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# Atmospheres of Transformation

## Language, Identity and the Liturgical Experience of a Transborder Orthodox Community

Christos KAKALIS<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract. The paper explores the role of language in the constitution of religious atmospheres with special emphasis on architectural experience of a multi-national transborder Eastern Orthodox Community based in Edinburgh. Due to its performative and communicative dynamics, language plays an important role in the activities held in a religious place. The performative activation of religious texts through ritual choreographies, reading in different ways, singing and instrumental music is one of the defining spatio-temporal components of sacred architecture. In the examined case, the aurality of the text contributes to the emergence of a shared identity of moving populations having to settle at a new land based on a process of parallel or overlapping transformations.*

**Keywords.** *Language, Atmosphere, Religious Place*

### Introduction

It was Sunday, 1 November 2009, when I first visited the Orthodox Christian parish of Saint Andrew in Edinburgh. Having just arrived from Greece, my background had to do with domed churches, Byzantine chanting, rituals and services conducted in Greek. Entering a classroom of an old Parish School, I found myself in a totally different 'religious universe' from the one I was used to. It was a shock for me to see around sixty people of different nationalities celebrating the Divine Liturgy in different languages (mainly English, but also Greek, Russian and Rumanian) and the choir singing in a way that was reminding me the joyous songs of Greek children's instruction schools. Standing as a surprised observer, I could follow the ritual choreographies and define their pivotal moments through either the movements of the clergy or the use of Greek. While it took quite a few Liturgies to find my place in them, leaving this first service I had a weird sense that these very different people were feeling as one body.

Eleven years after my first visit there, I am writing this paper seeking to discuss the way religious atmospheres influence and at the same time are influenced by the repositioning of identity in transborder communities. The life of the multi-national Eastern Orthodox community of Saint Andrew in Edinburgh offers a unique example to unpack the spatio-temporal qualities of these processes. With a congregation of more than thirty different nationalities, the parish has been travelling through the city (since its establishment in 1948), appropriating and re-appropriating diverse spaces depending on its liturgical as well as community needs.

In this paper, I focus on the role of language in the making of inclusive religious soundscapes. Open to moving populations, the examined parish is a place of worship for

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groups of people that consider Christian Orthodox culture as part of a long-established collective identity (i.e. Russian, Serbian, Rumanian, Greeks) and converts that are recently received in its context (including a considerable number of locals). Using English as the main language for their services the examined community has been working on the creation of an inclusive atmosphere in which the linguistic translation of different parts of the Liturgy in different languages (including even Mandarin and French) is combined with its musical transcription in different notations and the performance of specific choreographies shared between different Orthodox cultures.

Standing between subjects and objects, atmospheres are of vital importance for the experience of the topos, synthesizing sounds, light, wind, incense, objects and human movements. Besides reading and chanting, religious atmosphere also includes a number of other sonic markers, as for example the ringing of bells. Based on formal ecclesiastical documents, the normative orchestration of religious atmospheres in Orthodox Christianity aims to offer a field of communal worship through rituals that are repeated strengthening the bonds between the members of the community. Focusing on sound, here I present a case in which interruptions of these normative atmospheres are not considered as dissonances, but as a part of an integration process in which worshipping inclusivity is practiced.

### *Performing the Text in Religious Architecture*

In this paper, I argue that there are two different kinds of attunement of the religious atmosphere in the Orthodox Christian Church. On the one hand, there is this normative attunement that is based on formal documents that define the order of the services (*Typikon*)<sup>2</sup>. Following established patterns and fixated traditions, this is usually the result of Synodical meetings and is published in books and distributed to the parishes annually. On the other hand, we will see here that there is also a more flexible, organic harmonisation of ritual ambiance that is based on the interpretation of the normative one. While respectful to the doctrine and theological connotations of the *typikon*, this order is characterised by a sense of controlled fluidity to respond to the needs of the parish in which it is performed. Here I present a rather unique case of congregation demographics that while not the only one, it is not a representative example of what we can consider as the mainstream congregation of an Orthodox church. In the case of Saint Andrew, the minority citizens comprise the majority of the population and the locals become one of the groups of it.

In Orthodox Christian tradition, art and architecture are parts of a liturgical act during which its different components are dynamically interconnected aiming to deepen the participants' embodied knowledge of the divine. For Nicoletta Isar, in this liturgical choreography, ritual movement, the devotees, and the sacred space (either built or part of the natural landscape) are united into "a living space of presence and participation"<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, a liturgical choreography is a living architectural brief by which the formation of religious architecture is fulfilled. This approach frees us from the need to think of a service only happening in a church building, as it is the movements in the space that perform the consecration of this place. It is not surprising therefore that Saint Andrew's community has used as a church an old Parish School building, a house, or a side chapel of the Episcopalian church of Saint Michael and All Saints without losing its worshipping identity.

2. Archbishop Job Getcha. *The Typikon Decoded. Orthodox Liturgy Series*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012.

3. Nicoletta Isar, "Chora: Tracing the Presence," *Review of European Studies*, 1:1 (June, 2009), p. 44.

Critically appraising Isar's theory, Bissera Pentcheva underlines the active contribution of psalmody and censing in a liturgical chorography of the church through the inscription of sonic boundaries and aural intermediate zones. Church buildings were gradually developed into an architectural typology to offer an active context of human liturgical movement. The centrally organized plans, consolidated as a common church pattern during the Middle Byzantine period with their vaulted surfaces and the carefully placed openings giving the devotees the opportunity to perform the Christian drama in a more effective way. Initially all the devotees and later the choruses representing them participate in the drama through responsorial or antiphonal chanting<sup>4</sup>. Sound is reflected on the concave surfaces and thus reverberated and amplified with the succession of echoes acquiring greater tangibility. Eastern Orthodox Church typology is still meant to fully accommodate the normative atmosphere, while in parallel allowing for more organic versions of it to be performed, space, time and people allowing; though limiting them by the unchanging built shell of its structure. The *typika*, institutional texts, have been translated into rituals, and the rituals have called for a built forum to surround them in a performative way.

