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ON THE SPIRIT OF PLACES OF WORSHIP – PRACTICAL ECUMENISM
OF THE POLISH CULTURAL BORDERLAND

O DUCHU MIEJSC KULTU – EKUMENIZM STOSOWANY
POLSKIEGO POGRANICZA KULTUR

Abstract

This paper presents selected examples of interaction between architecture, iconography and theology in contemporary Orthodox, Greek- and Roman-Catholic religious architecture built after the World War II period in Poland. It also shows the process of the evolution of traditional spatial and functional structures and applications of new iconography conventions in Christian temples. It covers problems in art as well as new essential ideological aspects of a symbological and liturgical nature. Examples of modern churches seem to prove that the separatist tendencies of Christian Churches and cultures are now being reversed; this is not only an outcome of mutual dialogue, exchange of ideas, values and different forms of worship, but it also confirms the authentic will of ecumenical unity in art. These examples are representative of the architecture of the cultural borderland, which attempts to synthesise both Western and Eastern Christian art.

Keywords: architecture, art, icon, theology, dialogue

Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono wybrane przykłady interakcji między architekturą, ikonografią chrześcijańską a teologią we współczesnej ortodoksyjnej, greckokatolickiej i rzymskokatolickiej architekturze sakralnej, zbudowanej po II wojnie światowej w Polsce. Ukazano proces ewolucji tradycyjnych konwencji architektonicznych i ikonograficznych. Ujawniono problemy sztuki oraz jej nowe, istotne aspekty ideologiczne natury symbolologicznej i liturgicznej. Przykłady współczesnych świątyń dowodzą odwrócenia separacyjnych tendencji chrześcijańskich Kościołów i kultur, co jest nie tylko symptomem wzajemnego dialogu, wymiany idei, wartości i różnych form kultu, lecz także symptomem potwierdzającym autentyczną wolę ekumenicznej jedności w sztuce. Przykłady te reprezentują architekturę pogranicza kulturowego i są próbą syntezy sztuki chrześcijańskiego Zachodu i Wschodu.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, sztuka, ikona, teologia, dialog

1. The profane versus the sacred

The existence of borderlands between cultures, nations and religions is a highly fascinating phenomenon. It inspires and even provokes reflection, but sometimes it is also highly dangerous as it refers to past conflicts and prejudices. Such was the case all across the world, after all. And it still is. Religious conflicts do take place and architecture, in a sense, is also a part of them. This has been proven throughout history both through acts of the mutual demolition of temples and opposition to their construction, as well as cases of mutual inversions and conversions, mutual remodelling projects and adaptations of Catholic churches, Protestant churches, Orthodox churches, mosques and synagogues. They are visible proof of ever-present religious exclusivism – of religious mission and of opposition towards religion, of proselytism and even religious wars. It is so all around the world and it is so within Christianity itself – from Scandinavia to the Balkans. It has been like this in Lithuania and in Ruthenia, in Hungary and in Romania. It is the same in the Balkans, in Turkey, Syria and Egypt to this day. We too have participated in this process of appropriation and exclusivism in Poland, from the dawn of history up to the present day. We were neither worse nor better.

Today, however, something has drastically changed in the world of the religious man's spiritual values. As before, temples are being demolished by all sides in Africa or in the Middle East, or are being adapted or converted into places of worship of another religion. But they are also being demolished in the West. In a fit of raging secularisation, they are either being demolished or converted to purposes that do not befit their former religious status. The significant escalation in aggression towards the sacred is progressing. From a complete negation of spirituality and total secularisation – to religious proselytising and religious war.

This cannot be ignored today. Forecasts and reported data are frightening. For instance – according to official forecasts of the Observatoire du Patrimoine Religieux – while there are around 100,000 Christian places of worship in France, including 45,000 parish churches, it is estimated that between 5,000–10,000 municipally managed temples will be demolished by the year 2030, which accounts for 5–10% of all temples. This is also happening in Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Ireland, Austria and even in Italy. In countries of Western Europe – just as in countries subjected to totalitarian communist rule until recently, particularly in the USSR, where 70,000 temples were destroyed during the communist period – they are once again being programmatically demolished or converted into restaurants, discos, storage buildings, hotels, shops, car repair shops and garages, and even into public houses and toilets. This was and is also happening here. We do this gladly in Poland as well. We are also guilty of sin.

Perhaps this is not the time and place to discuss this hurtful phenomenon in the context of deliberations on the culture of the Republic of Poland and its heritage – on the one-hundredth anniversary of it being restored to independence. But are historic moments and most important anniversaries not an excellent pretext for a moment of deeper reflection and thought on the various stages of Polish past or discussing difficult subjects? Perhaps it is the other way around, and the situation is better here than elsewhere? Perhaps we have more reasons to be hopeful, to have faith in a better future – one that brings joy and consolation in truth, good and beauty?

