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Blake & Orthodoxy

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Abstract

This paper aims to give an engaging introduction to a study of the relations, as I identify them, between Blake's work and Orthodox thought and beliefs. Giving a succinct outline of some of Blake's most central preoccupations, the paper suggests links between Blake's vision and the thought of, among others, Sergius Bulgakov, Kallistos Ware, Nicolas Berdyaev and David Bentley Hart. The basis for a fruitful dialogue between Blake and Orthodoxy, the paper argues, is found in the joint emphasis on man's calling to grow in the likeness of God, his potential for theosis. This mutual belief leads to some significant shared understandings on such crucial issues as repentance, creativity and transfiguration; iconicity, the role of art, and the nature of personality and communication. Ultimately, the real affinity between Blake and Orthodoxy, the paper argues, is expressed in the conception of – and the commitment to – humanity's divinely appointed and inspired task to creatively transfigure and spiritualise the world.

Keywords

Albion: The embodiment and personification of collective mankind; more particularly, he represents England. Fallen, and chained to the rocks in deadly sleep, he needs to be awakened, rescued and reunited with Jerusalem.

Los: A blacksmith, the agent of creative form-giving and regeneration in Blake's drama of Albion's redemption.

Spectre: The enemy and antithesis of Los, signifying despair, scepticism, destructive industry and the darkening of imaginative vision.

Golgonooza: The visionary city that Los and his sons and daughters are building, symbolising the triumph of art and creative manufacture over the powers of division and dissolution. It prefigures the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem.

Introduction

This paper may be read both as a Blakean approach to Orthodoxy and as an Orthodox approach to Blake. It is an attempt at initiating a dialogue, mutually informative and jointly fruitful, between a comprehensive (Eastern) theological tradition and an (Western) artist, possessed of a singularly powerful spiritual vision, who is commonly said to be the most resistant to any traditional affiliations.

The following statement from Blake's writings is often taken as defining of his position:

I must Create a System. or be enslav'd by another Mans

*I will not Reason & Compare; my business is to Create*¹.

My venture, then, may well be deemed doomed from the start. However, the above words of Los's – for they are not, of course, simply Blake's own – must not be taken out of context and used to limit the capacity of Blake's work to engender wider affiliations and meanings.

Certainly, these words testify to something of Blake's own singularity,

¹ Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 307 (*Jerusalem*, plate 10).

even obstinacy; but, more importantly, they are uttered by the character of Los in the context of his inspired labours of trying to build a culture – both material and spiritual: a world of art, thought, and human relations – which is properly responsive to the revelation of Christ. Los utters his words *against* all the false systems of human thought and life which obstruct or deny a real vision of the divine; but they are, above all, spoken *in favour* of the project to regenerate the fallen world and render the world more conformed to the glory and likeness of God. This is Blake's priority, of which Los is only one mouthpiece. It is also the aim of Orthodoxy. Here, then, in the commitment to a holistic regeneration of human life and culture, Blake and Orthodoxy find common ground.

I must stress that this paper offers only an introductory exposition of these relations between Blake and Orthodoxy, an invitation to further discussions and discoveries. Much more can be said, and hopefully will be said.

I happen to hold the view that it is the very nature of art to be a 'saying more'; that any (good) work of art is inexhaustibly articulate, ever inviting new meetings and offering new meanings; that no artwork may be reduced to paraphrase or exhausted by propositions and

descriptions. Blake is exemplary in this respect, tirelessly rewarding re-readings, re-revisions and re-livings. This is so, not only because of the often elusive 'content' of his work, nor only because of his perpetual re-workings of a sustained theme, but primarily because of the multi-dimensional nature of its 'form'. In this way, I suggest, Blake's work may be regarded as closely akin to the novels of Dostoevsky. Ideally, our discussions of art should be attentive to this truth and, in its own way, follow the same principles of generosity and openness to revision.

On that note, then, I offer the following suggestions as points for further thought and conversation.

I

The best place to begin is where Christian theology itself begins (or should begin), and where, as we shall see, Blake's work also begins (and should be seen to begin); namely, with the belief that man was created in the image of God and given the potential to grow into God's likeness.

