

## **/DIS/CONTINUITY REGAINED? SERBIAN ORTHODOX HYMNS IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES**

The term hymn is not widely established in writings on Serbian church music or in church every-day experience. It is frequently reserved for national anthems. In the realm of religious music word song has much wider acceptance, whether alone, whether more precisely defined with adjectives such as church, sacred, devotional, liturgical, para-liturgical, etc. If used in this sense – and that is extremely rare – there is no important difference between hymn in religious worship and that with religious content, but not intended for the church service. On the other side, some terms, especially church and sacred song, are clearly separated. Church songs are used in worship, in the liturgical context, although some might have their own role out of church (mostly troparia). Sacred songs are a sort of religious, para-liturgical music and they are not a part of official songs approved by Orthodox church for regular use.

On this particular occasion I will deal mostly with sacred songs – hymns, widely accepted by Serbian Orthodox community in the movement known as *bogomoljački pokret /movement of God-prayers/*, organized and led between the two World Wars by bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1881–1956), canonized on May 19, 2003 by the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Before the First World War roots of this movement existed in different places settled by Serbs, not only in Serbia, but in Austro-Hungary, too. One group of pious people, peasants in Vojvodina, mostly Srem and Banat, organized in the last years of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, was among them. Members of this movement were extremely religious. According to the description by one priest from 1902, "for about one year during the winter, on Sunday afternoons, these man and women regularly gather at our school. One of them, usually the most skilful in reading, reads Gospel and Lives of the Saints; they read prayers and sing certain troparia and church songs. Facing important feasts, they learn festal troparion and one can notice that in the church all the people, man and women sing troparion together." They attended church services regularly and took care of ordinary confession of their sins, keeping of the fasts, and frequent communing. While going to visit monasteries they formed processions with the school boy wearing special close and holding cross in his hands at the head, and other members followed him and sang hymns during ceremonial proceeding. Another group of Orthodox Serbs in Čurug asked their priest to organize regularly evening services every Sunday and feast during the First World War; they wanted to sing all prescribed church songs.

Final organization of the movement of God-prayers occurred after the First World War: in 1921 Serbian patriarch Dimitrije gave his approval and blessing for its' foundation. Official name was National Christian Community, later changed into Orthodox National Christian community.

The goals of the National Christian community included "achievement of moral revival of Serbian people", "spreading Gospels, creation of new Orthodox groups and suppression of incorrect religious teachings and sects, harmful political movements opposed to Orthodoxy." Their objectives were accomplished through religious periodicals (*Missionary* was one of the most celebrated) and other publications, annual gatherings with lectures, speeches and common prayers. Members of the pious movement always stressed their devotion to the Orthodox faith and Serbian Orthodox Church, pointing out the importance of close interaction between their own and official church activities. As described by episcope Atanasije Jevtić movement of God-prayers was "religious and moral movement of the Serbian Orthodox peasants at the end of 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, emerged after

several wars and enormous sufferings of the people. The basic content of this secular religious movement was penitence and solid moral life – personal, domestic and social. They gathered around their churches and monasteries, and their leader was bishop from Ohrid and Žiča Nikolaj Velimirović, together with other members of Serbian clergy." After the Second World War the movement felt decline, even though its influences present were during the second half of the 20th century.

Music had important role in the movement. Members were aware of its' influence and did all their best to learn church and spiritual songs, take part in musical section of the service, especially the Divine office and improve their musical knowledge. Their efforts were reinforced when they had recognized that other religious organizations, such as Adventist movement, made use of public hymn singing to attract people.

Members of the pious movement realized their musical activities on several levels:

