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POLITICAL MYSTICISM AND THE LEGIONARY MOVEMENT IN INTERWAR ROMANIA. A COGNITIVE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT. ***Political Mysticism and the Legionary Movement in Interwar Romania. A Cognitive Approach*.** The purpose of this article is to explore the public discourse of the Iron Guard, the often called "exotic" Romanian fascist movement. I will focus especially on the messianic figure of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the charismatic leader of the movement, and the long lasting fascination he has exerted in the Romanian public space for more than a century now. The approach taken here is based on Gilles Fauconnier's and Mark Turner's conceptual integration theory and it is an attempt to show how by blending various mental spaces, from religious elements to medieval historical characters and events, the movement managed to create a unique mix that seemed to set it apart from other European fascist movements. Its members were extremely young and, by all accounts, genuinely religious, even practicing a type of political „mysticism" that was rather uncommon elsewhere.

***Keywords*:** *discourse, ideology, cognitive linguistics, mental space, conceptual integration, political religion*

REZUMAT. ***Misticism politic şi mişcarea legionară în România interbelică. O abordare cognitivă*.** Articolul de faţă propune o incursiune în discursul public al Legiunii Arhanghelului Mihail, „exotica" mişcare fascistă românească din perioada interbelică. Ne vom concentra mai ales pe figura mesianică a lui Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, liderul carismatic al mişcării şi pe fascinaţia pe care a exercitat-o şi continuă s-o exercite în spaţiul public românesc. Abordarea pe care

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o propunem pornește de la teoria integrării conceptuale a lui Gilles Fauconnier și a lui Mark Turner și reprezintă o încercare de a demonstra cum, prin amalgamarea mai multor spații mentale – de la elemente religioase la personaje și evenimente istorice –, mișcarea a reușit să creeze un univers unic, care-o separă de celelalte mișcări fasciste din epocă. Membrii Legiunii Arhanghelului Mihail erau, în general, extrem de tineri și, după toate aparențele, autentic religioși, practicând un fel de misticism politic greu de găsit în altă parte.

Cuvinte-cheie: *discurs, ideologie, linguistică cognitivă, spații mentale, integrarea conceptuală, religii politice*

1. The context

On April 24th, 1938, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the leader of the Romanian Iron Guard and of the Legion of the Archangel Michael, finds himself in Jilava Prison. It's cold and damp and he feels his lungs are being "pierced by needles, by bullets". It's Saturday evening before Easter and the young man is "awaiting the Resurrection of our Lord". After a brief visit from the guardians who, at least according to his account, seem to understand his "inner sadness", he begins to recount the recent events that preceded his arrest. He then thinks of his family, the wife and daughter he left behind, and finally starts to prey: „Lord, I pray to You, on this night of the Resurrection, to receive my sacrifice! Take my life! Since for you, O Country, our life is not required. It is our death that you desire. It is undoubtedly past midnight. Who knows, perhaps even later than one o'clock in the morning. I did not hear the bells sound the Resurrection. I light the candle and recite the traditional *Christ has Risen*!" (Codreanu 2015, 15). "O Country, he later exclaims, How you reward your sons!" (15).

When reading Codreanu's lamentations, one cannot help but notice that he seems to address two deities: first of all, God, the Christian God, to be more precise, to Whom he was a devout and honest servant, and then another entity called "Country", also spelled with a capital C (a convention that is normally reserved to God only). Feeling betrayed by this other deity (a mother-like figure), he turns to God and asks Him to receive his sacrifice. This is just a snapshot or a quick glimpse into the world view of an entire generation of young students, renowned intellectuals, politicians, priests and teachers that lived in interwar Romania and adhered to the legionary movement.

This phenomenon, the Romanian more or less "exotic" version of the European fascist movement (or so would most researchers agree), was and remains a source of fascination for researchers and the wider public alike. The

impressive number of books and scientific articles dedicated to it, as well as primary sources, such as articles from the newspapers of the time, manifestoes, journals, recordings, posters and pictures generously shared online by the supporters and followers of the Legion today, attest to this fascination. But perhaps nothing bewilders the contemporary reader more than the involvement of major Romanian intellectuals of the era, such as Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Constantin Noica, Nae Ionescu with the Iron Guard, and not just their involvement, but their outright enthusiastic support. In his *Journal. 1935-1944. The Fascist Years*, Mihail Sebastian offers a tragic and lucid depiction of the atmosphere of those days. He watches his close friends (Mircea Eliade, Nae Ionescu, Emil Cioran, Camil Petrescu) grow ever more distant under the influence of the right wing ideology. "Perhaps one day things will have calmed down enough for me to read this page to Mircea and to see him blush with shame. Nor should I forget his explanation for joining the Guard with such passion: `I have always believed in the primacy of the spirit`. He is neither a charlatan, nor a madman. He is just naive. But there are such catastrophic forms of naiveté." (Sebastian 2000, 114). And perhaps the most shocking interaction recorded by Sebastian in his journal is that with Nae Ionescu. As they are discussing the anti-Semitic measures taken by Octavian Goga's government in 1938, Sebastian, as a member of the Jewish community, remarks: "the slow or even impetuous killing of Jews would not have quite such implication of that kind and anyway, the Iron Guard would surely not operate differently". Nae Ionescu's reply is memorable: "Not in their deeds, but in their mind (…). There is a big difference between a man who kills you in a mocking spirit and one who does the same with pain in his heart" (144).