According to the Genesis account, "God said, 'Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness'" (Genesis 1:26). "The image," as Kallistos Ware explains, "denotes man's poten-

tiality for life in God; the likeness, his realisation of that potentiality"². Orthodoxy, to a greater extent than the Western churches, has emphasised and safeguarded this possibility of the human person to achieve *theosis* or deification. "In Eastern Christianity," Nicolas Berdyaev argues, "the fundamental question has been the transfiguration of the nature of the world and of man; in a word, of 'theosis'"³. This understanding of man as created in the image of God also provides the vital theological framework of Blake's work; and this conception of humanity's potential for transfiguration and real communion with God is the guiding force behind Blake's vision. It does not only underpin his loving attention to all things playful and childlike in *Songs of Innocence*, but also his comprehensive concern for the fate of Albion in his greatest work, *Jerusalem: the emanation for the Giant Albion*.

Insofar as we fall short of living up to the divine image and likeness, Blake understands also this fallenness of our nature in terms congenial to Orthodoxy; for Blake does not conceive of 'original sin' in terms of hereditary guilt

2 Ware, K. (1995), *The Orthodox Way*, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 51.

3 Berdyaev, N. (1935), *Freedom and the Spirit*, London, Geoffrey Bles, p. 349.

or the total deprivation of our nature, but rather as the partial obscuration of the image in us. For Orthodoxy, the divine image "is merely obscured and crusted over, yet never altogether lost"⁴; crucially, it is more difficult to discern both in ourselves and in others. It is not least our failure to see the image of God in our neighbours that constitute our fallen state. Thus Blake illustrates the fall and chaining of Albion in a poetic narrative of jealousy, selfishness and betrayal, resulting in the division of the collective human body and the darkening of our vision. Indeed, it is not only our will which is affected by fallibility and sinfulness, but also our vision. In Ware's words, "The world ceased to be transparent – a window through which [man] gazed on God – and it grew opaque"⁵; or as Blake would put it, "man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern"⁶. Consequently, it is difficult for us to *love* and to live with and for each other as we should.

But Blake and Orthodoxy are emphatic in their proclamation that the image is not completely lost within us;

4 Ware, K. (1995), *The Orthodox Way*, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 52.

5 Ibid, p. 59.

6 Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 120 (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 14).

indeed, that it remains inviolate, present in each person. We still bear the divine potential, and a measure of freedom to act upon this in repentance and in creative acts of regeneration. As Orthodoxy understands the Incarnation, Christ was made man chiefly to restore our vision of the divine image in mankind, and not simply to pay with his own life our debt to God. This is also Blake's understanding, voiced already in some of his earliest productions:

*God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is*⁷.

Crucially, we need to act upon this potential together, in mutual labours and mutual love. This is the whole theme of Blake's work, the restoration of Albion to life and love through the labours of all mankind, inspired by the revelation of Christ. Just as Orthodoxy teaches how Adam was made new in Christ, so Blake affirms that Albion must be made new. Blake also understands the real need for repentance, and so, for example, he has Milton return to the world to redress his past misconceptions: "To bathe in the Waters of Life"⁸ and wash off all falsehoods of the self. Like Orthodoxy, Blake

7 Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 41 (*There is No Natural Religion*).

8 Ibid, p. 292 (*Milton*, plate 44).

understands that this kind of renewal is not something that we can accomplish ourselves; to undo our false selves we must invoke the aid of God. Thus we can hear the words of Psalm 50, so integral to Orthodox prayer and worship, echo also through the work of Blake: "Create a clean heart in me, O God, and renew a right Spirit within me."

Blake is a joyous artist, but he realises that joy comes to us precisely in the moment of self-renunciation, and that it comes to us as a gift of the Spirit – in that "Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find"⁹, the moment of inspiration and conception. This is the *iconic* moment at the intersection of time and eternity, which we should always seek to discover and from which we must always draw strength for our regeneration.

Thus, for all his recognition of our need for renewal, however, the real emphasis in Blake's work is upon the positive aspect of this need: the promise that we retain the divine image within ourselves, and that we are called to theosis, to partake of God's glory. Also Orthodoxy stresses this positive aspect of our present imperfection; and, like in Blake, our situation is often understood in artistic terms. Thus, in the words of Sergei Bulgakov, "Man is the living icon

of Divinity, an icon created by God but not made by human hands; humanity is the image of God"¹⁰.

