Liturgy and the Concepts of « Text » and « Music »

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Liturgical is a complex phenomenon. It encompasses text and language, music, gesture and sets of ethnographic aspects related to the performers, to time and place, and to the very progression of the performance. Liturgy proceeds through highly ritualised forms of linking between the above-mentioned aspects. It is generally set inside or accompanied by a strong historical consciousness as well as by outspoken authority and obedience. A truly comprehensive understanding of liturgy imposes an analysis of its several components but also an integrative perspective. Yet, be it when looking for what constitutes the core of the performance or when trying to deal with the categories of the liturgy, specialists have come to focus on the relationships between text and music, between words and music. The present study reflects upon the ways different liturgical cultures have coped with these relationships. We shall deal with Christian liturgies, with the reading of the Bible and the study of the Talmud in the Jewish communities, and finally

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with the reading of the Koran. Beyond the different cases at hand, we shall discover the varying manners under which texts and music practically exist and interact.

The above-mentioned issues were clearly expressed not a long time ago. In an article devoted to Christian rituals, S. Corbin (1961) raised two questions. The first one was dealing with a discussion of the liturgical categories and of the criteria that are to be looked for in order to assess a relevant sorting out and definition of these categories. The second question focused precisely upon the elementary components of any liturgical situation. Through Corbin's eyes, the essence of liturgy, in musical and literary terms, lies in the combination between sets of fixed texts and the devices that are required in order to hand them down. It is in the very link between the texts (be written or oral) and their oral transmission that an answer about the liturgical categories should be looked for. In such a context only, psalmody and cantillation could be differentiated properly. Psalmody would be bound to texts of a fixed and poetical style, performed collectively according to a compulsory setting. Cantillation would be bound to prose texts, read or chanted by one person according to fixed rules. The adjustment between the rules and the text would leave some space of liberty to the person who cantillates, a fact that would not be accounted for in the case of psalmody.

Dating back to the early sixties, S. Corbin's propositions were raising the entire issue of liturgy in totally novel ways. Yet, more work had to come so as to get a more precise understanding of what should be meant under the term "text", and of the sets of rules that are required to have the texts handed down.

I. The liturgical texts

The reading of the biblical text in the synagogue has any knowledgeable man read out of a hand written text, which is characterised in the following way. Lacking any visible punctuation the text is written in continuation without any indications for the vowels. It is not in the written text that the cues are to be found in order to have the full and proper wording, or the proper segmentation of the written text into sentences, clauses and further subparts. It is only through the oral singing that vocalisation is given, that the detailed and systematic segmentation is made clear, and that the syntactic organisation of the written text is made available.
Over the time, a graphic equivalent for the vocalisation - namely dots - and another graphic equivalent for the linguistic functions played by the oral rendering of the text have been established by the sages and the grammarians. Nevertheless, none of these graphic devices is to be found on the biblical text - namely the weekly portions of the Pentateuch - which is read, or sung, in the synagogue. Yet, the one who reads will have on his left hand side a man who checks that no error occurs in the very wording of the text and who, at the same time, might make specific hand gestures that are totally and functionally parallel to the graphic signs which are the equivalent of the syntactic segmentation through music.

The written text of the Koran bears similarities and differences when compared to the written text for the Jewish Bible. It has been also a solely consonantal text, at least for a certain period of time. Later on, graphic signs have been added which, on the one hand, would indicate the required vocalisation (at least part of it) and which, on the other hand, would have the successive verses of the text made explicit through punctuation. These signs are integrated to the written text, which is used in the liturgical contexts. But no equivalent for the music, chant or intonation used during the performance is to be found, no graphic substitute is available on the written text what so ever, be it within or outside the liturgical situations.

Considering the Jewish communities, one still finds the text of the Talmud, where a good part of the interpretations of the Bible is to be found. The specificity of the Talmud lies in the fact that it is studied by whoever follows the explicit commandment to study the Biblical text daily, or at least regularly and without any age restrictions. The written text for the Talmud is again, a consonantal one and it is written without punctuation. This situation has remained constant through the centuries since the time when this text, called also the Oral Law - when the Biblical text is called the Written Law -, was set to writing in the very first centuries of the Christian era. Practically, only the oral reading makes it possible to reach to the full identification of the words and to the proper segmentation of the sentences.

