

STEPHANIE RUMPZA

Université Paris-Sorbonne
Department of Philosophy

Looking like the Father: The Meaning of Life and the Transfigured Gaze

Why is life worth living? This is not an idle question in our nihilistic age, which has emptied the world of any shared higher meaning. If it is all a matter of personal opinion, nothing really matters, then my choice to die and your choice to live are equally valid options. Or at least, that is the optimistic perspective. The reality is that higher meaning of life is replaced with a lesser one, calculated by efficiency and utility, so that choice and life are mostly matters for the rich, the strong, and the intelligent, the people who earn their keep. Those who don't, who can't, find themselves facing an ever-widening choice only of ways to marginalize or eliminate themselves, so as not to become burdens on the rest.

Christians are right to want to claim something more, to insist that there is meaning in life. But on what grounds may we do so? One approach is to try to identify objective qualities in the thing itself, to argue for the inherent value of life against rival forces of evaluation. Of course, the risk of such an approach is that we fall back into the trap of the very mindset we are trying to critique. For, as Jean-Yves Lacoste observes, we live in an age “ontology has been enriched with one more transcendental, the *utile*.”¹ We are too deeply practiced in this quantifying, objectifying mindset, which is reinforced on every side by the technological and economic forces that govern

¹ J.Y. Lacoste, *Half-Objections and Remarks*, „Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal” 3.3 (Autumn 2019), p. 26.

the world as well as our everyday life. Conceptual frameworks like this one have a gravitational pull we must not underestimate. How can we be certain that in answering this question we are not merely setting up a new scale of utility or commodity?

Perhaps our advance might be more secure if we begin from another starting point. The very temptation to fall into an economic and utilitarian model of value forces us to acknowledge that truth is not simply a matter of picking out objective facts, like reading figures off a chart. Truth necessarily also involves the way we turn to the things, the kind of act by which we open ourselves to what gives itself in our experience. The phenomenological approach is well aware of this fact: that what is known is always given to the lived experience of the knower, and that all objectification and abstraction takes place at a secondary level from this basic starting point. Might turning to this other dimension of the truth, that of our reception of it, be a more promising way to respond to the question of life's meaning? The fact is that we all live in the same world, we encounter the same things that are available to anyone else, we encounter the same ambiguities that allow things to be covered over under dollar signs or efficiency statistics. Yet we do not for that fact encounter them in the same way.

It might not be evident at first how such an approach could be strong enough to advance beyond subjective opinion. It is more fragile, in some sense. Might that very fact not be more honest to the confusion that arises by the question?

Not what we see, but how

This concern about the ambiguity of human experience mirrors a debate found especially among Orthodox Christians in the 20th century.² While our question is whether we can retrieve a Christian understanding of the meaning of life, their question is whether or not a painted image could reveal the face of God or his Divine work in the world. One solution that was suggested by well-known iconographers like Leonid Ouspensky was to prioritize the Byzantine aesthetic tradition as bearing a special spiritual insight. In contrast to the subjectivism and carnality of realist painting, which shows “a visible world which is independent of the divine world,” the Byzantine icon alone is able to show the “the transfiguration of the human body,” the “spiritual purity, inner

² In what follows, I will be elaborating upon my discussion in chapter 7 of *Phenomenology of the Icon: Mediating God in his Image* (Cambridge 2023).

beauty” of “purified and sinless flesh,”³ and a world created and transfigured by divine love.

There are many questionable assumptions in these claims, but what is important for our purposes is this: Ouspensky is claiming that the ordinary visibility of realism, the ordinary appearing or experience of life, is not enough to reveal God or his working in the world. Instead, we need some kind of special language, aesthetic tool, or symbolic code to unlock this secret truth. The problem with this is that it assumes that the burden of this knowledge, the critical key that would mark the difference between a Christian way of seeing and a nihilistic one, lies with the appearances themselves. It assumes that realist paintings, and by consequence the real ordinary experience it depicts, are subjective, carnal, sentimental – “mere appearances” closed to God. It’s certainly true that we can encounter appearances in this way. But is it really fair to blame the appearances for this? What if, instead, the burden of this difference was in us? What if the relevant question was not so much about *what* we see, but *how* we see it?

Take most relevant experience for Christian thinking: God himself, incarnate. As Kierkegaard pointed out, crowds of people saw his face, and yet very few recognized him for what he was: some said Elijah, some said John the Baptist, a prophet, a king, a rebel, and so on. What makes the difference, then, between those who really *see* God and those who do not? We might be tempted to make a distinction between different modes of Christ’s appearing. It is true, most of the time he may have been veiled by the ambiguity of an ordinary human face, but at least on one dramatic episode he was revealed in glory. As the account in Matthew 17 tells it:

After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, conversing with him. Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud cast a shadow over them, then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” When the disciples heard this, they fell prostrate and were very much afraid. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and do not be afraid.” And when the disciples raised their eyes, they saw no one else but Jesus alone. (Matt 17:1-8)

³ L. Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, New York 1992, p. 184-185.

