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Between Early-Christian Architectural Form and Postminimalism

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Abstract. We are currently observing a growing interest in the early Christian writings of hermits, the great eulogists of Christ. In modern religious architecture the manifestation of this interest is a return to the simple forms of early Christian temples. The problem, however, is the quality of this architecture and how it is received by the public. New temples, minimalist in form, so eagerly promoted in architectural professional journals, which are mainly to the liking of critics and architects, are rejected by the faithful. Could the reason for this be the fact that emptiness is excessively exhibited in their interiors? Emptiness is a certain type of synonym for nothingness, and nothingness remains in contradiction with the main message of Christianity. Contrary to the almost unchanged canon of the orthodox temple, the architecture of Catholic churches sees strong protestant influence. In extreme cases this leads to a sort of elimination of decorative forms which have traditionally been present in Catholic churches. The postminimalism that appears in religious architecture refrains from completely contesting interior decoration. We are currently seeing a return to decorative forms, techniques like the fresco or the mosaic, which are treated architecturally, analogously to how they were treated in the beginnings of Christianity. Simplicity, however, should not be mistaken for simple-mindedness, which is why the demand for good Christian architecture and religious art is ceaselessly rising. The art of religious architecture, however, is based on the appropriateness of the architectural form in relation to the content that it expresses. The form of a church that is mistaken with the form of a discotheque should raise an eyebrow, especially that of its author, even when said author is a star of architecture.

1. Introduction

What can contemporary religious architecture and the contemporary Church¹ be in a postmodern world, in which Christian temples or churches are being lawfully demolished in some countries? However, it sometimes happens that new churches or temples are being built. Nevertheless, from the point of view of art, and especially architecture, the style in which they are being built constitutes somewhat of a problem. Postminimalism, as this can probably be the appropriate name for the style that is currently dominant in our time in the arts (as far as minimalism² can be considered a style or a manner), in which

¹ Napiórkowski A. *Współczesny Kościół i ponowoczesny świat*, publ. UP JP II, Kraków 2015, p. 272

² There is no unambiguous definition of minimalism, nor has a precise date of its beginning been established. One of the first places in which minimalism had manifested itself as a style in the arts and in architecture was the New York MOMA, where an exhibition held in 1976 initiated the use of this term in architecture, cf: Stelmach B. *Architektura minimalistyczna. Wybrane aspekty*. Technical Transactions, p.414



we can observe a specific type of oversaturation with the ostentatious preference for minimalism by the majority of architects, who are being commissioned to design a church or temple. Minimalism manifested itself in New York, not in Europe, with some considering I.M. Pei³ and his J.F. Kennedy Library in Massachusetts as the precursor of this current in architecture, while others consider John Pawson, whose trappist monastery of Our Lady in Nový Dvůr in the Czech Republic, which is considered to be one of the most well designed and built religious spaces, to be the same⁴. To be more precise, the fascination with this style among the wider architectural community, including architects who design churches or temples, began with the construction of the Church of Light by Tadao Ando. However, the greatest problem is the fact that ordinary faithful completely reject minimalism as a style in religious architecture, which, as it would appear, seems to be praised solely by the architects themselves, in addition to irreligious aesthetes. By rejecting the cold and emptiness that is so typical of minimalist religious interiors, which are not present in Orthodox churches⁵ and historical Catholic temples⁶, the faithful turn to painters or mosaic-making workshops⁷ in order to have someone decorate the interiors of these temples. Even in protestant temples, despite a lack of rich ornamentation, we can find some elements of warmth, which emanates from timber or clay, which is being used in contemporary built projects⁸. The slogan *"we do not want to pray inside concrete"*⁹, which was found on the Internet - appears to reflect the mood of ordinary people who do not accept the new churches because their architectural forms do not refer to traditional religious aesthetics, nor are they beautiful, instead being concrete and repulsive, sometimes provoking one to utter a statement that *"for some reason, the average Polish church is dark, folksy and resembles a chicken from the outside"*¹⁰. Is it really that bad?