In the case of the texts in the Greek Orthodox Church, there are graphic signs that help the one who reads make the proper expression of the text audible to the audience. Actually, in this tradition, the written texts of the New Testament have been complemented with several and distinct sets of signs, namely accentuation signs, interpunctuation signs and signs that are specifically related to the character of the liturgical contexts.
"Im Grieschichen... war die Interpunktuation schon lange entwickelt, als die ekphonetische Notation hinzugefügt wurde. Die ekphonetische Notation baut auf die Strukturierung des Textes auf, die schon durch die Interpunktuation gegeben war. Die Zeichen stellen somit eine Spezialisierung auf die Gestalt des musikalischen Vortrages dar. Diese Gestalt wurde speziell für den liturgischen Vortrag geschaffen. Ihre Funktion ist die der festlichen musikalischen Darstellung des Textes (Flender 1988 : 117).

Starting from the 16th century and for historical reasons, the different sets of signs ceased to be added to the written text. This means that from that period onward only the oral tradition has been forwarding the linguistic and liturgical functions that help understand and perform the written text. Before the 17th century, the graphic signs were the partial equivalent of the oral side, a reminder of it or a guide for the text to be handed down.

In the liturgical cultures we have been referring to so far, the written texts are practically lacking essential elements. Only the oral performance of the texts conveys the missing informations. Under specific conditions, the written text might be complemented with graphic signs. Such signs and systems are not systematically available in the different contexts where the texts are used. But they all are partial representations of the oral material as well as a guide for the oral rendition of the written text.

We are now using the expressions "oral rendition" and "oral material" when dealing with the cantillation of the biblical text or the performance of the new testamental texts, with the reading of the Koran or the study of the Talmud. Since the living performance of the texts is required to have the written side of the text be complemented by the oral one, one should now take a closer look at the oral side. We shall then come to a more accurate understanding for such terms as music, reading or chanting.

II. The oral rendering of the texts

As far as the Koran is concerned, one can turn to M. Ben Otman’s study (1995) of a tradition that has been documented in a religious school for youngsters in Meknes (Morocco). Two sets of oral tools appear to function with somewhat differing linguistic aims. The first one shows the centrality of phonetic patterns that explain the unique auditive character of the Koran. These patterns lay upon an explicit distribution of an arithmetic rhythm, upon an explicit repartition of syllabic duration, and upon an explicit
appreciation of the vocalic timbre. There is a constant interplay between these three elements.

Four parameters make the second set of tools. They are used to shape a written text where only the verses as such are made visible but not their internal linguistic segmentation and organisation. These parameters are the pauses (a longer and a shorter one); the final phonetic schemes of the verses; metrics; and the lengthening of the syllables. These parameters are to be considered inside of the boundaries of the different suras, which materialise the grouping of a varying number of verses according to a given theme.

The four parameters are not equivalent, formally speaking. Pauses are to be found after varying groups of verses or inside of one verse. But unexpected pauses – that are produced for psychological reasons – oblige the reader to consider the semantic consistency of his interruptions towards the overall semantic identity of the text. He is then obliged to reshape the way he subdivides the text on the basis of the pauses.

The final phonetic scheme at the end of the verses is partially bound to vocalic and/or syllabic quantity. But, to the extent that it does not hamper fundamentally the rules of the vocalic and/or syllabic quantity, this scheme does play a specific role beyond the phonic or auditory characterisation of the text. The same holds true for the metrics, only taking into account that phonetic scheme and metrics differ very much formally, as well as when considering the systematics and the dynamics that are attached to them. Finally, the lengthening of one syllable does affect specific syllables that the reader willingly chooses to stress particularly, or that he has learned to stress according to the tradition he got.

