English Summary for the PhD thesis with the Title *Gesture and Ritual in the Orthodox Liturgical Areal – History and Hermeneutics*

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# Introduction

Gesture and the ritual have always raised various interests and considerations, many of them diverse and contradictory: amazement and fascination, intrigue and curiosity, denouncement and ambivalence.

Regarding the research advancement today, the gesture and ritual became, in the last half of the century, and in particular in the last twenty five years the object of various researches that put together and intersect the perspectives and the conversations of various contemporary consecrated sciences that are using different though specific inquiry methods, under the generic title of *ritual studies*: history of religions, cultural anthropology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, biblical theology, liturgics, systematic theology etc.

Today, Romanian Orthodox Theology cannot afford to ignore these researches and determining the present research premises we observe that the research and the ritual studies in the orthodox contemporary theology in particular the Romanian Orthodox theology, has to consider an interdisciplinary approach and incorporate critically the statements of the sciences already mentioned. The present research project represent a novelty in this regard bringing together and leveraging non-apologetically the different valuable contributions brought to the ritual studies by numerous researches.

The project aimed at opening a conversation about ritual studies in the Romanian Orthodox contemporary theology inviting and challenging the audience with an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating different perspectives – liturgics theology, biblical theology, history of religion, ritual theory, cultural anthropology, linguistics and sociology without debating the pros and cons but accommodating for further analysis the different perspectives.

The research builds also communication bridges among the different fields, identifying in a pertinent manner but with simplicity the intersection/overlapping areas between these research field as well as their complementarities. This determines the relevance and the importance of the of the research theme for the Romanian orthodox theological research.

From the author’s perspective the ritual is about faith and its manifestation, it is about the passage from a certain status of spiritual and faith experience to another one, it is about facilitated progress and in particular about the manifestation of the live and experience of love in the context of the ecclesiastic community and God and human kin relation and about the restoration of the human life regarded/looked at though the lenses of the ontological give of the creation of the human person in the image and called to likeness. This ontological given gives the humanity the enormous potential and capacity to express itself in rich forms consecrated liturgically and ritualistically.

***The method*** used follows the simple paradigm the covers the critical comparison, analysis and interpretation of the different perspectives regarding the gesture incorporated into ritual and the rituals themselves in the context of the different sciences, the critical reflection then the analysis of these perspectives though the agency of the theological thinking categories: biblical history, biblical theology, liturgical theology etc., so that, towards the end, to advance/propose the formulation of a few creative approaches to the contemporary challenges related to the gesture incorporated into the ritual and the ritual in general in the context of the Eastern Orthodox Eucharistic Liturgy and liturgical theology, passing gradually from theory and analysis to pastoral practice.

This methodological approach is justified by the fact that today there is no coherent research approach that can stand in isolation from other research approaches een if they belong to contexts and sciences that are not directly related to theology and in particular to liturgical theology.

In time ritual was looked at from different angles that, without having the arrogance of an exhaustive presentation, are presented in the chapter I and II of the thesis (covering a whole variety of perspectives, from the pragmatic realism to the symbolic dimension and idealized expression of the ritual, from the social role of the ritual concept to deconstruction of the values that are associated to the ritual)[[1]](#footnote-1) and then, in the chapters III and IV to describe the continuity of the ritual legacy of the Old Testament in the liturgical construct of the Orthodox Eucharistic Liturgy and the mapping and analyzing the gestures and rituals in the mystagogical commentary covering six of the most well know commentators of the Eucharistic Liturgy: St. Cyril of Jerusalem and his Mystagogical Catechesis, St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. German of Constantinople, St. Nicholas Cabasilas and St. Symeon of Thessalonica; in the final section of the thesis we analyze the gestures and rituals that are most used in the Orthodox Church today proposing un updated theological pastoral hermeneutic. In the final section we launch for debate a functional analysis of the ritual and gesture (sacramental, aesthetic, pedagogical, social etc.), proposing a set of approaches and solutions to the contemporary challenges referring to rituals and gestures in the Orthodox Eucharistic Liturgy context that are to be treated in depth in a specific set of studies creating a framework for liturgical and ritual studies in the Romanian Orthodox Church theological research areal.