2. The borderland

Poland lies in a cultural, religious and national borderland. Both in its past and current state borders it has been situated on a border that divides Europe between Roman and Latin culture and Greek and Slavic culture. Christianity has breathed with two pairs of lungs here for a very long time. Wonderful temples stand here: Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches, in addition to molennas. Here, the bodies of ancestors lie together in ecumenical cemeteries. From generation to generation, their memory is celebrated. Eternal memory.

Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity have co-created the Christian spirituality of the Republic of Poland for over a thousand years. They are its autochthonic parts. They jointly shape its national and ethnic awareness. They build its culture and religious identity. Worshipers of the Greek faith – as Orthodox Christians were once known – constituted almost half of its residents, and more than half until the Union of Brześć of 1596. For over three centuries up to the present, the Orthodox Church has been the second-largest Christian Church in Poland in terms of the number of faithful. It constitutes a significant minority.

In the past, mutual contact and attempts at exchanging values between the two Christian rites were limited. Both Churches closed themselves off, sensitive to their dogmatic and doctrinal integrity. They often exacerbated their differences, making them more pronounced. They defended themselves from the influx of values that were alien to them, even at the level of spiritual values and art. However, this flow did indeed exist, despite the will of the Churches. Caused by the preferences of rulers and patrons of the arts, and sometimes in a spontaneous and uncontrolled manner, it created the diversity of this value, its synthesis that was difficult to reasonably explain.

Although the separation of both Churches – the Western and the Eastern – became a permanent caesura in the history of Christianity, for some time now, largely under the influence of ecumenical movements and a reduction of tensions, perhaps due to the numerous temple conversions or as an effect of the Second Vatican Council and joint declarations (for instance the one from Balamand in Lebanon), a certain transmission of values has indeed taken place. We are seeing living symptoms of mutual exchanges in ideas, forms of worship and values – in architecture and the arts – that often stimulate both sides.

Are these symptoms of an ecumenical meeting? Or is it a – jointly postulated by both Churches – ‘meeting in truth and love’?

For if not here – this living ecumenism, unburdened by the proselytism and exclusivism of the Churches, without incorporation and combination, without mixing and without division, in direct contact, in such a large and rich alloy of cultures and religions, with such a representation of nations. In that, historically, lived as a community and that experienced tragic divisions: both social, local and sometimes familial – then where should it take root?

Particularly here, in the borderland, in the east of Poland, we today often encounter cases of joint ecumenical services. Prayer weeks, joint Bible translations, the joint blessing of places of worship and public buildings, joint state celebrations, weddings and funerals, joint Catholic and Orthodox holidays included in both calendars.

However, the question of whether the time has come to start building joint temples begs to be asked. Is it time for a joint space for prayer to be performed forever – perhaps not in intercommunion yet, but jointly, at one altar, perhaps separately and not at the same time – but nevertheless the same one?

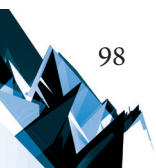
We do have some experience in this, that is quite recent. Perhaps it is not fully the result of the new ‘meeting’ of the Churches in the spirit of ‘truth and love’, for this has come about either as a result of conversion or being forced to jointly use the same temples. However, the meeting has taken place sometimes lasting several decades. It is taken part in by both Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, Evangelicals and Greek Catholics. At one altar – as it has taken place to this day in Kulno, and – until recently – in the Lemko Orthodox church in Bielanka. And at separate altars – like in the Orthodox church in Zdynia, or the Evangelical church in Pasłek – but in a common prayer space. After all, this was seen as almost impossible until only relatively recently.

Admittedly, this phenomenon of the exchange of values is not entirely new; it has existed in this part of the borderland for a very long time. One example is the penetration of musical culture to Red Ruthenia from Poland with her Roman polyphony. Another is the adoption of scholastic theology by Kiev and Moscow in the times of metropolitan bishop Piotr Mohyla in the seventeenth century. Another is the later incorporation of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque elements in the architecture and art of Orthodox churches.

The emergence of the rather peculiar alliance of the eastern icon with the Western Gothic style is quite a phenomenon in Poland. Examples include the fifteenth-century Ruthenian and Byzantine frescoes in the churches of the period of the first Jagiellons, the Gothic architecture of Lithuanian and Belarusian Orthodox churches, as well as the Ukrainian churches of the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

In the Castle Chapel of the Holy Trinity, founded by King Jagiełło, all the walls, the column and the vaults were densely covered with icons by Ruthenian painters (Fig. 1). In the collegiate church in Wiślica, built by King Casimir the Great, beautiful fragments of iconography from around 1400 have survived. The presbytery of the Sandomierz collegiate church was covered in eastern icon paintings ca. 1423. Soon after, additional paintings were uncovered and subjected to conservation. Finally, in the so-called Jagiellonian Chapel of the Cross and the Holy Spirit of the Wawel Cathedral, founded by King Casimir IV Jagiellon, which is counted among its most valuable interiors, Ruthenian and Byzantine Pskov school frescoes were painted. All of these exceptional paintings harmonise excellently with the Gothic geometry of the vault divisions. Their value primarily lies in synthesis – in the harmonious relationship between Gothic architecture and the art of the icon.