So what exactly drew the young (and not so young) intellectuals to the legionary movement to the point where they thought that getting killed was justified as long as the killer had good intentions, a reason or a purpose and „pain in his heart"? Just like many of their European counterparts, the Romanian intellectuals, Roger Griffin notes in *Modernism and Fascism,* "embarked on idiosyncratic quests for sources of cultural renewal before being drawn to the Iron Guard" and promoted "nationalism as a remedy to modernity's ills" (Griffin 2007, 358). The same ambitions seem to have constituted the driving force (at least in part) behind the political activists of the organisation and their supporters coming from various social backgrounds: students, country priests, school teachers, peasants, aristocrats, workers etc. They were all hoping for a renewal of what they perceived as being a corrupt society (often times a justified perception), they all dreamt of a new world, they were all haunted by what Roger Griffin calls "the 'sense of a beginning', the mood of standing on the threshold of a new world" and by "the belief that transcendence can be achieved through cultural, social, and political transformation" (1, 2). Not to be ignored, of course, are the

more pragmatic aspects, such as the social injustice, poverty, and the general political climate of interwar Romania, one that was dominated by violence and corruption[2]. Finally, and this takes us to the actual purpose of this article, the religious dimension of the movement, be it genuine religion or a political religion, played an important part in attracting enthusiastic and loyal followers.

The connection between religion (Christianity) and the legionary ideology, as well as, more specifically, between the Iron Guard and the Romanian Orthodox Church is obvious to all those who are even just slightly familiar with the phenomenon. The language, the rituals, the system of beliefs are all inspired by, if not built around what we generally call Orthodox Christian Spirituality. The international reception of the movement and the attempts to describe and define it varied greatly, and, at least as far as its connection with Christianity goes, there are two main lines of argumentation.

On one hand, there are those who regard it as genuinely religious and thus tend to exoticise it among other European fascisms. For Ernst Nolte, the Legion of the Archangel Michael was one of the most interesting and complex fascist movements in Europe. In *Three Faces of Fascism*, he notes that Codreanu's "allegiance to the church was closer than that of all fascism's founders" and his "views had an affinity to those of the Romanian Orthodox tradition" (Nolte 1965, 37). However, despite the honest devotion to the Orthodox Church, Codreanu felt that "with few exceptions, the clergy did not support the Iron Guard" (37). In *A History of fascism 1914-1945*, Stanley Payne also emphasizes the unique character of the movement: "The Legion was arguably the most unusual mass movement of interwar Europe. It is generally classified as fascist because it met the main criteria of any appropriate fascist typology, but it presented undeniably individual characteristics of its own" (Payne 2003, 279-280). "What made Codreanu especially different, Payne goes on, was that he became a sort of religious mystic, and though the Legion had the same general political goals as other fascist movements, its final aims were spiritual and transcendental" (280). The Romanian Legionary or Iron Guard movement, the author of *A History of Fascism* concludes, was "a mystical, kenotic form of semireligious fascism that represented the only notable movement of this kind in an Orthodox country. It was also marginal" (466). In *The Nature of Fascism*, Roger Griffin also affirms the uniqueness of the ideology of the Romanian Legionary movement, which was "based on a blend of Orthodox Christianity, xenophobia and anti-Semitism rooted in peasant culture, with a Romantic nationalism cultivated in university circles. The Legionary elite fused the commitment to Romania's rebirth that grew out of these ideas with an initiatic leader worship and death cult which is

[2] For an overview of this topic, see Oliver Schmitt, the chapter "Criza și camarila", in Schmitt 2017.

unparalleled in other fascist movements" (Griffin 1993, 139). Despite the rather uncommon combination that constitutes its system of beliefs, "the ideas of the Iron Guard, Griffin adds, are from those of the various strands of Fascism, they share with them the same core of palingenetic ultra-nationalism" (139). In *Reflections on Fascism and Religion*, Roger Eatwell discusses the relationship between fascism and religion and pays special attention to the term "clerical fascism", which he generally feels is a misleading concept in most cases, but can be somewhat justified in the case of certain "fascist movements which were overtly and sincerely religious, such as the Romanian Iron Guard, led by the devoutly Orthodox Corneliu Codreanu" (Eatwell, 2003 145-146). Due to the genuine religiosity of the leaders and members of the Iron Guard, Eatwell feels that "there are problems in unequivocally including the Iron Guard within a radical generic fascist pantheon" (154).

On the other side, we find Radu Ioanid, who although accepts that "mysticism was a distinctive quality of Romanian fascism", regards it less like a sincere manifestation of religiosity and more like an attempt to insert Orthodox Christianity into its political doctrine (Ioanid 1990, 140). The author of *The Sword of the Archangel* believes that, despite the important religious propaganda, the results were modest in comparison with the effort put into it because "Eastern Christianity, unlike other Christian and non-Christian religions, was impregnated by a more tolerant spirit, which was incompatible with the fanaticism of the legionnaires". For Emilio Gentile, in line with his famous theory of the sacralisation of politics, the Iron Guard "may be placed within the dimension of sacralised politics, notwithstanding their exaltation of Catholic or Orthodox Christianity, because their ideology makes the sacralisation of the nation and the State evident, even if through a strongly politicised version of a traditional religion". In Gentile's view, the Iron Guard assumes "the character of a political religion in that they become the main factor of legitimation for the sacralisation of the nation, and for the nationalisation of Orthodox Christianity itself" and it constitutes a clear example of his theory "about the syncretic symbiosis between political religion and traditional religion" (Gentile 2004, 361-362). Finally, in his chapter dedicated to the Romanian legionary movement and entitled *God's Chosen Warriors* from *Comparative Fascist Studies*, Constantin Iordachi summarises his position as follows: "although building on a popular and widespread cultural Christian code, the cult of the Archangel Michael was, in fact, the main axis of the process of sacralisation of politics in Romania" (Iordachi 2010, 322). For him, despite the fact that through its public discourse, the Legion put forward "mainstream religious themes, their motivations, means and goals are different from those of the Church" (350).

