'Unless You are Converted and Become as Little Children' – in Liturgy and Arts

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This paper traces the impact of Christ's words quoted in the title on Christian culture. Although well-known and highly appreciated, this biblical motive, nevertheless, does not seem to be highly influential in actual ecclesiastical life—against the backdrop of its easily recognizable striving towards sublimity and earnestness. Or maybe simply the advancement of theoretical tools has been needed (awaited) in order to detect this kind of influence? The introduction of the notion of *play*, which only in twentieth century got a proper theoretical framing, is the key methodological innovation that will be proposed in order to answer the questions opened on following pages. With the help of this tool, not only the influence of the 'become as little children' strategy in the history of ecclesiastical life becomes evident, but the deep intersection of arts and worship gets wider cultural grounding, while artistic style(s) developed on this line of intersection are further elaborated—in historical and in contemporary ecclesiastical contexts.

> *Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.* [Mathew 18:3–4]

I

Very famous verses—whosoever has any familiarity with the Christian Bible could hardly have missed these words. Among Christ's sayings recorded in New Testament, moreover, this one brings a message so important that it needed to be included in all three synoptic Gospels [cf.

Mark 10:15 and Luke 18:17]. We could say that this message is overtly metaphorical, since it invites listeners/readers to 'become *as* [ὡς] little children',[1] which surely doesn't mean being *the same as little children* but being in some way *similar to them*. In other words, children are the image of what authentic Christians should become. The parallel presence of the adverb ὡς [as] preceding the term referring to *child* [*παιδίον*] in the Mark and Luke accounts—which are almost identical and a bit simpler than the quoted one from Matthew—supports the purely metaphorical approach to the subject. On the other hand, the quoted words of Christ ask for the true, existential response of Christians—a kind of response indicated by terms the 'conversion [*στραφῆτε*]' and 'becoming [*γένησθε*]'—and are formulated almost like a commandment, potentially sanctioned by no less than the expulsion from the kingdom of heaven. (The sanction formula itself is not a peculiarity of Matthew's Gospel, but belongs to all three accounts.)

Even if it is primarily a metaphorical saying, which includes the more or less substantial difference between the image and what it explains, all of this does not make our subject less important. On the contrary, today it is well known that metaphors are much more than a secondary decoration for our concepts and our behavior. Namely, the famous Lakoff-Johnson book from the 1980s, *Metaphors We Live By*, reflects the fact that concepts that define our cultural behavior are not just abstract structures. Rather, they are followed by richly picturesque cognitive material, which the authors have called 'conceptual metaphors'. This kind of imagery, furthermore, is not merely a neutral backdrop for our cognition and our concepts. Instead, whether consciously or not, it radically influences them. Let us use the authors' words to illustrate this thesis, by the most typical example, which opens their study and could be quite illustrative for the opening of this one.

> To give some idea of what it could mean for a concept to be metaphorical and for such a concept to structure an everyday

[1] Cf. also Mathew 19:14; the Bible is quoted here according to *New King James Version* translation; Greek text of the New Testament, according to: *Byzantine Greek New Testament; K^r/family 35 textform* (Rockville: The Center for the Study and Preservation of the Majority Text, 2014); Greek translation of the Old Testament (*Book of Isaiah*), according to: *The Old Testament in Greek, according to the Septuagint*, Vol. III, ed. Henry Barclay Swete (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905).

> activity, let us start with the concept argument and the conceptual metaphor argument is war. This metaphor is reflected in our everyday language by a wide variety of expressions: *He attacked every weak point in my argument* ; *His criticisms were right on target* ; *I demolished his argument* ; *I've never won an argument with him* ; *You disagree? Okay, shoot!* ; *If you use that strategy, he'll wipe you out* ; *He shot down all of my arguments*. It is important to see that we don't just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument – attack, defense, counterattack, etc. – reflects this. It is in this sense that the *Argument is War* metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing.[2]

All of this tells us that whether the advice/commandment to be 'converted and become as little children' was conceived in a more or less metaphorical fashion, this does not influence its importance among Christ's sayings. After all, it is obvious that he was well aware of the power of literary images; otherwise he would not formulate this one in the form of a commandment. In spite of that, the influence of this recognizable and picturesque commandment can hardly be noticed behind the imagery of (imperial or ascetic) earnestness, which dominantly structure our ecclesiastical life. It is as if throughout the two millennia of its history and culture, the Church persistently admires these words, yet at the same time wonders what to do with them. Or, maybe the influence of this metaphor/commandment does exist in our ecclesiastical experience, but we do not notice it, the way we do not notice that the metaphor *Argument is War* truly structures the actions we perform in arguing? Thus, the opening question of this paper should be: how it

[2] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

is possible to think about the application of this obviously important teaching in ecclesiastical life—in a historical or in contemporaneous context? Or, if we prefer to think about it in conceptual-metaphoric terms: how is the image of becoming 'as little children' supposed to be *lived by* within (contemporary) Christian culture?

In order to put the image in its context, we have to continue with the discussion about the biblical text itself. If one could rightly claim that the previously cited metaphor 'argument is war' originates from our agonistic heritage, deeply rooted in foundational levels of European culture,[3] then it seems that the image of being 'converted' and becoming 'as little children' comes from a radically different context. Moreover, it comes directly as an answer to the typically agonistic question uttered by the disciples: 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' [Matthew 18:1]. And the answer given by Jesus after he 'called a little child to Him' and 'set him in the midst of them' [18:2] was surely something that no one could have expected. It was the radical subversion of the very (agonistic) cognitive/social bases from which this kind of question originates— almost like making fun with the basic civilizational proposition of the ancient world (and the contemporary world as well). This subversive aspect of Christ's unusual call to conversion—which from now on I will call the *childish turn*—can be comprehended not only from the widest cultural context, but also from the text itself. Namely, the quoted account from Matthew, which is the most detailed among its synoptic counterparts, brings one peculiarity that could become a good starting point: the presence of the term *humbling*. The term ταπεινώσει, used by the writer of the first Gospel here, is not speaking about some delicate or humble way of humbling, the way the term *humble* is usually described in English dictionaries.[4] This word recalls the, so to speak, very 'raw' images of *humbling* and *lowering down*, such as the image of the *Suffering Servant of Jehovah* from the *Book of Isaiah* [53:8], or the Crucified Christ himself, from the *Epistle to Philippians*: 'And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled [*ἐταπείνωσεν*] Himself and

[3] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 1949, 46–75.

[4] Cf. for example: 'Humble' *adj* (humbler, humblest) 1: not proud or haughty, 2: not pretentious, unassuming, 3: insignificant; *synonyms* – meek, modest, lowly; 'Humble' *vb* (humbled, humbling) 1: to make humble, 2: to destroy the power or prestige of; *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2004, 350).

became obedient to *the point of death*, even the death of the cross' [2:8]. Finally, the icons inscribed as *Akra Tapeinōsēs* [*άκρα ταπείνωσης*] by Byzantine painters represent *Dead Christ in the Grave*, while the title is usually transcribed as the *Utmost Humiliation*.[5]

But what is humiliating about being a child, the contemporary reader may now ask? Is not childhood the most beautiful and the most excellent phase of our lives? Different methodological approaches are needed to find an answer to this kind of question and—what is more important—to relate it with the subject of this paper. Firstly, the concept of 'Human Rights' was far from being recognized at those times, while the concept of 'Children's Rights' was hardly even imaginable. Being child meant being heavily subject to the authority of the father, whether in a legal manner (in Rome) or in a traditionally patriarchal manner (anywhere else).[6] For a free man, being like a child was certainly an image of the loss of freedom, or, to be more precise, the loss of individuality, the loss of the possession over one's own personality. 'A child was on a par with a slave, and only after reaching maturity was he/she a free person who could inherit the family estate'; consequently (even in Bible) 'the term "child/children" could also be used as a serious insult [cf. Matthew 11:16–17; Luke 7:32].'[7] Thus, the obedience to the (institution of the) father was obviously the most recognizable aspect of the antique experience of childhood. Moreover, it is well known that, in a Roman cultural context and in the Old Testament community as well, children were basically the property of the father, who more or less literally decided on their status of living human beings.[8]

> The notion of control is fundamental to understanding the Roman idea of childhood. It was a time when control and guidance by adults was considered essential, a time when the child was in

[5] Hans Belting, 'An Image and Its Function in the Liturgy: The Man of Sorrows in Byzantium', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34 (1980 - 1981): 1–16; at 3–4.

[6] Cf. in notes 8 and 10.

[7] Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science commentary on the Synoptic Gospels'* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 336.

[8] William V. Harris, 'The Roman father's power of life and death', in *Studies in Roman Law in Memory of A. Arthur Schiller*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall and William V. Harris (Leiden: Brill, I986), 81–95; Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's people in God's land. Family, land, and property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 222–38; Anthony Phillips, 'Some Aspects of Family Law in Pre-Exilic Israel' in Anthony Phillips, *Essays on Biblical law* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 111–26.

> the power of adults. This is underlined by the fact that children are often associated in the Roman mind with other groups who lack the ability of self-control: women, slaves, the insane, barbarians. Romans writing about children assumed ideals of the over-riding power of the father and of the state; this informed all their opinions and is the point from which to measure perceived moments of indulgence and sentimentality.[9]

Less legally formal, but not essentially different was, finally, the status of children throughout Mediterranean antiquity, together with the first century Roman province of Judea, where the subject of this paper was formulated.[10] But, is it not a bit strange to think of Christ referring to all of this in his proposal/commandment to 'become as little children'? Does this kind of interpretation really fit with his Good News? It is truly hard to imagine him advocating a patriarchal narrative, camouflaged by the image of childhood, about obedience and subordination, when we all know that his Evangelium was causing fundamental changes in the traditional values of the ancient (and all following) cultural contexts. Moreover, as it is well known, Jesus also said this: 'Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life' [Luke 18:29–30 cf. also, Matthew 19:29, Mark 10:29–30]. And even more radically: 'If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple' [Luke 14:26; cf. also, Matthew 10:37]. All of this is, finally, congruent with the famous 'Let the dead bury their own dead' [Luke 9:60], or with the following answer to the potential disciple who expressed attachment to his family

[9] M. Harlow, R. Laurence, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome: A life course approach*, London – New York 2002, 34; cf. also: 'The child occurs in association with animals, women, and tyrants—all four symbolise behaviour opposed to that of the adult male citizen'; Thomas Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1989), 8. For wider context and interpretation, cf. ibid., 5–43; John K. Evans, *War, Women and Children in Ancient Rome* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge 2014), 166–209; Beryl Rawson, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[10] Warren Carter, *Households and discipleship. A study of Matthew 19–20* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 95–108; Jan Grobbelaar, 'Jesus and the children in the Gospel of Matthew', in *Theologies of Childhood and the Children of Africa*, ed. Jan Grobbelaar and Gert Breed (Durbanville, Cape Town: AOSIS, 2016), 132–86; at 136–41; cf. also, bibliography from the note 8, supra.

('Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house'): 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God' [Luke 9:61–62].[11] Obedience to inherited/traditional social structure obviously was not the central point of Christ's New Testament.[12] Thus, it does not seem plausible that the interpretation of the quote from the title of this discussion should be interpreted as: 'be a good kids and listen to your parents'. Moreover, if Christ had wanted to suggest something like this, it could have been said in numerous more distinctive and expressive ways.

All of this suggests that his statement on becoming 'as little children' carries the additional semantic load, which is not only far from the traditional agonistic spirit but equally far from the traditional (patriarchal) imagery of subordination. After all, children and childhood are not primarily characterized by obedience to parents (father). Obedience is a necessary aspect of this stage of life in order to ensure safety, but it is not the highest quality of the childhood. It is not the quality by which we remember childhood, making it hard to imagine why the word 'humiliation' was used by Christ in this context. Moreover, children are generally unable to be absolutely obedient and must be taught to obey. Children are yet in a 'raw' state of mind (and body) and need to be molded according to the required social and cultural standards in order to become obedient in the future. Thus, what differentiates children from adults is precisely their disobedience. While this was, as we have just seen, their 'weak point' from the perspective of ancients, the contemporary reader has the capacity and the opportunity to recognize the positive qualities behind this specific social feature of childhood.

Yet, I do not think that becoming 'as little children' was a call to disobedience. Or, at least, I do not think this is the primary interpretation of this story. So, maybe we should finally try to leave aside the very idea of subordination and interpret the quotation through a theology of kenosis: in other words, to approach the social relations fostered by Christ's saying through the concept of self-emptying, or if we try to avoid the heavy and vague motive of *self*, power-emptying.

[11] Cf. also, Matthew 8:22, 12:46–50; Mark 3:20–35; Luke 8:19–21.

[12] Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth (New York: Macmillan, 1979 [1949]), 87–114; David C. Sim, 'What about the Wives and Children of the Disciples?: The Cost of Discipleship from another perspective', *The Heythrop Journal* 35.4 (1994): 373–90.

What is 'humiliating' in becoming like a 'little child', thus, is exactly what was 'humiliating' for God's Son when he became a human: the loss of the power,[13] the loss of the control over himself. Or, as it was precisely described in Philippians: 'being in the form of God, [Christ] did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled [*ἐταπείνωσεν*] Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross' [Philippians 2:6–8].[14]

What does this kenotic story tell us about the obedience of the Son towards the Father? The Son is obedient to Father in things that 'make

[13] For a possibility for this kind of interpretation cf. Jürgen Moltmann, 'Child and childhood as metaphors of hope', *Theology Today* 56.4 (2000): 592–603; at 600.