Many phenomenologists have taken an interest in this event, as there is no other place in the Bible where the glory of God made so visibly manifest to human experience.⁴ Following Ouspensky's logic, we may initially assume this change of visibility is something that occurs to *Christ*. However, there is a significant Patristic tradition that suggests a different interpretation. Consider how John Damascene describes the event of the Transfiguration in a homily:

He was transfigured, then: not taking on what he was not, nor being changed to what he was not, but making what he *was* visible to his own disciples, opening their eyes and enabling them, who had been blind, to see. This is what the phrase means, "He was transfigured before their faces"; he remained exactly the same as he was, but appeared in a way beyond the way he had appeared before, and in that appearance seems different to his disciples.⁵

Thus, according to this Greek patristic tradition articulated here, it was not Christ who changed to take on a new appearance, but the disciples who changed. This event was not a vision of something new, but simply accessing the vision of what had always already been there.

This is the approach that I am suggesting here: that a phenomenology of Christian life will involve changing the way we see, not bringing us to a new world, but to a new way of seeing and encountering this world that we all share, that we all live in, that we all in principle have access to. Drawing inspiration from this theological tradition, let's call this a "transfiguration of vision." The next task is to understand how this works. To do this, let us take instruction from the case of the icon.

⁴ See for example R. Kearney, *Transfiguring God*, in: idem, *The God Who May Be*, Bloomington [USA: Illinois] 2001, p. 39-52; J.Y. Lacoste, *The Phenomenality of Anticipation*, in: *Phenomenology and Eschatology: Not Yet in the Now*, ed. N. DeRoo and J. P. Manoussakis, trans. by R. Mendoza-De Jesús, N. DeRoo, New York 2009, p. 15-34; J.L. Marion, *They Recognized Him; and He became Invisible to Them*, in: *Believing in Order to See: On the Rationality of Revelation and the Irrationality of Some Believers*, trans. by C.M. Gschwandtner, New York 2017, p. 136-143/*Ils le reconnurent et lui-même leur devint invisible*, in: *Le croire pour le voir*, Paris 2010; M. Westphal, *Transfiguration as Saturated Phenomenon*, „Journal of Philosophy and Scripture” 1:1 (2003), p. 26-35. See also A. Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, Crestwood [USA: New York] 2005, p. 41-42.

⁵ John Damascene, *Homily for the Feast of the Transfiguration*, in: *Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfigurations of the Lord*, Yonkers [USA: New York] 2013, 12, p. 221. See also Gregory Palamas, *Homily 34*, *Patrologia Graeca* 151, Migne 1865, 433b.

Prayer before the Icon

We could try to explain the spiritual vision available in the icon by its properties as a sacred thing, by its spiritually significant aesthetic language and its consecration by the Church. However, it is also clear that not everyone sees and appreciates the icon in this way. In the same way that many of us pass over the value of human life, many people see the icon as an image among others, as a historical artifact, as an aesthetic achievement, and so on. This difference must thus be something more than the image alone. If we want to approach the icon phenomenologically, as I am suggesting, we must once again ask both *what* is given in this painting, and *how* we receive it. The fact is that Christians do not come before the icon as a beautiful artwork, an object, or a special cognitive tool. They come before it as a personal presence to be encountered in the act of prayer. Ouspensky is right that the icon is special, but the reason for this is found especially in the way that the icon guides us into a certain reception of it.

Let's discuss, rigorously, what this means, from both sides: the way that the image presents itself to us and the structure of the actions by which we receive it. Drawing from the work of contemporary French phenomenologists like Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and Jean-Luc Marion, prayer can be understood as placing oneself in the presence of God. Or in Marion's words, it is to expose oneself to the gaze of God who always sees us. We can perform this action of prayer in many ways, but when we pray to an icon, this divine initiative is visually symbolized: we come before a painted figure whose eyes are always already on us before we decide to turn to it.⁶ We will not find here the immediacy of a "window into heaven" in a literal sense, like a face-to-face presence given in the flesh. But a presence is given when we pray.⁷ We do not come before an icon to see an image, but to place ourselves before the gaze of God. The icon finds many ways to communicate this to us.

Andreas Andreopoulos recounts that in some traditions, iconographers used to begin every icon by painting the eye of God and writing the Divine name underneath it.⁸ Usually, this would be covered up by other layers of pigment. But in one famous 15th c. Novgorodian icon of the Transfiguration, Andreopoulos ob-

⁶ J.L. Marion, *De surcroît. Études sur les phénomènes saturés*, Paris 2001, p. 68-73; trans. by R. Horner and V. Berraud as *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, New York 2002, p. 56-61.

⁷ J.Y. Lacoste, *Expérience et absolu: Questions disputées sur l'humanité de l'homme*, Paris 1989, p. 55; trans. by M. Rafferty as *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, New York 2004, p. 45.

⁸ Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 27.

serves, the alignment of the underpainting of the Divine eye is not only perfectly aligned with the mandorla, or the glory surrounding the transfigured Christ, but the particular composition of this mandorla, with the proportion of the three inner circles and the golden rays spreading outward, give the mandorla into an “uncanny” resemblance to the “Great eye of God”.⁹ This effect is amplified in this remarkable 17th fresco from the Monastery of St. Mary of Ravenja near the village of Goranxi, Albania. Not only does it copy the same form of mandorla from the Novgorodian Transfiguration, but it employs the form of the apse, as set apart from the other frescoes, to further the compositional reference to the Divine eye presiding over the prayer of those gathered beneath it. This visual symbolism communicates that the icon is not an artwork to look at, but a way to bring ourselves to the seeing presence of God.

