



## Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

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Publication Department

# To Liturgize the World

## The Cosmo-Ecological Ethos of Eastern Orthodoxy

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Let us consider the cosmological and ecological functions of liturgy. In the understanding of the early Greek Church, liturgy is not merely the *lex orandi* of believers, but is cosmology in action. The fullest example in the Christian tradition of the metaphysical, theological and ethical unity of science, religion, contemplation, and asceticism in a cosmic vision that is profoundly unifying, reconciling and ecological is the liturgical cosmology and cosmic liturgy of St. Maximos the Confessor, a great theologian and philosopher who lived in the 7th century.<sup>1</sup> Liturgy, in the sense that St. Maximos uses it, and in the sense that the Greek Orthodox tradition has embodied, is not to be considered in terms of conventional church ceremonies consisting of outwardly figurative words and actions in which one satisfies his religious duties by placing his body in a pew in an ordinary, untransmuted and unregenerate state of consciousness. This type of experience may by conventional language and untransmuted consciousness be called attending liturgy, but it is nothing of the sort that St. Maximos means.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. St. Maximos the Confessor, Migne, *P.G.*, XC-XCI. For English translations of selected works of Maximos, see *Philokalia*, vol. 2, Palmer, Sherrard, Ware, trans., (London: Faber & Faber, 1981); George Berthold, *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985); Polycarp Sherwood, *St. Maximus the Confessor: The Ascetic Life, "The Four Centuries on Charity"* (Ancient Christian Writers, Vol. 21: New York: Newman Press, 1955); Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (The Early Church Fathers: London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

The Byzantine Church of St. Maximos' time recognized liturgy as the *topos*, or place, of the direct link between human knowing and ethical action with the well-being of the cosmos and the metaphysical transparency of things. The insight that the cosmos itself is a vast liturgy is a revelation of the cosmological dimension to the liturgy of the Church. This *theoria*, itself the fruit of natural contemplation (or *phusiki*, in Maximian terminology), leads St. Maximos the Confessor to interpret the Divine Liturgy of the Byzantine Church as sacred cosmology in salvific action. We can clearly see this conception fully expressed in St. Maximos' commentary on the Divine Liturgy, the *Mystagogia*.<sup>2</sup>

His very choice of title is instructive, for a *mystagogy* is an initiation into a mystery. The work is divided into three parts. In this division, we may see how St. Maximos conveys his understanding of liturgy as sacred cosmology in action. He begins his commentary by a lengthy section in which he presents his image of the universe as a living symbol in which God, the Church and humanity are presented as icons — or reciprocal symbols — of one another. Then he interprets the actions of the rite of the *synaxis* (or holy communion) in terms, not only of the life of Christ, but more specifically in relation to the eschatological goal of creation, and most of all, in accordance with the ethical, ascetical, contemplative and mystical transformation of the human soul. Finally, in the third section, he sums it all up in a unitive contemplation that unites the human image, the image of the cosmos, and the Divine image in and through the sacrifice of the Logos.

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Because the human image and the cosmic image are reciprocal in the thought of the Byzantine spiritual master, the inner constitution and condition of the human soul or microcosmos will be seen to have a direct effect on the outer condition and order of the universe or macrocosmos. This understanding leads Maximos, in his commentary on the liturgy, to write:

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<sup>2</sup> English translation found in Berthold, *Maximus Confessor*, pp. 183-225. See also Dom Julian Stead, O.S.B., *The Church, the Liturgy and the Soul of Man: The Mystagogia of St. Maximus the Confessor* ( Still River,MA:St. Bede's Publications, 1982).

For thought is the act and manifestation of the mind related as effect to cause, and prudence is the act and manifestation of wisdom, and action of contemplation, and virtue of knowledge and faith of enduring knowledge. From these is produced the inward relationship to the truth and the good, that is, to God, which he [St. Maximos' teacher, the 'great elder'] used to call "divine science," secure knowledge, love and peace in which and by means of which there is deification. This whole reality is science because it is the achievement of all knowledge concerning God and divine realities and virtues accessible to men. It is knowledge because it genuinely lays hold of the truth and offers a lasting experience of God. It is love because it shares by its whole disposition in the full happiness of God. Finally it is peace inasmuch as it experiences the same things as God and prepares for this experience those who are judged worthy to come to it.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, St. Maximos understands liturgy to be an ethical science. 'Divine science,' or the attainment of authentic being in knowledge and virtue, leads to 'knowledge,' or the identity of knower and the known in the experience of truth, which leads to love,' or the ethical harmony of being and knowing and doing in man, which leads to peace, or the fulfillment of the destiny of man, in which his deification and the transfiguration of nature are one and the same experience.

