

Intersectionality and Orthodox Theology: Searching for Spandrels

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ORTHODOX CHURCHES ARE OFTEN BUILT in what is called the “cross-in-square” style so that from above, the building looks like a cross. In the square at the center of the cross is a dome, meant to symbolize God’s bending of the heavens. From the inside, when one is standing below the dome one looks up and see a circle in the square, resulting in rounded-edge triangles. In architecture, those triangles are called spandrels.¹ In the dome the icon of Christ the Pantocrator and in those spandrels depictions of the prophets or apostles are often found. Where two large opposing structures—the straight walls of the cross and the dome—come together, the Orthodox Church sees fit to fill the space with even more icons, finding the interaction to be spacious rather than cumbersome.

My hope in writing this paper is to engage intersectional methods and Orthodox theology in light of one another as an exploration.²

I’d like to give special thanks to the people who assisted me along the way in my thinking. First is Mary E. Hunt, my mentor, who bought me *Intersectional Theology* as a present for Christmas in 2019—kicking off this journey. Thank you to the folks at Marquette University who sparked this work: Deirdre Dempsey for allowing me to explore Orthodoxy and Intersectionality in a directed study; Andrew Kim for providing revisions during Introduction to Ethics, and Kate Ward for advising me throughout. Thanks also to Telly Papanikolaou for your directed study on Modern Orthodox Thinkers in Spring 2022, which allowed me to think with my Tradition around this subject, and for your thoughtful comments and edits. Thanks also to the lovely women who provided intellectual and spiritual guidance throughout: the boards of Axia Women and the St. Phoebe Center for the Diaconess. Please forgive me, anyone I’ve forgotten along these three years of writing.

¹ Of note also are structures called pendentives, curved triangles that uphold a dome. They hold the weight of the dome and are constructed for that purpose—they are what the spandrel looks like three-dimensionally in the case of an Orthodox dome. I chose spandrels for this paper because they are formed specifically by the collision of two opposing shapes: the square and the circle.

² The idea for this exploration first came to me because I am a lifelong Orthodox Christian and also worked for six years for systems change around ending homelessness and decreasing infant mortality. In this work, I brought myself as an Orthodox person to the table, but I also had to engage intersectional method. The cohesion seemed so natural that I was surprised when I entered my Master’s and saw what seemed like suspicion from both structures in the spandrel. I soon realized that



Fig. 1.1: In this picture, we can see the dome alongside the cross structure, creating the rounded-triangles, or spandrels. Photo credit: Julia Volk.

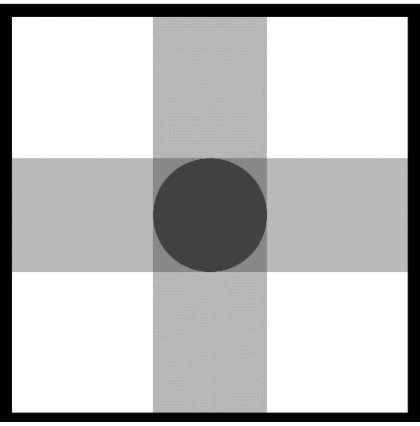


Fig. 1.2: This is a simplified version of what a cross-in-square church looks like from above. In the center, the rounded triangles “left over” by the circle (i.e., the dome) are the spandrels.

These are two large, expansive theologies and my aim is to let them collide on their own terms and look for spandrels. While there are many more and expansive sources to look at for further exploration, I hope that this preliminary spark can be a space to think creatively and with openness to experiencing mutual illumination. Are there areas where the overlap is uncontrived and convergent? Are there areas of dissimilarity that seem unresolvable? Can the prophetic voices of those at the margins find expression in the spandrel created by intersectionality and Orthodoxy? Can we hear that cry and work to *dismantle* the systems causing their marginalization?³

In this essay, I argue that Orthodox theology and intersectionality can be mutually illuminative—both in theory and praxis—ordered to dismantling interlocking systems of oppression and reuniting the Kingdom of God and earth. This article is organized in five parts. In “Introductions: Intersectionality and Orthodox Theology,” I outline

this suspicion was really curiosity and so it seemed right that something so natural might be explored at the level of theory.

³ I have to credit this framing to my dear friend Nicholas Roumas, who, upon my hearing about what I was writing, emphatically said, “This reminds me of a spandrel,” and then lovingly looked at my building to find one and explain it to me. I later found out that he first heard the term in Slavoj Žižek’s *Living in the End Times*. Further exploration is outside the scope of this article, but I am thankful to Nick for giving me words and concepts with which to understand my own task in a way that I pray shows the beauty of creating space.

basic tenets of intersectional method, intersectional theology, and Orthodox theological ethos. Next, in “Community: *Sobornost*’, Coalition, and Beloved Community,” I draw a connecting line between Orthodox, intersectional, and activist understandings of community to probe the conceptual and embodied realities of transformative communities. Next, in “Shared World: Icon, Subjectivity, and Emergence,” I explore how the theological realities of being made in the image of God, the inherent subjectivity that comes with that reality, and the concept of emergence can be useful in honoring each person on the path to justice. In “World-Building: *Theosis*, the Basement Metaphor, and Transformative Justice,” I explore the convergence of the previous two sections. Concretely, I present what it means to work toward a new world, the Kingdom of God manifested (even if in glimpses) on earth and in turn move closer to salvation. Lastly, I return to the concept of creating space and what I hope the exploration of intersectional theology and Orthodox theology can bring now and going forward. Throughout these sections, I show that Orthodox theology and intersectional method produce coherent and iterative understandings of dismantling systems of oppression that involve community, encounter, and the use of everyday practice to build a more just world.

INTRODUCTIONS: INTERSECTIONALITY AND ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to describe the multiple social locations Black women occupied and the interlocking systems of oppression they face as a result of these intersections.⁴ Crenshaw defined the term after a judge ruled in *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* that the plaintiffs, women of color who had been laid off through tenure-based cuts, could not claim discrimination as Black women, but rather as Black people *or* women.⁵ A recent example of this type of binary understanding is the response to the 2021 murders of eight people in Atlanta spas, six of

⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8?utm_source=chicagounbound.uchicago.edu%2Fuclf%2Fvol1989%2Fiss1%2F8&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

⁵ *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors Assembly Division*, nos. 75–487 C (3), May 4, 1976, law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/413/142/1_660699/. In this case General Motors started hiring Black women last after discrimination became illegal and then made cuts based on tenure, which disproportionately affected Black women, who had been hired most recently. The court held that the plaintiffs could not sue on the basis of discrimination for being Black women, but only Black *or* women, and because the original hiring policy was not discriminatory on those separate counts and the firings were tenure based, the court ruled that no discrimination could be proven.

