
CHRISTIAN ART AND RELIGIOUS MUSIC

BIVALENT SIGNIFICATION OF THE ARTISTIC

‘CONCEPTUALIZATION’ OF THE DIVINE AND OF

THE DOXOLOGICAL CULTIC PROJECTION

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Abstract

In the Orthodox cult is synthesized the religious value of sacred art in a unique specificity, in the sense that cult with all identity elements becomes a worship. Liturgical worship - essentially the entire Orthodox worship is centred on Holy Liturgy - resize the sacred art at the level of capacity to provide in a symbolically way the variations of expression of the Divine Transcendent. Plasticization, in an artistic form of what in a rationally way cannot be understood, finds its articulation and possibility in worship. In this sense, sacred art and religious music are expressions of the Divine presence in creation. And this real presence of Divine provokes man to a doxological experience.

Keywords: sacred art, music, worship, transcendence, Orthodoxy

1. Christian art – conceptual delimitations

Art is in essence the most profound expression of the human creativity. As difficult to define, as it is difficult to assess, given that each artist chooses alone the rules and work parameters, it can be said however, that art is the result of the environment choosing, of a set of rules for the use of this environment and of a set of values that determine what deserves to be expressed through that environment to induce a sentiment, an idea, a sensation or feeling in the most possible efficient way for that environment. Through its way of manifestation, the art can be considered also as a form of knowledge (artistic knowledge) [1].

In a broad sense, the term *art* designates any activity that is based on knowledge, exercise, perception, imagination and intuition. In a strict sense, it is added to the above the lack of functionality (practice), knowing, aesthetics [1]. *The British Encyclopedia* defines art as “skill and imagination in the creation of objects, environments or aesthetic experiences that can be shared” [2].

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The definition and evaluation of art has become problematic especially from the start of the 20th century. Richard Wollheim makes a distinction between three ways of access: realist, where the aesthetic quality is an independent value of any human point of view; objectivistic, where the aesthetic quality it is also an absolute value, but dependent of the general human experience; and the relativist position, in which the aesthetic quality isn't an absolute value, but depends of, and varies with the human experience of different individuals [3]. An object can be characterized according to the intention, or the lack of it, of its creator, indifferent of its purpose or function. For example a cup that may be used as a simple recipient can be considered an object of art, if it's intended an aesthetic object. Also, a painting may be considered a crafting object (therefore not an art object), if it's a mass object.

The nature of art was described by Richard Wollheim as "one of the most elusive terms of the human culture traditional problems" [3, p. 2]. It was defined as a vehicle for the expression or communication of emotions and ideas, a way for exploring and appreciate the formal elements for itself, as mimesis or representation [1, p. 5]. Leo Tolstoy has identified art as an indirect way to communicate between persons [1, p. 5]. Benedetto Croce and R.G. Collingwood have advanced the idealist idea that art expresses emotions, and that the artwork therefore essentially exists in the mind of the creator [1, p. 16]. Last but not least, it must be mentioned the fact that the theory of art has its roots in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and was developed in the 20th century, and the art as *mimesis* has deep roots in Aristotle's philosophy [1, p. 18]. *Mimesis* is a theory about art appeared in Ancient Greece, which considers that art represents an 'imitation'. This concept appears until Plato and was attributed especially to the theatrical art. Later it is generalized by the Pre-Socratic led by Democritus which said that all arts represent an 'imitation' of nature. Plato claims that the mimesis is in fact an 'imitation of the imitation'. Aristotle has developed the idea of mimesis, and that utilizing it, classifies arts in two groups: 1. representative arts or the mimetic ones; 2. the arts that complete (which inspire from nature) [1, p. 17].

