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Anthropology, Theology, and the Simplicity of Benedict XVI's Chant

Introduction

For a late-Victorian theologian like John Harrington Edwards music is by its very nature sacred. Writing in *God and Music* (1903) he claims that “music . . . speaks of God, from God, for God, and to God.”¹ Other Victorians considered music to be neither sacred nor secular. For them music existed only to serve the basic human need of expression. Evolutionist Herbert Spencer epitomizes this materialist view when he suggests that the function of music lies entirely within the human mind, to help develop its “language of the emotions.”² Chant was often caught in this ideological crossfire. For anthropological thinkers like Spencer chant was primitive and utilitarian; for theologians like Harrington it was developed and spiritual. For both of them, however, chant was also “simple”. For theologians chant encapsulated divine simplicity; for anthropologists, human simplicity.³

Chant continued to be defined by these respective types of simplicity – one theological; the other, anthropological – until the 1960s, when unexpectedly commentators on the Second Vatican Council seemed to invert anthropological and theological criteria of musical simplicity. As this paper argues, they applied anthropological criteria to Gregorian chant and theological criteria to primitive chant. Reflecting this ideological switch, and ominously for the theological future of church music, Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler preface their translation of the musical documents of Vatican II claiming that church music “of its very nature . . . [can] hardly be reconciled with the nature of the liturgy and the basic principle of liturgical reform.”⁴ More frighteningly, while “the treasury of sacred music is to be preserved and cultivated with great care”, it does not mean “that this is to be done within the framework of the liturgy.”⁵(97) If Rahner and Vorgrimler are to be believed then

anthropology had usurped theology, and the utility of social function had usurped art.

Gregorian chant—arguably the most historically artful of all sacred music—began its decent down the slow, slippery slope of ideological disrepair.

Trying to resuscitate the glory of chant and other sacred music seemingly orphaned by the Second Vatican Council, Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Ratzinger, decries this state of affairs in his famous essay “The Theological Basis for Church Music” (1974; trans. 1986), criticizing those who would observe a supposed

tension between the demands of art and the simplicity of the liturgy”. Benedict attributes this tension to a misapprehension in the concept of musical participation. For Benedict, unlike Second Vatican commentators on music, active participation in the liturgy involves listening as much as it does singing. Listening, in other words, is a type of Eucharistic singing, and singing chant (be it singing or listening) is the very essence of divine simplicity. In the broadest possible sense this essay uses chant to explore changing meanings of liturgical simplicity. The first two sections outline the two principle forms of conceptualizing chant before and after Vatican II, firstly through anthropology and the notion of human simplicity, and secondly through theology and the doctrine of divine simplicity. A third section explores how changing attitudes towards simplicity affected a redefinition of active participation in the revised liturgy, and a fourth and final section examines the consequences this redefinition had for the depreciation of Gregorian chant.

Pre-Vatican II chant – anthropology

Anthropology of simplicity

Simplicity has a well-established pedigree in nineteenth century anthropology, evidenced through the history of morphology and evolutionary thought. The earliest formulation of simplicity with long-lasting historical traction is Ernst von Baer’s axiom of differentiation,

according to which features become increasingly specialized as they evolve: “The general features of a large group of animals appear earlier in the embryo than the special features; and “Less general characters are developed from the most general, and so forth, until finally the most specialized appear.”⁶ An unapologetic consumer of German idealism, Victorian polymath Herbert Spencer read von Baer and translated his axiom into a principle synthetically applicable to all organic and inorganic life: “Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of Life upon its surface, the development of Society, of Government, of Manufactures, of Commerce, of Language, Literature, Science, Art, this same evolution of the simple into the complex, through a process of continuous differentiation, holds throughout. From the earliest traceable cosmical changes down to the latest results of civilization, we shall find that the transformation of the homogeneous [simple] into the heterogeneous [complex], is that in which Progress essentially consists.”⁷ Spencer sought verification of his synthetic principle in the recapitulatory theory of Ernst Haeckel, for whom “Ontogeny is the short and rapid recapitulation of phylogeny “;⁸ accordingly, the growth of the individual embryo (ontogeny) recapitulates the growth of the species (phylogeny), so that the human embryo passes in gestation through successive evolutionary stages, from protozoa to invertebrate and vertebrate to mammal. Haeckel depicts this process in various images, sometimes in embryological schemata and elsewhere as a mighty oak crowned by man.