2. A return to the source - the home church

From among differing views on how the first Christian churches actually looked, the dominant one is that initially, at least until the Church could exit the catacombs, the first temples had been the houses of the first Christians, in which they performed the Eucharist using everyday items¹¹. One of the first meeting places of Christians was the house of St. Peter in Capernaum, whose remains were discovered under the ruins of a basilica with a baptistery¹², erected on top of it in the fifth to sixth century. It is not the only house ascribed to St. Peter, as according to Israeli scholars there also existed a different house in Bethsaida¹³. Similarly, one of the first Christian churches that was discovered in Syria had previously been a residential building¹⁴ in which a polychrome was discovered - an early depiction of Mary near a water well (in accordance with one of the apocryphal gospels).

When visiting Roman catacombs, we can observe that even the walls of the oldest ones contain simple polychromes depicting Christian symbols and images of the Good Shepherd, or of the *Fractio Panis* - the Breaking of the Bread, as it can be seen in, for instance, the catacombs of St. Priscilla¹⁵. It is also proof of the fact that the first Christian communities did not negate the making of images whose subject was Christ. The tradition of the home church is alive to this day, while in countries in which Christianity

³ <https://www.archdaily.com/870059/im-peis-inspiration-a-comparison-of-masterful-architecture-with-minimalist-art>

⁴ <http://www.archsarp.pl/4755/wielka-cisza>

⁵ Kryworuczek Y. 2011, Światło w architekturze sakralnej // Czasopismo teologiczne Katedry Teologii Prowostwnej Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku. Book 23-24 (36-37). – 2011. p. 99-137

⁶ Rąbiej J. *Współczesna architektura sakralna chrześcijaństwa środowiskiem ekumenicznej jedności wiary*. Studia Oecumenica, Opole, 2013, p. 91-100

⁷ http://www.centroaletti.com/index_ing.htm

⁸ Gemeindezentrum Karlsruhe, Evangelisch Freikirchliche Baptisten, Professor Löffler

⁹ <http://synchronicity.beczmania.pl/modlitwa-w-betonie/>

¹⁰ <http://natemat.pl/77883,kosciol-san-jorge-w-pampelunie>

¹¹ ks. prof. dr hab. Marka Starowiejski [in] <https://m.deon.pl/religia/kosciol-i-swiat/z-zycia-kosciola/art,16409,problem-ubostwa-dotyczy-takze-budownictwa.html>

¹² According to testimony by Anonimus Placentis from 570.

¹³ <https://pl.aletia.org/2017/08/26/ziemia-swieta-rodzinny-dom-sw-piotra-i-sw-andrzeja-odnaleziony/>

¹⁴ <https://pl.aletia.org/2017/06/03/archeolodzy-odkryli-najstarszy-wizerunek-maryi/>

¹⁵ <http://www.catacombe.roma.it/pl/origini.php>

is not officially recognised, liturgy is performed in private houses or apartments. In a home church, when liturgy is performed in the Christian Byzantine tradition¹⁶, apart from liturgical vessels the icon becomes its inseparable element, similarly to candles; in western, Catholic tradition, a cross and candles usually appear. Szymiski¹⁷, when comparing the form of the Jewish synagogue and the Christian church, stated that in the early centuries - from the first to the third, there were practically no differences between the two types of temples.



