

## Article

# Mimesis or Metamorphosis? Eastern Orthodox Liturgical Practice and Its Philosophical Background

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Academic Editor: John Jillions

Received: 12 April 2017; Accepted: 27 April 2017; Published: 12 May 2017

**Abstract:** What does Eastern Orthodox liturgy do? Is it a mimetic remembrance of Christ's acts or about a transformation of the believers who come to worship? This paper explores the larger philosophical worldview within which patristic liturgy emerged in order to negotiate this tension between mimetic and transformative aspects of liturgical practice. It suggests that ancient philosophical conceptions of the cosmos and of soul and body underlie and can hence elucidate what Byzantine liturgy does. Liturgy tries to unify soul and body, heaven and earth, in a particular way. Liturgy seeks to transform the human person and the cosmos in such a manner that they come to image and match each other. The introduction to the paper briefly examines some contemporary accounts to show the stakes of the question about what liturgy "does" and the role mimesis and metamorphosis play in this debate. The main part of the paper explores the shared philosophical heritage regarding imitation and transformation, inner and outer, heavenly and earthly in order to understand more fully the background for how liturgy negotiates these dimensions. The conclusion to the paper draws out the implications of this patristic heritage for making sense of what contemporary liturgy does in a broader sense.

**Keywords:** liturgy; mimesis; transformation; cosmos; philosophy; Maximus

"What does liturgy do?" wonders Robert Taft in an article that goes on to list 16 theses about what happens in liturgy and what it is supposed to accomplish (Taft 1992). He concludes that liturgy is about encounter with Christ and the "spiritual formation of the Church" (Taft 1992, p. 211).<sup>1</sup> Liturgy celebrates the activity of Christ, expresses the faith of the Church, and transforms us.<sup>2</sup> Alexander Rentel grapples with a similar question about what liturgy is and does (Rentel 2015). Like Taft, he argues that liturgy must be centered on Christ and that it is a revelation of God's love, but acknowledges that this leaves unanswered why we do it in precisely this way and how exactly particular liturgical practices accomplish this.<sup>3</sup> He argues that liturgy has to be more fully understood in order for it to lead to "a constant transformation of the mind"; this "requires work, training, and discipline" (Rentel 2015, pp. 226, 229). Throughout the article he stresses both the mimetic function of liturgy as revealing Christ's mystery and its intent to work transformatively in our lives.

<sup>1</sup> The summaries in the next sentence refer to claims he makes on pp. 207, 203, and 201, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> In a more recent book he asks what the Byzantines might have experienced in church. Here no claims are made about how liturgy might transform the worshipper, but his account is primarily descriptive (who was there? where did people stand? what did they see? what happened?) (Taft 2006).

<sup>3</sup> "In the mysteries, Christ is revealed and comes and dwells amongst the faithful. In their celebration, Christ unites himself to his people and grows into one with them, stifling sin and enlivening the faithful with his own life and grating them a share in his victory" (Rentel 2015, p. 221). But "a fundamental understanding of what happens in liturgy does not come easily even to those who have dedicated themselves to theological study" (Rentel 2015, p. 222) and often there is "a tragic feeling of disconnection between the Orthodox liturgy and [a] person's life" (Rentel 2015, p. 223).

This question about mimesis and metamorphosis, about whether liturgy images or represents something or whether it instead is meant to “do” something, to transform us in some way, often hovers uneasily in the background and at times moves explicitly into the foreground of many contemporary reflections on liturgy, both Eastern and Western. At times this is presented as an either/or option. Either liturgy is primarily about remembering Christ and his salvific actions on our behalf, in which case liturgy is primarily mimetic, representing his life and action in some fashion to enable the act of anamnesis as the primary function of liturgy. Or liturgy is primarily about transforming its participants in some way, having some significant impact on their lives, shaping them in some fashion. Such transformation is often read in an eschatological way: somehow liturgy makes “real” what will be and enables us to begin to enter into the coming kingdom. At times these tensions are compounded by distinctions between an “inner” and an “outer” reality; the ways in which “physical” or material dimensions interact with (or possibly hinder) the supposedly more “spiritual” aspects of liturgy.

In some way this dilemma goes back to the patristic mystagogies. Germanos of Constantinople and Nicholas Cabasilas, for example, strongly stress the mimetic function (Cabasilas 1960; Germanos of Constantinople 1984). Each aspect of liturgy is supposed to show or represent some aspect of Christ’s life, from his conception leading up to his crucifixion and resurrection. Indeed, the liturgical year itself in its cycle of feasts seems to have such a mimetic function. Liturgy, on this account, is primarily about helping us remember and celebrate Christ’s salvific action. Other thinkers, such as Maximus the Confessor, whose vision has gained tremendous popularity in the twentieth century, conceive of liturgy in more transformative and eschatological terms (Maximus the Confessor 1985). Here liturgy is meant to unite and transform the whole cosmos; it is an eschatological anticipation of what will be.

Many contemporary accounts try to hold these two dimensions together, but it is not always very clear how they interact with each other or how the tension between them can be resolved. At times, mimesis is taken as the precondition for metamorphosis, that is to say, somehow imaging Christ’s actions mimetically within liturgy (the Sunday liturgy or the annual festal cycle) enables participants in liturgy to become more like him. This paper will seek to show that we can better understand the “how” of the possible interactions and relationships of these dimensions of liturgy (and therefore the question of how liturgy functions or what liturgy is supposed to “do”), if we pay more careful attention to the larger philosophical worldview within which liturgy emerged.<sup>4</sup> This may also suggest upon closer examination that the connection might function in reverse of what is often supposed: maybe it is not just mimesis that leads to metamorphosis, but metamorphosis is required in order for mimesis to be accomplished. The introduction to the paper will briefly examine some contemporary accounts that negotiate this tension in different ways to show the stakes of the question about what liturgy “does” and the role mimesis and metamorphosis play in this debate. The main part of the paper will then turn to an exploration of the shared philosophical heritage regarding imitation and transformation, inner and outer, heavenly and earthly in order to understand more fully the background of how liturgy negotiates these dimensions. The conclusion to the paper will briefly draw out the implications of this patristic heritage for making sense of what liturgy does in a broader sense.

## 1. Introduction

Several recent and contemporary thinkers argue strongly against a purely mimetic interpretation of liturgy. Alexander Schmemmann’s entire liturgical project might be summarized as an argument

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<sup>4</sup> Although I focus in this paper on Eastern Orthodox liturgy—in keeping with the journal issue’s theme of exploring “Orthodox identity”—tracing these sources may also have implications for Western liturgical approaches, especially as at least some contemporary Western liturgical theology is influenced by the work of Schmemmann and relies to some extent on historical research on patristic liturgical forms. For a critique of this tendency in liturgical theology, see (Hughes 2003). Hughes is sympathetic to the broader concerns of liturgical theologians such as Schmemmann, Kavanagh, and Fagerberg, but judges their approach as too romantic for honestly confronting the contemporary situation. Hughes and others are certainly right to raise these questions, but at the very least a rethinking of the functioning of liturgy today must include as full an understanding as possible of how it was originally meant to function, especially when considering its *meaning*.

for the transformative effect of liturgy on the world, which he interprets in eschatological fashion (as opposed to a merely anamnestic/commemorative interpretation of liturgy) (Schmemmann 1987). He does not necessarily argue that liturgy has no anamnestic or mimetic dimensions, but he seriously downplays them in favor of the more transformative and eschatological emphasis he considers to have been lost over the centuries. Liturgy is “for the life of the world”; within liturgy the assembled church enters into the kingdom, celebrates the heavenly mysteries with the larger cosmic reality, and is then sent out to transform all of life into that liturgical vision.<sup>5</sup> His student Aidan Kavanagh carries this further by arguing that liturgy is “doing the world as it is supposed to be done,” that liturgy is the “stunningly normal” practice of “world” in the insanity and abnormality of our contemporary culture (Kavanagh 1984).<sup>6</sup> Both proposals, however, are rather short on working out exactly what this means or how it is supposed to be accomplished.<sup>7</sup> David Fagerberg, who strongly shares their overall vision, suggests that ascetic practice must supplement liturgical practice in order to allow liturgy to accomplish what it is supposed to do.<sup>8</sup> These liturgical scholars all move away from a purely mimetic understanding of liturgy to a much more substantively transformative one, although the question of how exactly liturgy *accomplishes* such transformation is often left unanswered.

Andrew White argues heavily against *any* notion of mimesis in Byzantine liturgy. He contends that the Byzantines explicitly and deliberately separated liturgy from theatrical performance (which was concerned with mimesis/representation) and thought of liturgy in purely rhetorical terms (White 2015). Liturgy is not an “enactment” or a “sacred representation”; the Eucharist is completely “non-mimetic” but instead purely symbolic (White 2015, pp. 27, 45, 65, respectively). Indeed, the rejection of mimesis seems to mean for him that liturgy is entirely “spiritual” (White 2015, p. 52).<sup>9</sup> The celebrants “did not do or enact anything” because any such agency in liturgy would have “distracted the congregation from spiritual matters.” Liturgy, then, “served to activate a mystical, spiritual presence in the minds of the congregation” (White 2015, pp. 84, 85, 104, respectively). Here liturgy becomes a purely internal, spiritual affair with little connection to its outward, physical performance or material elements. In contrast to White, Terence Cuneo does think that there is a kind of liturgical enactment occurring in Orthodox liturgy, namely one that serves to immerse the listener and participant in liturgy in such a way as to take on certain roles that allows the enactors to appropriate the message and “revise their narrative identities” or shape moral selves (Cuneo 2016).<sup>10</sup> While he does not necessarily claim

<sup>5</sup> Yet, like Rentel, he also laments the disconnect between liturgy and life: “But the individual believer, entering the church, does not feel he is a participant and celebrant of worship, does not know that in this act of worship he, along with the others who together with him are constituting the Church, is called to express the Church as new life and to be transformed again into a member of the Church.” (Schmemmann 1986, p. 30). The phrase “for the life of the world” refers to his popular lectures *For the Life of the World* (Schmemmann 1973).

<sup>6</sup> The way in which liturgy is “supreme normality” is explored in the final chapter.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Kavanagh claims that liturgy detects shifts in theology: “To detect that change in the subsequent liturgical act will be to discover where theology has passed, rather as physics detects atomic particles in tracks of their passage through a liquid medium” (Kavanagh 1984, p. 74), yet at the same time seems extremely critical of most changes and liturgical development as a kind of degeneration or corruption of some original “purer” form. Similarly, Schmemmann can be extremely critical of “corrupt” liturgical forms and mysticizing interpretations, which seem to include almost anything from the fifth century onward. Much of his work seeks to restore the church to an earlier (and presumably better) liturgical interpretation and practice. See W. Jardine Grisbrooke’s criticism (Grisbrooke 1990).

<sup>8</sup> See (Fagerberg 2004). He works this out more fully in (Fagerberg 2013).

<sup>9</sup> He reiterates several times that it is “purely spiritual.”

