

# The Body in Byzantine Hymnography

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“Lord, save our souls!” This end of many liturgical hymns sounds like familiar music to anyone who regularly attends divine services of the Byzantine liturgical tradition. “Glorify God in your body!” instructs Saint Paul, on the other hand (1 Cor. 6:20). Are the two ideas in contradiction?

According to the patristic adage *lex orandi lex credendi*, derived from the writing of Prosper of Aquitaine, the terms of our prayer are the expression of our faith: liturgical texts transmit, in poetic terms drawn from the context of their composition, a theology. Is it always the theology of the Orthodox Church? This question can be asked regarding the conception of the body in particular. I would like to observe here how the lines between body and soul, material and spiritual, visible and invisible, fallen and divine, can overlap or diverge in the rhythm of hymns heard in the Orthodox Church. What resonance do these dividing lines have with the church’s scriptural and patristic tradition?

Using a few examples, I will look at how the soul/body dichotomy is expressed in hymnography, before opening up to the vision of “flesh” that we can draw from our attendance at services and eventually questioning our understanding of the notion of “corruption.”

## 1. The Soul/Body Dichotomy

It is enough to open the first page of the January service texts to note an anthropological cliché of hymnography: a dichotomy between two constitutive dimensions of the human being, the “soul” and the “body”:

Belonging to the heavenly choirs and sharing the abode of the Angels whose condition you imitated by the pure splendor of your life, O Father Basil, since in your body (σώματος) you had already renounced earthly pleasures as though you were incorporeal (ὡς τις ἄσαρκος), intercede before Christ our God for us who enjoy your inspired doctrine, so that avoiding the darkness of ignorance we may obtain salvation and enlightenment for our souls. (Vespers, January 1)

What hierarchy between the soul and the body can we observe here? Saint Basil is linked to the model of the monks, “heavenly men and earthly angels” according to the common hymnographic expression, who struggle for domination of the soul over the body, that is, the subordination of the carnal appetites anchored in the animal instincts of survival and reproduction to the awareness of humanity’s vocation for deification. “You subjected your flesh to

the spirit” insists the following doxastikon. This superiority of the soul over the body constitutes the aim of the ascetic struggle. It implies a discernment of the soul, escaping from the “darkness of ignorance,” to direct the whole human being towards the good. To be sure, the canon of Matins states that Basil “cut down the passions of both soul and body,” suggesting that fallen forces can attack the “spiritual” component of the being as well (ode 1). This line avoids the Manichean binary of the soul/body pair as good/bad. Generally, however, the body comes across as merely the fallen, material component of man, turned toward the passions. In its superiority, the soul is the immaterial dimension, called to become the receptacle of God. This vocation can be fulfilled when the desiring part of the soul turns resolutely toward God rather than the satisfaction of physical desires.

This understanding seems to be confirmed by the petition “Lord, save our souls,” which is omnipresent in the hymnography. It can certainly be understood as a synecdoche, designating the whole of the human being by one of its parts (as in the title of Nikolai Gogol’s novel *The Dead Souls*). However, it can also be interpreted in line with the deprecatory language concerning the body mentioned above: the soul, as an immaterial aspect of the human being, would be the only one dedicated to deification, needing only to be freed from its material envelope. The prayer for the deceased, “Grant rest, O Lord, to the souls of your servants,” can also be understood along these lines, implying that while the body disintegrates in a tomb, the soul sails to some luminous heavenly abode in proportion to the past good deeds of its owner and the prayers of the living.

This conception of the soul is linked to a Platonic vision according to which, roughly, the immortal part of man has been able to free itself from the sensible world in order to go toward intelligible truths. Such a perspective, which implies a negative vision of the body as the “tomb of the soul,” according to the classic Platonic expression (*soma sema*), exerted a lasting influence on patristic thought, particularly that of Origen and Evagrius.<sup>1</sup> It emerges here in the hymns probably due to the monastic mindset that equates the struggle against the passions mainly with mortification of the body. The angelic model proposed for the monks goes in this direction: it suggests that the objective of the human being, in order to reach union with God, is to free himself from his corporeality, equivalent to his fallen component.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Salvation of the Body, Salvation of the Flesh

Nevertheless—incarnation obliges!—Byzantine hymnography also expresses in many places the eminently positive dimension of our bodies. A few days after celebrating Saint Basil, we can hear, on the occasion of the Forefeast of Theophany, that the Lord has come “to free souls and bodies” (Compline of January 4, ode 3). Still, while the salvation of the body is explicit here, the soul/body dichotomy remains.