One special case of the alliance of Orthodox religious art with the Gothic style is a group of Byzantine and Gothic Orthodox churches from the fifteenth and sixteenth century. They comprise a typologically separate group of defensive, nine-bay, cruciform or cruciform and dome-covered temples, with either one or three apses, flanked by four towers. What is most attractive in them is their Gothic outer costume, which they seemingly put on. They feature Gothic patterns of groin, diamond and star vaults, gabled roofs, portals and windows with pointed arches, brick patterns, rhomboid decorations or Gothic brick. But the manner of combining all of this into a whole of liturgical and spatial orders – of forms of decoration



or iconography – is completely different and distinctively eastern. This group includes Orthodox churches in Synkowicze, Nowogródek, Mołomożejków, Kodeń, Brześć or Vilnius. The katholikon of the Annunciation in Supraśl (Fig. 2), with its groin and dome interior disposition and Gothic vault, wall and column structure, features exceptionally valuable frescoes made by the artel of the Serbian Monk Nectarius – the monk who is probably also the author of the famous hermeneia.



Fig. 1. The Castle Chapel of the Holy Trinity in Lublin (photo by author)



Fig. 2. The Orthodox katholikon of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Supraśl Lavra (photo by author)

3. The East

The adaptations of post-Evangelical churches of Lower Silesia, Pomerania and Warmia and Masuria to satisfy the religious needs of the Orthodox and Greek Catholic populations that were displaced from their homes after Operation ‘Vistula’ in 1947 are contemporary examples of this extraordinary alliance.

One of the first examples is the cathedral of the Birth of the Mother of God in Wrocław. This historical Gothic church of St. Barbara, initially Roman Catholic and then Evangelical, is now an Orthodox temple. The authors of the adaptation of its interiors were Jerzy Nowosielski and Adam Stalony-Dobrzański. The ideological programme of the iconography here is built by eschatology. It reveals itself in the iconostasis, with its row of icons depicting – as in the former Gothic altar of the church – the history of the earthly life of Christ (Fig. 3).

The iconostasis is almost an openwork form that is Gothic in its structure. It combines a deep presbytery with the naos of the Orthodox church. The large choro builds the central character of the space. It 'climbs down' from above, as if it wanted to replace the dome that is traditionally placed there, a dome which we never encounter in western Gothic temples but that is necessary in an Orthodox one. The iconostasis is crowned and ideologically connected by the elevated Crucifixion. It connects the theological programme with the paintings of the vaults; it references Italian paintings of the thirteenth century. Returning to times of the separation of both traditions – Greek and Latin – it attempts to bring them closer together [1].

Stained-glass windows are a technique and philosophy of painting with light that has been taken from the West and developed in a manner appropriate to the icon. Typically for Byzantine apses, the eastern one displays the Mother of God – the Sign, with a cycle of scenes from Her life. Also classically, the Western one depicts the Last Judgement.

The Orthodox church of the Dormition of the Mother of God in Krakow is located in a townhouse from the end of the fourteenth century that was later adapted to serve as a synagogue. Its unique iconography was created towards the end of the 1990s by Jerzy Nowosielski. The eastern orthodox temple is depicted on the fresco on the arcade of the vestibule – Praise to the Mother of God. The spatial layout resembles the naves of Evangelical churches with their galleries, and partially the pronaos of Lemko Orthodox churches. The historical two-row iconostasis has been supplemented with new icons in the Sovereign tier. However, it did not feature the necessary scene of the Deesis, which is why it was placed behind the iconostasis on the axis of the wall. Christ Pantocrator with the Little Deesis and the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist. Above them are the Mandylion and the Oranta, while below is the icon of Christ's Descent into the Hell. All of the icons are flanked by abstract and figurative stained-glass windows featuring geometricized symbols of the angelic world (Fig. 4). Thanks to the superimposition of two planes in space, the historical iconostasis, the icons and the stained-glass windows create the joint gabled composition of the new iconostasis. They bind the iconostasis with the 'eastern wall' of the hieratheion. The entirety is crowned by the icon of the Oranta, which has been ever present in the apses of Orthodox churches.