In his brand new book dedicated to this topic, Iordachi makes an attempt to offer "a novel theoretical research framework for reconceptualising the origins, history, and main features of the Legion `Archangel Michael` in Romania" (Iordachi 2023, 2). He makes a compelling case for defining the ideology of the Iron Guard "as a palingenetic political faith of a theological type, called Legionarism" (8). Part of the belief system of this political faith were the idea of an elect people – in this case Romanians – who can lead humanity to salvation under the guidance of a charismatic leader, as well as the idea that this must be done by using sacrifice, martyrdom and violence in order to achieve social regeneration. While Iordachi's theory builds on other theoretical frameworks, such as Griffin's palingenetic myth of the regeneration of the nation through violence as central to the fascist ideology and on Emilio Gentile's sacralisation of politics and his definitions of political and civil religions, among others, it departs from the original sources in several significant ways. Unlike Griffin, who uses the term palingenesis metaphorically and, in a sense, divorced from its religious sources, for Iordachi the term is used in a proper mystical sense (albeit new and different from the one assumed by traditional religions) and is part of the larger project of reconceptualising the sacred by modernity. Apart from the *palingenetic* core of the legionary belief system, Iordachi also mentions *messianic nationalism* (with its Romantic roots) and its *charismatic type of leadership*. When talking about the charismatic leader, Iordachi uses the term in a proper sense, so to speak. A charismatic leader is not simply somebody endowed with magnetism, but is someone who is chosen by God and remains in relation with God (or at least he is presented as such) and so the transcendental dimension of charisma becomes central to the belief system. Finally, unlike Gentile who seems to suggest that the final goal of a political religion is totalitarism, the concentration of power in the hands of a leader or of a group of people, Iordachi feels that totalitarism is simply the means through which a higher goal is achieved: the salvation of the nation and the birth of a new man (15-26). That is why he considers the fascist movement in Romania more like a fascist faith that „can be defined as a gospel of national redemption based on an inner transformation of the followers through Christian technologies of the self" (27).

The Legion of the Archangel Michael has captivated the attention of scholars from various fields and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu remains a constant source of fascination both for sincere admirers and for researchers. While the contributions mentioned above offer us a good explanation of the phenomenon in terms of *what* and *why* it happened, my analysis here is more concerned with *how* it happened. Rather than looking at the historical context, cultural, social or religious factors, this article represents an attempt to look at the phenomenon

through the lens of cognitive linguistics, more precisely, the theory of mental spaces and cognitive integration, a theoretical framework put forward by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner.

2. Mental spaces and conceptual integration

In their seminal book *Metaphors we live by* (1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson note that our conceptual system is largely metaphoric, so the way we think, act or feel is in strong connection with the metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 3). They describe what they call a „conceptual metaphor" in terms of a *target* and a *source domain* which partially overlap for the purpose of communicating certain aspects of reality, while often concealing others. Inspired by this initial idea, the *theory of conceptual blending* or *conceptual integration* was later developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, as the new approach seemed to offer new possibilities of covering a larger variety of linguistic phenomena (metaphors, metonymies, counterfactuals, irony, hyperboles, etc.). Mental spaces are "very partial assemblies constructed as we think and talk for purposes of local understanding and action" (Fauconnier 2007, 351). Or, as Seana Coulson puts it, "a mental space contains a partial representation of the entities and relations of a particular scenario as perceived, imagined, remembered, or otherwise understood by a speaker. This representation typically includes elements to represent each of the discourse entities, and simple frames to represent the relationships that exist between them" (Coulson 2006, 21). Mental spaces are constructed as we speak and think and they interact with each other creating conceptual networks. A basic conceptual network contains four mental spaces: a generic space, two input spaces and a blend. The generic space contains the general structure that the two spaces share, while the process of conceptual integration consists of selecting certain elements from the two input spaces and putting them together in the blend. It is important to note that projecting things from the two input spaces into the blend is selective: only certain elements get transferred into the new space. Due to the fact that this is a selective process, new structures may emerge in the blend through *composition* (elements from the two blends are transferred into the blend), *completion* (additional structure is brought into the blend) and finally *elaboration* (the blend starts working or running on its own, imaginatively) (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 39-50). It is also worth mentioning here that the initial input spaces can suffer transformation in the process, as new elements can be projected back into them, which technically means that mental spaces are ever changing realities that constantly interact among themselves.

For the purpose of this argumentation it is important to emphasise the fact that, as a highly imaginative mental operation, conceptual integration is characterised by *invisibility* and *speed* and we are often times unaware of it. The

correspondences the speaker uses in order to connect elements within a conceptual network are not objectively there, but are suggested by the speaker (20). The interlocutor then has to process an imaginative scenario, one that does not correspond to an existing reality, as if it were real. Because this process is so fundamental to our cognitive system and because it makes communication possible, we have the tendency to be open to interpreting, understanding and accepting this new creation, even when it contains unlikely and impossible elements. Fauconnier and Turner note that many blends are "so compelling that they come to represent, mentally, a new reality, in culture, action, and science" (21).

