

The Forces of Darkness and the Forces of Goodness: Jerzy Nowosielski's Concept

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Abstract The paper aims at answering the question to what extent, according to Jerzy Nowosielski (the Polish artist, Orthodox theologian and philosopher [1923–2011]), the forces of darkness affect goodness. Despite the Manichean views that evil dominates the empirical reality, Nowosielski claims that goodness is revealed within this world and imposes a divinized status upon the cosmos. In this process a crucial role is played by art, which belongs to the sacred sphere. The Polish artist, following the Orthodox theology, states that it is only beauty and goodness that can save the world. Nowosielski focuses upon the Orthodox icon as the most important means of participation in the divinized cosmos. Thus art constitutes a true home for the artist within this evil empirical reality; it brings eschatological hope not only to human existence but also to the cosmic life.

Who Was Jerzy Nowosielski?

During the ceremony awarding the title of doctor *honoris causa* of the Jagiellonian University to Jerzy Nowosielski in Kraków on January 13, 2003, Mieczysław Porębski said in his laudation: “Not only does Nowosielski paint, he also writes. He writes, and converses. In his writings and conversations, we find everything that can be found in his art – existential and philosophical reflection, truly inspiring knowledge of the mysteries of faith, cults, liturgical rites of the European and non-European East as well as the West; of the glory of the *Mediterraneum* as well as the damp depths of the North.”¹

¹M. Porębski, *Nowosielski* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003), p. 250.

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The reconstruction of the philosophical and theological views of the Orthodox icon painter is not easy. Nowosielski's knowledge relies on an understanding of many fields – most importantly: philosophy, religion and art. A synthetic formulation of his views becomes possible mostly through an insightful analysis of numerous interviews conducted with the artist. The gist of his thought can be expressed as a combination of the Eastern Orthodox tradition and elements of the gnostic knowledge. The theologian does not explicitly specify any gnostic sources of his vision of the world apart from Manichaeism.

He was an artist, an unorthodox Orthodox theologian, who expressed his views straightforwardly, unyieldingly, with astounding frankness and without academic support. Presenting his thoughts, he preferred to be heretic rather than orthodox. In his view, heresy is a different opinion, a right to freedom of speech, a right to oppose the official teachings of the Church.

Regarding himself as a heretic and a gnostic, Nowosielski stood in opposition to the official and binding “school” of theology of the Church. The views of the artist as a declared heretic place him in the movement of opposition to rigid orthodoxy. His numerous questions addressed to the Church are an attempt to “renew and resurrect” the original Good News.

Nowosielski, declaring himself as a gnostic, continued his studies in gnosticism throughout his entire life. Therefore, he is considered a heretic by his contemporaries. In this context, the words of Jerzy Prokopiuk prove valid: “The gnostics in various forms were thrown into the underground of Christianity. They gave rise to the so-called Esoteric Christianity (...). I think that the tragedy of Christianity in its entire history was the fact that gnosis was suppressed and thrown into the underground.”²

If we assume that the statement of Gilles Quispel, who says that the gnostic movement regards itself as an “extra-ecclesiastical” Christianity, “Christianity without Church” is true, then the views of Nowosielski comply with this approach.³ Gnosis is an answer to the questions which cannot be answered by the official teachings of the Church because of a dogmatic and one-sided formulation of Christianity.

For Nowosielski, gnosis is a form of knowledge, an initiation experienced especially in the process of reading the Bible. In the Christian West, “the Bible is read”; in the East, it is learned, contemplated. As Jerzy Prokopiuk says: “Gnosis (Gr. *gnosis*) is identical with a direct inner (non-intellectual) experience of God, the essence of things, self, others, as well as the world – through “enlightenment” or “initiation”.”⁴

Nowosielski's assertions about the unknown God are not the only elements of gnostic origin. So are the statements about Sophia – the Creator of the world, about the dualism of light and the dark, the good and evil, spirit and matter, soul (mind) and body, and the teaching about the God-man.

²J. Prokopiuk, *Labirynty herezji* (Warszawa: Warszawskie Wydawnictwo Literackie, MUZA SA, 1999), p. 58.