1. **Mutual singing in the church** was the most important part of their activities. They regularly attended church services, especially the Divine liturgy on Sundays and feasts. Some members of the movement were church singers (psaltes), such as president of the pious community from Pirot in 1923, Sima Popović-Čarla, "who solely by going to church and practicing church singing had learned all answers and church songs, receiving, by the approval of bishop Dositej, status of the psalt."
2. **Mutual singing outside the church** (in religious processions, common prayers organized in houses, on special gatherings; *slava* – annual service served in a home in honor of a patron Saint – was one of the most significant). On these occasions pious people sung church songs, mostly troparia or liturgical songs, as well as sacred songs – hymns.
  - a. Among the church songs following are mentioned: troparion for the Epiphany *Vo Jordanje / When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan*, mode 1; troparion to the most famous Serbian Saint St Sava; the liturgical hymn *Vidjehom svjet istinij / We saw the true world*.
  - b. Sacred songs gained large popularity. The most admired was *Pomozi nam višnji Bože / Help us, heavenly God*, shown in the example 1. Members of the movement used to sing them in different occasions: on Sunday afternoon, after the liturgy they used to gather in private houses, sing and read the Bible, especially New Testament, on *slava* after the church service and during the lunch, on common meetings, together with lectures. In April 1940, for example, small choir from Požarevac organized the gathering and the following hymns were sung: *Pomozi nam, višnji Bože (Help us, heavenly God)*; *Ne tugujte, deco (Children, do not sorrow)*; *Spremajte se hrišćani (Christians, prepare)*, *Gospode Bože moj (Oh, Lord, my God)*, *Svud se Gospod slavi (Lord is celebrated everywhere)*.
3. **Education of church singers.** On certain occasions members of the community had decided to organize courses for church singers and missionaries. In 1932 meeting in Rakovica board of the National Christian Society made the decision to organize this type of course; students were supposed to learn church singing, Church-Slavonic language and missionary work.
4. **Establishment of church choirs:** their members were adults or children. There choirs did not sing not only in church, but in sacred concerts organized by local organizations of the Orthodox National Christian community. Sacred concert programs included church songs and hymns. The following program from the sacred concert in Čačak held in 1937 shows the type of songs typically offered by choirs of God-prayers between the two world wars.

1. *Blagosloven jesi / You are blessed*
2. Sacred songs, solo with gusle accompaniment
3. *Da ispravitsja / Let my prayer raise*
4. Sacred songs, choral performance
5. *Dostojno jest /It is trully meet*

Many books containing lyrics of sacred songs were published regularly, as well. *Crkvene i duhovne pesme /Church and Sacred songs/* (1924), *Mala zbirka narodnih duhovnih pesama /Short anthology of national sacred songs/* (1930), *Pesme Bogu i radu /Songs to God and work/* (1941), *Duhovne pesme /Sacred songs/* (several editions) were among them. These books were without musical notation but designed "for singing". Hymn verses were also published in periodicals published by Orthodox National Christian Community, such as *Christian community* or *Missionary*.

## Hymns

Hymns were mostly monophonic, but two- or three-voiced or choral versions were not rare: sometimes choirs were accompanied by small orchestras or instrumentals (among which were even the gusle, understood as Serbian national instrument).

Hymn verses were taken from collections of sacred songs, many of them written by bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. He had published several books, among which the *Duhovna lira / Sacred lyre* (1938) was the most important. These texts are different than church ones: the language is vernacular, instead of official church-Slavonic, which is still in use in the Serbian Orthodox Church. The possibility to praise the Lord in the native language, with simple, honest and straightforward reflections, without complex theological thoughts and dogmas brought a joy and delight to these zealous Orthodox Serbs. Sometimes lyrics has prayerful character, with appeals for help and protection, sometimes – it contains pure and simple religious truths, or strong narrative aspect such as famous *Bogomati pod krstom /Mother of God under the cross/*. Most hymns are rhymed, with several stanzas (2-8), parallel verses, and many of them have refrain.

As already mentioned, at the height of the movement music for sacred songs was not published, but transmitted orally. The only printed collection, *Duhovne pesme / Sacred songs* by metropolitan Damaskin Grdanički (1892-1969) dates from 1992. It was published posthumously. The author, metropolitan Damaskin, had close connections with the movement: in 1920, while he was professor at Theological school in Belgrade, he became one of the founders of Woman's Christian movement in Belgrade. He also published article on movement of God-prayers, and he was deeply devoted to church music: he had collected and/or prepared several books on church and sacred music. *Duhovne pesme, Hvalite Gospoda / Praise the Lord* (collection of church songs on Church-Slavonic and Serbian language in three volumes, published in 1972), *Church choirs and church songs for mixed choir* and *The Divine liturgy for three voices* are among them.

The book *Duhovne pesme* contains 98 sacred songs. Most of them are based on religious lyrics written by Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović; texts are taken from several books, collections of sacred songs and lives of the holy man and women.

A number of songs is based on Serbian chant: simple process of contrafacta is used, and words of a church song were replaced by Velimirović's lyrics. These hymns display typical qualities of Serbian chant: they belong to one of the eight church-modes, following melody, phrase shapes, scale patterns and structural principles by which the certain mode is distinguished. There is just one dissimilarity as a result of a rhymed hymn text: rhythmical and metrical structure. It is considerably different in church and sacred songs based on the

same mode. Rhythmic grouping of the Serbian chant is fluid and flowing, without fixed metrical patterns. It depends on textual accents: since church songs (in Church-Slavonic language) have prose texts, their regular metric division is impossible. If used (as was the case during the 19th century), the result would be incongruity between textual, metrical and melodic accent. On the other side, measured lines of the religious poetry easily adopt themselves to simple and clear rhythmical/metrical models.