The artistic icon, the whole tradition of icon-painting, is of course closely related to this theological point. The purpose of icon painting is precisely to paint such figures, the Saints of the Church, who have shone most brightly with the glory of God and who have most truly conformed to his likeness. This aim is reflected in the very means and materials of the icons, from their stylised composition to their use of gold. There are similarities here to the paintings and illustrations of Blake, both in his formal solutions and in his use of light, not least in his illuminated books. Importantly, Blake's visual art shares with icons the 'two-dimensional' or planar surface of spiritual vision. Blake does not seek a resemblance or a 'look-a-likeness' of the material world as described by the senses and the categories of science, but rather seeks to render the fabric of reality transparent to spiritual realities, to really make it manifest the *likeness* of God.

Blake's work is saturated with pronouncements on art, which could be assembled to form a kind of manifesto – against the trends of post-Renaissance Western art and for the dedication of art

⁹ Ibid, p. 283 (*Milton*, plate 35).

¹⁰ Bulgakov, S. (2012), *Icons and the Name of God*, Cambridge, Eerdmans, p. 56.

to spiritual vision and spiritual manifestation. Blake would largely agree with Pavel Florensky that "From the Renaissance on, the religious art of the West has been based upon esthetic delusion"¹¹; Blake, whom we should take as an exception to this judgement, worked actively to counteract some main trends of that delusional tradition. Central to this task, as Blake conceives it, is the attention to *outline*; it is the outline of a person, the essential form of a person, which reveals his spiritual nature. Contrary to what the Western tradition supposes, art has no duty at all to be 'true to nature'; its real task is rather to be true to the spirit and to render visible in paint the divine likeness of a person. This is a task that the icon-painters fully embrace, and this explains the difference between the icon tradition and the development of Western art. Compared to realism or naturalism in art, the icon manifests a radically different way of looking at man and the human person: as Bulgakov explains it, the ordinary "portrait seeks to express his natural individual aspect, whereas the icon seeks to express his supernatural glorified aspect"¹².

11 Florensky, P. (1996), *Iconostasis*, New York, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 67.

12 Bulgakov, S. (2012), *Icons and the Name of God*, Cambridge, Eerdmans, p. 100.

On a physiological level, certainly, Blake's figures – though singularly Blakean – owe much to Classical as well as Gothic forms; but in their deployment, in the way they inhabit the painterly space, and the way they ask to be encountered, they are closer, I would argue, to the compositions of icon-painting. Take, for example, Blake's *Christ the Mediator: Christ pleading before the father for St Mary Magdalene* (c.1799-1800), or *The Virgin and Child* (c.1825). The latter, in particular, with its tempera and gold, is strikingly Byzantine or Russian in its style and form, and movingly beautiful.

There is also something of the icon-painter in Blake's understanding of the role of art in the religious life. Indeed, the tradition of icon painting fully supports Blake's bold claims that:

Prayer is the Study of Art.

*Praise is the Practice of Art*¹³.

II

Insofar as Blake shares a visual language with the icon-painters, we should not be surprised to find that he also shares their attitudes to *seeing*. For the icon-painter, no less than the painter

13 Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 403 (*Laocoön*).

of landscapes, paints what he sees – the difference simply lies in what kind of vision is practiced, and in what it is possible to see. The painter of icons, then, must practice a way of seeing the radiant glory of God in the faces of men. For Blake, this glory is precisely what it is possible to see – and what we should learn to see – though the exercise of the Imagination, which of course in Blake's conception is identified with Jesus Christ himself. Christ, for Blake, is foremost an object of vision; in the seeing of which we realise his image within ourselves and are transformed into his likeness. With an icon-painter's dedication, all Blake's artistic efforts are dedicated to this end.

It is one of Blake's great achievements that he saw how wrong practice is inseparable from wrong philosophy; we lead a false life because we conceive of life in a false light, and vice versa. As a man is, says Blake, so he sees. Therefore, to redress the way we *are* is to redress the way we *see*. The kind of seeing to which Blake enjoins us is the kind of seeing that the icons teach us: to see the spiritual in the material, the divine manifested in the particulars of this world. One way to begin is "To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower"¹⁴. Ulti-

mately, we should recognise the beauty and presence of God in the features of the world, in works of art, and in the faces of our fellow men, making the whole creation iconic. Blake, again in one of his earliest works, tells us that

*He who sees the infinite in all things, sees God*¹⁵.

For this and other reasons, Blake's work is very congenial to comparisons with the philosophy of David Bentley Hart, an outstanding modern Orthodox thinker, as developed in *The Beauty of the Infinite*.