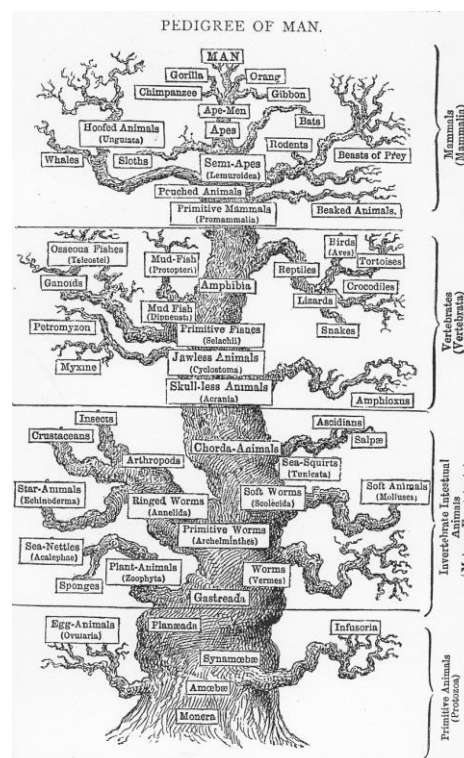


Figure 1. Ernst Haeckel, *Anthropogenie* (1874) and Ernst Haeckel, *The Evolution of Man* (1879), originally from *Anthropogenie* (1874).

Together, the dynamic duo of differentiation and recapitulation protected the values of Victorian society, especially imperial, racial values locating white Western man at the top of the evolutionary tree. Armed with scientific validation the two paradigms entered the anthropological bloodstream of late Victorian culture, redefining the previously uni-dimensional nature of simplicity. Simplicity was no longer understood as time's conceptually horizontal arrow, shooting teleologically towards complexity, nor was simplicity the first conceptual step in of a vertical ladder of ascent towards a greater, more developed form. Simplicity was no longer just a conceptual state to be advanced towards complexity, but a biological force which had acquired the characteristic of organic internality. Under the rules of recapitulation, differentiation gave simplicity a biological imperative, and with it a new relationship between cause and effect, individual and the whole. Previously simplicity implied no causality whatsoever. Simplicity did not necessarily progress ineluctably towards

complexity: it could be a permanent state of its own. In James Cowles Prichard's *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind* (1813), for instance, simplicity merely denotes antiquity: "The simple and primitive form of the Polynesian grammar is one indication of its greater antiquity."⁹ But in the later work of E. B. Tylor, the father of modern anthropology, simplicity attains germinal significance. Writing in his ground-breaking book *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor claims that "Civilization, being a process of long and complex growth, can only be thoroughly understood when studied through its entire range; that the past is continually needed to explain the present, and the whole to explain the part."¹⁰

Although for Tylor simplicity could remain unchanged——like folk tales, myths or primitive rituals or other "survivals" preserved within culture——the very existence of a living fossil bore proof of its capacity to evolve into complexity. Thus late nineteenth-century anthropologists discerned within culture a dialectical, if unequal, hierarchy favouring the complexity of the whole over the simplicity of the individual, the phylogeny of multiplicity over the ontogeny of singularity – effectively the empirically higher, civilized descendant over its ontologically lower, primitive ancestor. When culture was sociologically relativized in the early twentieth century anthropology would retain a phantom, mutual dependency between the complex and the simple, the civilized and uncivilized, high and low, group and individual. And thus the societal complex, whole or group became the primary focus of anthropological investigation, while the individual tended to wither on the vine.

Anthropological paterfamilias Franz Boas typifies this approach when he claims that "The group, not the individual, is always the primary concern of the anthropologist . . . the individual is important only as a member of the group."¹¹ Early to mid twentieth-century anthropological opinion eventually divided over this crucial issue. Functionalist Bronislaw Malinowski argued that culture functioned to support the basic needs of the individual; structural functionalist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown disagreed, believing that the individual

functioned to support society. In either case, however, it was complex social function which now defined and arbitrated simple individual identities.

Anthropological simplicity of chant

Nineteenth-century music anthropology—or ethnomusicology, if it can be called that—reflects these same trends, and perhaps unsurprisingly it was polymath Herbert Spencer who first came to use them. Spencer contends that music originates in human, impassioned speech: “vocal peculiarities which indicated excited feeling *are those which especially distinguish song from ordinary speech*. Every one of the alterations of voice which have found to be a physiological result of pain or pleasure *is carried to an extreme in vocal music* . . . in respect alike of *loudness, timbre, pitch, intervals, and rate of variation*, song employs and exaggerates the natural language of the emotions; it arises from a systematic combination of those vocal peculiarities which are physiological effects of acute pleasure and pain.”¹²

From its origins in impassioned speech music develops into a recognizable historical narrative from the simple to the complex: “In music progressive integration is displayed in numerous ways. The simple cadence embracing but a few notes, which in the chants of savages is monotonously repeated, becomes, among civilized races, a long series of different musical phrases combined into one whole; and so complete is the integration that the melody cannot be broken off in the middle nor shorn of its final note, without giving us a painful sense of incompleteness. When to the air, a bass, a tenor, and an alto are added; and when to the different voice-parts there is joined an accompaniment; we see integration of another order which grows naturally more elaborate. And the process is carried a stage higher when these complex solos, concerted pieces, choruses, and orchestral effects are combined into the vast ensemble of an oratorio or a musical drama.”¹³

