

# SAINTS AND SANCTITY IN THE POEMS OF GREEK "UNCONVENTIONAL" POETS DURING THE 20TH AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY. THE CASES OF C.P. CAVAFY & D. CHRISTIANOPOULOS

**Doundoulakis Emmanouil**

assistant professor

university ecclesiastical academy of ecumenical patriarchate in crete

## **Abstract**

*This paper aims to approach the issue of sanctity, as well as some cases of saints that are recorded in the poems of contemporary greek "unconventional" – due to their homosexuality – poets: constantine p. Cavafy (1863-1933) and dinos christianopoulos (1931- ).*

*Both cavafy and christianopoulos mention saints and several aspects of their lives in their poems for different reasons. The questions arising from the study of their poetry are the following: in which poems and why are the saints included? Under which criteria were these specific saints selected? What is the objective or the message they wish to communicate to the readers of their work?*

## **Introduction**

It is commonly accepted that poems, classified generally as historical, philosophical, erotic (love poetry), etc, allow for the expression of emotions and thoughts, memories and even inner desires, either on a social or a personal/sexual level, in an emotional, concise manner. It should be underlined that this study does not focus on some general statements about poetry or on the poem classification mentioned above. Instead, it concentrates on another dimension of the poetic texts associated with religion: issues related to saints and sanctity according to the poems of modern greek "unconventional" poets: cavafy and christianopoulos.

The presentation is divided into three parts. The first part includes some clarifications regarding the information acquisition process and research behind this project, as well as a summary of the poems. The second part discusses the poems related to the title of this paper, and the third part attempts to provide the possible reasons why the poets chose to incorporate these particular saints into their poems, while also examining their different approaches on the subject of sanctity.

## **Our research data**

Our research was based on the poems of constantine cavafy and dinos christianopoulos. Consequently, we had to read nearly 680 poems in order to reach the conclusions that are going to be presented in this paper. According to scholars, cavafy wrote 330 of these poems, the rest being composed by christianopoulos. It is important to underline that this study is focused only on their poetic work, with their prose therefore not being included in the research process. It is also necessary to clarify that our research was conducted on the greek text, in the language that both poets chose for the majority of their work.

An important question that arises is related to the reason why these two specific poets were selected for this paper, under this specific title. In other words, what is the connecting link between them that makes their parallel comparison so important and necessary. The answer is multidimensional and complex for the following reasons:

A first reason would be that both greek poets, cavafy and christianopoulos, walked upon an "unconventional" path during their lives, based on which they expressed their thoughts and emotions: homosexuality. Christianopoulos – who is still alive and currently resides in thessaloniki – never denied his preference towards the male gender, in opposition to cavafy, who never directly declared it, nor "allowed" his scholars to obtain a clear idea about his inner desires (haggerty g., p. 177· bien, p., pp. 197-211· eudokaw t. - lamprakis o., pp. 115-124)..

Secondly, christianopoulos has the tendency to imitate cavafy, both in terms of context and regarding his techniques and vocabulary, especially near the beginning of his poetic career.

His first poetry collection, with the title "*season of the lean cows*", reflects the conscious influence the alexandrian poet had on his work. Additionally, both poets chose not to adopt the use of the metaphor, opting instead for simplicity, directness and irony. These common elements remained in regard to their ideology and homosexuality after the first period (plasthras k., p. 5· dimitrakos v., p. 11, 12).

The third and final reason is their religious background and the connection of their ancestors to the church. We ought to highlight that the pseudonym "christianopoulos" – meaning "son of christ" (haggerty g., p. 177· dimitrakos v., p. 9) –, which the poet konstantinos dimitriadis decided on and has used since 1945, reveals his association with the church during the early years of his life. As far as cavafy is concerned, his great-grandfather peter cavafy (1740-1804) was secretary of the ecumenical patriarchate. In fact, in one of his poems, he declares that no-one is more knowledgeable regarding the church than himself (poem: "a byzantine nobleman in exile composing verses", 1921).

At this point, it becomes necessary to include some biographical information about the poets analyzed in this presentation.

