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The Gestalt Pedagogical Method as a Path To Better Mental Health

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ABSTRACT. Gestalt pedagogy takes an anthropological starting point: the here and now. We use the example from the Gospel of John (8:1-11); it was Jesus' withdrawal that enabled the crowd to embark on the path of healing. Using the students' experiences and Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach, we show how he uses the process of distancing in his hermeneutics. This dimension of Gestalt and the hermeneutic process enables a healthy interaction between figure and ground in the complexity of life as understood by Gestalt psychology. The narrative used by the regular methodological approach in Gestalt pedagogy and Christian proclamation is used to show the need for distance. In this way we create a fruitful hermeneutic process that incorporates a meaningful distance for a more effective pedagogical and therapeutic process. Above all, such a distancing process with a suitable method enables the individual to act more and more independently in everyday situations. It is precisely the religious dimension that makes it possible to step out of the here and now in order to strengthen the sources of resources for life.

Keywords: Gestalt pedagogy, P. Ricoeur, religiosity, distanciation, dramatization, mental health

Introduction

Modern life is much more stressful than it was a few years ago. There are many reasons for this: the pressure at work, the hardships brought on by the daily news of horrors around the world, the fast pace of life, and the list goes on. Today, there is also more social pressure on the individual. Although we talk about a free and tolerant society, this is not what we experience in everyday life.

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The pressure of the media and especially the pressure of social networks, which have become the modern forum, is getting worse and worse.[1] Despite the fact that modern technology offers many new opportunities to communicate and meet, young people are getting increasingly isolated. Their activity on social networks is increasing. At the same time, their loneliness is growing, which goes against the fundamental promises of the creators of modern digital communication.[2] If Paul Ricoeur understands the creation of one's own identity through narratives[3], then one could say that we have many more options today than in the past. However, the short posts on social networks are not what one might understand as a narrative that boosts self-esteem. These posts are mainly aimed at getting likes, shares, etc. We regularly show ourselves on social media in a way that appears good to the public, and not as we truly are or want to be in order to build our own personality. We seem to have betrayed our own freedom in the name of freedom. The biggest problem with this is that when we read short pieces of information on the internet, we are not even aware of their manipulative and limited nature. We look for news that fascinates us and, in our amazement, we forget the criterion of truth.[4]

Many agree that this is also the reason why there are more and more problems with mental health among the youth.[5] For this reason, it is increasingly the task of educators to help young people on the path to adulthood. This help must be aimed at increasing their independence and their resilience to negative social pressures. If we want to speak of genuine religious education, we must also keep this in mind in religious upbringing. Not only for people in the Old Testament, but throughout history, the transmission of faith through narrative has had fundamental importance.[6] Today, these biblical narratives are hardly ever heard. Young people in particular struggle with this, because they feel like the biblical stories have little to do with their lives. That is why it is important for young people and for all of us to relate the biblical texts to our own lives.

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1 The European Union Mental Health surveys 2023 showed that 46% percent of EU citizens have experienced emotional or psychosocial problems. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3032 accessed in 18. 11. 2024

2 David Kraner, "Osamljenost in raztresenost v mreži socialnih medijev (Loneliness and Distraction in the Social Media Network)," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83, no. 4 (2023): 1003–1022.

3 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

4 Manca Erzetič, *Hermenevitka pričevanja* (Inštitut Nove revije, zavod za humanistiko, 2023), 152.

5 Manfred Spitzer, *Cyberkrank! Wie das digitalisierte Leben unsere Gesundheit ruiniert* (Droemer, 2015).

6 "Be on your guard! Make certain that you do not forget, as long as you live, what you have seen with your own eyes. Tell your children and your grandchildren about the day you stood in the presence of the Lord your God at Mount Sinai, when he said to me, 'Assemble the people. I want them to hear what I have to say, so that they will learn to obey me as long as they live and so that they will teach their children to do the same.'" (Dt 4, 9-10) There are many similar examples in the Bible where narrative and listening are the foundation of faith.

Our presentation will show how this is still possible today through the approach of Christian Gestalt pedagogy.

The role of a narrative approach in Christian Gestalt pedagogy

If Christian spirituality is to find its way into the life of the modern young person, he or she must first enter into the narrative of his or her own life The pressure of society's expectations can be a good opportunity to show how we can do this today. This can be achieved by strengthening our own experience by drawing back into the biblical text. Just as we read in the passage from the Gospel of John about a woman committing adultery (Jn 8, 1-11), where we learn about the pressure of the environment on the individual, we can draw parallels to the young people of today. Christianity still has the power to follow Jesus and strengthen the young person so that he or she can withstand the pressure and make a strong foundation in life. Despite declared freedom, individual rights and the protection of privacy, young people today are often placed before the 'court' of public opinion. They are exposed in all their vulnerability and weakness. They need strength to trust in the power of forgiveness and a new beginning.[7] Above all, however, they need to be able to stand up for themselves (in a good sense of the word). Not in arrogance and contempt for every rule of society, but like the adulteress in the Gospel of John, who knows that she only needs a word from the right authority to have the strength for a new beginning. And the youth of today must experience this for themselves many times on their way to adulthood. This is the fundamental characteristic of Christian Gestalt pedagogy: learning through experience in a safe environment, with an openness to the transcendent, the divine.

Integrative Gestalt pedagogy is based on Gestalt psychology and therapy. The former originated with the Graz School, the latter with the work of Fritz and Laura Perls in the USA. The very name of the movement indicates a fundamental view of people and society. "Gestalt" is more than something that is perceived in individual parts; it is wholeness and unity. F. Perls is considered to be the first therapist to encourage his clients to focus on the perception of what is happening in the "now" moment. For Gestalt therapy and Gestalt pedagogy, the 'here-and-now principle' is paramount.[8] In pedagogical work, working according to the here-and-now principle is also a fundamental feature of dynamic group work.[9]

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[7] Andrej Šegula, "Resonanca in sinoda v kontekstu sodobne pastoralne teologije," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 82, no. 3 (2022): 679.

[8] Felix Marcus Hufnagel, "Geštaltfilozofija-Geštalt psihologija-Geštalt terapija," in *Geštalt pedagogika nekoč in danes*, Ljubljana, ed. S. Gerjol et al., (Društvo za krščansko pedagogiko, 2011), 7.

[9] Alenka Kobolt, "Skupina kot prostor socialnega vedenja," *Socialna pedagogika,* 13, no. 4 (2009): 368.

It is characteristic of Gestalt pedagogy that it understands teaching and learning primarily as a relational process. It aims to form a holistic view of the experienced person and their thinking, feeling and acting.[10] Gestalt educators achieve these goals through specific methods using creative approaches. The preferred methods of Gestalt pedagogy include: identification/projection, fantasy/imagination, exercises in self-perception and perception of others, bodywork and movement, role-playing and simulations, creative media, group communication exercises and consciousness-raising.[11] Gestalt pedagogy uses a variety of existing methods, techniques and media, often derived from experiential learning, and applies them in its own way. The teacher must be careful not to forget what the main purpose of each teaching method is. He or she must not neglect the fundamental principle of Gestalt pedagogy, which is to relate the subject matter to the concrete life of the student. So, these approaches are not all self-directed, they always lead to the construction of one's own personality and to an exercise in better relationships first within the group and then in society. As a Christian Gestalt pedagogy model, we also include a religious dimension. Personality building goes even deeper and leads to a relationship with God. This is why the power of building spiritual health is even greater.

Gestalt approaches can be used to work effectively with both adults and children. In order for children and young people to be able to express their inner emotional world in a way that is safe for themselves and others and to come into contact with themselves, creative expression in the form of structured play with tools (painting utensils, clay, sandbox, dolls), in which the child projects his or her feelings onto objects, toys or a drawing sheet, is part of the educational process. In this way, the child can come into contact with his or her body and feelings through movement and at the same time reflect on them in a more guided way by transferring them to a medium. This makes it easier to see where the child is doing well and where not, and to see how the child expresses or does not express his or her feelings. Through creative projections and a safe relationship, children come into better contact with their body, get in touch with their feelings and can express themselves in an appropriate way, which enables them to strengthen their sense of self and improve their self-esteem. Group education is particularly suitable for young people who find it easier to express themselves in the safety of a group and thus acquire social skills. "Part of the individual's security is provided by social interaction in groups, including

[10] O. A. Burow, "Was ist Gestaltpädagogik," in *Gestaltpädagogik in der Schule,* ed. H. Gudjon and O. A. Burow, (Bergmann und Helbig, 1998), 15.

[11] Hans Neuhold, "Christlich orientierte Gestaltpädagogik und ganzheitliche Bildung," in *Leben fördern – Beziehung stiften. Festschrift für Albert Höfer*, ed. H. Neuhold, (Institut für Integrative Gestaltpädagogik und Seelsorge, 1997, 17.

the rules, norms and established roles that the individual tries out again and again as he or she grows older and matures. This is the basis for the development of social skills. At the same time as relationships develop, members in each group learn from each other."[12]

Gestalt pedagogy is not fundamentally linked to Christianity or religious pedagogy, but its development in relation to religiosity and the integration of Christianity was influenced by the catholic priest, religious pedagogue and psychotherapist Albert Höfer. Instead of an analytical and strictly structured religious education based mainly on dogmas, he opted for a different concept - he introduced the concept of integrative teaching into religious education based on "the Bible, which proclaims faith in the risen and present Christ, who is still active in healing today."[13] According to Höfer, man's self-discovery is thus founded and justified in the experience of God. This does not refer directly to his spirituality and his relationship with God, but to his nature as man and woman and how he develops in the eyes of God. Through concrete biblical stories, individuals learn to process their own feelings and their relationships with people and with God. Biblical themes (family conflicts, reconciliation, jealousy, betrayal, etc.) help to bring the seemingly abstract and distant reality closer to real life situations. Since the biblical man is concrete and has many faces, the individual can identify with him and find orientation for his life. Jesus accepted people as they were without judging them. He also addressed all social classes and paid particular attention to the poorest and those on the margins of society. The Gestalt pedagogy approach therefore encourages educators not to shy away from the difficulties and problems they encounter in the group or classroom, following the example of 'pedagogical love'. Through compassionate understanding, which helps the educator to empathize with the student's experiences, feelings and motivations,[14] the educator can help the student to overcome the dark sides and transform them into positive experiences. Following the example of Jesus, the educator is encouraged to see in the student his full potential, what he or she can become. In this way, the educator also builds the student's self-confidence and hope.[15]

Changes in the lives of the biblical characters can be viewed from several different perspectives. Sudden steps of transformation are sometimes challenged by crisis situations in the landscape, which, as expected, also carry a psychological and symbolic contextualization, such as the Flood, the river, the Sea of Reeds,

[12] Kobolt, "Skupina kot prostor socialnega vedenja," 372.

[13] Iva Nežič Glavica, "Geštalt pedagogika v službi oblikovanja duhovno religiozne dimenzije življenja," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 81, no. 1 (2021): 136.

[14] Iva Nežič Glavica, "Zaupam, zato si upam: zaupanje kot temeljna geštalt pedagoška kategorija," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 81, no. 4 (2021): 913.

[15] Nežič Glavica, "Geštalt pedagogika v službi," 142.

etc. Such key challenges then sensitize the biblical man to such an extent that he intensifies his relationship with God and - more courageously and with less fear - undertakes further steps of transformation, which ultimately turns his entire biography into a process of change. Accordingly, we see, for example, how with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob's stories, life changes lead to personality transformation, while with Moses his personal transformation creates new life circumstances.[16]

A concrete example of the use of a biblical text

In our training courses at the Faculty of Theology UL, which are primarily aimed at educators, we make use of this power of biblical passages. The participants in these courses have no theological background and often have little religious experience. They are often even afraid of any religious dimension, because in the Slovenian public, religiosity is relegated to the periphery of society. We therefore start from a purely anthropological premise and always include the religious dimension. We do not try to explain or clarify this first, in order to awaken our own experience of the need to transcend everyday life. The training for Gestalt educators consists of ten thematic modules. Each one focuses on a particular theme and is always accompanied by a specific biblical text that addresses the theme in one way or another.