It is precisely this fundamental human ability to create mental spaces that are built dynamically as we think and speak in our working memory and that can be temporary or become entrenched in long term memory, which can help explain phenomena such as the legionary movement in Romania and the fascination it exerted on an entire generation of people coming from various backgrounds (students, priests, intellectuals, members of the aristocracy, politicians, peasants, blue collar workers, priests). Through repeated overlapping and blending of mental spaces, the members of the Legion and their supporters created a strange, romantic, imaginary world, populated by demons, angels, archangels, knights, musketeers, Romanian medieval kings, saints, alongside real characters, such as politicians and political activists. The borders between what was real and what was imagined, between past and present, between the physical and the spiritual realm became fuzzy and uncertain, moral instincts and reason were easily suspended and it was all made possible by the powerful process of conceptual blending. The following sections are dedicated to the analysis of several conceptual networks, all of them related to the interaction between the legionary and the Christian imaginary: the unseen war or the Armageddon, the saviour-like figure and the legionary version of an imitatio Christi, the Orthodox doctrine of theosis and the idea of "the whole Adam", all reinterpreted so that they fit the intended purpose.

3. Armageddon

In his exceptional book dedicated to the life of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, Oliver Jen Schmitt remarks that what truly mobilised the members and the supporters of the Legion was their belief in an eschatological war. The fire sword of the archangel, he notes, was not a metaphor for them. Instead, they genuinely thought they were fighting against the powers of hell (Schmitt 2017, 110).

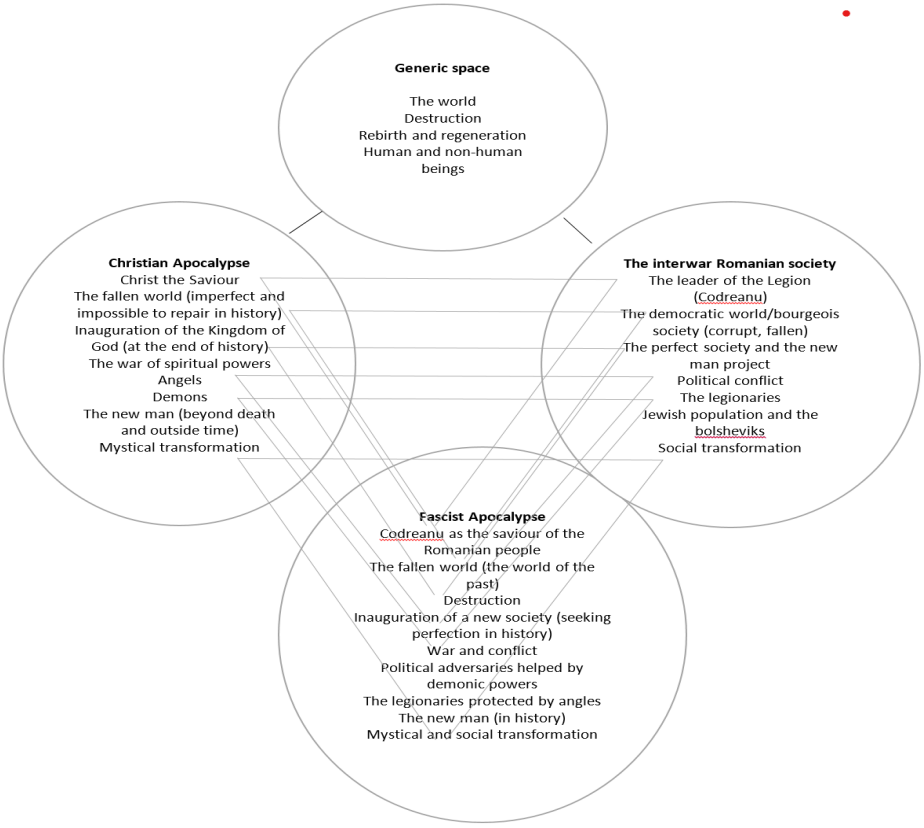
For example, in his programmatic book *For my Legionaries*, Codreanu sums up his view on the nature of the war he was carrying on as follows:

> "Wars were won by those who knew how to summon the mysterious powers of the unseen world from above and to ensure their help. These mysterious powers are the souls of the dead, the souls of our ancestors who too were once attached to this land, to our furrows, and who died in the defence of this land, and who today also are attached to it by the memory of their life here, and through us - their children, grand-children and great-great-grandchildren. But above all the souls of the dead stands God" (Codreanu 2007, 175).

Several things become evident in this description: the mystical understanding of a nation as an organic body, encompassing past, present and future generations and their belief in the actual presence of the entities belonging to the spiritual realm: angels, demons and the souls of the dead. While so far nothing here contradicts the typical Orthodox world view and is in fact very much in line with the spiritual tradition of the Church, there are very subtle interpretations and changes that the leaders and the public communicators of the legion operated in order to justify their actions or to determine the desired reactions in those reading or listening to them.

In the *Apocalypse* of Saint John, we find the depiction of the *Second Coming of Christ* and the events preceding it. According to Saint John, before the *Second Advent* and before the *Last Judgement*, humanity will witness the final battle between good and evil and will go through a period of great tribulations. Most fascist movements in Europe made great use of the imagery from *The Book of Revelation*, but did so in a rather metaphorical and symbolic manner. They embraced the fin du siècle mood and used the traumatic experience of the First World War in order to forge their own Apocalypse, not one marking the end of the world and the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, but rather one that had more pragmatic goals. They felt that liberal democracy was a dead end, that materialism became exacerbated in the 19th century and that the world no longer revolved around grand ideals, but around the mediocre values of the bourgeois society. They wanted to put an end to society as they knew it and to build instead a brand new world and a new man. The change would have to be total and violence was not only necessary, but also desired for the vitality and power of regeneration it brought along. In this scenario, the kingdom of God was not going to be inaugurated in the Eschaton, marking the end of history, but within history, in the here and now, a vision that is in fact typical for what Frank Kermode describes in *The Sense of an Ending* as "the modern apocalypse". "And although for us the End has perhaps lost its naïve imminence, he observes, its shadow still lies on the crises of our fictions; we may speak of it as immanent" (Kermode 1966, 6).