As this suggests, Spencer translates musical origins into a developmental paradigm exemplified in the sliding scale of the Great Chain of Being, from the simplest to most complex – from the most savage to most civilized. At its most rudimentary position are savages, with their monotonous, barely evolved “dance-chants” akin to the earliest expressions of man: “That music is a product of civilization is manifest; for though some of the lowest savages have their *dance*-chants, these are of a kind scarcely to be dignified by the title musical: at most, they supply but the vaguest rudiment of music, properly so called. And if music has been by slow steps developed in the course of civilization, it must have been developed out of something. If, then, its origin is not that above alleged, what is its origin?”¹⁴

By giving chant such an important, transitional position in the history of musical origins Spencer ensured that the trope of simplicity would become ingrained in nineteenth- and early twentieth century histories of music. Composer and historian C Hubert H Parry (1848-18) is probably the most prolific Spencerian musicologist of time. Paraphrasing Spencer, Parry equates chant with folk music and folk music with savage music in his influential *The Art of Music* (1893; in 1896 re-titled *The Art of the Evolution of Music*): “The basis of all music and the very first steps in the long story of musical development are to be found in the musical utterances of the most undeveloped and unconscious types of humanity, such as unadulterated savages and inhabitants of lonely isolated districts well removed from any of the influences of education and culture. Such savages are in the same position in relation to music as the remote ancestors of the race before the story of the artistic development of many began.”¹⁵ As such, the earliest music is, by definition, simple: a chant of Australian savages represents a “simple figure”; folk music of British Columbia alternates “simple figures”; and a Romanian folk song is “unusually simple in part, but very characteristic as a whole”; folk tunes of the world are simple patterns.”¹⁶

By the turn of the century ethnomusicology, like anthropology, had begun to reformulate its understanding of simplicity. The founding father of British ethnomusicology, Charles Samuel Myers, speaks for a methodologically transitional ethnomusicology, when he updates Spencer and equates the musical impulse to instinct, and instinct to a type of consciousness derived from past rudimentary experience.¹⁷ When a chick pecks for the first time, he maintains, it has already acquired “a vague awareness of the result of its first peck, before it has actually performed the action”;¹⁸ it has a consciousness which is “the embryonic representative of meaning”.¹⁹ Belief in an embryonic representative of meaning led to an evolutionary model of human growth Myers called accrescence, “the “carving” of new parts out of the old. The old may grow in the process; it may and does by *accrescence* add new material to itself. It also combines into larger unity by union with others.”²⁰ Musically, accrescence follows eight key recapitulatory stages, like Haeckels tree or embryos: (1) discrimination between noises and tones; (2) awareness of differences in loudness, pitch, duration, character and quality; (3) awareness of absolute pitch; (4) appreciation and use of (small) approximately equal tone-distances; (5) appreciation and use of (larger) consonant intervals and the development of small intervals in relation thereto; (6) melodic phrasing; (7) rhythmic phrasing; and (8) musical meaning.²¹ Recalibrating the parameters of musical simplicity, Myers locates primitive chant not at the beginning, but at the apex, of this process – with musical meaning.

Thus begins primitive simplicity’s newly recalibrated life at the disciplinary apex of comparative musicology and comparative anthropology. Like the society it reflects, Myers’s primitive chant gradually acquired a functionalist anthropological hue. Becoming a study in individual cultural adaptation it increasingly located simplicity within the terms of its own musical culture rather than any external (Western) comparators. Other ethnomusicologists reflect this development. Trying to solve the problem of style in Indian music, George

Herzog, for example, suggests that “we have to consider the current notions of tribal or national styles as integrated, homogeneous pictures which tend after due time to assimilate new additions to their background, maintaining and restoring their “original” integrity.”²² Cultural adaptationism would ethicize methodology while extolling societal musical identities. Chant was no longer merely an aesthetic object to be positioned in the great, if discreditable, arc of Western musical development, but an aesthetic product judged in its own terms, and unlike earlier comparative musicologists modern ethnomusicologists were concerned with “the behavior employed in producing it, and the emotions and ideation of the artist involved in it.”²³ The progression from object to product concentrated attention on chant’s social functionality. Thus, like its other cultural counterparts, primitive chant evolved into a function of culturally inscribed physical, verbal and social behavior rather than an entity with absolute aesthetic properties. No longer archetypal chant——simple, primitive, non-Western——it became merely another type of music of a particular people and its society.

