



THE CATHEDRAL AND THE ICON: THE THEOLOGY OF LIGHT

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Christian culture exists not only in modes of life and in the realm of ethics and morality, but it is also deeply intertwined with the artist expression of the West.

Whether that expression reifies Christian teachings, or even actively goes against it, the fact remains that the principle that informs western culture is Christianity.

One of the highest expressions of Christian culture occurred in the [Gothic age](#), which is also known as the "[Age of Cathedrals](#)," for it was in this era that most of Europe's cathedrals were built.

Of course, cathedrals were not only grand buildings, they were also embodiments of faith, and places of sanctity wherein the divine mystery of God could be felt.

The prototype of the Gothic cathedral is the [abbey church of St. Denis](#), just outside of Paris.

This monastery was under the direct control of the French kings and served as their burial place.

Around the middle of the twelfth-century, the abbot of St. Denis, [Suger](#), undertook to rebuild the abbey. In effect, the Gothic cathedral is the invention of Abbot Suger.

Given their grandeur, Gothic cathedrals came to dominate the medieval landscape.

The tall spires of the churches served as beacons to travelers and led them to the shrines enclosed within the church.

The bells rang out and regulated the lives of the people who lived within listening range. These same bells tolled for weddings and funerals, and announced the time of prayer and for work.

Thus, cathedrals were places where the divine was brought into presence, and as such, cathedrals shaped the destiny of the faithful.

Cathedrals were also places that brought together in a visible sense all that the earth provides and offers, from plants and animals, to saints and the intervention of God in history, through Jesus Christ.

Thus, primarily, cathedrals were places of iconographic representation. It is important therefore that the patron of the arts was the Virgin Mary, and each and every French cathedral therefore was dedicated to her; she was the Notre Dame (Our Lady).

The cathedral was not only a spiritual center, but also a geographical center for the faithful. This in turn was a reflection of the theology of the day, which placed God in the middle of all life, for nothing could exist outside of God.

Therefore, a cathedral is a mirror to nature, a mirror to instruction, a mirror to history, and a mirror to morality.

The mirror to nature is seen in the plant and animal forms that are represented in a comprehensive fashion.

Instruction is present in the personification of the [seven liberal arts](#) and the branches of learning taught in the universities of the day, often housed in churches and cathedrals.

History was found in the story of humanity from Adam and Eve to the Last Judgment.

And morality was seen in the figures depicting virtue and vice, the wise and foolish virgins, the saved and the damned in the Last Judgment, and in the hovering saints and angels and fleeing [gargoyles](#) and devils.

Here is the important point which is often neglected – the medieval mind was an allegorical mind (a way of thinking we have entirely lost in our literalist age).

The stress on representation in medieval art and architecture is on allegory, where all that is shown, created and depicted by human hands is read as great and vast examples of the redemptive qualities of God's mercy.

Gothic interiors are also flooded with light streaming through the stained glass.

There is an important transformation taking place in this sacred environment: Ordinary light is transformed and changed into something miraculously colorful and sublime.

This mirrors the process that the soul itself follows, for it too is transformed by holiness into something miraculous.

As well, the flow of colored light makes the entire cathedral ethereal and otherworldly.

We must see these stained glass windows within the context of a world where such display was rare. It was only in a cathedral that people could see the magical transformation of light taking place.

More importantly, this play of light suggested the mystery of God in that the ordinary light of day became prismatic, revealing colors that are ordinarily never seen.

This transformed light activated and animated the interior space of a cathedral, making the voids and the empty spaces into holy displays. Ordinary sunlight becomes sacred light, the holy light of God, which fuses the material with the immaterial into a harmonious whole.

Just as the material body contains the immaterial soul, thus, the cathedral is like the body, and the holy light within it is the soul, or spirit, or even the emblem of the Holy Ghost.

This light therefore is mystical, an example of God's divine light, which could change the mundane into

the colorful and miraculous.

Further, stained glass offered patterns of pure color and geometrical designs, thus promoting the illusion of infinite space.

It is always a mistake to explain medieval stained glass windows as images for illiterate peasants to look at, since they could not read the Bible. This is simply "fake news" created in the nineteenth century. Nothing is further from the truth.

Stained glass has nothing to do with educating peasants, but everything to do with the medieval theology of light. Since no one seems to know about this theology anymore, it is always easier to talk about images educating illiterate peasants.

Therefore, in the Middle Ages, stained glass replaced the mosaics and mural paintings of the early Christian and Romanesque churches – so that space itself became sacred. Suddenly, light is given both shape and meaning. Light becomes the paint on the canvas of the sacred interior.

The purpose of this artistic expression was innately religious, of course. The stress on allegory in the Gothic cathedral allowed for the presence of God to be felt. It was the mystical place where the divine manifested itself to the worshipper.

Thus, the cathedral became a liturgy in stone, glass and light, which the faithful minutely and piously heeded for instruction and guidance.

Given that the medieval mind was allegorical, therefore it was also highly sophisticated. How else could it achieve the perfect symmetry of cathedrals?

This, of course, dismantles the common misconception that the people of the medieval era were superstitious, dark-minded buffoons.