Starting with the *Enlightenment* under art are understood especially the forms of the so-called beautiful arts: a) plastic art as the classical genres painting and graphics, sculpture, architecture and a multitude of other secondary genres, as from the 19th century, the applied art as a genre close the artistic crafting; b) the dramatic art with the main divisions theatre, dancing/choreography and cinematography; c) music with the main divisions vocal music and instrumental music; d) literature with the groups epic, drama and lyric. From the beginning of Modernism till now the ways of expression, the techniques and the ways of art have expanded significantly, for example with photography in the case of plastic art. Both in the case of the dramatic art, music and literature and also plastic art, in the present day are added also the so-called new media, for example the radio and television, but also video, online media and others. From the last decades of the 20th century, the classic division begins to lose importance [4].

As a specific segment, the Christian art in the chronology of art's history begins in the first century and continues till today, maintaining fidelity to the dogmatic-theological canon of the iconic representation of Jesus Christ the Saviour and developing itself in various specifics regarding the religious music.

2. The aesthetics of the Christian art - plasticization in the empirical references of the transcending beauty

Aesthetics represent a science and theory of the beautiful in general and of the sentiment that it provokes and maintains in us. In a narrower sense, aesthetics is defined in a current way as the science that studies laws and the art categories, considered the highest form of creation and reception of the beautiful.

The problems of high generality like the category of the beautiful, the manifestations of beautiful, the contemplation of the beautiful, the essence of art, its connections with reality, the act of creation, the personality of the artist, the classification, criteria and genres of art, the artistic communication circuit, the conceptual determination of art, the nature of the value and artistic ideal, the artistic truth as the fundamental epistemological value, the nature of the creative processes in art, the structural unit of the aesthetic act, the purpose of art, the instances of art, the dynamics of values in art, the relations of art with other spiritual domains, the aesthetic capacity, the particular aesthetics of various arts, the beautiful as hierarchical reality, numerous other related problems are in chapters of every aesthetic theories.

For some scholars, Aesthetics is, alongside Logic, Metaphysics, Anthropology, Gnoseology and Praxeology, a philosophical discipline. As a branch of human knowledge, Philosophy proposes, as we showed before, to study and order the principles and phenomena causes to the level of their maximum generality, to understand their fundamentals, to organize knowledge into a coherent system.

As a branch of Philosophy, Aesthetics aims the axiomatic structure and formal systematization of the principles and theoretical conclusions of the beautiful.

Aesthetics offer a *global* image of the art laws and categories from the perspective of the *whole* human creations and life aspects considered beautiful. To realize this purpose, Aesthetics is founded on premises and principles with a clear order of the values and meanings highlighted by art, by the act of creation, by the condition of man in general, and of the artist, especially.

In the 19th century, when the concerns dedicated to the problematic of the famous were so supported, aesthetics was defined in a current way, as the science that studies the laws and categories of art considered the highest form of creation, feeling and reception of the beautiful. In this century have existed attempts to replace the term of aesthetics with the one of *calist* (gr. *kalon* - beautiful). The 19th century however imposed the term aesthetics [5].

It has been talked about an aesthetic of Orthodoxy, a beauty of elements that enter in the general register of the Christian art, and here we take into account the iconography and music. The functionality of the Christian elements is, firstly, to give a plastic or linguistic outline to the Beauty, and here we take into account the Divine Beauty, as a way of manifestation towards the creature of the divine Being.

After all, the elements of the Christian art have a more deep significance and that aims the apophatic knowledge theology of the divine personal Reality. This is very well observed and commented by the Academician Alexandru Surdu in the *Preface* of the first volume of *Prelegeri de estetică Ortodoxiei, Teologie și estetică*, of Mihail Diaconescu. Aesthetics, as speciality of the Christian art, aims a dialect-speculative way of thinking. Speculative thinking (from *speculum* – ‘mirror’), has, indeed, the capacity of referring at infinite totalities and processes oriented towards the transcendent [6].

The great speculative tradition accompanies the European philosophical thinking since its beginning. From Pythagoreans and from Heraclitus till nowadays, transcendence and some antithetic-speculative schemes are always present in all the stages of philosophy. In the New Testament Orthodox theology, the notion of *mirror (speculum)* is used to express spiritual truths. In this sense, the Holy Scripture is like a mirror in which the man can contemplate his spirituality [6].