Pre-Vatican II chant – theology

Theology of simplicity

Until the Second Vatican, chant was theologized under the doctrine of divine simplicity. Like its anthropological parallel, the doctrine coalesced in the nineteenth century under the influence of an organic philosophy situating unity within diversity and parts within wholes. Franz Anton Staudenmaier typifies this view, encapsulating differentiation (progression from simplicity to complexity) and recapitulation (ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny). For Staudenmaier “the historical process is itself a revelation of the Absolute: the meaning of history is to be identified as the history of God . . . [as] a vision of history where, as in a covenant dialogue, divine hypostases are disclosed *for the sake of personal union* with their

human images.”²⁴ Staudenmaier also contends that man is rooted in a profoundly incarnational Christology: “The world is God’s idea of the world brought into being, and the perfection of the original world consisted in the fact, that it absolutely corresponded to the Divine idea.”²⁵ Gerald McCool describes Staudenmaier’s combination of differentiation and recapitulation as representing “an intelligibility in sacred history . . . undeducible divine freedom and not [simply] the metaphysical necessity of a divine architectonic idea.”²⁶ For any good neo-Thomist like Staudenmaier, divine simplicity not only explained the relationship of man and God but the relationship of God and His creation. Echoing these two strands neo-Thomist theologian Jacques Maritain describes divine simplicity as “a limitless instant which indivisibly embraces the whole succession of time”;²⁷ “the Act of Existing, subsistent by itself, is above the whole order of beings, perfections, [and] existences which are its created participations.”²⁸

As an expression and embodiment of divine aseity, pre-Vatican II simplicity resisted an ideational approach to theology. Reflecting this, von Balthasar, for example, translates divine simplicity into a theological aesthetic leading from the reality of Christ and God’s immutability to the relationship of expression and dialogue. This is “reality of a real I/Thou exchange within God who is love . . . Christ as personal expression and dialogue partner of the Father becomes the exemplar of our relationship with God.”²⁹ At a linguistic level Balthasar enriches this relationship by what Peter Casarella depicts as “a metaphysics of expressive transcendentality.”³⁰ Distinguishing – but not dividing – the beautiful as both expression and dialogue, and by analogy expression and form, Balthasar recapitulates an aesthetic of the beautiful within an incarnational theology. Balthasar follows Thomas, creating a dynamic exegetical continuum between “theological aesthetics” and “aesthetic theology”, theological beauty and worldly beauty. As Oliver Davies suggests, in this way Balthasar “constantly brings to the fore the Incarnation as the divine taking on a particular

and material existence.”³¹ For Balthasar, “the whole truth of this mystery is that the movement which God (who is the object that is seen in Christ and who enraptures man) effects in man (even in his unwillingness and recalcitrance, due to sin), is co-effected willingly by man through his Christian Eros and, indeed, on account of the fact that the divine Spirit en-thuses and in-spires man to collaboration.”³²

To function organically this relationship must preserve the integrity of individual and whole, for “when Being is confronted as love the threat which infinity poses to finitude vanishes.”³³ The influence of Rahner is observable in this construction of a transcendental theological anthropology. Rahner underscores transcendentalism in his mystagogical approach: “the essence of knowledge lies in the mystery which is the object of primary experience . . . the incomprehensible mystery, in relation to which the openness of transcendence is experienced.”³⁴ Stated more boldly: “In the primary realization of his being and in the philosophical reflection derived from it, man comes to be himself and here he does not experience himself as the dominant, absolute subject, but as the one whose being is bestowed upon him by the mystery . . . the one whose self is granted to him by the Mystery.”³⁵ Illuminated in and by incarnational mystery, divine simplicity became ideologically prepositional in the heavily neo-Thomist, pre-Second Vatican theological anthropology. Writing in *The Discovery of God* (1956) Henri de Lubac paraphrases Blondel, arguing that “nothing can be thought without positing the Absolute in relating it to that Absolute; nothing can be willed without tending toward the Absolute, nor valued unless weighed in terms of the Absolute.”³⁶ The same could easily apply to Edward Schillebeeckx, for example, whose work expresses the conviction that the meaning of human life is grounded in, and only understood in relation to, the mystery of God.³⁷ Neo-Thomist Schillebeeckx sounds just like Staudenmaier: “God reveals himself by revealing humanity to itself.”³⁸

Theological simplicity of chant

The irreducible nature of divine simplicity typifies writers utilizing theological hermeneutics to compare chant to human nature. A good English example is Anglican convert and Catholic priest Henry Formby (1816-84). Formby was at Oxford when the deeply divisive, Catholicising theological movement, the Oxford Movement, was in full swing. He was a friend of its principal force John Henry Newman, and as a trained Anglican priest and later Roman Catholic priest was immersed in the highly charged theological debates of the time.