*"The action of liturgy... cannot but result in a person capable of genuinely feeling the wrongness of the ongoing despoliation of the environment, which is a desecration of the temple of nature created by God."*

For St. Maximos the Confessor, then, authentic liturgy is sacred cosmology in action. The field of the action is the human person as microcosmos, united reciprocally to the macrocosmos, the universe as a whole. But even the cosmos as a whole is not seen as the spiritually empty mechano-organic universe of astrophysicists and evolutionists, but the universe

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<sup>3</sup> St. Maximos the Confessor, *Mystagogy 5*, in Berthold, *Maximos Confessor: Selected Writings*, pp. 193-194.

understood liturgically and reciprocally as a Cosmic Man, the Macroanthropos<sup>4</sup>, or, equally, as cosmic Church.<sup>5</sup> The action of liturgy is twofold: first, the reconstitution of ordinary space and time into liturgical space and time, wherein the valences of eternity are manifest, as the Blakean “infinity in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour” intimates; second, the transfiguration of human nature by uniting mind, heart, will, soul and body into graced wholeness and wellness, which results in a person whose faculties are energized and oriented toward truth, goodness and beauty in self, neighbor and earth. This cannot but result in a person capable of genuinely *feeling* the wrongness of the ongoing despoliation of the environment, which is a desecration of the temple of nature created by God. Enlightened and empowered by liturgy, mankind’s true work in the world, such a person is thus capable as well of responding with ethical and practical effectiveness toward making the necessary sacrifice that will lead to healing and harmony in person and cosmos.

*“The action of liturgy... cannot but result in a person capable of genuinely feeling the wrongness of the ongoing despoliation of the environment, which is a desecration of the temple of nature created by God.”*

Liturgy in its authentically Orthodox sense is the transfiguration of nature (not just human nature, but all nature) through the living symbolism of the sacramental act, which unites man and women, this present world and paradise, earth and heaven, the sensible and intelligible dimensions of creation in its totality, and, ultimately, the creation and the Uncreated. The word liturgy is from the Greek *leit-ourgos*, which literally means “the work of the people.” In the conception of St. Maximos, which is the view of ancient traditional Christianity, the liturgy is the divinely ordained work of the people in which the

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<sup>4</sup> “The whole world, made up of visible and invisible things, is man, and conversely...man, made up of body and soul, is a world.” St. Maximos, *Myst.* 7, Berthold, p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> “God’s holy Church [is] a figure and image of the entire world composed of visible and invisible essences because, like it, it contains both unity and diversity.” St. Maximos, *Myst.* 2, Berthold, p. 188.

essence of religion and science is fully embedded in the cosmos because the cosmos is fully embedded in God. Through liturgy as cosmology in action, both the universe as macrocosm and the individual human being as microcosm are transformed, transfigured and deified. This transfiguration and deification is the ultimate destiny of both cosmos and man. Liturgy as sacred cosmology in action is able to accomplish this because the essence of liturgy is communication of and communion with the Archetypal Sacrifice which is the very foundation of the universe.

*“The Church’s mission is to bring about the reciprocal transfiguration of the cosmos and itself as the New Creation.”*

For St. Maximos and the early Christian Church, the purpose of liturgy was the transfiguration of the world, not just the moral well-being of believers. The heart of liturgy is sacrifice, and the purpose of sacrifice is to make holy. Liturgy was conceived (and is presently so understood in the Orthodox tradition) as the primary work of all people, and the field of this work was not merely the horizon of the individual soul, but the whole world. The Church was embedded in the cosmos and the cosmos in the Church.

The Church’s mission is, through the Holy Spirit, who is everywhere present and fills all things, to bring about the reciprocal transfiguration of the cosmos and itself as the New Creation. The responsibility of people on the earth was – and is – to liturgize the world, and by so doing, heal its divisions in an ecology of transfiguring light.