Figure 1. Insula Sacra, Capernaum, photo author

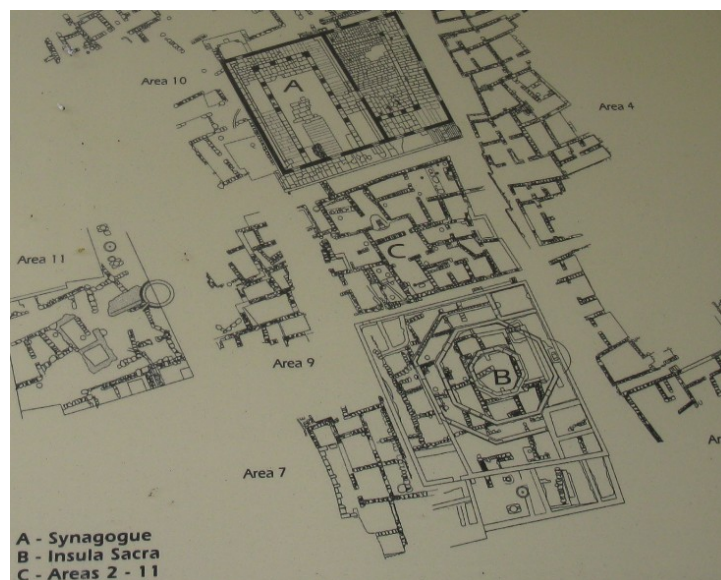


Figure 2. Insula Sacra, Capernaum, Dig site plan

¹⁶ The matter of home churches in the traditions of the East is associated with bans on open worship under repressive systems. However, apart from this exception, home liturgy is confined solely to the minor rituals, the anointing of the sick, blessing houses, blessing foodstuffs, funerals. It is recommended for rituals to take place in temples due to the communal character of worship. Bartkowiak L. CR Mozaika w kościele. 2018, MS, Roma - Kraków

¹⁷ Szymiski A. <http://www.sse.geo.uni.lodz.pl/uploads/space7/szymiski.pdf>

Table 1. Table with a comparison of the early forms of the synagogue and the Christian church by Szymski A, [8]

Synagogue		Christian church
First - third century		
1.	House of prayer for the community	The same
2.	Meeting house	The same
3.	Reading and explaining Scripture	The same
4.	Permanent orientation of the building towards Jerusalem	Permanent orientation "towards the east"
5.	The Greeks called synagogues "oratoriums" - a rectangular hall	A rectangular hall
6.	An atrium with a pool for ritual baths	An atrium with a pool for baptism

This resulted from the fact that the first Christians were primarily members of Jewish communities. It was only in the fourth century, under Greek influence, did the process of the taking over of ancient, abandoned temples and pagan buildings at sites of worship, as well as of their adaptation by Greek Christians to fulfil the function churches, take place. The process of the shaping of the form of the church - which was still similar to the form of the synagogue - went on during the subsequent centuries, however, after the division into Byzantine and Roman Christianity, the forms of Orthodox churches moved closer to a central model, presented in its prime by the Hagia Sophia, while those of the Catholic church leaned towards the elongated basilica model, derived from Roman public buildings, evolving (in its main, somewhat classical current) to the form of the basilica of St. Peter at the Vatican. Omitting the history of the development of the form of the church up to contemporary times, as tracing it is not the goal of the article, we can make a reference to the latest temple projects - mostly western churches, but also orthodox churches, primarily built in the style of minimalism. Apart from orthodox churches, whose interiors are traditionally decorated with rich polychromes, Catholic churches are usually white and without ornamentation, as this is the most popular manner of the manifestation of the minimalist style - a given church is somewhat stripped of its traditional multitude of decoration, which has melded in terms of its content, ideology and formal expression with its form over the centuries. This state initially causes surprise among the faithful, who gradually attempt to convince the author of the design to change the interior design, often using the priesthood as intermediaries, taking matters into their own hands after their attempts prove unsuccessful, or they start to use their car, selecting even faraway temples - the ones whose interiors have an ambience that is conducive to concentration and prayer and there is no fear of an interior that can bring to mind a hospital room. The manifestation of minimalism in the external architectural form of a church also leads to a misunderstanding of and a lack of acceptance for such forms in the eyes of the faithful, as it does not resemble the traditional one to which they have become accustomed to and in the shadow of which they were raised¹⁸. In extreme cases, the minimalist architectural form is rejected and the reaction of the faithful is identical as in the case of a minimalist interior - they abandon such a temple and travel to a structure they accept. Even worse was the (authentic!) case described by the parish priest of one of the churches outside of Poland, designed by a "starchitect", with the priest being forced to hang a sign saying "this is not a dance club" on the front gate every Friday, because he is unable to discourage the young people who drive there with their cars after dark, prayer being the last thing on their minds in light of their interpretation of the structure's form when seen from afar. A situation such as this means not only a failure on behalf of the architect, but also of the decision-makers and the local community whose sacrifice has obviously been wasted by the pride of the architect, who built a monument unto himself instead of a temple to God.

