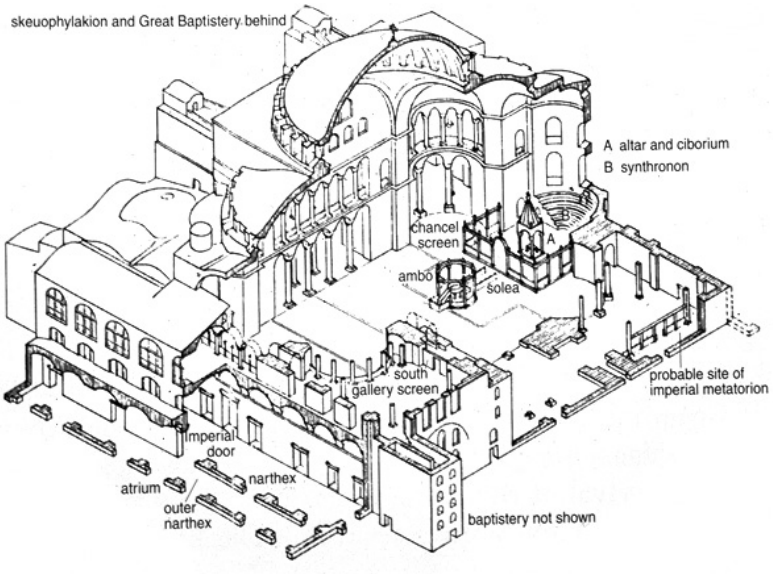

Reconstruction of Hagia Sophia interior by Rowland J. Mainstone.

LIVING STONES

A Meditation on Sacred Space

Robert Arida

To speak about sacred space from an Orthodox Christian perspective requires us to first think about how we perceive and understand reality. For many, knowledge of reality is not linked to an actual experience of someone or something. This becomes most acute in the realm of cyberspace and virtual reality where an artificially created environment offers a semblance of experiencing the other.

With all its positive contributions, technology relentlessly continues to veil the line between the world and an artificially created environment manipulated by a keyboard and viewed on a computer screen. A consequence of the divorce between the real and the virtually real is the inability to appreciate space—and more specifically sacred space—as the context in which the mystery of the other is encountered. To further illustrate this divorce, I would like to borrow some ideas from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

In his *Discourse On Thinking*, Heidegger sets out to distinguish between "calculative" and "meditative" modes of thinking. He demonstrates how Western persons, bound to the "calculative " mode, create a worldview—an ethos—that resorts to an interpretation of reality that ultimately supersedes experience. Calculative thinking "consists in the fact that whenever we plan, research, and organize, we always reckon with conditions that are given. We take them into account with calculated intention of their serving specific purposes. Thus we can count on definite results. This calculation is the mark of all thinking that plans and investigates. … Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself.

Calculative thinking is not meditative thinking, not thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is."[1]

For Heidegger, it is only by recovering "meditative" thinking, thinking based on experience, that one is able to encounter the mystery of the other. He perceives calculative thinking as being limited, since it is based on processes or systems that ultimately dictate the result, inasmuch as the result is dependent on rules and formulas and not on encountering the other. Calculative thinking is a monologue in which the other is relegated to an object. On the other hand, meditative thinking does not rely upon a particular thought process or an established system of laws based on reason. This is so because meditative thinking seeks an experience with the other not as an object but as a subject that cannot be contained or manipulated by a pre-established and regulated epistemology. Meditative thinking is rootedness in reality that opens up to the meaning of persons and things.

Heidegger raises a question that is directly related to our reflection on sacred space: "Is there still a life-giving homeland in whose ground man may stand rooted, that is, be autochthonic?"[2] His call to meditative thinking serves well the understanding of sacred space as the context in which both self-awareness and awareness of the other occur. With broad strokes, Heidegger summarizes meditative thinking as the "releasement toward things" that moves into the mystery of reality: "Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery belong together. They grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way. They promise us a new ground and foundation upon which we can stand and endure in the world of technology without being imperiled by it."[3]

Complementing this approach is the insight offered by Father Pavel Florensky—a brilliant mathematician, inventor, theologian, electrical engineer, and student of linguistics—who perished in the Gulag. In his magnum opus, *The Pillar and Ground of Truth,* he grapples with the reality of antinomy (the logic of contradictions), and concludes that "life is infinitely fuller than rational definitions and therefore no formula can encompass all the fullness of life."[4] Meditative thinking allows us to see and experience sacred space as a dynamic reality that ultimately provides the venue in which everyone and everything acquires or re-acquires its proper identity. This is accomplished through relationship with the other in the context of worship. Space and worship are inseparable components that re-root all reality in the divine and eternal. In the following essay, I shall explore four basic aspects of sacred space: space and person; sacred space and person; sacred space and personal identity; and the expansion of sacred space.

