrontation with the aesthetic work. Professor Ch. Stamoulis writes theology in a different way than we are used to, his latest publications bringing to the forefront solutions sought in dialogue with others, not only with the Patristic tradition and contemporary thought, but also with students, friends, people with whom he is in constant contact, academically, ecclesiastically or purely human. The same is true of the book *Holy Beauty*, first published in 2004 and reprinted in 2005 and 2008 in Athens.

In *Author's Preface*, Professor Stamoulis, renouncing the aspiration to write a gigantic theological treatise for soteriological aims, modestly announces that his desire is to offer “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...” (p. XIX). This proposal stems from the author’s conviction that the time for writers who claim to be omniscient has passed, and that we must make room for the relative as a space for dialogue between theology, culture and science, when it comes to subjects that concern neither dogma nor Christian morality. Seemingly disconcerting in its spontaneity of thought, in its thematic openness to new and new directions, in its overall architecture, built around a central concept, “the beautiful”, and its most important correlatives, “aesthetics” and “Philokalia”, the book allows at least three levels of reading:

- a first level is the interpretation of the data and experiences of Orthodox spirituality from an aesthetic perspective;
- a second level is the theological one; *Holy Beauty* can be considered a Dogmatics reduced to its essentials;

- a third level is the self-reflexive and self-critical one, insofar as Ch. Stamoulis competently and courageously undertakes the analysis of the main deviations of contemporary Orthodox theology, attracted by fragmentariness and one-sidedness.

The book is divided into three parts that cover nine chapters. The three parts are as following: I. Philokalia or Aesthetics? The ‘Dilemma’ of Contemporary Orthodoxy, II. Orthodoxy’s Philokalic Aesthetics: The ‘Both Together’ of Patristic Teaching, III. ‘Unutterable Beauty’: Examples of a Philokalic Reading of Ecclesial Life.

The first part, entitled “Philokalia or Aesthetics? The ‘Dilemma’ of Contemporary Orthodoxy”, notes the existence of a theology of division, oriented against a holistic theology, capable of embracing life as a divine gift in all its manifestations. The author polemically refers to such a theology, existing at least in the Greek Church environment, which postulates absolute, exclusivist formulas that deny otherness and is incapable of an integrating, unitary vision. The idea is pursued and exemplified throughout the book, the defining formula for such a theology being the disjunction “either-or”: either spirit, or body, or mysticism, or asceticism, or aesthetics, or philokalia, or law, or grace, but never complementarity and balance between opposing poles. In the title of this part, the word “dilemma” is in quotation marks, because we are dealing with a false dilemma, non-existent for the authentic Orthodox conscience.

The author draws on the authority of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann to point out that in the past, such a perspective has created historical heresies such as Montanism, Donatism, Bogomilism, Chiliasm, etc., which have separated/divided reality, “maximising” elements of it to the detriment of the whole. The solution to avoiding this danger, which is still evident today, even if manifested differently, lies in understanding the fundamental antinomy by which Christianity relates to the world: on the one hand, “For God so loved the world...” (John 3, 16), and on the other hand: “Don’t love the world, nor what is in the world” (1 John 2, 15) (pp. 31-32). Following the thread of Father Alexander’s *Journal*, the Greek professor laments Orthodoxy’s inability to be in realistic touch with change. The “historical crisis of Orthodoxy” is caused by the insistence on denying change, by the inability to creatively take on the new, by the perception of

any change as an attack on its identity (pp. 33-34). Moreover, “people are horrified by the fallen world, but not enough by the falling of Orthodoxy” (p. 35). Resistance to change is illustrated by the example of contemporary iconographers “who are often copyists” (p. 37).

In order to outline more precisely the idea of a theology of unity, the author proposes the model of Nikos Matsoukas, whose disciple he himself was. According to Ch. Stamoulis, his master writes a theology of continuity and unity. This means that for the definition of Orthodoxy there is no need for an adversary to help it represent itself contrapuntally, by contrast with it. “The West is not the indispensable presupposition for the existence of the East” (p. 64), Matsoukas notes. The West is not to be idolised, as the pro-Westerners do, but neither is it to be turned into a “scarecrow”, as the anti-Westerners do (p. 64).