In the first *Epistle to the Corinthians* of Saint Apostle Paul ‘of nations’, we are told that the God’s Revelation in the divine-human Person of the Saviour will be completed, in the eschatological perspective, at the end of ages (of history), when it will establish the eternal kingdom of God, and Jesus Christ will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. That’s why, says Saint Apostle Paul, “now we see in a mirror dimly (...); then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13.12) [6].

3. The externalization of the religious interior content through the ‘formalization’ of the sacred music

Indubitable, a simple radiography of the ancient and actual civilizations’ religiosity reveal the fact that since always the relation between man and Divinity, regardless of how it was conceived, abstract or personal, has taken a cultic form. In these conditions, *the cult* isn’t a simple form of abstracting the historicity of a cultural anthropological content, but actually a commitment of the human in the condition of worshipping the divine [7].

Art, as a culture segment, was born from the wish to plasticize the live implication of man in relation with the Divine, on the one hand, and on the other hand to offer a visible, plastic frame of the measure intensity of the religious feeling. Michelle Brown tells that art is like music: it can make things be ‘more than what they are’ and go beyond the act of seeing and experimentation, reaching a deeper level of perception. “Because if the human impulse of creating can be seen as a constituent part of a perpetual search to be closer to the

fundamental creative force, which the Christians, as many others, know it as 'God', then the act through which art is born – as the birth of kids or ideas – is a vigorous expression of that impulse. Like the prayer, it offers a potential path for entering in contact with the Creator, as Michelangelo admitted when he conceived the electrifying iconic image which looms on the dome of the Sistine Chapel, embodying the creation moment and the foreshadowing of reconciliation, when the outstretched fingertips of God and Adam, the divine and human, are about to touch." [8]

Art, in these meanings, was and will always be an irreducible way of man's commitment 'towards' the Divine [9].

When we talk about Christian art, in general there are taken into account two frames: 1) iconography, architecture etc.; 2) music, poetry etc. If in the religious iconography and architecture the religious feeling's projection is somewhat abstract, in music, specifically, the affective implication of the human is an effective, direct one, immediate and not mediated by secondary forms. Of these considerations, music becomes an existential way of transposition and expression of the human in the laetific condition [10].

In the sacramental and liturgical space of the Church, the chanting is the live expression of some feelings of the man, it's a mirror in which reflect the joys and sorrows of the human spirit, his defeats and hopes, faith and love towards God, man and nature. Chanting is the universal language through which people understand each other since all ages and places. It is of the created Cosmos and governed by God, fragment of the harmonies of which attribute is harmony itself. In a broad sense, it is the most expressive art, communicative and most suitable to pour out the inexhaustible river of our soul's lives. If by word the man has the possibility to share to his peers all thoughts, feelings or anxiety, through chanting the human being rises above these communications. Through chanting, the life of the man brightens, his heart becomes delighted, and the entire being is enchanted, transported from earth to the region where the beautiful, sublime and deity thrones. Only so can be explained the fact that researching the mankind's past, we find that in all the places and times the chanting was presented in the culture of every nation without a distinction towards the faith, being a complex form of the religious feeling manifestation [11].

In the line of those stated, "the worship is the totality of forms, of rites and ceremonies fixed, established and enshrined or accepted by Church, through which it shares to the Christians the sanctifying grace of God and through which the Orthodox Christians community or congregation express their attitude and feelings towards God, namely they praise or glorifies Him, thank and pray to Him" [12]. "Any form of worship is nothing other than a way of expressing or outpouring the soul" [12], having as a source the religious idea about divinity, idea that inspires and outlines the character of the worship of which is bounded also the religious chant's significance. Therefore, "nowhere can be seen better the strong organic connection between worship and religion, as in Orthodoxy. Indeed, the Orthodox dogmas have found in the ways of our worship – but

especially in the rich Byzantine hymnography, which is a great versified theological ontology, admirable forms of expressing and popularization. The two supports or grounds of each worship, namely on the one hand the dogma or teaching, and on the other hand, its piety or feeling and experience, intermingle perfectly in worship forms.” [12]

Therefore, one of the many forms of expressing the worship is also the religious chanting, which as we will see, has the purpose to strengthen the power of the word and to express through sounds, in a symbolical way, the movement of the heart and to awaken it, serving so both the expressed word through prayer and the religious feeling.