This icon of the transfiguration is thus a dramatic example of a strategy for communicating the prayerful engagement with the icon. But this language is expressed in a number of ways through the visual language of every icon, beginning with its compositional movement and style. Byzantine icons do not use techniques of direct perspective to draw us in to a painted world with a vanishing point at a distant horizon. Instead, the icon pushes forward into our space and bathes us in its light-filled world through both inverse perspective, which scrutinizes their viewer through setting a vanishing point within us, and the relational perspective, which renders impossible any central point of reference that could grasp the whole of its visibility. More importantly, every icon shows a person who is identified by name, known to the Christian tradition for their holiness: saints, angels, or Christ himself. These holy men and women are always shown gazing on us. The face of the holy one depicted is not static and fixed, but transversal, which makes their eyes follow us as we move across the room.¹⁰ The stylistic way the icon renders faces preserves some natural resemblance, but especially emphasizes features of receptivity: the mouth is small, and always closed while the ears and eyes are larger, looking and listening. The holy figure in the image thus seems to be already listening attentively to us, as if waiting for us to speak. If we are to take up this invitation, we, too, must decide to make ourselves present to this holy figure.

This choice is the beginning of the communal relation of prayer, where we open ourselves to the divine gaze which is always open to us. Prayer is never automatic, nor can it be forced. It is a free choice to expose ourselves to

⁹ Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 252.

¹⁰ See illustrations of this in G. Kordis, *Icon as Communion*, Brookline [USA: Massachusetts] 2011, p. 20-21, 72.



Southern apse of the Church of the Monastery of Saint Mary of Ravenja / Goranxi, Albania, 1621 / Photo by Pierro Thomo. Used with permission.

God, and God's free choice to present himself as he wishes. The space of this freedom is protected by the icon's style of aesthetic play. While some artworks project energy, violence, or sorrow, an icon does not try to overwhelm us into a certain kind of feeling. Rather, its aesthetic play calms emotions, lightens the spirit, and focuses the attention of an overzealous mind, bringing a state of stillness and peace which we might compare to liturgical chant. The more we gaze at an icon, the more we enter this play, the more our disposition imitates or takes on these movements. This silence allows us the space to choose to enter this relation of prayer, and allows us to cultivate it more deeply. After all, a true encounter with any person requires us to be present as listening. It would be impossible to determine the success of a conversation based on how articulately one has made one's own points. This listening presence is all the more important in prayer, since we do not so easily hear God's words. The icon thus leaves us the freedom to take up this relation of prayer and helps us to cultivate this receptive attitude by which we freely present ourselves to the God who presents himself to us.

It is important to recognize the significance of any single encounter of prayer. And yet, if this single action is extended into a sustained practice, it begins to work on us. As Paul Evdokimov states, "The icon is a powerful and methodical spiritual exercise program."¹¹ A first prayer before an image may feel artificial or forced, but if we continue this exercise, we quickly become habituated to placing ourselves within this mutual relation. The more we pray, the more vividly we feel the gaze of God through the image, the more easily and the more often we can place ourselves before it. The more we allow ourselves to be attuned to the icon's aesthetic play, the more it cultivates in us an attitude of receptivity. The more we stop to express our love for the holy one pictured in the icon and the more we intensify this relation by bowing before his image and kissing it, the more quickly we begin to regard it as a place of personal presence of another. Even after we finish praying, we can still feel the holy gaze upon us in the background as we attend to our other work. Through the practice of prayer before the icon, the iconic gaze becomes a holy presence that enters into space which it inhabits, sanctifying it, shaping our attitudes and experiences even when not directly engaging in prayer.¹² Put simply, the world changes for one who prays.

¹¹ P. Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. by S. Bingham, California 1989, p. 11.

¹² A. Lidov, *Hierotropy. The Creation of Sacred Spaces as a Form of Creativity and Subject of Cultural History*, in: *Hierotropy. The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. idem, Moscow 2006, p. 32-58.

Thus, the icon is designed in prayer and for prayer and helps form us into the right disposition for the personal communion of prayer. When we take up this relation as prayer we become better attuned in our receptivity and attention to the free relation with God. Yet ultimately prayer passes beyond our own initiative, for the character of prayer involves a deeper moment of dispossession.

Twofold Inversion

For if prayer requires our initiative, it also requires we abandon any measure of achievement. This idea is also deeply embedded in the spirituality of the icon, including the very existence of the icon itself, which, as legend goes, was *acheiropoieton*, not made by human hands, but by the working of God. John Damascene tells the story as follows:

Abgar the king of the city of Edessa, sent an artist (ζωγράφον) to paint the Lord's image but could not do so because of the shining brilliance of his face (τοῦ προσώπου λαμπρότητα). The Lord therefore placed a large cloth on his divine and life-giving (ζωοποιῶ) face and wiped his own imprint onto it. He sent this to Abgar in answer to his request.¹³

The weight of the reversal is clear in the Greek, where the life-painting (ζωγράφον) artist receives the image from the life-giving (ζωοποιῶ) face. Further, upon receiving this miraculous image, the king Abgar immediately presses it to his own face and is healed of his leprosy. Thus, Christ imprints his image on the icon, but he also imprints it on those who come to pray before it with his miraculous and healing touch. Just as the divine image exceeded artistic talent, so to receive this Divine look exceeds our own accomplishments and actions. In a similar way, as Sergei Bulgakov writes, Christ “sketch[es] in the world and in man his own image.”¹⁴ By a practice of prayer before the icon, we submit ourselves to be engraved by God's look upon us, which can only be received as a gift. We can identify two moments of this inversion.