**The project research goal** is to help the contemporary orthodox theologian refocus his/her attention on a few of the theological, biblical, liturgical and historical perspective taken for granted in the modern orthodox academic research and to address, in the Romanian orthodox theological areal a series of questions and challenges around the conceptual and motivational framework approach of the gesture and ritual that yet have a pragmatic/pastoral character: the need to formulate a specific analytic though holistic theological framework under the pressure of a global context/environment that rejects the ritual and the necessity of ritual.

Ritual occupied, towards the end of the XIX century, a central place in the cultures, history of religion research though lately it became an interest subject in itself, departing more and more from the approach that considers ritual a complex social phenomena. Now, ritual is object as well as method and style of research in the western academic research areal.[[2]](#footnote-2) One of the pioneers of ritual theory as science is the well known Jack Goody[[3]](#footnote-3), the one that describes the advancement of ritual theory research in a defining article for the topic though he expressed later his skepticism in losing his trust in the formal category of ritual.

No one since Jack Goody in the west and in particular in the Romanian Orthodox academic theological thinking, developed and supported a coherent analysis of the concept of gesture and ritual in liturgical context that would evaluate the role and importance of ritual in understanding religion, society and culture. One significant, extraordinary exception I would dare to say, is being made in the western academia, by the extremely valuable research of Catherine Bell (that passes away in 2008).[[4]](#footnote-4) None after, until today, evaluated the dimension of the problems as well as the challenges the ritual and ritualic gesture concepts imposes to the theoretical discourse about gesture and ritual in the ritual studies context/areal let alone the areal/context of theology of ritual, exception might be the research of Ithamar Gruenwald and other researchers/theologians be they catholic or protestant.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the contemporary Romanian orthodox theology ritual is approached in a dispersed manner, sporadic, insufficient and incoherent and this is the reason for choosing the theme as well as the title of the research project.

In the research done we open, on the basis of some works well known already mentioned (Mystagogical literature), a series of perspectives that could be valued/exploited in the theological research today. The Eastern Orthodox theology ritual is extremely rich and consistent and the research done and captured in the present thesis explores and puts together, methodically, different constitutive elements of this theology: the biblical perspective, historical, liturgical, cultural anthropological theory and ritual studies.

***The novelty of the research is*** given exactly by this gathering of the diverse and dispersed elements across the various research fields, by the mapping and the analysis of the known symbolic meanings of the gestures and rituals incorporated into the Eastern Eucharistic Liturgy along the identification of a whole list of challenges and opportunities that could be exploited by the Romanian orthodox liturgists and the questions that are to be answered, from a theological and pastoral perspective, that would regard ritual and ritualic gestures in a different way, given the rich potential of the ritual in the Orthodox liturgical set up.

**Summary of the thesis**:

**Chapter *I – Genesis and the structure of the ritual gesture – Historical, Anthropological, Theological and Liturgical perspective.***

In this chapter and its subsequent sections there is framed a conceptual methodological approach for the whole research endeavor where put together the different perspectives brought by the various research fields used (history, history of religion, cultural anthropology, liturgical theology, linguistics, all serving to the purpose of proposing a rearticulated hermeneutics of the gesture and ritual incorporated into the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Orthodox theology. The motivation for such approach is given by the holistic dimension of the ritual and liturgical life of the Orthodox Church.

The chapter accommodates also a series of clarifications, semiotics and hermeneutics, the relation between myth and ritual (complementarities and dependencies), the clarification of the relation between myth and the ritual and the sacred, the sacred and profane distinction of some of the historians of religion (Mircea Eliade), gesture and ritual outside the liturgical construct, the context of the ritual genesis and finally some theological clarifications regarding gesture as God’s work in the context of the world creation – a paradigm for the liturgical gesture.