Formby addresses plain chant in three theologically characteristic treatises, *The Catholic Christian's Guide to the Right Use of Christian Psalmody and of the Psalter* (1846); *The Plain Chant, The Image and Symbol of the Humanity of our Divine Redeemer and the Blessed Mary* (1848); and *The Roman Ritual and its Canto Fermo* (1849). In *The Catholic Christian's Guide* Formby identifies chant with the indelible simplicity of creation: "Popular Christian Psalmody, in its simple form, is so little intricate, that it admits of being learnt, as language itself, without direct instruction."³⁹ Accordingly, there is no greater simplicity than that found in the unison chanting of plainsong; it is the very epitome of divine simplicity itself: "The glorious type in nature of the Church's song, the unwearied and never-failing song of generations and ages, is the roar of the sea, whose waves beat in unison on the shore. Again, what is a more precious practical truth than Unity, the "Communio Sanctorum?" and how can there be on earth a more perfect typical expression of this, than the vast unisonous song of a multitude, who, with one mouth and one heart, glorify their God and their Redeemer – where the voices of all, young men and maidens, old men and children, are, as it were, the voice of one person."⁴⁰

In *The Plain Chant* and other writings that one person is never just the Catholic church, but God Himself: "The idea contained in the following pages, of the Song of the

Divine Office being a symbol of our Lord's Incarnation, is but part of an idea capable of being exemplified in every means that the Catholic Church has taken to manifest the Godhead Incarnate, whose kingdom she is to men."⁴¹ As exemplar of the Godhead Incarnate chant was also "designed by our Divine Redeemer to pourtray (sic), in a perceptible and intelligible manner, the attributes and characteristics of the human nature, which He took to Himself from His blessed Mother, and this in the manner of an abiding manifestation of Himself in the Church."⁴² Like all good Thomists, Formby relies upon a theory of divine simplicity to evoke a sacramental experience of God: "Song is gifted with the inherent capability of being a manifestation of our blessed Lord's humanity", and with "the mysterious power of symbolising the Man-God, and manifesting Him in a sacramental but intelligible manner to all who hear, and in an especial degree, to those who sing".⁴³ In *The Roman Ritual* the theological stakes are even higher. Plainchant, Formby claims, is the Exemplar or Pattern – the essence of divine simplicity, the "absolute correspondence to the Divine idea".

If chant were the "absolute correspondence to the Divine idea" it would be reflected in the intentions of reformers to express the quality of that relationship in broader terms. Rector of the Propaganda College in Rome, Father Loreto Jacovacci circulated a letter on the matter which would eventually attract the interest of Ratisbon reformer Franz Xavier Haberl; according to Jacovacci "The Church has wisely directed that this chant be joined to her liturgy. Hence it should be necessary to restore the school of Gregorian chant to its pristine splendor and to urge clerics more forcefully to use it constantly."⁴⁴ Unwittingly, Jacovacci's restorational concerns belie an arguably more urgent theological imperative. Restoring chant requires a parallel restoration (or reinforcement) of its theology, but like so many well-intentioned contemporary reformers Jacovacci voices concern over the practical anthropological surface of chant rather than its theoretical, theological underlay: "The choral

books in many churches which are in present use are imperfect, inauthentic, and often times corrupted.”⁴⁵ In some respects the quality or type of restoration is theologically insignificant, or at the very least culturally constructed. Ratisbon’s monopolist project to create uniformity is known to have spectacularly failed ultimately because it relied upon previously reformed Guidettian forms – reform by replicating reform is not, in other words, reform at all.⁴⁶ Solesmes was obviously more successful at reforming chant, not because it increased uniformity or authenticity, but because it used the authenticity of chant to reinterpret and revitalize the meaning of divine simplicity. Ratisbon editions may imitate Tridentine reform, but they were ultimately more political than theological, with decrees positively oozing with the consolidation of power: “The opinions and petitions put forth last year by the Convention at Arezzo . . . towards restoring the liturgical Gregorian chant to its ancient tradition, cannot be received and approved as stated.”⁴⁷

At a time when chant represented the “absolute correspondence to the Divine idea” Ratisbon was theologically out of step because the reinvigoration of Tridentine reforms only partially responded to the exigencies of divine simplicity. The Solesmes revival went right to the Church’s theological fountainhead, like divine simplicity itself. Its founder, Dom Prosper Guéranger, provides a telling, representative sampling in early communications: “Who has not tasted the charm of so many [Gregorian] pieces sublime or original, stamped by the geniuses of the centuries past . . . What Christian has ever been able to hear the Paschal chant of the *Haec Dies* without be tried with that vague sentiment of the infinite, as if Jehovah Himself was having His majestic voice heard? And who has not heard . . . an entire congregation making the sacred vaults of the roof resound with the inspired accents of the *Gaudeamus*, without his being brought back through the ages, to the epoch when the echoes of subterranean Rome resounded with this triumphant chant?”⁴⁸ Guéranger’s imagined “communitatis” – to paraphrase Benedict Anderson’s term “imagined communities” – is