First, if prayer is communal, it is also asymmetrical. This brings us to the first inversion, which I will call the *reversal*: just as the artist comes to Christ and finds himself unable to paint the image that only Christ can give, we come

¹³ John Damascene, *De Orthodoxa Fidei*, IV.XXVI, PG 94, 1173a. Trans. from M. Guscini, *Image of Edessa*, Leiden 2009, p. 152.

¹⁴ S. Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, trans. by B. Jakim, Grand Rapids [USA: Michigan] 2012, p. 92.

to the icon to see the face of Christ, but we find ourselves already seen. This is reinforced again and again in the aesthetic language of the Byzantine icon, as in the faces always attentively gazing on us, the geometrical reversal of perspective, and the flat plane which pushes the image forward into relation with our worldly space. Levinas reminds us an asymmetrical reversal occurs before any person, whose presence will always arrive prior to any ability to objectify to pierce my subjective command over the world. In the case of the other, I have at least have some awareness of his corporeal presence. This is amplified in prayer, for God's presence to me remains invisible or at the very least ambiguous.¹⁵ Even if I still hold my conviction that God is present, I have no confirmation of it.¹⁶ When I pray, my own presence, words, and actions come to rebound upon me like an echo in a closed room. But just because my own actions are most manifest does not mean it is thereby an inner monologue. The subject of address remains another person. It is true that none of these aesthetic devices, nor any element of our experience in prayer, can unambiguously assure us that this other person exists. This is not a problem, provided that we can abandon experience as the measure of success.¹⁷ However, there are consequences to doing so. If we no longer have a clear grasp on our words and actions, we no longer have a full grasp of ourselves. Prayer thus demands we give up any self-measure and ultimately our very selves.¹⁸

To pray without any confirmation of my action and my success requires self-dispossession. This moment also provokes a second inversion, which I will call the *isomorphic collapse*: apparent differences become one thanks to their shared structure, which in turn ripples outwards in a chain reaction. This is illustrated in one of the most common gestures of the icon: the *orans* position, the open palm held out, and often raised, an ancient gesture of prayer that predates Christianity, and indeed seems to communicate something at the most basic human level, as exposing, as receiving, of giving, of pointing out, of praising, beseeching, or perhaps all of these at once. It is the gesture of self-dispossession or self-gift which is demanded by the asymmetry of prayer.

¹⁵ J.L. Marion, *Au lieu de soi. L'approche de Saint Augustin*, Paris 2008, p. 37-38; trans. by J.K. Kosky as *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, Stanford 2012, p. 18-19.

¹⁶ J.L. Chrétien, *L'arche de la parole*, Paris 1998, p. 29; trans. by A. Brown as *The Ark of Speech*, London–New York 2004, p. 21. See also J.Y. Lacoste, *Expérience et absolu*, §55, p. 180/*Experience and the Absolute*, §55, p. 149.

¹⁷ J.L. Marion, *Au Lieu de soi*, p. 37-38/*In the Self's Place*, 18-19/, also J.Y. Lacoste, *Expérience et absolu/Experience and the Absolute* §56; J.L. Chrétien, *L'arche de la parole*, p. 38/*Ark of Speech*, p. 27.

¹⁸ J.Y. Lacoste, *Expérience et absolu/Experience and the Absolute*, §§ 25, 56.

As Jean-Luc Marion has explained, a gift is defined by what is constantly flowing from elsewhere, like a basin in a tiered fountain, which can only receive the water poured into it from above by continually emptying out to the level below it. To try to appropriate the gift destroys the possibility of receiving it; only by giving can we receive what is poured out.¹⁹ To close our fists around our own autonomy is to refuse the gift of God's presence, but also to refuse the central truth of our existence as poor and needy, fundamentally dependent at every moment on a God to whom we can offer nothing but our own nakedness. Thus we can understand when Paul Evdokimov writes that the *orans* position "represents the proper attitude of the human soul, its inner structure in the form of prayer."²⁰ As the ambiguous open-palmed gesture of prayer indicates, the initial opposites of giving and receiving become exchanged and finally identified, just as the abandonment of oneself to God is simultaneously the reception of the abundant outpouring of his love.

Both of these paradoxical structures come together in the extended practice of prayer before the icon, and this results in our transformation—or transfiguration—and with it a new way of seeing.

Seeing the World Anew

The icon trains us to see in a new way: the shape of this look that we receive in the icon, this open-palmed posture of our being, is maintained when we turn from the icon to the world. Those who pray before icon begin to see the world and themselves now in relation to God. Pavel Florensky explains the role of the icon by comparison with novice medical students, who rely on injections of colored dye to help identify the different organs they are dissecting. In a similar way, icons are a colorful and vivid training tool for entering relation with God. And yet, as experienced doctors no longer need colored dye to identify nerves and arteries we can also say that experienced believers no longer strictly need

¹⁹ J.L. Marion, *L'idole et la distance*, Paris 1977, p. 207; trans. by T.A. Carlson as *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, New York 2001, p. 162; cf. Lk 6:38.; see also *Étant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, Paris 1997; trans. by J. Kosky as *Being Given: Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Stanford 2002.