whom were Asian women.⁶ Directly after the news broke, there were online debates over whether the shooter was perpetrating anti-women hate or anti-Asian hate—particularly because he had self-professed having a sex addiction and not an anti-Asian bias.⁷ From an intersectional lens, it is efficacious to understand that he was perpetrating violence against *Asian women*, which some have conjectured is a result of fetishizing them and then blaming them for his own sexual desires.⁸ In response to these heinous murders, Captain Jay Baker—a white male police officer—noted that the white male perpetrator had “a really bad day.”⁹

While Crenshaw’s original work centered on legal theory, intersectionality soon became a metaphor used in activism, community organizing, and public policy to describe the complex lived experiences of oppression.¹⁰ Intersectional practitioners are indebted to the work of Black women whose work on concepts like “double jeopardy” and the “matrix of social domination” paved the way for intersectionality’s wide acceptance in both the academy and activist circles.¹¹

In *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide*, Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw define intersectionality as “a tool for analysis that takes into account the simultaneously experienced multiple social locations, identities, and institutions that shape individual and collective experience within hierarchically structured systems of power and privilege.”¹² Further, intersectionality is incomplete without praxis; it is “an ongoing loop of action-reflection-action—that

⁶ Bill Chappell, Vanessa Romo, and Jaclyn Diaz, “Official Who Said Atlanta Shooting Suspect Was Having a ‘Bad Day’ Faces Criticism,” National Public Radio, last modified March 8, 2021, www.npr.org/2021/03/17/978141138/atlanta-shooting-suspect-is-believed-to-have-visited-spas-he-targeted.

⁷ Chappell and Romo, “Official Who Said Atlanta Shooting Suspect Was Having a ‘Bad Day’ Faces Criticism.”

⁸ Jiayang Fan, “The Atlanta Shooting and the Dehumanizing of Asian Women,” *New Yorker*, March 19, 2021, www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-atlanta-shooting-and-the-dehumanizing-of-asian-women.

⁹ Fan, “The Atlanta Shooting.”

¹⁰ Intersectionality as a method gained recognition as potential response to the limitations of feminism, criticized for a lack of cultural competency around the plight of women of color, leaving many non-white and non-heterosexual women feeling (and being) left out of the various waves of feminism. See Constance Grady, “The Waves of Feminism, and Why People Keep Fighting over Them, Explained,” *Vox*, updated July 20, 2018, www.vox.com/2018/3/20/16955588/feminism-waves-explained-first-second-third-fourth.

¹¹ For a detailed understanding of the differences between double and triple jeopardy and matrix of social domination see Anna Carastathis, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

¹² Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 2.

integrates social justice-oriented theory with activism toward social justice on the ground so that theory informs practice and practice informs theory.”¹³ Intersectionality is distinctive in that it approaches practice and theory as mutually informative in seeking to overturn interlocking systems of oppression. Lastly, both the theory and praxis of intersectionality have a “bias toward justice,” seeking to “restructure power relations by dismantling oppressive ideologies, practices, and institutions.”¹⁴

Other key considerations in the integration of intersectional method with theology are the epistemological, ontological, and resistant dimensions of intersectional theology. Kim and Shaw aptly explain that intersectional theology is epistemological in that it assumes “all knowers are situationally located in different relations to power.”¹⁵ It is ontological in that it declares people as “ontologically plural,” while also being “fully integrated.”¹⁶ Further, it is resistant in that it “moves the experiences of the marginalized from the periphery.”¹⁷ This tripartite understanding of intersectional theology intimately connects the unique person, interacting with interlocking systems of oppression, to the infinite—God.

With this framing I unpack Orthodox theology and its relationship to intersectionality. In Orthodox theology and ethics, it is important to start from the theology of the first seven Ecumenical Councils.¹⁸ These councils together answer Christ’s central question in Matthew 16:15, “Who do you say that I am?” The councils answer this question of *who* by answering questions about God (Trinity), Jesus Christ (Christology), and what it means to be saved (soteriology).¹⁹ I have organized three Orthodox concepts—*sobornost*, icon, and *theosis*—with respect to these three questions, but want first to give a basic description of what they mean for the Orthodox in community and as persons. To do so, I will explore the theologies of Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas, Vladimir Lossky, and St. Maria Skobtsova. I have

¹³ Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 2.

¹⁴ Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 10.

¹⁵ Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 11.

¹⁶ Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 11.

¹⁷ Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 12.

¹⁸ These are: First Council of Nicaea (325); First Council of Constantinople (381); First Council of Ephesus (431); Council of Chalcedon (451); Second Council of Constantinople (553); Third Council of Constantinople (680–681); and Second Council of Nicaea (787).

¹⁹ I must say that this section on Orthodox theology is woefully inadequate—there is so much more to this deep and beautiful Tradition. What I have chosen to focus on with regards to each of these doctrines is what I think will allow for Orthodox and intersectional theology to best communicate, and for the reader to have the best understanding of just *some* of the nuance of Orthodox theology. My hope is to prove that further exploration of Orthodox theology and intersectionality is warranted and necessary at both this broad level and when drilled down into more deeply.

chosen the former two not only for their importance as modern Orthodox thinkers, but also because of their articulations of “theology proper” within an Orthodox context. Throughout the article, I supplement their work with St. Maria, who is a prime example of a theologian who was well-versed in Orthodox theology, lived a life of social engagement, and wrote theological reflections on the intersections of theology and praxis.²⁰

The mystery of the Trinity is the starting place of Orthodox theology. As with other Christian Traditions, we affirm a triune God who is three *hypostases* (persons) and one *ousia* (nature). In Orthodoxy, this order—*hypostasis* then *ousia*—matters and yields important implications for intersectionality. In John D. Zizioulas’s *Being as Communion*, he asserts that “the being and life of God does not consist in the one substance of God but in the *hypostasis*, that is, *the person of the Father*.”²¹ The *Father* begets freely (rather than out of necessity) the Son and processes the Holy Spirit, thus “the hypostasis of the Father ... makes the one divine substance to be what it is: one.”²² He goes on to say that “the substance never exists in a ‘naked’ state, that is, without hypostasis.”²³ This Trinitarian understanding emphasizing personhood before nature affirms for Zizioulas that God’s very “being is identical with an act of communion,” a communion freely entered into through *love*, “identified as ontological freedom.”²⁴

Two important implications for intersectionality are drawn from this Trinitarian understanding: a) communion is constitutive of personhood and b) a free person is a “*concrete, unique, and unrepeatable* entity.”²⁵ Throughout this essay, I return to concepts of community, life, and world-building underpinned by these two ideas steeped in Orthodox Trinitarian theology of personhood and substance. Further, I see glimmers of continuity with intersectional theology’s understanding of each of us as ontologically plural; while not the same, a primacy of *person* seems to allow for a similar ethos between Orthodox Trinitarian theology and intersectional theology.