<sup>10</sup> This is worked out most fully in chapters four and five. While Cuneo’s philosophical interpretations of liturgy are provocative, it is strange that especially in his account of narrative identity he does not at all engage Paul Ricoeur, the philosopher who has developed this topic by far the most fully. Cuneo also repeatedly claims that philosophy has never thought of religion in terms of practice, but treats it entirely as an abstract system of beliefs that does not provide a good account of how believers actually experience their faith. While this may be true of *analytical* philosophy of religion, it is patently untrue of phenomenology, which has engaged in a substantive analysis of experiences and practices for decades. French phenomenologists, especially, have analyzed ritual and liturgy, including Eucharistic practice, for years. This tradition is entirely ignored by Cuneo’s account. (E.g., he claims that Christianity “is dedicated to engaging God in various ways by doing such things as blessing, petitioning, and thanking God—activities about which, I should add, philosophers have said virtually nothing” (Cuneo 2016, p. 148). Yet, philosophers like Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Emmanuel Falque, even Emmanuel Lévinas and in a quite different way Martin Heidegger, have said lots about precisely these issues. Similar claims about philosophy’s supposed silence on these issues are made throughout the book.)

that liturgy “merely” represents certain aspects of Christ’s life, he does attribute mimetic function to our appropriation of the liturgical message, as we strive to imitate the characters who are presented to us as models within the liturgical world. He argues that this is not “to enter into a liturgical time machine in which the past mystically becomes present” but instead a call “to order one’s life around the founding events of the church” and “to view one’s life as a part of a larger narrative, which includes the founding events of the church,” hence effecting a “living relationship with these events” (Cuneo 2016, pp. 122–23). Thus, for Cuneo, any transformation that might occur in our lives on the basis of liturgy does so because of our imitation of the acts and persons represented in the liturgy.

A similar claim is worked out in much more detail and in a close reading of patristic liturgical sources by Derek Krueger, who argues that Byzantine ritual—whether in Romanos’ kontakia, in various aspects of the church year, in the praying of the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, or in other penitential hymns—sought to shape a particular liturgical self within liturgy (Krueger 2014). The liturgical texts provide us with models of “salvageable sinners” as “icons of moral development,” which serve as “norms for self-understanding and self-presentation” (Krueger 2014, p. 3). In contrast to White, he thinks of this as explicitly mimetic: “In a manner analogous to theater, ritual activities involve playing and ultimately inhabiting the mythic roles of sacred narrative” (Krueger 2014, p. 7). Identifying with the biblical characters enables congregants to “call a sinful identity into being through accusation” and to participate “in their own redemption” (Krueger 2014, pp. 24, 218, respectively). He concludes: “Thus Christians gained access to themselves through penitential rhetoric. Repentant speech provided a mechanism through which to understand themselves. Confidence in the ability of the speaker to inhabit the role lay at the heart of Byzantine ritual theory and undergirded Byzantine ritual practice. Anguished first-person performances of compunction effected the formation of the self. In a moment before their amnesty, the liturgy called selves into being with interpellative force. It produced a communion of liturgical subjects poised between self-recognition and salvation” (Krueger 2014, p. 221). As in Cuneo, liturgy here is taken to have transformative power precisely through its imitative function: the models we encounter in liturgy enable us to understand ourselves and give us access to ourselves; by imitating them, we form a particular version of the self that ultimately functions redemptively.

Krueger seeks to give us a greater understanding of how certain penitential hymns might have served to shape penitential practices leading to particular kinds of self-understanding in historical Byzantium. He leaves open the question of whether these practices and the hymns that remain in contemporary liturgical celebrations can have a similar transformative effect today. Rentel acknowledges that our sensibilities and presuppositions have changed over time and that these changes “push Christian faithful ever so subtly away from the cultural sensibilities that were in place when the liturgical rites were formed,” causing “a disconnection from the liturgy of the Church” (Rentel 2015, p. 231).<sup>11</sup> What were these sensibilities and how might they have informed what liturgy was taken to “do”?

This question might be addressed more successfully if we understand more about the larger worldview of late antiquity. Byzantine sensibilities and presuppositions about the world and the human person were significantly shaped by this larger worldview, a worldview that is articulated most fully in what we now identify as “philosophical” texts, such as those of Plato and Aristotle and the commentary tradition that built on them, but also by the contributions of thinkers like Ptolemy and Galen. This is obviously not to claim that patristic “theology” is merely a vulgarization of Greek philosophy or that it appropriated ideas in an unquestioned fashion. Rather, it is to acknowledge that both are worked out against a backdrop of shared assumptions about reality that are not always fully articulated (and which, at least in some cases, we can maybe see more clearly precisely because we no

<sup>11</sup> I am not convinced that the shift is anywhere near as “subtle” as Rentel suggests, even in an Orthodox context. Western liturgical scholars often make much stronger claims, accusing Eastern theologians of deliberately ignoring the ecclesial reality of the twenty-first century, in which very few confessional Christians still experience the kind of liturgical life presupposed by Orthodox liturgical theology. See, for example, the texts by Grisbrooke and Hughes mentioned above.

longer share them and they appear strange to us). It also does not mean that the patristic worldview accords in all points with the ancient philosophical one or that philosophical texts were used explicitly to formulate what might occur in liturgy. Yet, mystagogical texts like that of Maximus the Confessor do draw on broader ancient presuppositions and terminology about the cosmos and the human person within it that are most fully explicated by Plato and Aristotle and taken up explicitly in various ways by the Cappadocians, Nemesius of Emesa, Maximus himself, John of Damascus, and others, which seems to suggest that these shared presuppositions about the world were also operative in what liturgy was taken to do or to accomplish.

A fuller understanding of the philosophical background of this terminology will help us see not only how these assertions might make sense, but could also bring together the often dichotomous or even contradictory claims about what liturgy does, the tension between its mimetic and its transformative functions. *By taking account of the philosophical background to the terminology employed by the patristic thinkers, liturgy can be understood as a metamorphosis into a certain kind of mimesis; that is to say, liturgy tries to effect a “mimetic match” between soul and body, heaven and earth, the invisible and visible realms.*<sup>12</sup> This enables us to hold together mimesis and metamorphosis as connected elements of what occurs in liturgy, but is also a stronger claim than that advanced by Krueger or Cuneo. Liturgy is not only in some general sense about the formation of the self; it is about a unification of soul and body, heaven and earth, invisible and visible in such a way that they begin to match and reflect each other. And it is not just about imitating certain models in order to be personally transformed, but actually calls for the sort of transformation that makes possible a more effective mimesis—one that operates on both anthropological and cosmological planes in such a way as to connect them to each other.

## 2. Invisible and Visible Realms

Let us return briefly to Maximus' *Mystagogy* to sharpen the question about philosophical presuppositions at work in liturgy. Maximus begins by contending that the “holy Church bears the imprint and image of God since it has the same activity as he does by imitation and in figure” (Maximus the Confessor 1985, p. 186). This means that it brings together various aspects of reality and connects them to each other, yet without abolishing their natures. Such unification of dispersed aspects of reality occurs on several levels: a combination of invisible and visible realms, intelligible and sensory aspects, heaven and earth (identified as the two aspects of the sensory world), human soul and body, and the intellectual or rational and vital or non-rational parts of the soul. Although these are various levels of reality that appear distinct to us, they are also intimately connected, i.e., the two aspects of the soul parallel the two aspects of the human person, which reflect the two aspects of our earthly reality. These in turn parallel the two aspects of the larger cosmic reality, and ultimately the largest distinction between visible and invisible. Bringing together the various levels of reality becomes possible if the soul itself becomes unified through the pursuit of wisdom (*phronesis*), the development of virtues, and the contemplation (*theoria*) of divine reality. Maximus concludes this part of the analysis by saying: “Whoever has been fortunate enough to have been spiritually and wisely initiated into what is accomplished in church has rendered his soul divine and a veritable church of God” (Maximus the Confessor 1985, p. 195). What does he mean by these levels of reality and by their unification? On what conception of the soul does this interpretation of liturgy rely and how is liturgy taken to effect such divinization of the soul? Maximus is using terminology and conceptions of reality that have a long history not only in patristic literature but also in the ancient world more broadly. They are worked

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to argue that this is the *only* way to understand liturgy or even necessarily the best one. This is merely a first exploration into how taking account of the broader worldview in which liturgy develops might help us understand more fully what it is meant to do, something I hope to work out much more fully in the future.



out most fully in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, on whom the fathers draw extensively in their use of these terms.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most fundamental shared presuppositions in the Hellenistic ancient and late antique world concerns the very nature of reality as both visible and invisible. Visible reality is associated with the body and the material world; it undergoes change or motion, comes into being and goes out of being (via *genesis* and *phthora*), and it is physical, i.e., constituted by the four elements (earth, water, air, fire). Invisible reality does not undergo change, is characterized by cyclical motion (which is not really motion in the proper sense but in some form immutable because it has no beginning or end<sup>14</sup>), does not undergo generation or disintegration, and is associated with the soul or the mind. It is often called “intelligible” reality (rather than the “sensory” reality associated with the material world). The fact that it has no beginning or end means that it is eternal; the fact that it is purely intelligible and incorporeal means it is not found in any physical location or place. This invisible reality is often associated with the divine, but also with “spiritual” or intelligible beings (angels, demons, heavenly bodies, and the human soul).<sup>15</sup> These claims about the two-fold nature of reality are already made in Plato’s *Timaeus* (28a–37a), where the visible world order is fashioned by its divine maker based on an invisible and beautiful heavenly model, hence imaging its divine inspiration and principles (a possible precedent for Maximus’ *logoi* of creation). Already in the *Timaeus* anthropological and cosmological levels are taken to image each other: the cosmos is a living creature and the human is a small cosmos (30c–d, 34b, 44c–46a). Plato also already speaks of the four elements, linear and cyclical motion, and the beginning of time as “a moving image of eternity” (*Timaeus* 37c–39e). This is worked out more fully and with much more concrete detail by Aristotle in the *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and *On the Heavens*, where he outlines the ways in which the four elements are arranged in a spherical universe, why heavier, denser, colder elements (like earth) are at the center moving in linear fashion, while lighter, thinner, and warmer elements (air and especially fire) are further “up” (i.e., further away from the center and closer to the “heavens,” which move in a cyclical fashion around the earth). These assumptions about the basic building blocks of the universe (the four elements) and their respective weight, temperature, and density are universally shared by the ancients.<sup>16</sup>

Various patristic thinkers draw extensively from these treatises for their practically identical divisions of reality. Basil of Caesarea uses the *Timaeus* extensively in his *Hexaemeron*, a series of homilies on the creation accounts in Genesis, including employing the Platonic terms “maker” (*demiourgos*) and “making” (*poësis*) rather than creation (*ktisis*).<sup>17</sup> Maximus and John of Damascus rely more heavily on

<sup>13</sup> They do not always do so directly, but often through the commentary tradition or various “digests” of philosophical texts. Philosophical texts continued to be copied and preserved throughout Byzantine history and they were taught as introductions to rigorous thinking and for the formation of rhetorical ability, an immensely important skill for civil servants in the Byzantine *politeia*. Over a thousand manuscripts of Aristotelian texts alone survive from the hands of Byzantine scribes. The history and legacy of Byzantine philosophy is explored in a number of recent sources (Ierodiakonou and Zografidis 2010; Bydén and Ierodiakonou 2012; Knezović 2015; Ierodiakonou 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle argues this explicitly. Basil challenges the notion that circular motion has no beginning in order to contend that the universe as a whole has a beginning, including the invisible realm, although he does not challenge the broader assumption that visible reality moves in straight and invisible reality in circular ways.