### **Biography of cavafy and christianopoulos**

Constantine petrou photiadis cavafy (as he preferred his family name to be spelled in english), the youngest of seven brothers, was born in alexandria in 1863. He also lived in liverpool, london, and constantinople (istanbul), as well as in paris and cairo during his life. He was aiming for a career in politics or journalism, but, in the end, he chose to be employed as a clerk at the third circle of irrigation in the ministry of public works of egypt. He also worked at the alexandrian stock exchanges as a registered broker. Additionally, he used to gamble systematically; an activity that he continued pursuing during the rest of his life.

It has been recorded that he had his first homosexual experience when he lived in istanbul at the age of nineteen, but he never confirmed his sexual preference nor acknowledged this specific fact – a situation known as "*egodystonic sexual orientation*" (icd-10: f66,1) – in his poems. It is also said that he suffered from alcoholism, although he never provided any cause for scandal in the alexandrian community. He died on the same date he was born, in 1933, due to laryngeal cancer.

As mentioned above, cavafy authored approximately 330 poems, even though he never published them in the form of organized book collections. He preferred publishing them in newspapers and magazines, or even privately printing them on broadsheets for friends who were interested in reading them. It is important to note that he was honored for his contribution to greek literature by the greek state some years before his death, with the silver medal of the order of the phoenix.

Moving on to the second poet we will be examining herein, dinos christianopoulos (konstantinos dimitriadis (1931- ) is an awarded and acknowledged poet, scholar and literary critic. He is the founder of the literary journal "diagonal", a "greenhouse" for the "cultivation" of contemporary poets and authors, which he continued to release until 1983. He made his first appearance on the literary scene in 1949, having published more than 350 poems in many poetry collections since then. Among other achievements, he has also written prose and history books. As far as the main topics of his poems are concerned, he directs his attention toward the issue of ephemeral homosexuality, thus revealing his loneliness and guilt.

It is important to state that cavafy is considered a genius and a universal poet. According to christianopoulos, this is thanks to the superiority of his poetic expression and devices, as well as the educational path he enabled his readers to explore through his work. At the same time, christianopoulos is considered "*a master, not only of poetry but also of prose*" (taylor, j, p. 169 ) and should not be studied and regarded only as part of "*the greek homosexual poets*" (taylor, j, p. 159 ) . Needless to say, the poetic works of both poets were translated in many languages besides greek.

### **Sanctity and saints in the poems of cavafy and christianopoulos**

The second part of this paper focuses on the terms "sanctity" and "saint" and the names of the holy individuals mentioned in the poems of cavafy and christianopoulos.

#### **I. Sanctity and saints in the poems of cavafy**

The research conducted on cavafy's texts concluded that 22 of his 330 poems can provide us with information concerning the topic of this presentation, 4 of which are entitled using the names of saints of the orthodox church (ilinskagia, s., p. 383-384, 392, 405-406, 428).

In the greek text, the terms "sanctity", "saint" as well as their derivatives used to express "holiness", are observed 16 times in 5 poems written by cavafy. While attempting to analyze these cases, we ought to admit that almost all of them are related to issues of the church. The classification of these cases is realized as follows:

I. The *holy cross* mentioned twice in the poem entitled: "*a great procession of priests and laymen*". According to the text, the holy symbol brings joy and conciliation to christians. Additionally, the sanctity of the holy cross is also mentioned twice in the poem of "the seven holy children" (or "the seven sleepers of ephesus"), in which the city of ephesus is consecrated by the holy cross.

Ii. The *holy icons* in the poem "*the emperor konon*", where cavafy directs his irony towards patriarch german (715-730), due to the "ignorance of danger" he exhibited regarding the issue of the removal of the holy icons from the church by emperor leon (717-741) (lavagnini, r., p. 235) during the iconomachy.

Iii. The *holy grail* in the poem "*the suspicion*", in which some information about the well-known legend is included.

Iv. The christian *church* is also associated with the idea of sanctity, as presented in the poem "*the seven holy children*". In the text, the city of ephesus is consecrated not only by the holy cross but also by the presence of the churches.

