

Temples or Concert Halls?

I recently came across an opinion column in a secular Ukrainian newspaper addressing the question of why concerts are not permitted in church temples. The author noted that in certain parishes concerts are permitted and that the decision seems rest solely upon the position of the parish priest.

The author was clearly in favour of permitting concerts in Churches. Is it right to hold concerts in Churches? Why shouldn't we?

A church is a building consecrated unto the glory and dedicated to the worship of the one true God. The prayers at the service for the consecration of a temple are very clear and eloquent – the church is sacred space, God's habitation on earth, a place set aside for worship, intercession, thanksgiving, and prayer. It is not blessed for any other use.

It's important to emphasize that the Orthodox and Catholics have a similar understanding of what the church temple is. Other Christian groups do not hold the church building in the same regard. For Protestants who do not recognize sacramentality (e.g. no priesthood, the Eucharist as merely symbolic, etc.) the church building is nothing more than a meeting hall. Protestants consequently have no theological qualms about renting out their sanctuaries for concerts.

Besides understanding what a Christian temple is from the standpoint of traditional, historical Christianity several other questions must be addressed: the questions of need, of money, and of secularism.

If I want to play football, I go to a football field. If I want to hunt, I go into the forest. If I want to hold a concert why go to a Church? There are such things as concert halls. They are usually better suited to serve as concert venues than churches are. So why hold a concert in a church?

The answer usually has to do with money. One or another artistic group wants to hold an event and can get a really good deal from a church, much better than they'd get at a local school or theatre. You can't blame them. Conversely, the parish can make a few dollars by renting out the sanctuary on an off night.

Regarding this second point we should remember that only one of the apostles was concerned about money, and we know what happened to him. Of course the Church needs money to function in the world - but at what point is the cost of compromising our fundamental values too high?

A core assumption of secular materialism is that there is no God, therefore nothing can be objectively sacred. If a church temple is simply a place, like any other place, why not hold a concert there?

A building can't be holy and not-holy at the same time. Either the Church is a holy place or it isn't. If it isn't, we shouldn't have hang-ups about what goes on there. If it is, we should treat it accordingly (this includes no unnecessary conversation; no eating or drinking inside except for foods like bread, kolyva, etc., which are blessed at services; no playing or singing of secular music; etc.) whether a service is being held at the time or not.

Theatrical plays or musical concerts are problematic enough. But as the saying goes, "when you say 'A', you must then say 'B'". If singing is OK, why not dancing? I once saw a video clip on YouTube of Ukrainian dancing in a Ukrainian Catholic church in the USA. The dancers used the entire area in front of the iconostas (including the solea itself) as their "stage".

The response generated by this was quite interesting. Leaving aside the issues of "liturgical dancing" (theatrical dancing in Church is an innovation and has nothing to do with authentic Christian worship - if anything it's associated with paganism) or "engaging our youth" (if the only way you can get young people into the church is by asking

them to dance there the battle for their souls has already been lost. The Church is about Christ, not the Kozachok), one person quoted Psalm 150:4: “praise Him with timbrel and dance”, insinuating that the Bible says it’s OK to dance in Church.

Using biblical quotes out of context in a simplistic manner does not a good argument make. The Psalms were written before there was a temple; there is no record of concerts ever being held in the temple in Jerusalem; and concerts were never held in Christian temples until after the Protestant reformation. Holding concerts of any type in Christian temples is an innovation with no biblical or theological support.

The only Person who should be honoured and glorified in a Church is God. Concerts of any type, with the performers standing in front of the iconostas with their backs to the Holy Table and being applauded by the audience are simply unconscionable. If Protestants want to do such things, that’s their prerogative. We should know better. We should respect our own traditions and teachings.

I remember walking into St. Sophia Sobor in Kyiv in 1988 and seeing theatrical seating set up in the nave. The tour guide informed us that the church was used for concerts. It upset me that the communists had turned Christian temples into concert halls.

Sadly, it appears that in the western world we don’t need communists. Our own Ukrainian people – some of them clergymen – are apparently willing to turn our churches into concert halls of their own free will.

God help us.

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