4. Music and its functionality in the manifestation of the religious feeling as prayer

In the Orthodox space any artistic masterpiece, either picture or chanting, was conceived as a prayer, fact that invites us in reflecting upon what is profound and essential, revealing about the art aspects in Orthodoxy [5, vol. 2, p. 14]. Unfortunately, it must be stated that today, because of the secularization and desacralisation of life, the contemporary man does not express anymore the same sensibility towards the significance of the prayer.

Is an incontestable fact today that the barometer of spiritual Christian life is subject to a more and more obvious danger in the society, namely the secularization. In front of the relativism, and implicitly, the desacralisation, it exists the risk that the theological speech would indulge in two valences: either it expresses very advanced, abusing the terms and concepts way too philosophical, with the purpose of competing the post-modern philosophy, or it expresses “with a wooden language”, as Mihail Neamțu states [13], which devalues, undress Theology of its experimental character. The theological speech, therefore, risks to be empty, to not reach the Christian souls’ confused by the fulminant, alarming, crisis, suffocating rhythm, of today’s society, not to have that efficient practice: the perspective of uniting with God, the eschatological perspective of a future life, the deifying perspective. The man of today wants a simple Christianity, reduced at the dimension of a social life, a Christianity that would accept the hazard and hedonism of life, a Christianity without restrictions against the sins and passions. Or, to fold Christianity on the today’s desecrated society way of life, is one of the greatest dangers for the Church, as the Greek theologian Christos Yannaras states [14]. Father Dumitru Stăniloae finds that today, in the context of secularization, it can be felt a weakening tendency of faith [15]. Inevitably this weakening of faith is the consequence of man’s alienation from God, indifferent towards the prayer, the excellence means of familiarizing in the basis of love dialog with God. In the frequency of prayer it is verified the measure of man’s belief.

Christian theology of today must invite to prayer: this is the priority element of its mission, because to be a theologian means to pray, and the one that prays can call himself a theologian, as Evagrie the Pontic teaches us. The

prayer in the Orthodox spirituality distinguish itself through a fundamental characteristic: the prayer is a dialog, it's a conversation with God, a God that through the intimacy of the prayer is closer to the man, but in the same time God appears extremely far, not only because of His transcendence, but also because of our sins. However the conscious of the Christian is under the mark of a positive note, of hope: the distance between man and God, caused by the sin, can be reduced to uniting with God with real repentance, engagement with the perfection path.

The prayer is an existential act for every Christian Orthodox believer, as indeed for the practitioners of any religion. Few religious acts are as pure, uplifting and humane as the prayer. Few express so good the fighter condition of the man with the sin, with the difficulties that assault him and also with the violent or perfidious temptations of the evil that cross the famous and contradictory world in which we live. The prayer synthesizes, expresses and potentiate the human's existence drama, always torn by weakness, temerity and hope. The prayer reminds us always how much our soul aspires to God, our Creator and Governor, Which gave us the paradox of freedom. The prayer lifts us to God as beings worthy of His love [5, vol. 2, p. 15].

Significant fact – the prayer, as an act of personal or collective relation with Divinity, is lived in an infinite variety of forms in all nations, in all the world's religions, in all ages, cultures and civilizations. The prayer tells us something profound, essential about the ontological unity of people from everywhere. This fact is possible because the prayer expresses more intensely, directly, shaded than many other religious acts the profound necessity of exaltation of the soul towards God, the never quenched thirst in humans to confess, to directly communicate with their Creator, and in the same time, with their peers from everywhere and always [5, vol. 2, p. 15].

