

PERCEPTION OF TIME IN THE EUCHARISTIC CANON OF THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH

Arusyak Shirinyan*

Abstract

The article examines the relationships between the studies on time and eternity in ancient philosophy and some prayers of the liturgical texts of the Eucharistic Canon of the AAC. Liturgical texts, such as church hymns, prayers and mainly the texts of the anaphora, reflect not only theological but also philosophical views, especially in the issue of perception and development of understanding of historical time in the medieval era. The philosophy of postmodernism, tracing its genesis to antiquity, for a long time ignored liturgical texts as an object for philosophical research, thereby determining their place on the periphery. As a rule, these texts are studied within the framework of linguistics and archaeography, and are also partly used as a historical source.¹ The partial exclusion of liturgical prayers from Western philosophical discourse is associated with such historical phenomena as early Renaissance humanism, the Protestant Reformation and the history of early modern literature. Thus, the basis of the modern selective approach to philosophical texts is a stable position regarding the forms of knowledge traditionally considered philosophical.² Nevertheless, a philosophical analysis of a sacred text is possible, in particular in the systemically presented process of transformation of the perception of cyclical time into linear and in the formation of the concept of eschatological orientation.

Keywords: anaphora, prayer, philosophy, liturgy, metaphysics, hermeneutics of time.

Introduction

In philosophical literature, the term “liturgy” is used with caution since it is predominantly associated with religious rites and rituals, which limits its universal application. Philosophy strives for neutral and universal terms to discuss general concepts such as being and knowledge, while liturgy can be perceived as specialized and limited to a specific religious practice. In addition, philosophy and theology are often considered separate disciplines, and the use of the term “liturgy” can be avoided in

* *PhD student and lecturer, Yerevan State University, arusyak.shirinyan@ysu.am*

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¹ Sazonova 1998.

² Piana & Soranzo 2020.

order to maintain clarity of boundaries between these areas of knowledge. However, the word “Liturgy” has been widely used to denote all purposeful practices or rituals in human life. The institution of classical liturgies was a unique phenomenon of ancient Greek reality and had institutional provisions for both sacred and secular implementation.³

In the narrow sense, the word “liturgy” is used today exclusively in connection with church services, but it should be taken into account that the formation of Christian thought was carried out by accepting the heritage of ancient science and philosophy, since they came from the same cultural world, which undoubtedly influenced liturgical texts. Since the first third of the 19th century, a liturgical movement began in the Catholic Church, which, in addition to restoring the active participation of Church members in the liturgy, set the task of scientifically studying liturgical texts and analyzing the history of worship.

The study of Orthodox worship and non-Chalcedonian traditions began to be carried out by the Eastern Pontifical Institute, which made an invaluable contribution to the study of the development of the historical and philosophical path of the Eastern liturgy (R. Taft, H. Mateos, M. Aranz, G. Winkler, etc.). In turn, a direction focusing on the Sacrament of the Eucharist emerged in the Orthodox Church. We are talking about the Eucharistic theology associated with such researchers as Archpriests Nikolai Afanasyev, Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff, Metropolitan John (Zizioulas). In the framework of their work, special importance was attached to the place of the Eucharist in the life of the Church, which required its detailed understanding, in connection with which the topic of liturgical space and time was raised.⁴ I. Meyendorff noted that the assimilation of the Greek language and the characteristic features of the cultural and philosophical life of Hellenism became real evidence of the “catholic understanding of the Church.”⁵

Regarding the liturgical revival in the Armenian tradition, its moderate development should be noted. Having at our disposal historical works on the genesis and formation of the Armenian liturgy (O. Ghatrijyan, M. Findikyan, A. Shirinyan, etc.), the Armenian rite needs additional research based on modern realities. As for the studies aimed at studying the problem of the philosophy of time perception in Armenian medieval literature, they are even more insignificant. Despite the relevance and importance of this problem, it rarely acts as an object of special scientific and philosophical research, which certainly affects the source study base.

³ Bondar 2009: 6.

⁴ Khmara 2020: 35.

⁵ Meyendorff 2013: 3.

Eucharistic Canon of the Armenian Apostolic Church

The Liturgy of the Armenian Church in the 3rd–4th centuries was formed under the influence of Syrian and Greek traditions. The textual basis of the worship and dogma of the Armenian Apostolic Church was a synthesis of Semitic and Hellenistic elements, which undoubtedly affected the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church.⁶ Some Eucharistic prayers of the Armenian Apostolic Church are the earliest surviving prayers of St. Basil the Great and have textual parallels with Western Syriac texts. Until Gregory the Illuminator, Christianity of the “Syrian type” was more widespread and therefore more influential. As a result of the consecration of Gregory the Illuminator by Leontiy of Caesarea, a new wave of Hellenophile missionaries appeared, which contributed to the widespread dissemination of the “Greek type” of Christianity throughout pro-Roman Armenia, but in general this movement did not suppress the Semitic tradition.