[14] Although the subject of *kenosis* (*κένωσις* = *self-emptying*) of God does not belong to a list of the most popular theological concepts of medieval Christianity, kenotic theology/Christology was persistently present in the Church from New Testament times and the (quoted) *Christological hymn* from Paul's *Epistle to Philippians* [2:5–11]. The kenotic images of Good's Son, who 'made Himself of no reputation (*ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν*)' and 'humbled himself (*ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν*)' to the point of humiliating 'death of the cross' have been—sometimes more sometimes less enthusiastically—re-activated or de-activated throughout Christian history but could hardly be forgotten. Among the ancient authors, St Cyril of Alexandria stands out as one of the most authoritative proponents of kenotic theology; after the outbreak of the Nestorian controversy, he distinctively noted that 'the discussion of the kenosis (*ὁ περὶ τῆς κενώσεως λόγος*) must precede other topics' and later on used the kenotic formula from Philippians ('*ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν*') to interpret no less than the second article of the Creed itself; Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 150–51. It is important to note here that the concept of *kenosis* started gaining huge attention in recent scholarship and it seems that such attention has something to do with the so called 'religious turn' in contemporary philosophy. This kind of trend suggests me that, from the methodological frames of the present discussion, the subject of *kenosis* also can be interpreted as a specific sort of *conceptual metaphor*, which quietly but persistently shaped Christian theology and culture, up to the point of its full recognition in our days. Presenting only the current research (from the third millennium) is sufficient to illustrate this tendency. About *kenosis* in New Testament context, cf. Gordon D. Fee, 'The New Testament and Kenosis Christology', in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 25–44; R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii. 5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 165–96; in patristic context, cf. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 135–71; in the wider historical context, cf. Peter J. Colyer, *The Self-emptying God: An Undercurrent in Christian Theology Helping the Relationship with Science* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 29–131; in wider theological context, cf. David T. Williams, *The Kenōsis of God: The self-limitation of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2009), 41–49; in (contemporary) Orthodox theological context, cf. Nicholas V. Sakharov, *I Love therefore I am; The Theological Legacy of Archimandrite Sophrony* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 93–115; in contemporary philosophical context, cf. Luca D'Isanto, 'Kenosis of the Subject and the Advent of Being in Mystic Experience', *Qui Parle* 17.1 [Special Issue: *Thinking Alterity, Reprise*] (fall/winter 2008): 147–73; Renée D.N. van Riessen, *Man As A Place of God: Levinas' Hermeneutics of Kenosis* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 173–205; Matthew Edward Harris, 'Vattimo, kenosis and St Paul', International Journal of Philosophy and Theology, 75:4 (2014): 288–305.

no sense' from the perspective of any traditionally recognizable value-scale. It is quite a ridiculous thing for God to do, and this is exactly the way Greco-Roman culture mocked Christians. Their God was—as the second-century Roman philosopher Celsus was trying to ridicule them: 'born a mortal … shared those carnal weaknesses that the Christians themselves regard as abominable'[15] and, finally, not only that he died, 'but died a death that can hardly be accounted an example to men'.[16] And, of course this critique was firmly grounded inside the 'natural' religious order: 'were he a god he should not have died'.[17] This kind of attitude was, after all, well predicted by St Paul when he wrote his famous: 'but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness' [1 Corinthians 1:23]. Thus, Son's obedience to his Father obviously goes against the recognizable religious and cultural models, against the recognizable social laws, and finally—to say it in a more picturesque way—against the natural world order as we know it. In other words, obedience exists, but it does not function according to the traditional 'Wille zur Macht' standards and brings a radically different model of behavior and cognition. After all: why would the One who is supreme—truly and unquestionably supreme—become not only less than the supreme but opposite to supreme? What the Father asks his Son to do is, thus, to change the universally valid 'rules of the game'. Or, to be more precise, to open the game with different rules, and, moreover, to call all people to enter this game with him. And, not only do his Divine self-emptying and self-sacrifice oppose and convert all previous concepts of the Godhead, but the basic Eucharistic ritual he calls his disciples to perform, consequently, proposes a radical cut in the cultic life of the entirety of European culture.[18] Thus, if Christ is to be followed, then a game radically different from the dominant world order needs to be played.

Now, I introduced a words *game* and *play* here for a very special reason. These words are humbly bringing us back to the 'unless you are converted and become as little children' concept. Namely, children are by their nature excluded from the power distribution of the 'real

[15] Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 72.
[16] Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 65.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Cf. infra, especially notes 41–44, 47.

world'. Except in few bizarre excuses, little children do not govern the world order. Unlike adults, children cannot wish to 'rule the world'. They do not, or cannot, even care for such things. Or, to put it simplest way, children are free of power. They are power emptied. We can say that they really are a good example for the kenotic power-emptying that Christ suggests by his own example. In other words, if one would be right in concluding that through his Incarnation and his voluntary death on Cross 'God expresses his love by circumscribing or demarcating his omnipotence, leaving a space of freedom for us',[19] then Christ's proposal to be 'converted and become as little children' is the best possible example of how to apply this crucial theological knowledge in our lives.

Nevertheless, the kenotic interpretation does not seem to be sufficient by itself. Namely, a 'kenotic anthropology', which invites Christians to follow their teacher on the self-emptying and self-giving path of love, was already thoroughly and sufficiently expressed throughout the Gospels. One can easily find it in Christ's numerous sayings, such as: 'For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it' [Matthew 16:25].[20] Thus, the saying marked by the phrase *childish turn* here, although basically belonging to this 'kenotic corpus', was obviously important for some additional reason that was not contained in other sayings. This additional semantic load, which seemingly gives an example of the application of kenotic theology in anthropological domains, is what we are searching for here. On the other hand, all evangelic texts that show Christ's special care for those weak, poor and marginalized, for those downtrodden and despised by the world,[21] also come from this basically kenotic worldview. Yet if all of

[19] Romilo Knežević, 'Surprising God: An Ontological Proposition for Creative Monasticism', *Philotheos* 17 (Belgrade 2017): 106–112; at 108. In addition to different contemporary readings of the subject of *kenosis* (from note 14), I have extracted this formulation for its innovative and condensed meaningfulness; on God's kenotic self-limitation, in more detail, cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 108–119 ['God permits an existence different from his own by limiting himself. He withdraws his omnipotence in order to set his image, men and women, free. He allows his world to exist *in* his eternity. The divine kenosis which begins with the creation of the world reaches its perfected and completed form in the incarnation of the Son'. Ibid., 118]. Cf. also, David T. Williams, 'Kenosis and the nature of the Persons in the Trinity', *Koers* 69.4 (2004): 623–40.

[20] Cf. Matthew 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24, 14:26, 17:33; John 12:25; for kenotic interpretation of this crucial and incomparably persistent aspect of evangelic message, cf. Mark E. Moore, *Kenotic Politics: The Reconfiguration of Power in Jesus' Political Praxis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 81–82.

[21] Cf. ibid., 83; Grobbelaar, 'Jesus and the children in the Gospel of Matthew', 142–43.

them—Samaritans, prostitutes, tax-collectors, lepers, thieves, insane, etc.—could be marked by a single metaphor that would describe their special place in Christ's heart, would it be the image of the child? Even if this could have been a valid interpretation for the ancient readers of the Gospels, the two millenniums of its presence among us surely do allow some further interpretative steps.

Namely, today it seems that our childish metaphor has hermeneutic potential that puts it somewhere beyond the imagery of basic social divisions. After all, if he needed the pure image of the human weakness, the pure semantic negation of will-for-power and the clearest representation of human powerlessness, Christ could always turn to the metaphor of *slavery*. And this binary was by no means avoided in Gospels. Moreover, sayings of the type 'whoever desires to be first [*πρῶτος*] among you, let him be your slave [*δοῦλος*]' [Matthew 20:27], which do make a direct inversion of recognizable power distribution mechanisms, are so often presented in the Gospels that one can rightly recognize them as a true hallmark of the evangelic teaching.[22] Thus, the 'unless you are converted and become as little children' image obviously would not have been needed if it did not possess some additional content—some colorful quality that was necessary in addition to the recognizable binary, black-and-white opposition of master-and-slave political imagery. More precisely, the metaphor we are dealing with is not a simple opposite to the imagery of power, a pure semantic negation, but brings some positive content. Additionally, it is interesting to note that none of the binary, high-low, (first-last) conversion sayings is followed by the commandment stricture such as '*unless you are converted* ... you will *by no means enter the kingdom of heaven*'. At best they sound like very strong recommendations of the type: 'If anyone *wants to be* first, he *shall be last*' [Mark 9:35]. Peculiarly, thus, the binary, black-and-white, negative conversion is a *proposal*, while the colorful, qualitative conversion is a *commandment*. This gives more than enough reason to suppose that the surplus of meaning contained in the *childish turn* here is not only worth of searching for, but that it opens a unique, meaning-

[22] Matthew 19:30, 20:16, 20:26–27, 23:11; Mark 9:35, 10:31, 10:43–44; Luke 13:30, 22:26; this significant list of sayings is highly congruent with the one from note 20, which puts their specific message in the very core of Christ's evangelic teaching (for kenotic interpretation, cf. Moore, *Kenotic Politics* 79–81).

ful and indispensable view of Christian culture. So, if we finally want to interpret this story in all of its colors, which now seems quite plausible from different points of view, we should definitely try to approach it from the positive, we could call it qualitative, perspective.

For the beginning, our everyday experience tells us that this kind of approach is possible, since we know very well that children are not merely of empty cognitive vessels. They are not simply powerless. Instead of 'Wille zur Macht' they possess a different kind of content, some different kind of quality, which—if it can be grasped and interpreted—might become highly important for the present discussion. Together with the natural love for their parents, the only thing that actually concerns children is—as it is also well known—their *play*. 'It is, no doubt, recognized that in the child's existence it [*the play*] plays an important, indeed fundamental, role and is at the center of the child's life.'[23] And the key feature of children's play is—from the perspective of the adult observer—its *difference from the dominant world order*. It is not that they wish to be excluded from the world order, but the world order does not take their playing seriously (as they do)—from Roman times up to our own. And no one has a problem with this—neither adults nor children. They are expected by their parents and by wider society to play games that differ from the 'games' of adults, and this is something everyone accepts without questioning. One would say that this is a kind of primordial social contract, or the God-given 'state of affairs'. And this primordial contract is exactly what makes the world of children's play so interesting for the present research. Because, from an adult perspective, this is a contract of exclusion, while from the perspective of child, this contract is approached differently: play is full of the positive content, which is not less but more valuable than anything from 'reality', and is almost as important as parental love. Moreover, play is the best complement to the parental love, since it is the most delicate and most fragile space where kids are paradoxically voluntarily expelled-and-protected from the power-share of their own parents. Thus, play is not only what children do in their powerlessness, it is, I would say, the privilege and the positive content of childish powerlessness. It is what transforms the negativity of powerlessness to its

[23] Eugen Fink, *Play as Symbol of The World; and other writings*, trans. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 36.

opposite: the brilliance, the freedom, and the plentitude of life. From such a perspective, play becomes a distinctive, meaningful, and affirmative sign of childish powerlessness, which finally brings us to the most important hermeneutic shift that will be proposed here.

Namely, what if we the *capacity to play* is the key feature of the image of child we are interested in? Or, to say it more straightforwardly, what if Christ was referring exactly to the *capacity to play* when he uttered his famous 'unless you are converted and become as little children'? Or, with the highest available theoretical precision, what if the conceptual metaphor of *play* is inconspicuously attached to the idea of *conversion* proposed by this statement? And, finally, what if – speaking from methodological point of view – contemporary research of *liturgy*, *art*, and *play* were needed in order to discover the importance of this conceptual metaphor and uncover the ways it has influenced the formation of Christian culture for the centuries? Now, let us try to re-enter the discussion from this perspective.

II

For the beginning, we should recall that being 'converted' and becoming 'as little children' surely means power-emptying and the readiness to play by different kind of rules. From this perspective, the world of childish play becomes the very expressive image of the 'otherness' of the liturgical life to the dominant world order. This kind of 'otherness' is seemingly denoted by Christ's words from the title of this paper, but also by the words of Celsus, whom I am going to use once again as the example of the most radical antique opponent to Christian doctrine. Namely, he was not only mocking what Christians believed in, telling that their 'story is really one for the hearing of small children',[24] but also Christians themselves and their religious practices, asserting that their ministry is dedicated to 'anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone childish',[25] while their teachers 'show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women and little children.'[26] It seems

[24] Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 80.
[25] Ibid., 72–73.
[26] Ibid., 73; cf. interpretation in: Coleman M. Ford, '"Able to Convince only the Foolish":

from this perspective that Christians, their faith, and their way of ecclesiastical life have been initially truly recognized as powerless and childish by the dominant culture of the late antiquity, which indirectly implies that they truly accepted the *childish turn* suggested by their teacher. Thus, to be 'converted and become as little children' meant accepting the game initiated by God, who was truly *foolishness to the Greeks*, with the principles and rituals that made no sense from the perspective of the dominant civilization of the time. It meant the readiness to play the game that subverts the dominating natural and social laws. Most precisely, it is the readiness for the game unrelated to the natural laws of the survival and the laws of power-distribution by which 'we [Christians] are trying trough free play to make ourselves fit for the totally-other'.[27]

Now, is it not exactly this kind of game that Christ asks all of us to play when we enter his Church? All of us Christians, with more or less certainty, 'know' what we believe in, as defined in the Creed, but what are Christ and his Church asking us to *do* in order to be Christians? I believe the majority of contemporary theologians would agree on one thing: what the Church asked all Christians of all ages to do is to 'remember' and follow the 'commandment of salvation', which consisted of performing Christ's own Eucharistic words ('Take, eat; this is my body ...' and 'Drink ye all of it; This is my blood ...'[28]) followed by partaking in the consecrated Eucharistic meal. The most conservative and the most liberal Orthodox theologians would probably agree today that the partaking in the Holy Eucharist is the most essential distinctive element of an authentic Christian life. What the Church calls us to perform, thus, is a highly ritualized meal, which is believed to bring to presence the One who is otherwise not physically present among us. Now, if we try to make an intellectual experiment and think about this essential ecclesiastical call as if the two millennia of its continual performance had not occurred, would it not look like truly childish play from the perspective of the world concerned with survival, conformity, and success? Is not this call quite similar to the way children make the

Anti-Christian Polemicas Social Scrutiny in Celsus's On the True Doctrine', *Churchman* 133.1 (Spring 2019): 21–33; at 25–26.

[27] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 16.

[28] *The Orthodox Liturgy*, ed. The Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist – Essex (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 74.

rules when they play their games: 'I'll be the princess, and you'll be the knight, and this will be the castle. Let's play!'? The rules of children's games do not proceed from the laws of the nature/society but have their own inner principles, created according to their own will. This is why childish play is not objective enough in order to influence anything out of the play itself—especially in the adult world. But, on the other hand, this is what makes play ultimately creative: the creative act of free will, which neither conforms to the laws of nature nor the laws of society. With a bit of generalization, one could say that what makes this kind of game childish makes it creative, and *vice versa*. To be more precise, children's play usually does not directly confront natural laws but uses them freely, according to the creative needs of the players. Children do not hate the world they live in; on the contrary, they love it so much that they relate with it creatively, beyond the fear of its dark side. The world twists in their playing hands and heads, as if it were a puppy, or a piece of the modeling clay. Now, is this not as close as possible to the genuine call to creativity, given to us by our creation *according to image and likeness* of the Creator?[29] And does not this kind of imagery, finally, show us the most authentic and the most creative aspects of Christian (liturgical) life?

> Indeed, he [Christ] has received from his Father the power to introduce others into his own birth from the paternal Source (Jn 1:13; 3:5-8). He calls them to join him in outgrowing their false adulthood and to become like children again. It is no empty simile; rather, it is an expression of inmost Christian reality to say that we have received the Spirit of childhood, which enables us to cry out 'Abba, Father!' And when we do, 'it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (Rom 8: I5-16). This mystery places us beyond the opposition between seriousness and play. There is no more serious responsibility for God than the creation of the world, yet the Wisdom that stands at his side treats the whole business as a form of play: 'When he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing

[29] On the biblical *Image and Likeness* doctrine, cf. in notes 61–66.

