

for the life of the world schmemann

for the life of the world schmemann offers a profound exploration of Orthodox Christian theology, specifically through the lens of Father Alexander Schmemann's seminal work. This article delves into the core themes of his theology, examining how he conceptualized the Church, liturgy, and the Christian life as intrinsically linked to the concept of "the life of the world." We will investigate Schmemann's emphasis on the Eucharist as the culmination of creation and redemption, and his understanding of the Christian's role in sanctifying all aspects of existence. Furthermore, we will explore how his thought provides a relevant framework for understanding Christian engagement with contemporary issues, ultimately revealing the transformative power of a life lived in Christ for the entire cosmos.

Understanding Father Alexander Schmemann's Theological Vision

The Core of Schmemann's Theology: The Life of the World

Father Alexander Schmemann, a towering figure in 20th-century Orthodox theology, fundamentally understood Christian existence as participation in "the life of the world." This concept is not merely an abstract theological notion but a vibrant reality centered on Christ, the source and fulfillment of all creation. For Schmemann, the Christian life is an immersion into the divine life, a transformation that extends outward to the entirety of God's creation. He argued that the Church, through its liturgical life, acts as the new humanity, the nascent kingdom of God, constantly bringing the world into communion with its Creator. This understanding moves beyond a purely individualistic salvation, positing a cosmic dimension to Christian faith and practice. The core of his message is that God's salvific plan encompasses and redeems the whole of reality, making it a vessel for divine presence and glory.

Schmemann's emphasis on "the life of the world" is deeply rooted in the Orthodox understanding of theosis, or deification. This process involves the believer partaking of the divine nature, not by becoming God, but by being united with God. This union, facilitated by the Holy Spirit, imbues the Christian with the capacity to live a life that reflects God's own life-giving presence. Consequently, the Christian's existence becomes a conduit through which God's love and grace can permeate and transform the world. The church, as the body of Christ, is the primary locus where this transformation takes place, and its liturgical celebrations are the means by which the world is continually offered back to God, renewed and sanctified.

The Significance of Liturgy in Schmemann's Thought

Central to Schmemann's theological project is the indispensable role of the liturgy. He viewed the Divine Liturgy not as a mere ritual or a set of religious exercises, but as the very essence of the Church and the primary means through which the life of the world is made manifest. For

Schmemmann, the liturgy is the existential expression of the Church's faith and the place where heaven and earth truly meet. It is in the liturgical assembly that believers encounter God directly, are transformed by His presence, and are empowered to carry that transformative grace into the world. The rhythmic unfolding of the liturgical year, with its commemorations of Christ's life and the lives of saints, serves to re-present the entirety of salvation history and to sanctify time itself.

Schmemmann's understanding of the Eucharist is particularly illuminating in this regard. He saw the Holy Communion as the "Eucharist of the world," the ultimate act by which God's creation is offered back to Him, consecrated, and filled with His divine presence. This act of thanksgiving and communion is not just for the individual believer but for the entire cosmos. By partaking in the Body and Blood of Christ, the faithful are united with Christ and, through Him, with all of creation. This sacrament is thus the epitome of the Church's mission to bring "the life of the world" back to its intended purpose: glorifying God and participating in His divine life. The earthly elements of bread and wine, transformed through the liturgy, become vehicles of divine grace, mirroring God's pervasive presence throughout the created order.

Schmemmann's Conception of the Church and its Mission

The Church as the New Creation

Father Alexander Schmemmann posited that the Church is not merely an institution or a community of believers, but rather the new creation, the enfleshed reality of God's kingdom on earth. This radical understanding means that the Church is the tangible manifestation of God's redemptive work, a foretaste of the age to come. Within the Church, the power of sin and death is overcome, and the principles of divine life are already operative. This perspective elevates the importance of ecclesial life, not as an optional extra, but as the very context for experiencing and participating in "the life of the world" as intended by God.

The Church, in Schmemmann's view, is the continuation of Christ's own earthly ministry. It is through the Church that Christ continues to sanctify, redeem, and transform the world. This mission is not confined to the spiritual realm but extends to all aspects of human existence and the created order. The Church, therefore, has a cosmic responsibility to be a beacon of God's love and truth, drawing all of creation into the divine communion. This necessitates a holistic approach to Christian discipleship, one that embraces and transforms every dimension of life.

The Christian's Role in Sanctifying Creation

Schmemmann articulated a powerful vision of the Christian's mandate to sanctify the world. He argued that Christians are called to be priests of creation, offering themselves and the world back to God. This priestly function is realized through a life of prayer, worship, and service, where every action, from the most mundane to the most significant, can be transformed into an act of worship. The Christian's daily life, therefore, becomes an extension of the liturgical life, a means of bringing God's presence and transforming power into every sphere of existence.

