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FOLK ART IN CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP CONTEXT: THE ROLE OF GOD WORSHIPPERS PRAYER SONGS WITH THE SERBS TODAY

Since its origins, Christian church music has been a part of the musical tradition of local communities.⁵ Initially, simple melodies were used during liturgical services, which were performed by all the assembled Christians. During the first centuries of Christianity, Christians were persecuted for their faith, which impeded the greater development of Christian art. When the persecution ceased, liturgy as well as church music which is an integral part of it, began to develop over time.

During this research, I investigated the relationship between folk and church music in the contemporary period, that is, during the 20th and early 21st century in Serbia. I wanted to answer the question of whether and in what way folk art from this period was part of the liturgies. The attitude of church hierarchy, clergy, church singers and believers towards church music, as well as the possible influence of folk art on the church art is a separate topic. This paper is the result of years of field research with

⁵ This work represents the result of the research performed at the SASA Institute of Ethnography, while the Ministry of education, science and technological development of the Republic of Serbia provided the means for the realization.

active participation in liturgical services in Serbia, especially in Belgrade from the 1990s to this day.

The following types of church songs are currently present in Serbia: Byzantine music chanted in unison, more recent Serbian church chants (sometimes called Serbian folk church chants) and polyphonic choral singing (Perković Radak, 2008: 5). A particular characteristic of the liturgical services in the Serbian Orthodox Church is the use of the so-called *bogomoljačke* songs [God Worshippers prayer chanting]. Originally, these songs were not performed in liturgies, but rather at church folk convocations, house gatherings, etc. They became very popular over time, and they were transformed into communion songs [Serbian: *pričasne pesme*]. In order to get a better picture of how these songs developed, we will first discuss the so-called, *Bogomoljački movement* [God Worshippers' movement] who created them. During my research, I analysed the transformation of the role of these songs in the lives of their performers and in liturgical services.

God Worshipper movement

God Worshipper movement [in Serbian: *Bogomoljački* movement] was a voluntary association of believers within the Serbian Orthodox Church (hereinafter: SOC), that reached its peak in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, that is, in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The official name of this movement was the Christian National Community. The formal establishment of the movement can be traced back to 1921, when Dimitrije, the Serbian Patriarch and Archbishop of Belgrade, approved the Rulebook of the Christian National Community and gave his blessing for this association to be founded (Subotić, 1996: 33). At the beginning of 1922, God Worshipper movement established the journal called *The Orthodox Christian Community*, which initiated a prolific publishing business. By 1941, over 100 books had been published (Subotić, 1996: 36).

This religious and moral movement of Serbian Orthodox peasants was named the God Worshipper movement due to the extremely pious way of life of its followers (Subotić, 1996: 13). On the one hand, this movement

intended to stop the decline of interest in the Orthodox faith, and on the other hand, to contain the spread of Protestantism (primarily Adventism), and to restrain the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the interest in spiritism, theosophy, and the rise of communism, atheism and materialism (Subotić, 1996: 13).

The beginning of this movement dates back to the middle of the 19th century when informal Orthodox God Worshipper movement groups appeared in Vojvodina, spreading to the south and southeast of Serbia in the 1870s (Ašković, 2010: 55; Vojinović, 1991: 229). The great suffering of the Serbian people in the Balkan Wars and the World War I was partly responsible for the spread of the God Worshipper movement (Vojinović, 1991: 230). At the end of the World War I, the existing God Worshipper movement groups started to connect. That is when a number of laymen, with great missionary fervour, started to travel and preach the doctrine of salvation to the people. The movement attracted more and more followers over time (Subotić, 1996: 13). This sincere zeal for faith was incomprehensible to many of the SOC clergy. Some looked at them with suspicion and disapproval (Ašković, 2010: 68-71). This was a big difference compared to the Orthodox movements *Life* and *Salvation* established in Greece where the leaders were monks and priests. In Serbia, the God Worshipper movement was established by the people and spread by laymen (Ašković, 2010: 60).

The first major Council of the Christian National Community was held at the end of the summer of 1921, in Kragujevac (Ašković, 2010: 61). God Worshipper movement preached a pure Orthodox faith. However, they did introduce some practices that were not part of the Orthodox tradition until then, such as public reading of the New Testament sections. Due to the fear that the movement might *go astray*, The Bishops' Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church entrusted to Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich (1881-1956) the spiritual leadership of this spontaneous national movement.