Above the temple, in the refectory, stands the iconostasis that Nowosielski painted for the small village of Orzeszkowo near Hajnówka. There, in opposition to their priest, 'the people of God' did not allow it to be taken inside the church. It was too difficult, too modern, too simple and incomprehensible for them. The beautiful work of the ingenious master clashed with the devotional expectations of the faithful – for neither the first nor the last time in his life. Nowosielski painted the most beautiful icons in the 1990s in this refectory, on the 'living' wall-boarding wood. Naturally, the wood can be seen through them. It marks its existence in the world of temple art. Icons sanctify nature, they lead it further into an unbelievable world (Fig. 5).

When discussing temple conversions and their ecumenical adaptation to a different denomination than the original, largely through iconic efforts, it is also worth mentioning three peculiar Greek Catholic churches.

For the first – the Uniate church in Wroclaw – the crypt of St. Bartholomew, which is located in the lower church of the Collegiate of the Holy Cross, Jerzy Nowosielski prepared an



Fig. 3. The Orthodox cathedral of the Birth of the Mother of God in Wrocław. Interior design and iconography by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

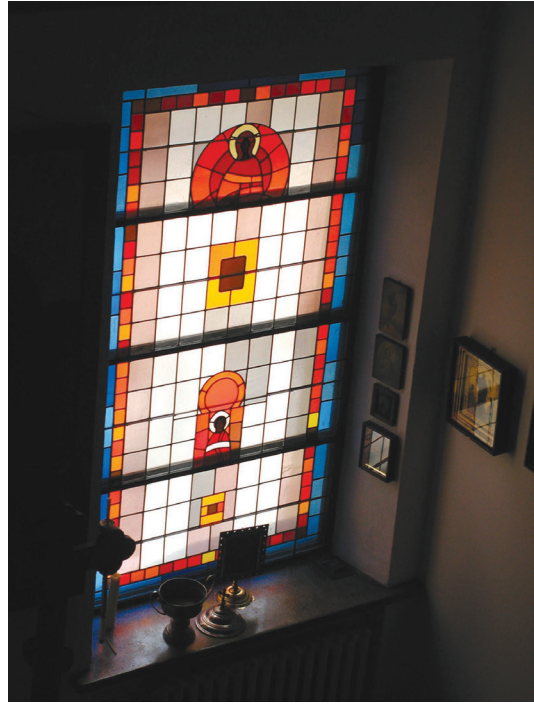


Fig. 4. The Orthodox church of the Dormition of the Mother of God in Kraków. Stained-glass windows in hieratejon of the church by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)



Fig. 5. The Orthodox church of the Dormition of the Mother of God in Kraków. The refectory. Iconostasis and iconography by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)



iconostasis, polychrome fragments and interior furnishings in the years 1984–1985. In 1996, 10 stained-glass windows (Fig. 6) were produced according to his design, in addition to banners, liturgical objects and icons. A most beautiful temple was created. Unfortunately, it was not to be so forever. In 1999 the furnishings, apart from the stained-glass windows, were transferred to the renovated cathedral church of St. Vincent and St. Jacob that was converted into a Uniate church.

Of note is the fact that the stained-glass icon is an extraordinary alliance of the icon and Gothic. This is a very dangerous alliance. The icon has its canonical form, set by the many centuries of the tradition of its existence in the East. The stained-glass window, apart from its polygonal structure of surface divisions and the more abstract, non-anthropological imaging convention, uses a different form of the manifestation of light in nature. In the icon it is about reflection, while here it is about going through matter. In the icon it is the light that emanates from it, while here luminescence results from translucence.

Although both methods of depicting sanctity – both techniques of icon painting and stained-glass window production – were used by both Churches, they came to be accentuated differently throughout history and even different, although similar, theological interpretations. They also became a part of the arsenal of tradition in a different manner, and have also remained there in a different form. At present they have become very close to each other. They have also undoubtedly brought the East and West closer together.

Today the cathedral church of St. Vincent and St. Jacob is one of the oldest temples in Wrocław, founded along with a monastery for the Franciscans, who came here from Prague in around 1240. It was a three-nave hall church and had a single or two-aisle presbytery. Its remodelling and extension projects in the fourteenth and fifteenth century provided the church with a very tall and long main nave. After many Franciscans converted to Protestantism at the start of the sixteenth century, it became abandoned and was taken over by the Norbertines, who devoted the temple to St. Vincent. In 1810, after the secularisation of the order, the church was converted to a parish church. In the closing days of the Second World War it suffered heavy damage: its tower collapsed, as did a part of the wall of the aisle and the vaults along with it. It was rebuilt and served as a military church for some time. In 1997 Pope John Paul II and cardinal Henryk Gulbinowicz transferred the temple to the Uniates.