<sup>15</sup> There is frequently a problematic slippage between invisible, spiritual, incorruptible, etc. and the divine. While Plato and Aristotle often identify the divine with the invisible and immaterial, which moves in circles and is beyond the lunar sphere, the patristic thinkers increasingly move to speaking of God as beyond even the visible/invisible, sensory/intelligible, corruptible/incorruptible distinction. John of Damascus does this most consistently and most deliberately. Liturgy, however, continually engages in this slippage: sometimes the heavens are merely the invisible realm of the angelic beings, who praise with us (and hence clearly and unambiguously *created*); sometimes it is more closely associated with God. I will have to leave this aside for now, though it is obviously something that would have to be addressed eventually.

<sup>16</sup> This includes even such thinkers as the anonymous author of the *Christian Topography* (now called *Cosmas Indicopleustes*) who argues most strenuously against the spherical nature of the universe and instead favors an image of the cosmos patterned on a tabernacle. He never questions the reality of the four elements, their respective weight and density, or the superiority of cyclical over linear motion, but actually draws on these notions in order to argue for a flat earth.

<sup>17</sup> To give just one example: “There are inquirers into nature who with a great display of words give reasons for the immobility of the earth. Placed, they say, in the middle of the universe and not being able to incline more to one side than the other because its centre is everywhere the same distance from the surface, it necessarily rests upon itself; since a weight which is everywhere equal cannot lean to either side. It is not, they go on, without reason or by chance that the earth occupies the

Aristotle's fuller version. To give one concrete example, John of Damascus summarizes the patristic consensus when he says: "The heavens are the outer shell which contains both visible and invisible created things. For, enclosed and contained within them are the spiritual powers, which are the angels, and all sensible things... Furthermore, some have surmised that the heavens surround the universe and have the form of a sphere which is everywhere the highest point; and that the airier and lighter bodies have been assigned by the Creator to the higher positions, while the heavy and unbuoyant have been consigned to the lower, which is the center. Now, the lightest and the most buoyant of the elements is fire, so they say that it comes directly below the heavens. They call it aether. Just below the aether comes the air. Earth and water, since they are heavier and less buoyant, are said to be hung in the midmost position, so that by contrast they are below. The water, however, is lighter than the earth—whence its greater mobility. Everywhere above this, like a blanket, lies the encircling air; everywhere around the air is the ether; and on the outside encircling them all are the heavens. Furthermore, they say that the heavens revolve and that they so bind together the things contained within that they stay firmly together and do not fall apart" (*On the Orthodox Faith* II.6; [John of Damascus 1958](#), pp. 210–11).<sup>18</sup> The patristic vision is insistent that God is the creator and hence the universe (both earth and heaven) must have a beginning (a conviction shared by Plato, though not by Aristotle or later Platonic thinking), is often ambivalent about the existence of aether (as are the ancients), and moves increasingly to "locating" God beyond the division of visible and invisible altogether, but otherwise adopts the ancient worldview.<sup>19</sup> We seriously underestimate today how "real" the "other" (invisible) realm was for the ancients, because the physical and material seems so infinitely more real to us today. For them the intelligible, invisible, incorporeal realm was not only far more real, but also more "extensive" (bigger, albeit it not in spatial terms) and, of course, far more important. And these are precisely the distinctions Maximus refers to when he identifies the nave with the visible, earthly realm and the sanctuary with the invisible, heavenly one. As we will see shortly, these presuppositions about ancient cosmology are operative throughout the Byzantine liturgical texts.

### 3. Human Soul and Body

The human brings together and participates in both of these two realms: the human is soul and body, "spiritual" and physical, intelligible and material. But the discussion of soul and body has multiple layers. On the most basic level the soul is "most like the divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always in the same state as itself," while the body is "most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble, and never consistently the same" (Plato, *Phaedo* 80b). Thus, the soul belongs to the incorporeal, immaterial, invisible, incorruptible, intelligible realm, while

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centre of the universe. It is its natural and necessary position. As the celestial body occupies the higher extremity of space all heavy bodies, they argue, that we may suppose to have fallen from these high regions, will be carried from all directions to the centre, and the point towards which the parts are tending will evidently be the one to which the whole mass will be thrust together. If stones, wood, all terrestrial bodies, fall from above downwards, this must be the proper and natural place of the whole earth. If, on the contrary, a light body is separated from the centre, it is evident that it will ascend towards the higher regions. Thus heavy bodies move from the top to the bottom, and following this reasoning, the bottom is none other than the centre of the world. Do not then be surprised that the world never falls: it occupies the centre of the universe, its natural place." *Hexaemeron* I.10 ([Basil the Great 1995](#), p. 57). This is a fairly straightforward explication of Aristotle's theory of motion and the arrangement of bodies and elements. Basil does not take over the philosophical tradition uncritically. He (together with pretty much all other Christian thinkers, including the late Platonic philosopher John Philoponus of Alexandria) insists most strongly that the universe has a beginning and that matter is not eternal, as Aristotle (not, however, Plato) seems to contend (and as the Stoics did, against whom the fathers argue not only in regard to the creation of the world, but also in regard to fate/providence/free will).

<sup>18</sup> He goes on to summarize the scientific consensus of his time about the arrangement of the planets and later discusses the four elements in detail, including an outline of ancient meteorology, geography, astronomy, and aspects of the seasons (including exact dates when each season begins). Most of it is a succinct summary of Aristotle, Galen, and Ptolemy, albeit presumably taken from compendia or commentaries and not directly from the primary texts.

<sup>19</sup> John of Damascus does this most strongly, often speaking of God as beyond the distinctions between visible/invisible, corporeal/incorporeal, etc. For example, he affirms that "God, then, is substance, and so is every created thing," but immediately qualifies: "God, however, even though He is substance, is super-substantial" (*Fount of Knowledge* I.4; [John of Damascus 1958](#), p. 14). He also makes similar qualifications frequently in *On the Orthodox Faith*.

the body participates in the corporeal, material, visible, corruptible, sensory realm and is made up of the four elements and the four humors.<sup>20</sup> The human is always both, hence already in Plato described as a microcosm, a world in miniature. This is taken up by many of the fathers, such as Maximus: “Hence the Artisan Word, wishing to display this mixture in a single living creature formed from both—I mean from both invisible and visible nature—created man. Fashioning a body from already existing matter and placing within it his own breath, that is, a soul endowed with intellect—the image of God, according to Scripture—he made it a kind of second cosmos, a great creature in a small frame.”<sup>21</sup> Or John of Damascus: “Now, a soul is a living substance, simple and incorporeal, of its own nature invisible to bodily eyes, activating an organic body in which it is able to cause life, growth, sensation, and reproduction. It does not have the mind as something distinct from itself, but as its purest part, for, as the eye is to the body, so is the mind to the soul. It is free, endowed with will and the power to act, and subject to change, that is, subject to change of will, because it is also created . . . A body is three-dimensional, that is, having height, breadth, and depth or thickness. Every body is composed of the four elements, but the bodies of living things are composed of the four humors.”<sup>22</sup> This description of the human soul and body and their interaction is basically indistinguishable from that of Aristotle, especially as appropriated by the late Platonic schools contemporary with early Christian thinkers such as Origen and the Cappadocians. At the same time, it is clear that soul means far more for all of them than it often does today. It is not just some amorphous “spiritual” essence, some possibly dispensable appendix of what we “really” are (bodily); soul is the very identity of the person, the principle of life within the “matter” of the body, moving it and making it into a human being. A soul is what distinguishes a living being from an inanimate corpse, from mere “stuff.” Soul for the ancients meant everything irreducible to the purely material (flesh and bones), including emotion, desire, consciousness, rationality, even the capacity to breathe, eat, digest, grow, reproduce, feel, hear, see, taste, and so forth. While we might think of the senses or emotions as primarily associated with the body today, all these were considered functions of “soul.”<sup>23</sup>

Already Plato depicts a tripartite version of the soul: mind/reason, spirit/emotion, and appetite/desire. A soul is healthy if it is well ordered and harmonious with all three parts in the right balance (just as a polis is healthy when its guardians, warriors, and laborers are in the right, harmonious balance). In a just soul, a wise reason rules over passions refined by courage and desires tempered by self-control in an overall harmony (*Republic* IV, 433b, 443d–e).<sup>24</sup> Aristotle develops this picture considerably and it is the post-Aristotelian version that is most consistently taken up by the fathers. In Aristotle, the soul is conceived as the “form” or “actuality” of the body (*De Anima* II.1, 412a). It has a rational part (containing both calculative and deliberate functions, i.e., theoretical and practical elements of reason), an appetitive part (containing both spirited/passionate and desirous functions,

<sup>20</sup> This final aspect is worked out most fully by the medical thinker Galen. More of his treatises survive than of any other ancient thinker and they were clearly copied extensively. Many patristic thinkers draw on them.

<sup>21</sup> Ambiguum 7 ([Ambiguum 7, Maximus the Confessor 2014](#), vol. I, pp. 125–27). This is precisely the terminology operative also in his *Mystagogy*: “And again using a well-known image he submitted that the whole world, made up of visible and invisible things, is man and conversely that man made up of body and soul is a world. He asserted, indeed, that intelligible things display the meaning of soul as the soul does that of intelligible things, and that sensible things display the place of the body as the body does that of sensible things. And, he continued, intelligible things are the soul of sensible things, and sensible things are the body of intelligible things; that as the soul is in the body so is the intelligible in the world of sense, that the sensible is sustained by the intelligible as the body is sustained by the soul; that both make up one world as body and soul make up one man, neither of these elements joined to the other in unity denies or displaces the other according to the law of the one who has bound them together.” ([Maximus the Confessor 1985](#), ch. 7, p. 196)

<sup>22</sup> John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* II.12 ([John of Damascus 1958](#), p. 236).

<sup>23</sup> This is obviously worked out in the most detail by Aristotle’s famous treatise on the soul (*De Anima*), which has detailed discussion on sense perception, emotion, imagination, and so forth.