²⁰ St. Maria Skobtsova was also a student of Sergius Bulgakov, an extremely influential twentieth century Orthodox thinker. Some of his theological ideas are controversial and complicated for a first exploration into the overlaps of Orthodoxy and intersectionality. Noting his influence on St. Maria is sufficient representation of Bulgakov for the purposes of this essay. However, I do believe his theology has significant implications for intersectionality, and so further study is a next step.

²¹ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 40.

²² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 41.

²³ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 41.

²⁴ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 44, 46.

²⁵ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 46.

From this understanding of Trinity, let us turn to the co-working of Christ, Spirit, and Theotokos in the Incarnation. In the latter, Christ exists in “*hypostatic* union of the two natures—divine and human.”²⁶ Christ, the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity, is the perfect person, existing as both human and God.²⁷ The Incarnation happens with the co-working of the Holy Spirit and Theotokos (Mother of God). In his seminal *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Vladimir Lossky emphasized the freedom of the Incarnation. As with the Trinity, the Word’s Incarnation is a *free* relationship of persons; the Father freely gives the Son who freely becomes incarnate through the freedom of Mary who accepts the descent of the Holy Spirit.²⁸ Further, according to Zizioulas, in the Incarnation “the Son *becomes* history” while the Holy Spirit’s role “is to liberate the Son and the economy from the bondage of history.”²⁹ Zizioulas goes on to distill two particularities of this *beyond-time-ness* of the Spirit: it is eschatological and allows for Christ not to be one but many, particularly through the Eucharist.³⁰

Again, this Orthodox understanding of Christology has clear areas for collaboration with intersectional method and theology. Christology understands the importance of freedom, nature, personhood, historicity, and ongoing creativity through time and beyond history. Christology affirms that we *are* situationally located in history, and yet it is possible to think about our work here on earth *eucharistically*, in that communal co-working moves us toward moments where our actions can exist here while at the same time manifesting or glimpsing the Kingdom of God.

Lastly, a core concept within Orthodox theology is its understanding of salvation as *theosis*, or divinization. The penultimate section of this article includes a treatment of *theosis*, but it is important here to explore this topic in relation to both Orthodox Trinitarian theology and Christology. *Theosis* can best be understood in the words of St. Athanasius, who says, “For He [Christ] was made man that we might be made God.”³¹ Trinity shows us the importance of difference and community for *theosis*. Based on the activity and example of the Trinity, Zizioulas says that the “eternal survival of the person as a unique, unrepeatable, and free ‘hypostasis,’ as loving and being loved, constitutes the quintessence of salvation ... ‘divinization.’”³² Further,

²⁶ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 55.

²⁷ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 55–56.

²⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1957), 140–141.

²⁹ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 130.

³⁰ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 130.

³¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), Section 54.

³² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 49–50.

this hypostatic *theosis*, must also be in community—just as the Trinity is both only itself in relation to hypostatic difference, the hypostases are most themselves in their unity by nature.

Christology intimately relates to *theosis*. To rephrase Athanasius with more detail: God, in a hypostatic (personal) way in the person of the Son, became human so that humans may become, in their unique hypostasis, God. Christology, then, shows us that *theosis* is not the obfuscation of each of us being subsumed into God; rather, from our unique place in history we can self-transcend to be irreducible and participate in the Kingdom of God *in time*.

With our two spandrel-creating structures—intersectional method/theology and Orthodox Christian theology—laid out in broad strokes, the rest of this essay will look toward the spandrels created by putting them in conversation with one another. In what follows, I overlap Orthodoxy and intersectionality with attention to the iterative relationship of embodied practice and theory.³³ First, I explore community in the overlapping of *sobornost*’ or conciliarity with the intersectional concept of embodied coalition toward justice through beloved community. Next, I examine subjecthood and our shared world in the Orthodox understandings of icon and *symbolon* and the intersectional concept of subjectivity, practiced in activism using emergence. Lastly, I will explore the resistant and world-building dimensions of Orthodox theology in the concept of *theosis* and the basement metaphor, practiced through transformative justice. Figure 2.1 shows the relationships.

For the bulk of this article, I compare the concepts laid out in Figure 2.1 to one another as columns. While I present them in this order, through an iterative process of embodied practice, we also work through this table from left to right. *Sobornost*’ and icon are part of *theosis*; coalition and subjectivity help achieve solutions built to the bottom of the basement; beloved community and emergence are embodied activist practices that lead to transformative justice. What I am suggesting here is an integrative understanding of Orthodox and intersectional method and practice that leads to nothing less than the transformation of ourselves and the world in community, ordered to justice and salvation.

³³ This is new for Orthodox theology—Orthodoxy does not do intersectional theology formally and also does not systematize its theology in the way Western theologies often do. Orthodox theology is part official doctrine mixed with an “ethos” perceived as homogeneous while being heterogeneous. As such, the overlaps presented here are mere glimpses into the possibilities for interaction, they are incomplete and each could warrant further study that hopefully leads to action.

Figure 2.1

Theology/Method	Community	Shared World	World-Building
Orthodox Theology	<u>Sobornost</u> : The fullness of the individual being manifest in community; communal working out of salvation.	<u>Icon</u> : An image. Being made in the image of God while simultaneously working to be the image of God. The “throwing together” of who we are now with our call to be like God.	<u>Theosis</u> : The Orthodox understanding of salvation. Becoming God and manifesting the Kingdom of God.
Intersectional Method	<u>Coalition</u> : Social identities are not formed based on essentialist qualities but on robust understandings of social location.	<u>Subjectivity</u> : We do theology from our social locations and reject single-axis thinking in favor of complex embodied realities.	<u>Basement Metaphor</u> : Solutions for injustice need to focus on liberation for the most marginalized.
Activist Practice	<u>Beloved Community</u> : Community members are our beloved and we move with each member in their fullness and in community working toward justice.	<u>Emergence</u> : Our small-scale practices affect the large scale. We are not in competition, but interdependent.	<u>Transformative Justice</u> : Justice happens when we transform and eliminate the conditions for injustice to occur.

COMMUNITY: *SOBORNOST'*, COALITION, AND BELOVED COMMUNITY

Community is one of the most transformative forces of love we have, a key way our activity as humans points to the creative activity of the Trinity, God's existence in unity and uniqueness. In this section, I explore the concept of *sobornost'* in the Orthodox Church alongside the intersectional conception of our social locations and work as coalitional and practiced by beloved community.