³Cf. G. Quispel, *Gnoza*, trans. Beata Kita (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1988), p. 105.

⁴J. Prokopiuk, *Labirynty herezji*, op. cit., p. 8.

As a gnostic, the author of *Mój Chrystus* did not share his world of mysteries with others. He kept the innermost hidden knowledge only to himself, and he emphasized clearly that he did not give interviews about his personal experiences. The knowledge of the gnostic is in reality a hidden knowledge, an individual revelation of the bond between the human and the Divine being. It relies on intuition, not on discursive thought. The following words of Gilles Quispel are pertinent in this context: "(...) the gnostic possesses a receiving apparatus not accessible to anyone else. The gnostic is proud of his apparatus, and he refers to it by the philosophical term *nous*. This term can be translated as super-consciousness, higher consciousness, clairvoyance or, most accurately, intuition."⁵

Based on his acquaintance with the artist, Piotr Sarzyński writes: "Nowosielski shared his thoughts with others willingly, though he might have kept the most vital ones to himself".⁶ If we assume that gnosis is a cosmologic, anthropologic and eschatological knowledge, then Nowosielski's views satisfy these classification criteria. Regardless of the Orthodox pneumatological image of Christianity, the experiences and intuitions of Nowosielski comply with the gnostic movement because he values metahistoric and eschatological insight into reality over the plain historical course of events. It should be emphasized, that as an "Orthodox gnostic" he devotes most of his attention to the eschatological issues.

A hostile attitude towards the world one lives in is also a manifestation of gnostic thought. Anxiety, the feeling of being thrown into the world, and hatred towards this world are typical of gnosticism.

Nowosielski, following gnostic thought, takes a stance of negation of the existence in this world, which is infested by evil and suffering. This attitude does not arise from intellectual speculations or acquired theoretical knowledge, but from exceptional sensitivity of the artist to evil which takes over the entire cosmos and affects every aspect of life. "The Devil has to be believed in because we feel him every day. The whole tragedy of human and animal existence, the tragedy of nature, result from the blatant reign of Satan and fallen angels. Where is God, then? Where should we search for him?",⁷ asks Nowosielski.

All Nowosielski's efforts are directed towards the overcoming of the evil of this world and breaking free from Satan's rule by means of the sacral power of culture and particularly of art.

The solution to this problem will come with the second cosmic catastrophe anticipated by Nowosielski, which will annihilate evil and open the gates of paradise, regained in the form of the entire cosmos transfigured (divinized) by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As an Orthodox theologian and partially a gnostic, the artist accepts a conception of the unknown, hidden Father-God of Jesus Christ. This unknowable God

⁵G. Quispel, *Gnoza*, op. cit., s. 93.

⁶P. Sarzyński, "Byty subtelne", *Polityka* 2797: 10 (March 5, 2011), p. 80.

⁷J. Nowosielski, *Sztuka po końcu świata. Rozmowy*, ed. Krystyna Czerni, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2012), pp. 363–364.

transcends the world; He is not present in this world. But He is also an immanent God because, as the theologian tersely says: “He divided Himself into two”; he begot his Son, who participates in human life, and therefore also in nature’s life. Thus, Nowosielski clearly distinguishes the transcendence of God in His own being from His immanence in the created world. Through Jesus Christ, the unknowable God becomes immanently present in the world.

As Jerzy Prokopiuk writes: “(...) new gnosis is ‘towards the world’, that is, it wants to live according not only to the transcendent God’s will, but also to the immanent Divinity’s will, that is, the Deity involved in the world, in nature. It wants to unite heaven and earth, not to separate them.”⁸

Jesus Christ united heaven and earth in His Divine and human nature, which means His participation in restoring the man to the state before the Fall, when the “image and likeness of God” made an integral and inseparable structure.

Nowosielski strongly emphasizes the suffering of God and man embodied in Jesus Christ. In Him God suffers together with man. The great merit of Christ lies in His *kenosis*. He descends to the world permeated by evil. If it were not for the evil of this world and human sin, the incarnation would not be necessary. The incarnation of God is a consequence of the Divine catastrophe, which humans also take part in.