reflected in the enduring language of Pius X's famous motu proprio, *Tra le sollecitudini* (1903): "Gregorian chant . . . is . . . the proper chant of the Roman Church, the only chant which she inherited from the ancient Fathers, which she has jealously kept for so many centuries in her liturgical books, which she offers to the faithful as her own music, which she insists on being used exclusively in some parts of her liturgy, and which lastly, has been so happily restored to its original perfection and purity by recent study."⁴⁹ Even considering later refinements the essence of Pius X's words would continue to resonate across the decades, even to the Second Vatican Council and beyond. Although no longer overtly humanized Christologically, like Formby's chant, in its mystical, mystagogical relationship of individuality and universality chant reflects and embodies the immutable purity, originality and authenticity – the divine simplicity – of the Church: *Musica Sacra Disciplina* (1955) states that "if in Catholic churches through the entire world Gregorian chant sounds forth without corruption or diminution, the chant itself, like the sacred Roman liturgy, will have a characteristic of universality, so that the faithful, wherever they may be, will hear music that is familiar to them and a part of their home. In this way they may experience, with much spiritual consolation, the wonderful unity of the Church."⁵⁰

Theological anthropology and the simplicity of the liturgy

Contained within their own disciplinary boundaries anthropology and theology maintained a perfectly constructive tension between the relativism of the individual and the absolutism of the universal. But by the 1960s methodologies began jumping disciplinary fences, contributing eventually to the type of intellectual cooperation Clifford Geertz would characterize as "blurred genres."⁵¹ In theological anthropology this involved a reappraisal of the human person from a finite, naturally contingent, socially and culturally constructed individual to a transcendently totalized human being – to "humanity as determined by the

other”. Reading Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* Ray Anderson describes theological anthropology as a type of three-fold “co-humanity” – humanity as determination of the Word of God, a determination of being with others, and the determination of one person with the other: “The determination of humanity in general as being with others does not dissolve individual being into corporate being, but results in a determination of humanity in its *singularity* as well as its plurality. This singularity, however, is experienced as a reciprocity of being, that is, a being of one *with* the other and also, to an extent, *for* the other.”⁵² Barth own words emphasize anthropocentric relationality, conceptualizing humankind as “one of two foci of the ellipse of revelation”:⁵³ “Who and what man is no less specifically and emphatically declared by the Word of God than who and what God is.”⁵⁴

There are liturgical implications for Barth’s type of reasoning on divine simplicity. According to Barth God exists in holy immutability: “There is such a thing as a holy mutability in God. He is above all ages. But above them is their Lord . . . and therefore as One who – as Master and in His own way – partakes in the alteration, so that there is something corresponding to that alteration in His own essence. His constancy consists in the fact that he is always the same in every change.”⁵⁵ Barth calls this constancy “the pure *immobile*”.⁵⁶ If, as he argues, God is pure *immobile*, He is not immobile in the sense of stasis but the dynamic liveliness and absolute actuality of divine simplicity.⁵⁷ He is so innately dynamic that nothing can make him more active. He is “act pure and simple.”⁵⁸ It is act pure and simple – pure *immobility* – that attracts the attention of Second Vatican reformational zeal; pure immobility which sparks the flash-point of theological and anthropological frictions in the Church; and pure immobility which Benedict XVI targets when trying to interpret and define the role of music within the liturgy.

Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963) enunciates the Church’s much vaunted revisionary attitude towards liturgical participation of the laity.⁵⁹ The word “participation” appears

sixteen times, in twelve instances preceded by the word “active”. The second section of the document is headed “The Promotion of Liturgical Instruction and Active Participation”. Point 14, the first under this heading, states that “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy.”⁶⁰ Jungmann contends that liturgy configures worshippers as Eucharistic living sacrifice, and as such *active* participants in the liturgical action.⁶¹ Marsili describes this activity as two-fold, combining the personal interiority of Eucharistic experience with the collective exteriority of worship: “The Eucharist really implies interior *dynamic* movement, since it is not a form of worship expressed by human religiousness, but an action (“do this”), which brings us infinite vitality within the reality of the mystery that is in Christ, the only Priest of the New Testament . . . This interior movement, which is a separation from oneself and an adhering to God, is the natural requisite for the Eucharistic “mystery of worship,” and at the same time a justification for that external action of the Christian assembly which is being rightly called “active participation.”⁶²

“Active participation” is a problematical term because the combination of active and participation seems tautological, even redundant. But the writers of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* were making two key points. Firstly they were trying to equate “conscious” with “active” in the same way they were trying to equate interior with exterior. But interior and exterior, for example, are not necessarily the same as conscious and active. An interior experience can be active, and an exterior one conscious. A conscious act is one such example. Secondly, they were trying to equate action with participation and participation with sacramental immersion. To equate conscious with active is also to equate unconscious with inactive, but the corollary is not true: to equate active with interior is not to equate inactive with exterior. They are not really opposites; in other words, activity can be either interior or exterior, or both in combination, and active participation should not necessarily depend upon a definition which