Sobornost' comes from the Russian word *sobor*, which means "conciliarity" or "coming together."³⁴ St. Maria Skobstova beautifully explains *sobornost'* by saying: "The Orthodox Church is not solitary standing before God, but *sobornost'*, which binds everyone with the bonds of Christ's love for one another."³⁵ *Sobornost'* is the coming together of persons fully and uniquely themselves but also fully manifested in community. Underpinning *sobornost'* is Orthodox Trinitarian theology, wherein unique hypostases are in constant communion of love with one another. The Trinity's manifestation in three *because of the Father* is a kenotic (or self-emptying) act.³⁶ With this self-emptying in community in mind, *sobornost'* bears on the reality of our working out of salvation. As St. Maria Skobtsova states, "man [*sic*] is not alone and his [*sic*] path to salvation is not solitary; he [*sic*] is a member of the Body of Christ, he [*sic*] shares the fate of his [*sic*] family in Christ, he [*sic*] is justified by the righteousness and bears the responsibility for the sins of sinners."³⁷ I will return to this understanding of communal salvation in section IV in light of *theosis*. However, for now, I would like to focus on *sobornost'* as a manifestation of the tension between community, uniqueness of personhood, and working out of salvation *together*.

First, I believe that *sobornost'* illuminates the intersectional concept of coalitional identities and social locations. A potential pitfall in intersectional analysis is to equate intersectionality with "double jeopardy" or even a complex form of multiple jeopardies.³⁸ In *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons*, Anna Carastathis argues that seeing identity this way is additive and leads to essentialist

³⁴ For more information on *sobornost'* see Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (London: SPCK, 2013), or Nikolai Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy* (New York: Prometheus, 1994).

³⁵ Maria Skobtsova, "Second Gospel Commandment," in *Essential Writings*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 47.

³⁶ Sergius Bulgakov's Trinitarian theology is based on the idea of *kenosis*, or self-emptying of each person of the Trinity. See Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

³⁷ Skobtsova, "Second Gospel Commandment," 47.

³⁸ Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, 6.

thinking with regard to intersecting axes of one's social location.³⁹ For example, a critique of the first waves of feminism is that the fight for women's liberation looked the same for all women, viewing the identity of "woman" as a monolith.⁴⁰ In this essentialist model, a united womanhood would be considered one axis of identity. Under this schema, another form of oppression like Blackness would represent an additional one-dimensional axis. Thus, with "double jeopardy" these two axes form the foundation for two types of discrimination. However, intersectionality asks us *not* to view these axes in essentialist terms—for example, my female axis may consist of a completely different experience than another woman's female axis. Rather, intersectionality asks us to view identities as "coalitional structures of heterogeneous people."⁴¹ Each person's axis of "womanhood," "Blackness," "queerness," etc., is unique and as such the overlapping of these parts is larger than their sum. We see an echo of Zizioulas's assertion that *hypostasis* should be emphasized before *ousia*.

Rather than seeking a "purity test" to ensure that someone who has a particular identity lives up to the essentialist caricature, intersectionality seeks to see the experience of that identity as unique to each person and in coalition with the community of people who identify similarly, even though no one person has some perfect iteration of the identity. This is similar to how *sobornost*' asks us to view ourselves; the fullness of these social locations exists *not* in their monolithic hegemony or homogenizing "purity," but in their coalitional nature.

The coalitional nature of intersectionality and its rejection of colonialist tendencies toward hegemony and turning away from the unhelpful tendency toward "purity tests" can also illuminate Orthodox practice by uplifting *sobornost*'s power for liberation. One sees this, for example, in Orthodox women's movements cross-jurisdictional in nature, including both Eastern and Oriental Orthodox women, such as Axia Women.⁴² Rather than creating clearly-defined understandings

³⁹ Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, 6. Essentialism here refers to an underlying essence that necessitates a certain reality. For example, while I do have a *real* identity and social location as a white person, there is no essential reason inherent in my whiteness that necessitates the advantages I gain as a result of white supremacy, even though the passivity by which I gain these privileges can make my experience of white supremacy seem essential.

⁴⁰ Grady, "The Waves of Feminism."

⁴¹ Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, 7.

⁴² Axia Women is a group by, for, about Orthodox women that seeks to uplift their voices in the Church. Axia is comprised of both Eastern and Oriental Orthodox women who work together in coalition. For more information see www.axiawomen.org/. The Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches are separated by their adherence to the Council of Chalcedon's Christological formula with the former being Chalcedonian or Diophysite and the latter being non-Chalcedonian or

of “Orthodox womanhood,” this work seeks community first and a living in tension of different experiences of womanhood and Orthodoxy the women engaging with Axia have because of their different jurisdictions. In this community and coalition, Axia has the power to engage Orthodox theology and transform how women use their voice and experience embodiment in their own Church. This further leads to a more comprehensive praxis of activism and liberation. As Carastathis argues, “The political potential of intersectionality lies in our ability to reimagine our identities and our alignments in coalitional terms, revealing the inherent and potential impurity of categories by practicing their interconnectedness.”⁴³ In coalition, we move away from purity and toward building power together against systems of oppression.⁴⁴

In activism, beloved community is a powerful embodied practice to learn from in the way it honors the mutual creation of the individual in community and of communities by individuals *and* honors coalition in working toward justice. *Sobornost*’ highlights the creative holding together of individual and community in Orthodox theology, while intersectional method emphasizes coalitional understandings of identity. One is both fully themselves and fully part of the community, across monolithic identifications. Beloved community presents a similar understanding of how we are to be in community with one another, working toward creating an equitable, just, and liberated world. In “The Beloved Community: A Conversation with bell hooks,” Brosi explains that “beloved community defines the relationships among those working for change and also the desired result of these efforts.”⁴⁵ Beloved community is a framework for holding the work of justice within a loving, human community seeking to create a new world.

Further, beloved community meets at our coalitional social locations, rather than seeking mere affinity. It embraces and looks for conflict so that iterative and practical growth can occur for justice. In talking about the struggle in beloved community bell hooks says:

MIAPHYSITE. It is outside the scope of this essay to deeply explore the historical divide here, but importantly, they do not often work in coalition on issues of justice.

⁴³ Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, 7.

⁴⁴ Amanda Lawrence, “The Power of Intersectionality to Transcend National Identity in the United States,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 17, no. 2 (October 2017): 7.

⁴⁵ George Brosi, “The Beloved Community: A Conversation between bell hooks and George Brosi,” *University of North Carolina Press* 40, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 76. To be clear, beloved community is not *only* an activist framework and has deep roots in Christianity, particularly Black American churches. I frame beloved community as a concept in activism because it is used in non-Christian activist spaces as well as Christian ones and is an effective framework for creating and sustaining community.

One of the things that has always made me sad is the extent to which civil rights struggles, black power movements, and feminist movements, have, at times, collapsed at the point where there was conflict, and how conflict between people in the groups was often seen as a negative. The truth is that you cannot build community without conflict.⁴⁶

We see here that the struggle of justice is *not* about creating a one-dimensional axis of social identity but rather allowing for constructive conflict that honors our unique personhood in conjunction with how the community can be truly whole.