According to Nowosielski, besides God-man, who assumed the role of a willing sacrifice for the sake of the world salvation, angels also participated in the sacrifice, permanently living their own hell.

The artist explains the origin of the overwhelming cosmic evil by referring to, among other things, gnosis and contemporary neognosis. He writes: “In Christianity, there are conceptions – of course deeply-rooted in gnosis – stating that God rules the world with His two hands. His right hand would be the Logos – Christ; the left one would be the Accuser, who did not like God’s idea of the world’s organization, and who caused the cosmic catastrophe and released a virus into the work of creation, which basically spoiled everything”.⁹ Elsewhere, the theologian speaks about Satan as the left hand of God.

Originally, Satan was a part of God, His servant or even His son. It was Satan who caused the cosmic catastrophe, rising up against the plans of God, the Divine plans of the cosmic organization. He aspired to hinder the development of the spirituality of matter.

Subtle intelligences cause real evil by invalidating certain elements of the primary reality, which is beyond good and evil.

The fallen subtle beings spoiled God’s work of creation and control this world. Speaking of Satan, Nowosielski refers to the Gospel: “Besides, even in the Gospel he is called the prince of this world.”¹⁰ Elsewhere he says: “The entire empirical

⁸ Ibidem, p. 59.

⁹ J. Nowosielski, *Sztuka po końcu świata*, op. cit., p. 387.

¹⁰ “Czy Bóg się wycofał? Z Jerzym Nowosielskim rozmawia Dariusz Suska”, *Gazeta Wyborcza* No. 86 (1998), p. 14.

reality, both cosmic and planetary, the one closest to us, is precisely one giant *infernium*. It is hell."¹¹

The Polish artist repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the tragedy of animal and human existence, the tragedy of nature, constitutes the evidence of the reign of Satan and fallen angels. The law of nature is an infernal law.

From the moment of "expulsion from the Garden of Eden", man is a sinner, a criminal who is aware of good and evil, and commits mostly evil. Nowosielski rejects Pelagianism. After the fall, man changed his state from being immaculate to being sinful in every aspect and he has to live perpetually with the awareness of his sinfulness: "We have to be aware of the fact that we are the last and the worst sinners (...). We cannot be better."¹² The evil caused by humans cannot be eliminated; it can only be lessened by doing as little harm as possible to people and animals.

Evil is not a lack of goodness; it is active and possesses actual power. The Orthodox heretic finds Satan everywhere in life. His existence is obvious, personal, and experienced directly. Moreover, since Satan is everywhere: "He is inside the table I am sitting at, inside the telephone, inside myself, inside anyone."¹³

According to Nowosielski, the world described as the "empirical reality" came into being as a result of two cosmic catastrophes – the fall of angels and the original sin of man. The theologian claims that the battle which took place between God and subtle beings became the reason why the "fallen world" formed. Furthermore, man also participates in the frightful cosmic battle on the Divine level.

Nowosielski says man was doomed to commit the original sin because of Satan's rebellion. It means that man carries not only the burden of his own fall, but also the burden of the rebellious angels' fall. It follows that man's sin is lesser than Satan's sin. This thesis is not binding in the Christian orthodoxy, where it is proclaimed that man is to blame for evil. Here the artist's words are completely valid: "We really are innocent; it is only the enemy who accuses our brothers before God, day and night. Regaining the consciousness of the lack of guilt is a fruit we can pick from the 'tree of life'."¹⁴

Man was doomed to commit the original sin, which is a "fortunate sin". One can thus speak of man's "unguilty guilt" as he is not ontologically and morally responsible for the cosmic evil and the evil within this world. He rebels against God and disagrees with Him, because he does not know why he is to blame and why he is sinful. In addition, man suffers the consequences of the cosmic catastrophe, including death.

Nevertheless, we owe the awareness of the good to Satan, who is directly experienced by us alongside the evil he creates. Experiencing evil opens up the horizons of goodness, the possibility of spiritual improvement, "Evil is, in a sense, blessed,

¹¹Z. Podgórzec, *Mój Chrystus*, op. cit., p. 20.