Thus, in the third set of ten full three days meetings at the level of basic education, we work through the selected miracles of Jesus. Each individual chooses a miracle from the four proposed biblical texts. In addition to the passage about the adulterous woman, these include: Jesus raises a widow's son (Lk 7, 11-17), the calming of a storm (Mt 8, 23-27) and the account of the healing of the crippled woman on the Sabbath (Lk 13, 11-17). The selection of the so-called personal passage takes place in several stages. The first step is to meet oneself. Each person is invited to face his or her moments of helplessness and the desire to be helped. Through this experience, they go into the depth of their experience of this helplessness through what is called guided meditation. After this guided meditation, where each person experiences the need for a miracle in his or her own concrete way in life, the participants are invited to read all four Gospel passages. This is followed by two days of work with the chosen passage, first alone and then in a small group. The working method is simple. They are given a coloring sheet of a selected Gospel passage. Then they color it on their

[16] Stanko Gerjolj, "Mut zu Lebensveränderungen aus der Sicht der biblischen Beziehungsdynamiken," in *Die Kunst zu leben – zum Menschsein befreien,* ed. H. Reitbauer et al. (EHP-verlag, 2024), 69.

own, as they feel at that moment. In small groups, they then 'read' the coloring sheet. The leader does not encourage the interpretation of the coloring sheet, but guides the work in such a way that each person accepts his/her weakness and seeks help. First, he or she seeks help in the group and then from God.

At the end of the entire three-day course, there is a dramatization of the passage about the adulteress. The course leaders choose one of the participants to play the role of the adulteress and one for Jesus. Everyone else is a mob. How this is experienced by the participants is best left to one of the participants: "What followed was one of the most shocking scenes in the Gestalt: we acted out the scene with the adulteress. I was part of the mob. At the beginning we could not play the role - we were too weak. And then I really took on the role and I was terrible. We were loud, aggressive, scary. I was not just scared of the crowd; I was scared of myself. You are part of the mob; you go with the flow or you get carried away by it. I was surprised by a teammate who was reserved, and then he shouted and screamed [so much] that I was left speechless. We realized that the power of the crowd is much greater and cannot be controlled. The crowd does not ask if it's fair - it has no substance and no positive things. If you are just a means to an end, you do not stand a chance."[17]

From their words, we can see how deep the experience goes and how quickly they make a connection to their own lives. Leaders have to be extremely careful here because there are strong emotions involved. That is why there is always an act of reconciliation and prayer after the performance. The need for prayer arises spontaneously during such work. Only then does the reflection follow, during which we can also clarify the whole process theoretically. The results are regularly extremely positive, as we can see again from the words of one participant: “I felt paralyzed as I played a role in the mob. I was part of the mob, I felt the pressure it put on the sinner, I heard the various shouts, I watched the reactions of the sinner and Jesus, but I could not join in the shaming and mocking myself. It was important to me that after the difficult role plays, we stood up and hugged the member of the group who was playing the role of the sinner. I was very touched by the idea that after Jesus touches or heals someone, he sends them back to life healed. This is how Jesus gives me life in the different relationships I find myself in. Sometimes he brings me health and joy through me, other times he brings me health through others.”

It's an obvious act that triggers religious feelings in participants with

[17] At the end of the course, each participant must write a final paper. In addition to the theoretical and practical work, he/she must write his/her own reflection on the experience of the entire training. The references I use come from these final reflections. The participants are aware of this and agree to its use.

little or almost no faith, while awaking spiritual resources for resilience in life. We do not talk as much about these resources that come from religiosity, but they emerge as if they were here themselves. To confirm this, I quote words from a participant's personal reflection: “God has found me again and will not let me go. Like Moses, I realize that in times of need I finally seek God's help. How glad I am that I can feel Him and that he takes me in his arms again and again. How often do I insist with my own head that I can manage on my own. When I cannot, I give myself to Him. He really has a nerve with me. I forget to thank Him, but I also remember to remind Him when He forgets something. My prayers are short. It's a waste of time for litanies. I can spend my time doing something else. That is so naive, so simple in my world. But deep down, I can feel how much he loves me. I do not hide anything from him. He knows me. I do not need to apologize. I must accept the consequences of my actions. There is no other way.” There is not much to add to that. This method has enabled individuals throughout the process to feel themselves. In doing so, they also felt themselves in relation to their neighbors and the society in which they lived. They were able to see themselves in all the entanglements of the everyday flow of life as dictated by the 'street'. Most importantly, they have found a place for the transcendent, the need for God. This process is much easier to understand if we relate it to the hermeneutic process of the French philosopher P. Ricoeur.

Distanciation as a path to a better self-image

In this concrete presentation of the methodological work in Christian Gestalt pedagogy, we have seen how the individual can, here and now, first accept himself and then in some way to heal his own weakness. Through the guided reading of a selected Bible passage, everyone first encounters themselves and becomes aware of this in a safe group. Then, through a dramatization that allows a certain distanciation from the experience of life itself, as P. Ricoeur argues in his hermeneutical philosophy, he can open himself to God. But first one must perceive oneself reflexively through the stories that enter one's own life through the stories of others. The self compares itself with others in order to create space for that which lies outside itself and to open itself up to the transcendent. So Ricoeur presupposes a subject that is ‘capable of narrative’. We are open for narrative through imitation - mimesis. This must be understood as an activity, an active process of imitation or representation. He distinguishes several stages in this mimesis: The first stage is a person's ability to distinguish what they are narrating and in what way. It is about the person as a ‘narrating being’. Ricoeur understands this ability as ‘mimesis I’. When we think about

ourselves, we do not close ourselves off from the world, but the outside world moves in on us. If we reinforce this through dramatization, the process is even stronger. It is about the interplay between our perception of ourselves and everything around us. It is the dramatization of the 'sacred' passage that sets the process of active imitation in motion even more strongly. Mimesis I, which forms the basis of self-perception as capable of narrative, is automatically transformed into active imitation through dramatization.

In order to understand a story when reading or listening to it, you have to put yourself in the story, to lose yourself in it, so to speak. This is mimesis II. In the dramatization of the Gospel passage, this 'loss' is expressed in the text. Everyone forgets their everyday 'polite' behavior and assumes a role that is often ignored in life, even if we live it in one way or another. Although the participants are convinced that they are imitating the characters from the Gospel, they quickly recognize themselves in these roles. In the next step, the reader/listener returns from the story to his or her own life. This third stage, Mimesis III, is the creative understanding of the story. This brings new understanding for one's own life and change.[18]

It is therefore a process which, in a constant dynamic between distancing and returning to life, helps to shape the story of one's own life as well as that of others. When reading/listening, we stand in front of the text and also in front of our own lives. Reading/listening creatively means that we can see ourselves anew with the help of imagination and thus also create a new world. It is this hermeneutical process, as described by Ricoeur, that takes place when working with biblical texts. Dramatization in particular helps to make the plunge into the text, mimesis II, even more powerful. From the testimonies of the individual participants, we have seen how necessary it is to take a distanciation, mimesis III, which helps to process one's own life in the spirit of the Gospel.

Conclusion

The most important aspect of the dramatization is that this transformation took place in a Christian setting. While the adulteress recognized her weaknesses, she was at the same time able to see new possibilities in Jesus. Ricoeur's whole philosophical endeavor is to open the individual to the so-called good life for oneself and at the same time with and for others. This is only possible through a kind of loss of self in one's own actions or texts. For Ricoeur, the biblical texts are the best way to find true inner strength for the good life. In these texts, the

[18] Paul Ricoeur, *Krog med pripovedjo in časovnostjo* (Apokalipsa, 2000), 120-137.

reader loses himself in a certain way in order to then find a much greater openness first to new possibilities and then to a kind of transcendence, we could say: to religiosity. For these texts make use of a logic that is not of this world and open doors that this world cannot open.

The example of the adulteress makes this dynamic even clearer. The participants, both the mob and the sinner, must first step out of their current role in order to return more easily and better to the here and now of everyday life. Jesus' demand that the one who is free from all sin should throw the first stone at the adulteress opens the healing process. Both the sinner and her judges must look inwards. Both scribes and Pharisees recognize that the solution to the aggressiveness that drives them to condemnation is to acknowledge their own dark sides.[19] Modern man, who likes to hide behind the sins of others and justify his actions with contempt, can learn here the way of inner healing from personal bitterness. The dramatization of this Gospel passage teaches us that rigid adherence to legalism does not bring true liberation. Looking for someone to blame for what is bad in society leads to more injustice. Mercy and understanding are the only things that bring hope. Jesus acts as a true therapist with the dimension of hope for a new, fuller and healthier life.[20]

The whole process that Christian Gestalt pedagogy sets in motion to strengthen mental health, inner stability and self-satisfaction is best illustrated by the words of one participant's final reflection: 'How do I feel?!?' Like a naked goddess, able to be strong despite a deeply internalized vulnerability. Where do I penetrate everything that stands in my way and destroy it in a redemptive way? Wow!!! Priceless, even though I am on the verge of a melancholic cry almost every moment, a mixture of sadness and happiness, pain and relief, at the thought of the coming meeting, the journey together through the depths of my soul. Will I be able to cope with my own deep feelings, as if the last fiber of the fabric of my emotions had failed for a moment?!? I do not know, but I suspect I will unearth a jewel of the soul, for myself and for all those who will be by my side."

This is the goal of all educational work, which does much to help young people withstand the pressures of society. By using Gestalt pedagogical approaches, we first educate the educators and through them the young people to recognize the

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[19] Tomaš Halik, „Wege einer neuen Evangelisierung?," in *Das Ewige im Fluss der Zeit: Der Gott, den wir brauchen,* K. Rehustorfer ed. (Herder, 2016), 223.

"I cannot believe in a faith, a church, a Christ without wounds. Everything that is offered to us on the religious market today should be subjected to an authenticity test: Do the offerings bear any kind of wounds? Have they not removed the elements of tragedy, pain and insecurity? Are they not just ... shiny offers for a quick path to happiness, success and contentment? Christ shows us his wounds so that we too may have the courage to admit our wounds and scars and not cover them up."

[20] Hans Neuhold, *Integrative Gestaltpädagogik und biblische Spiritualität* (EHP, 2023), 159-160.

pressures of society and the dangers of the demands of closed and fundamentalist groups, and at the same time, through Christianity, we give them the strength to free themselves from the pressures of society or to protect themselves in advance against groups that are too narrow-minded. This is true Christian spirituality, which draws its fullness from the incarnate God. All pedagogical and therapeutic work, even if the biblical theme is not in the foreground, opens up a religious dimension. It is important that this dimension has a therapeutic effect, as we can confirm one last time in the words of a participant: "On a religious level, I felt a deep connection between life and religiosity. Through the biblical narratives, I recognized my own destiny, personal trials, mistakes, grief and the possibility of forgiveness and new hope. Through the liturgy, the biblical texts, the songs and the meditation, I felt the possibility of changing my idea of religiosity. Religiosity is not an activity alongside all the others, but I felt it was a fundamental event from which everything comes and to which everything returns."

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Saint Macarie the Hieromonk and the Technique of Adapting Byzantine Stichera in Second and Third Mode

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ABSTRACT. This study aims to explore the reasons behind the differences between the original Greek version of the *Anastasimatarion* and its Romanian translation by Macarie Ieromonahul (the Hieromonk). I undertake a musicological analysis of the 2nd and 3rd Mode stichera, taking into account the method proposed by Costin Moisil and applying it to these two modes. One of the most important compositional rules, which is also a crucial factor in the adaptation process, is the relationship between a cadence formula and the position of the accented syllable in the text to which it corresponds. This factor – along with other aspects discussed in the article – helps explain why Macarie's melodic line differs from the original. I argue that a good adaptation does not primarily mean melodic identity, but rather keeping the Byzantine compositional rules and, as much as possible, the final cadence note. To support this claim, I propose the hypothesis of the set of cadences: formulas that share approximately the same melodic structure but develop differently depending on the accentuation of the literary text for which they are used.

Keywords: compositional rules; byzantine modes; adaptation technique; Petros Lampadarios; Macarie the Hieromonk.

Introduction

Father Macarie Ieromonahul [the Hieromonk] (1770-1836) – canonized by the Romanian Orthodox Church in 2024 – is considered to be the founder of modern church byzantine music, and his *Anastasimatarion* – the first printed

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collection of chrysantic Romanian chants – was used not only by the Church chanters, but also by professors in newly established Romanian chant schools in the 19th century. His work was considered a model for other Romanian *Anastasimataria* and has been re-edited four times, being used to this day by many protopsaltes. In this paper I bring forth some aspects of my research undertaken upon the technique of adaptation of Greek ecclesiastical chants of the New Method into Romanian[1]. I compare the syntoma-arga stichera of the *Neon Anastasimatarion*, composed by Petros Lampadarios Peloponnesios, edited in chrysantic notation by Petros Ephesios[2] (Bucharest, 1820), with their translation into Romanian by Macarie Ieromonahul, printed in 1823.[3] The subject of my paper was tackled by Costin Moisil in his study on the 1st Mode stichera.[4] Therefore, I will briefly discuss his method and conclusion on this topic; next, I will describe my own analysis concerning the adaptation of the 2nd and 3rd Mode stichera. Since in this study I intend to undertake an exercise in musicological analysis of the sources, I will leave aside the information concerning Father Macarie's life and activity.[5]

1. Costin Moisil's Method

Moisil[6] divided the Greek chants in musical phrases, which follow specific rules of concatenation. A musical phrase contains a syllabic part and a cadential formula. The cadential formula – where the duration of syllables is

1 I have discussed the topic extensively in my thesis, „Principii componistice în acțiunea de românire a cântărilor bisericești la Macarie Ieromonahul" (Compositional Principles in the Process of Adapting Church Chants by Macarie Ieromonahul), written under the supervision of Fr. Prof. Vasile Stanciu at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Babeș-Bolyai University.