²⁰ P. Evdokimov, *Art of the Icon*, p. 16; Ouspensky notes the liturgical connection to the priest whose makes this gesture during the liturgy, linking it to intercession and sacrifice, *Theology of the Icon*, p. 28, and G. Krug interprets it rather as intercession, a call for grace, linking it to the prayer of Moses during the battle with the Amalekites, Exodus 17:8-16 in *Carnets d'un peintre d'icônes*, Lausanne 2019, p. 146.

icons to be able to recognize God's presence, for they can see it everywhere they look. Thus, if icons can teach beginners to see, it is not because it is an exception from the rest of visible reality. For, as Florensky continues:

the spiritual world of the invisible is not some infinitely far off kingdom; instead, it everywhere surrounds us as an ocean; and we are like creatures lost on the bottom of the ocean floor while everywhere is streaming upward the fullness of a grace steadily growing brighter. But we, from the habit of immature spiritual sight, fail to see this lightbearing kingdom.²¹

In other words, it is the “immature spiritual sight” that sees the world as a flattened, a “mere appearance.” For those who have trained their vision with icons, who have a “mature” spiritual sight, the whole world becomes instead a place where God is manifest. Ouspensky, too, wanted to defend the spiritual vision offered in the icon, yet he too quickly identified it as a feature of the icon itself, in the special aesthetic language which could bypass “carnal” reality. Florensky is here offering a corrective, by identifying the possibility of this vision not with the icon itself but with the “spiritual sight” which has been ripened in the practice of prayer before the icon. The decisive factor, in other words, is no longer what we look *at*, but what we look *like*. To understand the unique dimensions of this “transfigured” spiritual vision, we must preserve the deliberate ambiguity in this phrasal verb. It is true in the passive, objective sense, that is, how we *appear* to others (as in “he looks like his Father”), but also in the active, adverbial sense of how we *see* (“his *way of looking* is like his Father’s way of looking”). The gaze we turn to God is conformed more and more to the gaze which God turns to us.

This idea is deeply infused in the iconographic tradition, which often affirms that the saint, not the artist, is the true iconographer.²² We often speak of the saints as those who publicly image Christ for us, whose lives pattern for us the image of Christ more clearly, made all the richer by the variety of their personalities, cultures, and contexts.²³ This is all true. But now we add another dimension to this: if the saints are to be icons, they must also perform the counter-gaze on us, or enact the gaze of God through their human eyes. What the saints *show* is thus linked with what they *see*. As Florensky states, “Only

²¹ P. Florensky, *Iconostasis*, trans. by D. Sheehan, O. Andrejev, Crestwood [USA: New York] 1996, p. 64; see also E. Sandler, *Les mystères du Christ: les icônes de la liturgie*, Paris 2001, p. 59.

²² P. Florensky, *Iconostasis*, p. 88-89.

²³ See for example H.U. von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 2: *Studies in Theological Styles: Clerical Styles*, trans. by A. Louth, F. McDonagh, B. McNeil, Edinburgh 1984.

those who know from personal experience the state it portrays can create images corresponding to it”—only the saint fully sees and recognizes the holy in the visible, and then communicates this vision to the artists.²⁴ Commenting on John Damascene, Andrew Louth explains, “Images, icons, disclose the world of God’s creating, the deified realm of the saints, only *to those who look with pure eyes and pure hearts.*”²⁵ How exactly does one develop this “pure look,” this transfigured vision? According to Louth, it is “the fruit of a simple openness to God’s gift and grace that demands a life of sacrificial striving to love.”²⁶ Using terms developed above, we could call it what results from a heart open in kenotic dispossession, which is the central shape of prayer. As is indicated by the continual reappearance of the reversal, to see in this way is not a simple hermeneutic choice. Although it may be developed over time and in patient practice, although we must desire it and accept it, and although choices are necessary along the way, it is a capacity that is sketched within us, more than something that we sketch out for ourselves.

A transfigured vision thus does not encounter a different world than anyone else is able to see, just as everyone sees the same image of Jesus Christ in the icon, just as in Judaea everyone saw the face of the same man. But with transfigured vision, the world no longer appears as it used to, as an object at our disposal, a blank slate for the exercise of our will, or an obstacle to our efficiency. Rather, the world “shines” in a new way, as in relation to God, as a gift of love and for love. To see the world as a Divine gift is more than authentic encounter of the world as being, and even more than to recognize in gratitude the contingency of the phenomenological given. This transfigured vision, follows to its conclusion, allows us to recognize the mystery of each being sustained at every moment by a loving giver, embracing their full glory and their full poverty... recognizes the world in relation to God, the world as created.²⁷ In the dispossessive act of prayer we learn our own poverty and gratuity. As our being is formed into the posture of *orans*, we learn to welcome with joy the poverty of other beings. As the Divine look is etched into us, we echo the loving Giver’s look, cherishing these beings. Thus, Louth concludes, “The defence of the icon, of the image, is not a matter of mere aesthetics; it is concerned with preserving

²⁴ L. Ouspensky, V. Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. by G.E.H. Palmer, E. Kadloubovsky, Crestwood [USA: New York] 1952, p. 42.