Professor Matsoukas’ integrative Orthodox vision is illustrated by his description of the Greek General Makriyannis, for whom there can be no drastic separation between Church and society: “He cannot separate the people of God from the people constituting the Polity (*Politeia*), so that metaphysics and moral theology are one thing, and culture (*politismos*) is another, with its own spiritual goals... If a people forgets and betrays this continuity and this identity, it loses its memory, its own being...” (p. 69). Commenting on the above statements, Ch. Stamoulis gives them a greater degree of generalization: “Divided reality is condemned to decline and death. Its redemption consists in a return to its original condition, to the cradle of its unity” (p. 70).

The second part, entitled “Orthodoxy’s Philokalic Aesthetics: The ‘Both Together’ of Patristic Teaching”, is the most theologically dense. Within it, the main axes on which an Orthodox aesthetics, or, to use the author’s terminology, a philokalic aesthetics, could be built are exposed. The relief of beauty takes place both within Patristic theology and within literature, thus giving rise to a fruitful encounter between Saint Dionysius the Areopagite and F. M. Dostoevsky, between Saints Cyril of Alexandria, Maxim the Confessor, Gregory Palamas and Thomas Eliot. The correspondences that Professor Stamoulis finds between these very different authors are impressive, with intertextuality functioning as a literary process designed to reveal the depths of understanding that the great spirits of humanity can reach in ways other than theology.

Thus, after identifying in the passage which states that “the world will be saved by beauty” from Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot* the very essence of Orthodox theology (p. 83), the author traces the correspondence of vision with Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, for whom beauty is not an attribute but a person. God himself is “beauty” and “goodness”, and thus “love” and “beloved”. Here the author identifies “a revealed aesthetics, an aesthetics of the revealed and revealing God” (p. 86).

Analyzing the Areopagian view that God, as Beautiful Sun, is Goodness in Himself and *ad extra*, the author of the book makes a purely theological excursion into the creation of the world and intratrinitarian relations (the Father begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit). The drama of the fall and the redemptive *oikonomia* through which man is restored is summarized. The return of creatures to the source of goodness is an act of reversal of the fall, and for this reason, the “philokalic aesthetics” of Orthodoxy has the role of bringing together the scattered in the unity of the “ecclesial body” (p. 95). Its ultimate aim is to grant communion with “the supra-substantial good”, with “the supra-substantial beauty” (p. 101).

The Areopagitic language allows the assimilation of terms uncomfortable for a conformist theology, stifled by repetition and fearful of the new. But the challenge of this language is fully taken up by the author of this book. If for St. Dionysius (and for St. Ignatius of Antioch), “My *eros* is crucified” (*Divine Names* IV, 12 – PG 3, 709 B), and the restoration of creatures has its beginning in the loving invitation (*erotic*) addressed by God to man, for Dionysius’ interpreter, “the ecstatic divine love by which God invites humanity does not allow the lovers to belong to themselves, much less to others, but invites them to belong to those beloved by them” (p. 99).

In a series of dense pages (pp. 102-110) the disfigurement, the falsification of the divine image in man through the Fall, and its transfiguration into Christ is described. Despite the multitude of meanings of the divine image in man, the patristic authors identify it in free will, in man’s capacity for self-determination, for self-control. This is the source of creativity, the essential feature of the image, the mark of a Creator-God on the human beings (p. 106). Satan cannot really be creative; he can only parasitize

and paralyze God's creation (p. 108). Man responds to Satan's "evil arts (*kakotechnia*)" (p. 107) with the most important of the arts, *theologia*, which is primarily, in the Orthodox tradition, "a creative art" (p. 107). Its power derives from the incarnate Word Who "has abrogated the consequences of the fall of human nature" (p. 110) and placed on the shoulders of the naked man the mantle of holiness – "the beauty that is holy" (p. 110).

The author of the book notes that Orthodox anthropology "strongly rejects the truncating of the human being" (p. 116), so it considers the whole of the psycho-somatic human, not just a part of it. From these positions he questions the dogmatic correctness of some contemporary theologians who refuse to give the senses and imagination any spiritual valence (p. 116). His main counter-argument is the teaching of St Gregory Palamas that the knowledge of God is not an abstract one in which human nature is abolished. On the contrary, we know God through the senses and even through imagination (*The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*) (p. 117).

St. Maximus the Confessor writes about the spiritualization of the complete human being, body and soul. What is required in the Orthodox theology "is not a process of the mortification of the senses", but an attempt of reordering them, of putting them in order (p. 122). The "exercised senses" of the ascetic allow him or her to perceive that beauty which will save the world (F. Dostoevsky).