> before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men' (Prov 8:29ff.). Though the game leads to the scourging at the pillar and the crowning with thorns, it never ceases to be play and delight.[30]

While following von Balthasar in his proposition that the subject of the *childish turn* has to be connected with the Trinitarian theology as we know it, and the image of Jesus as the 'archetypal Child who has his abode in the Father's bosom',[31] I will suggest that this connection is actualized exactly within the liturgical realm. The same passage from the *Proverbs*, in the interpretation of Romano Guardini, one of the most influential twentieth century explorers of the liturgy, will lead us in this direction.

> The liturgy has laid down the serious rules of the sacred game which the soul plays before God. And, if we are desirous of touching bottom in this mystery, it is the Spirit of fire and of holy discipline 'Who has knowledge of the world'—the Holy Ghost—Who has ordained the game which the Eternal Wisdom plays before the Heavenly Father in the Church, Its kingdom on earth. And 'Its delight' is in this way 'to be with the children of men'. Only those who are not scandalized by this understand what the liturgy means. From the very first every type of rationalism has turned against it. The practice of the liturgy means that by the help of grace, under the guidance of the Church, we grow into living works of art before God, with no other aim or purpose than that of living and existing in His sight; it means fulfilling God's Word and "becoming as little children"; it means foregoing maturity with all its purposefulness, and confining oneself to play, as David did when he danced before the Ark.[32]

[30] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology, Volume 5: Man Is Created*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 216.

[31] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 10 (this basic proposition is emphasized in the study, almost in all of its aspects; cf. ibid. 9–55).

[32] Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (Chicago: Biretta Books, 2015 [1918]), 44; Cf. also, congruent interpretations of the verses from *Proverbs*, in: ibid., 41–42; Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play* (London: Burns & Oates, 1965), 19–25; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child* (San Francisco: Communio, 1991), 35–36; Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985), 310–12.

As we can see, twentieth century theology has not only recognized the connection between the evangelic call to become 'as little children' and the notion of *play*, but also recognized deep relations of liturgical life with the phenomenon of *play* and the possibility to use this relation as a theoretical tool for liturgical research.[33] If approached from the perspective of the *childish turn*, thus, liturgy itself truly becomes one of the utmost actualizations of Christ's unusual call to conversion. Once again, it is important to note that this event involves playing a game that looks totally foolish from the perspective of 'this world'. If approached from this perspective, furthermore, all serenity, all richness, all decoration that is attached to this basic structure does not actually make it more serious, but more childish. To attach all of this pomp to one ritual meal consisting of bread and wine truly looks paradoxical from a worldly perspective.[34] It is the ornamentation of childishness, the quintessence of childishness. For people worried about worldly issues, thus, this ritual is truly a childish game—the opium for the masses, as once was uttered. On the other hand, every religious ritual truly has its childish side, since, as Johan Huizinga has shown in his masterful *Homo Ludens*, religious rituals always have an aspect of play. 'Primitive, or let us say, archaic ritual is thus sacred play, indispensable for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development but always play in the sense Plato gave to it—an action accomplishing itself outside and above the necessities and se-

[33] It is interesting to note here that two decades before the appearance of the groundbreaking study named *Homo Ludens*, by Johan Huizinga, which made a radical and positive change in the humanities towards the subject of *play*—and thus will be thoroughly used here—Guardini dedicated the entire chapter of his (also highly influential) *The Spirit of the Liturgy* to the notion of *play* (cf. infra, in note 51). Nevertheless, it seems that the wider interest of theology in the notion of *play* (with some pivotal theological figures involved) can be detected after the appearance of *Homo Ludens* (1938) and Fink's *Play as Symbol of The World* (*Spiel als Weltsymbol*, 1960), which—not unlike Guardini's study—dedicated a chapter to the relation of *play* and *cult*. Cf. Rahner, *Man at Play* (1965); Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1969); David L. Miller, *Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970); Moltmann, *Theology of Play* (1972); Robert K. Johnston, *The Christian at Play* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997 [1983]); Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child* (1991); Robert Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014); Courtney T. Goto, *The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning into God's New Creation* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2016). The interest of philosophy in the notion of *play* is, of course, very wide; as an introduction can be used two homologous contemporary readers: *The philosophy of play*, ed. Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell, and Malcolm MacLean (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); *The Philosophy of Play as Life*, ed. Wendy Russell, Emily Ryall, and Malcolm MacLean (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

[34] Cf. infra, especially notes 45–47.

riousness of everyday life. In this sphere of sacred play the child and the poet are at home with the savage'.[35] I would add here, moreover, that what makes these religious settings primitive is exactly the 'consciousness' that this action, which is 'accomplishing itself outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life', is 'indispensable for the well-being of the community'. The 'maturing' of European religious and cultic life will end, if we do not take into account the twentieth century atheism, in the simplification and rationalization of ecclesiastical ritual by Protestant Christian denominations, essentially followed by the divorce from medieval sacramental realism and Eucharistic communitarianism.[36] This kind of rationalized and individualized piety—empowered by the objective/rational scientific affinity to early/archeological Christianity—produced the worship that was, if not useful, then at least more compatible with the 'seriousness of everyday life'. In an answer to these changes, the Latin Church saved the sacramental realism but threw away the unnecessary medieval ornament from its own worship,[37] making it compatible with 'real life' as much as it was contextually possible. If it could not be truly functionalized it at least became less conspicuously childish, from the perspective of unstoppable worldly utilitarian progress. This is, after all, why conservative cults, such as those practiced by the Roman Catholic and especially the Orthodox Church, in the accelerated religious 'maturing' of the twenty-first century world—are recognized (by themselves and by others) as guardians of tradition that turn their eyes more towards the past than towards the future.

I would like to stress once again here that from the perspective of the described maturing process, taking ancient cultic forms seriously is the most childish thing that can be done. This is why Huizinga had no problem skipping in his analysis from the 'primitive' to the 'higher' religious systems, and to conclude, by their way of practicing the faith

[35] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 25–26.

[36] Gregory Dix, *The Shape Of The Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), 613–99; John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence and the Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper*, ed. Linden J. DeBie (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012 [1846]), 315–22.

[37] Cf. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), 34, 50, 122–30 (vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html); Neil J. Roy, 'The Church's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: A review of Sacrosanctum concilium fifty years after the close of Vatican Council II', *The Newman Rambler* 11.1 (Winter 2014): 33–45.

and consecrating life, that there is no essential reason why the qualification of 'play' should not be extended to those 'higher creeds'. The attachment of serious-mindedness and solemnity to acts that make no sense from the perspective of the worldly economy surely do not make them more but less reasonable, which, correspondingly, do not make them less but more playful and childish. This is, finally, why no less than Plato's Laws could lead Huizinga to conclude that there is always a critical relation connecting the categories of 'play' and 'holy' in the domain of religious ritual. 'Play consecrated to the Deity, the highest goal of man's endeavor—such was Plato's conception of religion. In following him we in no way abandon the holy mystery, or cease to rate it as the highest attainable expression of that which escapes logical understanding. The ritual act, or an important part of it, will always remain within the play category, but in this seeming subordination the recognition of its holiness is not lost.'[38] Or, as Eugen Fink summarized in his later study: 'in the cult perhaps the most primeval form of human play appears, and because the aspect of "non-actuality" belonging to every kind of play here signifies an elevation and intensification beyond customarily actual things.'[39]

But, if approached this way, from the perspective of the 'playworld',[40] the application of Christ's commandment to be 'converted and become as little children' to the liturgical life of the Church does not seem to bring any radical hermeneutic novelty, one could object here. I would, on the contrary, try to suggest that this kind of reading enables us to detect the novelty which, although neither conspicuous nor revolutionary is nevertheless of utmost significance. It helps us to recognize the essential aspect of the 'positive weakness' in the very core of Christian worship. Weakness of the God who kenotically leaves his supreme dwelling-place in order to dwell with human beings. Namely, when I said that the process of the 'maturing' struck Christian worship through the protestant revolutions, ending in the twentieth and twenty-first century rationalization of ecclesiastical ritual according to standards of worldly economies, this did not signify that ritual life has been deeply confronting the 'adult world' for the first time. Namely, ancient,

[38] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 27.
[39] Fink, *Play as Symbol of The World*, 143
[40] Phrase overtaken from Fink; cf. in quote referred by the note 52, for example.

pre-Christian rituals confronted the worldly economy in one specific domain: the domain of *sacrifice*. Their innocence and childishness were primevally lost, as Rene Girard convincingly shows, at the level of cultic intersection of the *sacred* and *violence*. 'There is every reason to believe that the minor catharsis of the sacrificial act is derived from that major catharsis circumscribed by collective murder'.[41] Thus, in the centre of the sacrificial act there is the mimetic behavior that replaces violence of the 'major kind' with that of the 'minor kind'. 'The original act of violence is unique and spontaneous. Ritual sacrifices, however, are multiple, endlessly repeated. All those aspects of the original act that had escaped man's control—the choice of time and place, the selection of the victim—are now premeditated and fixed by custom. The ritual process aims at removing all element of chance and seeks to extract from the original violence some technique of cathartic appeasement.'[42] Such a kind of cultic life, thus, does not oppose violence, but tries to rationally penetrate its 'economy' and put it under control. This means that what primordially blurred the innate childishness of the cultic life is the realism of the violence present in it. Much before previously described 'maturing' of the Christian worship, thus, the real violence—the blood of innocent animal (and sometimes even human) victims and the real death of the 'scapegoats'—added severity to the sacred rites and pushed them back to the 'adult world'. In other words, if we could make an intellectual experiment and make ourselves present at the times of the slayer in front of some ancient pagan or monotheistic altar, we could hardly have had playful impressions. Not because of the cruelty of the spectacle, which was not unusual for the people of those times, but because of its realism. Real lives were 'spent' in order to 'buy' attention from the deities, while the partakers were forced to take this kind of action seriously. However irrational it may appear today, this play did not detach from the worldly economy but rather penetrated it as much as possible; it was too real to be understood in terms of 'an action accomplishing itself outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life'.[43] On the other hand, Christ's Revelation, as Girard also

[41] Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 102.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Cf. note 35.

convincingly shows, put a stop to the history of the intermingling of *violence* with the *sacred*. Christ's Passion uncovers and subverts this mimetic chain of violence, which was hidden deeply in the cultic life of our civilization.

> Once the basic mechanism is revealed, the scapegoat mechanism, that expulsion of violence by violence, is rendered useless by the revelation. It is no longer of interest. The interest of the Gospels lies in the future offered mankind by this revelation, the end of Satan's mechanism. The good news is that scapegoats can no longer save men, the persecutors' accounts of their persecutions are no longer valid, and truth shines into dark places. God is not violent, the true God has nothing to do with violence, and he speaks to us not through distant intermediaries but directly. The Son he sends us is one with him. The Kingdom of God is at hand.[44]

What I would like to add, after these revealing words, is the new possibility of the contextual analysis of what Christ and his Church *placed* in the center of cultic life (instead of what was denied by the 'revelation' recognized by Girard). What Christ asks us to do is again a mimetic imitation of the sacrifice—his own sacrifice—but a *weak kind of imitation*. It is the new sacrificial act, which is deprived of the violent realism of the ancient sacrifices. One could say *a sacrifice of the sacrifice*. 'And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God ... For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.' [Hebrews 10:11–14]. And, after the abandoning of the ancient sacrificial realism, 'those who are being sanctified' and 'perfected forever' become the eagerly awaited 'sons of God' [Romans 8:19; 1 John 3:1–2], whose lives and worship do not belong to the inherited world-order anymore, but play by the new rules of the 'new heavens and a new earth' [Isaiah 65:17; Isaiah 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1]. By these overall changes in the way worship relates

[44] Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 189.

the surrounding world, finally, the place for the primordial child-like play-quality is opened in cultic life in its full capacity. Thus, final touch that is needed in order to apply all the research that has been referred so far to the actual Christian ritual life is exactly the Gospel quote from the title of this paper. Being 'converted and become as little children' is the ultimate liturgical call to play. The call to play, in which 'something that is held to be "non-actual" can be conceived as a higher, superior mode of Being', and something that 'is stronger in Being can conceal itself in the semblance of what is weaker in Being'.[45] The peculiar play in which God's Son and his sacrifice can be concealed and revealed in such ordinary things such as bread and wine. It is the call to play because it gathers those who are as weak as little children around the revelation hidden behind the weakest, the most perishable matters. Or, as the Apostle Paul says: 'God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are...' [1 Corinthians 1:27–29] Now it becomes clear why this kind of conversion is 'humbling'—because it is the kenotic decline from power towards weakness, which makes no sense from the perspective of economic and utilitarian worldly existence. It makes no profit, it brings no power-aid, it does not help us achieve a better position within the dominant world order…[46] It even cannot be used to persuade God of something—because it is not our move towards him but his move towards us. It is his own call to play, which asks no sacrifices except the very personal sacrifice of 'humbling' in order to be 'converted and become as little children'.[47] From the perspective of the worldly order, though, this kind

[45] Fink, *Play as Symbol of The World*, 145.

[46] Of course, I am speaking about the ideal image. There have always been people who can successfully profit from participating in the Eucharist, even if they do not care for Christ and Christianity. However, this possibility came about only after Constantine's reforms and the Church's own entrance into public governmental structures. After all, from those earliest times, up to the Protestant Reformation, Christians have been expressing their disagreement with this kind of abuse of the ecclesiastical life.

[47] On the other hand, it was noted that the weakening of the sacrificial mimeticism in cultic domain was followed by the overall implementation of the *Imitatio Christi mimetic* concept in numerous domains of the Christian life, and by the profound interiorization of the sacrificial strategies on personal existential levels: Jaś Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art From the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 221–43. Whether this can be directly connected with the kind of 'conversion' proposed by

of sacrifice/humbling/conversion is not inconsiderable at all, since from this perspective the ritual life of the Church is truly no more than childish play, the ministry for—as Celsus already said—'anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone childish'… It is a *conversion* that asks us to accept a God who was himself *humbled*, up to his humiliating death, and then to accept his presence in the *weakened* cultic frames, deprived of any kind of sacrificial *realism* and *persuasiveness*. Christ's call to every human to be 'converted' and 'humble himself' as a 'little child' seemingly makes sense exactly in the domain of the liturgical life. And this is, finally, the space where art can also enter our story.