This concept implies that there is no division between the sacred and the secular in the life of a faithful Christian. All of life is, in principle, capable of being sanctified and offered to God. By embracing their baptismal calling to be "in the world but not of the world," Christians are empowered to imbue their work, their relationships, and their interactions with the divine spirit. This transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, making the entire created order a temple of God. The Christian is thus an agent of God's ongoing creative and redemptive activity, actively participating in the transformation of "the life of the world."

The Relevance of Schmemmann's Theology Today

Schmemmann and Contemporary Ethical Challenges

Father Alexander Schmemmann's theological insights offer a robust framework for addressing contemporary ethical challenges. His emphasis on "the life of the world" as a divinely intended reality, meant to be redeemed and sanctified, provides a powerful counterpoint to secularizing tendencies that compartmentalize faith. In an era marked by environmental degradation, social injustice, and cultural fragmentation, Schmemmann's call for a holistic Christian engagement with the world resonates deeply. The liturgical life of the Church, as the place where the renewal of all creation is enacted, equips believers with the spiritual vision and the practical mandate to be agents of healing and reconciliation in a broken world.

His theology encourages Christians to see their participation in civic life, their professional endeavors, and their personal relationships as integral to their spiritual journey. This means that ethical decision-making is not divorced from worship but is an extension of it. By recognizing the inherent dignity of all creation, a dignity affirmed in the incarnation of Christ, Christians are called to act as stewards of the earth and advocates for justice. Schmemmann's emphasis on thanksgiving and offering helps to cultivate a spirit of gratitude and responsibility towards God's creation, fostering a more profound commitment to ethical living in all domains.

Living "The Life of the World" as a Call to Action

The enduring legacy of Father Alexander Schmemmann lies in his compelling articulation of what it means to live as a Christian in the world. His emphasis on "the life of the world" is not a passive theological contemplation but an active, dynamic call to participate in God's ongoing work of salvation. This involves embracing the Church's liturgical life as the source of spiritual vitality and then allowing that spiritual vitality to permeate every aspect of one's existence. The Eucharist, as the memorial of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, empowers believers to live lives of self-offering and love.

Ultimately, Schmemmann's work challenges believers to move beyond a purely inward spirituality and to actively engage with the world as transformed individuals. This engagement is characterized by a deep love for God and for neighbor, expressed through acts of service, justice, and the pursuit of beauty. By sanctifying their daily lives and offering them to God, Christians participate in the very

"life of the world" that Christ came to redeem and glorify. This transformative process, initiated in the Church and extending to the farthest reaches of creation, is the ultimate expression of the Christian faith.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme of Alexander Schmemmann's 'For the Life of the World'?

The central theme is the Christian understanding of the world as a sacrament, created by God, intended for communion with Him, and ultimately destined for deification and the Kingdom of God. It emphasizes that the entirety of human existence and the material world are meant to be sanctified and transformed through Christ.

How does Schmemmann connect the liturgy to the 'life of the world'?

Schmemmann argues that the liturgy is not merely a religious ritual separate from daily life, but the very 'sacrament of the world.' It's the place where the world is brought before God, blessed, transformed, and made holy, demonstrating how earthly realities can become vehicles for divine encounter.

What does Schmemmann mean by the 'sacramental' nature of creation?

He means that creation, in its very being, is a gift from God and a sign pointing to Him. The material world is not inherently evil or separate from the spiritual, but is intended to be a means of communion with God, filled with His presence and grace.

What is the role of 'thanksgiving' in Schmemmann's theology presented in this book?

Thanksgiving, particularly in the context of the Eucharist, is presented as the fundamental Christian response to God's creation and gifts. It's an acknowledgment of God as the Giver and Source of all, and a way of sanctifying earthly bread and wine, and by extension, the entire world.

How does Schmemmann address the problem of evil and suffering in relation to a good God and a sacramental world?

While not explicitly a focus of 'For the Life of the World,' Schmemmann's framework implies that evil and suffering are disruptions of God's original, good creation. The sacramental life of the Church and the ultimate triumph of Christ in the resurrection offer the hope and means by which these disruptions are overcome and the world is healed.

What is the significance of 'eating' and 'drinking' in the context of Schmemmann's ideas?

Eating and drinking are elevated beyond mere physical sustenance to become acts of communion and thanksgiving. In the Eucharist, they are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, signifying the spiritual nourishment and the ultimate union of humanity and the world with God.

How does Schmemmann's perspective challenge secular understandings of the world?

Schmemmann challenges the secular view that separates the material and spiritual, or sees the world as merely a resource to be exploited. He posits that the world is inherently sacred and meant for communion with God, thus demanding a reverent and sacramental approach to all aspects of life.