The anaphoric prayers of the Armenian Church, bearing the name of the liturgy of Gregory the Illuminator, belong to different types and editions: the Armenian edition of the short version of the anaphora of St. Basil the Great (the 1st and 2nd Armenian editions of the long version of the anaphora of Basil the Great), Sahak Partev, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. John Chrysostom, St. Athanasius the Great (Constantinople type), the anaphora of the Apostle James, and the anaphora of Gregory the Theologian.⁷ This is an important point that must be taken into account when studying liturgical texts, since it can expand our understanding of the specifics of the perception of time in the Armenian liturgy.⁸

In the anaphoric part of the Liturgy, there are intersections and divergences between the philosophical and religious-mystical versions of the ontology of being in time. Using metaphysical methodology, Christian theologians argue that time is being sacralized; it overcomes spatial limitations and actualizes the events of salvation; it introduces one into a new, saving reality, into the eighth day, where there is no longer time, but eternity is clearly recognized as the presence of the Kingdom of God. The Liturgy is an identical reproduction “here and now” of the events of the Last Supper. Communion is the culmination of the Liturgy, in which two chronologically distant events merge, reproducing one unique event. The Liturgy contains events of the past, but due to their eschatological significance, these events are eternally effective.⁹

The Armenian rite, as well as any other rite of the historical churches, in its sacred tradition, similarly asserts the exit from time into eternity, which is preceded by the transformation of temporality, the synthesis of past and future time into the present mode; the liturgy collects moments of time into a “single continuous” present, which has no dimension or duration and represents the presence of eternity. Most likely, for one of

⁶ Sargsyan 2014: 74.

⁷ Orthodox Encyclopedia 2002: 239-332.

⁸ Sargsyan 2014: 94.

⁹ Shmeman 2017:75.

these reasons, in the Eucharistic Canon of the Armenian Church, there is no sharp line in the structure of the canon, unlike the Liturgy of the Apostle James in the Greek and Syriac editions, as well as in the structure of the Roman canon. The text of the Armenian anaphora is distinguished by its monolithic nature, where the beginning of one part becomes a continuation of the previous one, creating the impression of a “single continuous” present time.¹⁰

However, from the point of view of modern philosophy, this statement seems somewhat contradictory and, at the present stage, has no convincing explanation. This tension is sometimes aggravated by the differences between the “inner” and “outer” realities. To some extent, this dilemma goes back to the patristic mystics. Germanos of Constantinople and Nicholas Cabasilas, in particular, have strongly emphasized the mimetic function (Cabasilas 1998; Germanos of Constantinople 1984)¹¹ of the liturgy. Each element of the liturgy is supposed to show or represent some aspect of the life of Christ, from his conception to his crucifixion and resurrection. Indeed, the liturgical year itself, in its cycle of feasts, seems to have such a mimetic function. The liturgy in this sense is primarily intended to help remember and glorify the saving work of Christ.¹²

In the 20th century, a peculiar path of de-Hellenization was set, that is, the exclusion of ancient Greek (primarily Platonic and Neoplatonic) influence on the discussion of the issue of God’s relationship to time, which can be called one of the trends of temporalism.¹³ Nevertheless, liturgical texts do in fact partially rely on broader ancient premises and terminology about the cosmos and the human personality within it, which were most fully explained by Plato and Aristotle and were clearly picked up in various ways by the Cappadocians; for example, time as a category was understood throughout the patristics exclusively in an Aristotelian way: Basil the Great asserted that: “time is a continuation, co-extended with the state of the world; every movement is measured by it...”¹⁴; “Is not time such that in it the past has passed, the future has not yet arrived, and the present eludes the senses before it is known?”¹⁵; Aristotle: “Some parts of time were, others must be, for what is now is not a part”¹⁶, etc. Ancient philosophy considered time as cyclical, eternal rotation. The great Cappadocians partially accepted this idea, but at the same time emphasized the linearity of time from creation to the eschaton. At the same time, despite this, they failed to understand these categories with complete conceptual accuracy, while their definition of eternity became quite detailed.¹⁷ The Eucharistic Canon of the AAC, which contains the anaphoric

¹⁰ Shirinyan 2022: 86.

¹¹ Cabasilas 1998: 60.

¹² Philosophy Department, Fordham University 2017: 92.

¹³ Pleshkov 267.

¹⁴ Basil the Great, *Against Eunomius*.

¹⁵ Basil the Great, *Conversations on the Hexameron*.

¹⁶ Aristotle 1981: 218 a.