<sup>24</sup> These four later become the four “cardinal virtues”: prudence/practical wisdom, fortitude/courage, temperance/self-control, and justice.



i.e., emotions and desires<sup>25</sup>), and a nutritive part (containing both pulsative and vital functions, i.e., respiratory, reproductive, and nutritive capacities), the rational part distinguishing the human from other living beings (*De Anima* II.2, 413a–b). Nemesius, a late fourth-century bishop of Emesa, summarizes the Platonic and Aristotelian notions of the soul and uses them against various Stoic and other later interpretations to present a refined Christian interpretation of the soul that accords to a large degree with Aristotle's explication, albeit worked out with the use of the commentary tradition that had grown up around Aristotle's texts (Nemesius of Emesa 2008).<sup>26</sup> Nemesius' treatise on human nature was immensely influential for the later patristic tradition and both Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus draw on it extensively for their own explications, sometimes lifting whole passages literally from Nemesius. For example, the citation from John of Damascus above continues in a straightforward summary of Aristotle on the soul, appropriated from Nemesius: "One should note that man has something in common with inanimate things, that he shares life with the rational living beings, and that he shares understanding with the rational. In common with inanimate things, he has his body and its composition from the four elements. In common with the plants, he has the same things plus the power of assimilating nourishment, of growing and semination of generation. In common with the brute beasts, he has all these plus appetite—that is to say, anger and desire—sensation, and spontaneous movement. Now, the senses are five; namely, sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Belonging to spontaneous movement are the power of moving from place to place, that of moving the entire body, and that of speech and breathing—for in us we have the power either to do these things or not to do them. Through the power of reason man is akin to the incorporeal and intellectual natures, reasoning, thinking, judging each thing, and pursuing the virtues, particularly the acme of the virtues which is piety. For this reason, man is also a microcosm."<sup>27</sup> Here the subsequent patristic literature is completely in accord with Nemesius' summary of Plato and Aristotle on human nature.

Both Plato and Aristotle (and of course the later Platonic tradition in such thinkers as Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus<sup>28</sup>) claim that it is possible for humans to participate in the divine. In Plato this is the very presupposition of the entire theory of forms: the one who loves wisdom is able to ascend from purely corporeal, material, visible, changeable reality to seeing incorporeal, immaterial, invisible, immutable reality, i.e., ultimately joining with the eternal divine: "Therefore we ought to try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can; and to escape is to become like God, so far as this is possible; and to become like God is to become righteous and holy and wise ... God is in no wise and in no manner unrighteous, but utterly and perfectly righteous, and there is nothing so like him as that one of us who in turn becomes most nearly perfect in righteousness" (*Theatetus* 176b). In Aristotle, the activity of *theoria* is the highest kind of activity, the one that provides the best shot at *eudaimonia* (happiness in the sense of a full and flourishing life), and the one that brings us closest to the gods, rendering us divine: "we should try to become immortal as far as that is possible and do our utmost to live in accordance with what is highest in us," namely "the divine element within" us (*Nicomachean Ethics* X.7, 1177b). For Aristotle this is achieved through the intensive practice of habits of excellence (*arete*), i.e., the virtues. For Plato, as we have seen, it is developing a rightly ordered or supremely healthy (hence virtuous) soul achieved through rigorous discipline over passions and desires. The patristic thinkers not only make heavy use of the notion of *theoria* (usually translated as

<sup>25</sup> In the Western tradition, relying on the Latin translations, these are often referred to as "concupiscible" and "irascible" elements. These do not, however, seem like optimal translations for the Greek patristic appropriation of the terms, although the "Fathers of the Church" (somewhat problematic) translation of John's *Fount of Knowledge* employs them.

<sup>26</sup> Nemesius' use of various texts is traced carefully by the extensive footnotes of the editors.

<sup>27</sup> John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* II.12 (John of Damascus 1958, p. 237).

<sup>28</sup> For the sake of brevity, I have focused here on Plato and Aristotle—and even that summary is far too sweeping and superficial—but many middle and late Platonists work aspects of this worldview out more fully or bring Plato and Aristotle together more explicitly. Often the fathers draw on them rather than directly on Plato. The parallel between Christian and late Platonic interpretations and practices is explored far more fully in (Digeser 2012) and specifically for Iamblichus (Shaw 1995).

“contemplation” and seen as one of the major stages of the spiritual life), but often appeal explicitly to Plato’s claim from the *Theatetus* that humans can participate in the divine and become like God.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. Connecting the Dimensions

The crucial question for the ancients (both philosophical and patristic) is this question of participation, not only of the human in the divine, but more broadly of the relationship between the two realms (invisible and visible, heavenly and earthly) and correspondingly the two parts of the human (soul and body). Although contemporary commentary often dismisses this worldview as simplistically dualistic, things are much more complicated.<sup>30</sup> Philosophical and patristic thinkers alike are confident that the two realms relate to each other, participate in each other, and depend on each other. Plato continually tries to work this out in his texts in various forms. Although there are certainly instances when he seems to speak of the two realms (and of soul and body) as utterly separate and even antithetical to each other, at the same time he always affirms that one images and possibly even participates in the other.<sup>31</sup> The famous “allegory of the cave” and its corresponding “divided line” assume that there is a connection between inside and outside the cave and the lower and higher parts of the line (*Republic* VI, 509e–11e; *Republic* VII, 514a–518d). The images in the cave are shadows of the external realities (one cannot have shadows without the realities that cause them); the lesser lights of the cave participate in some way in the abundant and stronger light of the outside world. The visible realities below the line image or represent the ontologically superior invisible realities above the line. The knowledge needed to investigate them is a weaker and less stable form of the knowledge and wisdom needed to apprehend the fuller realities they image.

Indeed, imaging or mimesis itself has an ambivalent status in Plato: it can function both as a positive, good, and beautiful reflection of the divine realities (as in the *Timaeus*) or as an inferior, weak, pale imitation of the real that may distract us away from it (as in *Republic* X, 595b–607c, where poets are banned from the ideal polis precisely for trafficking in such pale imitations and arousing our bad desires and emotions to focus on them).<sup>32</sup> The universe is “a piece of work that would be as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow” (*Timaeus* 30b), imaging the divine as much as possible, because its creator “believed that likeness is incalculable more excellent than unlikeness” (*Timaeus* 33b). There has to be a bond enabling such relationship, “making it a symphony of proportion”

<sup>29</sup> Obviously, they also appeal to biblical texts, often far more explicitly than to philosophical ones. To highlight the continuity in worldview is not to imply that this somehow constitutes a denial or betrayal of the biblical heritage. The two are often read in harmony with each other or biblical passages are interpreted through a philosophical lens, i.e. with these presuppositions about cosmology and anthropology. (This latter tendency is particularly strong in Origen, the Cappadocians, and Maximus.)

<sup>30</sup> Often the accusation of dualism itself seems sufficient to reject a particular view. But not all dualisms are of necessity pernicious. Far more nuance is required in this discussion; one must examine how the two spheres interact with or relate to each other, how the supposed dualism functions and what effects it has, etc.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory Nazianzen often expresses a similar ambivalence: “How I am connected to this body, I do not know, nor do I understand how I can be an image of God, and still be mingled with this filthy clay; when it is in good condition, it wars against me, and when it is itself under attack, it causes me grief! I love it as my fellow servant, but struggle against it as an enemy; I flee it as something enslaved, just as I am, but I show it reverence as called, with me, to the same inheritance. I long that it be dissolved, and yet I have no other helper to use in striving for what is best, since I know what I was made for, and know that I must ascend towards God through my actions...So I treat it gently, as my fellow worker; and then I have no way of escaping its rebellion, no way to avoid falling, weighed down by those fetters that drag me or keep me held down to the earth. It is a cordial enemy, and a treacherous friend. What an alliance and what an alienation! What I fear, I treat with honor; what I love, I fear. Before we come to war, I am reconciled to it, and before we have made peace, I am at odds with it again. What wisdom lies behind my constitution? What is this great mystery?” Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 14.6–7 (Daley 2006, p. 79).

<sup>32</sup> Plato uses strong language: “So, imitation [*mimesis*] is an inferior thing that consorts with another inferior thing to produce inferior offspring” (603b); “But we haven’t yet brought our chief charge against imitation. For its power to corrupt all but a very few good people is surely an altogether terrible one” (605c). The language in the *Timaeus* is equally strong in the other direction. The “maker and father of this universe” is described as “most excellent,” making our universe “most beautiful” by using an “image” or “eternal model” for its construction (29a–b). As reason for the likeness of the universe to the divine, *Timaeus* says: “Now why did he who framed this whole universe of becoming frame it? Let us state the reason why: he was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so, being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible” (30a). Therefore, “divine providence brought our world into being as a truly living thing, endowed with soul and intelligence” (30c).

(*Timaeus* 32c).<sup>33</sup> Well satisfied with the beauty of creation, its “Father” “in his delight thought of making it more like its model still” and created time as “a moving image of eternity,” “an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity” (*Timaeus* 37d). To fall away from this unity and likeness or to imitate it in deceptive and ignorant fashion, as the artist is taken to do, is the most horrible kind of evil and misfortune.<sup>34</sup> There are hence two forms of mimesis: “bad” imitation that distracts from the reality by focusing attention on mere appearance and “good” imitation, which represents the eternal model well and participates in it in some form. Aristotle will wed these two possibilities of mimesis to some extent by arguing that appropriate presentation of emotion on stage can lead to cathartic release of difficult or even destructive emotions (such as fear and pity) in such a way as to lead to moral formation through imitation of the heroic actions of superior ethical characters (*Poetics* 6, 1449b, 13–15, 1452b–54b).<sup>35</sup>

The same ambivalence characterizes the relation of soul and body. While the *Phaedo* (maybe the most “Platonic” of all the dialogues) presents philosophy as a “practice of dying,” namely the effort to free “the soul from association with the body as much as possible” to the point where “it takes leave of the body and as far as possible has no contact or association with it in its search for reality” (64a, 65a, 65c), other dialogues instead advocate a rule of the soul over the body and the soul’s rational element over its spirited and desirous parts, rather than a total separation. Such rule can be depicted quite violently: in the *Phaedrus* the mind is pictured as a charioteer who guides two horses and has to assert control over them by pulling back on the reins so sharply that the horses are covered with foam and the unruly horse of desire finally gives up in exhaustion (245c–256d).<sup>36</sup> Only such a well-ordered soul has access to the intelligible realm. This pursuit and self-discipline is not only beneficial inasmuch as it gains true wisdom through access to eternal realities, but it is also supremely valuable in itself, as Plato argues through Socrates in several crucial texts. This claim is worked out the most fully in the *Republic* (e.g., 433a–445e), but also returns in several other dialogues. For example, in the *Gorgias* Socrates seeks to convince his interlocutor of the value of philosophy over rhetoric or sophistry by showing that Gorgias’ version of rhetoric would ultimately endorse an unjust life and is useful only for escaping punishment, while Socratic questioning helps us realize that such an unjust soul would be supremely unhappy, because it is an eminently unhealthy soul, a “soul that is rotten with injustice and impiety,” which is a “most serious kind of badness” surpassing “others by some monstrously great harm and astounding badness” (479c, 478d, 477e). It is much better to undergo punishment for injustices than to get away with them, because at least these measures will begin to work a cure in the soul. Thus, such a person should be courageous, “grit his teeth and present himself with grace and

<sup>33</sup> Plato stresses that “the best bond is one that really and truly makes a unity of itself together with the things bonded by it” (31c). He describes the right proportion as a kind of permanent friendship: “They bestowed friendship upon it, so that, having come together into a unity with itself, it could not be undone by anyone but the one who had bound it together” (32c). The immediate context here is the connection between the four elements, but also the larger bonding of the entire cosmos.