²⁵ A. Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford 2002, p. 219, emphasis mine.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

²⁷ M. Conostas, *The Art of Seeing. Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography*, Los Angeles 2014, p. 32-33.

and making possible a world in which meaning is mediated by reconciling love.”²⁸ This transfigured vision, followed to its conclusion, speaks to the very meaning of the world as created, allows us to recognize the mystery of each being sustained at every moment by a loving giver, embracing their full glory and their full poverty.

This does not mean that those who love God should expect to always experience a world bathed in light. As C.A. Tsakiridou counsels, “theophany does not bring rupture and ecstasy” except to the novice.²⁹ The biblical account of the Transfiguration does not allow the disciples to dwell in the vision of glory; Peter’s very suggestion of building the three booths is ignored and interrupted. Instead, the story ends when the disciples, still flat on their faces, feel the touch of Jesus, and they look up to see the man of Nazareth they chose to follow. This indicates that this kind of ordinary everyday intimacy, too, is part of the transfigured vision, along with the ambiguity that results from it, just as the icon embraces the paradoxical continuity of glory and poverty. Further, the episode of the transfiguration is framed on both sides with Jesus’ foretelling of his crucifixion, a fact central enough to the event that it is frequently shown within the icon itself on the left and right of Mount Tabor. Maximos Constas explains the deep theological significance of this fact: “to see the light of Christ in all creation also means to see the suffering of all creation embodied in the crucifixion, to perceive the paradox that Tabor and Golgotha are the same mountain.”³⁰ This vision that cuts through glory and ambiguity and suffering is especially important for the poor and for the non-obvious cases, the dying on the streets, the faces of humanity in unrecognizable forms, the ugly or outcast or unwanted. It even extends to the greatest sinners. The shining of God’s presence here may not be so easy for a novice to see. It is only available to the look of loving attention of a transfigured vision which is etched in us. Evdokimov characterizes the vision which Isaac discusses here with a beautifully precise phrase: it is a vision of “*ontological tenderness*,”³¹ or a *tenderness for all being*. St. Isaac the Syrian describes this well in his *Ascetic Homilies*:

It is the heart’s burning for the sake of the entire creation, for men, for birds, for animals, for demons, and for every created thing; and at the recollection and sight of them, the eyes of a merciful man pour forth abundant tears. From the strong

²⁸ A. Louth, *St. John Damascene*, p. 219.

²⁹ C.A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity: Orthodox Theology and the Aesthetics of the Christian Image*, Burlington [USA: Vermont] 2013, p. 317.

³⁰ M. Constas, *The Art of Seeing*, p. 33.

³¹ P. Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon*, p. 58.

and vehement mercy that grips his heart and from his great compassion, his heart is humbled and he cannot bear to hear or to see any injury or slight sorrow in creation. For this reason he offers up prayers with tears continually even for irrational beasts, for the enemies of truth, and for those who harm him, that they be protected and receive mercy. And in like manner he even prays for the family of reptiles, because of the great compassion that burns without measure in his heart in the likeness of God.³²

This is what it means to speak of a transfiguration of vision, which is held to be one of the ultimate results from the practice of prayer before the icon and the flowering of the Christian life: it is a love for all beings, for what they are, as created by God. In this “superabundant outpouring of love and compassion,” Isaac tells us, in the way they see all creation, the saints “resemble God.”³³

This transfiguration of the gaze is held to be one of the key aims of prayer before the icon, if not exclusive to it. This new way of seeing the world as a “lightbearing kingdom” may begin with the transformation wrought by aesthetics, but it is clear by now that the “spiritual sight” Florensky and others speak of means much more than this.³⁴ Although only a theological approach could trace out all its dimensions, I have given an initial sketch of the structure of this transfigured vision as a reversal-collapse. The saint we see painted on the icon is the one who shows us God, because it is the saint who looks out with God’s gaze. Similarly, the more we expose ourselves to the counter-gaze of God in prayer, believers say, the more it will be etched into our hearts, the more we mirror this glory, the more we see as God sees, the more we embody God’s gaze for others.

³² Isaac the Syrian, *Homily 71*, in: idem, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, Boston 2011, p. 491; P. Evdokimov cites as *Homily 74* (the Eastern Syriac notation) in *Art of the Icon*, p. 115.

³³ Isaac the Syrian, *Homily 71*, p. 493.

³⁴ This transfiguration of vision is also recognized to be the result of deification, the sharing in God’s life, something which is said to begin here on earth for the faithful and which awaits eschatological completion. This is amplified in the dialogue of Nicholas Motovilov, who asks St. Seraphim of Sarov if we can ever know of the presence of God in the Christian life. Suddenly, the saint begins to shine with a blinding light and Nicholas feels a deep peace. St. Seraphim calls this vision a grace from God, but explains that Nicholas is able to see his transfiguration only because he himself is also transfigured. Like sees like; to see God we become like God, and only in our becoming like God can we recognize the likeness of God in the world. *The Aim of Christian Life: St. Seraphim of Sarov’s Conversation With Nicholas Motovilov*, trans. by J. Phillips, Cambridge 2010. Andreopoulos beautifully summarizes the link between iconography and hesychasm, *Metamorphosis*, p. 214-225. See also P. Florensky, *Iconostasis*, p. 145-46; P. Evdokimov, *Art of the Icon*, p. 237.