Following example will illustrate this type of hymns. Two songs in Mode 6 are shown: one belongs to Serbian Octoechos (stichera *Voskresenije tvoje Hriste spase / Your Resurrection, Christ the Savior*), and the other one is the hymn from Damaskin Grdanički's book (*O presveta Božja mati / Oh, holly Mother of God*). Stichera is given as an illustrative example, it is not the original used by Grdanički.

The other group of hymns is freely composed or their melodies are taken from other sources (folk, Russian, Carpathian, etc). They differ from the former type: melodic outline, rhythmical models and musical form have their own distinct profile. Interval of second, as the basic melodic interval in church songs, is now replaced by third, probably under influence of polyphony and awareness of harmony. Rhythm is more steady and metrical flow is continuous, proving the consistency of procedure. Symmetrical, balanced phrases, often realized through two- or four-bar structures, clarify musical form. Binary overall structure with repetition of both parts or the second part, as well as ternary form, sometimes with partial reprise are usual. Representative illustration is hymn *Molitva naroda / National prayer* shown in example 3.

As already mentioned, Orthodox National Christian Community suspended activities after the Second World War, but their hymns didn't fade away. Many members of the movement became monks and nuns, transferring center of hymn singing into monasteries. The tradition was kept alive and during the last ten or fifteen years of new religious awakening in Serbia, many hymns are gaining popularity again. They are usually sung in the church after the service by whole community, and some of them are, according to testimonies of nun Sara from monastery Rajinovac near Belgrade, used even in the Divine liturgy during the communion of priests. New recordings of nun singing of hymns, made during last years, show vitality of some songs, such as *Bogomati pod krstom / Mother of God under the cross* or *Bože mili na svemu ti hvala / Dear God, thank you on everything*. On the other side, many recorded hymns are different than those written by metropolitan Damaskin: some of them contain new verses, while others – new melodies. Nevertheless, this renewed interest in sacred songs allows God-seekers to lead the way in restoration of the Serbian Church, proving once again, continuity of religious life and power of the sacred music.

Example 1: *Pomozi nam višnji Bože / Help us, heavenly God* from Damaskin Grdanički, *Sacred songs*, 1992.

Example 2a: stichera *Voskresenije tvoje Hriste spase / Your Resurrection, Christ the Savior*, from Nenad Barački, *Notni zbornik crkvenog pojanja*, 1923.

Example 2b: *O presveta Božja mati / Oh, holly Mother of God* from Damaskin Grdanički, *Sacred songs*, 1992.

Example 3: *Molitva naroda / National prayer* from Damaskin Grdanički, *Sacred songs*, 1992.

Further discussion on terms religious, church, sacred, liturgical, worship... music are given in my PhD thesis, *Serbian Choral Church Music before 1914*, Faculty of Music, University of Arts, Belgrade, 2005.

Quotation from the magazine *Bogoslovski glasnik / Theological Messenger* from 1903, according to: Đoko Slijepčević, *Istorija Srpske pravoslavne crkve / History of Serbian Orthodox Church* vol. 2, Beograd, BIGZ, 1991, 216.

Ibidem, 217.

Dragan Subotić, *Episkop Nikolaj i pravoslavni bogomoljački pokret. Pravoslavna narodna hrišćanska zajednica u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji / Bishop Nikolaj and Orthodox movement of God-prayers. Orthodox Christian community in the Kraljevina Jugoslavija*, Beograd, Nova Iskra, 1996, 31.

Ibidem, 31-31.

Ibidem, 15.

Ibidem, 48.

Ibidem, 125, 165, 168.

Ibidem, 37

Ibidem, 88

Ibidem, 267.

Ibidem, 118.

Ibidem, 200.

Ibidem, 46.

O bogomoljačkom pokreku / On the movement of God-prayers, *Vesnik Srpske crkve*, 1925.

Mitropolit Damaskin, *Duhovne pesme*, Beograd, 1992.

In Serbian church practice this procedure is generally known as krojenje (literally "cutting out"), and it is regularly used for singing church melodies with written text, but without written melodies.

More on Serbian chant and Octoechos in: Ivana Perković Radak, *Muzika srpskog Osmoglasnika / Music of the Serbian Octoechos*, Beograd, Fakultet muzičke umetnosti, 2004.

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