2 *Νέον Αναστασιματάριον, μεταφρασθέν κατά την νεοφανή μέθοδον της μουσικης* (Bucharest, 1820).

3 *Anastasimatariu bisericesc după aşăzământul Sistimii Ceii noao* (Vienna, 1823).

4 "The Romanian Versions of Petros Lampadarios' *Anastasimatarion*. Observations regarding the Principles of Music Adaptation," in *Papers Read at the 12th Meeting of the IMS Study Group Cantus Planus, Lillafüred/Hungary, 2004. Aug. 23-28*, ed. László Dobszay (Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2006), 151-170. See also the Romanian translation of the article: "Versiunile româneşti ale Anastasimatarului lui Petros Lampadarios. Observații privind principiile de adaptare a muzicii," in *Românirea cântărilor: un meşteşug şi multe controverse. Studii de muzicologie bizantină* (Ed. Muzicală, 2012), p. 96-119.

5 For details, see Niculae M. Popescu, *Viața şi activitatea dascălului de cântări Macarie Ieromonahul* (Institutul de Arte Grafice Carol Göbl, 1908).

6 See also, „Adaptarea în limba română a stihirilor din Anastasimatar," in *Românirea cântărilor*, 120-133.

two or four beats – represents the core of the musical phrase, carrying a more complex melodic line than the syllabic part, which gravitates simply towards the polarizing step of the mode. The cadential formulas have a quadruple meter, and the accentuated syllable starts on the first beat. The cadential formula can be *perfect* (the text is longer, and it contains a completed idea), while the *imperfect* cadences are used for a shorter text and incomplete idea. There is a specific correlation between a cadence formula and the position of the accentuated syllable of the text to which the formula corresponds; therefore, some musical cadences are used for texts accentuated on the last syllable, other for those accentuated on the penultimate syllable, and others for the antepenultimate syllable.

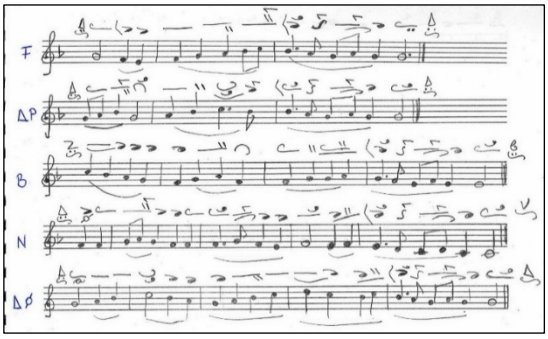
Macararie's *Anastasimatarion* presents the same characteristics: the musical piece is divided in musical phrases, and the cadences have more or less a connection with a specific accentuation of the text.

Comparing the two versions, Moisil points out the following: in both *Anastasimataria* the cadences occur in the same place of the literary text, in 80% of the cases; 70% of the formulas end on the same cadential step, and 40% of the occurrences use the same musical formula.

Moisil's study reveals several arguments that explain the differences of the two versions: 1. The Romanian translation is longer/shorter than the original text, so Macarie had to add or cut a formula; 2. In order to have a suitable accentuation for the Romanian text, Macarie can use other formula than Petros (usually, on the same step); 3. Certain changes are made by rhetorical means: for a text which talks about `death` or `darkness`, the adaptor could use a low-pitched cadence, while for `heaven` he can introduce a high-pitched one; 4. Some formulas which don't correspond with those used by Petros are taken by Macarie from an older adaptation of the *Anastasimatarion* (translated by Mihalache Moldovlahul, a disciple of Petros) from the end of the 18th century. With other occasions, Macarie borrows a formula which was employed in a different stichera for the same literary text; 5. Moisil also argues that Macarie had a certain amount of freedom, by preferring fewer common formulas than keeping the original melody.

2. Second Mode Stichera

I have applied Moisil's method for the 2nd Mode stichera. I have divided the chants in sections (periods), musical phrases and cadences, perfect and imperfect. In all 23 studied chants, I was able to identify 5 types of perfect (**Figure 1**) and 12 imperfect cadences (**Figure 2**), and 1 melismatic.[7]



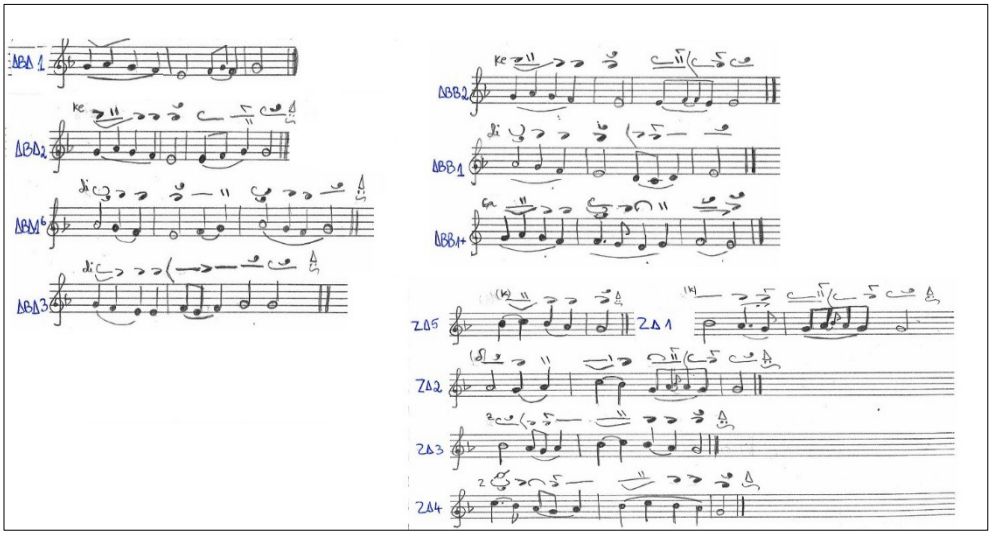


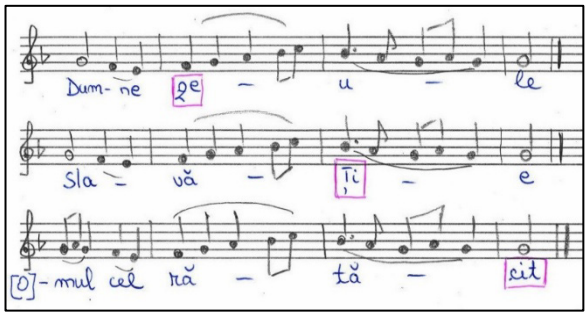
Figure 2. Imperfect formulas

After identifying the formulas, I have also established the correlation of each melodic formula with the particular stressing of any of the final three syllables of the word to which the formula corresponds. For example, the ZD 2 formula will be used only in relation to a word with a stressed penultimate syllable, DP for the stress on the antepenultimate one and so on.

[7] Each formula has a given code (letters +/- numbers or symbols) most of the time related to the final note of the formula (*e.g.* N, B), to the melodic line (*e.g.* DBD = Di – Bu – Di; ZD = Zo – Di), or to its role (*e.g.* F = final cadence).

The Romanian version of Petros Lampadarios' *Anastasimatarion* features the characteristics mentioned above with regards to the structure of the chants. The cadences are identical when compared to the Greek *Anastasimatarion*, with a slight change in the proportion between the two: 180 cadences Ephesios – 206 Macarie. The higher number of cadences with Macarie can be explained through the fact that, most of the times, the translation of the Romanian text is longer than the Greek text, which implies the introduction of a new cadence on Macarie's version.

As far as the melodic stress-formula correlation goes, Macarie keeps some of the associations made by Ephesios, while changing others. For example, the *F[inal] formula* (**Figure 3**) – always employed as a final Formula, both by Ephesios and Macarie – is used in 75% of the cases in order to stress the penultimate syllable, as the rest of the percentage is split rather equally between emphases on the antepenultimate and last syllable, while Petros relates it only for the antepenultimate one. This way, the original melody is kept unchanged.



The adaptation

In the 2nd Mode, the adaptation technique reveals the same traits as those disclosed by Moisil study. These features can be traced throughout all the stichera under study. Here I provide only a few illustrative examples.

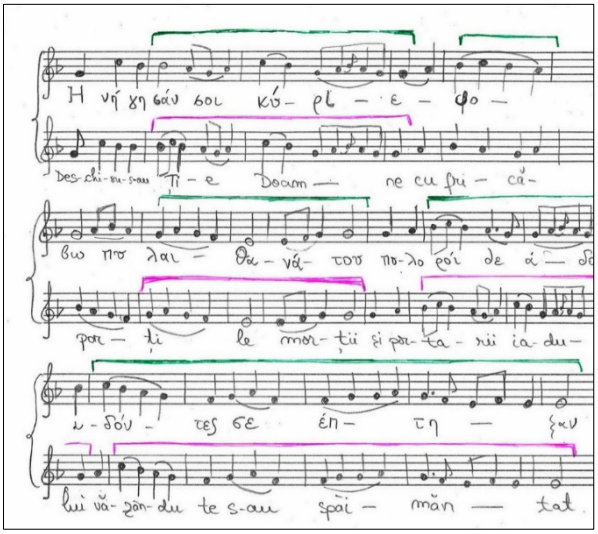


Figure 4. Macarie *maintains the division* of the chant of Ephesios: the example shows how this sticheron (the 6th of the Vespers) is divided almost the same as the Greek source.

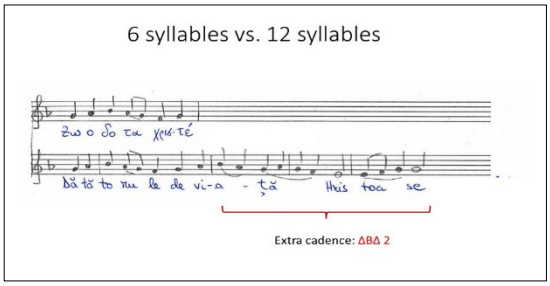
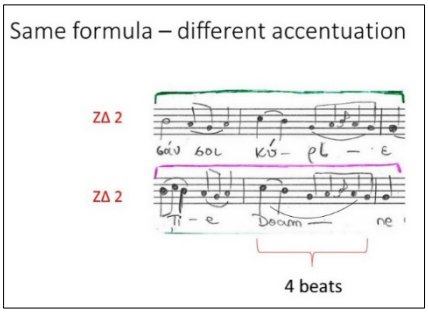


Figure 5. In the following example, we observe how Macarie *adds an extra cadence* to fill the difference of the syllables between Ζωοδότα ("Giver of life") and the Romanian translation („Dătătorule de viață").



When there is a difference regarding the position of the stressed syllable between the Greek text and the Romanian one, Macarie will find two solutions: **(Figure 6)** maintaining the formula but changing its original correlation with the text – even if this means to stretch the syllable on two extra beats.

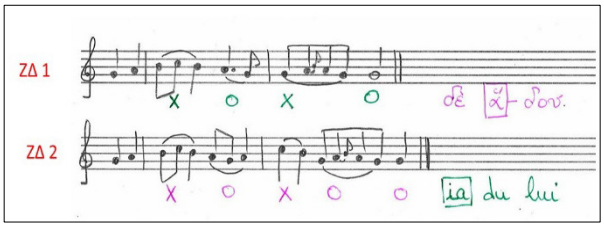


Figure 7. The second solutions, as the example shows, is to replace the formula with one of the same category (Zo-Di type), only suitable for the way in which stress is placed in the Romanian version of the text.