<sup>34</sup> It is fairly clear in the argument about banning the poets from the ideal republic that they are condemned not for imitation *as such*, but for lacking knowledge about the reality they are trying to imitate and therefore creating a false beauty that is deceptive and leads people *away* from the true reality they ought to know (e.g., *Republic* X, 599b).

<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Aristotle argues explicitly that imitation is natural to human beings and that it is conducive to learning (*Poetics* 4, 1448b). He also stresses that tragedy is not about imitation of persons, but a representation of “actions and life” (*Poetics* 6, 1450a16, 1450b3–5). Ricoeur has worked this into a far fuller analysis of narrative identity and plot, including the ways in which texts open a world for us in which we are challenged to envision ourselves differently. I have tried to show the relevance of this for analyzing liturgy in my “Toward a Ricoeurian Hermeneutics of Liturgy” (Gschwandtner 2012).

<sup>36</sup> This is also taken up by some of the fathers. Basil argues, for example, that “the body in every part should be despised by everyone who does not care to be buried in its pleasures, as it were in slime; or we ought to cleave to it only in so far as we obtain from it service for the pursuit of wisdom, as Plato advises, speaking in a manner somewhat similar to Paul’s when he admonishes us to make no provision for the body unto the arousing of concupiscences. Or in what way do those differ, who are solicitous how the body may be as well off as possible, but overlook the soul, which is to make use of it, as utterly worthless, from those who are much concerned about their implements but neglect the art which uses them for its work? Hence we must do quite the opposite—chastise the body and hold it in check, as we do the violent chargings of a wild beast, and by smiting with reason, as with a whip, the disturbances engendered by it in the soul, calm them to sleep; instead of relaxing every curb upon pleasure and suffering the mind to be swept headlong, like a charioteer by unmanageable horses riotously running at large.” Basil of Caesarea, “On Greek Literature” IX (Basil of Caesarea 1934, pp. 420–23).

courage as to a doctor for cauterization and surgery, pursuing what is good and admirable without taking any account of the pain," even if this involves flogging, imprisonment, fines, exile, or even execution (*Gorgias* 480d). While Socrates' audience reacts with revulsion at this counsel to voluntary punishment, this is precisely the pedagogical and therapeutic language much of the patristic literature will use to speak of the battle against sin and injustice in both soul and body.<sup>37</sup>

What is evident here is that soul and body cannot be separated in the simplistic fashion we often read Plato. Clearly punishment of the body results in improvement of the soul. Disciplining one's body enables disciplining one's soul. And there are also less violent measures in Plato's dialogues. The attraction of beauty, for example, is consistently taken to help us remember the realm from which we came and to draw us back toward it. In the *Symposium*, the lover with the help of beauty's attraction learns to move from a love of concrete, particular, physical, and transitory beautiful things to a love of the universal, immaterial, incorporeal, immortal reality of beauty as such (206c–208b).<sup>38</sup> The true lover generates such beauty in another (*Symposium* 209b–c). In the *Republic's* allegory of the cave and divided line, knowing the "reality" helps in negotiating the appearances. A process of education leads us from darkness to light, from the shadows of the cave to the brilliant reality of the good (*Republic* VII, 518a–d). Plato consistently assumes that what we do in this corporeal, transitory life matters to what happens to our soul after death. The *Republic* culminates in the powerful "Myth of Er" in which souls pick their next life based on how they have behaved in the previous one (Book X, 614b–621c). Indeed, "it was a sight worth seeing how the various souls chose their lives" because "their choice reflected the character of their former life" (620a). Although they must drink from the river of forgetting before being reborn, their new bodies match their souls better and this ought to be borne out by the subsequent life lived, which can work at better match and thus be reborn at a higher level in the next life. At other points, too,

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<sup>37</sup> For example, Basil says: "As, therefore, the physician is a benefactor even if he produces distress or pain in the body (for he fights the illness, not the sick person), so also God is good, who provides salvation to all, through particular punishments. And you do not accuse the physicians of any wrong in his cuttings and burnings and complete mutilations of the body; but rather you probably pay him money and you call him a savior, since he has produced illness in a small part of the body to prevent the suffering from spreading throughout the whole of it." "Homily Explaining that God is Not the Cause of Evil" 3 (Basil the Great 2005, p. 68). Or John Chrysostom: "In the case of diseases and injuries we do not grieve for those who are being cured, but for those who have incurable diseases. Sin is the same as disease or injury; retribution is the same as surgery or medicine. Do you understand what I am saying? Pay attention: I want to teach you a word of wisdom. Why do we grieve for those who are being punished, but not for those who are sinning? Punishment is not as grievous as sin, for sin is the reason for the punishment. If you see someone with a putrifying sore, and worms and discharges coming from his body, and you see him neglecting his infection, but you see another person with the same affliction benefiting from the hands of physicians, from cautery and surgery and bitter-tasting medicines, for whom will you grieve? Tell me, for the one who is ill and is not being treated, or for the one who is ill and is being treated? In the same way imagine two sinners, one being punished, the other not being punished. Do not say, this one is lucky because he is rich, he strips orphans of their property, and he oppresses widows. Apparently he is not ill, he has a good reputation in spite of his thefts, he enjoys honor and authority, he does not endure any of the troubles which afflict mankind—no fever, no paralysis, nor any other disease—a chorus of children surrounds him, his old age is comfortable; but you should grieve most for him, because he is indeed ill and receives no treatment. I shall tell you how. If you see someone afflicted with dropsy, his body swollen with a painful spleen, and not hurrying to the doctor, but drinking cold water, keeping a Sybaritic table, getting drunk every day, surrounded with body-guards, and aggravating his disease, tell me, do you call him lucky or unlucky? If you see another person afflicted with dropsy, benefiting from the care of doctors, purging himself with hunger, with great difficulty braving his bitter medicines which are painful but bring forth health through pain, do you not call this person more fortunate than the other? It is agreed: for one is ill and is not treated, but the other is ill and benefits from treatment. But, you may say, the treatment is painful. But its purpose is beneficial. Our present life is like this also, but you must change the words from bodies to souls, from diseases to sins, from the bitter taste of medicines to the retribution and judgment from God. What the medicines, surgery, and cautery are for the physician, chastisement is from God. Just as fire is often used to cauterize, to prevent the spread of infection, and as the steel removes decayed flesh, bringing pain but providing benefit, so hunger and disease, and other apparent evils, are used on the soul instead of steel and fire to prevent the spread of disease, by analogy with the body, and to make it better... When you see a bad person faring well, then weep: for there are two evils, the disease and its incurability." "Sixth Sermon on the Rich Man and Lazarus" (John Chrysostom 1984, pp.101–3).

<sup>38</sup> At the same time, there is a similar ambivalence as that noted above in regard to imitation: beautiful bodies can lead us to beautiful souls, but they can also distract and deceive. And not all beautiful souls necessarily inhabit beautiful bodies: Socrates is consistently pictured as snub-nosed and generally ugly despite his eminently beautiful soul. The tradition of "match" between soul and body, including the conviction that moral and immoral behaviors are somehow visibly expressed in one's countenance, has a long and rich tradition. One particularly striking more recent example is Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.



Plato suggests that present behavior is both an indicator of the state of one's soul and a predictor of one's future body (*Phaedrus* 248d, *Laws* 944e, *Timaeus* 42b–c). This implies that somehow soul and body must match each other, that there must be a “fit” between the two.<sup>39</sup> And the goal obviously is not just any kind of “fit”: a “bad” soul also suits a “bad” body. But such a bad soul is supremely unhealthy and disordered, at variance with itself and the universe. A healthy soul, in contrast, “becomes entirely one, temperate and harmonious,” acting externally in order to “preserve this inner harmony” (*Republic* IV, 443e).<sup>40</sup> Hence, soul and body only truly match each other if their harmonious and well-ordered unity also matches the larger cosmic order. For Plato, such fit is assured through the practice of philosophy and the succession of reincarnations, where each life provides the chance to achieve a better match between soul and body and to exercise the soul to greater purity and justice.<sup>41</sup>

This notion of the transmigration of souls was obviously rejected by the patristic tradition. While some of the earlier fathers still allow that the soul might in some form preexist its body (dwelling in some heavenly realm before it is sent into the one body in which it lives out its one mortal life), most insist that soul and body are created together.<sup>42</sup> Just as the cosmos has a beginning and is created by God together with space and time, so souls have a beginning created by God together with their material bodies. And they certainly do assume that soul and body are closely connected. Nemesius consistently argues that various aspects of the soul are concretely expressed in parts of the body and visible in their functioning.<sup>43</sup> Maximus is quite emphatic that soul and body always go together: “Moreover, if the body is the instrument of a soul endowed with intellect (since it is the soul of a human being), and if the whole soul permeates the whole body, giving it life and motion (since the soul by nature is simple and incorporeal), without however being divided or enclosed by the body, then the soul is present to the whole body and to each of its members (for each member by nature is able to receive it, consistent with its innate potential to receive the soul's energy). Being present to the body in this way, the soul binds together the members that variously receive it, in proportion to each member's way of maintaining the unity of the body” (*Ambiguum* 7, Maximus the Confessor 2014, vol. I, p. 135). John of Damascus also insists: “The soul is united with the body, the entire soul with the entire body and not part for part. And it is not contained by the body, but rather contains it, just as heat does iron,

<sup>39</sup> Plato's assumptions about the need for a “fit” between soul and body or even a possible “mismatch” between the two is particularly evident in his comments about gender: although women can be trained and even govern in the ideal republic, Plato is fairly clear that they have “male souls” in “female bodies” and that somehow the two do not match. Cowardly men really have female souls in their male bodies and will be reborn in female bodies. Comments of this sort are quite frequent throughout the dialogues.

<sup>40</sup> In Aristotle also, an excellent person is one whose soul is supremely in harmony with itself, all its parts well-ordered and honed to greatest excellence of character. In both Plato and Aristotle, the same applies to the larger *polis* or *koinonia*. For Plato, a disordered and unjust state is one in which someone self-indulgent or “puffed up by wealth” governs. Such bad ruling and disorder among classes will “destroy the city” and “is the greatest harm that can happen to the city and would rightly be called the worst evil one could do to it” (*Republic* IV, 434b). For Aristotle, excellent friendship creates the same kind of harmony and balance as rules in an excellent individual soul and the relation evil people have with each other similarly reflects the disordered soul of the unjust person who is at variance with himself (*Nicomachean Ethics* IX.4, 1166a–1166b).

<sup>41</sup> In the interest of space, I'm leaving Aristotle aside here, who obviously holds soul and body far more closely together than Plato in the first place. The patristic thinkers consistently treat the Platonic–Aristotelian heritage as a whole and read them as corroborating each other. Aristotle is interpreted as the logical and introductory basis for Plato's more elevated and more difficult theories. In either case, the Aristotelian pursuit of excellence supports a similar philosophical “program” for improvement of the soul within its body (and larger social and political context) and its “imaging” of the divine as much as humanly possible.

