
SOCIO-RELIGIOUS INTERFERENCE IN ART AS A SPIRITUAL FORM OF MANIFESTATION

Carmen-Gabriela Lăzăreanu*

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Cloșca Street, Iași, 700066, Romania

(Received 30 November 2023, revised 5 January 2024)

Abstract

The research aims to present the importance of religion with its forms of expression through art: painting, sculpture, music. It can therefore be said that by sensitizing the olfactory, visual, auditory and tactile senses, an important element of cohesion in society is thus constituted both by creating distinct networks and groups, as well as by defining a mental universe through which individuals have a certain conception of man and the world.

Keywords: culture, religion, spiritual, art, education

1. Introduction

Art represents one of the multiple forms of spiritual culture and for the integration of the artistic phenomenon it is necessary to define the notion of culture. The concept has a Latin origin, polysemantic coming from the verb *cholere*, which means to collect, cultivate, educate, develop, being encountered for the first time in the creation of the great thinkers of antiquity Cicero, Horace, etc.

The notion of culture, in the linguistic context, has a very wide circulation, being found in various spheres of human activity. The formulated definitions can be focused around several concepts as found by Florea [1]:

- axiological, in which culture represents the totality of material and spiritual values created by man;
- sociological, situation in which culture characterizes the level of development of society, expressing the material and spiritual values found in the community;
- anthropological, in which culture is a universal method of authorization and self-expression of human creativity;
- semiotics when culture is presented in the form of social information accumulated and preserved in society through various semiotic systems.

*E-mail: gabrielalazareanu@yahoo.com

Material values as a component part of culture represent the result of the production process, and spiritual values are the result of educational, normative (ethics, jurisprudence), orientation (religion, ideology) and aesthetic (art) human activity. The two component parts of the cultural phenomenon (spiritual and material) interfere and form a system, a whole that produces values. Science contributes to the production of material goods and art is a specific form of spiritual culture that also appears as a material value.

Art can be defined as a form of spiritual culture, an expression of social consciousness and human activity. It presents a way of practical - spiritual valorisation of the world, it aims to produce aesthetic values and combines the reflection of reality in artistic images through the creative process carried out according to the laws of beauty, using for this purpose the means of expression with a specific character (plastic art - colour, the literary line - the word, music - the sound, in the theatre - mime, dance - gestures and movement).

2. Operational goals

The purpose of this study is to identify how spiritual values in their forms of manifestation, through art or religion, contribute to the fulfilment of the cultural ethos of the people participating in the realization of education.

3. Art functions and manifestation forms

Art is closely related to social life as a form of manifestation of spiritual culture. Externally, it interferes in society with sciences such as political, ideological, religious, moral and technical, determining the meaning of evolution, of the manifestation of the arts. Internally, it can be mentioned that art expresses the life of society, its level of development and evolution through the forms of manifestation of spiritual culture. It can be stated that all of these have the central focus on man, but the forms of manifestation and reproduction of reality are different.

The special functions of the artistic phenomenon are divided by types of artistic activities and aim to shape the human psyche by facilitating working conditions, improving living conditions by detaching the individual's attention from the practical-utilitarian process to emphasizing the aesthetic function as an activity.

The social functions of art are as follows:

- of humanization, intended to shape the human personality through the accumulation of moral valences;
- socializing, with an emphasized role in the communication of feelings, ideas, messages, contributing to the process of integrating the individual into society;
- epistemological (cognitive), being appreciated as a 'life manual' of knowledge, presenting information from the past, present and having the ability to forecast the future;

- axiological (orientative), art helps the individual to acquire value criteria in the appreciation of interpersonal relationships in the elaboration of life principles;
- recreational, art has a 'curative' action, relaxing recreation;
- hedonistic constituting a source of delight, pleasure enjoyment;
- kathartic, produces spiritual purification effects.

By diversifying the artistic phenomenon based on artistic activities, artistic genres are established as forms of manifestation that have preoccupied creators since ancient times, constituting even today an element of topicality.

There have been numerous classifications of the criteria applied in the morphological analysis of the arts, two of which were considered fundamental: the ontological criterion and the semiotic criterion.