One of the core components of both the beloved community and *sobornost* is the willingness of its members to make grave sacrifices for members of the community. Paul expresses this in Romans 9:3 when he says, “I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people.” St. Maria Skobtsova echoes this, saying, “We cannot excuse ourselves from active love, from the selfless giving of our soul for our friends.”⁴⁷ She then broadens this idea of sacrifice to include all peoples (not just Israelites as is the context of Romans 9:3, or friends as in her first quote) saying, “Anyone who loves the world, anyone who lays down his soul for others, anyone who is ready, at the price of being separated from Christ, to gain salvation for his brothers—is a disciple and follower of Christ.”⁴⁸ *Sobornost* requires free sacrifice in love.

Similarly, in a conversation with bell hooks, Cornell West laments that in our culture “love is either reduced to some kind of stimulatory lust or some kind of sentimental passion,” but in reality “love is about struggle.”⁴⁹ In West’s view,

⁴⁶ Brosi, “The Beloved Community,” 76.

⁴⁷ Skobtsova, “The Second Gospel Commandment,” 48. St. Maria uses this phrase “giving of our soul” in relation to 1 John 4:20, “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen,” and John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” She sees laying down the soul as a gesture toward communal salvation. We lay down our souls so that *all* may be saved together because that is what it means to be Christ’s disciple; she contrasts this with what she sees as a self-serving understanding of salvation wherein someone focuses only on their soul and relationship to God even if to the detriment of their fellow human (“The Second Gospel Commandment,” 47–48).

⁴⁸ Skobtsova, “The Second Gospel Commandment,” 48–49.

⁴⁹ Cornel West and bell hooks, “Beloved Community: Racial Justice and a World Free of Racism,” 1997, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjRSk4hlrtI&t=0s. I chose to use this video because it is a beautiful example of beloved community. Bell hooks and Cornell West had been in an argument before this conversation and used their time to struggle together in community with one another. Further, groups I have worked with have

You cannot talk about love without talking about death ... we cannot invoke Martin [Luther King, Jr.]’s talk about love without acknowledging the degree to which he loved us so much that he was willing to die for us. Each and every one of us. Now I’m not suggesting that martyrdom is normative for serious struggle, but it’s always lurking in the background for those who are serious about love.⁵⁰

We see here West articulating that martyrdom is part of what to be in beloved community means. In the same conversation bell hooks, by contrast, is

Much more interested in the symbolic willingness, the willingness to die to things of the past symbolically and be born again. That is to say, [she thinks] that when we talk about love in connection to racism and white supremacy, essentially, we’re asking that all of us in this nation be willing to die to values, attitudes, beliefs, that many of us have held on for years, and be born again in another way of thinking about the world.⁵¹

When taken together we see the power of *sobornost*’ and beloved community to be mutually illuminative. The former has a focus on individual sacrifice for the community and the sake of their salvation, while the latter brings martyrdom into sharp focus with ongoing systemic change needed to manifest a better world. When we add coalitional social identity here, we see a call to “give up” essentialist ideas of identity that seek hegemony, instead living in the creative tension of coalition. We see here, again, the freedom of the Trinity—the Father who *in love* self-empties to beget and process the Son and Holy Spirit in their unique *hypostases* not homogenized into nature, but together in community as both three persons and one nature.⁵²

In this spandrel, the concepts of *sobornost*’, coalitional identity, and beloved community collided to illuminate that to be oneself fully is to be in community—whether at the level of worship, salvation, activism, or even social identity. The next section explores the individual person in relationship to their experience, relationship to God and the Kingdom, and to the ways we as people who may feel small can participate beyond ourselves to a better world.

used this video many times to frame conversations and remind ourselves how to argue with accountability, and it remains a source of illumination.

⁵⁰ West and hooks, “Beloved Community.”

⁵¹ West and hooks, “Beloved Community.”

⁵² See Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, chapter 1: “Personhood and Being.”

OUR SHARED WORLD: ICON, SUBJECTIVITY, AND EMERGENCE

Community is one aspect of transformative praxis and theory present in both Orthodox and intersectional theology that evoked the unity and simultaneous uniqueness of the Trinity. Yet, we are each ourselves within community. Orthodox Christology, using Christ—God Incarnate in history in conjunction with the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through time—as an example, shows us the role of the unique person here and now, and in relation to the future Kingdom. With this in mind, in this section, I turn to the unique person in our shared world—a world we participate in as it is now, while forming the shared world of the future. I will elucidate the Orthodox understanding of icon and symbol in light of Eastern Orthodox Christology alongside intersectionality’s insistence on subjectivity and the ways activists embody these practices using emergence.

When one walks into an Orthodox parish, they usually are struck by the presence of iconography surrounding them. These icons are not merely reminders of our community of saints (although they do serve that function) but a reminder of the Incarnation of God. It is no coincidence that this word serves a double purpose to describe humans made in the image (icon) of God (Genesis 1:26). Walking into the liturgy, icons behold icons in community; when outside of the parish, icons behold icons in community. In the former, the sacred art and the human interact and, in the latter, people are interacting with one another. Being made in the image, further, is not a matter of merely being rational—but deeply connected to salvation, personhood, and *theosis*.⁵³

Icons are symbols in the most robust understanding of *symbolon*, which is derived from *symbollein*, meaning “to throw together.” Echoing Orthodox Christology, icons “throw together” the physical painting and the heavenly reality. When Orthodox Christians kiss icons, that action of reverence is passed onto the prototype.⁵⁴ According to Zizioulas, icons are always “something *real*, and as true as ἀλήθεια (truth),” in that “the [icon], or truth of history, is no less true than that of the eschaton” insofar as it brings that eschatological reality into historical focus—it is the “anticipating [of] the ‘end’ of history from within its unfolding.”⁵⁵ Icons mirror Christology as the work of Christ in time *and* that of the Holy Spirit beyond time.⁵⁶

⁵³ Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 95.

⁵⁴ John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), 13B33; the First Apology.

⁵⁵ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 99–101.

⁵⁶ See Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 130.

Icons, therefore, are not mere objects. The Orthodox understanding of icon requires action of us in community now and for the future. For Zizioulas, an iconographic (as well as dual Christ-Spirit Christology) understanding of ministry means that “[we] cannot, therefore, understand the nature of the ministry by seeing it simply in terms of a *past* (Christ’s ministry in Palestine) or a *present* (ministry as service to the needs of today) but of the *future* as well.”⁵⁷ We live in the current reality and the reality we are co-creating as we manifest the Image of God in the world and love our neighbors as the Image of God.

