
THE PERFECTION OF MAN FROM A RELIGIOUS PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This is an interdisciplinary study. On the one hand, it briefly investigates the fundamental and theological structural aspects of man that make possible the process of his perfection. And on the other hand it tries to capture the mystery of the deification of man that can be fulfilled in Christianity, also taking into account the general religious phenomenological perspective on the same topic.

Keywords: deification, revelation, iconic, representation, religion

1. Introduction

The present study seeks to analyse the theological dimension of the perfection or deification of the human being from a Christian theological and inter-religious phenomenological perspective. It evaluates in the strict sense the vocation of man's resemblance to God that can be achieved as a mystery through the Christian Faith, but also the way in which this vocation takes shape and manifests itself in the general religious plan.

From the Christian perspective, the creation of man implies the mystery of his resemblance to his Archetype. It is a natural tendency, an inner dynamic inscribed in the heart of man through which he will eternally tend to resemble his Creator. The mystery of resemblance is, therefore, the mystery of man as a being permanently and irreversibly bound to God. As we will notice further, the structural connection of man with God is manifested, apart from his full experience in Christianity, as a religion. The mystery of resemblance is manifested outside of Christianity as the mystery of the religious man. Thus, from the perspective of *homo religiosus* phenomenology, *the mystery of resemblance* is the synonymous definition of man [1]. Man in general can only be religious, no matter how he chooses to live, because he is created in the image

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of God, being determined in his existence by the tension that exists between *image* and *likeness*.

Therefore, perhaps for a deeper understanding of the reality of man's resemblance to God, a phenomenological-religious and theological approach is imperative. In order to be able to approach the mystery of human deification, it is necessary to identify the underlying theological principles, from the overall perspective of the theology of religions. This approach, as we will see, reveals to us the ontological-genetic foundations inscribed in the human being that tends towards perfection, foundations that determine and constitute both the nature of the spiritual act of perfection in its totality, as well as its form.

The genetic frameworks and structures drawn by the Creator, remain in the creation - the human being in this case, whether understood or not, regardless of the will and knowledge of man. In other words, whether he wants to admit it or not, man is a created reality whose existence comes from non-existence. He is religious and spiritual by definition, and lives in the prospect of his fulfilment (deification). Religion, as a predominantly human phenomenon, will be understood in its totality and unity [2] by identifying the background elements that condition it in its forms and expressions.

2. The profound structures of man and his communion with God

From the perspective of theology and philosophy of religion, the union of man with the Creator can be achieved on the basis of ontological structures that could be met, both in the constitution of man and in the entire created existence. As the researcher of religions Petru Culianu remarks, the humanists Emil Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Georges Dumezil and Mircea Eliade called these ontological realities of the human being: *profound structures* [3]. On the basis of these realities man can be unequivocally called *homo religiosus*, the deepest part of which aims towards fulfilment through *religious* union with its Creator.

These depths of the human beings are intimately linked to the genesis of man and are determined by the moment of Adam's cosmic fall. Therefore, in the structure of man we encounter both elements related to the gift and creative love of God, as well as existential realities related to the tragic event of the fall.

In this sense, Mircea Eliade notes the existence of a deep *collective unconscious of the origin* [4] of humanity; this profound collective unconscious, says M. Eliade, is determined by the 'archetypes' and soul forms of the self. In other words, the deep structures existing within the human being relate, on the one hand, to the Creator, and on the other hand, they create a unity of being between all people, regardless of the religious framework in which they could be identified. As for the effects of the fall, in terms of these internal structures, they can be perceived by the consciousness of all people that they live in a state of sin and by the spiritual relation to what M. Eliade calls "the Land without sin" [5].

Out of these profound realities, without a doubt, the most important one is the existence, at the level of the human consciousness, of the Absolute Being or of God. As the same tireless humanist Mircea Eliade observes: "*The sacred is a*

constitutive part of consciousness and implicitly of the whole human being" [4, p. 6]. Thus, he continues, human life acquires meaning by imitating paradigmatic structures [4, p. 6], revealed by the manifestation of the Absolute Being in the consciousness of man.