Distinct functions are attached to the two sets of linguistic tools. The phonetic patterns that are based upon an arithmetic rhythm, syllabic duration and the vocalic timbre serve as a way of manifesting the unicity and hierarchical rank of the Koran among the different textual genres inside of the Islamic culture. The second set of linguistic parameters does speak for the shaping of the text in terms of significations. These parameters have got a general disjunctive function that operates with linguistic units of varying length inside of a given sura. This disjunctive function actually bears several syntactic and semantic functions. On the one hand the syntactic organisation of the verses and of groups of verses is made clear, with no sharp separation between the syntactic and the semantic levels. Parallely, the status of certain portions of text is manifested. In certain cases, it is the topic or theme of the sura (or the leading point of a part of the sura), which is more specifically
underlined. In other cases, parts of the text are underlined for other reasons that are bound to their relative importance in the overall context of the sura. We can here talk of topicalisation and of emphasis.

The Greek Orthodox reading traditions of the new testamental texts have been recently approached (Flender 1988) with reference to two sets of evidences: the analysis of the graphic system with its relationship to text and the parallel analysis of oral performances. It is actually the system for manifesting the character of the liturgical performance that has been studied, taking into account that such a system draws upon the rules that are valid for the two other and earlier systems for accentuation and interpunctuation.

The third system has been labelled a rhetorical one by R. Flender. It is based upon a series of individual musical motives that are supposed to be specifically linked to an equivalent number of graphic signs. Nevertheless, such a bi-univoqual relationship might not be a systematic one if considering the actual performance of the texts. Beyond this fact, it appears that one and the same musical motive is rarely a stable one. Variations in the melodic material occur but these are not primarily linked to the mood of the performer. They are usually determined by the linguistic context to which the motives are attached and more precisely by the syntactic status of the clauses.

As far as the functions played by the musical motives are concerned, they are essentially linguistic ones. The motives are used to indicate the place of the word accent. They also play a role with regard to punctuation, be it the inner punctuation of the sentences or the separation of the sentences between themselves. They not only make explicit the segmentation of the sentences, but they indicate the syntactic hierarchy that governs the relationship between the clauses inside of a given sentence. Such a syntactic function has got a quite systematic bearing in terms of meaning or semantics.

The musical motives still play another linguistic role. They might underline certain portions of texts, be it verbal forms, common names or expressions that are thought to be more important or particularly vital when considering the message the text is supposed to convey.

Finally, the musical motives are meant to enhance the character of the liturgy. By themselves they are an indication of the unique importance that is attached to the liturgical functions and context to which the liturgical texts are linked. It is actually this last function that has been said to be the very reason for this set of musical motives. It appears now that beyond this rhetorical function – that has a bearing for the social consideration of the
liturgy – the same motives could not be organised without a sharp understanding of the text itself or without considering its reception by the listeners. In other words, the rhetorical and social reasons had to match the linguistic properties of the text as well as the cultural intentions of the same text beyond its mere wording.

It has been previously said that the oral performance of the biblical text inside of the Jewish communities goes through cantillation. This last term is actually a quite general one, as well as the notion of Biblical text itself. This latter notion refers on the one hand to the three sets of texts that make the Jewish Bible namely, the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Hagiographa. On the other hand: 1) the three sets of texts have been supplemented with the two graphic systems for vocalization and accentuation that are a partial visualization of an oral practice which dates back to the moment these texts began to be used; 2) these three sets of texts know varying usages in the liturgical context.

The Pentateuch is chanted by one person, as well as portions of the prophetic or hagiographic texts. To this performance is equally attached the term cantillation: even if, in the liturgical context, the text of the Pentateuch does not bear the graphic signs for vocalization and accentuation, when the portions of the Prophets and Hagiographa do bear these signs. The Psalms, which are part of the Hagiographa, might be sung by one person or by a group of persons. Vocalisation is found in the prayer books where series of Psalms are integrated. A further subdivision is to be known. Even if the totality of the Biblical text has been complemented with one and the same group of graphic signs for vocalisation and accentuation throughout, the musical motives that are attached to the accentuation signs are of two kinds, so as to differentiate what is called the poetical and the non poetical portions inside of the Biblical text (Flender 1988, 1992).