Two main normative worshipping orders are amalgamated in the case of Saint Andrew, the *Typikon* of Constantinople (followed in Greek Orthodox Church and the areas under the Ecumenical Patriarchate) and the *Typikon* of Jerusalem (followed in Russia and other countries of the Balkans, such as Serbia). Different languages, ancient Greek and old Slavonic, as well as different musical styles, Byzantine chanting and Slavonic polyphonic liturgical singing, are combined to address the different backgrounds of the congregation. Achieving the organic orchestration of soundscapes involves a complex process of transformations of the texts that have to be used during the services. English is used as the main language of the services. Hence, ancient Greek and old Slavonic have been translated into English. All of the three languages are used during the services in a rather careful way, pointing out differences and similarities in performance.

As in the case of different liturgical traditions, the text is also transformed here through scores into to (a) chanting (antiphonic according to the Byzantine tradition and polyphonic according to the Slavonic tradition) conducted by the choir, (b) melismatic reading (something between singing and prose reading) conducted by the priest, the deacon or a member of the choir, as defined in the *Typikon*, and (c) prose reading, performed again by the priest, the deacon or a member of the choir. In addition to these normative transformations, language translations and transliterations have been also employed to meet the needs of the services of Saint Andrew. Finally, there is also a hybrid, and slightly complex, process of transcriptions from one musical notation to another (Byzantine notation to European notation and vice versa) happening in parallel with translations and prosodic adjustments from one language to another.

For this purpose, new 'books' had to be made. These were folders in which the services were transformed from purely ethnical into trans-national ones, through a careful collaging process that was initiated by the Priest in charge John Maitland Moir (1928-2013) and has been kept since then. These folders are big enough to be placed on the lectern for the choir, while in parallel and are considered as 'essential objects for the worship of a service'. The materiality of these books, already challenges established liturgical spatial typologies. The 'normal' size books for Liturgical use is not good enough to cover the needs of a community that is not fully attached to any

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4. Bissera V. Pentcheva. *The Sensual Icon. Space, Ritual and the Senses in Byzantium*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008.

of the cultures that are traditionally considered as “Christian Orthodox” ones.

For example, in one of the most characteristic spreads of these books, the book of ‘The Divine Liturgy’, we find the *Apolytikion* of St Andrew (the feastal hymn of the Saint) scored in three different ways: in European Notation and Latin alphabet, in European notation and Greek alphabet and in Byzantine notation and Latin alphabet. The apolytikion of St Andrews is chanted during the first third of the Divine Liturgy and it is a fixed part of its order. The page is made to be read by people with different musical and linguistic knowledge. This was transcribed in both notations and languages by Dr George Nabil Habib and further edited by the Reader Gregory Gascoigne (both of them Christian Orthodox that spent a limited time in Edinburgh for studies and work). The people involved in these transformative processes (usually not professional musicians) transcribed specific kinds of notation into other types of notation while in parallel translating from (Ancient) Greek to English in a prosodic way. The lack of proper musical education and the complexity of the project has led into an empirical blended methodology, that keeps being ‘imperfect’ in terms of scientific, more ‘clinical’ approaches but has been able to remain flexible enough to adjust at diverse demographic dynamics as well as different spaces in which the community had to worship<sup>5</sup>.

It is really difficult to describe in text something that has to be lived (either heard or performed) as interrelated to the acting choreographies of the services in order to be fully understood. Even heard from online streaming, we perceive a different soundscape from the actual one, as translated from the phenomenal to the virtual. Writing about the soundscape of this community, allows us to take a distance from it, and think of the effort that is investigated to transform the text, the language that needs to be performed in a typical service, into an ambiental mosaic through: translation, transliteration and transcription. The blended process that is briefly analysed here reflects the demographic mobility of the parishioners.

### *Tansborder Identity in Transformation*

This sense of belonging characterises the transformative mosaic atmosphere of the place. Pieces of different national and cultural backgrounds are put together to allow for everyone to feel, at least partially, at home. What it is described here can be seen as a shared identity that while cannot be characterised as a ‘new’ one, it definitely involves the repositioning of identity, from its usual relation to the nation-state idea and engineering towards purification and unmixing tactics. In the case of Saint Andrew, we find a repositioning that appreciates that migrants and their descendants remain strongly connected to their backgrounds (either consciously or unconsciously). In parallel, it acknowledges the particularities of the new land that the different groups (have to) settle. In it, the local and the global are merged.

To argue that the examined processes suggest a model of repositioning the way identity has been reciprocally interconnected with worshipping places would have been at least premature at this stage, that further research and comparative analysis is needed. Though, I argue that Saint Andrew’s soundscapes suggest the significance of practising inclusivity and respect to ‘otherness’ within the theological limitations, but without losing the controlled organicity of a (cultural, architectural, artistic, ideological) religious tradition should have in order to meet its humanistic qualities. It is

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5. Interviews with Mr Thomas Francis Nicholas Donald, Mrs Marina Donald, Mr Stephen Gellaitry and Dr George Nabil Habib. April & May 2020.

part of transborder identity that allows for different people to slightly reposition themselves through worship in a shared, and hence more equal, way. This also suggests the insufficiency of traditional church building typology to embody the dynamics of the parish.

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