That is simply the false, yet enduring, mislabeling done by the Enlightenment, which sought to claim for itself the role of bringing humanity into "enlightenment" from the supposed wretched ignorance of the Middle Ages.

The medieval world served as a convenient foil for the [Enlightenment](#) philosophers, so they could privilege their own views.

Needless to say, this was an attempt to represent the seventeenth-century as the most brilliant age the world had ever seen.

Thus, the Enlightenment philosophers made very poor historians, but sadly their caricature of the Middle Ages has stuck.

In actuality, the medieval world was sensible, sagacious, practical, subtle, rational, scientific, and well-balanced.

The cathedral embodied all these characteristics.

But the medieval world also had something we have lost – a deep understanding of mysticism – that wisdom which knows how to learn from the mysterious, since not everything can be accessible by way of rationality.

This loss in the west has led to the lure of the mystical in eastern religions, which are, in fact, rather poor exponents, despite popularity.

Life must be a balance of reason as well as that unique ability to simply say, "I don't know," which is faith.

The medieval world knew how to say, "I don't know." We unwisely think that we can find it all on Google.

Thus, the cathedral was not merely a building, nor a just house of worship. Rather it was the opening into God's splendor, which could be viewed and used to better human life, and to better the soul.

Is this not the highest purpose of art? The betterment of the soul? But we have abandoned art to the ugliness of politics and its various agendas. We no longer even know what art is anymore, let alone what it is for.

By entering the cathedral the worshipper was reminded of the personification of the entire encyclopedia of God that was housed, and often hidden, in the world.

But there was also a very specific order to this revelation, for the Divine in a Gothic cathedral is a rational being, who was also Aristotle's [Prime Mover](#).

The cathedral was a place where God's plan for the world could be demonstrated and made visible. And the best way to do this was by showing harmony, which was allegorically expressed as Eden.

Thus, each part of the cathedral, from the tower to the spire, from the apse to the nave, from the transept to the choir – each section had to be harmonious to the whole, had to be Edenic.

This was an essential part of theology as well, for God was complete and harmonious. He did not exist in chaos and disorder. And the Gothic cathedral reflected this eternal, perfect structure.

A Gothic cathedral therefore turns the faithful gaze to the incomprehensible, sets the mind to consider the transcendent, and briefly lets the veil slip that hides the mystery of eternity, which is the real home and destination of all human souls.

The cathedral bridged the gap between the spiritual and the material, between the mass and the void, the natural and the supernatural, inspiration and aspiration, the finite and the infinite.

Here there was a union of the external and the internal worlds in architecture, as the inner world and the outer world flowed together through the glass-curtained walls.

That proportion of pier and flying buttress paralleled the thrust and the counterthrust of the interior vaulting on the outside.

The sculptural embellishments of the exterior were repeated in the iconography of the glass in the interior.

Through the medium of stained glass light was endowed with meaning and became holy illumination.

Nothing was superfluous; everything was crucial to sustain the whole – just as each soul was crucial in the grand scheme of God's redemption. Everything and everyone belonged. There could be no exclusion, except by human free will.

Is this why the gargoyles that hem the outside of cathedrals are so hideous, because they are allegories of free will misled from its true purpose, which is to understand its role in the grand plan of God?

This same process of transformation is also found in the icons that are housed in Orthodox churches.

Again, these representations are points of concentration, wherein the Divine is made visible so that the worshipper may comprehend the presence of God.

Just as a cathedral is a presencing of God, so an icon is a presencing of the transformational nature and quality of God.

It is in the icon that a worshipper may see the process that this transformation takes – from the mundane into the spiritual, from the physical to the metaphysical, from the ordinary to the mystical.

In one sense the icon may be seen as a parallel, though miniature, version of the cathedral, for the icon too seeks to make the ordinary extraordinary, and to give meaning to representation that lies in the realm of the divine.

The icon in itself is incomplete, for it needs the worshipper to fulfill it, to make it complete.

The worshipper is caught and swept up in the general stream of movement depicted in the icon.

The completion can only, however, be in the faithful imagination of the worshipper, since the icon requires that the worshipper arrive at the irrational (the Divine) by ingenious rationality (the depiction of

images), and to achieve the utmost immateriality (the salvation of the soul) through material manifestations (the icon itself).

Was not light God's very first creation? And thus it is light which is the truest architect of a cathedral, and also of the icon.

The medieval philosopher observed that light being the first creation was also therefore perfect, and therefore light is always associated with God.

That primeval separation of light and dark informs the entirety of human life – how we must bring the soul from darkness into light, from nothingness into eternal reality.

Is not the purpose of faith to understand? Faith and reason together are the basis of Christian art and architecture. Reason holds up the cathedral, faith illumines it. Reason delineates the contours of the image in an icon, faith makes it holy through meaning.

Both faith and reason are also properties of light, because without light all things are meaningless.

The photo shows the interior of the Church of St. Jeanne D'Arc, built in 1979, in Rouen, France. The stained glass windows date from the Renaissance (1520-1530) and originally illumined the twelfth-century Church of St. Vincent, which was destroyed in 1944, during an Allied bombing raid. However, the windows had been removed at the start of the war and were carefully preserved. They were installed, in 1979, in the present church, dedicated to St. Joan of Arc, who was burnt a short distance away, in the old market square of Rouen.