The above indications speak for the ritual aspects, which govern the cultural distribution of the texts. Beyond the practical variety at the level of the ritual and beyond the cultural reasons for it, we shall speak of a strong uniformity when dealing with the very chanting of the weekly portions of the Pentateuch, of the Prophets or of the Hagiographa, as well as of the portions that are chanted during the Holy Days of the annual calendar. This uniformity is linked to two strong principles: the musical motives for the cantillation have got a mnemonic importance; these same motives are organised according to linguistic functions.
The musical motives enter into a limited list, which is further divided into two subgroups. These correspond to two different but also totally complementary linguistic functions, namely a conjunctive and a disjunctive one. Such functions are central for the segmentation of the text - i.e. the successive verses - into its syntactical and semantical constituents. Furthermore, the different sets of conjunctive and disjunctive motives are further subdivided according to the hierarchical value they help introduce between the constituent subparts of each verse in the text. Such linguistic rules have been strongly followed in each of the Jewish communities for centuries, well beyond the real variety of the musical motives that each community has attached to the different accentuation signs (Wickes 1881, 1887; Rosowsky 1957).

Let us add that the musical motives and their linguistic bearing are paralleled by the hand signs that might be performed also in the liturgical context but specifically for the chanting of the Pentateuch. Such hand signs date back to ancient times. For part of them, they actually parallel - for the reader - the shape, or the contour, of the successive musical motives that are linked to the successive words of the verse. But all hand signs parallel the essence of the basic linguistic functions – conjunction or disjunction - which are attached to the accentuation signs and to their musical expression.

Switching now to the Talmudic text, one should remember that this text is the very tool for the study and the understanding of the Biblical text. No graphic equivalent for vocalization or accentuation being found on the Talmudic text, the oral performance is totally required to have the Talmudic text properly red and properly understood (Alvarez-Pereyre 1990, 1994).

Basically, and if speaking of semiotic resources, the study of the Talmudic text is based upon a quite restricted number of oral parameters. These parameters are linked inside of a highly organised and economical system which is supposed to function in order to have the detailed linguistic architecture and the meaning of the text duly manifested. This linguistically-minded system is made out of a closed list of oral parameters: musical motives of varying nature, intonative motives of varying nature, pauses, stress as applied to a syllable inside of a word but for semantic reasons, cadenced reading, lengthening of a syllable, changing the vocal register. To some extent, such a situation is different from the one we found for the chanting of the biblical text.

This fact is coherent when considering that the Bible has to be transmitted as such, being the text of the Revelation. Cantillation
systematically means here chanting. Thus, two parameters are strongly predominant in such a context, i.e. the musical motives and the pauses. The one who sings has to be very respectful towards the proper vocalisation of the words and towards the clear singing of the musical motives. Since the vocalisation and accentuation signs are not available on the text, which is red in the liturgical context, the help provided by the hand gestures as performed by the one who stands next to the one who sings is real. Let us add that any person of the congregation who would notice an error occurring in the proper vocalisation might intervene and correct the one who sings. If the one who sings makes an error and switches the nature of the musical motives as they are attached to the successive words of one verse, the singer would be equally made aware of his mistake. In both cases, the one who sings would have to read again the respective passage, with the proper correction.