According to this ontological criterion, the arts are grouped into three categories:

- temporary arts (music, poetry, various literary genres);
- spatial arts (painting, sculpture, graphics);
- spatial tempo arts (dance, theatre, ballet).

From the perspective of the semiotic criterion generated by the communicative functions of the artistic language, the arts can be classified into two categories:

- representative arts (artistic language reproduces reality in images: painting, graphics, sculpture, literature, theatre);
- non-representative arts (artistic language does not reproduce reality: music, dance, architecture, decorative art).

4. Religious values and the functions of the religion in the society

Sociology as a science tried to explain the religious phenomenon that knows a permanent dynamic in modern societies. The fathers of the sociology of religion tried to analyse the religious phenomenon; some such as Durkheim (1858-1917) believed that traditional morality should undergo modifications in order to respond to the demands of the spirit of Science in modern society [2]. So to adapt to the new requirements, Max Weber (1864-1920) emphasized the need for the 'demythization of the world' determined by the increasing rationalization of social life, by its bureaucratization and pragmatism [3]. In this demystified world, Weber gives great importance to charismatic characters. In the explanation of the religious phenomenon, there were clashes of opinions of sociologists who were sometimes positivist, sometimes with 'romantic relationships' or with tendencies to reduce the object, sacred elements of fascination exercised as mentioned by Willaine [2] and which over time was constituted in object of observation and analysis. The definition of religion by researchers has encountered problems. In this regard, some sociologists even mentioned the existence of a 'Babel Tower' of definitions. Lambert uses a single definition of religion for a variety of forms of religious behaviour [4]. In other words, this definition should have suited the various existing religions to be

equidistant, not biased. There are, as mentioned religions without a founder and without religious functions (Hinduism), religions without a supreme God and without priests (Buddhism), religions based on a ritual, without precise beliefs (ancient Roman religion) which contained no initiation or doctrine but it is based on the liturgical calendar and on precise rituals following a traditional form of celebration [5]. The problem between religious and non-religious that arises in some cultures was explained by Kapani in relation to Hinduism: "What is called Hinduism (a word created by the English around 1830) does not correspond to a separate field of social life, as is the case with religion today in the West. Hinduism is essentially and inextricably a socio-religious system. The word preserved in Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, etc. it is dharma, which means - without contradicting the idea of religion - fundamentally cosmic and social, a norm that governs life. It is an immanent law of the nature of things, inscribed at the same time in society and in the depths of each of us. To ask a Hindu 'What is your religion?' means asking him 'What is your way of life?'" [6]

What is important to note is that a religious system produces social bonds not only by creating distinct networks and groups (institutions, communities) but also by defining and forming a mental universe through which individuals and collectivities express and live a certain conception about man and the world in a certain society. The transmission of charisma, that is, of religion manifested as a regular social activity through rituals and beliefs, produces not only organization, but it sediments as a culture as mentioned by Max Weber [2].

5. The role of the icon in the spiritual life of humanity

Icons (which in Greek mean mirror image, living representation) are, as the etymology of the word suggests, images from the world of the Creator, of God, the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, saints or angels, "which provide a representation of the sacred, of God in our lives" [T. Cenușă, <https://doxologia.ro/ce-sunt-icoanele>, accessed on 4.08.2023]. They adorn the places that man considers the most important for him, the home the sacred bastion where he retreats from a sometimes hostile world and the church the place where he prays, meets God to tell his pains, defeats or victories who has them on the road of life. The church and the house are decorated with icons not only for their aesthetic properties but also for their liturgical character "as real windows through which man and God can look face to face" [<https://doxologia.ro/ce-sunt-icoanele>] to restore the sacred space of communication.

The church and the house are built for their sacredness and for the fact that they, especially the church, represent the world of the Creator, of God, of divinity. They are made by skilled craftsmen according to precise criteria imposed not only by the rules of art and culture but also by the elements that concern the doctrine of the Church and which are contained in the so-called *Ermines* of the painting which present the criteria according to which the iconographic scenes and the faces of the saints are made. The talent, artistic sense and personality of the icon painter, who must express the painted event,

the character traits of the saint, through the brush and used colour, also play an important role in the realization of the icon.