III

> Art as genuine creation, and not as a representational rendering of reality, is nothing other than an attempt by man to affirm his presence in a manner free from the 'necessity' of existence. Genuine art is not simply creation on the basis of something which already exists, but tendency towards creation *ex nihilo*... What is apparent in all this is the tendency of the person to liberate itself in its self-affirmation from the 'necessity' of existence, that is, to become God. This vital point is that this tendency is linked intrinsically with the concept of the person.[48]

Although highly generalized, a truly authentic theological reading of human artistic endeavors is advanced in this short analysis written by Metropolitan John Zizioulas. Moreover, it opens a new and virtually unexplored set of possibilities towards the interpretation of arts from the ecclesiastical perspective. Namely, art itself is play *par excellence*. Referring to Huizinga is again inescapable here, whose careful phenomenological analyses demonstrate that art is one of the ultimate cultural spaces where human play-capacity is virtually fulfilled.[49] Exactly like

Christ's *childish turn* is hard to say, but this interpretative possibility should not be ignored since the conversion to the likeness of little children cannot be dissociated from the generally kenotic, self-emptying and self-sacrificial approach to anthropology, as it was thoroughly expressed in Gospels (cf. infra, especially notes 14 and 20–22).

[48] John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 42–43, note 39.

[49] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 158–72.

children's play, art has its rules, but these rules do not have to conform to any 'natural' and/or 'social' low. Art uses this world in order to create other worlds, comparable yet differing from this one. Quite similarly to *play* and *worship*, as well, *art* belongs to this world but yet is not completely of this world. And this is the place where art and cult surely meet each other: 'ritual and play are so closely connected that it would be strange indeed if we did not find the play-qualities of ritual somewhere reflected in the making and appreciation of works of art'.[50] It is exactly this play-quality that makes art and ritual genuinely inseparable. Or, to be more precise, what is playful in cultic ritual is performed by artistic means: poetry, bodily performance (dance, gestures, processions, etc.), music, painting, architecture… Moreover, ritual cannot actually be performed without artistic means. Ritual can live without one or a few of the different art forms, but it cannot live without what I would describe as *the artistic way of thinking*, or simply *artistic behavior*: liturgical prayer is never just prayer, but a poetry at the same time, while ritual gestures are never just movements of the body, but movements that are performed by predefined rules, which are—it is important to stress again—different than the principles defining our everyday utilitarian bodily movements. Actually, it seems that ritual differs from the everyday utilitarian 'discipline' exactly by its intrinsically *artistic behavior* and by the artistic expressive means engaged in its performance. This is why liturgy and arts are inseparable. This is why art is not just an addition to the liturgy but the language of the liturgy. This is why removing the artistic means of expression from liturgy means removing its own blood and soul, or simply making it mute. And this is, finally, why Christ's call to be 'converted and become as little children' pertains to art as much as it pertains to the liturgy itself. Moreover, if play is the very content of the childish powerlessness, then art could be explained as the very playfulness of the liturgical call to be 'converted' and, thus, the very content of the liturgical kenotic powerlessness. Or, to put it in the simplest manner, art is the way the liturgical call to play actualizes itself in its very playfulness.[51] At this point I will argue more

[50] Ibid., 167.

[51] In a poetic—I would even say liturgically poetic—manner, this kind of hermeneutic perspective was proposed already at the beginning of the twentieth century by Romano Guardini in the chapter 'The Playfulness of the Liturgy' in his seminal *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. 'Because the life of the liturgy is higher than that to which customary reality gives both the opportunity and

thoroughly that the means to explain why arts constitute the actions that comprise the liturgy—why arts are the very language of the liturgy—can be derived from their special capacity to answer the Christ's call to 'become as little children'.

Art produces things that are different from the surrounding reality. Moreover, art creates different realities. Different worlds. Like in a dream, art uses reality, but makes new realities out of it: realities that overcome, subvert, and refashion 'real life'. It is not necessarily ignoring 'real life', or being against it, but what makes it art is the difference. Now, let us explore the play-quality in this difference.

> The play-companions, who have been embraced by a sense-imbued interplay and whose respective roles are coordinated with each other in it, live in a communal and a communally apportioned 'playworld'. This playworld is itself something irreal, although it involves actual human beings. But it involves them precisely with regard to the characteristics of their roles, and thus as having imaginary attributes. The 'playworld' is not an actual/real situation of actual/real human beings; it has a peculiar 'illusoriness'—it is nothing actual and yet not nothing. And it also by no means exists only in the souls of the players; these players do not dream a collective dream. If they perform the life-enactment of playing in the real actuality of life, they are precisely at the same time enraptured in an irreal sphere and have therein a communal, 'intersubjectively' recognized continuity of sense depending in each case on the overall sense of the instance of play. The 'playworld' in fact has a remarkable structural similari-

form of expression, it adopts suitable forms and methods from that sphere in which alone they are to be found, that is to say, from art. It speaks measuredly and melodiously; it employs formal, rhythmic gestures; it is clothed in colors and garments foreign to everyday life; it is carried out in places and at hours which have been co-ordinated and systematized according to sublimer laws than ours. It is in the highest sense the life of a child, in which everything is picture, melody and song. Such is the wonderful fact which the liturgy demonstrates; it unites art and reality in a supernatural childhood before God. That which formerly existed in the world of unreality only, ant was rendered in art as the expression of mature human life, has here become reality. These forms are the vital expression of real and frankly supernatural life. But this has one thing in common with the play of the child and the life of art – it has no purpose, but it is full of profound meaning. It is not work, but play'. Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 43 (cf. entire chapter in ibid. 37–45).

> ty to the 'image-world'. It is similarly enclosed in itself and set off against external surroundings.[52]

What Eugen Fink asserts here seems to be the exact expression of the *childish turn* where the plastic arts and liturgy can meet through their iconic qualities. The tension between the *resemblance* and the *difference* with the world is what unites [1] *play*, [2] *liturgy*, and [3] *arts*. The capacity to create a new world, which is made of this one but at the same time essentially differs from it, is where those three activities not only fearlessly meet but radically mutually overlap. In my opinion, the final decision about which of those two worlds—the old or the new—have the stronger influence on us is the basic question of the *childish turn*. Thus, if we decide that either the world of *worship*, or the world of *arts*, or the world of *play* is what our heart ultimately strives to, we will become childish in the eyes of the world, and, one or another way, be *humbled* for this inappropriate *conversion*. If we, moreover, start believing that any of these worlds can radically influence the real world of adults, and even change it, then our beliefs will probably be even more than inappropriate and consequently ridiculed as mere foolishness or a childish delusion. (And if someone, though, happens to persuade the critical multitude of this belief, then one becomes celebrated as a saint, or an artist, or as sports star, for example, and then the human capacity to create different worlds actually shows its power and its generative importance for human culture and society.[53])

> For magical savages and for the child, play is not characterized as a sphere of non-actuality that is determined to be 'less worthy' on account of its distance from customary things and their tangible actuality. On the contrary. The 'non-actual' has here an emphatically positive character, is a mode in which something that is more powerful and ontologically stronger enters into the customary sphere of life. The non-actual is characterized as the elevated and genuine. The 'fairytale-like' and the 'wondrous' is that which has validity in the best sense. However, that does not mean that the child and the primitive do not see simply actual things, going

[52] Fink, *Play as Symbol of The World*, 112.
[53] Cf. for example: Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 12–13.

> around, so to speak, as though in a dream, 'sleepwalkers', as it were. They instead actually have a very distinctive feeling for the difference between customary things and the 'fairytale-like'. Only this difference is evaluated in a different manner—differently than as otherwise occurs in the rational culture of human beings and adults. 'Non-actuality' is no objection, no degradation. In play they feel closer to what is essential and genuine. Their play has an entirely peculiar and strange seriousness. We lack the proper concepts for it, although we still commonly enough go about with the difference between play and work, play and seriousness.[54]

And, although the higher religions ('higher creeds'), as we like to call our system of beliefs, are rationalized enough to avoid the label of primitiveness, the widespread ignorance of the contemporary world towards the cultic life—especially among the nominal Christians—tells us that it is not easy to incorporate worship in the objectives of this world. While it is considered to be irrational behavior that is trying to become rational, Christian worship will be less and less able to reveal Christ to this world. But if it was approached from the perspective of the *childish turn* and recognized through its deepest connections with the worlds of *play* and *art*, then the world of *worship* would become something much more than a sentimental cultural/religious habit from the past.

If we, thus, agree that these peculiar three worlds have something essentially important in common, then interpretative field opens in which their interconnected position in the world appears more optimistic than it would be if approached separately. In order to enter this field, a short glance should be taken at the social functioning of these three worlds: in their capacity to re-create our presence in the 'real' world. For the beginning, we should remind ourselves that both *art* and *liturgy* are crucified between their intrinsic elitism and their equally intrinsic universalism. They both make internal social divisions that they both tend, usually successfully, to overcome. After all, this is the expected consequence of their antinomical unworldly presence in the

[54] Ibid., 122.

world. I would contend here that the inner tension that rises from these innate dichotomies can be resolved exactly in the domain of the intersection of *art* and *worship* with the world of *play*. Namely, play itself, as we have seen, also makes the abruption in reality that differentiates players from non-players.[55] But on the other hand, due to its intrinsic childishness, which never allows it to achieve the seriousness that can be attached to arts and worship, play basically does not deal with the problem of elitism. Everybody who knows the basic rules of the game can take a part in it, either as a player or as an observer. And joys of the playworld are not specifically reserved for any of those groups. By their inborn mimetic and empathic capacities, as God-given tools for social interaction,[56] observers can 'attach' to play as easily and deeply as it can become viral. Moreover, the human playworld is so widely open that even little children cannot claim the ultimate right to its possession. Although children are the most profound representatives of this world—the elite of players I would say—the playworld is open to all. Radically open. 'In the end it is not at all true that it is the child who predominantly plays. Perhaps the adult plays just as much, only differently, more secretly, in a more masked manner.'[57]

After finishing their daily labor, all humans—from any social or geographic coordinate in the world—resign to their 'privacy' in order to *play*. Whether in front of their computer or TV screens, whether on sport games, on concerts, in night clubs or at the opera, people passionately spend their time and energy on events that do not make any profit. (Moreover, if they are partaking in play as professionals, then this becomes their hard labor, from which rest should be taken, which then radically loses its authentic play-qualities.[58]) Different kinds of play, especially when it comes to arts, can acquire highly elitist pre-

[55] Cf. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 12–13.

[56] Vittorio Gallese, Christian Keysers, and Giacomo Rizzolatti, 'A Unifying View of the Basis of Social Cognition', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 8.9 (September 2004): 396–403; Vassilis Sevdalis, Markus Raab, 'Empathy in sports, exercise, and the performing arts', *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 15 (2014): 173–79; Tadayoshi Koide, Sotaro Shimada, 'Cheering Enhances Inter-Brain Synchronization Between Sensorimotor Areas of Player and Observer', *Japanese Psychological Research* 60.4 (2018): 265–75.

[57] Eugen Fink, 'Oasis of Happiness: Thoughts toward an Ontology of Play', in *Play as Symbol of The World; and other writings*, trans. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 18.

[58] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 197–99; cf. Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*, 37–48.

rogatives, but the *need to play* is unquestionably democratic and unquestionably universal. Who could claim the right to say that savages listening to their fairytales, hipsters binging in front of TV screens, or intellectuals reading their fancy/edifying novels essentially differ in their *need to play*? In this need, savages, the precariat, and the rulers of this world easily meet each other—as if they were little children—even if they tend to believe that they have nothing in common.[59] If it is hard to say that we work only in order to be able to play, it is equally hard to say that we could remove play from our lives and remain human. There is no space here to deal with these dilemmas—after all, no less than Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* has successfully dealt with this—but I have to try to explain how all of this affects our subject.[60]

This incomparable universality of *play*, finally, brings a very specific element of universalism to the 'unless you are converted and become as little children' theology. We all have this kind of call deeply 'written' in ourselves and throughout our lives we actually never forgot our childish 'duties'. But if both children and adults already have the capacity to play, then why to 'become as little children'? There is only one difference that, as I have already noted, makes this kind of 'conversion' essential: which world is more important to us, the one where we are 'thrown' into by our birth or the one we re-create as 'players'? And this is where the overlapping of the notions of *play* and *art* can help our interpretation. Namely, much before the New Testament call to be 'converted and become as little children' was uttered, the (pre)eternal Trinitarian council decided, as Christians tend to interpret the biblical account on Creation, to create human being in a very specific way: 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness' [Genesis 1:26].[61] While

[59] Cf. inspiring thoughts on these subjects in: Eugen Fink, 'Play and Cult', in *Play as Symbol of The World; and other writings*, trans. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 249–50.

[60] The basic theses and conclusions of the Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* concerning the overall (even formative) importance of play for human culture sound even more radical than my formulation from the previous sentence: 'genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilisation' (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 5); 'It [civilisation] does not come from play like a babe detaching itself *from* the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it' (ibid., 173); cf. also, Huizinga's introductory debate, quoted in note 69, infra. On the relation/opposition between play and labour, in general terms, cf. ibid., 159–67; in more detail cf. Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 7–29; in biblical context, cf. Jacques Ellul, 'From the Bible to a History of Non-Work', trans. David Lovekin, *CrossCurrents* 35.1 (Spring 1985): 43–48.

[61] On the way patristic theology interpreted those verses [Genesis 1:26–27], cf. in: Andrew Louth, *Genesis 1-11. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament*, Vol. I (Mad-

during the first five days of Genesis all creation simply got their names and tasks, in the account on the creation of humans we 'hear' God describing one of his creatures for the first time. Thus, we can recognize here the kind of primordial 'conceptual metaphor' that literally created humankind as we know it—not only in the context of biblical doctrine itself but also in the context of the gradual penetration of this doctrine into the Greco-Roman civilisation, which followed the Christianization of the European continent throughout the Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The consequences of this 'speech-act' regarding human social existence and culture are truly innumerable,[62] but one general conclusion can be emphasized here: this basic theological teaching of the Bible not only gives universal value to human beings as such but also gives a special significance to their creative endeavors specifically. 'As God's *work,* creation is not essentially similar to the Creator; it is the expression of his will. But as *image,* men and women correspond to the Creator in their very essence, because in these created beings God corresponds to himself. … As God's image, men and women are his counterpart in the work of creation. The human being is the Other who resembles God (Ps. 8.5). … In a certain sense God enters into the creatures whom he has designated to be his image.'[63] On the backdrop of 'messianic traditions about the likeness to God', Moltman finally concludes this argumentative line by asserting that: 'the very creation of God's image on earth in itself implies an unheard of condescension, self-limitation and humiliation on the part of the God who is without compare'.[64] Now, if the human being is truly approached as God's 'counterpart in the work of creation', then this has enormous consequences for our position in the world generally and for the subject of this research specifically.

ison: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 27–37; Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 217–18; on the meaning of these verses in wider interpretative contexts – from Bible itself onwards, cf. in next note.