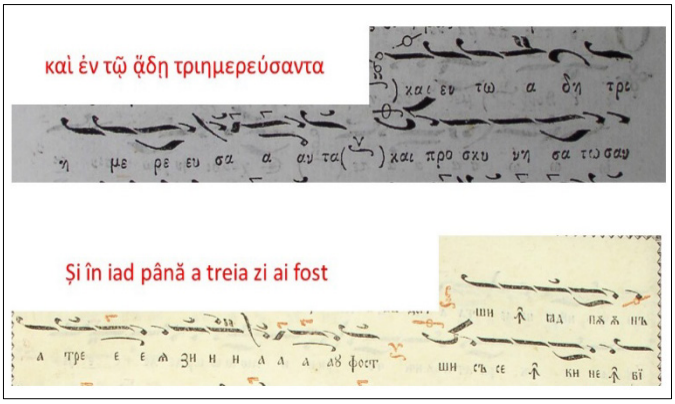
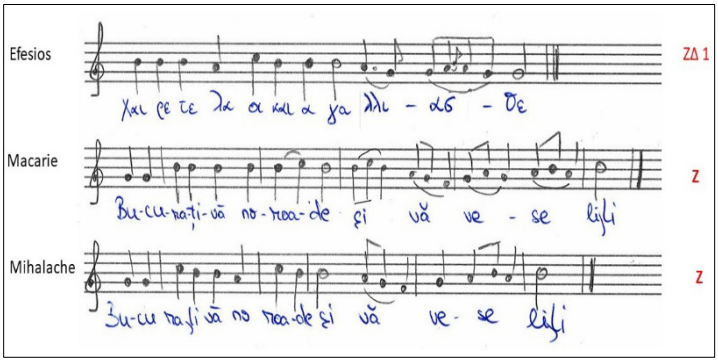


Figure 8. Rhetorical cadences. The *N formula*, which is concluded on the lower pentachord, Ni (Do), is associated, rhetorically, with words such as "hell", "death". In the example, we notice how Macarie identically reproduces it in the same place within the text. In the 4th stichera

of the Vespers however Macarie keeps the grave formula but correlates it with other text than P. Lampadarios does (Petros: „παντοδύναμος" – "almighty" vs. Macarie: „unuia fără de moarte" – "immortal"). We could say that Macarie was more interested than P. Lampadarios in keeping a rhetorical connection between text and melody.

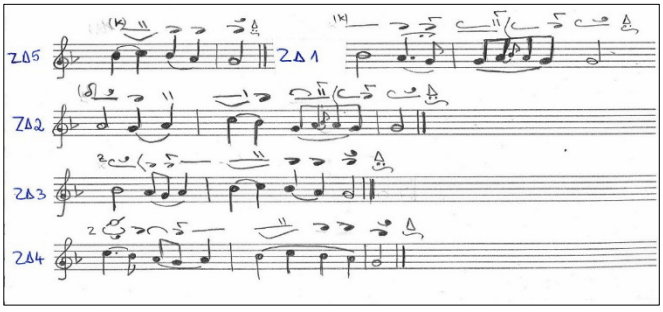
Figure 9. On other occasions, however, although he could have chosen one of the "regular" solutions, the Romanian hieromonk preferred to adapt the melody in a manner closer to Mihalache Moldovlahu, an older Romanian version of the *Anastasimatarion*. Therefore, it is plausible that Macarie knew this version, even if only in oral form. The manuscript written in 1776 is preserved in The Monastery of Great Lavra (Z 26).[8] As the example shows, it is easy to observe the similarities between these two Romanian versions and how they differ from each other.



The resulting percentage for comparing Greek and Romanian chants is approximately the same as that found by Moisil for 1st mode compositions: 80% for cadences placed in the same literary text; 70% for using the same cadential step, and 40% for using an identical formula. *But we can approach the situation differently.*

Set of formulas hypothesis

We take, for example, the Zo-Di type cadences (**Figure 10**). Each one has a specific correlation with the accentuated syllable of



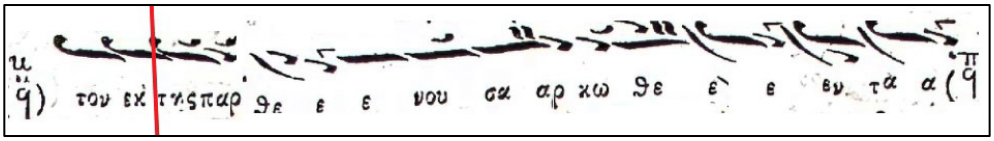
[8] Details in Sebastian Barbu-Bucur, *Manuscrisele muzicale româneşti de la Muntele Athos*, (Ed. Muzicală, 2000), 269-273.

the text[9], but they carry a similar melodic line. So, if, for example, the composer wants to use a Zo-Di type cadence, he will choose one which relates better for the accentuation of the text. But essentially, he could consider that the Zo-Di type cadences could be just *one formula which has a multiple accentuation and slight melodic differences*. Therefore, if the adaptor would use other formula than Petros, but belonging to the same set of formulas, it is possible to consider his adaptation as „identical" with the original (see **Figure 7** as an example, where ZD 1 is replaced with ZD 2 in the Romanian version).

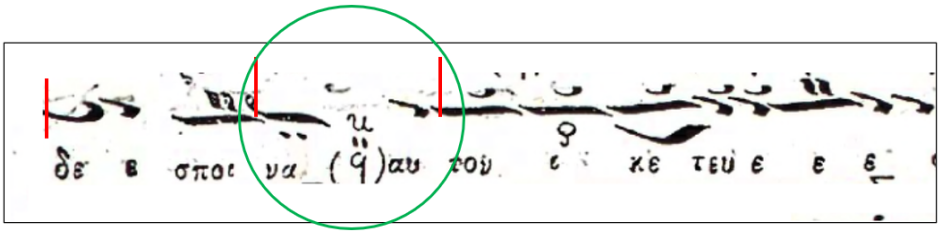
In conclusion, if we follow this theory, it means that the percentage of similarities between Ephfesios and Macarie in using the same formula increases significantly, somewhere around 60% (40% – without the formula set theory).

3. Third Mode Stichera

The compositional structure of a 3rd Mode musical piece has a reduced syllabic part, which lasts until the first stressed syllable of the verse, moment from which each syllable corresponds to 2-6 beats (**Figure 8**).



Avoiding ternal meter

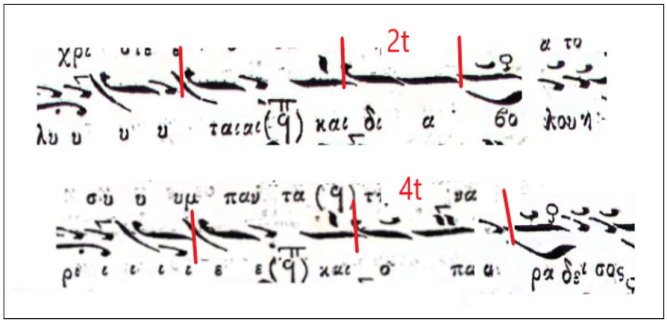


The syllabic part can be modified due to metrical reason, because there is a general tendency to avoid 3-beat measures, and to keep a quadruple

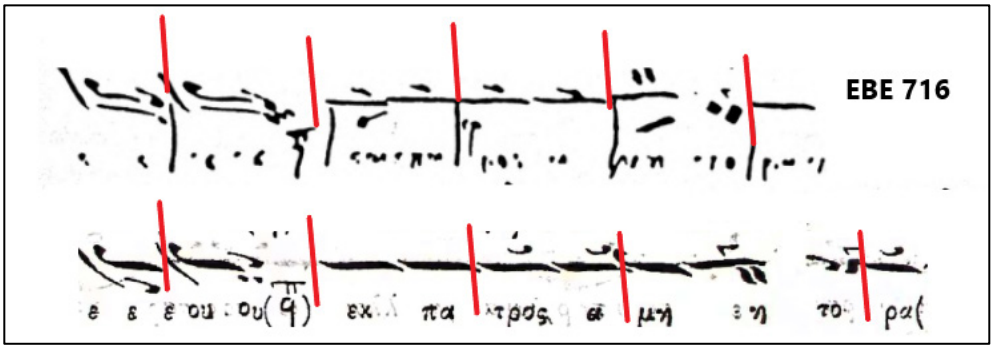
[9] ZD 1 and ZD 4 is used when the accent of the literary text is on the penultimate syllable. The others on the antepenultimate syllable.

meter[10] (a bar of 6 beats being less frequent). In this sense, the last syllable of a formula receives a dipli, or an apli depending on the number of next syllables and the distance to the next accented syllable (**Figure 9**).

Ephesios's interest in avoiding ternary measures is also evident from the different solutions he proposes for the same type of situation. In the first two stichera from the Vespers, there are two identical examples in terms of isosyllaby and homotony: και δι-α-**βό**-λου η... and και ο πα-**ρά**-δι-σος. Both solutions avoid a three-beat measure, but in the second example, Ephesios opts for a quadruple meter, while the first has a simple binary one (**Figure 10**).



The „protographon" of Petros' *Anastasimatarion*, in the exegesis of Grigorios Protopsaltis, EBE 716 (**Figure 11**)[11] written in 1815, provides clear evidence that Petros' compositions had, shortly after the Chrysantic Reform, a 4-beat meter. Even Ephesios doesn't always respect this rule.

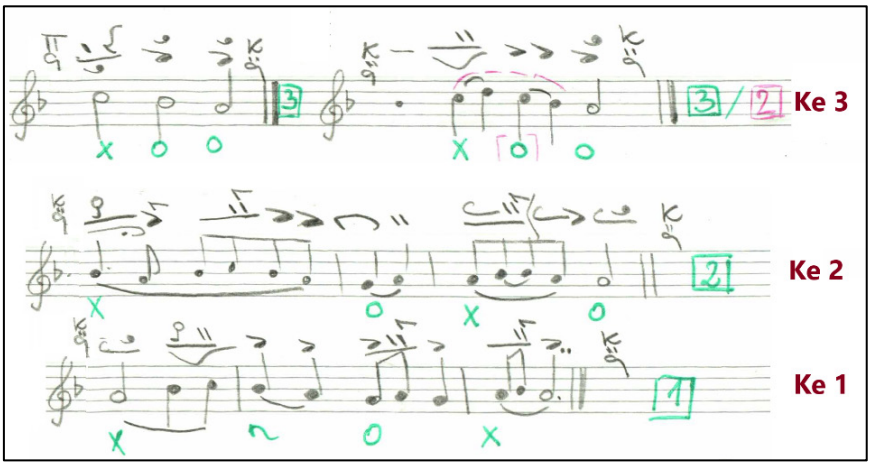


Regarding the division in syntactical units: I have counted 135 cadences, perfect and imperfect, and arrange them in 6 categories. I have classified the

[10] A practice found throughout the entire *Anastasimatarion* with regard to the syntoma-arga stichera.

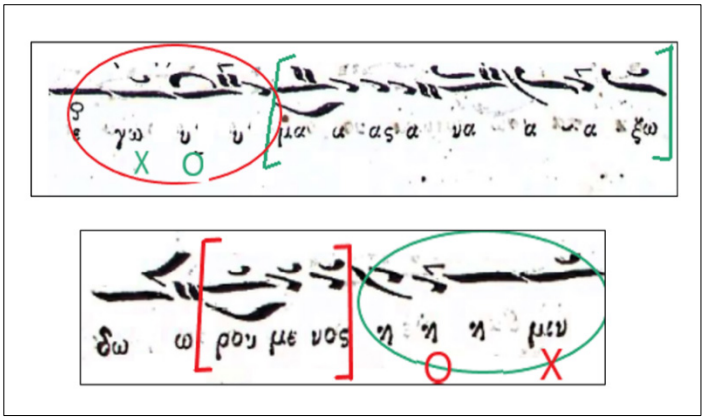
[11] Εθνική Βιβλιοθήκη της Ελλάδος („National Library of Greece").

formulas by their melodic pattern and found their correlation with the position of the accentuated syllable to which they relate. Once again, I take into consideration the `set of formulas` hypothesis, which say that there is one basic melodic formula for each set, that can take multiple accentuation, and therefore some melodic variations occur. In the **Figure 12**, I present the *Ke imperfect formulas.*



Microformulas. XO and OX

Another peculiarity of the studied corpus is the appearance of two microformulas, which can be added before or after the formula (**Figure 13**). The first one is used when, before the formula, there is a bisyllabic word that has its first syllable accentuated (X-O). The other micro-formula relates to a bysyllabic word with the last syllable accentuated and is added after the formula (O-X).



The Romanian Adaptation

With Macarie, after the division of the text syntactical units, I noticed the following:

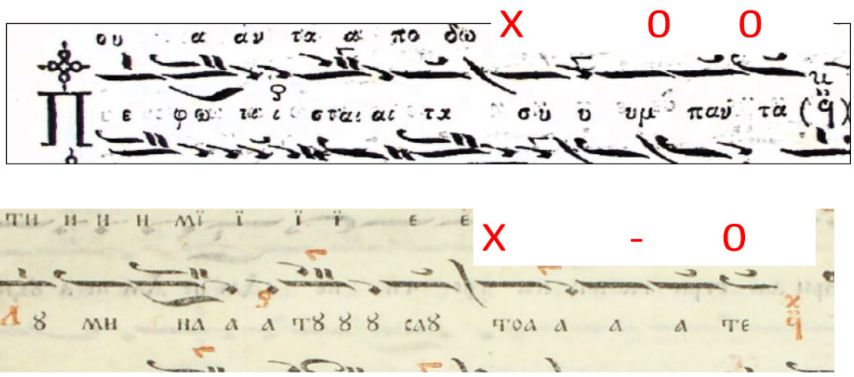


Figure 14. Macarie uses the same formulas as Ephesios, but he is not as strict as Ephesios in keeping their original correlation with the text.