¹²Ibidem, s. 45.

¹³"Mówi Jerzy Nowosielski: Jestem grzesznikiem, ale się tym nie chwale". Rozmawiał Kazimierz Targosz, *Przekrój* 11 (1998), p. 17.

¹⁴Z. Podgórzec, *Mój Chrystus*, op. cit., p. 57.

since it is a necessary condition for being able to perceive the good and the Divine (...). In this sense we should be grateful to the devils because they introduce us into the world of Divine mysteries.”¹⁵

The Orthodox theologian appreciates Manichaeism as one of humanity’s basic religious experiences which has allowed man to possess the awareness of good and evil coexisting as “cosmological co-partners”.

It is difficult to deny Nowosielski’s Manichean intuitions, as he claims that the presence and reality of evil is commonly perceived in the world. The whole cosmic order is in a state of permanent catastrophe, and is by its very nature evil. Human nature is not evil as a result of the original sin, but because it constitutes a part of the cosmic order which is subject to the forces of darkness. It follows from the conviction that, as Jerzy Prokopiuk states, in Manichaeism, “planets, including the Earth, the whole mineral, floral and animal realm are products of the forces of Darkness. The human is one as well (...).”¹⁶

Nowosielski asserted that Manichaeism is viable because the entire reality in the cosmic dimension is evil; it is “one giant *infernum*.” As the Manicheans proclaim: “Only in Manichaeism was the fall initiated by the forces of darkness. Anyhow, the formation of our world is the consequence of this fall.”¹⁷

As his life passed, Nowosielski became increasingly concerned with the problem of good and evil. Asked in one of his interviews where the good exists he answered: “The good is the greatest mystery. Even where it comes from in this inherently evil world which has no positive natural law, and which has infernal natural law – is the greatest mystery for me, infinitely greater than the infernal mystery or the mystery of Satan’s existence.”¹⁸

For the Polish artist, the evil integrated into the structure of this world is obvious and palpable, while goodness and beauty that are perceived in this reality constitute a great mystery. But they also testify that another sphere of reality exists, which is far more valuable and permanent.

The artist declares with the utmost firmness: “Manichaeism, with its proclamation of permanent catastrophe, states that everything comprising the manifested world is evil and we should turn our backs against it. On the other hand, I think that certain elements of manifested reality or maybe even the entire manifested reality contains some fundamental good. In the same way, this good was depreciated by the cosmic catastrophe; it has to return to its constant equilibrium by means of some future catastrophe.”¹⁹

The Manichean fight between good and the evil has to be settled. Nowosielski emphasizes that the splitting of the elements of good and evil was not primordial,

¹⁵ Ibidem, s. 152.

¹⁶ J. Prokopiuk, *Labirynty herezji*, op. cit., p. 44.

¹⁷ Ibidem, s. 22.

¹⁸ J. Nowosielski, *Sztuka po końcu świata*, op. cit., p. 391.

¹⁹ Z. Podgórzec, *Wokół ikony. Rozmowy z Jerzym Nowosielskim* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX: 1985), p. 61.

but resulted from the cosmic catastrophe. The essence of this catastrophe can be seen in the fact that the subtle beings possessed great demiurgic power and "spoiled" the cosmos, leading to the battle between good and evil.²⁰

Nowosielski as an Orthodox heretic finds salvation for the human in self-knowledge and spiritual growth. He thinks it is gnosis that reveals the innermost essence of man and constitutes a direct experience of the bond with God on the spiritual level.²¹ The awareness of Divinity, inherent in the Orthodox idea of *theosis*, is also reflected in gnosis. As Jerzy Prokopiuk states: "The knowledge of oneself is also the knowledge of God, for the spiritual ego of man, *pneuma*, this "spark of light", comes from the Divine Kingdom of Light, so the one who comprehends himself, his ego, comprehends also that he is the divine *ousia*. Accordingly, through the gnosis, the spiritual man becomes God again. Such man has always been God, but he has not remembered that."²²

Nowosielski claims that the profoundly pessimistic Orthodox Church reveals its true character and overcomes its pessimism only on the artistic level.