¹⁸ Kryworuchko J. Podhalański B. Wooden sacral architecture of Polish and Ukrainian lands as an example of authentic values from the past and contemporary time. Lisboa, 2016



Figure 3. The blending of different architectural forms of the eastern and western tradition. Fragment of the entrance to Zograf monastery. Athos, photo author

3. Is minimalism contemporary iconoclasm?

Perhaps there exists a different cause for the interiors of contemporary churches being white and devoid of ornamentation. Throughout Christian history and that of religious art there existed a movement known as iconoclasm which particularly affected the churches of the Byzantium. It was not a beautiful time and, unfortunately, it resulted in significant losses in the arts. These losses affected numerous works of art which had been damaged (many of them in an irreversible way) or completely destroyed. It was Constantine of Nakoleia who had initiated the movement against the worship of icons, while formally it was emperor Leo II who started the campaign of removing paintings from his own palace, recommending that his subjects do the same, in 726¹⁹. Icons were "fought with" until 843, when the Constantinopolitan synod reinstated the worship of icons²⁰. Despite this fact, conflicts between the proponents and enemies of the cult of images went on, despite logical interpretations that it was not the images but the Persons depicted on them who were the addressees of the prayers of the faithful. The Cistercians also preferred austere interiors without images in their churches. The next period in which paintings were deemed unnecessary in religious interiors took place after the Reformation, with similar occurrences taking place during times of the great revolutions - the Russian and French ones, when

¹⁹ <http://spm.salezjanie.pl/2012/03/ikonoklazm-spor-wokol-kultu-obrazow/> „We hereby decree (...) that the subject of worship should include not only the images of the precious and resurrecting Cross, but also venerable and holy painted images, assembled into a mosaic or fashioned in another manner, which are venerably placed in churches, on liturgical items and on robes, on walls or on wooden boards, in houses or near roads, with the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ (...), the Holy Mother of God, the venerable Angels and all the saints and saintly men. The more often do faithful look upon their representation through images, the more are they enticed to remembrance and veneration of those they were modelled after, to give them praise and bows - but not adoration, which, according to faith, is only to be given to Divine Nature (...) The worship of the image is directed at what the image was modelled after[St. Basil, On the Holy Spirit, 18, 45]”, for he who pays homage to an image, he pays it to the Being that image portrays”.

²⁰ <http://www.frona.pl/blogi/blogus-meus/sporu-o-ikony-trudne-dzieje,4674.html>

numerous paintings were destroyed. Perhaps, as Fr M. Starowieyski²¹ stated "*the latest iconoclasm was the one in the Catholic Church after Vaticanum II, which stripped the churches in the west of ornamentation*". In this manner we can attempt to search for historical conditions against the placement of images in church interiors, however, it is difficult to defend the thesis that minimalism is a modern form of iconoclasm in a documented way. Nevertheless, the consistent use of white wall surfaces devoid of ornamentation in a great number of religious structures being designed all around the world by various architects and so-called "starchitects", evidently in the spirit of minimalism, cannot be solely a matter of coincidence or fashion. Temples with forms resembling the original architectural forms of churches, but not residential buildings, can be easily spotted in professional architectural periodicals. They are being called minimalist, but there is an observable tendency to depart from the standard attributes of the style in favour of appreciating the significance of good art in interiors and a sophisticated architectural form that nevertheless does make a reference to tradition. Furthermore, the very use of environmentally friendly materials in the construction of such "bio"-buildings, like timber or clay, can result in highly positive effects in terms of aesthetics and the public reception of such well thought out designs. The Gemeindezentrum in Karlsruhe (Figure 4) can serve an example of this, as it, in a sense, draws from the conventions of the Protestant church, is ideologically ahead of its time, pointing to a beginning of a discussion with minimalism through the exposing of natural materials: timber, clay, stone and brick. This breakthrough is particularly visible when we compare the main interior and that of a small meditative chapel, which is kept strictly in the style of Protestant minimalism (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Gemeindezentrum Karlsruhe, the warm interior of a postminimalist Baptist church, with walls made out of rammed clay, design Prof. Löffler, photo author

²¹ <https://m.deon.pl/religia/kosciol-i-swiat/z-zycia-kosciola/art,16409,problem-ubostwa-dotyczy-takze-budownictwa.html>



Figure 5. Gemeindezentrum Karlsruhe, minimalist interior of a meditation chapel, design by Prof. Löffler, photo author