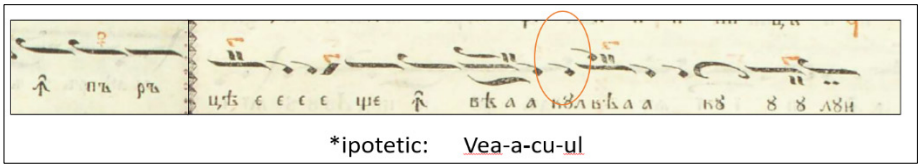


Figure 15. Sometimes, within a cadence formula, Macarie relates a syllable to a *single beat*, although he could have respected the original rule of composition (two notes to a syllable; here one syllable under the two apostrophoi).

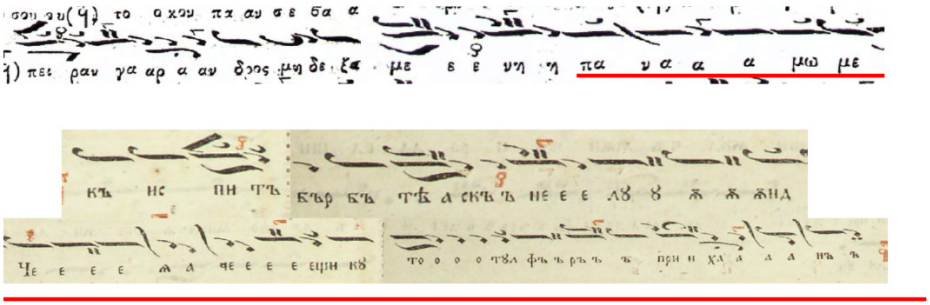


Figure 16. With regard to the adaptation, Macarie attempts to render as much as possible the original melody. Most of the inconsistencies are due in particular to the length of the words. In the example, the word Πανάμωμε („blameless") have, in Romanian paraphrase, a double number of syllables: „cu totul fără prihană". Therefore, Macarie will introduce an „extra cadence".

Figure 17. In the following table, I have rendered the musical formulas used in the 4th stichera of the Vespers with their codes. While Petros (P.E) uses Ke 1 and Ke 2, Macarie employs Ke 2 and Ke 3 (see formulas in **Figure 12**). But, if we take into consideration the different formulas as being part of the same *set of formulas* (here: Ke 1 = Ke 2 = Ke 3), we can say that – in the eyes of the adaptor –, there is 100% similarity.

P. E.	Ke inc	**Ke 1**	**Ke 2**	Pa A	Ke 2	F
M.	Ke inc	**Ke 2**	**Ke 3**	Pa A	Ke 2	F

Conclusion

The division of stichera in syntactical units and their correlation with a specific stressing of the text has a decisive role in shaping the rules of composition of a byzantine chant and its adaptation into Romanian.

Keeping a 4-beat bar (as much as possible) is a characteristic of Petros Lampadarios compositions, as it turns out from Petros Ephesios edition, and more evident from EBE 716 manuscript. Macarie however uses more often a 6-beat measure. Both authors avoid a triple meter.

Most of the inconsistencies between the Greek and Romanian variants are due to the difference in length of the original word and its translation. Most common situation when the melody differs are related to words as: Σωτῆρ („Saviour") = „Mântuitorule", Θεοτόκος „Mother of God"/ „God-bearer") = „Născătoare de Dumnezeu", Παναμώμη („blameless") = „Ceea ce eşti [cu totul] fără prihană".

Adding low-pitched and high-pitched cadences for rhetorical means are more common in the Romanian *Anastasimatarion*.

The 'set of cadences/formulas' comprises *similar formulas that display slight melodic differences and correspond to varying accentuations of the text.* Using a similar formula on the same cadential step as the original, could be considered in the eyes of the adaptor, as „keeping the same melos", which was one of Macarie's goal. This means that a good adaptation doesn't always imply keeping the same melodic line. The set of formulas hypothesis can be taken into consideration with regard to the 2nd and 3rd Mode chants. For the 1st mode stichera it seems that this method cannot apply – which means that the rules of composition and adaptation can differ from a mode to another.

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Noetic Experience and the Morphology of Prayer: Evagrius Ponticus and the Greek Philosophical Tradition

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the role of prayer within the spiritual framework of Evagrius Ponticus, focusing particularly on his definitions and his significant notion of "pure prayer." It aims to elucidate the nature and key function of this form of prayer within his ascetic and contemplative vision. By conducting a thorough textual analysis of Evagrius's key writings and spiritual terminology, the study places his teachings within the historical context of early Christian spirituality and its engagement with Greek philosophical ideas. The article contends that Evagrius's perspective of prayer as the preeminent function and genuine "state" of the intellect (*nous*) emphasizes the originality and relevance of his "imageless prayer" theory, positioning it as a central element in his mystical system.

Keywords: Evagrius Ponticus, intellect, contemplation, pure prayer, noetic experience, knowledge of God

Introduction

This article investigates Evagrius Ponticus' conception of prayer within his spiritual framework, focusing on distinctive definitions and the key notion of "pure prayer." The primary objective is to elucidate the multifaceted nature of prayer articulated by this influential fourth-century Desert Father and highlight its central significance within his ascetical and contemplative vision. Through a thorough textual analysis of Evagrius's principal treatises, including

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De oratione, *Skemmata*, and *Kephalaia Gnostika*, the study examines his specialized spiritual lexicon, with a notable focus on key terms such as *nous* (intellect), *theōria* (contemplation), and *noēmata* (representations). This examination is situated within the historical development of early Christian spirituality and addresses Evagrius's engagement with and reinterpretation of Greek philosophical elements. By conceptualizing prayer not merely as a text prayed or a request addressed to God but as the authentic activity, supreme function, and genuine "state" of the purified intellect, the author aims to demonstrate both the originality and enduring importance of Evagrius's theory of "imageless prayer." The article contends that this unique notion constitutes not simply one aspect among many but represents the culmination and driving impetus of Evagrius's mystical system, fundamentally shaping his understanding of the intellect's ascent to direct knowledge of God.

Evagrius Ponticus as a mystic author

In the 20th century, two significant developments reshaped the modern perception of Evagrius Ponticus,[1] (345/6-399) one of the most prominent Desert Fathers of 4th-century Egypt[2] and, at the same time, "one of the most enigmatic and elusive figures of the early Christian centuries."[3]

The first was the unprecedented pace of the recovery of Evagrius's writings – not only those in the original Greek but also translations into ancient

[1] The main historical sources referring to the biography of Evagrius Ponticus are: (1) Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 38 (ca. 420 AD); (2) Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.23 (ca. 440 AD); (3) Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.30 (mid-5th century AD) and a Coptic biography from the 5th century. Other sources include: the testament of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the anonymous work *Historia Monachorum* 20.15 (from the end of the 4th century), the anonymous work *Apophthegmata*, *s.v.* „Evagrius" (from the 4th/5th centuries), Gennadius, *De Viris Illustribus* 6.11 and 6.17, as well as Jerome, *Epistola* 133; *Dialogus adversus Pelagianos*, preface, and *Commentarius in Ieremiam* 4, preface. Cf. Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, "Evagrius Ponticus, the Origenian Ascetic (and Not the Origenistic 'Heretic')," in *Orthodox Monasticism Past and Present*, ed. John A. McGuckin (Gorgias Press, 2015), 159–224, https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463236656-012. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Evagrius and Gregory: Nazianzen or Nyssen? Cappadocian (and Origenian) Influence on Evagrius," *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies* 53, no. 1 (2013): 117–37.

[2] Regarding the life, writings, and reputation of Evagrius, see Antoine Guillaumont, *Un philosophe au désert: Évagre le Pontique*, Textes et traditions 8 (Paris: Vrin, 2009), 13–74; Augustine Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy* (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9–71.

[3] Cf. David E. Linge, "Leading the Life of Angels: Ascetic Practice and Reflection in the Writings of Evagrius of Pontus," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 3 (2000): 537–68.

languages.[4] These translations played a crucial role, offering access, albeit through a linguistic filter, to texts that would otherwise have been lost to us.[5] Furthermore, they contributed decisively to identifying specific Greek works which, although traditionally attributed to other authors, are now recognized with certainty as the work of Evagrius. Critical research on Greek manuscripts has led to the publication of a significant number of volumes containing Evagrius's "notes" (*scholia*[6]) on various biblical texts, as well as his "chapters" (*kephalaia*[7]), in which key aspects of Christian monastic life are analyzed.[8]

From a relatively early date, Evagrius's writings were divided into those considered valuable from a spiritual perspective and those viewed as dangerous from a theological standpoint. Beginning in the 7th century, Evagrius's reputation was so severely compromised that many of his writings were transmitted to

[4] Evagrius became the target of attacks even during his lifetime, and these intensified after his death, on January 6, 399; this explains the loss of many works in Greek and their survival only in ancient translations, especially in Syriac, but also in Armenian, Latin, and other languages. This survival exclusively in translations is especially true for his speculative works, while his ascetic works, generally considered more harmless, had a different fate. Cf. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *Evagrius's* Kephalaia Gnostica*: A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), xxiv–xxv.

[5] Evagrius of Pontus, *The Gnostic Trilogy*, trans. Robin Darling Young et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 13 sq.

[6] Evagrius describes his commentaries as belonging to the established genre of *scholia*, literally "marginal annotations", on successive, selected verses. See Luke Dysinger, "Evagrius Ponticus: The Psalter as a Handbook for the Christian Contemplative," in *The Harp of Prophecy: Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms*, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity, vol. 20 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 97–125.

[7] We usually translate *képhalaion* as "chapter", but this word should not be understood in the sense we give the term today. Unlike the chapters of a modern work, *képhalaia* are not part of a continuous discourse; the *képhalaion* is autonomous, and forms a self-contained whole, each being dedicated to a single subject. See Antoine Guillaumont, "Introduction," in *Sur les pensées*, by Évagre le Pontique, ed. Paul Géhin, Claire Guillaumont, and Antoine Guillaumont, Sources chrétiennes 438 (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 9–10.

[8] Especially those undertaken by Antoine Guillaumont, Claire Guillaumont, and Paul Géhin under the auspices of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris: Évagre le Pontique, *Traité pratique, ou, Le moine*, ed. Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, vol. I, Sources chrétiennes 170 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971); Évagre le Pontique, *Traité pratique, ou, Le moine*, ed. Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, vol. II, Sources chrétiennes 171 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971); Évagre le Pontique, *Le gnostique, ou, A celui qui est devenu digne de la science*, ed. Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, Sources chrétiennes, no 356 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1989); Évagre le Pontique, *Sur les pensées*, ed. Paul Géhin, Claire Guillaumont, and Antoine Guillaumont, Sources chrétiennes 438 (Paris: Cerf, 1998); Évagre le Pontique, *Chapitres sur la prière*, ed. Paul Géhin, Sources chrétiennes 589 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2017); Évagre le Pontique, *Scholies aux Psaumes*, ed. Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, Paul Géhin, and Matthieu Cassin, vol. I (Psaumes 1-70), Sources chrétiennes 614 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2021); Évagre le Pontique, *Scholies aux Psaumes*, ed. Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, Paul Géhin, and Matthieu Cassin, vol. II (Psaumes 71-150), Sources chrétiennes 615 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2021); Évagre le Pontique, *Antirrhétique*, ed. Charles-Antoine Fogielman, Sources chrétiennes 640 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2024).

posterity under less suspect names,[9] while others were entirely lost, at least in their original Greek form. In this context, the separation between writings considered "acceptable" and those deemed "suspect" deepened further, generally drawn between what was perceived as "practical" and what was seen as "speculative."[10]

Modern revisionist studies, through a critical re-evaluation of traditional paradigms, have come to view Evagrius's work in a balanced way[11] encompassing both its speculative theological aspects and its ascetic, practical dimension.[12] This academic rehabilitation has also been accompanied by an ever-deeper awareness of Evagrius's influence – not only as an essential figure in Syriac and Byzantine mysticism but also as one of the thinkers who definitively shaped Western mysticism and asceticism.[13]