If we examine the network in Figure 1, we can follow the process of conceptual blending of the two mental spaces mentioned above, as well as the mappings between various elements and, finally, their compression in the blend and the new structures that emerge there.



(Figure 1)

An apocalyptic vision can also be found in the following paragraph extracted from an article published by Ion Moţa, one of the main leaders of the Legion, in "Cuvântul Studenţesc", in 1936:

> "If our eye could gaze into the heavens above, from where our Saviour will soon descend on Romanian land, we could see, next to our Saviour and his saints, all the brave men who gladly sacrificed their lives in order to help those around them: we would see there Horia, Tudor, Avram Iancu, Brâncoveanu and the all those who sacrificed themselves from the treasure

> of their hearts. It is in these men that Christianity was most alive and they, more than others integrated in the community of the Christian Church, forming her living, complete body" (my translation)[3] (Moța 1936).

We find here the same interaction between two separate mental spaces. In the blend, we find Christ descending from heavens, but not just anywhere, "on Romanian land", and we find the typical parallel between national heroes and Christian saints. The historical characters mentioned above sacrificed themselves mainly for social or national ideals and were persecuted or killed by other Christians (apart from Brâncoveanu who is an actual saint of the Church and who was beheaded because he refused to renounce Christianity and to accept Islam). Nevertheless, elements belonging to the two mental spaces – Christian apocalypse and Romanian history – are projected into the blend through composition. Two new elements then make their way into the blend through completion: the Saviour's second coming happening "on Romanian land" and the sanctification of national heroes and their turning into Christian heroes. The resulting scenario starts "working" independently and the distinction between saints and heroes remains unnoticed as the two elements are compressed in the blend, becoming one element.

In his latest book, Iordachi summarises the conceptual network of the legionary Armageddon as follows: the legionaries perceived themselves "as an earthly army bearing divine revelation, who guided the nations under the direction of the charismatic leader and alongside the heavenly army of God's angels against Satan; the Romanian people and humanity as the recipients; Jews, led by demons, and the Bolsheviks, were the enemies; Romanian politicians and the church leaders were the Judas and the traitors; and the interwar period was the apocalyptic battle scene" (Iordachi 2023, 91).

4. Imitatio Christi

The notion of *Imitatio Christi*[4] is based on the idea that Christians must follow the example of Christ, they must behave as disciples who seek to imitate

[3] „Dacă ochiul nostru ar putea înțelege zările cerești în mijlocul cărora se va coborî în curând Mântuitorul pe pamântul românesc, el ar vedea, alături de Mântuitorul și de sfinții Bisericii, toate sufletele de viteji care s-au jertfit bucuros și conștienți pentru a ajuta pe aproapele lor: n-ar lipsi nici Horia, nici Tudor, nici Avram Iancu, nici Brâncoveanu, nici mulțimea celor care s-au jertfit cu adevărat, din toată comoara sufletului lor. Căci în ei mai mult decât în alții creștinștatea a fost vie, ei mai mult decât alții s-au integrat în comunitatea Bisericii creștine, formându-i trupul viu, împlinit."

[4] Perhaps an even better notion to describe the way the legionaries saw themselves in relation with Christ is that of *Alter Christus*. More than just following Christ, they sought to become *like Christ* or simply become *a Christ*. For a detailed history and analysis of the notion of Alter Christus see Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (2010).

their teacher, by first following His teachings and then by going as far as sacrificing themselves on behalf of their faith. *Imitatio Christi* is obviously central to the legionary belief system and while all members of the Legion were expected to adopt this devotional model, its appropriation is perhaps the most obvious in the case of the charismatic leader of the movement. Iordachi notes that although religiously inspired, their world view included motivations, goals and methods that were "fundamentally different from those of the Church". The use of violence is one example, and so is the subtle substitution of Christ with the charismatic figure of Codreanu, which Iordachi sees as a "form of blasphemy" (Iordachi 2010, 350).

It is striking to see how Codreanu himself, as well as those around him, interpret various episodes of his life in this key. *The Nest Leader's Manual* along with *For may Legionaries* both function as two central books that record the legionary teachings and can be considered the Gospel of the new faith. Like Jesus, Codreanu did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it. Although Christ presented a path to salvation that involved self-denial, sacrifice and universal love (enemies included), the legionaries felt that this path was no longer enough or adequate for the specific historical circumstances they were dealing with. Or rather, although they accepted that reaching the high state of universal love was the ultimate goal of a Christian, violence – which they recognised as a sin – was necessary to undo the wrongs of history: "Caring the halo of sacrifice, the Captain appears to be an apostle, who did not come to change the laws of the Christian faith, but to reactivate them, to help Romanian souls live these laws more intensely, to call Romanians to the fruitful spirituality of the first Christians. The power of the Legion lays in its mystical character, and so does its future victory" (Roman 1940).

The Captain was systematically identified as a Messiah of the Romanian people and there are enough proofs that he regarded himself as one as well: "For two thousand years our people has been waiting for someone to lead us towards imperial paths. For two thousand years we have been praying, working, fighting, hoping, a Captain will rise up over all Romanians and will lead us towards the great victory of the peoples" (Herseni 1940). Emil Cioran is also famous for drawing the parallel between Christ and Codreanu and for offering one of the most encomiastic portraits of the Captain: "With the exception of Jesus, no dead person has ever been more present among the living […]. This dead man scattered eternity over our human dust" (Cioran 1940).