It is not always present, as the use of the term “flesh” (σάρξ) in other hymns attests. “In the flesh, He was made poor and came to baptism” proclaims a sessional hymn at Matins on January 5, the eve of Theophany. Flesh is understood here not in the sense of the material body (σῶμα) but refers to our overall human nature, both material and spiritual. If eternal life concerns

<sup>1</sup> Other Fathers synthesize the biblical and Hellenistic visions. See especially Pseudo-Justin, *On Resurrection*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857–86) [hereafter PG], 6:1571–92.

<sup>2</sup> This theme of monks as “earthly angels” also reflects ideas found in Second Temple Jewish literature. See Bogdan Bucur, “Réflexions sur la tradition mystique du christianisme orthodoxe et sa filiation avec le judaïsme,” in ed. Dan Jaffé, *Juifs et Chrétiens aux premiers siècles. Identités, dialogues et dissidences* (Paris: Cerf, 2019), 674–84.

the whole of our being, including the body, it is because, in becoming incarnate, God takes on our flesh and makes himself a body, a mystery that we never cease to proclaim, especially in the theotokia (hymns addressed to the Virgin) as well as at all the great feasts. God assumes our flesh in order to deify it. Hence, we sing that at the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, Christ showed his “divinely radiant flesh (θεολαμποῦσαν σάρκα)” (Matins, August 6, ode 4 of the canon).

This definition of the flesh can also be observed in the canon of Matins on Holy Saturday: “You were torn, but not torn away, O Word, from the flesh (σαρκός) you had taken. For though the temple of your body (ναός) was destroyed at the moment of the passion, you were still one person in your Godhead and your flesh; for in both you are one Son, Word of God, God and man” (ode 6). Here the eighth-century hymnographer, Cosmas of Maiuma, makes a distinction between the material body (ναός) and the flesh (σαρκός), the latter referring to human nature as a whole. The hymn emphasizes that it is in his unique person as God-man that Christ fights Hades and that, although his physical death put an end to the vital functions of his body, he has not become disembodied. Rather, Christ “has granted incorruption to our flesh” (Matins for the Dead, praises): eternal life is thus addressed to our human nature as a whole, not just its material or spiritual aspect.

Such faith in the resurrection of the flesh is rooted in the gospel accounts of the appearance of the risen Christ, notably to Thomas (John 20:19–29). “Christ exclaimed unto Thomas: . . . Touch me. . . . Know that, like thyself, I also have bones and an earthen body (γῆῶδες σῶμα)” (Saint Thomas

Sunday, praises). As Thomas attests, Jesus is indeed risen in his body, both marked by the stigmata of his torture and invested with properties that do not belong to mortals.

The understanding of the flesh implied by the resurrection of bodies is developed in theological terms by Saint Paul. The apostle distinguishes between the “physical” or “animal” body and the “spiritual” body (1 Cor. 15:44–50), a distinction that does not map onto the material/spiritual dichotomy, but rather the relationship between the the human being in a fallen state of existence and one transfigured by the presence of God within. The “spiritual body” is then both physical and immaterial, like “the man of heaven” that Christ is, ascended in glory in his flesh to the right hand of the Father, in sight of his disciples (1 Cor. 15:49). A hymn from the Vespers of Ascension develops this holistic view of the flesh assumed by Christ:

O God, you have refashioned the nature of Adam, which had fallen into the depths of the earth. You have led it up today above every principality and power.

In this transfiguration of the flesh, Christ proclaims the superiority of humanity over the angels precisely because of its corporeal dimension. Therefore, the “flesh and blood” which, according to Paul, will not enter the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:50), are not the body per se, but the fallen part of the human being.

This approach is more in line with the Semitic conception of the human being than with the approach of Hellenistic philosophy. From the second biblical account of creation, in fact, the human being is situated at the crossroads of

the material and immaterial worlds, a mixture of “dust of the ground” and “breath of life” (*neshama hayyat* or πνοήν ζωής) considered as a whole (Gen. 2:7–24). The “garments of skin” (Gen. 3:21) given to the human being by God after the fall are not his physical body, as some Gnostics maintain, but a mode of existence cut off from God, which leads to death.<sup>3</sup> The return of a human being to the creator involves all the dimensions of one’s being, especially the material ones, as indicated by the psalm verse preceding the Eucharist, which insists on the possibility of sensory participation in the divine life: “Taste and see how good the Lord is!” (Ps. 33). The theology of baptism, the Eucharist, and marriage is anchored in this Pauline anthropology inherited from Semitic thought, calling for a passage from the old to the new Adam (Eph. 4:22–24), who, in his very physicality, has put on Christ (Gal 3:27).