I. Space and Person

Space provides for the differentiation of persons. It is the context in which I encounter the other and the other encounters me. From this encounter ensues a desire to draw closer to the other or to withdraw from the other. As one writer has put it, space is "the place where personal otherness manifests itself through the body; each body is different than the other; each body is able to move towards the other or to turn away from the other; each body is able to move towards the world [and] to utilize the space of the world."[5]

From a theological perspective, God creates space and time. Though God

[1] Martin Heidegger, *Discourse On Thinking: A Translation of Gelassenheit,* ed. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (1959; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 46.

[2] Ibid., 48

[3] Ibid., 54–55.

[4] Quoted in David W. Fagerberg, "The Cost of Understanding Schmemann in the West," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 53:2–3 (2009): 197.

[5] Marc-Antoine Costa de Beauregard, *Le Cosmos et la Croix* (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies, 2002), 149.

is super-spatial and super-temporal, he is not separated from what he creates. This means that God, dwelling in space and time, predestines all of created existence to expand into eternity. "In the beginning," says Genesis 1:1, "God created the heavens and the earth." These few words speak of the divine origin of space and its inherent sacredness, as well as two harmonious categories of created space—the heavenly and the earthly, the incorporeal and the corporeal. From a biblical and theological perspective this means that until the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise, all space was sacred. There was no duality of space and, by extension, no polarization between the sacred and the profane.

The human person occupies corporeal space that can be delineated and therefore measured. At the same time, there is incorporeal space where the bodiless powers dwell. Though created, incorporeal space broadens the concept of space. The co-existence of incorporeal and immaterial creation with the corporeal and material reveals space as having flexible contours. Space is not limited to what is perceived by the senses.

In addition to *exterior space*—heavenly and earthly—Orthodox theology also recognizes the *interior space* of persons, where the inter-communion or co-inhabiting of persons resides. In Orthodox theology this intimacy of persons based on the intimacy of the divine persons of the Trinity is summed up by the word περιχώρησις (*perichoresis*). This word attempts to describe each person, whether uncreated or created, as being the very space of the other. In the Gospel of John, Christ prays to his Father that the disciples "may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one". . . . (17:21–23).

While *perichoresis* describes the interpenetration of persons, it also describes the reciprocity of divine and human properties. The divine Logos, for example, shows that, in becoming incarnate, his humanity takes on divine qualities such as walking on water and passing through closed doors. At the same time, his divinity submits to hunger and thirst, suffering and death. The reciprocity of divine and human characteristics is a common theme in both Greek and Latin Fathers, summed up in Athanasius's famous aphorism, "God became man so that man might become God."

Space as a created reality not only draws together the incorporeal and the corporeal, but is the context in which the uncreated and the created encounter each other. Just as God extends himself by creating, his creation also extends itself to the divine and uncreated. This kinetic or dynamic character of space reflects the elastic contours of liturgical worship.

II. Sacred Space and Person

Within the divine–human interaction of liturgical worship, the dynamism of sacred space shows itself as having two complementary or interrelated qualities. On the one hand, sacred space reveals the uniqueness of persons in relationship to one another and to God. Given this quality, sacred space or liturgical space is to be understood as the archetype of all space. Within sacred space the human person, together with all of creation, is drawn into the uncreated space of God, while God is drawn into the created space of humanity and all creation.

Sacred space is archetypal, for it reveals space as it was intended to be, that is, the context of inter-personal communion of persons and things. The collapse or secularization of space resulting from humanity's rebellion against God distorts space. Intended for the communion of persons, space undergoes a destructive antithesis. It becomes the context in which human beings hide or escape from the other, or even fight and kill one another. This collapse of space is succinctly summed up in two passages from Genesis: "And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden" (3:8), and, "The Lord said [to Cain], 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth'" (4:10–12).