¹⁷ Paul Plass 1981.

prayers of Basil the Great, reflects the definition of time and eternity by the Saint: “For You are the one who brings, and is brought, and is distributed, Christ our God, and to You we send up glory, with Your beginningless Father...¹⁸”.

This passage combines elements of both linear and cyclical time and shows the influence of Aristotelian ideas about time. The formulation “You are the one who offers, and the one who is offered, and the one who is distributed” points to the cyclical aspect of time in the liturgical context. Christ is simultaneously the One who offers the sacrifice, the sacrifice itself, and the One who distributes it. This is repeated in every celebration of the Eucharist, where Christ is invariably present. Linear time is expressed through the mention of the Father without beginning and through the reference to Christ as the One who was incarnate, crucified, and resurrected. The Christian, linear history of salvation is expressed in the plan of Christ’s successive actions: His sacrifice on the cross, resurrection, and gift of eternal life, and echoes Aristotle’s understanding of time as a process conditioned by movement: “...the number of movement in the relation of before and after...”.¹⁹

Praefatio – preface

The Liturgy of the Faithful in the Armenian Rite begins with the prayers of Basil the Great, which occupy a leading place in the Eucharistic Canon of the AAC¹⁹. The anaphora opens with a lengthy Preface, the development of which is addressed to God the Father. The revelation of God is sung in the sense of God’s revelation of Himself to people for the sake of their salvation, about the work of salvation through the Son. A description of several stages of oikonomia and the theological remarks accompanying them is given: about the creation of man and the subsequent fall into sin (the remark “God did not abandon fallen man”), about the Old Testament era, when God spoke to people through the prophets, and about the era of the “fullness of time” (πλήρωμα), when the Father speaks to us through the Son: “You, God, have filled Your Holy Church with the ranks of angels. A thousand and a thousand archangels are before You, and myriads of angels worship You, O Lord. O Lord, You have deigned to accept the blessing also from men by the voice of the ministers. Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts. He has established His altar in the sun, and is like a bridegroom who descends from a sailboat. And He shakes it like a giant, passing along His way. We are like cherubim.”²⁰

¹⁸ Shirinyan 2022: 101.

¹⁹ Scholars of the last fifty years have come to a consensus in the dispute over the authorship of the liturgy. Examining individual anaphoras in the West Syriac, Armenian and Ethiopian traditions, common, albeit in varying volumes, textual parallels with the anaphora of the Byzantine Liturgy of Basil the Great have been noted, which testifies to their homogeneous origin and authenticity (Orthodox Encyclopedia, 2017, 280-289)

²⁰ Shirinyan 2022: 99.

In this prayer-preface, the dogma of the Holy Trinity is revealed and the pleroma is indicated – “the absolute fulfillment of super-time”, the fullness of time, when the final unification of all creation in Christ is accomplished without any time or space intervals (Eph. 1:23): “Between the body and the head there is no room for any gap, the slightest gap would kill us,” says St. John Chrysostom.²¹ According to its principle of unification around the ontological space represented by Christ and the power that carries out this unification and which is the Holy Spirit: “for in Him is all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col 2:9). The Church exists in the world but does not belong to it. It represents the divine community and is already now life “in the age to come”.²² According to Plato and Aristotle (and, of course, the later Neoplatonic tradition in the person of such thinkers as Plotinus, Iamblichus and Proclus) people can participate in the divine. In Plato, the pleroma is the very premise of the entire theory of forms, the primary basis of reality: he who loves wisdom is able to rise from a purely corporeal, material, visible, changeable reality to the vision of an incorporeal, immaterial, invisible, unchanging reality in time, i.e., to unite ultimately with the reality of the eternal and divine: “That is why one should try to escape as quickly as possible from here (from the earth, author’s note) to there (to the dwelling of the gods). Escape is a feasible assimilation to God, and to become assimilate to God means to become righteous, holy and wise...” (Theaetetus 176 b)²³

According to Aristotle’s doctrine of knowledge of God, man achieves the highest well-being and happiness by living in accordance with nature, which is subject to reason. Therefore, the highest activity, which brings the greatest satisfaction and happiness, is the mental activity, known as eudaimonia and what brings us closer to the gods, makes us divine: “We must try to become immortal as much as possible, and do everything possible to live in accordance with what is highest in us”, namely, with the “divine element within” us”.²⁴

However, prayer, as an encounter with God, has its own differentiation of time. On the one hand, the believer must correlate the mundane, astronomical time of worldly life with all the temptations with the time of the second coming of Christ, with sacred time: “... Not with arrogance and temptation, not with seduction and deception, not with doubt and lack of faith, but with righteous deeds, with a clear mind and a pure heart with perfect faith filled with love and all good deeds and with perfect prayer let us stand before the Altar of God, and find the grace of mercy and the day of revelation and the Second Coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”²⁵ The Liturgy is unique in that,

²¹ Saint John Chrysanthemum 72.