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[9] Evagrius's treatise *On Prayer* was transmitted under the name of St. Nilus of Ancyra, *De oratione* J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*, vol. 79 (Paris, 1865), 1166–1199. Following the studies of Irénée Hausherr, *De oratione* has been accepted as an authentic composition of Evagrius. See Irénée Hausherr, "Le *De Oratione* de Nil et Évagre," *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 14 (1933): 196–98. Irénée Hausherr, "Le *Traité De l'Oraison* d'Évagre Le Pontique (Pseudo-Nil)," *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 15 (1934): 34–93; 113–70. Irénée Hausherr, "Le *Traité de l'Oraison* d'Évagre Le Pontique: Introduction, Authenticité, Traduction Française et Commentaire," *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 35, 36 (1960 1959): 3–26, 121–46, 241–65, 361–85; 3–35, 137–87. Until recently, the treatise *On Thoughts* could be read either from volume 79 of the *Patrologia graeca* collection, edited by J.-P. Migne, 1200D–1233A, or from volume I of the famous *Philokalia* (Venice, 1782; new edition: Nicodemus the Hagiorite and Saint Makarios, *Φιλοκαλία τῶν νηπτικῶν συνερανισθεῖσα παρὰ τῶν ἁγίων καὶ θεοφόρων πατέρων ἡμῶν ἐν ᾗ διὰ τῆς κατὰ τὴν Πρᾶξιν καὶ Θεωρίαν Ἠθικῆς Φιλοσοφίας ὁ νοῦς καθαίρεται, φωτίζεται, καὶ τελετοῦται*, 3rd ed., 5 vols. (Athens: Ἀστήρ, 1957), 44–57, the text being published under the name of Nilus of Ancyra and rendered in an incomplete and unequal form. Only the critical edition from 1998 (Évagre le Pontique, *Sur les pensées*.) offers, for the first time, the complete text of the treatise. W. Bousset discovered that the important dogmatic letter of St. Basil the Great, known as "The Eighth Letter", was, in fact, written by Evagrius. His results were confirmed, independently, by the publication of the book by R. Melcher, which supports the same authorship of the letter. See Wilhelm Bousset, *Apophthegmata : Studien Zur Geschichte Des Ältesten Mönchtums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923), 335–41; Robert Melcher, *Der Achte Brief Des Hl. Basilius: Ein Werk Des Evagrius Pontikus*, Münsterische Beiträge Zur Theologie 1 (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1923), 1–4, 78–9. This letter, also known as *De fide* or *Epistula fidei*, is the earliest datable work of Evagrius and is considered evidence of his theological legacy. See Joel Kalvesmaki, "The *Epistula Fidei* of Evagrius of Pontus: An Answer to Constantinople," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2012): 113–39, https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2012.0001.

[10] Augustine Casiday, "Gabriel Bunge and the Study of Evagrius Ponticus: A Review Article," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (2004): 249–97.

[11] Ramelli, *Evagrius's* Kephalaia Gnostica, xxix: "Evagrius's thought must be approached in its entirety: it cannot be appreciated only for its ascetic insights and advice, while rejected for its metaphysical, protological, and eschatological Origenian implications."

[12] Cf. Casiday, "Gabriel Bunge and the Study of Evagrius Ponticus: A Review Article," 249, 251.

[13] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Metaphysik und Mystik des Evagrius Pontikus," *Zeitschrift für Askese und Mystik*, 1939, 31–47. (31): "Alongside this external rehabilitation, the growing realization

The vastness of the *Corpus Evagrianum* and the astonishing diversity of its themes were fully appreciated only in the modern era. Evagrius was recognized as "one of the most important names in the history of spirituality," and his teaching was evaluated as "the first complete system of Christian spirituality."[14]

Against the backdrop of increasing interest in researching the "Evagrian phenomenon"[15] and the expansion in the number of studies and translations, the Pontic monk has come to be viewed as "the first systematic[16] theologian of the spiritual life"[17], "among the most original mystical authors of Eastern Christianity,"[18] "and probably the most remarkable in all of Patristic literature."[19]

Evagrius was a prolific writer.[20] His fundamental ideas, such as "imageless prayer," the ascent of the intellect (*nous*) towards God, "the eight evil thoughts,"

runs parallel that Evagrius is not only the almost unlimited ruler of the entire Syriac and Byzantine mysticism but has also influenced Western mysticism and asceticism in a quite decisive manner." Cf. Antoine Guillaumont, *Les "Képhalaia gnostica" d'Évagre le Pontique et l'histoire de l'origénisme chez les Grecs et chez les Syriens*, Publications de la Sorbonne série patristica Sorbonensia 5 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962), 15: "Evagrius Ponticus left a work that ranks among the most vigorous and original of the 4th century. In it were expressed jointly, in a strange and powerful synthesis, the traditional and entirely empirical teachings of the first Desert Fathers, gathered and codified by a mind endowed with remarkable psychological subtlety, and perhaps the highest and boldest speculations ever conceived by a Christian theologian. The influence it exerted on the development of Christian ascetic and mystical doctrine was immense, in the West and even more so in the East, among the Syrians and the Greeks."

14 Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, trans. Mary P. Ryan (London: Burns & Oates, 1963), 381. Bouyer mentions Wilhelm Bousset, who first drew attention to Evagrius's importance in 1923. See Bousset, *Apophthegmata*., „Euagriosstudien", 281–341 (281: "Evagrius, the interesting monk of the Scetic desert, whom we can call the initiator of monastic mysticism.")

15 Julia Konstantinovsky, "Evagrius in the Philokalia of Sts. Macarius and Nicodemus," in *The Philokalia: A Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality*, ed. Brock Bingaman and Bradley Nassif (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 175.

16 However, as G. Bunge states, Evagrius's works do not have the character of a theological manual, and their author is by no means the straightforward "systematizer" he is often considered to be. Gabriel Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," in *Letters from the Desert*, by Evagrius Ponticus (Sibiu: Deisis, 2022), 126–75.

17 William Harmless, "'Salt for the Impure, Light for the Pure': Reflections on the Pedagogy of Evagrius Ponticus," *Studia Patristica* 37 (2001): 514–26.

18Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Limit of the Mind (Noῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh," *Zeitschrift Für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity* 15, no. 2 (2011): 291–321. (291) Cf. William Harmless and Raymond R. Fitzgerald, "The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus," *Theological Studies* 62, no. 3 (2001): 493–529. (498): „One of the pioneers of Christian mysticism."

19 Ramelli, "Evagrius Ponticus, the Origenian Ascetic (and Not the Origenistic 'Heretic')," 159.

20 Columba Stewart, "Evagrius Ponticus and the Eastern Monastic Tradition on the Intellect and the Passions," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 2 (2011): 263–75, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2010.01675.x.

etc., were to influence Christian mystical spirituality essentially in both the Greek East and the Latin West.[21] Evagrius's spiritual teaching has significantly impacted the entire Christian spirituality in the East and the West, and one can rightly speak of an "Evagrian spirituality."[22]

G. Bunge[23] has shed light on several essential themes that define the key to Evagrian thought, revealing its fundamental mystical character, which recommends the desert father primarily as a mystic[24] and "much less" as a speculative philosopher.[25]

As a disciple of the Cappadocians and an admirer of Origen and his successor, Didymus the Blind, Evagrius attributes particular importance to the issue of Scripture interpretation. He practices spiritual exegesis and a "multidimensional reading of the word of God," which may seem confusing to modern people.[26]

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21 Harmless, "'Salt for the Impure, Light for the Pure': Reflections on the Pedagogy of Evagrius Ponticus," 514.

22 Hausherr, "Le *Traité De l'Oraison* d'Évagre Le Pontique (Pseudo-Nil)," 169.

23 See Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," 126 sq.

24 Gabriel Bunge, "The Life and Personality of Evagrius Ponticus," in *Letters from the Desert*, by Evagrius Ponticus (Sibiu: Deisis, 2022), "§9. The Mystic," 88–102. Cf. Balthasar, "Metaphysik und Mystik des Evagrius Pontikus.", 31–47; Alois Dempf, "Evagrios Pontikos Als Metaphysiker Und Mystiker," *Philosophisches-Jahrbuch* 77 (1970): 297–319.

25 For a view that interprets Evagrius's writings as "the first and most profound effort made by any of the Desert Fathers to correlate the techniques and fruits of Christian ascetic practice – as it had been developed in the Egyptian desert – with a kind of metaphysical map of the monk's journey back to God", cf. Linge, "Leading the Life of Angels," 538. For a general presentation of Evagrius's "metaphysics", see Guillaumont, *Les "Képhalaia gnostica" d'Évagre le Pontique*, 37–9. Trying to give systematic expression to Evagrius's thought, where the author himself refused to offer it, A. Guillaumont brings to the forefront ideas that are found in the *Képhalaia Gnostica*, but which appear there secondarily and are expressed "only in an allusive and veiled way" (37). In the beginning, there was a *henad*, a unity formed by the totality of rational beings (*logikoi*), pure intellects (*noes*), created to know God ("essential knowledge") and to be united with God, a non-numerical Trinity, but also Unity or Monad (37). Due to the negligence of these intellects, which weakened in "the contemplation of essential knowledge", a rupture of the original *henad* occurred, by which these intellects, fallen from Unity, became "souls" (*psychai*) (38). A new creation followed – of "secondary" or material beings – distinct from that of the *logikoi* – purely spiritual beings – a creation whose purpose was to unite each fallen intellect with a body and to place it in a world proportional to its degree of fall (38). Depending on the degree of beings and the nature of bodies, there are different types of contemplation: thick contemplation, proper to demons and impious people; "secondary natural contemplation," which properly belongs to humans (at least those who dedicate themselves to *praktikè* and work towards freeing themselves from passions); "primary natural contemplation," which corresponds to the angelic state and is accessible to people who have acquired *apatheia*; and above all is the knowledge of Unity, or "essential knowledge," reserved only for completely purified intellects. The intellect must ascend step by step from one contemplation to another – and thus salvation is fulfilled, by passing from one contemplation to a higher one (38).

26 Evagrius practices allegorical, typological, tropical, and/or symbolic exegesis (cf. *Scholia on Psalms* and *Proverbs*). Origen set down in writing the four principles, which became classic, in *Peri Archon* IV. As for symbolism as a theory of religious language, and not just as an allegorical interpretation of Scripture, Evagrius owes much also to Clement of Alexandria, cf. Claude

Evagrius articulated his vision of the spiritual life around a tripartite model[27], structured into three distinct stages: asceticism (*praktiké*), the

Mondesert, "Le Symbolisme Chez Clément d'Alexandrie," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 26, no. 1 (1936): 158–80. This "mystical" interpretation is not arbitrary, but follows certain rules already received through Scripture and Tradition. This encoded imagery, Bunge notes, however exotic or even esoteric it may seem to the modern reader, must have been to some extent familiar to the ancient reader. Regarding questions of protology and eschatology, Evagrius avoids divulging the deeper meaning of his meditations, as Didymus the Blind taught him (cf. *Gnostikos* 48), because the "mystical meaning" is difficult for the ordinary person to penetrate, cf. *Scholia in Proverbia Salomonis* 23.1 sq. and 23.0. See Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," 126–131. These questions will be dedicated to a separate treatise, *Kephalaia Gnostika*, a work in which his "multiply encoded language" presents the most significant difficulties in interpretation. It was one of the sources of inspiration for the Origenist monks of the 6th century and thus contributed directly to Evagrius's condemnation. See Guillaumont, *Les "Képhalaia gnostica" d'Évagre le Pontique*, 124 sq., but which does not make a sufficiently clear distinction between Evagrius and the Origenists of the 6th century, cf. Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," 162 and n. 153.