Sacred space as liturgical space includes time. Like space and the person, time is not bound to the created or temporal. It too is created to participate in both divinity and eternity. Within the liturgical context—especially the Eucharist—space, person, and time intersect with the infinite, divine, and eternal. In the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, space, person, and time are joined to the realm of eschatology. Just before the elevation of bread and wine, the celebrant says, "Remembering this saving commandment and all those things which have come to pass for us: the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the sitting at the right hand and the second and glorious coming."

From the historical present, sacred space reveals the dynamism of time.

Photo by Inga Leonova.

Sacred space binds the present with the past and the future. The interaction of space, person, and time "remembers" the worshipping community to the saving works of God. In its liturgical usage, *remembrance* (ἀνάμνησις) conveys a person's oneness or communion with another person as well as an event. Within the context of sacred space, one is joined to a multi-temporal context (past, present, and future) and ultimately to an eternal context.

The dynamism of time is also expressed in the movement and unfolding of liturgical worship. This inter-relationship of time, movement, and space is a central feature of St. Maximus the Confessor's *Mystagogia.* For St. Maximus, the church building is an image of the cosmos and the Synaxis (the celebration of the Eucharist) is a prelude to the fulfillment of God's plan for creation. The unfolding of the Liturgy within sacred space consists of "movement" that unites divinity and humanity, time and eternity. This unity in diversity and diversity in unity is expressed by church architecture. Aristotelian concepts related to act (ἐνέργεια) and potency (δύναμις) are used by Maximus to describe the relationship of sanctuary and nave. For Maximus, the sanctuary is act and the nave is potency. Both are united in the one hypostasis of the church structure. Following this train of thought, the distinctions of space are not cause for division, since within the celebration of the Eucharist they are simultaneously different while also being the same. The sacramental act creates a unity in diversity. As St. Maximus says, "The nave is the sanctuary according to potency (τὴν δύναμιν) by the offering of the sacrament (τῆς μυσταγωγίας) … and the sanctuary is the nave on the basis of its own sacramental act (τὴν ἐνέργειαν) that remains one and the same in both parts."[6]

III. Sacred Space and Personal Identity

Because sacred space provides the contours for liturgical worship, it allows the human person to exercise the inherent gift of freedom to draw either near to or apart from the other. When human freedom is used to divide one from another, the result is hell. Encounter with the other without a communion of persons is a living death that is opened to eternal torment.[7] Here we confront one of the paradoxes of sacred space. Ideally, its purpose is to allow for the inter-communion or inter-penetration of persons. Yet because sacred space does not impede human freedom, it allows for pockets of *dark interior space* to exist within itself. Consequently, until Christ's second coming is completed, sacred space remains the arena of personal spiritual struggle or ascesis, as well as the place in which God's victory over evil and hell is affirmed and experienced.

Theodicy—God's triumph over sin, death, evil, and hell—is a characteristic of liturgical worship that unfolds in sacred space. Within the church building, the worshipping community is "re-membered" to the saving acts of God. In the Eucharistic prayer of St. Basil's Liturgy, the celebrant proclaims: "For as by man sin entered into the world, and by sin death, so it seemed good that your only-begotten Son, who is in your bosom, our God and Father, be born of a woman, the holy Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary; to be born under the law, that he might condemn sin in his flesh; that they who were dead in Adam might be made alive in your Christ… And having descended into hell through the cross, that he might fill all things with himself, he loosed the pains of death, and rose from the dead on the third day, making a way for all flesh

[6] Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia* in *Patrologia Graeca* 91, col. 669. Translated in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, ed. George C. Berthold (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1985), 188.

[7] De Beauregard, *Le Cosmos*, 151.

through the resurrection from the dead…"

Through liturgical worship, sacred space becomes a *word* (λόγος) that announces the victory of light and life over darkness and death. The overcoming of evil and death allows for the transformation of the interior space of the person. In the language of scripture and ascetical literature, this inner change is referred to as *repentance* (μετάνοια). Essential to the process of repentance is a dying to the self that gradually allows a person to become a dwelling space or place for the other.