<sup>42</sup> “And as for anyone who idly asserts this nonexistent ‘preexistence’ of souls, let him confine himself to rational arguments. For if the body and soul are parts of man, as has already been explained, then as parts they necessarily admit of reciprocal relation. . . . Therefore, insofar as soul and body are parts of man, it is not possible for either the soul or the body to exist before the other, or indeed to exist after the other in time, otherwise what is known as the principal of reciprocal relation would be destroyed.” *Ambiguum* 7 (Maximus the Confessor 2014, vol. I, p. 137). John of Damascus asserts the same: “The body and the soul were formed at the same time—not one before and the other afterwards” *On the Orthodox Faith* II.12 (John of Damascus 1958, p. 235).

<sup>43</sup> He is extremely detailed in his account of how various powers of the soul are located in and expressed in concrete parts of the body, even adducing particular illnesses or malfunction of the body that have an impact on emotional and intellectual functioning (presumably relying on Galen for much of this information). See especially *On the Nature of Man*, scs. 6–15 (Nemesius of Emesa 2008, pp. 100–27).



and, although it is in the body, carries on its own proper activities.”<sup>44</sup> The soul moves and permeates the body, is present to all of it, and the body is nothing without this animating principle within it. Yet, the two are not just naturally united, but we must work at bonding them together in order for a good and healthy soul to dwell in a well-functioning body. Health of soul and proper functioning of soul and body together are efforts to pursue and result in a larger harmony, not only between these two parts, but also with the order of all things.<sup>45</sup>

Even in the ascetic tradition, where the Platonic injunction to focus on the soul and separate it as far as possible from the passions and the body is maybe taken up most fully, a fit between soul and body is often implied. In Athanasius’ famous depiction of Saint Antony’s emergence from the cave, the holiness of his “soul” is visible in the vigor and youthfulness of his body ([Athanasius of Alexandria 2003](#)). And ascetic practice itself assumes that a rigorous disciplining of our body and the soul’s corporeal desires (e.g., for food and sleep) are conducive toward the more difficult task of disciplining the higher elements of the soul (ruling over anger, pride, sloth, etc.).<sup>46</sup> In Evagrius and Maximus, various vices can be attributed to various elements of the soul and they are correspondingly healed by virtues corresponding to similar parts of the soul.

This desire for a “match” between the mortal and the immortal or corporeal and incorporeal reality is perhaps adopted most expressly in the distinction between image and likeness. While the human is created in the image of God, likeness to the divine has to be achieved through virtuous and holy living.<sup>47</sup> While not all the fathers make the distinction between image and likeness, the ones who do consistently speak of achieving likeness through the transformative effort of combatting vices and cultivating virtues. At the same time, as in Aristotle, cultivation of virtues and especially the practice of *theoria*, bring us closest to the divine and allows us to imitate the divine, to become like God as closely as possible. This may be precisely what the idea of the microcosm exemplifies: the two realms come together in the human in some way; they begin to match and achieve a “fit,” a fit not only between an individual soul and its body, but also between the human (on personal and communal levels) and the larger cosmos.<sup>48</sup>

## 5. “Fit” in Liturgy

This finally gets us back to our original question of how these presuppositions operate within liturgy. The “fit” between body and soul, that is to say, the unification of the realms and their full participation in each other, is achieved most fully within and through liturgy. What Plato works out with a theory of the transmigration of souls, the patristic tradition tries to work out in liturgy: liturgy is the space where we strive for a greater “match” or “fit” between body and soul, between heavenly and earthly, between visible and invisible—and of all of them together via a match between anthropological and cosmological dimensions. In liturgy bodies come to match their “souls,” “spirits,” or “minds” and to cultivate the health of both through their harmony with the cosmos. The beauty of invisible reality becomes continually expressed in the visible, but the visible cannot “replace” it, just as liturgy constantly exhorts us to “see” the invisible in the visible, but we can only see it there if they truly match

<sup>44</sup> *On the Orthodox Faith* I.13 ([John of Damascus 1958](#), p. 198).

<sup>45</sup> As has often been pointed out, the Byzantines were obsessed with order, proper position, and harmony. Maybe this was not just a peculiar obsession, but a reflection of a deeper belief in the harmony of the universe that was part of a larger worldview.

<sup>46</sup> This is constantly assumed and even explicitly argued in the ascetic literature. To give just one example from Evagrius’ *Eulogios*: “Do not delay in paying the debt of prayer when you hear a thought by reason of the approach of work and do not make loud noises, troubling your body, during manual labour, lest you trouble as well the eye of the soul. . . . When you do not give your heart to considerations of material things, at that moment you may drive away captive the crowd of thoughts.” ([Evagrius of Pontus 2003](#), pp. 36, 38).

<sup>47</sup> “Since this was the case with his own hands he created man after his own image and likeness from the visible and invisible natures. From the earth he created his body and by his own inbreathing gave him a rational and understanding soul, which last we say is the divine image—for the ‘according to his image’ means the intellect and free will, while the ‘according to his likeness’ means such likeness in virtue as is possible.” *On the Orthodox Faith*, II.12 ([John of Damascus 1958](#), pp. 234–35).

<sup>48</sup> The fullest and most explicit expression of this is probably found in Maximus’ *Ambiguum* 41, where he outlines Christ’s and the human unification of all levels of reality ([Ambiguum 7, Maximus the Confessor 2014](#), vol. II, pp. 102–21).

and are not in discordance or disharmony. Real transformation would mean total mimesis—every moment of time would be imbued with the eternal, every physical reality would bear at the same time the invisible, each body would perfectly match its soul, everything human would become suffused with the divine, everything earthly would somehow bear the heavenly. This cannot be fully achieved in personal ascetic labor, because it is not merely about the match between one individual soul and its particular body. Only in liturgy can the larger “fit” between heaven and earth, invisible and visible realms be accomplished. Yet, what exactly does that mean? How do invisible and visible, incorporeal and corporeal, heavenly and earthly realms come together in liturgical practice?

First of all, patristic and contemporary Orthodox liturgy is suffused with language referring to both realms, including the frequent claims that heaven and earth celebrate together. Some feasts accomplish the fit particularly well. The liturgical texts for the feast of the Annunciation announce such unification on several levels: “Lo, our restoration is now made manifest to us: God is ineffably united to men. At the words of the Archangel error is laid low; for the Virgin receives joy, and the things of the earth have become heaven. The world is loosened from the ancient curse. Let the creation rejoice exceedingly.”<sup>49</sup> The divine is united to the human, the heavenly to the earthly, the invisible to the visible. These are “glad tidings of joy” because “things below are joined to things above” (Mother Mary and Ware 1998, *Festal Menaion*: 445). Christ is taken to gather “together all the creation” (Mother Mary and Ware 1998, *Festal Menaion*: 455). Similarly, Christ’s birth by the virgin is (in every liturgy) affirmed to be without “corruption” or “defilement,” i.e., literally without disintegration, decay, or perishing (*phthora*). Unifying the invisible, imperishable, incorruptible with the visible and mortal, as occurs in the nativity, renders such birth incorruptible and without decay.<sup>50</sup> The feast of Christ’s Nativity creates harmony, both in the larger creation and, more narrowly, in human social and political arrangements.<sup>51</sup> “Heaven and earth are united today,” a unification that concerns both heaven and earth and divine with human; it also always goes in both directions: descending (of Christ into the virgin, “bowing down” the heavens) and ascending (of the human via Christ into heaven, taking up the earth into it).<sup>52</sup> The constant affirmation that heaven and earth celebrate together (reiterated in all of the feasts) is surely also significant. The texts for Ascension speak repeatedly of Christ’s body ascending from “earth” to “heaven” and therefore bringing together earthly and heavenly, corporeal and incorporeal realms, simultaneously “renewing” the world. Therefore, “the earth celebrates and dances for joy, and heaven rejoices today on the Ascension of the Maker of creation, who by his volition clearly united that which was separated.”<sup>53</sup> The kontakion also explicitly affirms that Christ’s ascension “unites things on earth with the heavens.”<sup>54</sup> Hence the transformation worked by the feasts is that of the kind of unification in which earth images the heavens, where they come together and penetrate each other, yet without confusion or total assimilation.

Similar assertions are made about the dormition of the theotokos. Her entry into paradise is not just on her own behalf, but in some way reunifies earth and heaven.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, “by thy deathless

<sup>49</sup> Lity at Compline, Feast of the Annunciation of the Most Holy Theotokos (Mother Mary and Ware 1998, *Festal Menaion*: 445).

<sup>50</sup> This affirmation (“without corruption you gave birth to God the Word”) hence does not mean—as it is often interpreted—that sexual activity involves some sort of sinful defilement or is morally objectionable. *Phthora* is a basic characteristic of the material as undergoing change and decay, coming into being and going out of being; it is not a moral judgment and has nothing to do with sexual activity (or its lack) in the divine conception.

<sup>51</sup> Vespers for the Nativity According to the Flesh of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ (Mother Mary and Ware 1998, *Festal Menaion*: 254). It is maybe also not coincidental that Christ is called the “sun” (and not just the “son”) throughout many liturgies, festal and otherwise.

<sup>52</sup> Lity for Nativity (Mother Mary and Ware 1998, *Festal Menaion*: 263).

<sup>53</sup> Ode 3 at Matins for the feast of the Ascension.

<sup>54</sup> Proclus of Constantinople also claims this in a homily on Ascension: “The nature of creation is distributed in heaven and on earth, /but the grace of today, having bridged the division of these things, /does not permit me to see the division. /For who would in future say that heaven is separated from things on earth...” Homily 21.1 (Proclus of Constantinople 2001, p. 193).

<sup>55</sup> Paradise itself is often portrayed as a more beautiful version of the *oikoumene*. This can take quaintly amusing forms as when heaven is pictured by various medieval Byzantine sources as an enlarged, more beautiful and more harmonious Constantinople (e.g., Baun 2007).