Like Blake, Hart is concerned with the redirection of our vision, and the reorientation of our will and desire, towards God. This entails an effort which is both about vision and love. "Thus," writes Hart, "to come to see the world as beauty is the moral education of desire, the redemption of vision; it is in the cultivation of delight that charity is born, and in the cultivation of charity that delight becomes possible. In learning to see the world as beauty, one learns the measure of a love that receives all things [...] as beautiful in their own splendour; and in learning the measure of charity, which lets what is be in its otherness,

¹⁴ Blake, W. (1976), *The Portable Blake*, London, Penguin, p. 150 (*Auguries of Innocence*).

¹⁵ Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 40 (*There is No Natural Religion*).

one's vision of the world [...] is deepened toward that infinity of beauty that comprises it"¹⁶. These are words that can stand as a commentary on the whole of Blake's work.

Right vision, importantly, entails the conformity to what is seen; in seeing the beauty of God, the beauty of the infinite, we are to become more like that beauty: in cultivating a true receptiveness to it, we also come to embody the beauty of God. Blake, similarly, holds that seeing with and seeing in the Imagination, we are not just seeing Christ but indeed seeing with and in Christ, becoming members of his body. We can think of Albion standing before the radiant Christ on plate 76 of *Jerusalem*. In keeping with his commitment to collective man, to Albion, Blake consistently shows that correct vision is not simply a matter for the single person. Right vision is a communal thing, for the whole human community directed towards Christ. From an Orthodox perspective, we would say that right vision is a matter for the Church. The Church, consequently, can be understood as a visionary body.

Like Hart, Blake thus understands that *conversion* is precisely a matter of the reorientation of vision. Thus Hart speaks

16 Hart, D. B. (2003), *The Beauty of the Infinite*, Michigan: Eerdmans, p. 256.

of conversion in aesthetic terms, as a growing openness to the beauty of God. "In this way," says Hart, "one's grammar is converted, one enters ever more into divine rhetoric and divine music: one is conformed to Christ by assuming, and being assumed by, the language of God's revelation"¹⁷. This is a process in which art joins forces with liturgy, ritual and sacrament to re-fashion the entire person according to that which he beholds.

Significantly, Blake also complements Hart's stress on seeing with an equal emphasis on creative work and action. In Blake's vision, all human work must be redeemed, directed away from divisive and destructive ends, from its subjection to industrial production and material profit, towards real cultivation of our spiritual nature and the transfiguration of the material world. He finds support here in Ware, who writes that man's "vocation is not to dominate and exploit nature, but to transfigure and hallow it"¹⁸.

This is perhaps Blake's foremost contribution to theology and Christianity: his vivid conception of the essentially *creative* nature of life. The cosmos we inhabit, as Blake presents it, is fizzing

17 Ibid, p. 315.

18 Ware, K. (1995), *The Orthodox Way*, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, p.54.

with creative potential. Ours is a malleable and conditional world, which may be deformed just as it may be re-formed and beautified. Moreover, it is not only a created world, but a world in which we are called to be co-creators with God; Blake shares with Orthodoxy a strong sense of the *synergy* of divine and human activity – the reciprocity of inspiration and creative work, human freedom and the grace of God.

We inhabit a world, then, which demands of us that we are responsive to God's gifts as well as his demands; for it is our responsibility that the world is properly cultivated and fashioned for the right ends, for mutual transfiguration of man and the cosmos. Indeed, in Blake's vision our calling to grow in the likeness of God is inseparable from our calling to also re-create the world in the likeness of God. Between the image and the likeness, as it were – between the promise and potential, on the one hand, and the realisation of our vocation and our nature on the other – there lies a life-time of creative labours.

III

We may look to Blake's famous lyric, "And did those feet..." for the key elements of his vision. Indeed, I believe

this short lyric to be the best introduction to Blake's world, the most succinct formulation of his enduring concerns; we may read it almost as a point by point declaration of his beliefs and his aims as an artist.

Here is the hope, the belief, that our world was once graced by the real presence of God; that "the Holy Lamb of God" was once on "England's pleasant pastures seen".

Here is the lamentation, and the critical reflection, that this graced world has been soiled and spoiled by human activities and contrivances; "these dark Satanic Mills".