***Chapter II - Gesture and Ritual* – *Biblical Perspectives***

In this chapter there is being articulated a biblical framework for an adequate understanding of the liturgical gesture and ritual. In this chapter sections are being looked at and analyzed different categories of ritualic gestures and rituals: body gestures and postures, ceremonial gestures and rituals, sacrificial gestures and rituals, symbolic gestures and rituals, gestures, rituals and postures associated to prayer in the Old and New Testament, prophetic gestures, the symbolic areal of the gestures, body postures and ritualic gestures, prayer and ritual in the Scripture, Passover gestures and rituals, sacrifice/ and offerings bought (waved) to the altar, cleansing rituals, sprinkling gestures, consecration, clothing, anointing, laying of hands, washing; specific ritual gestures – incensing, funeral ritual; history of the altar consecration from the anointing of the temple to the consecration of the Church; gestures and postures/positioning with ritualic liturgical character: stretching of hands, raising of hands, the blessing, prostration, kneeling, standing, the salute, the embrace, the kiss; community gestures and rituals – gathering and procession.

***Chapter III – Gesture and ritual in the catechesis and liturgical commentary***

In this chapter, after some brief introductions in the mystagogical catechesis and liturgical commentary evolution I dive into the writing of six of the most well know orthodox liturgical commentators. The first one are the five Mystagogical catechesis of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, then St. Dyonisios Pseudo-Areopagite, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Gherman the I-th, Patriarch of Constantinople, St. Nicolas Cabasilas and St. Symeon of Thessalonica, mapping, describing and analyzing in detail all the gestures and rituals that are captured in these author’s writings.

In the final of the chapter I offer a thorough analysis of the alexandrine symbolism and Antiochian realism used in the gesture and ritual interpretation by all of the six authors, the development and evolution of the gestures and rituals in the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Orthodox Church; the ritualic gestures and rituals in use in the Orthodox church liturgical life and manifestation, methodological challenges in interpreting the gestures semiotics in the Easter Orthodox Church.

***Chapter IV – Gesture and Ritual Functions***

This chapter captures the analysis of the various functions of the gesture and ritual in the Orthodox Church Liturgical construct: the worship function, the sacramental/positive and charismatic function of gesture and ritual, the symbolic function, the dialogic/communication as well as pedagogical/formative/catechetic/moral function of the gesture and ritual.

I also identify a set of needs that are to be addressed by the academic research and pastoral ministry of the Church today: the need and opportunity to know and assimilate the faith content though participation and integration into the liturgical cycle of the Church life; the prophetic and missionary dimension of the Church ritual and liturgical life and the considerable potential that the Orthodox Church ritual legacy has in this area; the communitarian function of the liturgical gesture and ritual (the potential for shaping the very being of the community capacity that the ritual has, the missionary potential as well as the proclaiming potential of a witnessing community); finally the aesthetic function of the liturgical gesture and ritual, in the context of a holistic manifestation of the liturgical life.

I intentionally avoided a final section with the title conclusions since the statements of this section are to be the approached more in depth in the future research endeavors, however the challenges I formulate here are related to the specific needs of the pastoral and missionary ministry of the Orthodox Church today:

* maximization of the liturgical gesture and ritual huge potential in relation with the ecclesiastic community that realizes and stated the necessity of ritual today
* reconsideration and revisiting of the essence of the liturgical gesture and ritual – the union and communion with God in the context of community
* re-learning of the liturgical act and the contemporary community and society realized need for adequate ritual.
1. Emile Durkheim, *Formele elementare ale vieţii religioase*, Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 1995, pp. 322, 340-356 şi 374-379. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jack Goody, „Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem”, in *Journal of Sociology 12* (1961): 141—64; and "Against 'Ritual': Loosely Structured Thoughts on a Loosely Defined Topic," in Moore and Myerhoff, pp. 2.5-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Catherine Bell, *op. cit*., p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See the article collection published under the title *Discourse in Ritual Studies*, by Hans Schildermann, (editor), Brill, Leiden, 2007, as well as the volume *Theorizing Rituals – Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, edited by de Kreinath, Jens, Snoek, Jan Snoek and Stauberg, Michael, Brill, Boston, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)