This was not a project planned by Nowosielski, but it was placed in a space that was so different from its original one that it fully and naturally blended into it. The striking monumentalism of the structure takes everything towards the heavens, towards the Gothic vaults. It does not dominate, but also lifts the rather short iconostasis towards them. Semi-openwork, like in Wrocław's Orthodox cathedral, opens and links the nave with the presbytery. It constitutes a sort of geometric sign within space, in the form of a simple traditional cross-beam with a crucifix. It is perceived in an iconic manner only from a position immediately in front of it. Further away, it disappears in the void of the church. The seven 'abstract' icons of the Sovereign tier, placed on the crowning beam in an applicative manner, delicately underscore their theological expression. Crowned with the scene of the Crucifixion and the figures of the Mother of God and St. John the Theologian (Fig. 7), supported by delicate columns, it appears almost identical to the past architrave of the altar templons from Christianity's first millennium.



Fig. 6. The Greek Catholic church in the crypt of St. Bartholomew located in the lower church of the Collegiate of the Holy Cross in Wrocław. Stained-glass windows by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)



Fig. 7. The Greek Catholic church in the cathedral church of St. Vincent and St. Jacob in Wrocław. Iconostasis by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

This unbridled might of the Gothic walls – their abstract fragmentation into thousands of bricks – excellently corresponds with the abstract mysticism of the iconostasis and the icons. It is simultaneously present and absent, as if suggesting a different religious reality without any devotion, vanity or kitsch. It is austere and solemn, with theological expression. It is an expression reaching to the essence of the sacred – of this there can be no doubt.

Another highly interesting example of the synthesis of the art of the East and the West is the similarly Gothic Roman Catholic church in Górowo Iławeckie (formerly Landsberg), that was built in the years 1335–1367. During the Reformation it became an Evangelical church and in 1980 it started to fulfil the function of a Greek Catholic church of the Exaltation of the Cross. Another unique Eastern Christianity church was created here by Nowosielski in 1985. He did so in an extraordinarily restrained manner by using an iconostasis with a large crowning cross resembling the historical cross of St. Francis (Fig. 8) and icons painted directly on the red, mortared Gothic brick. Images on ‘living brick’ are a symbolic transmittance of Divinity through matter and its sanctification. The icon of the Mandylyon-Acheiropitos is also an additional conveyor of the historical



Fig. 8. The Greek Catholic church of the Exaltation of the Cross in Górowo Iławeckie Iconostasis and iconography by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

beginnings of the icon, recorded in the legend of King Abgar. This Greek Catholic church is an excellent meeting of the East and the West.

The former missionary church in the complex of the Metropolitan Theological Seminary in Lublin was built in the years 1719–1736. It was expanded around 1890 to include a Gothic Revival chapel as an extension of the presbytery. Intended for use by Greek Catholic clerics, in the years 1988–1989 the chapel became the church of St. Jehoshaphat. It was given a modern iconostasis–tableau, ascetic in its expression, beautifully painted by Professor Jerzy Nowosielski yet again. Restrained in form, yet suggestive in its content, it blends into the Gothic interior as if it were tailored specifically for it (Fig. 9).

The Greek Catholic chapel of the Foundation of St. Vladimir in Krakow, which, unfortunately, has been closed, also appears extraordinary. It served as a place of worship for a very long time. Due to the termination of a rent contract, despite protests from the entire cultural community, it serves a different Lord now. It is currently a restaurant. After the restoration of the chapel, it literally became a restaurant. It was also a masterwork of art, entirety designed and created by Nowosielski (Fig. 10).

One example of an interesting alliance is the Orthodox church of the Birth of the Mother of God in Gródek. Professor Jerzy Nowosielski and Professor Adam Stalony-Dobrzański were the authors of an excellent polychrome, made here in the 1950s. Noble figurative paintings were masterfully combined with the calligraphy of liturgical texts. Unfortunately, the original, beautiful, short and semi-openwork iconostasis did not survive intact. Only its Royal Doors



Fig. 9. The Greek Catholic chapel in the complex of the Metropolitan Theological Seminary in Lublin. Iconostasis by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

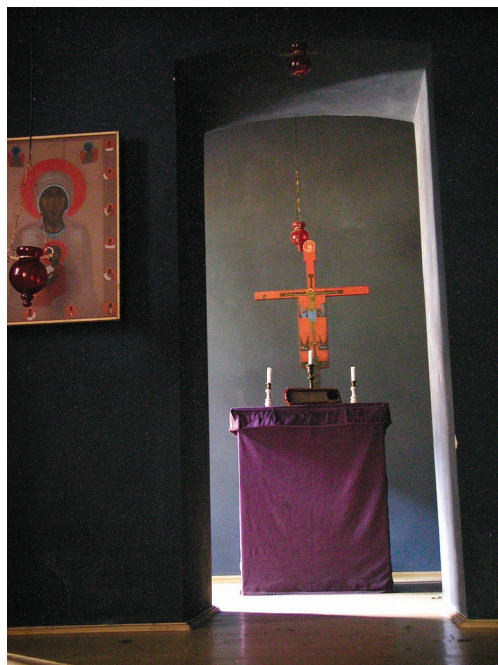


Fig. 10. The Greek Catholic chapel of the Foundation of St. Vladimir in Krakow. Design of interior and iconography by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)



Fig. 11. The Orthodox church of the Birth of the Mother of God in Gródek. Iconography by Adam Stalony-Dobrzański and Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

have survived, and it was truly one of Nowosielski's exceptional works. The stained-glass windows made by Stalony-Dobrzański were also excellent (Fig. 11).