God Worshipper movement was the most active in the 1920s. They often held liturgies at the Žiža monastery, where Nikolai resided as a bishop. God Worshippers [*bogomoljci* in Serbian] from the surrounding settlements came to church every Sunday. After the liturgy, they sang God

Worshippers prayer songs [*bogomoljačke pesme*], while bishop Nikolai gave his famous sermons.

God Worshippers spread their movement across Serbia and then across Northern Macedonia, Bosnia, and Croatia (Ašković, 2010: 56; Radosavljević, 2003: 60). The movement headquarters was in Kragujevac as well as in the Žiča Monastery. Over the course of 20 years, that is, from its formal establishment to the outbreak of the World War II, the Christian National Community included as many as 250 fraternities with several hundred thousand members (Pavlović, 1994: 26).

After the World War II, that is, in the Communist period in Yugoslavia, the SOC was persecuted and marginalized. Due to the unfavourable socio-political circumstances, church activities were minimized. God Worshipper movement was shut down. However, in post-war Serbia and Yugoslavia, pre-war God Worshippers and their descendants helped the survival of the SOC, setting up a large number of priests, monks, and nuns (Ašković, 2010: 264).

God Worshippers prayer songs [*Bogomoljačke pesme*]

God Worshippers preached the Orthodox faith in their songs. Wherever they went, they preached, and then sang their pious songs aimed at spreading moral principles (Subotić, 1996: 30; Ašković, 2010: 57). God Worshipper Movement Councils played a significant role in the spread and development of the God Worshippers prayer songs. It was an opportunity for the believers from different regions to meet and share their spiritual experiences and songs. That is where these songs were subjected to the influence of folk art (Ašković, 2010: 74).

Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich is the author of many texts of God Worshippers prayer songs. Beside him, many anonymous poets were also the authors of these songs. These songs are characterized by simple melodies, written by unknown authors, mostly originating from Serbian folk, church, and foreign music traditions. According to Ašković, *God Worshippers prayer songs are characterised by the synthesis of folk and church music traditions. The common people had the crucial role in this process*

(Ašković, 2010: 268). This author concludes that almost all the lyrics of these songs can be sung to a number of different melodies. Moreover, multiple different lyrics can be sung to the same melodies (Ašković, 2010: 270). The musical expression of God Worshippers prayer songs is similar to folk songs. Dragan Ašković's musical analyses have shown that *the melodies of these songs are mostly based on the major (Ionian) scale, and less often on a minor scale*. This was a favourable basis for the introduction of backing vocalists which made them similar to the folk songs sung *over the bass* [Serbian: *na bas*] (Ranković, 2019: 156).

Contemporary period

Since the late 1980s, and especially during the 1990s, a period of intense socio-political change in Serbia has brought the revival of church. The original God Worshipper movement was now gone, but the God Worshippers prayer songs continued to last, taking on a new role.

Ašković believes that God Worshippers prayer songs did not receive a significant status among the church prayer songs, because *they remained neutral and therefore non-ecclesiastical* (Ašković, 2010: 270). In his doctoral thesis, he calls them *paralitururgical* songs (Ašković, 2010: 76-88).⁶

However, my research has shown the opposite – they are very popular among the believers, not only in rural areas, but also in the capital Belgrade. Even though they originated in rural areas, they still continue to be popular, after many decades, even in urban regions. Although they were initially non-liturgical, they eventually became part of the liturgical practice as songs that are sung at the most sacred moment – the Holy Communion. They are also very often sung at the end of the Liturgy, when sharing the antidoron (Blagojević, 2018: 912).

My research has shown that these songs represent the favourite genre both among the national, *folk* singers and among the polyphonic choirs. I will list some of the favourite songs, such as: *Sunday at the Temple, Oh Sunday, the Holiest Day, Brethren, Let Us Go to the White Church, Heav-*

⁶ More about the term paralitururgical song see in: Perković Radak, 2006: 57-50.

only Serbia, *Two Angels Walking*, *Blind Bartimaeus' Song*, *St. Basil, pride of the monks*, etc (Blagojević, 2018: 911). God Worshippers prayer songs are still being created, inspired by our contemporaries, for example: *Song to Saint Justin of Čelije*, *Song to Father Tadej*, *Song to Patriarch Pavle* (recording from Monastery of St. Demetrius in village Divljana, Eparchy of Niš).⁷

According to the contemporary composer and church conductor Milorad Marinković, *there are some choir singers who love God Worshippers prayer songs and when communion starts, they cannot wait to sing them*. In some parishes, *piety is measured by how many songs you know: if you know a lot of songs, it means that you participated in numerous services in monasteries, and in various liturgies where they are sung*. Numerous songs can be sung in the weekly liturgies during the fasting period, as there are more communicants. When there are not that many communicants waiting to receive Communion, then only the usually established Communion songs are sung (Blagojević, 2018: 912).