Codreanu's *For my legionaries* and *The Prison Notes* give us a glimpse into his world view and his own interpretation of his destiny in general and of several key episodes of his life. He was arrested a few times, once, just like Jesus, at night, in a garden. When the prefect Manciu arrests him in Iași, while working

in the garden, alongside his comrades, Codreanu yells, echoing Christ's words: "Everybody hold back. Don't do anything" (Codreanu 1999, 154). Every arrest was followed by a *Via Dolorosa*: "We were carried almost 2 km in the city centre, before the eyes of the Jewish population, staring at us, in this humiliating position" (Codreanu 1999, 155). Elsewhere, he writes: "And again I was taken, between fixed bayonets, to the Secretary's office. When I went outside and I rediscovered the Sun, fresh air and warmth, I felt them as a caress. It seemed to me that, despite the fixed bayonets escorting me, the sky was blessing me." (Codreanu 2015, 26). Similarly, immediately after he shot prefect Manciu to death, he describes the scene as follows: "In a few minutes, in front of the courthouse a few thousands Jews gathered. They were holding their arms up in the air, clenching their fists in hatred, waiting to tear me apart" (Codreanu 1999, 170). The scene (as presented by Codreanu) obviously resembles the one in which Pilate brings Jesus outside in order to consult the Jewish population regarding His condemnation, and the people shouted in response: "Crucify Him!" (Matthew 27, 22).

There is also his version of the prayer from Gethsemane and the Christic gesture of taking upon Himself the sin of all humanity: "Lord, we take upon ourselves all the sins of this people. Receive our suffering. Make our suffering bear fruit for our nation one day" (Codreanu 1999, 132).

Particularly memorable is the "replay" of the "Last Supper". At His Last Supper, Jesus tells His disciples that He had been betrayed by one of them. "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?", asks Judah (Matthew 26, 25). While in Văcărești Prison, after having been arrested for conspiracy, Codreanu shares a meal with his comrades: "`I am compelled to bring you sad news`, he tells his mates. The betrayer has been identified. He is in our midst sitting at the table with us. Everyone was looking at everybody else. Moța and I followed everyone's face hoping for an indication. I put my hand into my breast pocket saying: `Now I will show you the proof.` At that moment Vernicheseu stood up, hesitated for an instant, gave Bandac the key to the food box and said: `I am leaving.`" (Codreanu 2007, 97). Thus, the first Judah enters the scene, followed by many others later. However, unlike in the biblical story, the Judahs of the legionaries do not voluntarely commit suicide, but are promptly punished, often by execution. "If I had but one bullet, the Captain remarks somewhere, and I were faced by both an enemy and a traitor, I would let the traitor have it" (Codreanu 2007, 92).

Then, of course, there's the final arrest, his assasination, the burial and his exhumation and rehabilitation two years later. All the details are there, including the white shroud prepared to cover his body, just like the mihrt

bearing women covered Jesus's body. The articles reporting the event described it in terms of a resurrection: "And still, the miracle happened. The captain and his martyrs rose from the dead. I say this without fear. Their rising from their graves has nothing human in it. It belongs to God's will and the eternity of the other resurrection, which happened almost 2000 years ago. It was truly a resurrection" (Posteucă, 1977)."

In an article published in "Chemarea Vremii", in November 1940, Ion Siugariu uses similar language to describe the episod: "The legionary movement has never been just a political movement. It began from a burning feeling, from the thirst for history, for fulfilment, for justification in time, so it had to accept and promote martyrdom as a first and admirable necessity. It held nothing back, it endured everything gladly, it suffered crucification without hesitation, knowing that it will rise again from the dead three days later" (Siugariu 1940).

The constant mappings between the two main mental spaces – Jesus's life on earth, as presented in the Gospels and Codreanu's destiny as the leader of the legionary movement – the permanent going back and forth between them, the creation and recreation of blended spaces shared by biblical characters and by members of the inter-war Romanian society created a baffling and emotionally charged atmosphere. The Christ-like figure becomes "like Christ" for his followers and begins to receive the same kind of adoration. He has his own group of disciples, a John the Forerunner (A. C. Cuza, his university professor and godfather), a Mary Magdalene (Nicoleta Nicolescu, the leader of the legionary women's organisation), his persecution, martyrdom and, finally, "resurrection". Whenever political adversaries or other voices pointed out the discrepancies between the Christian doctrine and what the Legion was promoting – such as the use of violence – they would reply by saying that killing is allowed in wars and that the Church canons not only allow the use of weapons in such circumtances, but also bless them. Of course, there was no war going on in the Romanian society, not in the proper sense of the word. However, both the legionaries and their oponents (the government, the monarchy, other political parties) used inflammatory speech which was meant to create the impression that they were at war, which of course justified violence on both sides. In again the newly created blend, political conflicts became "wars", acts of injustice became "murders", political activist became "soldiers", killing became a necessity, and it is all the result of our natural ability for conceptual integration: political or social conflicts and war are conflated in the blended space and those involved started to adjust their behaviour accordingly, oblivious of the fact that this newly created "reality" is the feat of their imagination.

In their desire to assume the *Imitatio Christi* model, the legionaries went to great lengths. In *The Fascist Faith of the Legion Archangel Michael*, Iordachi argues that what the legionaries sought even through their violent actions against civilians (political adversaries, authorities) was not as much the elimination of their enemies, but the martyrdom it involved. After killing whoever they targeted, they followed a similar scenario: they would surrender to the authorities and accept the consequences (Iordachi 2023, 27). Again, through conceptual integration, through compression, they arrived at a new, creative understanding of martyrdom, in which there was no clear delineation between the killer and the one getting killed, the victim and the persecutor.