Dormition thou hast sanctified the whole world.”<sup>56</sup> In some patristic homilies, she is explicitly said to bless all of the four elements as she is borne to paradise: “The air was blessed by your passing through it, the aether of the upper regions was sanctified”; “I imagine that the elements of nature were stirred up and altered... the air, the fiery aether, the sky would have been made holy by the ascent of her spirit, as earth was sanctified by the deposition of her body. Even water had its share in the blessing; for she was washed in pure water, which did not so much cleanse her as it was itself consecrated.”<sup>57</sup> Mary’s body perfectly matches her spirit or soul and hence enables a transformation of the elements in a manner that achieves a better mimetic fit with their heavenly reality.<sup>58</sup> Mary “blesses” the elements, transforms them mimetically so they are imbued with the holiness of the divine. (Maybe that is precisely what blessing ceremonies do: they try to effect the “match” of earthly and heavenly.) And the bodily matters here. John of Damascus assures his audience of this in vivid imagery: “And this holy temple—truly holy, truly worthy of God—I seemed for a moment to embrace with my own arms! I pressed my eyes, my lips, my forehead, my neck, my cheeks to her limbs, rejoicing in these sensations as if her body were present and I could touch it.”<sup>59</sup> Such vivid attention to the physical and corporeal reality maybe finds its apex in the cult of relics, where the bodily and material is taken to be a bearer of the divine, but precisely in and through its very physicality.<sup>60</sup>

The continual insistence—especially in the festal services but also more broadly—that all this takes place “today” similarly assumes that the eternal “reality” of the feast becomes present in the particular moment of the celebration. The events of annunciation, nativity, theophany, and so forth, really occur “today” because in them the eternal is manifested in time. The liturgical “today” is always simultaneously the concrete “today” of physical reality and the eternal “today” without temporality. They meet and come to merge in the celebration of the feast. At the same time it is continually recognized that the “fit” is not perfect, that the match is not yet achieved. We have to work at “fit,” it does not happen magically by itself. As we have seen, in Plato the path to it is dual: via beauty and via gnosis or ascesis—one is intrinsically attractive, the other more difficult, but there is always the danger that we will stop too early, remaining only with beautiful bodies and not going on to the contemplation of immortal, immaterial beauty (or that we might be distracted by mere appearances rather than proceeding to the reality). Similarly, liturgy is constantly torn between the attempt to match (in the feasts) and the recognition that the “fit” isn’t quite there (or maybe far from there), resulting in an attempt to work at better fit via repentance. Maybe we need to repeat all this continually precisely in order to achieve a better match; we try again at each liturgy, each Eucharist, during each Lent, at each Pascha.

Constant exhortations to repentance and especially the penitential time of Great Lent—and to a lesser degree the other fasting periods, including the kneeling prayers at the end of the Pentecost season—are hence also characterized by such a desire to achieve a match, but here the disconnect and lack are stressed rather than the accomplishment (maybe paralleling the tension in Plato’s dual proposal of attraction through beauty and stern pedagogy). The liturgical texts for the Lenten periods consistently counsel a greater match to the divine through a unification of soul and body. This is particularly obvious in the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete: “I have defiled my body, I have stained

<sup>56</sup> Sticheron at Vespers for the Dormition of Our Most-Holy Lady the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary ([Mother Mary and Ware 1998](#), *Festal Menaion*: 504).

<sup>57</sup> See especially John of Damascus’ cycle of three homilies on the feast of the Dormition ([Daley 1998](#), *Dormition of Mary*: 183–239). The quotes above are from Homily I.11: 196 and Homily II.11: 214–15. Germanos speaks of her as a “bridge” that will enable others to “bear the weight of all of humanity” ([Daley 1998](#), *Dormition of Mary*: 171). This is a common theme; John also mentions it several times ([Daley 1998](#), *Dormition of Mary*: 193). It is surely also significant that Christ’s and Mary’s bodies are said to ascend or be carried up into the heavens, in the feasts of Ascension and Dormition, respectively. It is the touch of Mary’s body (obviously united with its soul) that effects the sanctification of the elements.

<sup>58</sup> John affirms this also about her preparation for the conception: “she preserved the virginity of her soul no less than that of her body, and thus her bodily virginity was also preserved.” Homily I.7: 190. ([Daley 1998](#))

<sup>59</sup> Homily II.5: 209. ([Daley 1998](#))

<sup>60</sup> This is at least what Patricia Cox Miller argues ([Miller 2009](#)), especially ch. 1.

my spirit, and I am all covered with wounds: but as physician, O Christ, heal both body and spirit for me through repentance.”<sup>61</sup> Many liturgical prayers (whether in preparation for communion or in various litanies and not just during Lent) pray for the sanctification of *both* soul and body. This is evident not only in texts, but maybe even more strikingly in actions: fasting, abstaining from various activities and foods, and the bodily exercises of bowing and prostrations are all training the body to greater concordance with the soul as it should become.<sup>62</sup> Our bodily postures should reflect and match the dispositions of our minds and hearts. Repentance is always an effort of both body and soul, together. Many homilists upbraid their listeners precisely for lack of “match”: Chrysostom chides his congregation for running to the games and races: “On a Friday, when your Master was being crucified on behalf of the world and such a sacrifice was being offered, and paradise was being opened, and the robber was being led back to his old native land, the curse was being undone, and sin was disappearing, and temporal war was being destroyed, and God was being reconciled to human beings, and everything was being changed—on that day, you should have been fasting and giving praise and sending up prayers of thanksgiving for all the blessings in the world to the one who made them. Then why did you leave the church and the spiritual sacrifice, and the gathering of brothers and sisters and the sobriety of fasting? Were you carried off to that spectacle as the devil’s captive?”<sup>63</sup> Clearly Chrysostom thinks something is actually presently occurring within the liturgy and participating in it requires one’s behavior to match the content of the celebration and the events that are taking place within it.

In a different vein, John of Damascus argues that celebrating Mary’s dormition should result in concrete acts of mercy: “Let us delight in her holiness of soul and body; after all, she is truly, after God, the holiest of all beings, for like always delights in like! Let us do her homage by our mercy and our compassion for the poor. For if God is honored by nothing so much as by mercy, who can deny that his mother is glorified, too, by the same thing?”<sup>64</sup> Near the end of the homily he asks how we can celebrate a proper remembrance of her and suggests that this should involve avoiding impurity, “frivolous talk,” self-indulgence, “seductive perfumes,” “puffed-up arrogance,” “an unforgiving mind,” and “all vice,” instead pursuing their opposites “in fasting, in self-control, in singing of psalms. . . the peaceful and gentle heart,” “love and mercy and humility.”<sup>65</sup> Here, celebrating the feast requires a lifestyle that matches its content. Basil similarly exhorts his congregation to put what they are doing within liturgy into practice (Basil the Great 2009). He also bemoans the lack of match in their actions: “I know many who fast, pray, sigh, and demonstrate every manner of piety, so long as it costs them nothing, yet would not part with a penny to help those in distress.”<sup>66</sup> After describing all sorts of

<sup>61</sup> *The Lenten Triodion*: 392 (Mother Mary and Ware 2002). Such examples could be endlessly multiplied, not only from the canon but from the Lenten liturgical texts more generally.

<sup>62</sup> Indeed, many homilies stress this need for repentance to be the united effort of body and soul. E.g., John Chrysostom: “Do you see, dearly beloved, what true fasting really is? Let us perform this kind, and not entertain the facile notion held by many that the essence of fasting lies in going without food till evening. This is not the end in view, but that we should demonstrate, along with abstinence from food, abstinence also from whatever is harmful, and should give close attention to spiritual duties. The person fasting ought to be reserved, peaceful, meek, humble, indifferent to the esteem of this world.” Homily on Genesis 8.15 (John Chrysostom 1986, vol. 82, p. 114). In a later homily he says: “I am not making this point [that fasting is not worthwhile if one skips church] to undermine the importance of fasting—God forbid: on the contrary, I’m all in favor of it. Instead, my intention is to teach you to take an active part in spiritual matters with an alert mind, not just follow along out of habit. The shameful thing, you see, is not attendance at this spiritual teaching after partaking of food, but attendance with an attitude of sloth, addiction to passion, and failure to control the movements of the flesh. There is nothing wrong with eating—God forbid; the harmful thing is gluttony, stuffing yourself with food in excess of need, and ruining your stomach—something, after all, that destroys even the pleasure that comes from food. So, too, in like manner, there is nothing wrong with drinking in moderation, but rather surrendering to drunkenness and losing control of your reasoning through excess.” Homily 10.2 (John Chrysostom 1986, p. 128).

<sup>63</sup> “Against the Games” 164; in (Mayer and Pauline 1999, pp. 119–120).

<sup>64</sup> John of Damascus, Homily II.16 (Daley 1998, *Dormition of Mary*: 220).

<sup>65</sup> Homily II.19 (Daley 1998, *Dormition of Mary*: 223).

<sup>66</sup> “To the Rich” 3 (Basil the Great 2009, p. 46). Basil uses very strong language. After describing in detail the suffering of parents who are selling their own children in order to have something to eat, he tells the rich that they are utterly deluded and have a completely false conception of reality: “In everything you see gold, you imagine everything as gold; it is your

vain luxuries in detail, he exclaims: “when I go into the house of one of these tasteless newly rich individuals, and see it bedecked with every imaginable hue, I know that this person possesses nothing more valuable than what is on display; such people decorate inanimate objects, but fail to beautify the soul.”<sup>67</sup> He upbraids them for their lies, which do not match their actions: “you profess this to be true with your tongue, but your hand gives you the lie” (namely by flashing with expensive rings when claiming to have no money to help the poor).<sup>68</sup> Liturgical practice and Christian living requires one’s deeds to match one’s words, requires bodily actions to fit the “spiritual” content of the message.

While the focus in these homilies is on the human, the “fit” of body and soul parallels and participates in the match of earth and heaven, visible and invisible realms. This helps us understand the many references to visibility and invisibility in liturgical texts: we “mystically represent the cherubim,” so that we may “receive the king of all” who comes to us “invisibly.” The powers of heaven “invisibly” serve with us, as we visibly serve the liturgy of the presanctified gifts. We “taste and see” that the Lord is good, we see and taste the “pure, immortal, heavenly, and life-creating, and awesome mysteries” and pray that therefore our “whole evening may be perfect, holy, peaceful, and sinless.”<sup>69</sup> It may well be (although this cannot be worked out in detail here) that the circular movements around the sanctuary in which the celebrants engage evokes and in some way instantiates the invisible, eternal reality (which the ancients thought to move in a circular fashion). Similarly, the cyclical nature of time in the liturgical calendar is significant.<sup>70</sup>

This makes much better sense of Maximus’ vision and of many liturgical texts. Maximus’ vision is not purely eschatological, as it is often interpreted, but it is depicting what ought to occur in every liturgy: here the invisible and immaterial realm enters into and becomes one with the visible and material celebration. Maximus actually maintains this in the *Mystagogy*: “For the whole spiritual [intelligible] world seems mystically imprinted on the whole sensible world in symbolic forms, for those who are capable of seeing this, and conversely the whole sensible world is spiritually explained in the mind in the principles which it contains.”<sup>71</sup> It is not that we long for the day when we will finally leave our bodies behind and float as immaterial souls into some eternal, heavenly realm. Nor is liturgy best understood as departing the earth for heaven. Rather, liturgy seeks to bring together earth and heaven, tries to achieve a match between physical and spiritual realities, a fit between soul and body, precisely so the earthly and corporeal, including human body and soul, can fully image and therefore represent the heavenly and incorporeal while wholly remaining itself.<sup>72</sup>

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dream when you sleep and your first thought when you awaken. Just as those who are out of their mind do not see reality, but rather imagine things out of their malady, thus also your soul, being seized with avarice, sees everything as gold or silver. You would rather see gold than the sun itself. You wish that everything could be transformed by nature and become gold, and for your part you intend to turn as many things into gold as you can.” “I Will Tear Down My Barns” 4 (Basil the Great 2009, p. 65). Indeed, in a later homily Basil suggests that heaven may begin to match our unjust behavior by withholding rain and causing famine.