Through icons, the individual establishes the first contact with God, forming the seed of religious sentiment. As they grow older, within the family and through education, children gain knowledge from religious classes and regular participation in church services, understanding the importance of faith in human life. The depiction of Jesus Christ, saints and martyrs in certain icons allows children to move from the characterization of these representations by the painter to the mental projection of events and the abstract perception of religious paintings [7].

Florensky conducted an extensive study on the iconostasis and states that, "Regarding the icon, it is more than it could be in itself when it becomes a heavenly vision, or less than itself when it does not reveal the supersensible world to any knowledge, in which case it is nothing more than painted boards. It is profoundly false the modern tendency that in iconography, we should see an old art, an old painting, and it is false primarily because, beyond painting in general, the specific power of the icon is denied." [8] Miraculous icons serve as an example in this regard, as a means through which supernatural intervention is manifested in an individual's personal life. The miracle thus finds its place in the collective consciousness, in everyday life, through its positive effect that diminishes the power of evil, offering the individual a different perspective and a higher plan of action.

The pertinent explanation of the painted scenes in the church, along with their religious significance from the Old Testament and New Testament, represents for children and young people, but for all Christians, a Christian guide in images, a visual presentation of the Bible. The artistic and aesthetic emotion experienced in front of these iconic works of art accentuates feelings of reverence for the Supreme Being, contributing to the intensification of religious sentiment.

The purpose of any painting, as mentioned by Florensky, is "to lead the viewer beyond what is offered to them sensorially by the colours and canvas, into a certain reality, thus the plastic work identifies with all its symbols, with their fundamental ontological characteristics, becoming what they symbolize" [8]. The representation of the Divinity is accomplished according to the heavenly prototype, the support of transcendental reality and meditation. The mind focuses on the image that symbolizes reality, and in this sense, the icon becomes a symbol. Chevalier and Gheerbrant specify that the icon represents "an open window to heaven and earth, but in both directions, which allows the passage from the sensory world to the spiritual world" [9].

Icons speak by presenting the Gospel and the lives of saints, and they require a lot of reproductive imagination from the child, who is often tasked with reconstructing images of a reality they have never known. In this regard, two stages of imaginative development in childhood can be distinguished: one defining, characteristic of the early stages of education, with a weak representation, poor in details of the created images, thus a limited capacity for

abstraction, and the second stage systematized in the imaginative processes specific to older children in higher grades. The limited life experience in the first stage of imaginative development leads the child to create superficial and spontaneous representations, including some inadequate and fantastic images (e.g. Saint Paraskeva having large wings).

The created images are often static, devoid of movement, as evidenced by questions such as ‘When does my angel talk to me? Why can’t I see him? Where does God live? Who created God?’ In this sense, icons, especially the ‘biblical’ ones that depict scenes from the Holy Scripture, help the child in the mental representation of God, angels and other saints [8]. The second stage, specific to older children, introduces systematization in the imaginative processes, with the figures gaining more fullness, coherence and dynamism, and the child having the possibility to develop accumulated dogmatic knowledge in this regard [10]. Rafael, for whom the Virgin Mary was a concern since childhood, materialized her on canvas later, when he acquired painting techniques, creating a true masterpiece. “Rafael told me that from an early age, he harboured in his soul a special feeling towards the Virgin Mary; sometimes he would loudly utter her name, feeling great sadness in his soul. From the moment he discovered his inclination towards painting, he began to nurture the irreversible desire to paint the Virgin Mary in her heavenly fullness, but he never dared to rely on his own abilities. Continuously, day and night, his restless spirit created the image of the Virgin in his mind, but he was never satisfied with himself.” [8]

Sometimes, in front of exquisitely crafted icons, that state of bliss specific to mystical ecstasy can arise. Mystical ecstasy has been explained as that state in which one speaks of the ‘death of the senses’ or the death of discourse so that only God may live in the soul, merging with the individual in that ‘uncreated’ part of the Self called ‘Urgrund’ (‘the foundation from the beginning’) [11]. The merging occurs only after the senses and discursive intelligence have become silent, and in this state, ecstasy is actually a ‘rapture’ a ‘transport’ a transfer beyond experience, habit, and reason; it is therefore ‘suprarational’. Crainic mentions that ecstatic prayer is nothing but the union of man with God, in which only divine grace is active [12]. It is the highest degree of man’s love for the Creator. The state of ecstasy is “a total going out of oneself in order to live enraptured by Divinity”.