This truth also found in Orthodox theology shows that man is related to divinity through the soul, being an existence in the image of the divine Being. Consequently, man can live only in the perspective of connection and union with his Archetype and Creator, Who is present both in the depths of his soul and outside of himself. This truth ensures the correct understanding of the created-uncreated difference and tension that underlies Orthodox spirituality, between image and likeness. Therefore, from the perspective of religious phenomenology, the fact that the 'Sacred' is imprinted in the human consciousness defines the existence of man continually, even after death [6].

Under these conditions, in any religious context, man, by carrying in himself the presence of his Creator, can live only from the perspective of his union and fulfilment in Him. This can be seen from the fact that the human being, from the most elementary manifestations of the spirit to the most complex and systematic, expresses itself in a religious and Christian manner towards the ultimate goal and purpose of its existence: deification.

Another profound structure that defines the human being, closely related to the first mentioned, consists of *the consciousness of creature* [2, p. 137]. This, as R. Otto remarks, is a reflection of the *Numinous* [7], of self-consciousness, and of the deep religious feeling that the Divine Being is present in the human being. It is at the same time a feeling of dependence [7, p. 15] on the One Who gave him existence. The creature state, therefore, defines all of humanity whether or not it wants to acknowledge a God [or a god]; the human being is an existence not of himself but comes from non-existence. And this aspect of the human being sends man to the Absolute Being from Whom he originates.

All religious realities are based on the awareness that man is created. Whether or not all *homo religiosus* agree on the mode of creation or on the nature of the Creator, what matters is the underlying reality that he cannot get past, namely the state of the creature. Based on these two profound principles, the presence of the Divine Being in the depths of man and the consciousness of the creature state, we have at hand the two basic realities that can define man's vocation and tendency to perfection. On the one hand, he agrees with the thought that is an existence that comes from the absolute Existence, and on the other hand that this Existence is present in the depths of his being. These undeniable truths cause man to seek union with God as a natural act.

However, this search is also carried out on the basis of another existential structure of the human being, namely the *image-likeness* dynamics. Man has an iconic constitution, he is the image of the Image, that is of Christ [8]. He received by genesis the call to be like God by grace. Thus, the *image* imprinted in the constitution of man, determines him to tend to the *likeness* of his Archetype - the Divine Logos. Thus, the perfection of man will be accomplished through the incarnate Logos - Jesus Christ. In Christ, all human beings were

assumed and deified in an essential way through the contact of human nature with the divine one in the Divine Hypostasis of the Logos. This is a consequence both of His incarnation (having as its model the deified man) and of the deification of man (who have as a model the incarnate Logos). This is what Saint Maximus noted, that man and God are models of each other [9]. These are revealed truths valid for all people, regardless of their religious inclinations or beliefs.

Therefore, man, whether he wants to assume or not his constitutive reality, operates and manifests either towards the likeness of God, or towards nothing, nothingness and darkness. In any religious context this element is felt especially from the fact that everyone tends towards a transcendence of the human condition. In all people, without distinction, there is this *image-likeness* tension that takes different forms of expression.

Another fundamental structure of the human being consists of the ontological human-Cosmos relationship. And this is given of all the virtualities and rationalities of the whole Cosmos which subsist within man. It is on him, that its harmony or deconstruction depend. The Cosmos is for man a world open to a multitude of structural virtualities that must be activated. Through these, as M. Eliade observes, man is in touch with God and participates in the sanctification of the world [10]. Thus, man as a microcosm [10, p.159] fulfils in his being, through the relationship with God, the whole created existence. He must live in relation to the world, otherwise the world would eliminate him. He achieves communion with the divine Being through the Cosmos which can make God transparent in His manifestations [10, p. 128].

The last two defining structures of man inextricably linked together consist of *lost paradise* and *the fallen condition of man* [11].

In man's consciousness there was a time when he was in a full relationship with the divine Being, he was in the grace and happiness of communion with Him. Through two important works, 'Aspects of Myth' and 'The Myth of Eternal Return', Mircea Eliade tries to show that 'from the beginning' is the meaning of the relationship with the *Sacred*, a relationship that was later corrupted. In other words, we will recover from the fallen state only by living and returning to this initial state [5, p. 77].