Here is the commitment to fight, against these forces of falsehood and destruction, for the regeneration of the world and the fulfilment of God's promise; and here we see how Blake envisions this spiritual consummation in terms of a communal and cultural achievement:

*I will not cease from Mental
Fight,*

*Nor shall my Sword sleep in my
hand:*

Till we have built Jerusalem

*In Englands green & pleasant
Land*¹⁹.

19 Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 295.

As Blake's greatest illuminated books make clear, the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, entails the transfiguration of all our earthly works into a real home for 'the Great Humanity Divine': it is a place we inhabit in the fulfilment of our creative, imaginative and sacramental potential.

Blake gives us this theological drama, in different and developing versions, time and time again in his art. Thus the idea of a peaceful, harmonious and beautiful pre-lapsarian or edenic human habitat, evoked in the first lines of this lyric, is depicted with wonderful tenderness and playfulness in the *Songs of Innocence*; while the complementary *Songs of Experience* introduce the stark realities of a world subject to suffering, cynicism and uncertainty, a world in which the right and good relationships between man and the world, between persons, and between man and God, have been distorted.

The 'Satanic mills,' symbolic of our maladjusted relation to the world God has given us to love and cultivate, recur throughout Blake's work in a number of subtle and powerful figures and concepts. The most developed of these figures is the Spectre, which we encounter in Blake's greatest work, *Jerusalem: the emanation of the Giant Albion*. As

the antagonist and antithesis of Los, the prophetic blacksmith and agent of regenerative labours, the Spectre stands for a host of negative concepts and actualities; he is Industry, Scepticism, Selfhood and Despair – all the principles of negation which define man in his wilful isolation and separation from God.

As long as the Spectre covers the body of Albion, Albion may not look upon the radiant face of Christ. Against the Spectre, therefore, Los labours with all his sons and daughters, at their furnaces and their looms, for the regeneration of Albion, the restoration of his lost vision, and the reconciliation with Jerusalem, the true object of his love. This is that 'mental fight' with which Blake too is engaged. Indeed, it is the enduring battle in which every true artist, and every true Christian, is involved. For as Blake proclaims, to be a Christian is to be an artist:

A Poet a Painter a Musician an Architect: the Man

*Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian*²⁰.

Blake's work is wholly and wholeheartedly dedicated to the defeat of the Spectre. It is a concerted effort

20 Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 403 (*Laocoön*).

against disbelief, division and despair in all its aspects and in its total consolidation in a false version of human life. It is in this battle against the Spectre that Blake should join forces with Orthodoxy, I think, more fittingly and more successfully than if he would join with any other historical or contemporary body of belief and practice.

The evils that Blake identify as constituting the Spectre, are very much those against which Orthodox theology and life is directed; and the attitudes and activities that Blake identify as the means of defeating the Spectre, are very much those cures and weapons that Orthodox thinkers and artists make use of and call upon us all to make use of. These 'weapons' include imagination, repentance, creative work, self-annihilation, dialogue, *sobornost*, forgiveness and unceasing love.

It is fair to see the Spectre as a personification of Western epistemology, broadly construed, of which Blake was a fierce critic. The Spectre is very much a Cartesian figure, but also a Kantian, Hegelian and Postmodern figure. Blake, who does not at all share the Scholastic mind of someone like Dante, sees all such systems of philosophy as fundamentally threatening to our vision of the divine. Indeed, Blake sees the Spectre

as "Abstract Philosophy warring in enmity against Imagination / Which is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus"²¹. Thus Blake's reaction against the predominant philosophies of his day is closely related to his understanding of right vision, of how to perceive the image of God in this world.

In his fundamental antipathy towards the likes of Bacon, Locke and Newton – to name but a few of those that come under attack in the pages of Blake's illuminated books – and to Enlightenment thought at large, Blake exhibits a very similar temperament, and a very similar concern, to those modern Russian and Greek philosophers who look upon Western epistemology and metaphysics with both quizzical and censorious eyes. The lines of criticism pursued philosophically by Pavel Florensky and Nicolas Berdyaev, and more recently by David Bentley Hart and Christos Yannaras, have often been explored in poetry and painting by Blake. Perhaps the most succinct and powerful expression of Blake's antipathy to false philosophy is found in these words from *Milton*:

I come in Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration

21 Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 302 (*Jerusalem*, plate 5).