deems activity to necessitate both internal and external involvement beyond essential sacramental obligations like the Eucharist. Complete activity is not necessarily total activity, and neither is total activity necessarily participation: what is needed is a “conscious participation elevating the heart and soul, which expresses itself in – is aided by – the exterior rite.”⁶³ Despite this instruction *Sacrosanctum Concilium* considers activity form and participation function. And here are the roots of its problem: as form, activity—conscious interiority—is theological; as function, participation—liturgical exteriority—is anthropological—one might even say “religious.” Moreover, while activity is individual, and participation corporate, God’s simplicity dictates that form and function are indissolubly connected in “co-humanity” – in what Barth depicts as “pure immobile”. But if participating actively in the pure immobile means co-humanity is achieved only by combination of activity and participation, form and function, interiority and exteriority then the doctrine of God’s simplicity is threatened. To reinterpret von Balthasar: if simplicity is threatened “when Being is confronted as love the threat which infinity poses to finitude” *struggles* to vanish.

It was this same threat which Benedict XVI sensed when considering the place of Gregorian chant in the liturgy. What he noticed was a misconceived interpretation of liturgical simplicity and a concomitant misunderstanding over the phrase “full and active participation”. In “The Body and the Liturgy” Benedict objects to imbalanced readings of *participatio actiosa* emphasizing externality, claiming instead that the ideational multiplicity of what he calls “part-icipation” requires far more developed understandings of action.⁶⁴ To acquire that understanding Benedict begins by focusing on the transubstantive action of God in the Eucharist in which the distinction between *actio Christi* and *actio humani* are entirely dissolved, negating, collapsing – or ultimately fulfilling – the communion of man’s singularity and singularities with God’s unified and unifying multiplicities. Admittedly separate from the sacramental celebration, elements of the Liturgy of the Word, like singing

and reading, play their part in supporting a liturgy “that makes concrete in divine worship the fundamental structure of divine action.”⁶⁵ In this theologically analogical concept Benedict arrives at his understanding of music, for here he deems musical functions to differ according to their analogical relationship to divine action. There are psalms and hymns, and then there is the “new song” which the Church sings “as she goes off toward the music of the New Heaven and New Earth. This explains why, in addition to congregational singing, Christian liturgy of its very nature finds a suitable place for the choir, and for musical instruments, too, which no purism about collective singing should be allowed to contest.”⁶⁶ The musical aesthetic of Benedict’s theological anthropology begins to crystalize: choral music represents God and congregational music, man. The recapitulatory analogy does stop there, however, because congregational music can also represent God. But if congregational music represents God, what type of music represents man? Benedict’s answer is equally clear: it is not another type of music; it is listening. For Benedict active participation involves not just active singing, but active listening as well, not just to music but also to text, because liturgical listening and singing recapitulate the divine simplicity in which all men are intended and born to participate: “the conception of activity . . . the power of shared listening, shared wonder, the shared experience of being moved at a level deeper than words. At all events, one thing has become clear in recent years: the retreat into utility has not made the liturgy more open; it has only impoverished it. This is not the way to create the required simplicity.”⁶⁷

Conclusion: theological anthropology and the simplicity of chant

For Benedict listening characterizes an active participatory elevation – not abandonment – of the senses, and because of its sacramental exigency he deems certain types of church music more liturgically suitable – or divinely simple – than others. Perhaps inevitably, popular

music gets low marks for spiritualization, and so too does ethnic music: “The cultic music of pagan religions has a different status in human existence from the music which glorifies God in creation.”⁶⁸ Conversely, as the greatest paradigm of the musical Word Gregorian chant is “the supreme model of sacred music.”⁶⁹ Following *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 116, Benedict maintains that “The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.”

As Benedict and many other cantofiles observe, however, the theory and practice, anthropology and theology, of Vatican II are frequently incompatible when it comes to liturgical music, and especially to chant. But why is this? What changed? I think the problem is down to a change in the way Second Vatican commentators define simplicity. Benedict rehearses numerous reasons for the decline of chant and sacred music generally, but it is the concept of participation which stands out more than any other: “so-called creativity, in the active participation of all present”, he suggests, does not reflect the spirit of conciliar liturgical intention. Instead, Benedict claims, there is “an idolization of sociology at work”,⁷⁰ a sociology which revises our conception of the individual in relation to the whole, confusing the individual, yet corporate, expression of God’s Word with the ecclesial statement of the liturgy – the *communio sanctorum*. As Rahner, Barth and many other theologians have shown, the *communio sanctorum* has a special place in theologies of chant because it is embodies the unity of the individual in relation to the whole. Recall Henry Formby’s words: “what is a more precious practical truth than Unity, the “*Communio Sanctorum*?” and how can there be on earth a more perfect typical expression of this, than the vast unisonous song of a multitude, who, with one mouth and one heart, glorify their God and their Redeemer – where the voices of all, young men and maidens, old men and children, are, as it were, the voice of one person.”⁷¹ For Benedict, as Formby, in its theological incarnation chant

represents the epitome of divine simplicity – the perfect hypostatic union of words and music, music and man, man and God.