[62] For some possibilities of the basic interpretative contextualization, cf. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1939), 499–503; Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 216–25; Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 13–21; Jaroslav Pelikan, *What Has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Timaeus and Genesis in Counterpoint* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 54–59; Randall W. Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness; Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 117–76; Margaret Barker, *Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 101–7.

[63] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 77–78.

[64] Ibid., 78.

> The essential meaning of God's miraculous creation out of nothing should rest in the fact that God creates a being that is not simply his copy, but a being that possesses something uniquely of his own, something that God does not have. The message of the *creatio ex nihilo* is that God creates an absolute newness, critically augmenting the already existing. Strictly speaking, God is not a creator if in his creative act he only repeats himself, i.e., if the creature herself is incapable of bringing—creating—something of critical importance to the being, that the being did not previously possess.[65]

While, on one hand, all human artistic endeavors get deep theological grounding by this kind of approach to the 'image and likeness' theology, on the other hand it simultaneously removes the lure of exclusivity from those endeavors. 'If the artist is not a special kind of person, but each person is a special kind of artist, i.e., God's icon, then every form of our activity, no matter how "profane" it might be, is in fact an act of creation of a new world. Potentially everything could be art and every action could be a step toward a new world. Even the way in which we prepare tea for a visitor could be art, enhancement of being. Every action could be sacramental, ontological, and eschatological.'[66] If we do agree that the quoted passages have made a considerable steps in overcoming the deistic concept of God, through which theology has for centuries (unintentionally?) neglected his kenoticism in order to fortify the image of his omnipotence, then human creativity cannot be comprehended as a mere shadow of the one-and-only authentic Divine act of Creation, but as its fool-blooded re-actualization.[67] At the same time, the capacity to engage in creative play becomes the transformative power in a world that 'eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God' [Romans 8:19; cf. 1 John 3:1–2]. In other words, creativity becomes a way the human as 'image' ascends to the true 'likeness' of its Creator, as Christian patristic theologians tended to relate and mutually explain

[65] Knežević, 'Surprising God', 108; cf. also supra, in note 19; together with: Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 86–103.

[66] Knežević, 'Surprising God', 110–11.

[67] Together with the previously quoted research, cf. also: Romilo Knežević, 'Man as Priest or Poet of Creation', *Sobornost incorporating Eastern Churches Review* 33.2 (2012): 95–100; Romilo Knežević, 'On Freedom, Creativity and Hypostatic Prayer', *Philotheos* 11 (2011): 270–75.

those key biblical anthropological terms.[68] Finally, if approached and founded this ultimately theological way, human creativity becomes so inescapable and so universal that it can be compared to the inescapability and universality of the human playworld. The call to play and the call to create simultaneously become deep theological notions for understanding our life in the world—through a capacity for the 'enhancement of being'.

After all, throughout this paper, we have seen that God's most advanced task for the human being puts him somewhere between the image of God [Genesis 1:26–27] and the image of the child [Mathew 18:3–4; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17], which can be simultaneously accomplished exactly where human creativity and human playfulness meet each. Moreover, if the idea of 'conversion' to the likeness of 'little children' is reciprocally applied to the world of adult play, then it directly subverts its agonistic severity, which often blurs the playfulness of this specific playworld, and unveils its deepest creative foundations. (This kind of subversive interpretative turn finally allows us to close one of our widest hermeneutic circles, by putting the 'agonistic principle' of our civilization, together with all of its historic victories and defeats, together with the apostolic question 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven'—which was the indirect cause of this discussion—back to its intrinsic-but-unrecognized cognitive frames: into the domain of *childish play*.)[69] And if thus, finally, the universal and irresist-

[68] Louth, *Genesis 1-11*, 29–35.

[69] It might be useful here to take a look at the specific group of problems Huizinga met with in his attempt to incorporate the Greek 'agonistic principle' into his widest image of the play-culture. 'There remains, however, an extensive and very important domain which in our terminology would come under the head of playing but which is not covered in Greek either by παιδιά or ἄδυρμα: to wit, matches and contests. The whole of this sphere, so extremely important in Greek life, is expressed by the word ἀγών. We can well say that an essential part of the play-concept is concealed in the field of operation of the ἀγών. At the same time we must ask whether the Greeks were not right to make a verbal distinction between contest and play. It is true that the element of "non-seriousness", the ludic factor proper, is not as a rule explicitly expressed in the word ἀγών. Moreover, contests of every description played such an enormous part in Greek culture and in the daily life of every Greek that it might seem overbold to class so great a section of Greek civilization with "play". This indeed is the point of view taken by Professor Bolkestein in his criticism of my opinions to the contrary. He reproaches me with having "illegitimately included the Greek contests, which range from those rooted in ritual to the most trifling, in the play-category" … After enumerating a long series of agonistic activities showing how the competitive impulse dominated the whole of Greek life, my critic concludes : "All this has nothing to do with play – unless one would assert that the whole of life was play for the Greeks!"' (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 30) The most interesting part of this sophisticated discussion is Huizinga's subsequent positive answer to this rhetorical/ironical question: 'In a certain sense such indeed will be the contention of this book.' (ibid., 30–31) Now, what especially concerns us here is the

ible human need for play is interpreted through the prism of genuine human creativity, then it becomes clear that humans have not totally forgotten their genuine call to achieve the 'likeness' of their Creator and the congruent call to partake in the creation of 'new heavens and a new earth' [Isaiah 65:17; Isaiah 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1].[70] It becomes clear that—although it can be heavily blurred—people have not forgotten their need for the 'enhancement of being'. They keep it as a potential in their capacity to play but fully actualize it when they accept the call to be 'converted and become as little children' and enter the playground of worship, where the old world is being refashioned into the new one, artfully created by Christ and his playmates.

IV

Now it becomes even more clear why this new, re-created liturgical world has chosen arts to be its ultimate language of expression. We could say that arts remind us of the *childish turn* that is needed for the authentic partaking in Christian liturgical life. Nevertheless, if the

impression that, in a chapter where he deals particularly with this subject, he yet has difficulty overcoming the essential distance between the *Agonistic principle* and *childish play* (in the Greek cultural context). 'We saw how the Greeks distinguished ἀγών from παιδιά. This could be explained on etymological grounds, since in παιδιά the childish was evoked so vividly that it could hardly have been applied to the serious contests that formed the core of Hellenic social life. The word ἀγών, on the other hand, defined the contest from quite a different point of view. Its original meaning appears to have been a "gathering" (compare ἀγορά – "market-place" – to which ἀγών is related). Thus, as a term, it had nothing to do with play proper. The essential oneness of play and contest, however, still peeps through when, as we have seen, Plato uses παίγνιον for the armed ritual dances of the Kouretes … and παιδιά for sacred performances in general. That the majority of Greek contests were fought out in deadly earnest is no reason for separating the agon from play, or for denying the play-character of the former. The contest has all the formal and most of the functional features of a game.' (ibid., 48) From this perspective, it seems clear that the connection between agonistic playfulness and childish playfulness could hardly have been acknowledged by antique adult players in the earnestness of their contesting. This is, after all, why the Greek agonism could so spontaneously convert to the gladiatorial games of Rome (ibid., 71–75, 177–78) or, finally, to contemporary professionalized sportsmanship, which itself more and more resembles to the agonism of the Roman type. Similar to the ancient cultic playworld, with its bloody animal or even human sacrifices (cf. supra, especially notes 41–44), the ancient agonistic spirit had the realistic dimension which has tended until now to erase its distance from the 'real world'. On the other hand, recognition of this distance, and the subversion of sacrificial and agonistic realism by Christ's *childish turn*, enables us to put those activities to the special theological cognitive frames, from where all of their hidden and forgotten creative potential can be easily recognized and awakened.

[70] On the biblical theme of 'new heavens and a new earth' see in: Anne E. Gardner, 'The Nature of the New Heavens and New Earth in Isaiah 66:22', *Australian Biblical Review* 50 (2002): 10–27; Gale Z. Heide, 'What is New About the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3', *JETS* 40.1 (March 1997): 37–56.

childish turn was so essential for understanding the relation between *arts* and *liturgy*, then it should be expected to recognize its direct influence in actual products of ecclesiastical art. In other words, if the analysis of the playworld has helped us to find how Christ's words about being 'converted and become as little children' could directly affect the deepest cognitive intersection of arts and liturgy, now the time has come to see how the actual result of this intersection looks. For this reason, the interpretative construct built so far will be now focused on its final goal: the interpretation of ecclesiastical arts in their historical context. Will it be, after all, possible to recognize any actual influence of 'become as little children' theology, and of all that could be attached to it so far, in the domains of actual artistic expression?

In order to answer these questions, a wide historical excursus is needed. Namely, previously it was asserted—in more than one way—that genuine art is not just 'a representational rendering of reality' but something that authentically refashions this reality in a creative manner. Today it is widely accepted that even the paintings and sculptures that have primarily sought 'resemblance to nature' have not found their places in the museums on the basis of the resemblance itself but on the basis of their inner aesthetic qualities, which are far beyond the concept of the resemblance.[71] Between numerous skillful Dutch realistic painters exhibited in the Rijksmuseum of Amsterdam, for example, Rembrandt's paintings stand out primarily by the strength of their expression and the uniqueness of their artistic vision, not by the strictness of their realism. Nevertheless, the concept of 'resemblance' will be important for this discussion because it provides the firm referent point for denoting the specific process of 'maturing' in European plastic arts. Namely, art has definitely lost its innocence, and awakened from its childhood dreams when it made a concordat with sciences, and 'decided' to represent reality as such. Or, art grew up when it became a 'science' seeking to represent the surrounding reality as faithfully as possible, when it took the position of the neutral, 'objective' observer, which was granted to sciences. Of course, 'objectivity'—however phan-

[71] Widely accepted in twentieth century, this is not a novel idea; already Romanticism started with a re-evaluation of the arts from such a point of view, questioning the (hitherto unquestionable) connection between the concepts of *beauty* and *naturalism* in visual arts; Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art* (London: Phaidon, 2004), 73–81, 179–82.

tasmagoric it actually was—grants the power of persuasion and of the impression of ultimate proximity to the truth. The basic steps of this maturing include the Renaissance and Baroque introduction of the science of optics in arts, and the consequent instrumentalization of the *camera obscura* in painting, which culminated in the invention of the photography—the objective way of representing of reality, unblurred by human agency.[72] At the end of this developmental 'chain of power' of visual objectivity stands the media of motion-pictures, which becomes the most powerful means of mass control and brainwashing that human race has ever seen. And, finally, by acquiring absolute and unbeatable objectivity, by not only losing the distance from reality but becoming its active agent and modeler, what was once art could not but lose its play-quality. Thus, inside the conceptual/metaphoric frames I proposed here, one could rightly say that our visual culture definitely and ultimately 'grew up' at the end.

Prior to these last—I would not refrain from calling them apocalyptic—phases of development, while the specific 'objective'/'scientific' maturation of European plastic arts was taking place, all other artistic philosophies were considered primitive and childish, nullified and banished to the margins of cultural history. Together with this, of course, the concept of beauty itself had to grow up, and get rid of the childish motives of the ancients. 'And in this style we can see how the outline completely enclosing the figures, those eyes with their lustreless staring, the feet standing on tiptoe, the pointed hands, the absence of shadows, and the other monstrosities of those Greeks have all been abandoned, giving place to genuine gracefulness in the heads and softness in the colouring'.[73] This is how Vasari, quite famously, has

[72] Cf. Martin Kemp, 'Imitation, Optics and Photography Some Gross Hypotheses', in *Inside the Camera Obscura – Optics and Art under the Spell of the Projected Image*, ed. Wolfgang Lefèvre (Berlin: Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, 2007), 255–62; Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 43–44; Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 125–39; Don Ihde, 'Art Precedes Science: or Did the Camera Obscura Invent Modern Science?' in *Instruments in Art and Science: On the Architectonics of Cultural Boundaries in the 17th Century*, ed. Helmar Schramm, Ludger Schwarte, and Jan Lazardzig (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 383–93; Philip Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera: Uncovering the Truth behind the Masterpieces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 101–34; Georges Didi-Huberman, Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 242–60.

[73] Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 52.

been promoting the new art on the backdrop of what the next centuries will consider to be—partly due to his propaganda—the obscure and immature era of European art. The effectiveness and success of this propaganda can be seen in the words of Adolphe Napoleon Didron written no less than three centuries later, on the occasion of the publication of the famous 'Painters Manual' he discovered on Month Athos. 'The Greek painter is the slave of the theologian. His work is model for his successors, just as it is a copy of the works of his predecessors. The painter is bound by tradition as the animal is by instinct. He executes a figure as the swallow builds its nest, the bee its honeycomb. He is responsible for the execution alone, while invention and idea are the affair of his forefathers, the theologians, the Catholic Church'.[74] Of course, Didron does not write about childishness, but his presentation of 'Greek art' clearly follows well defined artistic/theoretical stereotypes and ideologies that connect creativity with resembling nature, considering every other approach to art to be, if not a 'monstrosity', then surly *not serious enough* or simply *naive*. And, if we are reminded how metaphors may affect our lives, then the zoological metaphors used here do not only reflect the ignorant attitude of this epoch towards the medieval art, but also the quality of this ignorance. After all, are not those bitter-sweet metaphors such as 'bee' or 'swallow'—describing the same sort of the restricted access to the full responsibility of the free human being—so very close to the way ancient Romans perceived their children, comparing them to 'groups who lack the ability of self-control: women, slaves, the insane, barbarians'? The creativity, the 'invention and idea', are obviously quite serious and responsible things, which inescapably have to be 'genuinely' connected to the naturalistic 'scientific' approach to images. Different approaches can be, at best, called primitive, which discards them directly to the savage cultural peripheries, while indirectly, metaphorically even to the domain of zoological phenomena. Peculiarly, in order to represent themselves as mature and grownup, and to climb up to the domain of free arts—which seemed to be unreachable in prior ages—plastic artists had to anathematize their childhood memories, up to the point of ridiculousness. That was, so to say, the price for their social victory.

[74] Translation from: Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 18.