In the Church of St. Alexander Nevsky located at the centre of Belgrade, the polyphonic choir, as well as the cantors practicing Serbian church folk singing, sing God Worshippers prayer songs at the end of the Liturgy, when the antidoron is distributed. The conductor of this choir, Jelena Tonić, says: *We very much love and cherish God Worshippers prayer songs, I consider them a powerful, simple and immediate tool for representing the holidays or the character/life of the saints*. In addition to the well-known songs from various songbooks, every Sunday they sing a song for the day from *Prologue* whose author is Bishop Nikolai. The lyrics are sung either to a melody of a well-known song or as the troparion, mode six (Blagojević, 2018: 912).

The lyrics for God Worshippers prayer songs are taken from the published songbooks, while the melodies are mostly passed on verbally.⁸ Dur-

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=miBDkROLTHA&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR3bwcwaN-1lWlo6oSXnJOo96oikpPZ0jf5u4R7h5Utrj4Mdn1M8o35GLRxg>

⁸ *Spiritual lyre*, selected and arranged by the protosyncellus Dr. Stefan Čakić, Novi Sad 1986. *Sing to our God, sing*, Prayer Songbook. Beseda, Novi Sad 1997. *Orthodox spiritual lyre*, collected by the nun Anisija Milovanović, Lelić Monastery, Lelić 2003. *Spiritual songbook Help us Good Christ*, Vreoci 2004. *Spiritual songbook To You, only to You*, Serbian Orthodox Community Šid, Šid 2004.

ing the research I conducted in the parishes in Belgrade, I noticed one interesting fact: in the 1990s, a small number of God Worshippers prayer songs adopted Byzantine church music characteristics. As a matter of fact, the lyrics were sung to the Byzantine liturgical melodies. Therefore, for example, the song *Krst je sila i znamenje [The Cross is the Force and the Sign]* has its older God Worshippers prayer song melody, as well as a newer Byzantine melody. The song called *Holy Martyr Photina* has a Byzantine melody, while the chorus mentions the syllables *eru rem* – part of the *kratema*, as well as a verse in Greek *Άγιος είσαι Κύριε* – *You Are Holy Our Lord* (Blagojević, 2018: 912).

Apart from the captivating melodies, which cause the emotional connection with the rural folk tradition, another important factor which brought the popularity of the God Worshippers prayer songs is the fact that they are sung in Serbian language. The interviewees who participated in this research emphasize that they want to understand what is being sung, and to sing in their own language (Blagojević, 2018: 915). Namely, the SOC still predominantly uses the Church Slavonic language in liturgies, which the majority of contemporary believers do not fully understand.

However, there are different opinions regarding God Worshippers prayer songs. One part of the church clergy, some professional clerical musicians and ordinary believers show their disapproval to performing these and other songs that are not prescribed by Typikon (Peno, 2004). However, as Ašković points out, the Christian liturgy was diachronically *improved with texts that were initially paraliturgical, but were later accepted and authorized. God Worshippers prayer songs fit into the aforementioned creative process and principle* (Ašković, 2010: 274).

Conclusion

One of the reasons why the God Worshippers prayer songs are popular is the fact that after World War II, mass internal migration of the population from villages to cities took place all over Serbia. This was in line with the new communist ideology of the establishment of proletariat. This new class could not practice many folk customs in urban conditions. During

the revival of church in the 1990s, many descendants of these proletarians recognized these God Worshippers prayer songs as the songs which originated in the *regions where their ancestors lived*, and they were happy to sing them in church (Blagojević 2018, 911).

Nowadays, God Worshippers prayer songs make the liturgies more invigorated. They originated in the first half of the 20th century in rural areas, however, they are experiencing a warm reception among the believers in urban areas at the beginning of the 21st century. In many churches in the country's capital, these songs bring together believers of all ages, regardless of their educational background. The key to their success is that they meet several requirements – the fact that they are sung in Serbian makes them understandable to all, while their simple folk melody emotionally connects the believers with their homeland.

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