The physiological signs of the individual resemble apparent death. “All senses disappear completely. The soul seems to be torn out of it self and raised in the whirl of the divine world. The body freezes in the state in which it was caught. Breathing sometimes ceases altogether. Limbs begin to cool. No movement is possible. Even the weight of the body is lost, and often it is itself lifted up from the ground. These are phenomena known as levitation.” [12]

From a psychological and physiological point of view, “ecstasy manifests itself as a trance, without having anything of the repulsive aspect of a hysterical or epileptic trance. In religious ecstasy, man, under all appearances of death, has an illuminated countenance.” [11] The infinite feeling of the greatness of God in

man triggers these feelings and states (the psychological process of sublimation mentioned by Freud takes place).

Mystical ecstasy is favoured by a complex of factors, such as the church chants intoned by the priest and teacher, emphasized either in overwhelming fortissimo or in a secretive pianissimo, in the setting of a Byzantine-style painted church that invites reflection and sanctity.

Church music, filled with Byzantine intonations, 'fertilized by contact with folk music', awakens in the Western listener a revelation of proportions [13]. Orthodox liturgical music, predominantly vocal, imparts a unique warmth and level of communication that can compensate for the lack of instrumental participation in the divine ritual. The solemn character of the musical performance promotes communication with the Divinity in the practicing listener of religious worship, mediated by the divine service and the presence of a congregation gathered for this purpose.

There is a certain degree of suggestibility in the Christian heightened by the environmental elements of the church, through which the listener more easily reaches areas of aesthetic satisfaction (regarding the music listened to) and sometimes even a state of ecstasy. This is the result of a complex of factors: the piety of faith, psaltic music with low tones, aesthetic-visual elements through icons, and olfactory stimuli - the smell of incense.

The prefiguration of the archetypal model through icons, the symbolic value of incense that connects humans to the Divinity, representing immateriality, the fragrant smoke that elevates prayers to the heavens, choral religious music with a solemn character, and religious rituals all contribute to creating an atmosphere of ecstasy by overwhelming the senses.

The religious state experienced by the Orthodox believer upon hearing church hymns intoned by the priest or teacher, sometimes in a mysterious pianissimo, within the backdrop of a Byzantine-style painted church that invites reflection and sanctity, is scarcely mentioned in literature. This ambiance, resulting from a complex interplay of religious, musical, aesthetic-visual and individual psychological factors, with a touch of voluntary self-suggestion (leveraging the strong suggestibility of the listener), easily reaches the realms of aesthetic satisfaction [7].

The representation of the Divinity in the early years of childhood and the subsequent processes of consciousness, which can lead to the acceptance or rejection of a religious system, are effectively captured in the case of the protagonist Apostol Bologa in Liviu Rebreanu's work 'Forest of the Hanged'. Due to the family context - a devout mother and the influence of Protopope Groza, who dominates his early childhood - Apostol perceives God as: "...Good, gentle, and forgiving, who, in exchange for daily prayers, bestows joy upon people on Earth and eternal happiness in Heaven. In his vivid imagination, the appearance of God merges with Protopope Groza, who often came asking about news from 'our martyr', to whom my mother would kiss his hand." [14]

Freud mentions that the later life of an individual is influenced by events in the first five years of life. The most compelling influences come from the period when the child's psychic apparatus is not fully capable of receiving impressions [15]. The mode of understanding experiences during this period is comparable to the impression produced by a photograph, which after a latency period, transforms into an image. Children, as mentioned, only need to remember in dreams what they experienced at the age of two [15]. Only through psychoanalytic treatment can these things be made known to them, but they may erupt at a certain later period as compulsive impulses that can direct actions, impose sympathies and antipathies, and frequently determine their subsequent choices. Childhood memories, due to their distance in time, become an 'unconscious' state, which becomes a decisive factor.