This concept is found in the hymnody evoking the Kingdom of God as a nuptial union: “At the arising of Christ, the dead came forth from the graves as from bridal chambers” (Matins, Sunday of the Samaritan Woman, ode 4). The image of Christ the bridegroom coming to unite with humanity runs through the New Testament (Mark 2:19–20; John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25–32; Rev. 19:7–8) and is in line with the theme of the marriage between God and his people (Hos. 2:19; Isa. 54:5; Isa. 62:4–5; Ezek. 16:8). This symbolism is echoed in that of the wedding banquet (John 2:1–11; Matt. 22:1–14; Matt. 25:1–13), an image of the Eucharist through which we take part in the divine life. Weddings and banquets are two kinds of event in which the body plays a significant role. By using these images, Christ emphasizes that bodily functions essential to life,

such as nourishment and reproduction, are also called to be sanctified. Even here on earth, they can constitute participation in the reality of the kingdom insofar as they are experiences of communion.

However, rather than singing the praises of human love, like the Song of Songs, Byzantine hymns tend to employ symbolic transposition of a Platonic type: Christ becomes the “spouse of our souls” (synaxarion, Holy Tuesday). Similarly, hymns for the saints, who, by their lives, have become participants in the resurrected life of Christ, tend to emphasize the physical mortifications that they inflicted on themselves (most of these saints were, after all, ascetics). These mortifications that are the counterpart of the torments undergone by the bodies of the martyrs, according to the definition of monasticism as “white martyrdom.”

This tendency of hymnography to lean towards a Neoplatonic perspective rather than a biblical one is, in my view, a way of dodging the complex implications of salvation for our bodies. What does it mean concretely in our ascetic struggle to glorify God in the body? Is it only a matter of abstinence from food and sex? How does the sanctification of the material, which begins now, take place in a “carnal liturgy,” according to Olivier Clément’s expression?<sup>4</sup> As he affirms:

Let’s face it: before being handed over to the image merchants, eros was profaned by Christianity. Christianity has served the mystery of the person who builds himself in fidelity quite well. It has served the family well enough. But it has cursed the properly nuptial mystery of eros, restored by Christ in its original, paradisiacal fullness, exalted at the wedding

<sup>3</sup> See Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1987). For an example of Gnostic dualism, see *The Gospel of Mary*, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1: *Gospels and Related Writings*, ed. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 340–44.

<sup>4</sup> Olivier Clément, *Corps de mort et de gloire* (Paris: DDB, 1995), 25.

feast of Cana in the perspective of a Eucharistic feast, defined by Paul as a privileged expression of the union of Christ and the Church, of God and the sanctified earth.<sup>5</sup>

Far from promoting a positive vision of body and eros, the Neoplatonic reading of some hymns even sometimes confronts us with theological misunderstandings on these issues, especially concerning the notion of “corruption.”

### 3. What is the Corruption of the Body?

The most popular hymn in Orthodox piety is the one addressed to the Virgin:

Greater in honor than the Cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim, you gave birth to God the Word without corruption [ἀδιαφθόρως]; true Mother of God, we magnify you.

This irmos of the ninth ode of the canon of Matins of Holy Friday, composed by Cosmas of Maiuma, sounds very familiarly to the ear of the faithful, as it is sung at all liturgical celebrations.

What does it mean for the Virgin to give birth to God “without corruption”? A hasty and unfortunately widespread understanding, favored by the Neoplatonic angle mentioned above, sees in it a moral allusion to Mary’s virginity, who gave birth without the help of a man: corruption would simply mean sexual relations. This vision contributes powerfully to the deprecatory view of the body, which already emerges in so many other places in our celebrations, corroborated by numerous patristic testimonies to the solely reproductive function of the carnal union.<sup>6</sup>

The true interpretation of ἀδιαφθόρως, however, lies on the theological side. The corruption designated here is the garments of skin, the fallen state of the human person dominated by death. Such a state is characterized, in particular, by the instability of the body—subject from its conception to the tropism of dissolution and return to dust—but also by the corruption of the faculties traditionally considered “spiritual,” in particular the desire and the will (the discoveries of neuroscience suggest a material basis for these invisible faculties).