From this point, a bit of historical irony can be recognized in the fact that almost simultaneous with the discovery of the 'Greek' artistic manual, photography enters the cultural horizon, while artists of the following decades will start realizing that their ultimate ideal of the precise imitation of nature is smashed to the ground. Machines simply took their job from their hands. And, not only are machines more 'objective' than humans ever could be, but, consequently, their appearance radically inflated the value of the very concept of objectivity in the domain of visual arts. Centuries of refining the artistic skills required to imitate the 'real world' are deemed to be irreparably worthless. This is why an extreme artistic revolution was necessary, and this is how the plastic arts entered the times of modernistic euphoria. And in this a peculiar transitory moment, art was enabled to rediscover and reactivate its youth, its childhood dreams and memories, or, more strictly, this was the moment when artists turned back to what previous centuries considered more or less primitive.[75] This is, finally, the moment when the status of Byzantine (and Russian medieval) art could be reconsidered. Not when collectors of antiquities discovered ancient icons, but when true artistic giants like, for example, Henry Matisse re-discovered them, the renewal of this painterly style could become an artistic issue.[76] And only after all of this happened could the renewal of the medieval styles in the ecclesiastical art of the Eastern Church get started. After centuries of following worldy trends, ecclesiastical culture could now freely turn back to its own youth.[77]

Finally, the 'patriarch' of the *neo-byzantine* renewal in visual arts, the incomparable Photios Kontoglou himself, discovered Byzantine art after his Paris years and discovery of postimpressionist painters in the cultural center of the world at the time.[78] If he was not freed as an artist from the dictum of naturalism—which defined his own education as it defined the plastic arts of the West and East for the centuries—he

[75] This is not the first turn 'back to the primitive' in European art history, but surely was the foremost one. Cf. supra, especially notes 84–85, 98–104; for detailed survey, cf. Gombrich, *The Preference for the primitive*, 196–268.

[76] Cf. supra, note 85.

[77] I wrote about the intrinsically modernistic roots of contemporary church art in: Тодор Митровић, '*Раскрсница континуитета*: *Црквено сликарство и доминација у култури*', *Живопис* 3 (2009): 89–111.

[78] Nikos Zias, *Photis Kontoglou; painter* (Athens: Commercial bank of Greece, 1993), 151–60.

would simply not have been able to detect the qualities of medieval art. He would have had no cognitive tools for this. The acquisition of these negative—maybe we could call them apophatic—tools is best described by artist himself. 'That which we call *realism* cannot be art in my opinion, since, as I have stated, art must move people by means other than everyday life. In other words, realism is devoid of rhythm, while each work of true art has always some kind of rhythm'.[79] Except for the innovative and somewhat mystical element of *rhythm*, we can see that Kontoglou fully acquired the achievements of artistic currents of his time. And, what is more important, he was not alone in this. The key Russian researchers of iconography from the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Trubetskoy and Florensky, together with Ouspensky, who was no less theoretician than artist, actually developed their attitudes towards the icon as an 'essentially Western European modern art theory developed in response to post-Impressionist artists such as Gauguin'.[80] And, while Evan Freeman rightly describes this phenomenon as 'a sharp departure from traditional Byzantine icon theory',[81] all that has been said so far suggests that this kind of perspective change, whether in a theoretical or an artistic field, was actually the only possible way to recognize the neglected and forgotten beauty of medieval artistic forms in the given historical context.

However, for Kontoglou himself, acquiring of this way of thinking did not come primarily from the abstract world of theory—neither from modern nor from Byzantine theory. His basic cognitive 'tool' for deserting the world of naturalistic painting can be recognized in the art of Vincent Van Gogh, whose profound influence can be seen in his numerous works painted after his first stay in Paris, where he confronted postimpressionist art.[82] After all, only the artist who was, at some point at the beginning of the twentieth century, struck by this kind of influence could have written the previously quoted words. Now, for this study is relevant to note that at those times Van Gogh himself was already recognized as the true icon of the unrecognized genius, who did not

[79] Overtaken from: Zias, *Photis Kontoglou*, 152 (note 4).

[80] Evan Freeman, 'Flesh and Spirit: Divergent Orthodox readings of the iconic body in Byzantium and the twentieth century', in *Personhood in the Byzantine Christian Tradition: Early, Medieval, and Modern Perspectives*, ed. Alexis Torrance and Symeon Paschalidis (London: Routledge, 2018), 150.

[81] Ibid., 149.

[82] Zias, *Photis Kontoglou*, 32–46, 152–54, fig. 16–22, 34–35.

follow the dominant rules of the game, and who consequently suffered total rejection by his contemporaries.[83] And rejection almost directly meant being considered uncultivated and primitive. But, what is most important, this generation of artists made an intentional 'Copernican turn' which converted their attitude, and the attitude of the following centuries, towards the notion of the *primitive* in art. Thus, Van Gogh—as Kontoglou's important role model—belonged to the wider movement that was deeply touched by the 'magic wand' of the 'preference for the primitive' idea. When he prized Symbolists as 'these primitive painters', and when his friend Gauguin described himself as 'a naive and brutal savage', this will be a part of the wider cultural movement that was recently very expressively described in a retrospective essay by Maurice Denis: 'Our art was an art of savages, of primitives. The movement of 1890 derived at the same time from extreme decadence and from a fermentation of renewal. It was the moment when the swimmer touches the solid bottom and reascends'.[84] After touching this bottom, reascending meant that the childhood of art was finally re-discovered, and that being primitive or childish in art will not be a negative but a positive kind of expressive conversion. Exactly this kind of conversion can describe the way Henry Matisse reacts to Russian icons in Moscow: 'The icon is a very interesting type of primitive painting. Nowhere have I ever seen such a wealth of colour, such purity, such immediacy of expression. It is the best thing Moscow has to offer. One should come here to learn because one should seek inspiration from the primitives. Their colours, their understanding, their simplicity – all these elements are in the primitives. The modern artist should apply them with a sense of measure so as to create a work of high artistic value.'[85] And, finally, exactly this kind of conversion—the conversion towards the artistic childhood of human civilization—allowed different kinds of deep his-

[83] Nathalie Heinich, *The Glory of Van Gogh: An Anthropology of Admiration* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–34.

[84] All quotes from: Naomi Margolis Maurer, *The Pursuit of Spiritual Wisdom: The Thought and Art of Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin* (London: Associated University Press, 1999), 13; cf. also: Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Going Native', *Art in America* 77 (July 1989): 119–29.

[85] As quoted in Yury A. Rusakov and John E. Bowlt, 'Matisse in Russia in the Autumn of 1911', *The Burlington Magazine* 117.866, Special Issue Devoted to Twentieth-Century Art (May, 1975): 284–91; at 289; cf. also, Alison Hilton, 'Matisse in Moscow', Art Journal 29.2 (Winter, 1969-1970): 166–73.

torical research from the beginning of twentieth century, among which Kontoglou's re-discovery of Byzantine art naturally fits.

After all, becoming mature and discovering the world (=power) of adults was good, natural, and appropriate, but being a child is obviously much better. Moreover, if we listen to Christ himself, then being 'converted and become as little children' is not just better, but an *incomparably better* goal. And this finally brings us to the question of status of Byzantine art in the experience of the contemporary beholder. Now we think about it as of something very serious and sublime, ascetic, and even rigid in its expression—almost as a direct projection of the sublime and superior mind of God into the pictorial forms, representing with the ultimate austerity the doctrine of his Church. Yet, ecclesiastical art is just as serious and sublime as much as the liturgy itself. It is serious and sublime for those who find a source of life in it, but for all others it is naive, primitive, irrational, uncultivated, etc., and—I will certainly insist on the metaphor that unites all of those descriptions—*childish*. This is exactly how Byzantine art was perceived for the centuries. And, I would add that from the dominant cultural perspective of those centuries this perception was not wrong. It was an exact reading of artistic forms produced by a culture that considered being converted to the Christian life like becoming 'as little children'.

V

This brings us to the ultimate question of this paper: can we speak about an innate, intrinsic element of childishness within Byzantine art? In order to answer this question, a specific historical journey will be undertaken. We have to start even before the beginnings of specifically Christian art, in Rome. Namely, the previous discussion on naturalism in plastic arts was important as the reference point that helped me to make a general contextual, metaphorical distinction between the 'maturity' and the 'childhood' of art. But, fortunately or not, this kind of maturation did not start with the Renaissance and Enlightenment movements of Europe. In the domain of visual arts, the Renaissance was a revival of something that had already existed in antiquity. Moreover, during its republican period, and in first centuries of the principate, Roman art reached such a perfect form of naturalism—especially in the

domain of the portraiture—which is fully comparable to the achievements of Renaissance and even Baroque art.[86] What happened after this is a mystery that, as far as I can understand, cannot be univocally answered in theory.

After Alois Riegl finally removed the labels of 'decay' and 'decline' from this period of art history,[87] different scholars succeeded to point out and interpret different sources of influence that could have fostered the abandonment of the perfect naturalism of Roman art in favor of highly stylized/idealized and abstract artistic forms of Late Antiquity.[88] Since a discussion on this subject would surely be beyond the scope of this paper, a simple and now almost classical description of the named stylistic change given by Hans L'Orange will suffice for our present needs. 'In the same way [as other forms of civic life] figurative art moves away from the animated forms of nature towards a firm and unflexible typology, from plastic articulation to conceptual image, from body to symbol. The concrete representation of nature is forced into a simplified, idealized image and comes to rest within this image'.[89] Although the motives for this change cannot be systematized, one thing seems to be clear: the change was not the invention of Christians.[90] On the other hand, the inability to find the dominant reason for this change stands against the fact that the change was gradually, universally, and almost uncompromisingly accepted within the entire cultural world of the Mediterranean basin. From this point of view, furthermore, it is

[86] Jaś Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100-450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 15; Jane Fejfer, *Roman Portraits in Context* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 262–70; Steven L. Tuck, *A History of Roman Art* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015)108–17; Donald Strong, *Roman Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), 44–53.

[87] Jaś Elsner, 'The Birth of Late Antiquity: Riegl and Strzygowski in 1901', Art History 25.3 (June 2002): 358–79.

[88] Cf. for example: André Grabar, *Byzantine Painting*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Cleveland, Ohio: Albert Skira, 1953), 31-46; Hans P. L'Orange, *Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965); Ernst Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making: Main lines of stylistic development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd -7th Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995 [1977]); Kurt Weitzmann, 'Introduction', in *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979, xix–xxvi; Robert Grigg, 'Relativism and Pictorial Realism', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42.4 (Summer, 1984): 397–408; at 397–399; Belting, Likeness and Presence, 129–33; Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 157–287; Jaś Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 15–23; Katherine Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons: Between Reality and Spirituality in Byzantine Art* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 47–66.

[89] L'Orange, *Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire*, 128.

[90] Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making*, 5–22.

hard to avoid the hypothesis that the pluralistic stylistic searches of Late Antiquity could have been an aspect of universal striving towards some kind of unifying factor. And this striving will obviously find fulfilment in Christianity. Now, whether this hypothesis was accepted or not, the fact is that the highly stylized, simplified, abstract, idealized artistic forms of Late Antiquity have been recognized as the perfect vessels for the expression of the Christian worldview in the domain of plastic arts. Christian civilization was, thus, the nest where those forms would be accepted, cherished, and developed for almost a millennium.

Now, let us look at these artistic forms from one specific angle. Namely, when I used phrases such as 'stylized', 'simplified', 'idealized', or 'abstract forms', I was actually using the widely accepted euphemisms that avoid directly saying something quite obvious. If we take a look at the wider historic 'sandwich', which puts the late antique and medieval artistic developments between Roman and Renaissance/Baroque naturalism, then definition of this art would certainly be: the primitive, the naïve, and the childish.[91] But, what is curious now, after considering the Roman artistic developments, is the fact that this art was not something that could not be avoided, a kind of the primitive phase in civilizational development; it was a very specific choice of the epoch. It was not a product of the necessity but the product of choice, the product of the 'preference for the primitive', as Ernst Gombrich would name it.[92] And, if this decision was yet a bit ambivalent during the multicultural times of Late Antiquity,[93] the Christian Middle Ages are certainly the cultural space where this decision was univocally implemented.

Now, to claim that Christianity, and religiosity in a more generalized sense, are by themselves more primitive modes of cultural behavior would surely be redundant today. After all, the Renaissance re-invention of artistic realism itself has been widely accepted and supported in the ecclesiastical world of Western Europe and even enhanced for the needs of the Baroque ecclesiastical contra-reformation of the Roman Catholic Church. To claim that the Middle Ages themselves are a more primitive period of culture seems to be a bit less redundant—educated

[91] About avoidance of this kind of terminology in contemporary theory, cf. infra, especially note 117.

[92] This is actually the title of his last book: Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art*, Phaidon Press Limited, London 2004.

[93] Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making*, 123–26.

people truly believed in this kind of claim for quite some time—but it is, as we have seen, a one-dimensional and ideologically defined assertion. Furthermore, a more detailed look at the history of Byzantine art, with its continual turn-backs towards the antique artistic forms—initially recognized as 'Renaissances' by a comparison to the homologous western artistic movement—shows that throughout different generations, the Byzantine artists' capacity to render forms in the antique way was never actually lost. But, we have to be fair, on the other hand, until its last phase of development, this artistic scene was never systematically interested in fully renewing such a capacity, while appearances of antique forms looked more like a random reminiscences than like an artistic trend.

This kind of innate but asymmetric ambiguity, after all, seems to be the reason why contemporary byzantinists basically abandoned the notion of *renaissance* in their research of Byzantine art.[94] 'The scholarly stalemate over the feasibility of a concept of renaissance in Byzantium has prompted alternative interpretations of the same phenomena, the most frequent of which has been to view classicism as endemic feature, a constant in Byzantine culture, emerging in different ways at different times.'[95] Robin Cormack himself obviously supports this kind of interpretation, since he concludes the quoted paragraph in following manner: 'Byzantine art was always related to but different from classical art, and in ways that varied at different periods.'[96] The only historic period where the notion of *renaissance* could be—in my opinion—meaningfully applied is the last Byzantine cultural renewal, which happened during the regime of the dynasty of Palaeologoi, and was almost simultaneous with the humanistic awakening of Western Europe.[97] All of this tells us that the Byzantine Middle Ages deliberate-

[94] Cf. Ernst Kitzinger, 'The Hellenistic heritage in Byzantine art reconsidered', *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 31 (1981): 657–75; at 658–65; Christopher Walter, 'Expression and Hellenism: A Note on Stylistic Tendencies in Byzantine Figurative Art From Spätantike to the Macedonian "Renaissance"', *Revue des Études Byzantines* 42 (1984): 265–87; Warren Treadgold, 'The Macedonian Renaissance', in *Renaissances before the Renaissance: Cultural Revivals of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Warren Treadgold (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 75–98; Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018 [2010]), 117–29; John Hanson, 'The Rise and Fall of the Macedonian Renaissance', in *A Companion to Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), 338–50.

[95] Cormack, *Byzantine Art*, 119.

[96] Ibid.