The liturgy constitutes the heart of the Orthodox Church because the experience of liturgical mysticism is the core of Eastern Christianity. It results from the fact that the Orthodox Church is predominantly a liturgical-artistic practice in the domain of a cult, and not so much a doctrine. In the Eastern Church liturgy is a work of art, and is performed on the Earth as an icon of the celestial liturgy, or in other words – the cosmic liturgy. Here the artist refers to Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who made him realize the role of beauty in the process of the world "salvation" with his famous quote that "beauty will save the world". This is why art has a principal significance. Liturgical practices, art, and especially painting induce specific states of super-discursive consciousness, akin or even identical to a mystic experience of the Church community. It is mainly through art that the Orthodox Church uncovers the mystery of history and resurrection.

In accordance with the idea of *theosis* and *apocatastasis* embedded in the Orthodox tradition, the whole of reality will be divinized, "Therefore every manifestation of the divinized empirical reality being possible is a kind of mystagogy – is an introduction to the mystery of God's Church"²³ – says the Polish theologian states.

From the anthropological and cosmological viewpoint, Nowosielski most impatiently awaits the transfiguration of the world, his own resurrection and the

²⁰ Nowosielski thinks the return to the state before the "original sin" will invalidate the awareness of the good and evil, which is the result of Satan's action. The conception of apocatastasis invalidates all human speculations about reward or punishment in the afterlife. Eastern Christianity leaves this issue to God to resolve.

²¹ Referring to the gnostic knowledge, he frequently recalls the division of people into pneumatics, psychics and hylics, considering himself the first one. Striving for spiritual development was a priority for him. Aware of the misery of existence, he perceived the spiritual experience with amplified intensity.

²² J. Prokopiuk, *Labirynty herezji*, op. cit., p. 34.

²³ Z. Podgórzec, *Mój Chrystus*, op. cit., p. 129.

resurrection of the whole world. This world submerged in the sea of evil does not concern him. He looks forward to its end.

The key to understanding this resurrected reality is the person of Jesus Christ. Nowosielski writes: “Man will not repair the hell that includes the empirical reality, the hell of nature, the hell of animals, the hell of plants, the hell he dwells in. He cannot repair all that. It can be done only by the mystery of redemption, the catastrophe of the Cross and Redemption. It restores the state in which good and evil cease to have opposite labels.”²⁴

The reality we live in will be transfigured into the celestial reality, which for the theologian “comprises the great mystery of Christ.”

The artist equates the problem of resurrection to the triumph of good and of beauty. He solves this problem by referring to the self-knowledge and creative activity of man, who is open to the Holy Spirit’s acts. The image of the transfigured reality is formed by the acts of the Holy Spirit, who continues the impulse initiated with the resurrection of Christ.

The painter rarely says anything about the Holy Spirit, who is difficult to identify, but the essence of whom can be brought into light by referring to its acts. According to Nowosielski, the Holy Spirit’s acts are best reflected in art. In other words, the Holy Spirit, the last link of the revealed truth of the Trinity, enables us to see the metaphysical reality through art.

For Nowosielski, the very existence of painting is the result of the Holy Spirit’s acts: “The act of artistic painting is the act of the Holy Spirit. They are the same. The act of the Holy Spirit and the act of art are not separate. The entire art exists as a result of the Holy Spirit’s acts. Without the acts of the Holy Spirit, art would not exist at all.”²⁵

The artist is the one chosen by God, acting under the Holy Spirit’s inspiration, and he is a prophet of the Church. He is free: “The freedom of the artist is absolute; it has to be absolute since the artist is a certain apparatus that conveys the will of gods, the will of Heaven, the will of deities and, as we know, God is an absolutely free being. The freedom of the artist is derived therefrom; it depends only on the orders coming from more mysterious spheres.”²⁶

Nowosielski recognizes the creational power of consciousness in the process of the creation of beauty. The artist does not extract beauty from nature, but he ennoble nature, endowing it with the qualities of beauty. “Nature is neutral. We are the ones who have to introduce beauty by the acts of God and the Holy Spirit originating from inside us, and somehow we ennoble this nature and make it beautiful.”²⁷

As previously mentioned, the issue of how the human consciousness converts the elements of evil to good and to beauty concerned Nowosielski throughout all his life. The artist writes: “The issue does not lie in the questions of how evil can exist

²⁴J. Nowosielski, *Sztuka po końcu świata*, op. cit., p. 309.