The Look of Love

Let's gather these thoughts around the central question. If we want to take a phenomenological approach to the meaning of Christian life, we must look to experience instead of assuming answers in advance. I have suggested that one way of avoiding the temptation to fall a back into a modified version of the economic model of value we are trying to critique is to place our attention not on the thing but on the way we approach it. I have further suggested that the discussion surrounding the icon can illustrate this claim. In contrast to those who want to claim that the icon shows us an unambiguous vision of the spiritual life because of its character as a consecrated aesthetic object, I have discussed the accounts of those who have understood that the icon's capacity to reveal is intimately tied with the concrete practices of prayer before it. Praying before the icon is one practice that helps us develop this transfigured vision. I do not intend to claim that it is sufficient, necessary, or exclusive. Praying before the Eucharist, visiting the sick and imprisoned, giving a cup of water to one of the least of these are other ways to place ourselves before the gaze of God, other ways that this transfigured vision may be developed within us. And if this is the case, transfigured vision is not barred to non-Christians, either, who may also learn a love of all being in the gratuity of the given, without calling it by the same name or recognizing the hand of the Giver.

Ultimately, the icon is not important because it gives us a special source of cognitive insight that provides us airtight intellectual security against the troubles of the contemporary world. Through the icon, we place ourselves before the look of love, which gives us a new sense of our own lives. As it shapes us and opens new possibilities of seeing, it also gives us a new way of understanding the world and the lives of others. This does not arrive as an epistemological content that can be claimed as an authority to end all arguments, nor does it present itself as merely one personal choice among other equally valid paths. It requires a personal transformation which can only be taken up by our free choice, and does not present itself as a definitively achieved answer. The world remains fragile for those who pray, and lives are still easily appropriated and objectified under utilitarian aims. But it is not the strength and power of the world that we should place our hope. We are reminded here of the mystical vision of Julian of Norwich, who also faced this poverty within created reality:

[H]e showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, and to my mind's eye it was as round as any ball. I looked at it and thought, 'What can this be?' And the answer came to me, 'It is all that is made.' I wondered how

it could last, for it was so small I thought it might suddenly disappear. And the answer in my mind was, 'It lasts and will last forever because God loves it; and in the same everything exists through the love of God.'³⁵

Julian's insight beautifully encapsulates the central issue. In the end there is only response that can answer the meaning of life within the deeply entrenched nihilism of our age. It is not found in arguments, but in the look of love.³⁶ It is the gaze of God, for whom "seeing is equivalent to loving," who "sees insofar as he loves, and to the extent that he loves," in Marion's words.³⁷ It is the look that engraves saints, who mirror this divine gaze by seeing a relation to God in the least of things. It is the tenderness for beings that sees every life as cherished in its particularity not because of its strength or glory, not for its utility or efficiency, but because it is a communication from God who is Love.³⁸ The look of love restores to the world a higher sense of meaning and truth, a sense of significance to even the lowliest of things. This is the understanding of life that we can learn in prayer before the icon, not simply as information to rattle off, but something we can truly see, through the gift of transfigured vision.

SPOGLĄDAĆ JAK OJCIEC:
SENS ŻYCIA I PRZEMIENIONE SPOJRZENIE

A b s t r a k t

W dzisiejszych nihilistycznych czasach wartość życia często mierzy się użytecznością. Niniejszy artykuł rzuca wyzwanie takiemu podejściu, odwracając uwagę od tego, co jest nam dane, aby skupić się na tym, jak to otrzymujemy. Czerpiąc inspirację z teologicznej tradycji ikony, omawiam, jak możemy rozumieć przesu-

³⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. by E. Spearing, London 1998, Chapter V; see I. Fernandez, *Création*, in: *Dictionnaire critique de la théologie*, ed. J.Y. Lacoste, Paris 2007, p. 343.

³⁶ Cf. J.L. Marion, *Negative Certainties*, Chicago 2015, p. 44-45/*Certitudes négatives*, Paris 2010, p. 78: Against the idea that philosophy should find a reason for creation, an answer to the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Marion suggests the proper response is disqualifying the question with another one: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:4).