[97] On Palaeologan art/renaissance, cf. in note 119.

ly and quite systematically preferred ways of expression that would be recognized as the primitive by later epochs. After all, this kind of 'preference for the primitive' is not an unusual tendency in the course of the development of European culture. Moreover, Gombrich recognizes this specific kind of resistance towards the dominant currents of cultural 'progress' throughout numerous different 'episodes in the history of western taste and art'—from classical Greece up to twentieth century.[98]

What crucially singles out Middle Ages art within this kind of categorization is one simple fact: it could by no means be defined as an 'episode'. Moreover, it is probably the most durable period of the history of European art that can be explored as an epoch with its specific artistic style. This was probably the essential reason why Gombrich excludes the Middle Ages from his thoroughly explored series of artistic episodes of the 'preference for the primitive'. Nevertheless, he gives a somewhat different explanation for this decision. Asking himself the 'question of whether a preference for the primitive is likely to have manifested itself in this atmosphere' [of Middle Ages], he laconically proposes the negative answer (which consequently justifies skipping this subject): 'The idea of the primitive, as we have seen, implies the possibility of technical progress, and this in its turn may depend on the kind of competition we encountered in Pliny's chapters on ancient art.'[99] And, by this competition Gombrich assumes the projection of the '*agonale Prinzip*, the principle of contest in Greek civilization' into the world of plastic arts.[100] Thus, from Pliny's chapters on ancient art he concludes that 'artists were expected to compete with each other in the imitation of nature, the achievement of perfect mimesis', in a sense that 'the whole history of painting or sculpture as conceived by Pliny's sources turns out to be a chronicle of triumphs by artists over difficulties which it took generations to overcome'.[101] All of this means that Byzantine artists (together with all of their colleagues) actually lost the Greco-Roman naturalistic skills, and that the 'primitive' elements in their art could not have been due to their decision to forsake their mastery but rather a general decline in mimetic skills. In other words,

[98] This is the subtitle of his last book – cf. in note 92.
[99] Gombrich, *The Preference for the primitive*, 40.
[100] Ibid., 37.
[101] Ibid.

the 'primitiveness' of medieval art was not the 'preference' of artists, who produced it without the capacity to conceive the 'idea of the primitive' in their heads—obviously because they acted in an inherited way of artistic behavior that did not allow a free decision between the 'perfect mimesis' and the 'preference for the primitive'. At the very beginnings of the third millennium, Gombrich still seemed to be under the direct influence of (Vasari's or Didron's) 'scientific' 'spells' from the previous centuries.[102] However, what is more interesting for the present discussion is the specific category mistake that was made.

Namely, interpretative skipping from the discussion about the 'atmosphere' of the Middle Ages and the 'principle of contest in Greek civilization' to the discussion about the 'idea of the primitive' that implies the freedom of artistic choice is plausible, at best, if we discuss the art of the second half of the twentieth century, where dominant styles do not exist and any artist can be easily informed about any moment in the history of art. In ancient times, though, cultural change was so incomparably slower that artists could hardly even have thought about the freedom of the individual choice the way we think of it today. Greek classical artists, for the example, could not have abandoned their striving towards the imitation of the nature even if they had wanted to. We cannot really imagine them turning back to production of archaic sculptures, even though no less a figure than Plato openly expressed the 'preference for the primitive' in his *Laws*, by open affinity to the arts of Egypt, where, as he asserts: 'Painters and others who represented postures and that sort of thing were not allowed to make innovations or think up things different from the ancestral', so that 'for ten thousand years… the paintings and sculptures have been in no way more beautiful or more ugly than those that are being made, with the very same skill, by their craftsmen now'.[103] Comparatively, naturalism was a free choice only for the artists of the Early Renaissance, but for those coming after them it was an unavoidable convention, which surely did not leave a possibility of choice. This is why the 'preference for the

[102] Jaś Elsner would, though, probably ascribe this kind of statement to Gombrich's 'life-long and yet partly affectionate battle with the legacy of Riegl' (Elsner, 'The Birth of Late Antiquity', 358).

[103] Laws, 656e [Plato, *The Laws*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 37]; for interpretation in context of the 'Preference for the primitive' motivation, cf. Gombrich, *The Preference for the primitive*, 11–15.

primitive' expressed by the Romantic or by Pre-Raphaelite painters, for example—although it was based on a quite conscious artistic interest in the Middle Ages or even a striving to uncover 'the language of a pure childlike spirit' in arts—by no means assumed the abandonment of the dominant and unquestionable convention of naturalistic/mimetic academism.[104] Finally, if the rule of this convention was not so strong, then we would never see the dramatic and radical modernistic revolution that was needed in order to break it. And, finally, after the revolution had passed, naturalistic art was for decades considered to be so redundant that drawing and painting by model would probably have been totally expelled from educational curriculums if the second half of the twentieth century had not turned out to be so progressive in its multiculturalism and so adverse to revolutionary zeal. So, ought we, after all, to say that students trained in the Bauhaus tradition or in some postmodern art academy with 'future oriented' curricula[105] on the one hand, and Tizian, Velasques, or Van Dike on the other hand, were all not able to choose their dominant artistic style consciously?

This is, of course, a two-sided rhetorical question, posed only for the sake of re-examining medieval art from the perspective of the 'preference for the primitive'. Namely, the choices of artists are always conscious because everyone has a choice to be free, brave, strong, or stubborn and to resist the dominant trends of his/her epoch. On the other hand, nevertheless, this kind of resistance is by no means easy. Quite often, it is actually impossible, and the farther we go to the past, the weaker this possibility becomes. What makes personal resistance weak is what makes the dominant trend strong: the unquestioned acceptance of the individual artist is the prerequisite for the existence of the style of the epoch. Thus, when we are trying to define the currents and the styles of the periods, inner feelings and individual decisions of particular artists simply are not the subject of the discussion (which is, in my opinion, Gombrich's *category error*). What counts is exactly what

[104] Gombrich, *The Preference for the primitive*, 73–144; cf. also: Theresa Marché, 'Swimming in the Invisible Sea: Children, Artists, and Art Education Reform', *Visual Arts Research* 27.2 (2001): 40–46; at 42.

[105] Cf. for example: Jeffrey Saletnik, 'Pedagogic Objects: Josef Albers, Greenbergian Modernism, and the Bauhaus in America', in *Bauhaus Construct: Fashioning Identity, Discourse and Modernism*, ed. Jeffrey Saletnik and Robin Schuldenfrei (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 83–102; Dennis Atkinson, 'What Is Art Education, What Might It Become?' in *What Is Art Education? After Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Jan Jagodzinski (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 143–60.

is not a conscious decision of a particular artist but common artistic behavior imposed by the 'spirit of the time'. Now, whether we tend to mystify this commonness or to explicitly theoretically formalize it—as Riegl did by introducing the notion of *Kunstwollen* (artistic will)[106]—there is no reason to doubt that the artistic style of the epoch is a collective, interpersonal phenomenon that can be discussed exactly because it restricted the free will of the artists of the period. In other words, it is simply the artistic language of the epoch/culture, which, like any language, is not 'invented' for the sake of our individual needs but is rather a very strict and conservative set of conventions that enables communication in its cultural domain.[107] From the perspective of these cultural forces, no artist is allowed to leave the predefined stylistic frames, except in revolutionary moments, when a few of them dare to make changes that will become the new canon for the next generations. Nonetheless, these are a statistical minority that is not more worthy than others who followed the dominant trends. From this perspective, finally, the majority of artists do resemble Didron's bees and swallows, which do not resist the tasks defined by the 'spirit of the times' and do not make a 'great decisions'. But, in spite of this, the great stylistic decisions/changes are somehow made after all, with or without the presence of particular artists who could be recognized as the revolutionaries. Moreover, great artistic/stylistic decisions and changes also happened in the distant past—which is in our focus at the moment—when the revolutionary spirit was, if not nonexistent, then surely not recognized and functionalized. These decisions and changes can be researched only as the collective tendencies that define the style of the epoch. And only once this common stylistic ground is theoretically extracted and interpreted can we fruitfully make comparisons between the trends of different epochs.

On the basis of these conclusions, it can now be contended that although the epoch of the Middle Ages determined its artistic style primarily on a communitarian basis, this does not indicate this was less decisive and purposeful. Accordingly, the impression that individual

[106] Elsner, 'The Birth of Late Antiquity', 361–63; Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 148–53.

[107] Cf. Todor Mitrović, 'Canon: Time for a Paradigm Shift', *Orthodox Arts Journal* (June and July 2020) [orthodoxartsjournal.org/canon-time-for-a-paradigm-shift].

artists had no possibility to make other kind of choices does not make this decision unthinkable and less relevant. Moreover, such a wide and long-lasting acceptance of common stylistic decisions suggests that some strong social force defined the 'spirit of the times', continually fostering the same kind of artistic conventions. It is very important to note that these decisions/conventions were so universal and so long-lasting that—although the remnants of Hellenistic (classicizing) and Roman (veristic) naturalism were not absolutely erased from the visual/artistic horizon of Byzantine culture[108]—the divergence between icons and reality (and realistic painting) actually was not noticeable for Byzantine beholders. As it is well known, Byzantines considered their images to be lifelike and to perfectly resemble their prototypes, almost the way we consider photographs to resemble their models today. For them, icons were not only lifelike but, moreover, capable of triggering an intensively emphatic emotional response, quite different from the way Byzantine art is perceived today.[109] As much as it has puzzled contemporary interpreters,[110] this paradox might be helpful regarding our subject. Namely, 'Byzantine perception of art seems' as Leslie Brubaker suggests, 'increasingly an emotional response, based not on what is seen, but what is imagined.'[111] If this interpretation is additionally

[108] Cf. Cyril Mango, 'Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963): 53–75; Kitzinger, 'The Hellenistic heritage in Byzantine art reconsidered', 667–72; Liz James, '"Pray Not to Fall into Temptation and Be on Your Guard": Pagan Statues in Christian Constantinople', *Gesta* 35.1 (1996): 12–20; Stratis Papaioannou, 'Animate Statues: Aesthetics and Movement', in *Reading Michael Psellos*, ed. Charles Barber and David Jenkins (Leiden: Brill, Boston 2006), 96–97; Ine Jacobs, 'A Time for Prayer and a Time for Pleasure. Christianity's Struggle with the Secular World', in *Religion and Competition in Antiquity*, ed. David Engels and Peter Van Nuffelen (Bruxelles: Editions Latomus, 2014), 196–213; Katherine Marsengill, 'The Christian Reception of Sculpture in Late Antiquity and the Historical Reception of Late Antique Christian Sculpture', *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 1.1 (2014): 67–101.

[109] Cf. Mango, *Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder*, 65–67; Henry Maguire, 'Truth and Convention in Byzantine Descriptions of Works of Art', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 28 (1974): 113–40; at 130–34; Gilbert Dagron, 'Holy Images and Likeness', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991): 23–33; at 23–28; Henry Maguire, *The Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and their Images in Byzantium* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 5–15; Liz James and Ruth Webb, '"To Understand the Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places": Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium', *Art History* 14.1 (1991): 1–17; Robert S. Nelson, 'To Say and to See: Ekphrasis and Vision in Byzantium', in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143–68; Robert F. Taft, S.J, *Through Their Own Eyes: Liturgy as the Byzantines Saw It* (Berkeley, CA: InterOrthodox Press, 2006), 145–48; Anthony Cutler, 'Makers and Users', in *A Companion to Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), 301–12; at 307–12; Freeman, 'Flesh and Spirit', 138–42.

[110] Robert Grigg, 'Byzantine Credulity as an Impediment to Antiquarianism', Gesta 26.1 (1987): 3–9; cf. also, bibliography from the previous note.

[111] Leslie Brubaker, 'Perception and conception: art, theory and culture in ninth-century

explained by Brubaker's note that, for Byzantines, imagination was 'the ability to transmit a resemblance, to comprehend the prototype behind the image, to see more than is present',[112] then we can add another interpretation to the body of the research dealing with this subject as we look at its relationship with the notion of the *childish turn*.

There seemingly existed a strong, irresistible, and persistent collective agreement concerning Byzantine art forms to the point that the reality depicted by those forms became ontologically stronger than the surrounding 'worldly' reality itself. This is why the motive of 'living icon' becomes so essential for understanding of the cognitive intersections between Byzantine imagery and imagination: the resemblance of the living people to the images, their acting like the images and being perceived as images, was comprehended as the consequence-and-sign of their dwelling in the uplifted/consecrated domains of sanctity—from Late Antiquity up to the late Middle Ages.[113] It is not, thus, that Byzantines could not see the difference between their images and reality—the difference that was, after all, very strictly defined after iconoclasm[114]—but that they comprehended/resolved this gnoseological distance in different ways than naturalistic artistic culture did. Since art was believed to convey information from the biblical and ecclesiastical past, and even from the eschatological future, often miraculously transmitting likenesses of the saintly persons up to the actual beholders, then the goal was not to adjust art to life but to adjust life to

Byzantium', *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 5.1 (1989): 19–32; at 25.

[112] Ibid., 26.

[113] Cf. James A. Francis, 'Living Icons: Tracing a Motif in Verbal and Visual Representation from the Second to Fourth Centuries C.E.', *American Journal of Philology* 124.4 (Winter 2003): 575–600; Slobodan Ćurčić, '"Living Icons" in Byzantine Churches: Image and Practice in Eastern Christianity', in *Spatial Icons: Performativity in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. Alexei Lidov (Moscow: Indrik, 2011), 192–212; Katherine Marsengill, 'The influence of icons on the perception of living holy persons', in *Perceptions of the Body and Sacred Space in Late Antiquity and Byzantium*, ed. Jelena Bogdanović (London: Routledge, 2018), 87–103; Тодор Митровић, '*Од иконизације тела до наликовања Христу*: *траговима процеса децентрализације иконичког поретка* у *периоду касне антике*', *Култура* 167 (Београд 2020): [in print].

[114] About the fact that Byzantines have been well aware of the restrictions of the visual representational media, cf. Charles Barber, 'From Transformation to Desire: Art and Worship after Byzantine Iconoclasm', *The Art Bulletin* 75.1 (1993): 7–16; Roland Betancourt, *Sight, Touch, and Imagination in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 199–242. About the specific theological definition of semiotic distance between image and its prototype, advanced by defenders of icons during the iconoclasm, cf. in: Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 115–23; Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 83–92.

art.[115] More precisely, from one side, the way reality should be perceived was informed by described pictorial conventions, while, from another side, the universal recognition of these conventional art forms was the platform for the activation of imaginative powers that engaged with elements from real life for the enlivening and intensifying of the reality presented by the images. Approached from a formal/stylistic perspective, thus, the observer was not primarily invited to passively compare the image with the 'real world', but to actively enter the creation of the world of the new kind, proposed by these images.