5. Theosis

While the idea that the ultimate goal of a totalitarian regime was to craft a new world and a new man could be found in all fascist regimes or movements in Europe, I argue that the legionary understanding of this process of transformation was presented more as an inner, spiritual renewal and less as (although not excluding) an outer, social change. The fact that the Legion refused to put forward a political program and thus came across more as an anarchist, anti-establishment movement can be explained at least in part by the fact that it was an organisation of mostly young people (the first "student movement in Europe" (Schmitt 2017), some would argue), but also by the influence of the Orthodox Church and, more specifically, by the influence of the monastic spirituality of Eastern Christianity. Central to this spirituality is the doctrine of *theosis* or deification, according to which the true purpose of human life is achieving likeness to and union with God, first through the purification of one's heart and body and then through illumination[5]. In *On the Incarnation*, St. Athanasius the Great famously wrote: "God became man so that we might become God" (Athanasius, Discourse I, Paragraph 39). The idea that the Incarnation made the deification of human beings possible can be found at many other Church Fathers, who always make sure to explain that this elevation of creation through theosis is not the product of human nature, but the result of the union with God, which is done through Grace (through God's uncreated energies).

In Christian terms, at the heart of most ideologies of modernity lays of course *the devil's deceit* that the human beings can evolve and become perfect, can create a perfect society here on earth and they can do so by themselves, not

[5] For the concept of *theosis* in relation to the life and mission of the Orthodox Church, see C. Sonea, "Theosis and Martyria—The Spiritual Process of Deification and Its Implication for the Mission of the Church" (2023).

through Grace, but through their own will and power. As far as the legionaries are concerned, it seems that they went back and forth between a traditional understanding of theosis and the modern apostasy. The traditional path to theosis involves specific practises such as renouncing the worldly things (by choosing monasticism, for example), praying, meditating, practising obedience to a spiritual father and, above all, humility. These, I believe, describe a very specific way of living and a specific attitude towards other human beings and reality in general. Those choosing this journey begin by renouncing the world, which means giving up their attachment to material things, but also giving up the idea that any kind of "perfection" is possible for the fallen world, at least while we still dwell in a historical time. This attitude is not necessarily one of passivism, but one which regards human beings and their limits with realism and humility. The legionaries picked certain elements from the traditional view of theosis: faith in God, prayer, meditation, not being attached to material things, ascetical practices such as fasting, vigil, hard physical labour, etc. These were the elements that their admirers and followers their admirers and followers found so compelling. The legionaries displayed a certain purity, austerity and moral rigorism which they opposed to the corrupt politicians of the day and that made people overlook their fanaticism (Schmitt 2017, 129). However, the element that makes its way into the blend from the mental space of the typical modern world view is the subtle displacement of God from the centre. Human beings take up His position, sometimes unconsciously. While the legionaries were practising Orthodox believers, they became tempted to "correct" and "complete" the Christian tradition, to introduce new goals and new practices that often went against a Christian world view, but which perfectly fit the modern world view. They did so largely unconsciously, but their sacralisation and exultation of secular things such as the nation, war heroes, national history, their own role as the creators of a new society led them to a place where, in their system of beliefs, God became a mere warrant for their purposes, a quiet protector, while the charismatic leader took His place at the centre of the universe. Those attending the meetings organised by the Legion could remark that they recited *Our Father* sitting down, but rose with reverence when the legionary martyrs or national heroes were mentioned. It is, I believe, a very telling scene for what went on in their minds, whether they were aware of it or not.

6. The Whole Adam

Finally, I believe that the doctrine of *the whole Adam*, synthetized by St. Sophrony Sakharov and by St. Silouan the Athonite in the second half of the 20th century, (although otherwise present in the Church tradition and

spirituality in various ways and under various names from the first centuries A.D.) is also central to understanding the legionary worldview. *The whole Adam* typically refers to all the people that live on the Earth at a given time, but also those who lived in the past and will live in the future, until the end of times. Praying for *the whole Adam* was a practice the Fathers of the Church talked about from the first Christian centuries, based on the conviction that we are all connected to each other in unseen ways, that through our sins or good deeds we influence the rest of humanity, whether we want it or not. Perhaps one of the earliest and deepest intuition of the transcendental unity of humanity belongs to Gregory of Nyssa (Moș and Octavian 2020, 43-44) who writes: "I think that the entire plenitude of humanity was included by the God of all, by His power of foreknowledge, as it were in one body" (Gregory of Nyssa 2004, 406). And then he goes on: "the whole race was spoken of as one man, namely, that to God's power nothing is either past or future, but even that which we expect is comprehended, equally with what is at present existing, by the all-sustaining energy. Our whole nature, then, extending from the first to the last, is, so to say, one image of Him Who is" (639).

In the legionary world view, there are at least two elements that are rooted in this doctrine. The first was their conceiving of the nation, of the Romanian people, but also, at a smaller scale, of their organisation as one organic being. They talk about the nation having a "physical, biological patrimony - her flesh and blood" (Codreanu 2007, 217), but also about various illnesses, gangrenes, infections, cancers that needed to be addressed, needed to be cured (Codreanu 1999, 196). The fact that they regarded the nation as one biological body is significant in several ways, but I will mention here just one that could justify the use of violence when necessary. It is obvious when taking a closer look at their actions that they had the tendency "to punish" the external enemy (the Jewish minority), whom they described as *parasites*, "only" by beating them up, but instead showed no pity towards those they perceived as traitors – fellow legionaries or Romanian politicians. In Jesus's teachings, He commanded forgiveness for one's enemy: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Matthew 5, 38-39). The legionaries did not "turn the other cheek" when it came to their Jewish "enemies", but they were merciless with the traitors. I would argue that this attitude is also "biblically inspired" and very much in line with the concept of *the whole Adam*. In Matthew 18, 8-9, Jesus says: "If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than to have two hands and two feet and be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two

eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell." Since the legionaries saw the nation as one body, there was nothing wrong with cutting off one limb that "caused it to sin". It hurt, but it needed to be done for the sake of the national redemption.