Being in this situation, man, throughout history, seeks, on the basis of the deep structures mentioned, his original nature, corrupted by the event of Adam's fall. The effect of this search, apart from the divine Revelation, has as a consequence the multitude of religions, from the most primitive and elementary to the most elaborate and subtle. All of this shows a theological consciousness that represents man as the image of God who is seeking his origin and destiny [R. Noica, *Postul și iertarea ca vocație și destin în Ortodoxie - despre căutarea omului*, <http://rafailnoica.wordpress.com>]. All men seek the true God, and all men deviate from the truth because they are not in an absolute relationship with the Truth. This tendency of man toward God helps man in so far as he responds to God the Revealed.

Therefore, we identify in the constitution of man essential internal forms or structures that absolutely determine his deification, as a being created in the image of God. Such internal forms and structures can be noticed in all religions or religious expressions and constitute the bridge of understanding and include to the whole humankind. Communion with God is fulfilled only in the conditions of these structures, from which humanity cannot escape.

3. Iconic structures and communion with God

The above described realities of human existence define, however, other structures that I have called *iconic*, given the fact that they refer to the manifestations and theological and formal aspects of the act of deification in Christianity. If the profound structures are the same in all religious expressions, being inscribed in the human being, the iconic structures represent the external aspects of the religious act. They, although based on the ontological foundations mentioned, are subjective, involving many human factors.

Therefore, man, apart from the divine Revelation, having in his depth the call to perfection and the consciousness of a Supreme Reality towards which he tends eternally, tries to approach the divine mystery through quasi-human powers and representations. Hence any of man's attempts to understand the divine mystery outside of the full Revelation of God is under the auspices of an *iconization* of the Christian spiritual act that leads us to perfection.

The iconic structures show that man can have at minimum an incomplete part or even a relative knowledge of God. On the other hand, these manifestations are the effect of the deep structures previously analysed. Under the conditions mentioned, man had to come into contact with his Creator and express himself in a certain way in that relationship. As R. Otto remarks, communion with the *Numinous* is a general and fundamental structure of the human being [7, p. 126].

Because he is created, a human being must relate and enter into communion with God either through liturgical acts and gestures, or through prayers, or, more complexly, through the performance of rites (mysteries) that mediate the participation in the Source of Life. Therefore, man can achieve communion with the divine Being only on the basis of these religious gestures of a liturgical, ascetic or mystical nature. These realities as form are concomitantly encountered in the Christian life. Man may participate to the divine mystery only through acts of a liturgical, ascetic or mystical nature. The difference is given by the content.

Through the mentioned religious acts, man tries to approach God on the basis of quasi-human representations and symbols. On the other hand, the Christian approaches of the divine Being are acts whose content is *theandric*, divine-human. In Christianity, all the acts and mysteries that mediate the relationship with God are sustained and founded by Christ God-Man Himself [12]. Therefore, the cultic or liturgical expressions are a necessity of human

nature, but are not products of man, but of the One (Jesus Christ) Who made them all for our salvation.

Consequently, the iconic structures represent insoluble principles of the religious act. Man can achieve his approach to the divine Being only through acts and manifestations that are conditioned by the deep structures presented above. In other words, the natural principles inscribed in the human beings require the relationship with God to be realised in a certain way. And this way is defined by acts and manifestations with symbolic, liturgical, ascetic or mystical significance. By phenomenologically analysing such manifestations we can see that, despite their heterogeneous content, that man manifests and lives his relationship with the Supreme Reality, only on the basis of the existential realities that define him (creature state, dynamic *image-likeness*, etc.). As such, man is not only a being who is involved in acquiring his perfection based on his vocation, but he realises this fact in a way strictly required by the existential conditions that determine him.

In order to achieve this desideratum, man is made a participant throughout history, whether or not he has assumed the divine Revelation, of some theological structures that define the whole Creation.

4. Theological-existential structures and created existence

The most important realities that underlie the possibility of the communion (union) of man with God are the divine-theological ones. These are the revelations, as well as divine structures that sustain all created existence. They are the divine evidence that defines the created reality, epiphanies that influence the history of the whole humanity.

Man, in general, regardless of religious affiliation, did not chaotically seek God, but he relied on some revelation of His or at least this search took place in a framework delimited by the very nature of man and the world in which he exists. As Atanasios Yannoulatos, the theologian of religions, tells us, no people in any context has been left out of the ray of Revelation, all people have benefited from a general grace and a general Revelation of God [13].