²⁵Ibidem, p. 389.

²⁶J. Nowosielski, *Sztuka po końcu świata*, op. cit., p. 112.

²⁷Ibidem, p. 69.

in art, ethics, theology, but in the question of how art, ethics, theology are capable of existing in the sea of evil."²⁸

Art is able to extract the essence of good from a reality that is fundamentally evil. Through art hell is saved, and we will be saved by art as well. Despite his pessimism and critical evaluation of the empirical reality, Nowosielski is convinced that this reality is never entirely spoiled.

From the existential perspective, for Nowosielski art constitutes an oasis of good; it is the affirmation of the world and its physical existence. It is also a real home for the artist. It helps him find hope in this gloomy reality.

From the eschatological perspective, Nowosielski wishes to solve the problem of evil in the world, referring to the creative capabilities of man, who becomes God's partner in the process of the creation of good and of beauty. Art is a window on another reality – the metaphysical reality. In art, he perceives the anticipation of the celestial reality – the real fatherland of man. Thus, the infernal reality can be "transfigured into the celestial reality." Henryk Paprocki writes: "Art finds its full expression when it is in harmony with the reality of heaven and earth. Thus it is the *Parousia* of the Kingdom, the icon of the Kingdom of God. And all temporal creation is endowed of an intransient quality, reflecting the element of eternity. Thus every artist is continually wandering towards the other side, casting us his works, in which shineth the dawn of the Kingdom."²⁹

The artist says: "We have to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ. That means taking out all the elements of current human experience that can pass through the fires of the end of the world. And in pointing out these elements, I see the role of culture, philosophy and art."³⁰

In Nowosielski's theological and artistic analyses, a significant role is played by the subtle beings, that is, the angels assuming the function of messengers between human consciousness and God, who is beyond our access. The artist emphasizes that in the Eastern tradition everything beyond God is, in a certain way, material. The angels possess luminous subtle matter different from human matter, and are genderless.

For Nowosielski, a direct contact with the world of subtle beings is possible because he himself possesses a gift that allows him to unite with the mystery of God and subtle beings through his spiritual experience. When he writes that art is an esoteric domain of man, he means a specific bond between the world of experience and the world of subtle beings, i.e. angels.

The Polish religious thinker leaves art under the guidance of angels. In the artist's oeuvre, abstract painting and abstract art in general are means of expression that enable an interaction with the spiritual reality, subtle beings and celestial powers. Nowosielski writes: "For me, abstract painting is a form of our human consciousness

²⁸Z. Podgórzec, *Mój Chrystus*, op. cit., p. 13.

²⁹H. Paprocki, "On Observing the Art of Jerzy Nowosielski. An Essay on the Nature of Art", in *Jerzy Nowosielski. Villa dei Misteri*, op. cit., p. 147.

³⁰Z. Podgórzec, *Mój Chrystus*, op. cit., p. 22.

reacting to extrasensory consciousness – the extrasensory consciousness, which permeates us.”³¹ As Mieczysław Porębski writes, commenting on the Polish painter’s art: “The artist is convinced that an abstract painting is also an icon, an icon of the angel, a recording of our sensations emerging from our contacts with the world of subtle beings, unmediated by symbols or prostheses.”³²

In Nowosielski’s theological analyses of the empirical reality, pessimism and a feeling of life’s misery dominate. When he talks about his painting, however, he seems to be fulfilled and happy. In the domain of art, happiness and experience of the good is possible. It is in abstract painting that Nowosielski achieves *katharsis* through contact with the spiritual world, luminous and good. He emerges from the shadows of evil and contemplates the otherworldly good and beauty. “(...) in painting abstraction I found peace and stability of contact with the world of good spiritual values, bringing about happiness, a sense of power, and felicity.”³³