Incidental as it may appear, the most spectacular example of a project from this period is the Orthodox church of the Holy Trinity in Hajnówka, whose construction took place in the years 1973–1992. It is the only Orthodox church of this size and spectacularity in Poland. It is the only traditional and, at the same time, rare example of the avant-garde. Being a reinterpretation of traditional canons, unbound by the burden of historical revival styles, it goes boldly against contemporary changes in culture, particularly in the – currently minimalist – modernist architecture of the West.

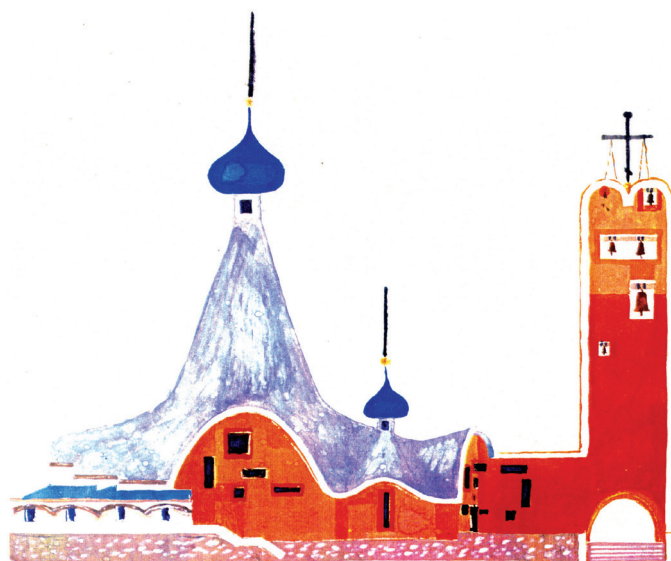


Fig. 12. The Orthodox church of the Holy Trinity in Hajnówka. Conceptual painting of the church by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

This Orthodox church was designed by Jerzy Nowosielski and Aleksander Grygorowicz. Nowosielski was originally the author of the wonderful iconography of the church, both in its interior and on the outside walls. He was also the author of the ideological conceptual proposal of the architecture and its first drawings. Unfortunately, they were not put to use (Fig. 12).

The temple features references to classical cruciform and dome solutions of the inscribed cruciform type. It combines the historical heritage of Orthodox church architecture with contemporary concrete technologies and the possibilities of its sculptural modelling. The interior of the temple is a cruciform, domed, nine-bay structure, classical for Orthodoxy. It is a negative reflection of the external form. It is esoteric, mystical.

That which could be implemented in architecture and remained from the original proposal is the freeform composition, sculptural profile line and the symbolism of forms and orders. It was not possible to implement Nowosielski's icons, and it is for them that the temple was designed. A pity.

The Orthodox baptistery of St. John the Baptist in Bielsk Podlaski is a universal project in terms of its overarching idea. Its interior has an original and absolutely unconventional sign-

-like liturgical area scheme (Fig. 13). It is built up by the red, profiled altar arch – a sign of the Royal Doors of the iconostasis. It highlights the synthetic unity of the vertical and horizontal orientation of the church, focused by this arch at the Eucharistic centre. This spatial message is developed by the icons of the Archangels that are placed underneath the dome of Old Testament Thrones and the symbol-icon of the Holy Ghost. In the niche of its symbolically ‘walled up’ eastern doors is the Crucifixion. Only the Saviour can pass through here during His ‘arrival from on high’, on Parousia. It is a true masterwork of contemporary religious art [2].



Fig. 13. The Orthodox baptistery of St. John the Baptist in Bielsk Podlaski. Interior design, altar arch and iconography by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

4. The West

The past examples of ecumenism in the arts and in architecture have their contemporary continuation in Roman Catholic temples. They are a testament to the universalism of the icon, its journey beyond the borders of cultures. Today the Christian West is developing its mystagogical function. A transfer of spiritual gifts has taken place, from the Eastern Church to the Western one.