In practice, however, the post-conciliar story of chant is rather degenerative, especially in parish churches, and this is the crux of the problem. In theory chant is theological, embodying divine simplicity in all its ecclesial richness; in practice, however, chant is anthropological, encapsulating human simplicity in all its equanimous cultural manifestations and forms. The reality of the situation is nothing new. Not long ago Beliefnet.com recently posted a blog called “Gregorian Chant Comeback”, recapitulating the need for training the clergy if Gregorian chant were to have a chance at staging a comeback. Benedict, it proffers, should reinvest in chant, and resurrect the church’s aesthetic morbidity towards its musical past. But Beliefnet does not really get to the root of the problem – only its symptoms. Training the clergy, according to Beliefnet, implies musical, practical, training. But training needs to go much deeper than that. It needs to revisit the theological concepts which undergird practical understanding, and the theological – not anthropological – aesthetics which inform that understanding.

Why is there this disparity between theological theory and anthropological practice? Why has Gregorian chant conceptually dropped the “Gregorian” and become simply another kind of music? What happened to our world view which has caused this change in aesthetic value? There are many well-known answers: Gregorian chant needs to be well rehearsed; it does not necessarily communicate equally well across all cultural contexts; it is considered to be old-fashioned, alienating and reminiscent of an out-of-touch church – the reasons are myriad. Another reason might be found in the way modern musicology has embraced ethnomusicology – even as early as C. Hubert H. Parry’s famous history of music, *The Evolution of the Art of Music* (1893). Being an anthropological discipline, ethnomusicology studies chant as religion, not theology, reflecting an objectification of music not found in its

theological counterpart. Ethnomusicology treats chant objectively, like a science. It talks of “musics”, not “music” – of multiplicities, not unities. Taking this thinking to its logical conclusion would make Herbert Spencer the first ethnomusicologist, because it was Spencer who was first to postulate chant as an evolutionary form of human expression. Spencer ushered in a new era in history by re-conceptualizing chant as anthropology, while Formby clung to its theological formulations. Both considered chant simple, but for largely dissimilar – if not diametrically opposed – reasons.

This classic division between theology and anthropology – embodied in two different concepts of the same thing – simplicity – is the irresolvable, contradictory inheritance of Second Vatican theory and practice. Viewed theoretically, theology beat anthropology in the struggle for chant’s survival, but viewed practically, it was anthropology that was naturally selected (to use a Darwinian term). Crudely put, as theologians see it, anthropology is emboldened by an evolutionary science concerned only with mechanisms of change. Anthropology reduces history to narrative, and humanity to man. As anthropologists see it, theology is driven by teleological notions of Design. Theology inflates narrative into history, and man into God. Somewhere in the middle of this disciplinary caricature, simplicity teaches us how to reinterpret the dilemma of chant without resorting to well-worn arguments. It asks not only how but why changing notions of simplicity effected changes in musical aesthetics, and why changes in musical aesthetics have driven a yawning chasm between theory and practice. Yes, Gregorian chant thrives in some religious communities, in fewer cathedrals and the odd parish church, but it is always because those communities overcame anthropological individualism militating against ecclesial expression of the Word. Amongst the many conclusions Benedict reaches in *Feast of Faith* is the fact that there is a difference between “banal simplism” and the simplicity which is the expression of maturity. Is anthropology banal [human] simplism and theology the mature expression of [divine] simplicity?

Understanding the true simplicity of chant may help answer that question, but the quest for reinstatement is far from over in a world manifestly divided by the separate but not unrelated ideologies of science and religion, anthropology and theology, theory and practice.

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- 55 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 496.
- 56 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 494.
- 57 Dolezal, p. 87.
- 58 Weinandy, *Does God Change?*, pp. 78-79.
- 59 Much has been written about congregational participation in light of Second Vatican documents, frequently emphasizing the historical process which drove terminological distinctions between actual and active participation. See for example Alcuin Reid, "Active participation and pastoral adaption", in *Liturgy, Participation and Sacred Music: The Proceedings of the Ninth International Colloquium of Historical, Canonical and Theological Studies on the Roman Catholic Liturgy*, Rochester; CIEL, 2006; Alcuin Reid, "Ut mens nostra concordat voci nostrae: Sacred Music and Actual Participation in the Liturgy", in Janet Elaine Rutherford (ed.), *Benedict XVI and Beauty in Sacred Music: Proceedings of the Third Fota International Liturgical Conference, 2010*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, and New York: Scepter Publishers, 2012, 93-126; and William P. Mahrt, *Musical Shape of the Liturgy*, Richmond VA: Church Music Association of America, 2011. Seldom, however, does this literature explore the theology undergirding Benedict's concept of congregational "participation"; neither does it assess its implications for interpreting the meaning of liturgical music.
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- 69 "Pope upholds primacy of Gregorian chant", <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-upholds-primacy-of-gregorian-chant/>, accessed 22-9-14.
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