[27] For the origin and evolution of the tripartite and bipartite model, see Antoine Guillaumont, "Étude historique et doctrinale," in *Traité pratique, ou, Le moine*, by Évagre le Pontique, ed. Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, vol. I, Sources chrétiennes 170 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971), 38–63. The pair πρακτική – γνωστική has its origin in Plato. He, seeking to define political science (*Politicus* 258em–259c), divides the whole of sciences into two parts: πρακτική (ἐπιστήμη) and γνωστική (ἐπιστήμη) – the first is that which is involved in manual arts, while the second pertains to the activity of the spirit (40). The opposition between πρακτικός and θεωρητικός is Aristotelian: νοῦς πρακτικός and νοῦς θεωρητικός are distinguished by the fact that θεωρητικός finds its purpose in its own activity and deduces necessary consequences from a principle, while πρακτικός reasons about the contingent and has action as its purpose (cf. *De anima* III, 10, 433a). In *Metaphysics* (α, 1, 993b.20–21), "theoretical philosophy" has truth as its purpose, while the purpose of "practical philosophy" is action, effectiveness. (41). According to the Stoics, the wise person must be, at the same time, active and contemplative – an ideal summarized by the term λογικός (Chrysippus, Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum* VII, 130) (42). Evagrius inherited the word πρακτικός, but attached a new meaning to it, which we can consider paradoxical to its previous uses. In St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the term designates the clergy who lead the "active life" and bishops who have responsibilities in spiritual guidance, in opposition to monks who dedicate themselves to contemplation and live in *hesychia* (48). Understanding ἡ πρακτική as the first of the two great stages of the spiritual life, whose purpose is "the knowledge of God," Evagrius developed a sense already reached in Philo of Alexandria (where the term acquires a moral and religious sense) and, especially, in Origen (where the "active life" and "contemplative life" are symbolized by Martha and Mary); however, compared to these authors, Evagrius was innovative, conferring on the term *praktiké* an essentially ascetic content adapted to the state of the anachoretic life, defining "practical life" to its purpose, "impassibility" (*apatheia*). However, this does not represent the ultimate purpose; it is sought only because it reflects the condition of "spiritual knowledge" (cf. *Praktikos* 32). Therefore, the true purpose, in Evagrius's view, is "the knowledge of God," which is reached through the spiritual contemplation of visible and invisible natures, and this contemplation is possible only through "impassibility." "Placed within this scheme, which has an almost scholastic rigor, whether in the bipartite form (πρακτική, γνωστική) or the tripartite form (πρακτική, φυσική, θεολογική) – which constitutes the true Evagrian scheme – the word πρακτική appears with all the characteristics of a technical term." (49)

contemplation of creation (*theōria physikē*), and theology (*theologia*). In specific contexts, he resorts to a more simplified scheme,[28] distinguishing between the "practical life" (*praktikos bios*) and the "contemplative life" (*theōrētikos bios*).[29]

"*Praktiké* is the spiritual method that purifies the passible part of the soul (*psychē*)"[30]. Elsewhere, Evagrius uses the term "teaching" (*didaskalia*)[31] instead of "method," suggesting that it is not a fixed formula, but rather a "path" or way of living. *Praktikē*, occasionally called *ethikē* by Evagrius, aims to put Christ's commandments into "practice." In a positive sense, it involves acquiring virtues, while, from a negative perspective, it signifies the struggle against the passions (*pathē*).[32] *Physikē* denotes the knowledge of nature, i.e., of all created things, in the sense of "reading" the divine *logoi*, hidden in every created thing.[33] *Theologikē* – also called "vision" or "mysticism" by Origen – indicates a living knowledge-vision of the mystery of the Holy Trinity and the intra-Trinitarian life of the Three Persons.[34]

Through a commitment to *praktiké* [35], one achieves liberation from the passions, which Evagrius refers to as *apatheia*[36]. Only in this state of impassibility

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[28] Stewart, "Evagrius Ponticus and the Eastern Monastic Tradition on the Intellect and the Passions," 267.

[29] Cf. Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," 145.

[30] *Praktikos* 78 Évagre le Pontique, *Traité pratique*, 1971, 666: Πρακτική έστι μέθοδος πνευματικὴ τὸ παθητικὸν μέρος τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκκαθαίρουσα.

[31] *Scholion 4 on Psalm* 2.12 (1): εἴγε πρακτική έστι διδασκαλία πνευματικὴ τὸ παθητικὸν μέρος τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκκαθαίρουσα.

[32] Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," 134.

[33] Cf. Ibid., 134–5 and n. 29.

[34] Ibid., 135.

[35] The object of the *praktiké* "method" is the soul, more precisely its passible, passionate, or passive part. According to ancient tradition, the soul was composed of three parts: a "concupiscible" or "desirous" part (*epithymētikon*), an "irascible" one (*thymikon*), and a "rational" one (*logistikon*) (cf. *Praktikos* 89) – the latter also being called the "rulling part" (*hēgemonikon*) (cf. *De malignis cogitationibus* 41). Concupiscence and irascibility make up the passive or passionate part of the soul, through which it – and through it, the intellect – is connected by the five senses with the body, and through the body with the material, sensible world. Evagrius invokes St. Gregory of Nazianzus, his "wise teacher", as the source of this tripartite division, although the inheritance is Platonic. Cf. Ibid., 135 and n. 31. Plato names the three parts of the soul in the *Republic*. In Book IX, he recommends that, before sleep, the rational part (*logistikon*) be awakened by sound arguments and reflections, the irascible part (*thymikon*) be calmed, and the desiring part (*epithymētikon*) be given only enough to sleep peacefully (571d–572a). Here, Plato considers the desiring part particularly dangerous, as it has a lawless dimension (572b). Evagrius uses the terminology from Book IX, changing "*logistikon*" to *nous*, perhaps because this term is closer to the biblical sense of the "heart", or the center of the human being. Cf. Hilary OSB Case, "Becoming One Spirit: Origen and Evagrius Ponticus on Prayer" (MA Thesis, Collegeville, Minnesota, Saint John's University, 2006), 160, n. 267 and 161, n. 268.

[36] In G. Bunge's interpretation, passion appears as a "disintegration" of the human person, so that the recovery of integrity is equivalent to "impassibility" (*apatheia*) – which Evagrius calls the "health of the soul" (cf. *Praktikos* 56). The essence of *praktiké* corresponds to a healing

does a deeper understanding of the divine work in creation become possible, through "natural contemplation" (*theōría physiké*) – first of the visible created order, then of the invisible. The supreme goal is, of course, "theology"[37] (*theologia*), that is, the return to the "essential knowledge of the Holy Trinity"[38].

G. Bunge has demonstrated that "in its deepest being, Evagrius's mysticism is a Trinitarian mysticism."[39] The essence of Evagrian mysticism is profoundly gnoseological and introspective, founded upon the activity of the intellect (*nous*). According to Evagrius, the *nous* is ceaselessly active on different levels of divine knowledge, from sensible knowledge to the experience of "pure prayer"[40] – which is assimilated to an "immaterial and formless knowledge."[41] Furthermore, contemplation (*theoria*) is inseparable from prayer, as the two act together to "awaken the intellective power of the intellect towards the contemplation of divine knowledge (*theōrian tēs theias gnōseōs*)."[42]

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process that results in the purification and unification of the whole human being: body, soul, and intellect. The purpose of *praktiké* is impassibility as the natural health of the soul. However, impassibility is not the terminus point of the spiritual path, but only its first step. Only in the state of *apatheia* can spiritual love (*agápē*) – which is the goal of *praktiké* (cf. *Praktikos* 84) – raise the "spiritual intellect" (*noûs pneumatikós*) to the knowledge of God in vision (cf. *De oratione* 53) – which is also union. Only if the "image of God" is united and healed in itself can it unite with its Prototype (cf. *Epistula ad Melaniam* 15.23). Cf. Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," 137–8 and 140.

[37] *Ad monachos* 136: "The knowledge of the incorporeals raises the intellect and presents it before the Holy Trinity" – Γνῶσις ἀσωμάτων ἐπαίρει τὸν νοῦν καὶ τῇ ἁγίᾳ τριάδι παρίστησιν αὐτόν; cf. Evagrius Ponticus, *Ad Monachos*, trans. Jeremy Driscoll, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 59 (New York: Newman Press, 2003), 66. This final knowledge has several names. Usually, it is called the "knowledge of the Holy Trinity," but Evagrius also mentions it when he speaks, more simply, about the knowledge of God. Sometimes, he refers to the knowledge of Unity or the One. Evagrius use the term theology (θεολογία) to designate the Holy Trinity. Furthermore, the Trinity is also called the "final blessedness" (ἐσχάτη μακαριότης, *Praktikos*, Pr. 8). Cf. Jeremy Driscoll, "Introduction," in *Ad Monachos*, by Evagrius Ponticus, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 59 (New York: Newman Press, 2003), 1–37.

[38] Cf. *Kephalaia Gnostika* 4.77, 2.11.

[39] Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus.", 172. Even if this has often been ignored or unrecognized. See, for example, Balthasar, "Metaphysik und Mystik des Evagrius Pontikus," 39: "Certainly he knows the Trinity – but it practically becomes an almost boundless supremacy of the Unity over the Triad, with clear traces of the subordination of the Persons."; Hausherr, "Le *Traité De l'Oraison* d'Évagre Le Pontique (Pseudo-Nil)," 117: "Despite the theology which is its supreme goal, Evagrian mysticism remains more philosophical than properly theological."

[40] Cf. *De oratione* 66–8.

[41] Cf. *De oratione* 69: ἄϋλον καὶ ἀνείδεον γνῶσιν Augustine Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2006), 193.

[42] Cf. *De oratione* 86: Ἡ γνῶσις, καλλίστη ἐστιν· συνεργὸς γάρ ἐστι τῆς προσευχῆς, τὴν νοερὰν δύναμιν τοῦ νοῦ διυπνίζουσα πρὸς θεωρίαν τῆς θείας γνώσεως; cf. Ibid., 195. Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Limit of the Mind (Noῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh," 292–293.

Prayer – "an activity proper to the dignity of the intellect"

Evagrius Ponticus ranks among the speculative mystics, who regard the intellect (*nous*) as the supreme organ of knowledge and union with God.[43] Evagrius will systematize and consolidate Origen's doctrine of the intellect in the *Kephalaia Gnostika*[44] and will adopt Origen's doctrine of prayer in his own treatise *De oratione*[45].

The intellect represents the personal core,[46] the place of the indelible image of God, and the organ through which man knows God[47] and responds to his call. It is, therefore, the seat of human freedom and responsibility as well as the means by which God acts upon man. Although Evagrius most often speaks only about the intellect, nevertheless, as Bunge explains, he always considers the whole man, explicitly viewed as the "image of God," oriented towards a personal encounter with God through knowledge (*gnosis*)[48].

For Evagrius, the knowledge of God is not a dialectical process, but a direct intuition: "The knowledge of God does not require a dialectical soul, but one who sees."[49] In *Reflections* 34, Evagrius states: "The intellect is a temple of the Holy Trinity" – Νοῦς ἐστι ναὸς τῆς ἁγίας Τριάδος. It is precisely this intrinsic quality of the intellect that makes it capable of knowing God, prayer being its natural state: "The intellect, by its very nature, is made to pray (πεφυκότα

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[43] Ysabel de Andia, "Le statut de l'intellect dans l'union mystique," in *Mystique: la passion de l'Un, de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, by Alain Dierkens and Benoît Beyer de Ryke, Problèmes d'histoire des religions, T. 15 (Bruxelles [Le Plessis-Paté]: Éd. de l'Université de Bruxelles Tothèmes diff, 2005), 73–96.

[44] *Kephalaia Gnostika* was initially composed in Greek, but only a few fragments of this work have survived. The loss of such a large part of the material is due to a series of theological debates and complications that arose after Evagrius's death Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 17–18. As a result of Evagrius's posthumous condemnation, starting in the 6th century and continuing until the 9th century (and beyond), there was a concerted and widespread effort in the Byzantine churches and monasteries to suppress and/ or destroy Evagrian writings (Ibid., 21–3).

[45] Cf. de Andia, "Le statut de l'intellect dans l'union mystique," 82.

[46] Cf. Luke Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 177–8: "the *nous*, the image of God and the core of personal identity."

[47] Monica Tobon, "*Apatheia* in the Teachings of Evagrius Ponticus" (University College London, 2011), 54: "The image of God consists in its receptivity to knowledge of God."

[48] Cf. Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," 136.

[49] *Kephalaia gnostica* 4.90, S2, Evagrius of Pontus, *The Gnostic Trilogy*, 355. In the Platonic tradition, dialectic was considered the first and highest expression of philosophy (so that the philosopher had to be διαλεκτικώτατος – "perfect in dialectic"). Nevertheless, the knowledge of God transcends philosophical knowledge, in that it is a mystical vision that takes place in the presence and union with God (cf. *Kephalaia Gnostica* 4.89), being deification itself. Cf. Ramelli, *Evagrius's* Kephalaia Gnostica, 245.

προσεύχεσθαι);"[50] "Prayer is an activity that befits the dignity of the intellect, that is, its best and uncontaminated activity and use."[51]

The Evagrian teaching on prayer is based on three primary texts: firstly, his treatise *On Thoughts*[52]; secondly, a collection of concise statements on various aspects of the spiritual life, called *Reflections*[53]; and, thirdly, his famous treatise *On Prayer*[54]. Columba Stewart refers to these three works as "a trilogy on the psychodynamics and theology of prayer," which are chronologically placed after the first two parts of Evagrius' better-known trilogy – *Praktikos*[55], *Gnostikos*[56], and *Kephalaia Gnostika*.[57] These texts can be understood as advanced works that deepen subjects previously addressed and are most likely the fruit of his mature reflections. The treatise *On Prayer*, the best known and most widespread of these three works, comprises 153 chapters, each consisting of one to three sentences. This treatise reflects "all of the ambivalences of its author's teaching on the nature and experience of prayer."[58]

Evagrius considered that true theology is lived in prayer: "If you are a theologian, you will pray truly, and if you pray truly, you will be a theologian."[59]

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[50] *Praktikos* 49 Évagre le Pontique, *Traité pratique*, 1971, 613.

[51] *De oratione* 84: Προσευχὴ ἐστὶ πρέπουσα ἐνέργεια τῇ ἀξίᾳ τοῦ νου, ἤτοι ἡ κρείττων καὶ εἰλικρινὴς ἐνέργεια αὐτοῦ καὶ χρῆσις; cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 195.