V. The appearance of *saint martyr babylas* (vavylas) in the poem entitled: "*on the outskirts of antioch*", regarding the "translation" of his relics in daphne, by command of julian the apostate.

Vi. *The seven sleepers of ephesus* are mentioned in the poem entitled: "*seven holy children*" in which the term "saint" is used seven times, in six of which it precedes their names and in one case it characterizes "their eyes": they closed their "holy eyes" and fell asleep – died.

Cavafy mentions several names of holy individuals in his poems, while, at the same time, he chooses not to use the term "saint". For instance, when referring to the holy trinity, he uses the terms "god", "lord" (twice), "father", "creator", the three former of which are observed in poems written in english. He also mentions the holy spirit. Regarding the appearance of jesus christ in his poems, cavafy uses six different words – in multiple occasions – in order to name him. The most common term he uses when referring to him is "christ" (5 times) while the words: jesus (4 times), lord (3 times), bishop (twice), prophet (once), god (once), and logos (verb) are also observed. In the majority of the aforementioned cases, the word selected functions as a vocative expression or a direct address. In some other cases, the name of jesus christ is associated with the serenity and safety he offered to christians.

The virgin mary appears twice in cavafy's poetry, with her church "koumariotissa", located in the village of nixori in vosporos, also being mentioned.

It is important to note that several angels (twice) and holy individuals such as john the baptist, apostles matthew and luke, emperors justinian and constantine, also appear in the poems, without being characterized as saints.

In his unfinished poem entitled "athanasius", cavafy focuses on saint athanasius the great emphasizing the virtue, frequent prayer and devotion of the holy father to jesus christ. Due to his not being a heretic, he was fought and hunted by heretics, thus spending many years living as a fugitive. Of course, cavafy cites the sources he used for the poem in the page margin (lavagnini, r., p. 103, 105· butcher, e.l., p. 184-185) .

The poem entitled: "*on the outskirts of antioch*" is thought to be cavafy's last work before his death. It contains some noteworthy information about saint martyr babylas and the command issued by emperor julian the apostate regarding the "translation" of his relics from daphne to another location, in order to reconstruct the temple of apollo. In the poem, the saint and triumphant martyr babylas is presented as a glorious and important figure for christians, his relics constituting a priceless treasure. According to cavafy's scholars, the poet seems to support the saint martyr, standing in opposition to the "fake gods". His relics reminded him of the end of life: death. Moreover, he helps his readers understand and realize that everything related to and created by humans is perishable and vain; history will simply move on (lilis, j., p. 125).

Cavafy seems to be positively surprised by venerable simeon stylites (pillar), as is apparent in the homonymous poem. According to the text, venerable simeon lived on top of his pillar, continuously practicing asceticism for thirty-five years, under varying weather conditions, praying ceaselessly and only thinking of god. This is an act that cannot be underestimated or compared to any other daily activity (doundoulakis, emm., p. 11). The following passage clearly showcases cavafy's admiration toward him:

*"[...] Please don't smile; for thirty-five years -think of it-  
Winter and summer, night and day, for thirty-five years  
He's been living, suffering, on top of a pillar...  
[...] Before we were born, just imagine it,  
Simeon climbed up his pillar  
And has stayed there ever since facing god..."*

The most representative poem that mentions saints and sanctity within which these terms are used nine times, is *"the seven holy children"*. The basic source for this poem is the synaxarion of the saints on the 4th of august, according to which the seven sleepers of ephesus were asleep in a cave during the persecution of christians. They mysteriously awoke 200 years later, during the reign of emperor theodosius, thus becoming living examples of resurrection (doundoulakis, e., 2012, pp. 158-159). The poem ends by stating that the young sleepers felt sleepy and slumbered peacefully, waiting for eternal life.

*"[...] The seven holy children soon were tired,  
Coming as they did from another world, from almost two centuries ago,  
And in the middle of the conversation they grew drowsy –  
And thereupon they closed their saintly eyes."*

It is also important to remember that, according to the poem, both the christian churches and the holy cross are considered "saint" and "holy" thus able to consecrate the city of ephesus.