As a conclusion on this sub-theme, Ch. Stamoulis notes,

"The problem in the end is not the going out of the soul to the world through the senses, but its imprisonment by sensible things and its inability to return to the place of unity. The soul goes out through the senses in order to gain knowledge of the fragmented world and also of God himself, aiming at bringing together within itself what has been separated, returning to itself and arriving at the final union of the whole human being with God himself. When this return is not realised, when the 'ascetic process' is interrupted, then and only then do the senses and sensible things constitute a problem for the human being and his or her Church" (p. 122).

The author goes a step further in affirming the value of the flesh and the senses. With arguments taken from St. Cyril of Alexandria, he proposes a “theology of touch”, not just one of vision and speech (p. 126). The Alexandrian hierarch’s Christological valorisation of the body (when, for example, Christ resurrects the son of the widow of Nain or when he anoints the blind man’s eyes with clay of the spittle – p. 126) allows us to bring theology out of the abstract and cold spheres of thought into the realm of the tactile, the immediate and the accessible, because, the Greek professor seems to suggest, the very kenosis of the Logos means contact and experience, touch and caress.

Another sub-theme developed is that of the relationship between aesthetic truth and death (pp. 133-146). What aesthetic values or arts can still evade the inexorable end? Drawing on Orthodox liturgical treasures, the author admits that death is the supreme challenge to the human being, a challenge that has touched even the beauty of the “sweetest child”. The Mother of God’s lament for her “sweetest child”: “Where has your beauty gone?” (Third Stasis of the Enkomia of Holy and Great Saturday), applies to us in the same way, and perhaps even more so (p. 136). But what seems to be man’s definitive defeat is converted into victory by the power of prayer. The transformation of the ugliness of death by the prayer of funeral services shows that the last word belongs to God, not to the devil (p. 138). The thaumaturgical presence of the holy wonder-working relics shows that Christ conquers death. The expelling of demons, the healing of sick, the giving of sight to the blind, the cleansing of lepers, could not be explained otherwise (p. 139).

The third part, entitled “‘Unutterable Beauty’: Examples of a Philokalic Reading of Ecclesial Life”, brings together a series of essays that focus on the writings of Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis, Abbot Sophrony of Essex and Father Porphyrios of the Holy Mountain. These readings confirm one of the author’s essential premises, that Orthodox “philokalic aesthetics” can only be a “theology of beauty, of loveliness and pulchritude” (p. 37).

Holy Beauty is therefore a book about the beauty of Orthodoxy. The author seems to be saying that to the extent that we know how to keep our spirit fresh and open to the new, to the extent that we know how to make creative use of the treasures of Tradition without rejecting the present and

immediate reality, to the extent that we succeed in integrating the authentic creations of the human spirit into our theological vision of the world and life, we will succeed in making holiness more interesting to contemporary human being than sin, and thus in saving the world.

Rev. Lecturer Dr. Florin TOMOIOAGĂ

Florin DUȚU, *Părintele și pictorul bisericesc Arsenie Boca (1910-1989) – monografie (Father and Church Painter Arsenie Boca [1910-1989] – A Monograph)*, “Florea Albă de Colț” Publishing House, Bucharest, 2021, 491 pp.

In 2021, “Florea Albă de Colț” Publishing House from Bucharest released a beautiful Ph.D. Thesis in Orthodox Theology, written by Florin Duțu and conceived as a monograph of one of the great Romanian Spiritual Fathers, Arsenie Boca.

The first chapter of the book, entitled *Father Arsenie Boca before the restoration of the communist regime*, presents important data related to the Father’s family, about the socio-political context of his time, about the spiritual revival movement undertaken at Brâncoveanu Monastery - Sâmbăta de Sus in “Făgăraș County”, the decisive contribution of Father Arsenie for the (partial) translation and distribution of the Philokalia, for the friendly connection with the Royal House. Simultaneously, aspects related to the Father’s first arrests are detailed (179).

Also in this chapter, we learn more details about the pilgrimage undertaken by Father Arsenie to Mount Athos, aiming to learn the mysteries of monasticism from the Athonite monks. For example, we also learn that

“deacon Zian Vălean Boca was housed in the «Saint Ipatie» hermitage, received from the Vatopedy Monastery, in the 19th century (...) In 1939 (the year in which Father Arsenie undertook