As mentioned by Xenia Costaforu religious life can be captured beyond the religious sentiment of the individual member [16]. This is how we can observe if there are religious manifestations of the group, as a whole, as well as the prayers made in common, as I mentioned, on the occasion of work or the family meals, if the family is used to going to church and cemetery on certain days, if there are saints or patrons whom they celebrate them - if they participate in the 'nedei', if they do common parastases or religious services for the memory of deceased relatives. Finally, the number of icons, their type (the saints they symbolize) and where they are placed in the family home are very suggestive indications of the character of the religious life of the studied group.

In the research undertaken by Xenia Costaforu [16] it can be stated that almost all households (except those that were not Orthodox) presented icons, the sacred place, the house was marked by icons, and these indicators bring important information about the religious feeling of the individual. It can be seen that the iconographic representations and the place in the household indicate the meaning that the faithful give to this private space.

6. Methodology and results

The research includes a group of students, homogeneous, selected from grades IV-VII, in total 137, in order to identify the influence of art and religion, of faith in the formation of individuals. The sample is made up of 53% boys and 47% girls. The manifestation of art is related to the presence of Christian painting in the social space. It was mentioned that the group is homogeneous, corresponding to common characteristic elements, such as belonging to a cultural environment (students of a school), a close age, and same cohort (9-14 years old).

The analysis used in the research is quantitative, using a structured interview to obtain data regarding the role of religiosity and religious artistic representations in the individual's life.

The sample indicates a slight predominance of boys (53%) over girls (47%) and a high presence of the VIth grade pupils, who represent the major responding group (Table 1). The most important gender differences, in favour of

boys, were reported in the IVth and VIth grades. The age of the students is between 9-14 years, being close in age, they present the same context (socio-historical) of educational training. The subject's environment of origin, which can have a decisive influence in the development of religious and artistic feeling, shows that 61% of the subjects come from the urban environment, and the students who come from the rural environment are 39% (Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of subjects by gender, age and background.

Class	Students number	Gender				Age	Origin			
		Male		Female			Urban		Rural	
		no.	%	no.	%		no.	%	no.	%
IV	29	16	55	13	45	9-12	15	52	14	48
V	34	16	47	18	53	11-12	9	27	25	73
VI	43	21	48	22	52	12-13	32	74	11	26
VII	31	19	62	12	38	12-14	27	87	4	13
total	137	72	53	65	47	9-14	83	61	54	39

The surveyed subjects almost all declared their belief in God, as it can be observed in Table 2. Only 2 students from the fourth grade, representing 2% of all respondents, stated that they do not believe in God. The high percentage of the respondents who believe in God (93%-100%) indicates an increased score of religiosity and of the religious belief. An important aspect in obtaining this high score is a result of the family education, which is supplemented by the teaching of religion in school. The religious unity within religious services, communal prayer, as Freud mentions, represents identification with other Christians and ultimately the aspiration to high morals [15].

Table 2. The presence of religious feeling and the importance of the icon as a form of manifestation.

Class	Gender				Belive in God				Have religious icons home				Pray at icons			
	male		female		yes		no		yes		no		yes		no	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
IV	16	55	13	45	27	93	2	7	27	93	2	7	25	86	4	14
V	16	47	18	53	34	100	-	-	34	100	-	-	31	91	3	9
VI	21	48	22	52	43	100	-	-	41	95	2	5	37	86	6	14
VII	19	62	12	38	31	100	-	-	30	97	1	3	31	100	-	-
Total	72	52	66	48	135	98	2	2	132	96	5	4	124	90	13	10

Through the art of icons, man establishes the first contact with Divinity (86%-100%). By means of art, of icons, the pertinent explanation of scenes from the New and Old Testament can be achieved. The purpose of the icon is to take the viewer, as Florenski mentioned, beyond what offers sensory, the colours of the canvas "sometimes in front of a masterfully made icon, mystical ecstasy can appear" [8].

7. Conclusions

As the Holy Fathers state, “what the Scripture does not say in words, the icon does not announce and present in colours” [<https://doxologia.ro/ce-sunt-icoanele>]. In other words, the role of the icon is to present the content of Scripture in colours - artistically. Holy Scripture tells us about the Incarnation of the Son of God, who came into the world to save us - and the icon does the same. In fact, there is such a close connection between the act of incarnation and the icon, that Saint Theodore the Studite states, in the context of iconoclastic disputes, that “he who rejects the icon, ultimately also rejects the mystery of the incarnation of the Word” [17]. We know that the Incarnation of the Son of God is the foundation and reason for the representation and veneration of icons: if Jesus Christ had not taken human form, we would not have been able to represent Him in icons. As far as the representation of the saints is concerned, this would not have been possible except through the work of God, for the redemption of the human race, which gave man the possibility to become a saint.