Owing to his philosophical and theological faith in the existence of Sophia as a fallen soul of the world or the soul of man betrothed to the Creator, Nowosielski rehabilitates the fallen infernal reality. The elements of good and beauty existing eternally in the nature of Heavenly Sophia can be extracted from this reality and saved. Of course, for the artist-theologian this can be achieved in art, which is a symbol of the ultimate, the transcending of the Apocalypse and the consecration of the world of nature.

Mieczysław Porębski introduced the term of ‘eschatological realism’ to describe the artist’s attitude towards reality, from which he tries to extract the elements of beauty and preserve them in his works. As Porębski writes: “Nowosielski’s eschatological realism is a particular kind of acceptance of reality in its entirety, a solidarity with it, with both its “diurnal” and “nocturnal” beauty, bowing down before it in the face of the inevitable.”³⁴

For the artist, art is an affirmation of the world and also an expression of faith in the reality greater than its manifestation. To confirm his thesis, Nowosielski points to the historical fact that the Byzantine culture did not know the distinction between sacred and profane art. “In fact, I think the *sacrum* domain extends over the whole art of painting. The whole art of painting is sacred, related to the eschatological hope.”³⁵

Henryk Paprocki comments: “Jerzy Nowosielski’s work forces you to stop and think about the phenomenon of culture, since the artist himself says that he only paints icons, and that there is no dividing–line between what we conventionally call ‘religious’ or ‘sacred’ art and ‘profane’ art. Professor Nowosielski relates his entire

³¹Z. Podgórzec, *Wokół ikony*, op. cit., p. 184.

³²M. Porębski, *Nowosielski*, op. cit., p. 117.

³³J. Nowosielski, “O abstrakcjach”, in *Notatki*. Part 2; J. Nowosielski (Kraków: Starmach Gallery, April 2000), (paper presented on April 27, 1983, at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, and on April 30, 1983 at the State Higher Theatre School in Kraków), p. 40.

³⁴M. Porębski, *Nowosielski*, op. cit., s. 134.

³⁵J. Nowosielski, *Sztuka po końcu świata*, op. cit., p. 65.

oeuvre to the 'religious' domain".³⁶ It follows that, as he further claims: "If there is no division between the *sacred* and the *profane*: if the whole of art belongs to the realm of the *sacred*, then it is a manifestation of eschatological fullness. In this sense art is 'not of this world'".³⁷

The artist finds the sphere of *sacrum* not only in icons, sacred murals, but also in his own, the so-called profane paintings – nudes, landscapes, which he also treats as true sacred paintings. He even said that he lit a candle in front of a landscape.

Mieczysław Porębski, commenting on the opus of Nowosielski, summarizes it briefly: "The Christological baseline requires an extension by at least another two lines: the angelological, associated by Nowosielski with his abstract painting, and the sophiological, which encompasses his entire figurative artistic output presenting secular themes – imaginative portraits, nudes, interiors, landscapes, still lives."³⁸ Consequently, for Nowosielski it is not only the icons which he paints for liturgical use that have sacred meaning; secular paintings manifest it as well. "Everything that is well painted is an icon"³⁹ – even a landscape, he says. What is more, he thinks that Malevich's or Mondrian's paintings would find their proper places in the church.

Portraits – Nowosielski's icons, as Mieczysław Porębski claims, represent his contemporaries "looking at us with their Byzantine eyes." The wonder of his portrait painting stems from the way in which he "brings back to life and updates the old icon tradition in a new and astonishing fashion."⁴⁰ Jan Stalony-Dobrzański adds: "But his people, both in his icons and those seemingly beyond them in his secular portraits, often constitute the source of pain and unrest. The source of the eschatological restlessness is a volcanic, hot, and still crystallizing material. But Nowosielski's inanimate world, his object, his interior, and in particular his landscape and his architecture, have already reached a conclusion. They have touched the glow of transfiguration. They are the Lamps of Tabor – the purest light of the icon."⁴¹

Therefore, everything recorded by our consciousness and preserved by its cognitive capabilities is resurrected – here and now – since there is no ultimate border between time and eternity. That which is resurrected is indestructible and immortal – in the human faces – the icons, the world of nature and the entire cosmos.