To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour

To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration

To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albions covering

*To take off his filthy garments, & clothe him with Imagination*²²

It is the prevalent, even systematic scepticism of Western thought which so baffles and so infuriates Blake and the Orthodox philosophers alike. Importantly, it is the ingratitude that scepticism entails, and the insult it constitutes, which upsets Blake as it upsets the Orthodox – because the kind of scepticism perpetuated by the Western schools of philosophy means a failure, even a refusal, to properly acknowledge, perceive and receive, the world that God offers to us as a gift and as a task. Thus Blake and the Orthodox philosophers recognise that much of the epistemological obfuscation and metaphysical confusion of Latin and Anglo-Saxon philosophy, for centuries past and to the present day, amount to a kind of spiritual sickness – indeed, to a wilful perpetuation of the effects of our fallenness.

No less than a personification of the post-Enlightenment philosophies of

²² Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 292.

Blake's day, the Spectre can be seen as a figure of post-modern deconstructive thought and practice. Indeed, the Spectre was not defeated in the 19th century; he is very much at large today, perhaps more insidiously influential and all-pervading than ever before. Insofar as the Spectre may be seen as a representative of some aspects of Derrida, Levinas and others, he is the target of David Bentley Hart's inspired critique in *The Beauty of the Infinite*. Hart may be said to investigate, with a doctor's concern for his ill patient, the same self-inflicted state of alienation from God which Blake dramatises to such great effect in the chaining of Albion on the hard, bare rocks of materialism, under the sterile sky of solipsism – a sky inhabited by the Spectre alone. Albion is prisoner under that soul-destroying influence; like a cloud of soot, sulphur and dust, the Spectre obscures the world from the vision and light of God. It is the restoration of this vision which is our vocation, and the task of every Christian artist.

It follows that the Spectre is also the enemy of the Church. The Spectre is materialism, systematic secularism, and the stipulation of the individual self or ego as the centre of all value, all judgement, and all reality. The antidote to this state of delusion is the recognition of an

objective reality, an objective goodness, and an objective beauty outside the self – in the world, and in other persons – and ultimately the recognition of the divine source of all this. Thus the struggle of Blake, as of the Church, is for communion; for genuine inter-personal communication and commitment, for the realisation of mutual love – between persons, and between us and God – that we may realise that:

I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend;

*Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me*²³.

IV

This question of mutuality and communion feeds into the question of *personality* or personhood. Here, Blake has an understanding of what it means to be a person which is similar to the understanding of Orthodox thinkers. I will note two crucial points here.

Firstly, the concept of *epektasis*, developed by Gregory of Nyssa in the 4th Century and taken up in our day by David Bentley Hart, is very applicable to Blake.

23 Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 301 (*Jerusalem*, plate 4).

On this view, man is not a static and stable thing, a self-sufficient 'essence' or centre of consciousness, but is rather defined by his longing, his reaching out, his openness to something which he does not possess. Man, on this view, is always incomplete in himself, perpetually in a state of growth, in ceaseless pursuit of his only real sustenance, which is the beauty and glory of God. Thus Gregory conceives of our life – indeed, of our very nature – as a constant progress from glory to glory. "Since, then [...] this good has no limit, the participant's desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless"²⁴. This limitlessness is what Hart comes to call 'the Trinitarian distance,' with and within which all human desire and love for the beautiful is enacted.

Blake most definitely conceives of man as a creature governed by desire, by energies and potentials. We are insatiable for inspiration, for the revelations of the Imagination, for the delights of creation and the joys of mutual love. We have already observed Blake's recognition of our need for the reorientation of vision towards its true end in the inexhaustible radiance of Christ. The very art and poetry of Blake's illuminated books testify to this tireless,

24 Gregory of Nyssa (1978), *The Life of Moses*, New York: Paulist Press, p. 31.

fiery energy, and to experience Blake's world is to be caught up in this rush of, and reaching for, divine beauty. The person of Blake himself, as well as his works, serves to prove Berdyaev's claim that "Personality is above all a spiritual energy of qualitative originality, a spiritual activity which is the very centre of creative power"²⁵.

Secondly, it is crucial to an Orthodox conception of personhood that this is grounded in an understanding of the Trinity. "Since the image of God in man is a Trinitarian image," says Ware, "it follows that man, like God, realises his true nature through mutual life. The image signifies relationship not only with God but with other men"²⁶. In this respect, Orthodox thought differs critically from Western philosophical approaches to personhood, where the concept of a person is predominantly derived from philosophical categories and only afterwards, if at all, applied to the Trinitarian God – thus resulting in a false understanding of both the personhood of human beings and the personhood of God. Blake, interestingly, expresses a vision of personality that chimes very well with the models derived from a Trinitarian understanding.