Further, iconographic theology necessitates *encounter* of each person in their fullness as made in the image of God. In her beautiful essay, “On the Imitation of the Mother of God,” St. Maria explains: “The Cross of the Son of Man, accepted voluntarily, becomes a two-edged sword that pierces the soul of the mother, not because she voluntarily chooses it, but because she cannot help suffering the sufferings of her son.”⁵⁸ According to St. Maria, we not only must imitate (that is, image) Christ by taking up our own crosses, but also imitate the Mother of God by being pierced by our neighbor’s crosses.⁵⁹ This means specifically that we see each person as an icon of Christ and the divinity of God, and we understand that each person is an image of the Theotokos who held Christ inside her.⁶⁰ This is a powerful ethical paradigm that starts *not with universal precepts*, but the experience of beholding the living God. It is not until we take up our cross and experience the particular piercing of another’s cross that we can begin to understand human relationships, moral actions in the world, or the ability to change systems.⁶¹ This particularity *before* universality—whether the universality was derived inductively or deductively—is steeped in Orthodoxy’s understanding of salvation and the Incarnation that makes it well-poised to interact with intersectional theological praxis. This is *not* to deny universals, but rather to start first with reverence and encounter of the other.

⁵⁷ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 211.

⁵⁸ Maria Skobtsova, “On the Imitation of the Mother of God,” in *Essential Writings*, 67.

⁵⁹ Skobtsova, “On the Imitation of the Mother of God,” 69. St. Maria is *not* calling on us to see ourselves as mothers to each person in a way that is condescending, but rather in this very specific way of holding Christ and being pierced through the heart by the cross. She says, “And we should not be disturbed by the ostensibly proud and arrogant assertion that our souls are related in a motherly way to other people’s souls. A mother is not greater than her children, and often is even lesser” (71). This is not a hierarchical relationship, but a relationship built on how we love one another and the actions necessitated by this love.

⁶⁰ Skobtsova, “On the Imitation of the Mother of God,” 70–71.

⁶¹ Skobtsova, “On the Imitation of the Mother of God,” 72.

Intersectional method similarly calls us to acknowledge, embrace, and understand that all theology is inherently subjective. History and theology have largely told the stories of white wealthy men as the archetype of humanity. As Phyllis Trible states in *Texts of Terror*, “In the speaking and the hearing new things appear in the land.”⁶² By telling our own stories in their true uniqueness, we discover the unturned stones of witness to both oppression and God’s self-revelation. Kim and Shaw describe this well: “We are advantaged and constrained simultaneously within interlocking systems of oppression depending on the intersections of our various identities. No one identity, then, is fully explanatory for any facet of the self or any experience of advantage or disadvantage.”⁶³ Storytelling allows us to show the uniqueness of our social locations and the coalitional nature of our identities. However, they play a second role—to help us understand the places in our analysis where we may have the lenses of supremacy on, the places we are denying our neighbor as image of Christ. In understanding the subjectivity of our analysis, we can open the door to criticism which points out our own inability to understand, for deep reflection on where we may lack insights, and we can practice grounding empathy in encounter for the work of dismantling systems of oppression.

This subjectivity, particularly in light of *symbolon*, necessitates a rejection of single-axis thinking because these concepts highlight the multitudes contained in each person.⁶⁴ Kim and Shaw posit that intersectional theology necessitates “an embrace of multiple theological perspectives as necessary and desirable in moving toward more inclusive theologies that capture the breadth and diversity of the human encounter with the divine.”⁶⁵ Two points stand out here: diversity is necessary—not a mere desire—and knowledge of the divine is first and foremost present in *encounter* and as such intersectional methods must honor diverse encounters of the divine.

M. Shawn Copeland puts an even finer theological point on this notion in relation to embodiment in *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, saying:

Five basic convictions ground my discussion of theological anthropology: that the body is a site and mediation of divine revelation; that the body shapes human existence as relational and social; that the creativity of the Triune God is manifested in differences of gender, race, and sexuality; that solidarity is a set of body practices; and that the Eucharist orders and transforms our

⁶² Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (London: SCM, 2002), 1.

⁶³ Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 19.

⁶⁴ Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 53.

⁶⁵ Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 40.

bodies as the Body of Christ. Privileging the black woman's body makes these claims specific and particular.⁶⁶

Intersectional theology is *embodied*, it honors encounter with the divine and necessitates diversity. Like icons which “throw together” the spiritual and physical in each unique person, intersectional theology rejects single-axis thinking in favor of the both/and. Orthodox parishes bedeck their walls with images of the community of saints who each have different stories, social locations, and paths to salvation. This physical practice should be modeled elsewhere as we seek justice.

The concept and practice of emergence is a powerful tool for how we embody the “throwing together” of worlds each day, particularly when paired with honoring subjectivity and each person as icon of God. For my analysis of emergence, I draw from *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown because of the way it balances individual and systemic change and the world as it is with the world as it should and *can* be.⁶⁷ Quoting Nick Obolensky, brown defines emergence as “the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions.”⁶⁸ Emergence stresses “critical connections ... building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and the mind.”⁶⁹ She centers her book on the idea that our actions are like fractals in that how we interact at the small level ripples out to larger levels.⁷⁰ She notes that “*what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system.*”⁷¹ The small scale is thrown together with the large scale—the world we live in now creates a greater world in the future.

⁶⁶ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 2.

⁶⁷ Note a reference here to Saul Alinsky, a prolific community organizer, who believed that we needed to act in the world as it is but work toward the world as it should be. See *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971). I chose to focus on activism specifically for its capacity and urgency around creating the world as it could be through personal, symbolic, and political action and because it is an umbrella under which community organizing sits.

⁶⁸ Nick Obolensky, *Complex, Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty* (Burlington, VT: Gower, 2014), quoted in adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK, 2017), 3.

⁶⁹ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 3.

⁷⁰ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 52.

⁷¹ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 53, emphasis original. *Emergent Strategy* covers five elements of emergent strategy: fractal, adaptive, interdependence and decentralization, non-linear and iterative, resilience and transformative justice, and creating more possibilities. For space considerations I do not cover each one in detail, but find each element valuable for intersectional method and praxis.

Icon, subjectivity, and emergence are concepts inviting us to everyday practice for our own spirituality, but also encountering and centering others with the goal of dismantling systems of oppression. This is particularly nascent as our small-scale embodied changes affect systems at increasingly large scales. An intersectional concept of subjectivity calls us to listen to a diversity of opinions and experiences, responding to them with earnest love. Orthodoxy asks us to go further and be pierced through the heart by the suffering we encounter and understand that our work today can “throw together” our world and the Kingdom here and now.