²² Evdokimov 2012.

²³ Plato 1936.

²⁴ Aristotle 2022: 196.

²⁵ Shirinyan 2022: 101- 102.

although everything happens in the liturgical present²⁶, at the same time there is constant reflection on the past and also in the eschatological anticipation of the future.

Intercessio - Prayers of intercession

An original feature of the Armenian Rite is the division of the prayers of intercession (Intercessio) into the commemoration of the deceased first, then the living, which is its distinctive feature and seems to be an important aspect in the issue of time perception. The order reflects the archaic layer in the Armenian liturgy, which is based on the most ancient Syrian symbol and doctrinal provisions, in contrast to all other traditions, which commemorate the living first, and only then the deceased. This characteristic feature is clearly visible in the first Armenian edition of the anaphora of Basil the Great:²⁷ “Spirit of God, descending from heaven! You, Who with our hands perform the Mystery of the One glorified together with You. We beseech Thee by the outpouring of His blood, give rest to the souls of our departed,” and also: “Remember, O Lord, have mercy and be merciful to the souls of the departed. Give them rest, sanctify them and join them to Thy saints in the Kingdom of Heaven...”²⁸, etc., which in the context of the Last Judgment is typical for the mention of two categories of Christians, since the entire liturgical life of the Church treats the departed in the same way as the living, that is, it does not see a difference between them, thus establishing a continuous connection between all its members, despite the division of physical time and space: “Now God is not the God of the dead, but of the living; to Him all are alive” (Luke 20:38).

In other words, God is presented as an Entity living outside of time, in eternity, where there are no time limitations and all events exist simultaneously in the “eternal present.” In its linear course, the text contains a continuous time cycle, reflecting Eternity. The mention of the souls of the departed indicates that the past is not lost, it continues to influence the present through prayer; the request for the communion of the departed with the saints and repose in the Kingdom of Heaven turns us to the future, to eternal life, which has no end. It is worth noting that this prayer is performed in the present tense, calling on the Spirit of God to influence the current reality, intervening in the order of things. According to the hermeneutical teaching, the anagogical level of the study of the liturgical text is determined here²⁹, which suggests that the Kingdom of God is already acting in the present tense and is not just an intermediate stage between the past and the future, but takes an active part in eternity, and turns us to the final

²⁶ The term “liturgical present” was introduced by N. Wolterstorff 2016 and has received wide recognition among theologians of the 20th century, despite the fact that his theory is not applicable in either Catholicism or Orthodoxy.

²⁷ Winkler 2011.

²⁸ Shirinyan 2022: 112.

²⁹ Clarification of the eschatological meaning of the Holy Scripture and liturgical rites (Orthodox Encyclopedia 2008).

fulfillment of everything in the Kingdom of God and to our present expectation of this future heavenly reality³⁰. The prayer of the anaphora, which affirms that God is the source and unifying principle of all levels of being – visible and invisible, and is expressed through Christ, who unites the heavenly and the earthly, the visible and the invisible, echoes the Platonic idea that all temporal processes are reflections of eternal, perfect models: “Since the model is an eternally living being, he set out to achieve a similarity here as far as possible, but the matter was such that the nature of that living being is eternal, and this cannot be completely conveyed to anything born. Therefore, he conceived the idea of creating a kind of moving likeness of eternity; arranging heaven, he creates with it for eternity, abiding in one, an eternal image, moving from number to number, which we called time.”³¹

From a philosophical point of view, this passage expresses the main ontological thesis of the mystical worldview: “the world is a living multi-level unity”; life, every particle of being, be it organic or inorganic from a materialistic point of view, visible or invisible, already discovered or supposed to be discovered in the distant future, located on Earth or on other planets, in our world or in other worlds – is alive.³²

Conclusion

The article analyzes the interaction of ancient philosophical ideas about time and eternity with the prayer texts of the Eucharistic canon of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Since the Armenian liturgical tradition includes prayers attributed to Basil the Great, the study included texts of the anaphora traditionally attributed to the Saint. Basil the Great, being not only an outstanding theologian but also an expert in ancient philosophy, integrated elements of philosophical ideas about time and eternity into his prayers, demonstrating striking analogies between Christian and Hellenic doctrines. This allowed us to better understand the influence of ancient philosophical concepts on the liturgical texts of the Armenian Apostolic Church and to trace how these concepts were rethought and adapted in the Armenian liturgical tradition.

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³⁰ Taft 1995: 120.

³¹ Plato 1994: 32, 37d.

³² Aleksandrov 2018: 122.

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