The prayer is one of the most important, sincere and complex religious acts of life, in general, and of the Christian Orthodox, in particular. Therefore, it has so many hypostasis, significations, forms of addressing and manifestations. Without the prayer, the life of the Christian and Church cannot be achieved.

This is how the great apologist Tertullian understood the sublime act of praying, the first Christian Latin writer, genuine doctrine master of the spiritual sacrifice brought in spirit and truth. In his treaty *About prayer*, Tertullian states: "We are the real worshipers and priests, that, praying in spirit, we sacrifice in spirit our prayer to God, as a self and well received sacrifice, which He asked and foreseen it. This prayer, given from all the heart, nourished from our faith, tended by truth, whole through innocence, pure through chastity, embellished agape with the ornament of good deeds, it is our duty to lift this prayer, between the psalms and hymns, at the altar of God; it will acquire for us all of God (...). Only the prayer can persuade God. Christ wanted it not to do any harm, it gave it the power to do only good. Thus, it doesn't know anything else but to call back from the path of dead the souls of the deceased, to strengthen the weak, to heal the wounded, to deliver the ones grasped by demons, to open the gates of the prisons, to unravel the chains of the innocents. It washes the sins, banishes the

temptations, quenches the persecutions, comforts the depressed, praises those hearty, leads those who travel, calms the waves, frighten the thieves, feeds the poor, guides the rich, raises the fallen, supports those who stumble and supports those standing. The prayer is the fortress of belief, our attack and defence weapon against the enemy that lurks from everywhere. Therefore, we should always be armed and not forget the day and night watch. To guard under the prayer arms the flag of our emperor, to wait, praying, the blare of the angel (...). What can be said more about the prayers' use is that the Lord has prayed, which are forevermore in His glory and power." [16]

We can only vaguely outline here, imprecise, the inexhaustible meanings of the prayer. Two of these meanings are yet dominant. On one hand, the prayer is a gesture of imploration and of "spiritual communication with God, with the word or thought" [17]. On the other hand, the prayer is "the bond of union between the brothers of the same faith. It is the main lever of the spiritual life." [17] Therefore, the Saviour urges those who believe in Him: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (*Matthew 26.41, Luke 22.40*).

Through prayer the Christian adores God after the Sacraments (Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, Penance, Marriage, Unction and Ordination) [18], through which God shares to the people [19], transmitting the grace [20], anticipating thus, His eschatological kingdom, maintaining and perfecting the man's life in Christ [21], the prayer being the most usual and safe way to obtain the grace and divine help. In prayer, the mind, soul and whole being of the believer raises to God, with which enters in a profound and durable connection. The prayer is inspired by the Holy Spirit and expresses man's love towards his Creator. The amazement, adoration, praise, imploration, sincere confession of the errors, the profound necessity of living with the soul purified by the sins, are expressed, also, through prayer. In prayer, the human acknowledges his state of being created through a special act of God, found in an infinite transcending movement towards the Absolute of which depends. In prayer is manifested the man's thirst of perfection, the ineffable mystery of our being lived in communion and bounded by the Holy Trinity. In prayer, the religious existence of each one naturally and continuously pulsates, because it is the main way of living piety. Christian is not the one that does not pray. The faith in God is strong and fruitful only where the prayer is alive, because in prayer the believer confesses his most secret thoughts, fears and aspirations. The prayer is a free act, as a dialog between man and God, as a relation of the soul with his Creator through the power of faith and love, as collectedness, act of trust, gratitude and exaltation. As a way of obtaining spiritual gifts, the prayer contributes at the raise towards deification. Professor Petru Dumitresă notes: "In the texts of prayers have been expressed the most deep and intimate feelings of the pious soul. In the prayers of the saints of all times we find their unshaken belief in God and the expression of their religious, intimate feeling. The prayer is the religion in activity, the religious process in its most direct being." [22] In the line of the ones presented above, any church chanting is a prayer that transposes the man in communion with God.