## **ii. Sanctity and saints in the poems of christianopoulos**

In contrast to cavafy, christianopoulos does not use the terms "saint" and "sanctity" as frequently in his poems. The research conducted on the work of christianopoulos revealed that 24 out of his 350 poems provide information regarding the topic of this presentation, 5 of which are entitled using the names of saints of the orthodox church (poems, p. 11-17, 20-21).

In the greek text, the terms "sanctity", "saint" and their derivatives are observed 7 times in 4 of his poems. The classification of these cases is as follows:

I. The greek metropolis of *"neapolis and stavroupolis"* near thessaloniki, is referred to as "all saintliness" by the poet, an expression used to address this specific bishopric, according to the greek orthodox church. It is also important to note that the poet uses irony in order to underline the contradiction between the poverty of the citizens of this area and the exaggeration of its title.

ii. The term "saint" is also observed twice when referring to *venerable zosimas* in a poem entitled "maria the egyptian".

iii. In the poem "st. Agnes's verses (dedicated) to st. Sebastian" the term "saint" is used three times (two of which in the title) describing *st. Agnes* and *st. Sebastian*.

iii. The name of *john the apostle and evangelist* is also connected with the term "saint" in the poem: "people of laodicea", where he is the recipient of a message regarding the situation of the citizens of laodicea.

There are many cases in christianopoulos's poems in which the word "god" or the names of the saints appear without being accompanied by the term examined herein.

The word "god" is used seven times in christianopoulos's work. In most cases, it appears within the exclamation: *"oh, my god!"* Moreover, in one particular example, the glory of god is compared and contrasted with the sinner in the poem "the crime of loneliness", as showcased in the following extract:

*"every time the perilous night arrives  
[...] Your dirty beauty is revealed to me,  
Erasing the light of god from my eyes."*

Jesus christ is also mentioned in many of christianopoulos's poems. In some cases, he appears in the greek proverb *"god only knows"*. In another example, the poet describes the event in which jesus washed the feet of his disciples and links it to his foot fetish:

*"thursday of holy week. Once again christ  
Will wash the feet of his twelve disciples,[...]  
I also had twelve loves in my life,  
But i was not fortunate to wash the feet of them[....]"*

(the naked piazza, p. 87)

It is important to underline that, besides the saints named above, there are other verses mentioning the 12 apostles, peter and paul, luke and john the evangelist, mary of magdala (or magdalena), cornelius the centurion, etc. Needless to say, these holy individuals are almost always connected, either directly or indirectly, with the poet's inner desires and sinful thoughts.

The dialogical relationship between christianopoulos's poems and the lives of the saints is revealed in two important poems of his early collections, entitled: *"mary the egyptian"* and *"st. Agnes's verses (dedicated) to st. Sebastian"*.

From a numerical viewpoint, 9 of the 22 verses of the first poem display not only a contextual but also a verbal connection to the synaxarion of maria the egyptian. According to the synaxa

Rion, saint maria had been a prostitute for about 15 years. However, her goal was not to earn money; she instead copulated in order to satisfy her mind and body. Her life was changed after witnessing a miracle and she fled to the desert living in isolation for the rest of her life (doundoulakis, e., p. ...). While in the desert, she communicated twice with venerable zosimas, who narrated her story. We ought not to forget that christianopoulos takes the basic concept of a saint's life and uses it liberally, either to talk about past events or to connect it with contemporary situations. This is why he writes:

*"[...] My name is mary,  
I was cleopatra in kyrenia  
And esther in the past..."*

(poems, p. 14)

The second poem, "st. Agnes's verses (dedicated) to st. Sebastian", is the only poem authored by christianopoulos in which the term "saint" is used twice in the title and once in the verses. It is widely accepted that martyr sebastian is considered the saint protector of homosexuals, which provides enough reason for the poet to select him. Reading between the lines in some specific verses of the poem, one can see christianopoulos's tendency toward homosexuality, given that he kept his inner desires hidden during that period of his life. He writes:

*"you (saint), having taken your military uniform off,  
Seem to me more saintly wearing your nakedness.*

(poems, p. 20)

While christianopoulos tries to hide his homosexuality, he also attempts to find a balance between his religious background and his attraction to men through this poem, due to the feeling of guilt that plagues him. This is probably why he chose st. Agnes (her name means "purity") in order to accurately express his emotions.