The way the liturgy was a mimetic representation of the sacrifice, icons have been created to be a mimetic representation of reality: nature and history. The way liturgical sacrifice essentially depends on the active presence of participants, without whom the event cannot be enlivened and the sacrifice cannot become a reality, liturgical art also essentially depends on presence of those same participants/beholders, who actively take part in the enlivening of the forms proposed by the artists, together creating the new world inside this specific community. Now, does this not, finally, bring us back to the terrain of play? Play: weak in its persuasiveness but with the dazzling power to create a new world out of the given one. Is it not now possible to say that Byzantines perceived reality through the prism of their liturgical play, which consisted of rituals and images? To say that, through the centuries of active, creative living in this playworld, their image of reality was redefined by the playworld itself? Is it not true that for dedicated players play becomes ontologically higher than reality? If we are reminded once again that the most dedicated players are surely little children themselves, and that 'in the small child, playing is manifestly the pure enactment of existence',[116] does this not finally bring us back to the *childish turn*? And, if we agree, after all, that epochs had their inner strivings/trends/spirits, which influenced artistic styles in a manner that can be compared and discussed, is it not then possible to recognize the direct influence of the *childish turn* on Byzantine artistic style? Thus, if we do agree that styles do have their inner strivings and identities, then we can finally try to answer questions raised by the comparative stylistic perspective, which

[115] Dagron, 'Holy Images and Likeness', 28–33; Grigg, 'Byzantine Credulity as an Impediment to Antiquarianism', 5–7; Grigg, 'Relativism and Pictorial Realism', 403–404.

[116] Fink, *Play as Symbol of The World*, 37.

finds Byzantine artistic style in the peculiar historic 'sandwich' between Roman and (post-)renaissance artistic naturalisms.

While we cannot, of course, even try to guess how Greek or Roman artists of the classical periods would think about Byzantine art, we have seen that the post-medieval artistic scene treated medieval art as primitive. And, at those times, this was surely a derogatory, but later on, as we have also seen, this kind of categorization became a compliment. Nevertheless, although in artistic world of the early twentieth century the primitivistic designations acquired a positive connotation, scientists of the twentieth century were less expressive in their discussions on Byzantine art. The reason for this kind of expressive reserve is, of course, very simple. Terms like *barbarian*, *primitive*, *naïve*, or *childish* had negative connotations for centuries. These and similar terms were used to discredit different artistic endeavors and gained a positive connotation only during (and after) the modernistic revolution previously described. But the curse of negativity actually never left these linguistic forms, so art historians who were trying to do scholarly justice to the periods of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages tried to avoid this kind of burden.[117] And, whether we liked it or not, we yet live in a society which is molded by outdated rationalistic ideologies, where division of cultures to high and low ones, or advanced and primitive ones, still functions—at least on popular and political levels. In such circumstances, furthermore, neither scientific nor ecclesiastical life could have been spared of these deeply grounded prejudices. Designating Byzantine art as primitive or naïve today would surely at least cause offence to its admirers, if not hatred, rejection, or anathematizing, although the Church itself deemed it to be primitive until less than a century ago. As we have seen, during the twentieth century the Church widely accepted the attitudes of contemporary art history/theory and contemporary artists—that Byzantine art should not be underestimated as naive and primitive. It was not practicing the skills of the naturalistic painting, because it was deeply involved in practicing different kinds of artistic skills, which are far from being underestimated today. These skills conveyed the religious sublimity and very specific

[117] Beginning already with Riegl; cf. notes 87–89, and 106.

kind of serious-mindedness that make this art so specific in European civilizational development.

Thus, for the sake of convenience—either the scholarly or ecclesiastical—I will try to escape use of the 'heavy' words such as *naive* and *primitive* here. Nevertheless, instead of the vagueness of the 'preference for the primitive', I will propose a congruent yet innovative interpretative tool, based on the importance of the idea of the *childish turn* in ecclesiastical arts and on the proposition that it is one of the essential points of intersection between arts and worship in ecclesiastical life. Namely, as we have already seen, the development and ornamentation of the liturgy did not made it less childish from the perspective of 'this world'. However spectacular the liturgy can be, it is still essentially 'to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness', and its enrichment and ornamentation do not change but even enhance this—the weak presence of God who resigned his power in order to be a weak human among weak humans.[118] And, I would like to stress here again, a better metaphor than the 'conversion' to 'little children' for this kind of essential weakness could hardly be found. Now, when we apply this kind of logic to ecclesiastical art and its style, we can see the high level of congruency in the domain of historical developments. Namely, as I have already noted, Byzantine art deliberately and decisively did not develop the skills of naturalistic painting because it was deeply involved in practicing different artistic skills, which were appropriate for its intrinsic religious needs. But similar to the liturgy itself, adding the new, highly advanced skills to the basis that was deeply struck by the idea of the *childish turn* could never make it less, but even more childish. However skilful those artists were, their art could never become persuasive in the manner of Renaissance or Baroque art. More precisely, its persuasiveness was of the conventional kind, and functioned quite similarly to the persuasiveness of the children's play. It needed the active participation of the beholder, who accepted the specific 'rules of the game', different than the laws of nature (and society). But with this kind of persuasiveness, it could never essentially become scientifically neutral art, mature in its power and persuasive regardless of the way the beholder

[118] Use of the motive of *weakness* in positive terms here is, of course, partly inspired by writings of Gianni Vattimo, especially those from the religious phase, opened by: Gianni Vattimo, *Belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999 [1996]).

relates with it. And this is why, although it occasionally wavered towards the antique style of the Greco-Roman period, Byzantine art could never truly turn back to the naturalistic ideological point, as it occurred in Renaissance Europe. Even during the Palaeologan period, when the influence of antique humanism was strong and the presence of Greco-Roman artistic forms was obvious, arbitrariness and high tendency toward the stylization was never abandoned. Or, to be more precise, Palaeologan art reactivated classical/antique art styles—quite ingeniously I would say—in a manner that basically excluded their naturalistic aspects.[119] Among other reasons for this peculiar artistic phenomenon, I want to emphasize that, even in reaching its most classicized stylistic forms, Byzantine art persistently perpetuated the possibility of its reading from the perspective of the *childish turn*.

VI

In a conclusion, thus, I would like to suggest that the essential influence of the *childish turn* can be detected in Byzantine art through-

[119] On Palaeologan art/style, cf. in: Виктор Н. Лазарев, *История византийской живописи* (Москва: Искусство, 1986 [1947]), 156–88; Andre Grabar, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire: Byzantine Art in the Middle Ages* (New York: Greystone Press, 1967), 193–203; Војислав Ј. Ђурић, Византијске фреске у Југославији (Београд: Издавачки завод Југославија, 1974), 46–54; Andre Grabar, 'The Artistic Climate in Byzantium During the Palaeologan Period', in *The Kariye Djami, Vol. 4; Studies in the Art of the Kariye Djami and its Intellectual Background*, ed. Paul Atkins Underwood and Otto Demus (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 3–16; Oto Demus, 'The Style of the Kariye Djami and its Place in the Development of Palaeologan Art', in *The Kariye Djami, Vol. 4; Studies in the Art of the Kariye Djami and its Intellectual Background*, ed. Paul Atkins Underwood and Otto Demus (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 127–56; Светозар Радојчић, '*Постанак сликарства ренесансе Палеолога*', in Светозар Радојчић, *Узори и дела старих српских уметника* (Београд: Српска књижевна задруга, 1975), 125–34; Doula Mouriki, 'Stylistic Trends in Monumental Painting of Greece at the Beginning of the Fourteenth Century', in *Византијска уметност почетком XIV века. Научни скуп у Грачаници 1973*, ed. Сретен Петковић (Београд: Филозофски факултет – Одељење за историју уметности, 1978), 58–65; John Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine art* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 302–43; Ihor Ševčenko, 'The Palaeologan Renaissance', in *Renaissances Before the Renaissance: Cultural Revivals of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Warren T. Treadgold (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 144–71; Вера Д. Лихачева, 'Изобразительное искусство Византии в эпоху Палеологов', in *Культура Византии XIII – первая половина XV в.*, ed. Г. Г. Литаврин (Москва: Наука, 1991), 447–83; Thomas F. Mathews, *Byzantium: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 151–63; Cormack, *Byzantine Art*, 184–99; Charles Bayet, *Byzantine Art* (New York: Parkstone International, 2014), 169–89; Annemarie Weyl Carr, 'Images: Expressions of Faith and Power', in *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*, ed. Helen C. Evans (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 143–52; Владимир Д. Сарабьянов and Энгелина С. Смирнова, История древнерусской живописи (Москва: Издательство Православного Свято-Тихоновского гуманитарного университета, 2007), 255–59.

out its entire history. While Christ's call to be 'converted and become as little children' has influenced the structuring of the Christian worldview in an incomparably wise and rich way, it turned out to be especially meaningful and influential when it comes to the structuring of medieval Christian art. We do not notice this influence today simply because we are used to forms of ecclesiastical art up to the point that we cannot take a distanced look and see it as if for the first time. 'The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes.) The real foundations of their inquiry do not strike people at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck them'.[120] But when one tries to take a critical distance by observing Byzantine stylistic forms in their widest historical context, then the influence of the *childish turn* in ecclesiastical art becomes quite obvious. The analysis of this specific creative preference in different periods of the development of Byzantine art is beyond of the scope of this research. Its basic goal was simply to demonstrate the presence of this influence and to stress its importance for further research in the domain of ecclesiastical art, whether in its historical or in its contemporary—theoretical and practical—contexts. Throughout the centuries of reading of the New Testament, the words that have been so frequently cited here made a quiet impact—in the sense of the conceptual metaphor—on late-antique and the specifically Byzantine pictorial stylization, and on the formation of what can today be recognized as ecclesiastical arts. This is why an essential element of childishness can be recognized more or less instantly in any of the phases of stylistic development of this artistic culture only if we remove the burden of negativity from the notion of 'childishness' and try to approach it through Christ's words.

[120] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), 56e. Maybe this specific feature of human cognition can, in addition, explain why Orthodox theologians have not been interested in researching the influence of the notion of *play* in ecclesiastical life, as their colleagues from Western Europe did (especially theologians with the Protestant backgrounds; cf. in notes 30–33). Namely, while the 'western', 'progressive', 'individualistic' world image of *Homo Faber* has radically overshadowed the image of *Homo Ludens*, being concordantly followed by rationalization and utilization of faith and worship, *play* becomes less and less intrinsic to human beings and, thus, more and more noticeable as a subject of inquiry. On the other hand, maybe we could say that in 'eastern', 'undeveloped', 'collectivistic' (Christian) societies, *play* remained so intrinsic and familiar to human behavior in general, and to ecclesiastical life specifically, that it can be categorized as the 'real foundation of their inquiry', which pass unnoticed by theologians since—'because it is always before one's eyes'—it 'do(es) not strike people at all'.

After all, pictorial stylization is always a tendency towards the abstraction and idealization of artistic forms, which distances these very forms from reality and the artistic methods used for their rendering from naturalistic objectivism. This kind of effort can always be interpreted from its childish dimension: the dimension of the play. When Fink says that the 'playworld' has a considerable structural similarity to the 'image-world' in the way that 'it is similarly enclosed in itself and set off against external surroundings',[121] this rests precisely on the notion of the 'non-actuality' that connects them.[122] Being of this world and at the same time able to create its own, non-actual world is the essential structural parallel between the art and play. And this kind of parallel can be seen in artistic expression exactly through the process of pictorial stylization/abstraction/idealization. The creative tension between actual and non-actual worlds brings the cognitive stringency that is playful in art and artful in play and can uplift all human endeavors above the dimension of utilitarian existence. And this is, after all, why stylization was always so important for Byzantine art. It is the exact way visual arts detach from reality and attach the aspect of playfulness to the final outcome. It is the way art, more or less efficiently, changes this world into a different one, which can exist only among us humans. Moreover, it is the way art re-actualizes and transforms this world in a manner that includes the beholders in the very transformation, as every play includes players in its own world-transformation. As in play, this same-but-new pictorial world can exist only among humans who accept the rules of the game that makes it. Artists are important for defining those rules, but the world of this play cannot exist without beholders who openly enter the game—beholders who recognize the forms of the new world and read them as an artistic language. We could say that this artistic language opens the specific perspective of 'non-actuality' or 'non-factuality', which was wisely used by Byzantine artists to make beholders recognize and internalize the possibility of the transfigured existence of this world, and to propel them into 'already-but-not-yet' eschatological stringency.

[121] Fink, *Play as Symbol of The World*, 112.

[122] Cf. infra, notes 39, 45, 52, 54; and, in more detail: Fink, *Play as Symbol of The World*, 106–24.

And all of this works not because anyone is positive about the correctness and exactitude of pictorial representation but, on the contrary, because the difference is what all of us need. We need to be active and creative players who help God to make the new world out of this one, with better rules and better games to play. We need a world that is free of pain and death, and we all remember that little children, while they are playing, are truly living in such a world.[123] And this is how the image of *little children* and the image of their *play* can become the utmost image of the *Kingdom of God*, which could be applied to worship and art simultaneously. Finally, this very specific kind of solemnity is what Christian art and worship keep in its essence—the solemnity of the event where God becomes human and enters into the communion with his weakest brothers and sisters in order to 'create new heavens and a new earth' with them [Revelation 21:1]. From this perspective there is every reason to say that the Byzantine art, in its deepest foundation, was heavily struck by the *childish turn*, and this is one of the keys to understanding why it was so successful in its attempt to transform the ecclesiastical space to 'an earthly heaven in which super-celestial God dwells and walks about'.[124]

At the end, I would like to stress that all that has been said here does not diminish the solemnity and sacredness out of ecclesiastical art and worship, nor does it downplay its importance for the Church. On the contrary, for those who live the ecclesiastical life, neither the liturgy nor liturgical arts can be anything but the solemn and sacred because all of this belongs to the sphere of the Divine presence in the Church. Nevertheless, this does not oppose the idea that the solemnity and sacredness of ecclesiastical life can be approached from the perspective of the *childish turn*. All that has been said here, moreover, suggests that the solemnity, sacredness, sublimity, and the general above-worldly ambience of genuinely Christian art and worship are essentially connected with the mystery of Christ's commandment to be 'converted and become as little children'. Of course, this also does not mean

[123] 'In other words, in joyful play it appears as if one were stepping not only from one chronology into another, but from time into eternity. Even as one remains conscious of the poignant reality of that other, "serious" time in which one is moving toward death, one apprehends joy as being, in some barely conceivable way, a joy forever. Joyful play appears to suspend, or bracket, the reality of our "living towards death" (as Heidegger aptly described our "serious" condition)'. Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1970), 58–59.

[124] St Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine* Liturgy, trans. Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 57.

that the *childish turn* can be proclaimed to be the most important aspect of church life, liturgy, or art. However, this kind of approach to the church art, and church life in general, is important exactly because it is posited beyond the divisions that decide about *the essential* and *the secondary*. The *childish turn* belongs to the aspects of the Gospel teaching that turn these value-scales upside-down, teaching us to leave the battlefields and enter the play, which is solemn and sacred exactly due to its intrinsic loss of power and due to its innate openness for all of our powerlessness, in all of its weakness and all of its creativity. And this kind of Divine play starts at the very moment that liturgy and art meet, unlocking the unique space of freedom where, among us humans, 'super-celestial God dwells and walks about'.