25 Berdyaev, N. (1935), *Freedom and the Spirit*, London, Geoffrey Bles, p. 16.

26 Ware, K. (1995), *The Orthodox Way*, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 53.

Blake would be emphatically opposed to any attempts to define a person in terms of a 'rational self', an 'individual' 'substance', an 'autonomous' 'entity', a 'thinking thing', etc; for all such definitions treats of a person as an isolated thing, self-enclosed and self-subsisting, while Blake understands – as does Berdyaev – that to be a person is always to be a person among other persons. To be a person is already to be *relational*. It is thus the opposite, in fact, to be being an 'individual'. Individuality is a material or biological category, whereas personality is a properly spiritual category.

Freedom is a crucial element of personality – and on this Blake is as emphatic as Berdyaev (who learns much from Dostoevsky) – but, just as crucially, to be a person is also to be a *communal* being. Freedom, certainly, can only be fully and rightly realised in concert with the freedom of others. This kind of understanding of what it means to be a person finds its paradigm in the Trinity, in the one God who is three persons in perfect mutuality, and the God who is freely in loving communion with his creation. Blake proclaims "Freedom & holy Brotherhood"²⁷, echoing the Orthodox

27 Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 280 (*Milton*, plate 32*).

understanding of *sobornost* so central to Berdyaev and others.

One of Blake's greatest illustrations of this understanding is the idea of 'the visionary forms dramatic' at the end of *Jerusalem*. This is Blake's ideal of what we might call imaginative intercourse: a conception of genuine communication as a mutually visionary communion of one imaginative personality with another. Thus we can see how Blake's understanding of personality is intimately linked to his understanding of language, art and communication. Like Dostoevsky, Blake has a keen sense of – and his work itself manifest – the *dialogic* and *polyphonic* nature of language, meaning and personality.

V

Both Blake's anthropology and his understanding of what it means for man to be created in the image of God centre on his account of man as an essentially *artistic* being.

Blake would have welcomed Bulgakov's arguments to the effect that man is essentially involved in the visionary transfiguration of the world. "Man," Bulgakov claims, "is a being who sees images, *zôon eikonikon*, and who also creates them, *zôon poiêti-*

kon"²⁸. Precisely this dual activity is at the heart of Blake's work: he consistently shows how we are called, firstly, to see the image of God in all things, and secondly to use our creative faculties to make images capable of manifesting the truth and glory of God. As such, as Bulgakov also concludes, "man is an artistic being"²⁹. Blake, based on this same understanding, also stresses the close affinity between our creative, visionary nature and what it means to be a Christian; for to be a Christian, on Blake's view, is precisely to realise fully the artistic task to which we are called by Christ.

For Blake, then, it is most important to stress that humans are beings of *imagination*, not simply that we are *rational* creatures. The elevation of Reason, so paramount in Western accounts of humankind's singularity, does not satisfy Blake. Indeed, Blake consistently warns against the potentially restrictive role of reason when this is divorced from inspiration and imagination. The character of Urizen is the cautionary example of a principle of division and delimitation, blind to the calling of man's expansive, creative and transformative nature. Blake has a fuller conception of man's

28 Bulgakov, S. (2012), *Icons and the Name of God*, Cambridge, Eerdmans, p. 43.

29 Ibid.

place and role in creation. Congenial to his vision is the language of man as a *microcosm*, key to Orthodox thinkers. "Man," as Ware explains, "stands at the heart of God's creation. Participating as he does in both the noetic and the material realms, he is an image or mirror of the whole creation, *imago mundi*, a 'little universe' or microcosm. All created things have their meeting place in him"³⁰.

Similarly Bulgakov claims that "Man is a contracted world, the anthropocosmos"³¹. Further, developing the claims I quoted above, Bulgakov writes that "Man actively participates in the iconisation of being (just as he actively and creatively realizes the knowledge of being, or logicicization). *In and through himself* he finds the icons of things, for he himself is in this sense the *pan-icon* of the world"³². This pan-iconic nature of man means that we are that in which all of creation finds its synthesis and fulfilment, and through which all creation can become properly responsive to God.