³⁷ J.L. Marion, *Voir, se voir vu voyant: L'apport de Nicolas de Cues dans le «De visione Dei»*, „Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique” 117, no. 2 (2016), p. 7-37; trans. by S.E. Lewis as *Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen: Nicholas of Cusa's Contribution in «De visione Dei»*, „The Journal of Religion” 96, no. 3 (July 2016), p. 305-331 at 324.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 327-328.

nięcie jako „przemianę spojrzenia”. Wnikliwe studium aktu modlitwy przed ikoną ujawnia, jak możemy nabyć szczególny sposób patrzenia, co z kolei ma implikacje dla sposobu, w jaki rozumiemy życie

Słowa kluczowe: przemienione spojrzenie; ikona; modlitwa; dar; sens życia; odwrócenie, ikoniczny izomorfizm; święci; spojrzenie miłości

Keywords: transfigured gaze; icon; prayer; gift; meaning of life; reversal, iconic isomorphism; saints; look of love

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andreopoulos A., *Metamorphosis. The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, Crestwood [USA: New York] 2005.
- Balthasar H.U. von, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 2: *Studies in Theological Styles: Clerical Styles*, trans. by A. Louth, F. McDonagh, B. McNeil, Edinburgh 1984.
- Chrétien J.L., *L'arche de la parole*, Paris 1998.
- Chrétien J.L., *The Ark of Speech*, trans. by A. Brown, London–New York 2004.
- Constas M., *The Art of Seeing. Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography*, Los Angeles 2014.
- Evdokimov P., *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. by S. Bingham, California 1989.
- Fernandez I., *Création*, in: *Dictionnaire critique de la théologie*, ed. J.Y. Lacoste, Paris 2007², p. 343-348.
- Florensky P., *Iconostasis*, trans. by D. Sheehan, O. Andrejev, Crestwood [USA: New York] 1996.
- Guscin M., *Image of Edessa*, Leiden 2009.
- Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, Boston 2011.
- John of Damascus, *Homily for the Feast of the Transfiguration*, in: *Light on the Mountain. Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord*, trans. by B.E. Daley, S.J. Yonkers, New York 2013.
- Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. by E. Spearing, London 1998.
- Kearney R., *The God Who May Be*, Bloomington [USA: Illinois] 2001.
- Kordis G., *Icon as Communion*, Brookline [USA: Massachusetts] 2011.
- Kroug G., *Carnets d'un peintre d'icônes*, trans. by J.C. i V. Marcadé, Lausanne 2019.
- Lacoste J.Y., *Experience and the Absolute. Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, trans. by M. Rafferty, New York 2004.
- Lacoste J.Y., *Expérience et Absolu. Questions disputées sur l'humanité de l'homme*, Paris 1989.
- Lacoste J.Y., *Half-Objections and Remarks*, „Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal” 3.3 (Autumn 2019), p. 26.
- Lacoste J.Y., *The Phenomenality of Anticipation*, in: *Phenomenology and Eschatology. Not Yet in the Now*, ed. N. DeRoo, J.P. Manoussakis, trans. by R. Mendoza-De Jesús, N. DeRoo, New York 2009.

- Lidov A., *Hierotropy. The Creation of Sacred Spaces as a Form of Creativity and Subject of Cultural History*, in: *Hierotropy. The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. A. Lidov, Moscow 2006, p. 32-58.
- Louth A., *St. John Damascene. Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford 2002.
- Marion J.L., *Au lieu de soi. L'approche de Saint Augustin*, Paris 2008.
- Marion J.L., *Being Given: Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. by J.L. Kosky, Stanford 2002.
- Marion J.L., *Believing in Order to See. On the Rationality of Revelation and the Irrationality of Some Believers*, trans. by Ch.M. Gschwandtner, New York 2017.
- Marion J.L., *Certitudes négatives*, Paris 2010.
- Marion J.L., *De surcroît. Études sur les phénomènes saturés*, Paris 2001.
- Marion J.L., *Étant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, Paris 1997.
- Marion J.L., *In Excess. Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. by R. Horner, V. Berraud, New York 2002.
- Marion J.L., *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, trans. by J.L. Kosky, Stanford 2012.
- Marion J.L., *Le croire pour le voir*, Paris 2010.
- Marion J.L., *L'idole et la distance*, Paris 1977.
- Marion J.L., *Negative Certainties*, Chicago 2015.
- Marion J.L., *Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen: Nicholas of Cusa's Contribution in «De visione Dei»*, trans. by S.E. Lewis, „The Journal of Religion” 96, no. 3 (July 2016), p. 305-331.
- Marion J.L., *The Idol and Distance. Five Studies*, trans. by Th.A. Carlson, New York 2001.
- Marion J.L., *Voir, se voir vu voyant: L'apport de Nicolas de Cues dans le «De visione Dei»*, „Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique” 117, no. 2 (2016), p. 7-37.
- Ouspensky L., Lossky V., *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. by G.E.H. Palmer, E. Kadloubovsky, Crestwood [USA: New York] 1952.
- Ouspensky L., *Theology of the Icon*, t. 1-2, trans. by A.G. Crestwood, New York 1992.
- Patrologia Cursus Completus*, Series Graeca, t. 1-161, ed. J.P. Migne, Paris 1857-1866.
- Rumpza S., *Phenomenology of the Icon: Mediating God in his Image*, Cambridge 2023.
- Sendler E., *Les mystères du Christ: les icônes de la liturgie*, Paris 2001.
- Seraphim of Sarov, Motovilov N., *The Aim of Christian Life: St. Seraphim of Sarov's Conversation With Nicholas Motovilov*, trans. by J. Phillips, Cambridge 2010.
- Tsakiridou C.A., *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity: Orthodox Theology and the Aesthetics of the Christian Image*, Burlington [USA: Vermont] 2013.
- Westphal M., *Transfiguration as Saturated Phenomenon*, „Journal of Philosophy and Scripture” 1:1 (2003), p. 26-35.