In addition to fractals, emergence also iterates the necessity of community and interdependence. Again, brown provides a space for critical reflection on our humanity, saying, “Humans are unique because we compete when it isn’t necessary. We could reason our way to more sustainable processes, but we use our intelligence to outsmart each other. We compete for fun, for ego.”⁷² Brown rejects this competition in favor of love as an emergent process that creates space for generosity and vulnerability, or giving what we have and sharing what we need, respectively.⁷³ Further, “Interdependence requires being seen, as much as possible, as your true self.”⁷⁴

This emergent practice of being not in competition, but in vulnerable interdependence in the context of *being seen* is a concrete description of the intersectionality praxis of hearing the stories of others and then working at all scales to dismantle systems of oppression. Interdependence illuminates Orthodox theology’s practice of seeing each person as the icon of Christ and being pierced by their cross by putting a finer point on the interdependence needed for this praxis. We are not in *competition* in our salvation or movement toward justice, but in community and coalition. Even within our spandrels, the Orthodox Church decides to paint *icons*—it chooses to see even more space for imaging the community of the saints as models from the past to help us create the future, one fractal and interdependent step at a time.

WORLD-BUILDING: *THEOSIS*, THE BASEMENT METAPHOR, AND TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE

Thus far, we have explored robust areas of overlap within the spandrels created by intersectional method and praxis and Orthodox theology. In this section, I want to turn toward *theosis* alongside what I see as potential social applications that intersectional method and praxis may illuminate through the basement metaphor and transformative justice. I will first provide definitions and then draw

⁷² brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 87.

⁷³ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 91.

⁷⁴ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 93.

out the ways the concepts from this and our previous sections act to inform the iterative process of salvation and building a new world.

If *theosis* happens in community and is intimately tied to our work today and in the future, then it cannot only be seen as an ethereal concept in the far-off eschaton. Rather, *theosis* involves communal world-building wherein we build the Kingdom of God on earth, even if only in glimpses today. “For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church,” commissioned by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, asserts that

The Orthodox Church must, therefore, before all else, remind Christians that the world we inhabit is God’s good creation (however marred by sin and death it may be), and a gracious gift to all his creatures. . . . It affirms that the human presence in the physical cosmos is also a spiritual office, a kind of cosmic priesthood. Humanity occupies the place of a *methorios*, the boundary where the spiritual and material realms meet and are united; and, through that priestly mediation, the light of spirit pervades all of created nature, while the whole of cosmic existence is raised up into spiritual life. This is, at least, creation as God intends it, and as it will exist in the restoration of all things, when he brings about a renewed heaven and earth where all the creatures of land, sea, and air will rejoice in his light.⁷⁵

Our relationships in this world should be ordered toward renewal and the creation of the Kingdom of God on earth. The working together in community toward this goal is part of the journey of *theosis*.

With its bias toward justice, intersectional method also seeks to create a new world. An important metaphor to describe this process is the basement metaphor. This metaphor illustrates the need to build systems that work to liberate those with the most marginalized social locations because their liberation is the liberation of all of us. First, I will unpack a common metaphor vis-à-vis a common caricature of intersectionality and then explain its relationship to *theosis* more clearly.

To understand better the importance of this metaphor, let us first explore a common misconception about intersectionality perpetuated by its opponents, for example, Elizabeth C. Corey. This “oppression competition” critique posits that intersectionality is at its core merely a way to create increasingly complex identities with which to claim oppression and at its worst a way to “compete” for the title of “most

⁷⁵ Special Commission of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, “For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church,” Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America website, January 2020, www.goarch.org/social-ethos, sec 68, accessed May 1, 2021.

oppressed.”⁷⁶ Corey displays this erroneous view in the following passage:

Intersectional theorists begin their work on the basis of a debatable (though never debated) set of characteristics that supposedly constitute personal identity: race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and sometimes others (weight, attractiveness, age). Women are collectively, and as individuals, oppressed. So are gays, lesbians, Hispanics, blacks, the disabled, the aged, the very young, the obese, the transgender—and the list goes on, becoming more complex with the addition and subtraction of multiple traits.⁷⁷

Corey conflates *personal identity* and *social location* and misunderstands their respective roles in unlocking systems of oppression. Intersectionality is not *merely* about the individual experience of oppression, but about the collective understanding that systems of oppression interlock and interact with overlapping social locations, and that we must dismantle these systems. Further, these overlapping aspects of “identity” are better described as social locations—intersectionality claims no essentialism to these identities, but rather seeks to situate social locations in relation to overlapping and hierarchical systems of oppression. Audre Lorde explains this with her own relationships to the Black and LGBTQ communities as a Black lesbian woman, saying: “Within the lesbian community I am Black, and within the Black community I am a lesbian. Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are Black. There is no hierarchy of oppression.”⁷⁸ The ultimate aim of the analysis is not to find a grand theory, but to dismantle these hierarchically arranged systems.

An important caveat here is that identities are often formed by social locations but are not merely the sum of these social locations (parts). For example, my social location is as a white woman and that is part of my identity—but there may be parts of my identity unknown

⁷⁶ Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 8. Kim and Shaw talk about this as “hierarchies of oppression” which sees intersectionality as merely about identities and not the power systems related to those identities. Audre Lorde further rebuts this when she says, “I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination” (Audre Lorde, “There Is No Hierarchy of Oppressions,” in “Homophobia and Education,” ed. Leonore Gordon, special issue, *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* 14, no. 3–4 [1983]: 9).

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Campbell Corey, “First Church of Intersectionality,” *First Things* 275 (August 2017): 30.

⁷⁸ Lorde, “There is No Hierarchy of Oppressions,” 14.

to me because I live in a racialized and gendered world. Thus, there is no “essential” white identity that means by some law I should be upheld by systems of oppression. It is *real* but not *ontological*. Corey tries to conflate identity and social location in her criticism by denying the measurable oppression the various groups she lists face as a result of their social location while simultaneously chalking it up as a form of identity politics.⁷⁹ Often, in naming these social locations and internalizing them, I believe we are actually trying to name the distance between the ways in which we are allowed to manifest our irreducibility in a world ordered by systems of oppression and our irreducibility as beings made in the image of God. Where I think intersectional method is a value added to Orthodox theology is in thinking of this in relation to systems of oppression rather than personal naming. Intersectional method and Orthodox theology help me see that the act of dismantling these systems of oppression to allow us to see more clearly our irreducibility in community is the same project as manifesting the Kingdom of heaven on earth (even if in glimpses)—ultimately, it is to work toward *theosis*.

In what then, does this dismantling consist? Crenshaw’s original conception of intersectionality is helped by the basement metaphor, particularly as it relates to irreducibility and systemic change.⁸⁰ Imagine that a group of people are all in a basement stacked upon one another with a hatch at the top. They need to escape. Of course, the folks at the top may be able to climb out easily, as well as the second layer of people who can stand on the shoulders of others. With each successive layer it becomes more and more difficult to get to that hatch, and the people who have already made it out become increasingly important in allowing anyone the chance at escaping because of their access to the outside world and materials. There is no essential identity that comes with being at the bottom, it is a *location* and so negative consequences come as a result. Now imagine that in acknowledging that there was a group of people at the bottom and naming it as a state that should not exist, a ladder was built that would reach the bottom and allow for *everyone to make it out* without needing to ask permission from the few in power who have.⁸¹ This is the basement metaphor.

