

culture, the Nigerian Igbo, and of the whole Christian theological tradition. Moreover, unlike many African authors who refer to their traditions in an ahistorical way and without reference to the present, O. contends that the current pluralistic African context must be taken into account. Hence he rejects uncritical ways of approaching African traditions.

Surprising, however, is the absence of the liberation theology perspective, as it plays a great role in African moral discourse. (Authors like Engelbert Mveng and Jean-Marc Ela believe that, since the 19th century, liberation is the defining feature of African theology.) One would have expected from O.'s illustration greater attention to nonacademic and lay voices as producers of theology that deserve to be heard. Instead, he privileges a magisterial perspective by focusing on papal and African episcopal teaching.

I recommend this book to readers interested in becoming acquainted with the present status of African Christian theology and ethics; and moral theologians who want to engage the growing contributions of current African Christian theological ethics will find this volume a valuable resource.

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Beauty, Spirit, Matter: Icons in the Modern World. By Aidan Hart. Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2014. Pp. vii + 214. \$53.99.

Hart's critical framework of the spiritual role of matter as explored through the theology of the sacred icon takes on a renewed relevance and perhaps even a sense of urgency within a 21st-century cultural context. In a time when critical studies of the material cultures of religion have become increasingly important across disciplines, H. contributes to this turn by addressing the grace-bearing capacity of matter through the lens of liturgical art and "the broader implications of the icon's theology for our lives in the twenty-first century" (3).

H. describes himself as a painter of icons with over 30 years of experience, committed to elucidating the complexities of the theology of liturgical art through lectures and published essays over the past several years. The book's theological focus follows his previous work on praxis in the form of a magisterial technical painting manual (*Techniques of Icon and Wall Painting*, 2011) by underscoring the role of sacred art as striving to show the world transfigured as on Mount Tabor. H.'s overarching purpose is to "awaken our spiritual vision" (47), compatible with the theories of philosopher, theologian, and mystical writer Hugh of St. Victor (ca. 1096–1141), who taught that one is invited to "see" by the "eye within." The inner eye perceives the essence of time, which possesses and sheds its own light, illuminating various spiritual complexities. H. likewise contends that we can strengthen our relationship to God, creation, and human beings through a closer understanding of sacred icons and, more broadly, the spiritual role of the material world today in light of issues of ecology, human nature, beauty, and abstract art.

H.'s intimate knowledge of Orthodox theology underpins the book—he is an ordained reader in the church. This knowledge shines through by a compelling and well-curated selection of quotations from Scholastics, writers, artists, and philosophers. The modern framework allows, for example, Maximus the Confessor's discussion of the Logos—or inner essence of things perceived as spiritual realities—to be analyzed alongside modernist sculptor Brancusi's thoughts on how the role of the artist is to bring out “cosmic essence into . . . visible essence” (181).

In a topical essay (especially given the Pope Francis's recent encyclical *Laudato Si'*), H. addresses the current ecological crisis through the notion of incarnation. As beings of matter and spirit—an embodiment of the Logos—H. contends that humans are not only stewards of creation but also artists and craftspersons called to transfigure matter by making the invisible visible (88). Icons, which portray a microcosm of the world through the use of the elements (mineral pigments, yolk binders, panels of wood, and a hollowed-out section called an “ark” in both Greek and Russian), become examples of the “affirmation of the grace-bearing capacity of matter” (88). These sacred images, therefore, help guide the pilgrim-viewer through the world of forms to where spiritual transformation can occur.

In “The Renewal of Sacred Art” (41–77), H. addresses the issue of the “copyist trend” facing contemporary iconographers. The challenge he and others face is to “identify the timeless principles and then have the courage, intelligence, and skill to express these in an authentic way, not relying on endless reproductions of old works” (57). H. contends that iconographers are called to perceive the essence of their subjects and then manifest this essence in paint. Hence, rather than copying subjects, the iconographer should rely on the inspiration of the Spirit to unearth these spiritual qualities—similar to what Gerard Manley Hopkins in another context called the *instress* of a thing. Through his emphasis on liturgical art, H.'s book initiates an important dialogue about theory and praxis in the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, and how icons are created and used today.

The section on Romanticism begins to address important issues of post-Enlightenment spirituality and religion. A more sustained discussion of William Blake would have been compelling, given the late 18th-century artist's notion of art as a mediator between this world and a divine realm, as well as his 1825 attempt at traditional icon painting (*Virgin and Child*). Like H., Blake invited spectators to “enter into . . . images in his imagination, approaching them on the fiery chariot of . . . contemplative thought” where she or he would “meet the Lord . . . and be happy.” H. has, however, succeeded in pointing to important issues of modernism and religion that art historians have long been reluctant to address.

Over 32 beautifully reproduced color plates, including plates of many of H.'s icons, provide centerpieces for discussion. Black and white illustrations of Gospel scenes face the title pages of the essays. H.'s expansive and erudite reflections on the grace-bearing potential of matter span from the fruits of Eden (137) to roadside icons (185), and will benefit anyone seeking to understand the import of sacred art and religious material culture from a theological perspective rooted within liturgical tradition.

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