Because of its influence upon the soul, the music is the most spread art throughout the world. In time and space it stretches its fibres and maintains as a means of universal expression of a vast gamma of human feelings. “Starting with the lower stages of civilization and finishing with the most advanced regarding the culture, the man sings when he wants to worship the deity he adores” [23]. Music is thus, a way of transposing spiritually on a superior level that favours the believers’ communications with God, approaching Him. Hence the conclusion that church music does not have the concern to satisfy our aesthetic sense, to delight our hearing, but to prepare our being through this spiritual transposition, through which we can be capable to raise to God, to feel His presence, or to praise and thank Him [11].

The frame in which it executes asks for a sober outfit and it involves a completely different style of other music genres. “The divine cult requires exceptional austerity, yet solemn music.” [23, p. 95] As in the religious act the material being of the human tends to raise spiritually, towards the heavenly ones, so as in the religious chanting, the body of the Christian vibrates at unison with his soul – being one [11].

The church chanting is an art, but an art that doesn’t want to be called an art in the usual meaning of the word. This is because it does not aim only the satisfaction of the artistic sense, or of the beautiful laws, as the other arts. It has the mission to be a ‘humble servant’ of the divine Church cult, with the purpose of praising [11]. Its virtues are being felt in every believer insofar as it contributes to creating a sense of communication with God and its fellows.

Music, the closest art to the spiritual world, is the capable way of transforming the human nature, to transpose it from the plan of the earthly concerns in the superior climate of harmony, common side to the divine nature, thus approaching the man to God. The boundary between art and religion, both ways of raising the man towards the superior zone of existence, totally disappears when the church chanting reaches the heights of perfection through simplicity and sincerity. Then the plans overlap – the believer enters in state of religiosity which opens all the valences of the being to receive in him God [11].

Any musical instrument – to impress must receive affection from the man. The man – through voice – does not need any intermediary. A voice ruled by the emotional vibration is the most convincing way of transmitting the ineffable thrill which facilitates the listener’s transposition in states of elevation that become true steps of ascent towards God. To a better understanding, it is enough that every one of us should think at the most famous liturgical services, at which we participated, where the majority of believers prays chanting, or accompanying affectively and tasting the choes harmonies. “Without realizing it, the prayers sung by the ones around, draws us also. Almost imperceptibly our heart rejoices; we forget about what surrounds us, the thought flies away towards the high spheres of the Heaven, the soul lights with love, and the accents of the sung prayers start to vibrate in the clouds also” [24], calling us to follow the sublime impulses of our ennobled hearts – and thus willing to fly to God and to transpose in life His commandments.

The chant united with the prayer is the ideal way through which is expressed the religious feeling. The chanting is the gathering of words with the modulation of the voice: “The mind expresses its work in simple words, in cold phrases. However the feelings are not content only with simple words of reason. They want themselves awakened and raised on other peaks – to the usual everyday life.” [25]

5. Conclusions

When the melodic theme is served by texts with a deep content and expressed in attractive forms, the action effect of the religious music upon the human spirit is stronger. This is realized richly by the liturgical texts from the texts of our church services. They contain, as it is known, poems of stunning beauty, which shed light in at the same time the religious truths.

Any religious service – Orthodox – is almost a continuing chant of prayers, at which calls us Saint Apostle Paul (Hebrews 13.15). The religious life, in its affective, sentimental life finds its expression under the form of church chanting, through which the believer can express both the requested prayer and the praise, thanking and worship of God, strong faith in Him, love to Him, humiliation and repentance feelings, etc. “The church chanting, at the godly services is nothing more than the language of which man talks to God, is the pleasant gift of God, is an expression of the soul full of deep piety towards God”. [25]

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