4. Postminimalism interiors of Catholic churches

Disaffected by minimalist emptiness and the white colours of temples, the faithful search for artists who are capable of decorating the large surfaces and areas of the interiors of their churches and have pointed their attention to early Christian motifs that appear on frescoes and especially on mosaic compositions that perfectly fill large architectural interiors. One advantage of mosaics and polychromes that is hard to deny is the fact that they can be adapted not only in terms of scale, but also the content of the imagery to the character of the liturgy performed in a given interior. The strong and dynamic message obtained through an appropriate selection of the themes of mosaics as well as the use of varied materials which do not lose their colour over time and, furthermore, appropriately used gilding that provides an immediate effect in the form of warming and making even the most architecturally poor interior seem more lively, have caused a demand for this type of ornamentation. Religious art, however, requires perfect knowledge of the subject it focuses on, which is why not every artist is capable of interpreting the message that their work is meant to convey in a manner that is theologically appropriate. In the case of irreversible techniques, such as the fresco, polychrome or mosaic, any mistake or error is difficult to repair, which is why - despite the high demand - there are so few centres in which these works gain widespread recognition. In contemporary religious art, and particularly in mosaic making, which cannot look perfectly like the ones that we know from the grand orthodox byzantine churches of Constantinople or the early Christian churches of Rome and Ravenna, more common materials are used, in addition to larger spaces being covered in comparison to their ancient counterparts (Figure 6). The twenty-first century is characterised by impatience and a pursuit of immediate effect. Nobody is currently willing to accept having to patiently wait for many years for a work - that can turn out to be imperfect - to be completed. But it is history that can, from a certain temporal perspective, judge the measurable worth of art or negate its quality. When searching for examples of good art, we do not necessarily need to travel far.



Figure 6. Contemporary mosaic, fragment, Rome, design by M. Rupnik SJ, Photo author

In Krakow there is a contemporary example of a large surface mosaic²², that decorates the interior of the John Paul II "Do not be afraid" Centre. Without discussing the architectural form (in which we can observe a certain reference to the central model of the early Christian temple), we can conclude that selecting the mosaic as an artistic technique for the interior of this church turned out to be beneficial. This can be confirmed by comparing the number of faithful who visit it with those who visit the austere interior of the Lord's Mercy Basilica in Łagiewniki, which is located nearby. The different positions seen in the statement by the Author of the design of the basilica, Professor W. Cęckiewicz, on the role of light in the interior of the basilica and his adversary, J.S. Majewski²³, who pointed out "The background of the altar: a lonely bush, constantly weathered by the winds of life" without acknowledging the "play of light" and the interior's "asceticism that induces focus", highlights that this late modernist, and still non-minimalist basilica will still be the subject of interest and discussion among arts lovers. However, the faithful themselves will choose which of the interior styles is closer to them in terms of aesthetics, while refraining from using the terms: more understandable and appealing. From here we are only a step away from discussing the folk aesthetic, which is directed by a pursuit of *"aesthetic canons that are direct in their message, with a particular fondness of pompousness, a wealth of detail and "palatial" luxury, having (also) its roots in the developed type of the church of the Counter-reformation period, which appeared to fully answer this peculiar "calling of the times", which has found its expression most fully in the basilica in Lichen"*²⁴. This constant conflict between the "religious and the profane" will probably always be a subject of discussion, however, we should remember that the place of contemplation of radical intellectuals has, since the dawn of the history of Christianity, been the hermitage.

It was, in its natural, rocky interior, devoid of mosaics. It was always decorated by the spirit of faith. In this manner, entering contemporaneity, we have returned to the start, to simplicity, yet not simple-mindedness. The question concerning whether simplicity will be the saviour of art does not have an accurate answer at the moment.

²² http://www.centroaletti.com/index_ing.htm

²³ Cf: Szyski A., op cit. p. 18-19

²⁴ Szyski A. Op.cit. p.7

5. Conclusions

It is highly probable that the remark uttered by Fr Górczyński during the seminar on the poor church can be the only appropriate conclusion to the observation of the reality of religious art that currently surrounds us: "Fr Górczyński remarked that the council reform calling for "simplification" or "noble simplicity" was a reaction to poorly understood wealth. But its unintended consequence can also be a reduction in symbols, which leads to a feeling of coldness, emptiness and of isolation as well".

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