The saints become normative models that we must follow in order to reach the happiness of Heaven. It can thus be stated that icons also fulfil a liturgical or cultic role in the Christian’s life. We pray to God and the saints through icons, thus creating a dialogue with the divinity and answering certain concrete human needs. For this reason, it is customary to paint churches and believers to have icons in their homes.

Another role of the icon would be the pedagogical one. Being painted according to a certain canon, the icons put before the viewer’s eyes events from the history of the salvation of the human race, inspired either from the Holy Scriptures or from the lives of the saints. Saint Gregory the Great says that “icons are for the unlearned what the Holy Scriptures are for the literate” [18]. By these words, we must not understand that the icons would only benefit the ignorant. The saint wants to highlight the special importance of icons, which he places on the same pedestal as the Holy Scriptures. An icon is also useful from a pedagogical point of view to all Christians, because it offers another perspective, the seen one of the Word of God.

The spiritual component with its forms of manifestation through faith (with the constitutive elements of morality) or through art, positively influences the individual’s behaviour, constituting an important aspect of education. The icon is the child’s first contact with the divinity that he cannot see otherwise than through these artistic representations. In front of artistically successful icons, even mystical ecstasy can be manifested in the case of some people, that breaking of the senses that highlights the individuals experience.

The icons have concentrated around them tradition, rituals, religious customs, also representing the heritage that demonstrates the unity in faith of the Romanian people, constituting a true historical-religious treasure. The educational process begins in the family, continues in school and society, and contributes to the formation of a people’s culture.

References

- [1] E. Florea, *Studiul Artelor și Culturologie. Istorie, Teorie, Practică*, **2(35)** 2019 58-59.
- [2] J.P. Willaine, *Sociologia religiilor*, Institutul European, Iași, 1995, 35-37.
- [3] S. Kalberg, *Am. J. Sociol.*, **85(5)** (1980) 1145-1179.
- [4] Y. Lambert, *Soc. Compass*, **38(1)** (1991) 312.
- [5] D. Jaques and F. Scheid, *Rome et l'integration de l'Empire, 44 avant J-C - 260 après J-C*, vol. 1: *Les structures de l'Empire romain*, PUF, Paris, 1990, 320.
- [6] L. Kapani and M. Hulin, *Spécificités de la religion hindoue*, in *L'hindouisme*, J. Delumeau (ed.), Fayard, Paris, 1993, 189.
- [7] C.G. Lăzăreanu, *Asistența socială și religiozitatea la diferite grupuri de populație vulnerabilă*, *Doxologia*, Iași, 2014, 44-47.
- [8] P. Florenski, *Iconostasul*, Fundația Anastasia, București, 1994, 45-46.
- [9] J. Chevalier and A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, Editorial Herder, Barcelona, 1986, 524.
- [10] M. Golu and G. Arsenic, *Dinamica personalității*, Geneze, București, 1993, 20.
- [11] I. Mânzat, *Psihologia credințelor religioase*, Editura Științifică și Tehnică, București, 1997, 35.
- [12] N. Crainic, *Nostalgia paradisului*, Editura Moldova, Chișinău, 1993, 45.
- [13] L. Plozza and I. Brad Iamandescu, *Dimensiunile psihologice ale muzicii*, Romcartexi, București, 1997, 67.
- [14] L. Rebreanu, *Pădurea spânzuraților*, Institutul Cultural Român, București, 2004, 82.
- [15] S. Freud, *Studiu despre societate și religie*, Trei, București, 2000, 65.
- [16] X. Costaforu, *Cercetare monografică a familiei*, Tritonic, București, 2005, 48.
- [17] Saint Teodor Studitul, *Scrierile Sfântului Teodor Studitul împotriva iconoclaștilor*, Editura Institutului Biblic, București, 2017, 115.
- [18] Saint Gregory the Great, *Dialoguri despre moarte*, Sophia, București, 2018, 120.