Christ’s passage through the tomb reveals to us that his human nature, unlike ours, is incorrupt, thus manifesting true humanity: “Christ has shown himself a stranger to corruption” (troparion of Holy Friday). The author of the hymn to the Virgin, Cosmas, develops this idea in the canon of Matins of Holy Saturday (he is the author of odes 6 through 9). The mystery of the incarnation lies in the fact that, having taken on flesh according to the new humanity, God nevertheless “made him to be sin” (2 Cor. 5:21), taking freely upon himself the consequences of our fallen humanity—notably death—to confer incorruption on us. This incorruption concerns both the ability of the body to escape decay and the ability of the mind to resist the influences of the passions. It is clear here that for Cosmas of Maiuma, “corruption” (διαφθορά) refers to fallen human nature. It is consistent with Cosmas’s interpretation of the term “flesh” (σάρξ) in the Holy Saturday canon, which also refers to human nature and not simply the body.

When he is born “without corruption” from the Virgin, Christ the divine person thus puts on human nature in its perfection. This happens because of the

<sup>5</sup> Olivier Clément, “À propos de l'érotisme,” *Contacts* 93 (1976/1): 76–77.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, PG 46:327ff.



divinity he shares with his Father from all eternity and which he fully preserves when he is given birth in time by the Virgin without the help of a male. The dogma of Chalcedon defines the relationship between divinity and humanity in Christ incarnated as “without confusion nor change, without division nor separation.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Mary’s virginity in the first place guarantees Christ’s divine-humanity, and secondarily attests to his moral purity and total consecration to God. She gives birth without corruption, that is, according to the mode of a new, deified humanity, of which Christ is the archetype. She becomes “more honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim” because she is the first mortal to participate fully in the divine life to which Christ gives us access. This mode of existence is characterized by a glorified body, which makes the Mother of God superior to the angels and not just equal to them, as is said in the hymnography of the ascetics who mortified their bodies. The Virgin Mary is not a unique case, however, but represents a model of holiness for all, having achieved the vocation offered to each human person.

What about the “natural” mode of generation in this perspective? Like any dimension of our present, fallen existence, sexual relations can be degrading when the body of the other is objectified as a mere instrument of pleasure or, on the contrary, can contribute fully to the sanctification of persons when it is inscribed in an authentic relationship of otherness. “Human love, love that is both loving and erotic, has something to do with God and remains for many people one of the only mystical experiences they can have here on earth,” argues Olivier Clément. “There is an asceticism of the couple, as there is an asceticism of the monastic life, and these



two asceticisms have the same goal: to make the transcendence of the person prevail over a dislocated nature, over a sexuality that is too often anonymous, over an indifference to the inferiority of the other—an indifference that can quickly become aggressive.”<sup>8</sup>

This asceticism is fully in line with the call for the sanctification of the body, which can be achieved—among other ways—by correct understanding of the sexual dimension of a couple’s love as an ultimate expression of communion without confusion.

### Conclusion

This brief analysis of the liturgical hymns reveals a widespread tendency to look down on the body. Wishing to express an ascetic warning against

<sup>7</sup> “Ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαίρετως, ἀχωρίστως.” Chalcedonian Definition (451) in T. Herbert Bindley, *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith* (London: Meuthen, 1899), [https://earlychurch-texts.com/main/chalcedon/chalcedonian\\_definition.shtml](https://earlychurch-texts.com/main/chalcedon/chalcedonian_definition.shtml).

<sup>8</sup> Olivier Clément, *Corps de mort et de gloire*, 84, 86.

the passions, the hymns often tend to favor a Platonic dichotomy of body and soul. The biblical understanding of the flesh, however, takes a wider view and envisages a transfiguration of human nature as a whole: body and soul, material and spiritual.

These tendencies are not just a matter of the Hellenistic or Semitic cultural sensibility of the hymnographers, for

they deal with a central issue regarding our salvation. “What is not assumed is not saved,” goes the patristic adage. A correct vision of the body, also called to deification, should be fully expressed in the *lex orandi*, so it reaches the ears of the faithful. Such an expression must be clear enough to be understood readily during the celebration, nurturing in truth our relationship with the living God. ✱

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#### LIVING TRADITION

## The Icon and the Body

Robert M. Arida

*We confess and proclaim our salvation in word and images.*

—*Kontakion, Sunday of Orthodoxy*

Iconography is one of the most important ways in which the body is affirmed and understood within a Christian context. This is because of iconography’s inseparable relationship with the incarnation. Both affirm unambiguously that the salvation, regeneration, transfiguration, and deification of everyone and everything depend upon God’s taking on human nature. This, of course, includes

God’s taking on a human body. Simply put, without the incarnation, and therefore without the body, the work of creation is incomplete and the divine economy becomes ineffectual. It is this Christological foundation—the reality of the pre-eternal Word and Son of God’s becoming a human being—that accelerates the development of icon theology over the two waves of iconoclasm that cover a period of almost one hundred years. The first wave begins in the eighth century and ends with the Council of Nicea in 787. The second