### **iii. The criteria under which cavafy & christianopoulos selected and wrote about these saints**

The third part of this presentation attempts to provide the possible reasons why the poets chose to incorporate these saints into their poems, while also examining their different approaches on the subject of sanctity.

In the process of analyzing under which criteria and for what reasons both cavafy and christianopoulos, the "unconventional" poets, ended up choosing the aforementioned saints to use in their work, the reader would probably detect some fundamental differences between them.

In cavafy's poetry, the most representative examples of saints mentioned are: venerable simeon stylites (pillar), martyr babylas and the seven holy children. All those holy names have no connection to the "dark side" of cavafy's life, as the poet tries not to taint their holiness with sacrilegious acts. On the other hand, all the holy individuals chosen by christianopoulos, such as st. Sebastian, st. Agnes, st. Maria the egyptian, were associated with sexual images and carnal thoughts in the poems. Needless to say, even maria magdalena and cornelius the centurion are used in a specific way in order to be combined with sexuality. Therefore, *"the erotic element is inextricably linked to the religious"* (friar, k., p. 60) in the case of christianopoulos.

In opposition to cavafy's tendency to concentrate on the positive side of the life of the saints in order to express his admiration for their deeds and miracles and to support their superiority against paganism, christianopoulos insists on revealing their weaknesses and creating a mirror on which he could reflect his own passions and fears regarding the sin of the flesh.

As far as the accuracy of the information on the saints is concerned, cavafy tries to correctly incorporate historical elements and introduce them in his poems by pointing out the difference between the life of the saints and ours. On the other hand, christianopoulos seems to be indifferent to this notion. He attempts to prove that both saints and we have a common path we ought to follow, without any regard for sin or guilt. In other words, he intends to exculpate (get rid of emotions associated with guilt) sex. This goal is revealed in the verses of the following poem, where he writes:

*"[...] If we had no faith, we could live without guilt...  
[...] What is this thing that censors our movements,  
And makes our virtue hermaphroditic?  
Let us live the beautiful life,  
Do not pester us with these inadequacies[...]"*

### Conclusion

To sum up, the following conclusions were reached and ought to be pointed out:

1. Both cavafy and christianopoulos use the terms "sanctity" and "saints" sparingly in their poems. The term "sanctity" is basically used by cavafy in order to characterize the christian churches, the holy cross and the holy icons. The same term is used once by christianopoulos, in relation to the name of a bishopric which belongs to the greek orthodox church.
2. The term "saint" is only used in the greek version of the poems, seeing itself replaced by the word "holy" in english. It is crucial to mention that both poets choose not to call all holy individuals "saints", limiting themselves to a few of them, especially in the case of christianopoulos.
3. A differentiation is observed between the two poets concerning the criteria according to which they choose the saints they include in their poems, as well as the elements of the characters of the holy individuals they prefer to explore. We ought not to forget the fact that cavafy focuses on the admirable side of their lives and their achievements, in opposition to christianopoulos who emphasizes their "dark side" in an effort to associate them with sin and thus release himself from his inner battle between sin and salvation, homosexual eroticism and his past religious consciousness, which is the root of his guilt.

### Biography

Doundoulakis emmanouil is an assistant professor at the ueapc (department of pastoral studies and department of ecclesiastical music), where he holds the chair of hagiography and hymnology.

He holds a phd in theology. His studies extend from theology (orthodox, catholic, protestant) to criminological psychology, journalism, psychology and counseling, counseling upon divorce, greek paleography, as well as management and marketing at universities and academies in greece, in switzerland and in france.

He is the writer of eighteen books (theology, poetry, prose). Some of his poems were set to music and were presented (as songs) in cultural festivals in crete.

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