The polychromes in the church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in the Jelonki district of Warsaw are painted on mortared brick walls. They are not merely the church's decoration or a beautifying addition – they are a deliberate theological message. With the rather pointed structure of the arches and vault surfaces, the applicative dividing lines and signs-icons have a character that clearly neutralises this sharpness, one that is contemplative (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. The Roman Catholic church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in the Jelonki district of Warsaw. Iconography by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

The polychromes of the church in Tychy are wonderful, yet unfinished. The church's intriguing architecture, designed by Stanisław Niemczyk, resembles an archaic desert tent, or perhaps the Old Testament Tabernacle itself. Nowosielski inscribed into it a programme that was compliant with the calling of the church – the Holy Spirit. He is present in the entire structure of the iconography, painted on a tightly boarded cover. This manner of depiction on the visible texture of the base, known from the previously painted Orthodox church of St. Nicholas in Michałowo, became the convention that led the unity of spirit and matter here, melding it into one – a convention of the visibility of matter and its theosis through art (Fig. 15).

This programme is already present in the blue band of the ray that accentuates the main axis of the temple, as if piercing the heavens by the will of the Holy Ghost, symbolically summoned under the guise of a dove. It is present in the little flames that dance in red above the figures of the saints. On the axis, a large figure of a praying Theotokos Oranta is located. She is accompanied by Old Testament patriarchs from the first millennium, prophets and kings, as well as the apostles, martyrs, Fathers and Doctors of a still-undivided Church, of both the East and the West. On the side axis of the transept are two scenes: the Transfiguration and the Crucifixion. At the centre, underneath the skylight of the roof lantern, as if underneath the dome of an Orthodox church, is the scene of the Deesis: the Mother of God, John the Baptist and the veil of the *veraicon* between them. Opposite is the Archangel Michael, who guards the approach.

The Romanesque Revival church of Divine Providence in Wesola resembles early Christian buildings. It is ascetic, orderly in its structure. The apse is dominated by the Mother of God the Oranta, but without Emanuel in the medallion, as it was initially meant to be. In



Fig. 15. The Roman Catholic church of The Holy Spirit in Tychy. Iconography by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)



Fig. 16. The Roman Catholic church of Divine Providence in Wesola. Interior design, altar templon and iconography by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

front of her, on the beam of the templon, is the Crucifixion in a transposition of the Cross of St. Francis. Christ and His Mother are, however, together. This resulted in the spatial superimposition of both depiction planes. The Madonna raises her hands in prayer and the placement of the cross makes it appear as if she is holding it in her open hands. It is a bold innovation, with a deep theological expression (Fig. 16).

On the border between the apse and the nave, Nowosielski built the templon of the altar. An iconostasis was, after all, present in nearly all temples of both Eastern and Western Christians. The architecture is excellently supplemented by an abstract ceiling and stained-glass windows. A true angelology. The cycle of the Stations of the Cross is also a masterpiece. It is drowned in greys, almost without light. Painted with all of the realism of the time and space of historical Jerusalem.

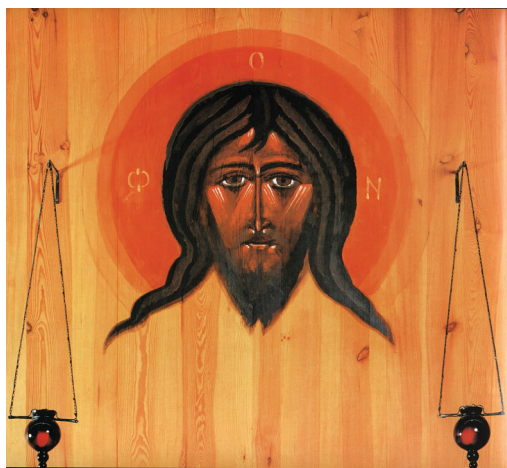


Fig. 17. The Roman Catholic church of the Immaculate Conception in the Azory district of Krakow. Icon of the Mandylion on the retable of the main altar by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

A similar project is the cycle of the paintings in the church of the Immaculate Conception in the Azory district of Krakow. Here Nowosielski painted the Stations of the Cross and the retable of the main altar. On a large, rectangular panel we can see three of its final stations play out. Painted on pine boards, they display their graining and divisions, their dark knots and the golden tone of the timber. They resemble the truly heavenly gold of the icons (Fig. 17).

Both instances of the Stations of the Cross are a certain breakaway from the classical religious paintings of the West. They are an example of the contemporary, unconventional transposition of the art of the icon. They are proof of the immense possibilities of the development of past canons and the creating of an original icon text that is replete with theological content on their basis.