When *interior* space is filled with the other, then the *exterior* space of liturgical worship becomes the abode of transfigured and deified reality. The contours of sacred space, both vertical and horizontal, while manifesting the visible and invisible, form a microcosm in which everyone and everything has the potential to acquire its authentic identity in as much as it is in communion with the triune and tri-personal God. All of the created components of sacred space and worship, because of their perichoretic and inter-penetrating relationship with God, are freed from a mode of existence destined for death. Created existence enters a multi-dimensional mode of existence that transcends all the parameters of created reality without compromising the uniqueness and integrity of persons and things.

Iconography covering many of the vertical and over-arching physical surfaces of sacred space is a testament to this transcendent reality. Images of particular saints and events of salvation history offer to the worshipping community a glimpse of the transfigured cosmos made possible through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. Through its lines and colors, the icon reveals the union of history and eschatology. The historical persons depicted in the icon are presented as already participating in the second coming. History and eschatology—time and eternity—embrace each other. Heaven and earth, uncreated and created, immaterial and material, spiritual and physical, male and female are united within the communal harmony of the Trinity. The dynamism of sacred space, particularly within the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, foreshadows in history the final overcoming of all polarities and divisions in the eschaton. The living icons gathered in sacred space must be consistent with what is revealed in lines and color. For unless the co-celebrants of the Divine Liturgy seek union and communion with one another and with God, sacred space and what occurs within it are desecrated.

IV. The Expansion Of Sacred Space

The contours of sacred space are intended to expand so as to eliminate the false dichotomy between what is holy and what is profane. The sacred microcosm points to the sacred macrocosm. Animated by worship, sacred space reveals the universal and eternal dynamism of creation that paradoxically rests in God. According to St. Maximus, ever-moving stability (στάσις ἀεικείνητος) expresses the never-ceasing development of creation within divine life. Development is a characteristic of creation nurtured by the divine-human synergy. God creates so that the whole creation may grow eternally within him. The human person, created in the image and likeness of God, leading the rest of creation, is destined to transcend the limitations of created nature. St. Irenaeus of Lyon points out that the first created human was in a state of spiritual infancy. This immaturity accounts for the sin of disobedience. Nevertheless, even if there had been no sin, the

human person would have continued to develop and expand beyond created limitations for all eternity within the synergistic relationship forged between himself and God.

Sacred space bound to liturgical worship shows that, as the human being is called to progress eternally within the stability of God, so too is the whole of creation. The expansion of sacred space corresponds to the eternal expansion of the spiritual and psychological aspects of the human person. In commenting on the commandment of Genesis 1:28, "increase and multiply," Fr. Marc-Antoine Costa de Beauregard writes: "The word 'increase' here prophetically proposed to the human being by God designates not only a numerical increase or expansion of the human species. It indicates above all the development of the human being as such—man is called to become more human—to reach human plenitude (cf. Eph. 4:13 'until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the son of God, to mature manhood, to the standard of the stature of the fullness of Christ')."[8]

The expansion of sacred space corresponds to the expansion of the new humanity that eternally offers the new and ever changing creation back to God. "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). Within sacred space, all of creation is transformed into sacrament; all of creation is consecrated into the means for intimate, personal, and eternal expansion with God. ✠

[8] De Beauregard, *Le Cosmos*, 155.

Additional Reading

Maximus the Confessor, *The Church's Mystagogy* in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, ed. George C. Berthold (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1985).

David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: the Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987).

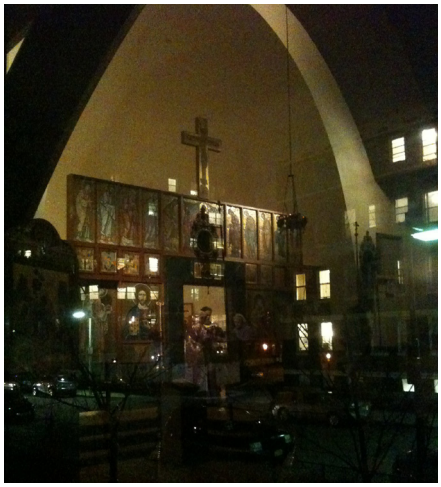

Photo by Inga Leonova.

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