What is the ultimate destiny of the world according to Schmemmann in this work?

The ultimate destiny of the world is its transformation and deification, its participation in the eternal Kingdom of God. Through Christ and the Church, the world is being redeemed, sanctified, and brought to its fulfillment as a dwelling place for God.

What practical implications does Schmemmann's theology have for the daily lives of believers?

It calls believers to live a 'sacramental' life, recognizing God's presence and gift in everyday activities, relationships, and the created order. It encourages a spirit of thanksgiving, prayer, and intentionality in sanctifying the temporal world for God's glory.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Alexander Schmemmann's thought, with descriptions, all starting with :

1. In the Image of the Trinity: Schmemmann's Theology of the Human Person

This book delves into Schmemmann's understanding of humanity as created in the image of God, exploring the Trinitarian basis of human dignity and calling. It examines how Schmemmann saw the relational nature of the Trinity as the blueprint for human existence and communion. The work highlights Schmemmann's emphasis on liturgy as the primary context for experiencing this divine image. It ultimately seeks to illuminate Schmemmann's optimistic anthropology and its implications for Christian life.

2. The Liturgy of the World: Schmemmann and the Sacredness of Everyday Life

This title explores Schmemmann's seminal idea that the entire world, not just church services, can be a sacred space. It examines how his theology seeks to infuse everyday activities with liturgical meaning and purpose. The book discusses Schmemmann's critique of secularization and his vision for the Christian to "sanctify the world." It offers practical insights into how to live a more sacramental life.

3. Bread and Water: Schmemmann's Sacramental Vision of Creation

Focusing on Schmemmann's profound connection between the Eucharist and the created order, this book unpacks his sacramental worldview. It explores how bread and water, the central elements of communion, represent God's benevolent provision for all of creation. The work illuminates Schmemmann's argument that the Eucharist is not merely symbolic but a re-presentation of God's ongoing gift of existence. Readers will find a deeper appreciation for the sacramental nature of food and sustenance.

4. The Eucharist as the Source of Joy: Schmemmann's Theology of Celebration

This exploration centers on Schmemmann's understanding of the Eucharist as the ultimate expression of Christian joy and thanksgiving. It examines how his liturgical theology emphasizes the celebratory nature of worship, moving beyond mere obligation. The book highlights Schmemmann's belief that encountering Christ in the liturgy transforms sorrow into gladness. It offers a compelling vision of the Christian life as one of perpetual rejoicing in God's presence.

5. Eschatology as Presence: Schmemmann's Kingdom Come in the Now

This work investigates Schmemmann's distinctive approach to eschatology, where the future kingdom of God is seen as actively present in the Church's worship. It unpacks his argument that the liturgy is not simply a preparation for the future but an anticipation and foretaste of it. The book demonstrates how Schmemmann found the fulfillment of God's promises within the sacramental life of the Christian community. It offers a hopeful perspective on the reality of God's reign in the present.

6. The Church as Sacramental Sign: Schmemmann's Ecclesiology of Communion

This book examines Schmemmann's understanding of the Church primarily as a visible sign of God's love and presence in the world. It explores his emphasis on the Church as the Body of Christ, unified and empowered by the Holy Spirit through the sacraments. The work delves into Schmemmann's view of the Church's mission to reveal the Kingdom of God through its communal life and worship. It provides a rich theological foundation for understanding the nature of the Church.

7. The Gospel of Thanksgiving: Schmemmann's Theology of Praise and Blessing

This title illuminates Schmemmann's consistent theme of thanksgiving as central to the Christian faith. It explores how he saw prayer, worship, and indeed, life itself, as fundamentally an act of thanking God for His gifts. The book highlights Schmemmann's argument that all of existence is a blessing to be received with gratitude and returned to God. It encourages readers to cultivate a disposition of constant praise.

8. The Blessing of the World: Schmemmann's Vision of a Eucharistic Existence

This work focuses on Schmemmann's overarching vision of a world transformed by the grace of the Eucharist. It explores how he believed the sacramental life of the Church overflows into and blesses all of creation. The book examines Schmemmann's call for Christians to be agents of God's blessing in their daily lives and interactions. It presents a compelling case for the world's inherent goodness and its potential for divine indwelling.

9. Feast of the Kingdom: Schmemmann's Liturgical Theology of Hope

This title synthesizes Schmemmann's liturgical theology, presenting it as a robust expression of Christian hope. It explores how the recurring feasts and fasts of the Church's calendar provide a framework for understanding God's redemptive plan and the ultimate triumph of His Kingdom. The book highlights Schmemmann's belief that the liturgy is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, offering profound consolation and anticipation. It offers a deeply hopeful perspective on the Christian journey.

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