The Greek Catholic church of the Birth of the Mother of God in Biały Bór was built in the 1990s. It is an innovative work by Nowosielski. It has a universal, super-confessional expression. It is minimalist, as in the West, and iconic, as in the East (Fig. 18). The temple resembles early Christian basilicas with its austerity. The simplicity of forms, the limited lighting and small square and circular windows bring the architecture of Syria, Egypt or Mesopotamia to mind. The external narthex



Fig. 18. The Greek Catholic church of the Birth of the Mother of God in Biały Bór. Architectural design, interior design and iconography by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

resembles the historical Syrian and Coptic atriums. The interior is central and elongated, with a lowered floor in the centre. The three red arches of the altar partition bring to mind the arch of the baptistery in Bielsko. The meniscus of the quasi-dome builds the vertical axis of the church. It creates the necessary ideological connectivity – although here it does so without the use of light – between the naos with the ‘super-heavenly’ sphere and the Pantocrator who rules there, unchallenged. Behind the altar, in front of the eastern window of the eastern wall, is a beautifully painted and innovatively placed Crucifixion. It shines with the light of the ‘arrival from on high’ (Fig. 19).

The two-tower facade opens to all the six cardinal directions. Underneath the towers is the external narthex – resembling the past Syrian and Coptic atriums. At the top there is a double Dutch gable with icons of the archangels Michael and Gabriel, as well as a Greek cross with 5 stigmata. It is this cross that descended to hell. One archangel led it there, and the other triumphantly led it out. It is a beautiful, universal message, written in an old apocryph. Below is the western Veraikon with the transfigured image of the Man of Sorrows.

The cross in the church of St. Dominic in the Służew district of Warszawa is a strong act of religious concentration (Fig. 20). The icon of the Crucifixion became the central icon in its presbytery, ordering and focusing on it its liturgical space. It would be appropriate to note, from Nowosielski, that the depiction of Crucified Christ was the most widespread type of icon in Medieval Italy. Byzantine-Italian crucifixes painted on wooden boards, the *croce dipinta*, are typical of twelfth and thirteenth-century Tuscan art, in addition to the so-called *maniera greca*. They came



Fig. 19. The Greek Catholic church of the Birth of the Mother of God in Biały Bór. The icon of the Crucifixion by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)



Fig. 20. The Roman Catholic church of St. Dominic in the Służew district of Warsaw. The icon of the Crucifixion by Jerzy Nowosielski (photo by author)

to Italy along with Syrian monks. These enormous icons, so-called *croci storiate*, along with the figures of the Mother of God and St. John the Theologian, as well as scenes from the Passion of Christ, once crowned the top of every Italian church's iconostasis architrave. They were commonly called the Cross of St. Francis or the San Damiano Cross. It was this cross that became the subject of St. Francis' contemplation, which was so beautifully depicted by Giotto on his fresco in the church in Assisi. These beautiful icons have survived. They became the connector between the Christian West and East. They remain in this role to this day.

This cross has become an earthly, vertical symbol of Nowosielski's contact with heaven. For true art, a true icon, comes down from heaven. It descends upon us like the holy angels. Such it has always been in the Divine order. Vertically, instead of horizontally.

In the second current of the journey of the art across the borderland, we can mention the contemporary Orthodox church of the Resurrection in Białystok. It has a traditional symbolic structure, being merely clothed in the stylish outer costume of a temple, tailored from Byzantine Gothic. It is, however, a cultural fashion, instead of a worship-related one. It is a structure and 'crystallinity' – the pinnacles, buttresses and gargoyles or cross-shaped applications – that is so distinct of the Gothic style [3].



Fig. 21. The Orthodox church of the Resurrection in Białystok. Architectural design by Jerzy Uścińowicz (photo by author)

The form of the Orthodox church highlights its devotion. The symbolism of the Holy Sepulcher, Anastasis and Jerusalem's Temple of Resurrection is encoded in its geometry. Crystalline forms refer to the Revelation of St. John and his description of New Jerusalem 'coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband' (Fig. 21). The interior is completely different: it is circular instead of polygonal, and it is built on the basis of the geometry of the intersection of the shape of the octagon and the Greek cross. The centrally suspended dome, cut off from the vaults using four light arches, is an innovation. They traditionally rise upwards, as in Byzantium, towards its dominance and unreality – towards highlighting its 'super-heavenly' status.

5. Colophon

The art of both Churches – the East and the West – can no longer be separated or pulled apart. They both live in a state of differentiation, but also of a dialectic, potential unity – on the path of 'meeting and dialogue' – particularly here, in Poland, in the borderland. It is worth remembering. It is in these buildings, with all their diversity and similarity, autonomy and unity, that the Christian world returns to its original unity. This unification is taking place naturally,

without being forced. It is being performed in a direct, open way. It took place almost 1,000 years prior to Poland regaining independence in 1918 and has been taking place since. It is not only a meeting. It is not only a dialogue. It is something more. In this attempt at synthesis, art gains meaning and attains its goal. It is fulfilled in what it was, in essence, created for.

Is it not true, then, that – as Fyodor Dostoevsky once said – ‘beauty will save the world’ [4]? Today we can – although perhaps still timidly – add ‘all of it’.

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