This conception of man, I would argue, is perfectly illustrated in Blake's

work: especially in the figure of Albion and in the powerful metaphor of the building of Golgonooza in *Jerusalem*. Albion is collective man, but his fate is also inseparable from that of the natural (and indeed spiritual) world; thus Los' labours, in building Golgonooza, entail both the regeneration of Albion and the artistic transformation of the material world. "Being a microcosm," Ware continues, "man is also mediator. It is his God-given task to reconcile and harmonize the noetic and material realms [...] to spiritualize the material, and to render manifest all the latent capacities of the created order"³³.

VI

As I hope is clear, Blake's vision is a total and transformative one; he calls us to communal, collective, and indeed cosmic labours of regeneration – and his conception is far from the Protestant notion of religion belonging to the private domain of life and being a matter, first and foremost, of the individual conscience.

As Blake's work – as all genuine Christian art – again and again testifies, Christianity is about *manifesta-*

30 Ware, K. (1995), *The Orthodox Way*, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 49.

31 Bulgakov, S. (2012), *Icons and the Name of God*, Cambridge, Eerdmans, p. 50.

32 Ibid, p. 43.

33 Ware, K. (1995), *The Orthodox Way*, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 50.

tion and *transfiguration*. Blake saw and professed, with fiery fervour, the artistic potentials – indeed, the artistic nature – of Christianity; how this religion of incarnation and glorification lends itself so well to be realised in works of art and beauty. Even among Christian artists, Blake makes one of the most compelling cases for Christianity's essentially all-encompassing and all-changing claims on each person and on humankind as a whole. Blake's model of human life is Los, "with many tears labouring"³⁴, passionately building Golgonooza and battling the Spectre, for love of the sons and daughters of men, for Jesus and Jerusalem.

We have already noted how Blake shares some crucial understandings with the tradition of icon-painting. Further to what has been said, Blake joins the icon-painters in seeing the very artwork as a transfigured part of the world. Every icon is *sacramental*, in the sense that it gives access to the energies of God; God is present in the image of his saints, and in the beauty which is there manifested. Blake, almost alone among Western artists, proclaims a similar conception; for on his view, every genuinely inspired

work of art is a building block of the New Jerusalem.

It would be strange if Blake's work was not indebted to a Western tradition of forms and meanings; but he is not comfortably conformed to those conceptions. In particular, his claims for the transformative role, and the divine nature of art, sound strange to Western ears, schooled in the sensibilities of Renaissance, Enlightenment, Reformation and Modernity. These often audacious pronouncements of Blake's chime far more harmoniously with an Orthodox tradition, in which art has consistently been seen in sacred, sacramental terms, and where the emphasis has been placed on art's revelatory and transformative potential over and against its didactic and decorative uses.

In *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, the central task of the building of Golgonooza entails the making of the whole world into a collective work of art, redeeming matter from the contingencies of the natural world, forming it, beautifying it, and rendering it a prototype of the New Jerusalem. This is a perpetual labour, to redeem time itself and restoring each moment to eternity. Thus "They Buildded Great Golgonooza Times on Times Ages on Ages"³⁵. In this ontological, even es-

34 Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 388 (*Jerusalem*, plate 91).

35 Ibid, p. 248 (*Milton*, plate 2).

chatological conception of art, Blake expresses an understanding that finds its closest parallel, I think, in the Orthodox vision of the iconisation of the world. The deepest, most ambitious implications of this vision are explained by Nicolas Zernov, who tells us that icons "were, for the Russians [...] manifestations of man's spiritual power to redeem creation though beauty and art. The [ikons] were pledges of the coming victory of a redeemed creation over the fallen one. [Consequently,] for the Russians the artistic perfection of an ikon was not only a reflection of the celestial glory – it was a concrete example of matter restored to its original harmony and beauty, and serving as a vehicle of the Spirit. The ikons were part of the transfigured cosmos"³⁶.

It is here, in the fusion of the religious and the artistic, that Blake and Orthodoxy really find their common ground and common cause. Indeed, Blake's ultimate rallying call – with which I will conclude this paper – may perhaps be seen also as the call of Orthodoxy to its faithful: "Let every Christian as much as in him lies engage himself openly & publicly before all the World in some

Mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem"³⁷.

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³⁷ Blake, W. (2000), *The Complete Illuminated Books*, New York, Thames & Hudson, p. 374 (*Jerusalem*, plate 77).