As already stated, the Talmudic text is totally different in its purpose. It is the collection of the discussions held over centuries by the religious authorities with reference to the Biblical text. These discussions are meant to be an interpretation of the Biblical text but also to draw the practical - i.e. legal - issues and rules that such a text calls for. In such a context, the main concept of the Talmudic text is argumentation. Thus, the oral reading of the Talmud is meant to have the students re-act and incorporate the detailed discussions of the Sages. The oral parameters shall then be bound to the practical linguistic resources that are attached to the complexities of argumentation. Thanks to the oral parameters, the process of argumentation shall be implemented. Being faced with a purely consonantal text with no punctuation, the students will learn which vocalic material has to be added. And they shall essentially learn the punctuation of the text as it is strongly linked to the interpretative and legal character of the Talmudic text. In such a context, it appears that the small and fixed set of oral parameters is linked to a fixed and strict set of linguistic functions that range from eliciting the successive syntactic and semantic constituents of the sentences to the hierarchy of the constituents inside of the sentence or between the sentences themselves. Parallely, the same set of oral parameters is linked to varying pedagogical ways, the purpose of which being to have the student be able to incorporate and master the methodology of argumentation. Not for the pure sake of argumentation, but with the concern of explicitly apprehending and personally integrating what is at stake when building both the legal and the philosophical value systems that are attached to the Talmudic text.
III. Conceptual reassessments

From a semiotic or semiological point of view, the liturgical cultures we examined largely behave in parallel ways. They make use of identical resources, which are integrated into complex systems. On the principle the architecture of such systems is greatly similar. The same holds true for the functions that are attached to these systems. The importance of the similarities between cultures speaks for essential and converging needs in the domains of transmission and perpetuation. The obvious differences hint at issues in the symbolic and philosophic spheres.

When trying to account for the linguistic and musical material the liturgical cultures are based upon, we are quickly facing difficulties if using such notions as text and music in a too general way. On the other hand, a mere inventory of the items at hand would be unsatisfactory if considering the high degree of coherence that characterizes the data. In the concluding section of our paper we shall try to match the needs for a proper conceptual framework together with an exhaustive consideration for the material.

The notion of text seems to be a central and an all embracing one, providing that 1) we do not restrict it to its linguistics components nor to its written aspect, and that 2) we extend it so as to include many heterogeneous elements on the basis of their converging functions.

The liturgical cultures we examined are deeply bound to texts the materiality of which is necessarily and at the same time written and oral. But again, a classical understanding of these two last words would be misleading. The written side of the texts is largely lacunary if considering that in some of the liturgies the linguistic constituents that are available are not sufficient to either simply read the text, or have it understood, be it a surface understanding or a deeper one. Even in the cases where the written texts can be easily read, the written side of the liturgical texts might have been supplemented with graphic signs that are a reminder and/or a guide for resources that are made available through the oral rendition of the texts only. These graphic signs and the resources on the oral side are linked to two sets of functions, a linguistic and a social one. For some of the liturgies under consideration, the graphic signs are not to be found on the written text, or not under all circumstances. Whatever the reason for it inside of each culture, the total or relative absence of the graphic signs means that the written text does not include the written - and always partial - equivalent of an oral side that remains vital for the existence of the liturgical « texts » as such.
Turning now to the oral side of the texts, we are facing an even more complex situation. Saying oral means firstly that we should differentiate between verbal and non-verbal resources. By non-verbal, we mean the gestures that might accompany the reading of some of the texts. The verbal resources are of several kinds: music, intonation, pauses and so forth. We have got several parameters, all linked to sound but of a varying nature. They are performed through the mouth, on the basis of a highly detailed and distinctive segmentation of the vocal continuum that is itself conceived and used as a complex physical medium.

When considering the role that is devoted to these resources, we have seen that the verbal and non-verbal resources function parallely in a strong relationship to linguistic and social dimensions, which are extremely complex ones. From the linguistic point of view, the oral resources add greatly to the basic constituents of the «written» text and they are vital for its reading and understanding. In its turn music – i.e. melody and the relationships between the musical motives – is to be understood as a strong and sophisticated linguistic device. On the principle the same holds true for the hand gestures, and for intonation, which is a substitute for music. As such, they might be considered to count among the constituents of the liturgical «text».

Having reached the end of our survey, we suggest that it should perhaps be set inside of a broader perspective. For we are inclined to think that our exploration of the referred to liturgical cultures might shed some light on textual repertoires of a purely oral character or on mixed textual traditions that would not bear a liturgical signification, at least as it is meant inside of the three monotheistic faiths. (Alvarez-Pereyre 2000).

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