<sup>67</sup> “To the Rich” 4 (Basil the Great 2009, pp. 48–49).

<sup>68</sup> “To the Rich” 4 (Basil the Great 2009, p. 49). Throughout these homilies Basil constantly accuses his listeners of deception and exhorts them to care for their souls precisely by divesting themselves of their superfluous and even damaging wealth. He chides them for the lack of consistency between their beliefs and their actions: “But you are not such a person. How do I know this? You begrudge your fellow human beings what you yourself enjoy; taking wicked counsel in your soul, you consider not how you might distribute to others according to their needs, but rather how, after having received so many good things, you might rob others of their benefit” “I Will Tear Down My Barns” 2 (Basil the Great 2009, p. 62).

<sup>69</sup> “Hymn of the Entrance,” “Communion Hymn,” and Litany after Communion from the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts.

<sup>70</sup> Andrew Louth points to this and explicitly connects it to the notion of time as a moving image of eternity in Plato’s *Timaeus* (Louth 2009; Louth 2013).

<sup>71</sup> *Mystagogy* 2 (Maximus the Confessor 1985, p. 189). Also: “Then the body will become like the soul and sensible things like intelligible things in dignity and glory, for the unique divine power will manifest itself in all things in a vivid and active presence proportioned to each one, and will by itself preserve unbroken for endless ages the bond of unity.” *Mystagogy* 7 (Maximus the Confessor 1985, p. 197).

<sup>72</sup> And Maximus puts this in terms of the formation of habits: “When the soul is moved by them to make progress it becomes united to the God of all in imitating what is immutable and beneficent in his essence and activity by means of its steadfastness in the good and its unalterable habit of choice.” *Mystagogy* 5 (Maximus the Confessor 1985, p. 191).



For Maximus, Christ is the supreme microcosm who most excellently combines soul and body. In Christ, there is a perfect match between soul and body, invisible and visible, incorporeal and corporeal. In him, they are no longer two divergent natures, but they are perfectly integrated, albeit without confusion.<sup>73</sup> As we have seen, the liturgies, especially those for the major feasts, also stress this. Similarly, John of Damascus affirms about Christ in a homily on Dormition: “You are not simply God or merely human, but one who is both Son of God and God enfleshed, God and human at the same time; you have not undergone confusion or endured division, but you bar in yourself the natural qualities of two natures essentially distinct, yet united without confusion and without division in your concrete existence: the created and the uncreated, the mortal and the immortal, the visible and the invisible, the circumscribed and the uncircumscribed, divine will and human will, divine activity no less than human activity; two self-determining realities, divine and human at the same time; divine miracles and human passions.”<sup>74</sup> Or, to use different patristic imagery: in Christ image and likeness of the divine match perfectly—he is the very icon of God—while we still have to work on the fit between the two through pursuit of the virtues and by battling what keeps us from such fit between image and likeness. Christ is affirmed to be both fully human and fully divine; they come together perfectly in his person, without schizophrenia, but also without confusion and without suppression of one nature by the other. Similarly, the Eucharistic “transformation” means that mimesis between the two is achieved: the physical bread and wine in some way “match” the body and blood of Christ, the earthly and heavenly come together. In physically consuming the gifts, the participants assimilate this reality to their own bodies: the “match” between earthly and heavenly, physical and “spiritual” becomes in some way performed in them.

## 6. Conclusions

What are we to make of these claims today? Can they still describe what liturgy does for us? Can we recover this sensibility for the meaning of invisible and visible reality, heavenly and earthly realm, human soul and body? Maybe because these terms (body/soul, physical/spiritual) are so loaded, bear so much baggage, are understood so differently today, we need new language.<sup>75</sup> While a full retrieval, re-appropriation, or rephrasing into new language (or even a full argument about whether this would be necessary today) is beyond the bounds of this paper, maybe we can draw at least some preliminary conclusions about implications for liturgy today.

Unlike what we often assume (both Christians themselves and their critics), the match between the two cosmological realms and the two aspects of the human is not and cannot be a flight from this earthly reality into some otherworldly, heavenly one. This is so because the incorporeal can only be “seen” in the corporeal—it is otherwise “invisible”—, can only be touched and tasted in the material—it is otherwise immaterial—, can only be encountered in the spatial and temporal—it has no other “place” or “time” because on its own it is without either.<sup>76</sup> And yet we frequently use spatial,

<sup>73</sup> This might actually also make sense of the many liturgical statements that affirm Christ to be simultaneously in heaven and on earth (lying in a manger, riding on a donkey, hanging on the cross, while still reigning in heaven). Rather than positing a schizophrenic split in Christ, where one nature dwells in some realm far away, while the other one walks around physically on earth at a particular point in historical time, the two “natures” combine the two realms fully within the liturgical celebration so as to make them inseparable. It is not that Christ is in two places at once, but that the two have become one in him.

<sup>74</sup> John of Damascus, Homily I on Dormition (Daley 1998, *Dormition of Mary*: 186). This is interpreted to remove *phthora*: “you transformed what was corruptible into incorruption” (Daley 1998, *Dormition of Mary*: 186).

<sup>75</sup> It is possible that contemporary phenomenology can help us with this, partly because it tries to overcome divisions between “objective” and “subjective” as they have become cemented in the (Western) tradition and partly because it is far more attentive to experience and hence an especially appropriate methodology for investigating liturgical praxis. Maybe it can provide resources also for articulating more fully and more authentically how liturgy functions (helping us hear again what the ancients heard at least some of the time and in some places). This is not something that can be worked out here, but I hope to explore it more fully in the future.

<sup>76</sup> This may also be at least one way of understanding more fully in what way the Eucharistic elements are “truly” the body and blood of Christ: they match perfectly, in them the visible and invisible accord, the incorporeal is entirely “present” within the corporeal, the “heavenly” bread is “there” in the earthly loaves (it could not be elsewhere). “Make this bread

temporal and physical language for the invisible, intelligible, heavenly, maybe because it is almost impossible to do otherwise in human language that reflects our human experience in space and time. The visual and physical metaphor of “entry” in Schmemmann, for example, certainly makes it seem like heaven is a place (located in the sanctuary?) to which we (magically?) ascend.<sup>77</sup> Yet, liturgy is not a “weekly trip” from earth to heaven. Khaled Anatolios describes such a view as a “temporary excursion to an otherworldly reality” or even a “magical replacement of earth by heaven,” judging such an interpretation a “misconstrual” that “can be disastrous for a proper appreciation of Byzantine liturgy and spirituality” (Anatolios 2000, pp. 1–2). If the invisible realm truly is incorporeal and immaterial, if it is truly eternal (i.e., atemporal and non-spatial), then the only way in which it can become visible, the only way in which it can be “entered,” the only way in which we can “live” in it, is *if it becomes instantiated in space and time, in bodies and in materiality*. Just as the soul always has to be expressed in, with, and through a body, so the invisible and immaterial reality has to be expressed in the visible and material realm. The only “place” the invisible (or the “soul”) can “be,” if they are to be united, is “here,” in the visible; the only time is “now.” The only “place” for a soul is in a body, the only place for heavenly liturgy is on earth; it must be “here” because it cannot be “there” (and has no spatial “there”). Earth does not just mirror heaven in the false sense of mimesis as mere shadow or deceptive imitation, but it becomes imbued with it as the two are transformed in a union without confusion where they match up, where the “feasting above” is entirely comingled with and occurs in the “feasting below.”<sup>78</sup>

Liturgy, then, enacts not just any kind of transformation, but a very specific one in which heaven and earth come together, where earth opens onto heaven—not in some magical other “place” but here and now. Liturgy is not a merely “spiritual” endeavor, but is profoundly and deeply physical and material, precisely because it brings the two together and seeks to establish harmony between them. Liturgy does not shape just a penitential self, but forms a self whose “body” perfectly comes to express a healthy “soul” in harmony with other human beings, and with the visible and invisible cosmos. And this cannot occur solely in private spirituality or personal ascetic pursuit, because it is never just about individual souls and their particular bodies, but also always about the unification of heaven and earth, intelligible and sensory, invisible and visible realms. The visible, physical, material is not merely a negligible conduit for accessing the invisible, incorporeal, intelligible realms, to be dismissed and abandoned as soon as one has tapped into the more “spiritual” reality. There is no access to the spiritual but through, via, and *within* the physical. This also means that liturgy is not primarily about some far-away eschatological reality, a mere preparation for the afterlife in “heaven.” Rather, liturgy does the important work of unification here and now. Liturgy is the deliberate practice of *together* shaping our bodies and identities to be in harmony with each other and in harmony with all of reality. Liturgy continually aims at such health and harmony and engages in the difficult labor that makes it possible. It is in this sense that liturgy renders us fully alive, most truly ourselves, and at the same time most authentically open to each other and to all of creation.

The questions raised by Rentel still stand, however: “Do we need liturgy? Why do we Orthodox Christians do this? Celebrate our services like this? Do they have to be this way? What do they mean? Do we even have to do liturgy as Christians?” (Rentel 2015, p. 213). If we no longer share this worldview, if we no longer conceive of the cosmos as the conjunction of visible and invisible realities,

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the precious body of your Christ” and “that which is in this cup the precious blood of your Christ” is maybe less a purely ontological claim than a claim about fit, where the two realities come together and truly “are” one.

<sup>77</sup> Aristotle has the same issue: he clearly argues that spherical motion is purely intelligible and yet it is somehow “located” beyond the moon. It is not physical in the sense in which earth, water, air and fire are physical (they can change into each other), yet he introduces “aether” as a subtle fifth element of “aetherial” reality.

<sup>78</sup> Again, there really is no “above,” technically speaking, because the heavenly/intelligible/invisible is not spatial; in all these cases, we are using spatial and temporal language for something that is not corporeal, material, or physical and hence not subject to space and time. Even the question of whether the two realms or parts are “even” is in some way a red herring, because such a comparison assumes proportion and measurement and those are “physical” terms. Only the spatial can have volume and extension.

if we no longer think of the human as ensouled body, if we no longer experience liturgy as cosmic in scope but as a purely personal matter, can any of this still work? Is it still possible to subscribe fully to this ancient worldview today? And even if this can be done, would it be desirable or would it simply constitute an unsustainable denial of the contemporary world in which we actually live? Yet, can Orthodox believers continue the same liturgical practices while simultaneously subscribing to a different cosmological worldview and an individualist conception of the self? Will liturgy still function in the same way if that is the case? And these questions must also be confronted, albeit in a different way, by Western liturgical theology: Can Western liturgies retrieve aspects of this liturgical worldview if their practices are now fundamentally different? What do those practices mean and what worldview do they communicate? What does post-Vatican II Roman Catholic liturgy do and how does it function? How do the great varieties of Protestant liturgies function and what do their practices mean? How do those practices shape personal selves and communal identities? These are absolutely crucial questions for liturgical theology and practice—East and West—today. They must be pursued vigorously and honestly. Yet, such questioning or even possible retrievals cannot happen without exploring the original presuppositions of liturgy in depth and understanding as fully as possible how liturgy—in a place and time crucial for the formation of Christianity—was meant to function.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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