⁷⁹ Special thanks to Dr. Monique Liston at Marquette University for helping me distill this difference in a late-night conversation after her class on activism in 2021.

⁸⁰ Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, 50.

⁸¹ The Orthodox ascetic text *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus (literally John of the Ladder), whose schema toward divine ascent involved 30 steps toward the ultimate *telos* of *theosis* including renunciation of the world, penitence, defeat of vices/achievement of virtues, and avoidance of traps to asceticism. It is beyond the scope of this article to overlay St. John’s entire schema onto structures of vice and virtue, but my hope is that this essay can be a first step in establishing the basis and

Intersectionality asks us to name that group at the bottom—a group that exists not as a result of an essentialism tied to their *identity*, but their location in society as constructed by society—and to be biased toward solutions to injustice that facilitate their self-liberation because through their freedom, all are made free. The basement metaphor ensures that intersectionality is not merely additive, as Corey asserts, but liberatory. In fact, it places the most liberatory power with those at the bottom! As Anna Carastathis explains, in this metaphor those who are most marginalized “are constructed as having the revolutionary potential through their self-liberation to liberate other oppressed groups (which other groups lack, because their “climbing” the social hierarchy, betraying an allegiance with those at the bottom, materially requires keeping hierarchy in place).”⁸² Intersectional methodology harks back to the parable of the goats and the sheep (Matthew 25:31–46), where Jesus states that “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me,” and also whatever we did not do. Jesus affirms that what happens to the least is important, while providing a framework as to how that focus helps dismantle systems of oppression.⁸³

Theosis asks us to build the Kingdom of God on earth by seeing each person as the icon of God and working in community toward manifesting that irreducible image. Intersectional methodology illuminates this by highlighting the importance of dismantling systems of oppression for the creation of that world. We will not achieve

preliminary research for such an analysis in the mutually illuminating nature of Orthodox practice and intersectional methods.

⁸² Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, 75.

⁸³ At first glance, building a ladder to the bottom of the basement may seem to conflict with the fractality of emergence. Are we supposed to make small steps or large revolutionary ones?! However, this is to misunderstand the location of both metaphors (the fractal and the basement). There is not one basement to overthrow—rather, the basement metaphor gives us a way of relating the solutions we build and the social locations of those trapped within systems of oppression. So, for example, when I worked with Best Babies Zone Milwaukee (www.mke-cni.org/bbz) to decrease infant mortality on the Northwest side of Milwaukee, we knew we could not wholesale overthrow the healthcare system and dismantle the racism that caused disparities in the infant mortality rate between Black and white mothers. We knew we needed to make small-scale, local, fractal steps to address the problem. However, in designing that solution, we took an intersectional and basement-informed approach. We sought solutions that would most help those with the highest infant mortality rate—poor Black mothers. One of the first projects we did was raise funds to get doula care for five mothers during the COVID-19 lockdown and all of them had healthy pregnancies and babies! This small-scale solution looked to the basement and had fractal effects—we were able to fund more doulas, training women in our neighborhood to become doulas, and formed partnerships that affected infant mortality at a larger scale. This is just one example of how even within a fractal step, intersectional practitioners can think about solutions with the bottom of the basement in mind.

theosis by letting people slowly crawl out of the basement alone, but rather by working *together* in community to build a solution that reaches the most marginalized at the bottom of the basement, in turn freeing all. An important activist practice for achieving these goals is transformative justice which seeks to transform the conditions that make injustice possible.⁸⁴ *Theosis* manifesting liberation from “the basement” and transformative justice both necessitate personal and communal practices and sacrifice (*sobornost*’/beloved community) that meet people where they are in reverence (*icon*, emergence) in order to make a new world (*theosis*, transformative justice).

Transformative justice seeks “practices that go all the way to the root of the problem and generate solutions and healing there, such that the conditions that create injustice are transformed.”⁸⁵ This practice calls for intersectional loving accountability acknowledging that we are all located differently with respect to overlapping systems of oppression and can cause harm on one axis even when we are simultaneously being harmed by another. It also recognizes the need to change when we have caused harm, and that accountability at small scale can change the whole system (fractals).⁸⁶

Transformative justice necessitates that we convert our everyday practice to change whole systems—it is nothing less than “creating systems of justice and equity in the future, creating conditions that we have never experienced.”⁸⁷ New futures are created in the re-creation of humans to live in the present the future they would like to see, just as the creation of the Kingdom of God happens as we achieve *theosis* and become like God. Orthodox theology and practice, mutually illuminated alongside intersectional theology and practice, must strive for the creation of liberatory systems that go to the bottom of the basement, transform systems of injustice, and are nothing less than working in community toward *theosis*.

⁸⁴ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 126. Often transformative justice is placed within the context of abolitionism and the need to create systems of safety and accountability that do not reinforce the carceral state. In *Emergent Strategy* brown broadens this to all forms of injustice, not just the injustice of carceral structures. For more information on using transformative justice in the context of abolition see *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*, ed. Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Peipzina-Samarasinha (Chico, CA: AK, 2020) or *Abolishing the Police*, ed. Koshka Duff (London: Dog Section, 2022), www.dogsection.org/product/abolishing-the-police.

⁸⁵ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 146.

⁸⁶ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 147.

⁸⁷ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 160.

CONCLUSION

When one walks into the main church, they see an image of the Mother of God with her arms open, presenting Christ to the world. In this icon, we label the Mother of God the “all spacious one” because she held God—the uncontainable—in her womb. Heaven and earth collided, and she held Christ within herself and then gave Christ to the world to die.

My prayer is that in this work, I have been able in some small way to imitate the Mother of God by creating space to explore two large ideas, intersectional method and Orthodox theology, for the benefit of the world. Not only are we called to create spandrels with these overlapping systems and create room for the prophetic voice of all—we are also called in community toward *theosis*—God-humanness—the very thing the Mother of God created space for within herself.

My hope is that in making room for mutual illumination between Orthodox and intersectional theology I have sparked creativity and deep reflection on the prophetic voices of those at the margins. *Sobornost*’, icon, and *theosis* alongside coalition, subjectivity, and the basement metaphor can provide rich reflections for intersectional and Orthodox activism illuminated through beloved community, emergence, and transformative justice. Orthodox and intersectional theology call us to create a world of justice—of which we have only seen glimpses—and work together toward salvation through love of God and our neighbors. **M**

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