Nowosielski, reflecting on the history of Christianity, just like Nicolai Berdyaev, distinguishes between the "history accompanying" Petrine Church connected with Rome, and the eschatological Johannine Church, awaiting the Second Coming of Christ, the Church eternal forever. In the artist's opinion, the Johnian Church is the birthplace of the icon.

³⁶H. Paprocki, "On Observing the Art of Jerzy Nowosielski. An Essay on the Nature of Art", op. cit., p. 137.

³⁷Ibidem, p. 140.

³⁸M. Porębski, *Nowosielski*, op. cit., p. 115.

³⁹J. Nowosielski, *Sztuka po końcu świata*, op. cit., p. 74.

⁴⁰M. Porębski, *Nowosielski*, p. 27.

⁴¹J. Stalony-Dobrzański, "Villa dei Misteri", in J. Nowosielski, *Villa dei Misteri*, (Białystok: Galeria Słowiańska, ORTHDRUK Sp. z o.o., 1998), pp. 94–95.

The icon comes from supernatural reality and is a gift of the immediate vision of a resurrected reality. Thanks to the icon, man interacts with the supernatural reality, that is happier and more real than our human reality, which is unsteady and constantly threatened with decay. Thus, in the Orthodox *theosis*, divinization finds its material prototype in the icon. As Henryk Paprocki writes: “An icon comes from Heaven. If it is not given ‘from above’, then it never comes into existence at all. The painter of icons has the ‘heroic virtue’ of creating an artistic vision. The monstrosity of empirical reality is overcome, and the world becomes a theophany.”⁴²

The theological meaning of the icon in Nowosielski’s oeuvre is aptly described by Adriana Kunka: “The icon is a mirror turned to the light of heaven. It reflects the realities of another existence, in which the dark and infernal aspect of human existence is also given a place in salvation. The icon is the ultimate rung on the ladder to heaven, but at the same time it is man’s first step in his climb to God.”⁴³

Nowosielski in his questions, addressed mainly to the Orthodox Church, argues about the existence of God, Satan, and man immersed in the world of evil. We remember that the power of Satan, embodying the cosmic forces of darkness and evil, brings man within the range of the real reign of darkness, in the situation of the Fall described in the terms of a mythos. Nevertheless, he persists in his efforts to extract light and goodness from the darkness of the empirical reality he is immersed in. This effort is best visible and effective in culture and especially in art. As Waław Hryniewicz aptly points out when analyzing Nowosielski’s views: “Although the blackness of historiosophic pessimism is prevalent in this thinking, a bright tint of gold should be noticed therein – a thread of eschatological optimism and hope.”⁴⁴ Therefore, in this reality art is that which allows the eschatic experience by transfiguring evil into good and to beauty. It shows us how beauty saves the world by overcoming the destructive, satanic power of evil. Through his painting, Nowosielski ennobles the whole world. Of special importance to him is the icon, representing the saved and transfigured reality. It is in the icon that the rehabilitation of all corporality of this world takes place. It prepares the space of New Jerusalem, where man will live. New Jerusalem will eventually appear after the second cosmic catastrophe, preceded by the purging fire of the end of the world. Although good will prevail, the divinized cosmos will most probably assume the form of existence beyond the dual experience of good and evil.

⁴²H. Paprocki, “On Observing the Art of Jerzy Nowosielski. An Essay on the Nature of Art”, op. cit., p. 142.

⁴³A. Kunka, “On Contemplating Woman as Represented in the Art of Jerzy Nowosielski” in *Jerzy Nowosielski, Villa dei Misteri*, op. cit., p. 179.

⁴⁴W. Hryniewicz OMI, *Kościół jest jeden. Ekumeniczne nadzieje nowego stulecia*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2004) p. 161.