While the Church tradition presents us with this idea of seeing humanity as one body, the fact that the legionaries modified it so that it was now limited to one group or one nation is significant and is also the result of our ability to perform semantic leaps, to modify and compress relations between various items in our cognitive networks. The problem, I believe, was not metaphorically seeing a group of people as one being (a natural process in our conceptual system), but not applying this mental operation at the right level, which is the universal level. In a Christian world view, universal love is central and one is asked to move past any fragmentations and divisions and restore the state of communion that God meant for the human beings when He created them. Having enemies becomes impossible this way, since there is no us versus them. And when we are told to cut and throw away the hand or the foot that causes us to sin, one has to remember that, being created in the image of the Holy Trinity, human beings share one nature, but are also separate persons, and when it comes to *oneness*, we are expected to find guilt strictly within ourselves and when concentrating on *otherness*, we are expected to apply the laws of love and humility.

The same idea – that we see humanity, a nation, a political party or any other kind of (organised) groups as one person – has also been included by Lakoff and Johnson among their conceptual metaphors: "Nations are people" (Lakoff 1980, 260). In an article entitled "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf", Lakoff talks about "the state as person system": "A state is conceptualized as a person, engaging in social relations within a world community. Its landmass is its home. It lives in a neighbourhood, and has neighbours, friends and enemies. States are seen as having inherent dispositions: they can be peaceful or aggressive, responsible or irresponsible, industrious or lazy" (Lakoff 2009, 7). Although these are all valid observations, in the case of the legionaries, the metaphor went possibly further that we think. It did not only shape their worldview, influencing their actions, but it also received a deeply mystical dimension, it became their way of experiencing the sacred in the very midst of violent political conflicts.

7. Conclusions

Human beings routinely imagine new stories and scenarios that run counter to what they are actually experiencing at a given time. Also, they have the ability to connect sometimes conflicting mental spaces or to blend them in

order to create a new space, containing elements from the input spaces, as well as new emergent structure. Mark Turner notes that "running multiple mental spaces, or, more generally, multiple constellated networks of mental spaces, when we should be absorbed by only one, and blending them when they should be kept apart, is at the heart of what makes us human" and it is a process that "works almost entirely bellow the horizon of consciousness" (Turner 2007, 378). The analogies we draw on a daily basis or even the very basic mental operation of establishing identity are not as straight forward as we may think. Imagination plays a more important part than we are generally aware of. Imagination is in fact "the central engine of meaning behind the most ordinary mental events" (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 15). Shedding some light on this invisible, but powerful operation was perhaps one of the main purposes of this article, as it is my belief that tragic events such as those surrounding the legionary movement in Romania can be avoided if we become even just a little more aware of how the mechanism works and of how easy it is to take an entire generation of students, professors, intellectuals, priests or peasants and place them in an imaginary world, populated by demons, knights, medieval kings, angels and ordinary people alike.

While it is indeed true that the past marks the present in decisive ways, it is also true that claiming that some medieval king who lived several centuries ago is now fighting along with us for a certain cause is simply the fruit of our imagination. What would be, might be or might have been is not the same as what actually is. A truism indeed, but one often overlooked. Also, we can of course summon the angels or other spiritual powers, but whether we receive their help and approval is also a matter of interpretation. The Church, as a matter of fact, has a well-established practise when it comes to limiting interpretation of our present (mystical) experiences: tradition. The decision making process in the Orthodox Church is famously slow and inefficient. It takes decades and sometimes centuries until they reach a conclusion. I would argue that as inefficient as it may seem, especially to our modern eyes, the process shows wisdom in many ways. By allowing enough time to pass, one can see the outcomes of an action more clearly, since the distance helps us detach from the emotionally charged exchanges we find ourselves in, from the powerful conceptual networks of an age. The analogies or connections that appear obvious at a given moment may not pass the test of time. That being said, I still believe it would be helpful if the Orthodox Church stated its position concerning the legionary movement in Romania and, more generally, if it developed a proper theology of history. As far as the former is concerned, perhaps the Church is like the man in the parable who sowed good seeds in his field and at night his enemy

came and sowed tares among wheat. He then instructed his servants to let that tares and the wheat grow together and only separate them at the harvest (Matthew 13, 24-30). As for a theology of history, it is high time the Church clarified its views on matters such as history, time, the role played by the historical time in the process of salvation, whether the struggle to reach perfection or deification is reserved for the kingdom to come or can also be "imperfectly" achieved in time (as well as the framework and specifics of a *theosis* that is possible in time), the tension between the inauguration of the Kingdom of God at the end of times, but also its unseen presence in time, and, finally on more mundane but otherwise urgent issues such as the role of nations in the history of salvation.

By examining the conceptual networks that form the world view of the legionary movement, we conclude that the architecture of their Weltanschauung presents the regular characteristics of a fascist movement (the centrality of the palingenetic myth, the typical fascist metaphors, the sacralisation of politics). However, there are also traits that make it stand out among other movements: a genuine religiosity and a mystical component under the influence of the spiritual and dogmatic tradition of the Orthodox Church (Sonea 2020, 346). I have only touched upon several doctrines that have been borrowed and reinterpreted by the legionaries: the *Imitatio Christi/Alter Christus* model, *theosis* and the concept of the *Whole Adam*. The vast corpus of articles, programmatic books and other types of documents easily accessible to the researcher should be explored more by linguists and specialists in discourse analysis and, of course, by theologians.

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