As for the ontological and theological structures that support existence, they are: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit or the Holy Trinity. The whole created order is under the Providence of the Holy Trinity. The most intimate structure of creation and man is determined by the *Trinitarian model*. Every human production is based on this Trinitarian model. Man cannot live outside this truth, whether he wants to or not. The Trinity is an existential seal deeply inscribed in the being of man from which he cannot make discount.

Derived from this Trinitarian principle is the truth according to which the whole created being is shaped by “One God and Father of all Who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4.6). The reality of one God and Father is required by the conscience of every man regardless of his religious background. The universal light of the Glory of God, which cares for the whole human nature, shines over the entire created reality [13, p. 168]. Thus, we can see the

religious experiences of humanity as a deep 'gift' of man offered and consumed in the search of the Supreme Reality to which he belongs. The different religious experiences can also be seen as a partial assumption of the rays of light and radiance, the irradiation of divine Glory [13, p. 172].

Another theological reality that inwardly imbues the whole existence consists of the incarnation of the divine Logos. God assumes human nature through the incarnation of the Word, achieving the full union between created and uncreated. From the moment of the Incarnation the whole created being is assumed in the Hypostasis of the Logos and is deified. Thus, as Father D. Stăniloae remarks, through Incarnation Christ becomes clear and manifests through His humanity in the whole world; in this manner He achieved a maximum closeness in rapport with us through His capacity as God to be in relation with us [14]. Therefore, after the Incarnation of the Son of God and his deification in Christ, man is called personally to assimilate and participate in this mystery of the enlightenment and perfection of humanity in Christ [15].

Therefore, there is an essential difference between humanity before the Incarnation of the divine Logos and that of humanity after the Incarnation. Through the Incarnation and the *oikonomic* work of Christ, the creation and all of humanity were brought to/in God. Before the Incarnation of the Logos we spoke of the principle of 'seminal reasons' which held the world and all existence. After the Incarnation all humanity and created existence are defined by the indwelling of divine fullness in the Body of Christ and through the His Body in the entire world [16].

No matter religious condition man may be, he becomes a partaker of the universal gifts of the Incarnation of Christ. He enjoys the potential quality of being a member of the mysterious Body of Christ, of the Church (I Corinthians 12.26-27) even if he does not know this reality or cannot or does not want to respond to this call. On the other hand, he participates in the gifts of the Holy Eucharist and in the Glory of the One Who Is Alive all over the Earth. The Holy Sacraments in general and the Holy Eucharist in particular, have a cosmic dimension, sending the rays of divinity and holiness over the whole of existence. Even if man refuses to acknowledge this evidence, in his solitary search he is helped by the gifts of the Eucharistic mystery which has cosmic effects and consequences.

A third theological-existential structure of creation is the Holy Spirit. The grace of the Holy Spirit is present in creation from the beginning and will be until the end of the ages. He is the One who carried Himself above the chaos until it was ordered in the 'cosmos' [13, p. 178]. He is the One who keeps the whole creation alive and the One through whom the eternal *oikonomic* mystery of the Incarnation of the Logos is decisively achieved. Moreover, the Holy Spirit is the One through whom the Church is born and formed at Pentecost, and after this moment, the One who reveals and manifests the Glory of God in a dynamic way [13, p. 179].

These are just a few aspects of the Orthodox pneumatology that open the understanding of the whole religious phenomenon. Every human person lives in this universal condition which cannot be denied, that is, the condition of the Holy Spirit 'Who is everywhere and fulfils all things'. If he neglects this obvious reality, he does so at the expense of his non-fulfilment and even dehumanisation. The fact that man cannot understand and explain the gifts that are given to him unconditionally, this is only a step in his status of existence. But when he wants to renounce the framework in which he was placed to live, this becomes the activation of his free will in a negative sense which leads him to spiritual death.

Any man with pure intentions, who seeks the Living God, whether or not he knows how to seek Him, will find Him enjoying the gifts of the Church of Christ (as an all-embracing Catholic reality), the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the shining love of the Father.

5. Conclusion

As a result of the above study, we note that the human being is defined by the existential, iconic and theological principles that determine his entire created existence. Every human being lives essentially in connection with these realities through which man can strive for perfection. Beyond these evoked principles, the support and goal of the existence of all people is deification. Everything is concentrated and can be understood through the mystery of the likeness, to which man is called to achieve by the grace of God. Man can live in the perspective of fulfilling this vocation or can disregard it to his eternal unhappiness.

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