[52] Περὶ λογισμῶν, see Évagre le Pontique, *Sur Les Pensées*, ed. Paul Géhin, Claire Guillaumont, and Antoine Guillaumont, Sources Chrétiennes 438 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1998), 122–126.

[53] Joseph Muyldermans published the Greek text (MS. Paris gr. 913) of the Σκέμματα in two studies: Joseph Muyldermans, "Note Additionnelle à: *Euagriana*," *Le Muséon. Revue d'Études Orientales* 44 (1931): 369–83. Joseph Muyldermans, "Évagre Le Pontique: Les *Capita Cognoscitiua* Dans Les Versions Syriaque et Arménienne," *Le Muséon. Revue d'Études Orientales* 47 (1934): 73–106.

[54] The work *Περὶ προσευχῆς* was transmitted under the name of St. Nilus of Ancyra, *De oratione* Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 1166–1199. As a result of the studies of Irénée Hausherr, *De oratione* has long been accepted as an authentic composition of Evagrius. See *supra* n. 9.

[55] The original Greek text of *Λόγος πράκτικος*, composed of one hundred "chapters" or propositions, has been preserved (having also been transmitted in Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, Georgian, and Arabic), as have several other ascetic works, mainly collections of maxims. Cf. Ramelli, *Evagrius's* Kephalaia Gnostica, xxvii.

[56] *Γνωστικὸς*, composed of fifty chapters, has been preserved in Greek only fragmentarily, but survives integrally in Syriac, in various redactions, as well as in Armenian. Cf. Ibid., xxviii.

[57] *Κεφάλαια γνωστικά*, translated as *Chapters on Knowledge* or, more precisely, *Propositions on Knowledge*, comprises six books of ninety propositions (sometimes called "chapters") each. *Kephalaia Gnostika* represents Evagrius's masterpiece: although he wrote it in Greek, the complete work has been preserved only in oriental versions: in an Armenian adaptation, in Arabic, and, especially, in Syriac, in two different redactions. Cf. Ibid., xx.

[58] See Columba Stewart, "Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2001): 173–204, https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2001.0035. (182–4)

[59] *De oratione* 61: Εἰ θεολόγος εἶ, προσεύξῃ ἀληθῶς· καὶ εἰ ἀληθῶς προσεύχῃ, θεολόγος ἔσῃ (Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 192).

"Just as bread is nourishment for the body and virtue is for the soul, so, too, spiritual prayer constitutes nourishment for the intellect."[60]

In Evagrian spirituality, the spiritual progression from ascetic practice to knowledge and contemplation, and the surpassing of both in "pure prayer" and entry into the "formless state" demonstrates the experiential character of the intellect, active on the three levels of spiritual life: *praktiké*, *gnostiké*, and *theologiké*[61].

> When the intellect is in *praktikē*, it remains among the representations (*noēmata*) of this world; but when it is in *gnosis*, it dwells in contemplation (*theōria*); but when it enters into prayer (*proseuchē*), it is in the "formless state" (*aneidēō*), which is called the "place of God" (*topos Theou*)[62].

In *Reflections*, Evagrius distinguishes between the three aspects of the intellect, highlighting the specific activity of each level: thus, the "ascetic intellect" (*nous praktikos*) "barks, like a dog, at all the unjust thoughts (*logismos*)"[63] and "always receives passionlessly the representations (*noēmata*) of this world"[64]; the "contemplative intellect" (*nous theoretikos*) – by moving the irascible (part of the soul) – chases down, like a dog, all impassioned thoughts (*logismos*)"[65], and the "pure intellect" (*nous katharos*) at the time of prayer is a censer[66] – no object of the senses (*prágmatos aisthētou*) connected to it"[67].

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[60] *De oratione* 101: Ὥσπερ ὁ ἄρτος τροφή ἐστι τῷ σώματι καὶ ἡ ἀρετὴ τῇ ψυχῇ, οὕτω καὶ τοῦ νοῦ ἡ πνευματικὴ προσευχὴ τροφὴ ὑπάρχει; cf. Ibid., 196.

[61] Cf. Ramelli, "Evagrius Ponticus, the Origenian Ascetic (and Not the Origenistic 'Heretic')," 162.

[62] *Skemmata* 20: Ὁ νοῦς ἐν πρακτικῇ ὢν, ἐν τοῖς νοήμασιν ἑστιν τοῦ κόσμου τούτου· ἐν δὲ γνώσει ὢν, ἐν θεωρίᾳ διατρίβει· ἐν δὲ προσευχῇ γινόμενος, ἐν ἀνειδέῳ ἑστὶ, ὅπερ ὀνομάζεται τόπος Θεοῦ.

[63] *Skemmata* 10: πάντας τοὺς ἀδίκους καθυλακτῶν λογισμούς William Harmless and Raymond R. Fitzgerald, "The *Skemmata*: A Translation," *Theological Studies* 62, no. 3 (2001): 521–29. (522)

[64] *Skemmata* 16: ὁ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου ἀπαθῶς ἀεὶ δεχόμενος τὰ νοήματα (Ibid., 523).

[65] *Skemmata* 9: διὰ τῆς κινήσεως τοῦ θυμοῦ πάντας ἀποδιώκων τοὺς ἐμπαθεῖς λογισμούς (Ibid., 522).

[66] This image evokes Psalm 141:2, which speaks of prayer as incense rising before God. In Evagrius's view, if prayer is like incense, then the vessel of prayer, the intellect, is like a censer. See Evagrius, *De oratione* 1, 75–77, 147. Cf. William Harmless and Raymond R. Fitzgerald, "The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus," *Theological Studies* 62, no. 3 (2001): 493–529. (513–4)

[67] *Skemmata* 6: Θυμιατήριόν ἐστι νοῦς καθαρὸς κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς προσευχῆς, μὴ ἐφαπτόμενος πράγματος αἰσθητοῦ Harmless and Fitzgerald, "The *Skemmata*," 522. Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Limit of the Mind (Noῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh," 305–6.

Prayer – "a conversation of the intellect with God"

For Evagrius, God is beyond (*hyper*) any perception (*aisthēsis*) and notion (*ennoia*)[68]. Therefore, the encounter with God in prayer does not involve perceiving a form (*morphē*) or shape (*schēma*), as God possesses neither.[69] "True prayer" requires the abandonment, even if for a short time, of concepts and mental representations that tether us to the world of ordinary experience. We are urged to "approach the Immaterial One in an immaterial way"[70] and to realize that attempting to "localize" or limit God through a mental image is not only futile but can even be demonic.[71] The ultimate goal is for man to turn towards God in prayer, without any notion of form (*amorphia*), in an immaterial (*aulos*) and dispassionate manner, renouncing all sensible perception (*anaisthesia*). Thus, Evagrius warns us against the tendency to shape the encounter with God according to our expectations regarding what He or the prayer experience should look like.[72]

In his *Scholia on the Psalms*, Evagrius Ponticus writes:

> And one form of prayer is the conversation (*homilia*) of the intellect (*nous*) with God, preserving the intellect unimpressed (*atypōton*). And by 'unimpressed intellect' (*atypōton noun*) I mean an intellect that imagines nothing corporeal (*sōmatikon*) during the time of prayer (*kata ton kairon tēs proseuchēs*). For only those names and words that signify something of sensible things (*tōn aisthētōn*) imprint (*typoi*) and shape (*schēmatizei*) our intellect, but the praying intellect (*proseuchomenon noun*) must be completely free from sensible things (*tōn aisthētōn*). But the *noema* of God preserves the intellect necessarily unimpressed (*atypōton*); for God is not a body/corporeal (*sōma*)[73].

This dense description encapsulates the significant components of Evagrius Ponticus's well-known theory of "imageless prayer." While the specific term "pure prayer" (καθαρὰ προσευχή) or its synonyms, "true prayer" and spiritual prayer, do not appear in the *Scholia on the Psalms*, Evagrius offered the exact

[68] *De oratione* 4: τὸν ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν αἴσθησιν καὶ ἔννοιαν.

[69] Cf. *De oratione* 67–75, 114–118.

[70] *De oratione* 67: ἀλλὰ ἄϋλος τῷ ἀΰλῳ πρόσιθι. See also *De oratione* 114.

[71] Cf. *De oratione* 67–68, 74, 116.

[72] Cf. Stewart, "Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus," 191–2.

[73] *Scholion 1 on Psalm* 140.2 (1): Τούτου κατευθύνεται ἡ προσευχὴ ὡς θυμίαμα τοῦ δυναμένου εἰπεῖν· Χριστοῦ εὐωδία ἐσμὲν ἐν τοῖς σῳζομένοις καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις. Καὶ ἔστιν ἓν εἶδος προσευχῆς ὁμιλία νοῦ πρὸς θεὸν ἀτύπωτον τὸν νοῦν διασῴζουσα· ἀτύπωτον δὲ λέγω νοῦν τὸν μηδὲν σωματικὸν κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς προσευχῆς φανταζόμενον. Μόνα γὰρ ἐκεῖνα τῶν ὀνομάτων καὶ ῥημάτων τυποῖ τὸν νοῦν ἡμῶν καὶ σχηματίζει τὰ σημαίνοντά τι τῶν αἰσθητῶν, προσευχόμενον δὲ νοῦν πάντη δεῖ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἐλεύθερον εἶναι· τὸ δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ νόημα διασῴζει τὸν νοῦν ἀναγκαίως ἀτύπωτον· οὐ γάρ ἐστι σῶμα θεός.

core definition in his *Chapters on Prayer*: "Prayer is the intellect's conversation (*homilia*) with God."[74]

While it is uncertain whether the *Scholia* predates Evagrius's more detailed treatises on contemplative prayer, such as *Chapters on Prayer*, *On Thoughts*, and *Reflections*, it nevertheless provides a poetic and fragmentary summary of his profound theory, in which the intellect (*nous*) plays a pivotal role. Evagrius defines prayer as a "conversation with God," thereby aligning himself with a long-standing Late Antique tradition[75], Christian and non-Christian, which similarly conceived prayer as *homilia*[76]. However, Evagrius significantly

[74] *De oratione* 3: Ἡ προσευχὴ ὁμιλία ἐστι νοῦ πρὸς θεόν (Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 188).

[75] For various approaches to prayer in the philosophical environment of Late antiquity, see John M. Dillon and Andrei Timotin, eds., *Platonic Theories of Prayer*, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition, volume 19 (Leiden Boston (Mass.): Brill, 2016).

[76] Bunge [Gabriel Bunge, *Das Geistgebet: Studien Zum Traktat De Oratione Des Evagrios Pontikos*, Schriftenreihe Des Zentrums Patristischer Spiritualität Koinonia-Oriens Im Erzbistum Cologne 25 (Köln: Luthe-Verlag, 1987), 20] emphasizes that Evagrius's famous definition of prayer formulated in *De oratione* 3 – as being "a conversation (ὁμιλία) of the *nous* with God" – represents Evagrius's adaptation of a definition found in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis*: "Therefore, to speak more boldly, prayer is a conversation with God." – Ἔστιν οὖν, ὡς εἰπεῖν τολμηρότερον, ὁμιλία πρὸς τὸν Θεόν, ἡ εὐχή [7.7.39.6; Clément d'Alexandrie, *Les stromates. Stromate VII*, ed. Alain Le Boulluec, Sources chrétiennes 428 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1997), 140]. The exact phrase is also found in *Stromata* 7.7.42.1 şi 7.12.73.1. Evagrius repeats this definition in *Scholion 1 on Psalm* 140.2(1). According to L. Dysinger, "it is tempting to speculate that this phrase may have been current among the Cappadocian fathers who taught Evagrius." Although it is not found in the works of St. Basil the Great or St. Gregory of Nazianzus, nevertheless St. Gregory of Nyssa describes prayer as follows, in *De oratione dominica*, *Oratio I*: Προςευχὴ θεοῦ ὁμιλία, τῶν ἀοράτων θεωρία, τῶν ἐπιθυμουμένων πληροφορία, τῶν ἀγγέλων ὁμοτιμία – "Prayer is conversation with God, contemplation of the invisible, fulfilment of desires, [an] honour equal to that of the angels" [Gregorii Nysseni, *De Oratione Dominica, De Beatitudinibus*, ed. John F. Callahan, Gregorii Nysseni Opera, v. 7 pt.2 (Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill, 1992)], 1124M.3–32, 8–9. Cf. Luke Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 74 and n. 52. This definition of prayer is also found in Maximus of Tyre, cf. *Orationes* 5.8, 188–190, Maximus Tyrius, *Dissertationes*, ed. Michael B. Trapp, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana (Stutgardiae: B. G. Teubner, 1994), 45: ἐγώ δὲ ὁμιλῶν καὶ διάλεκτον πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς περὶ τῶν παρόντων καὶ ἐπίδειξιν τῆς ἀρετῆς – "whereas in my opinion it is a conversation or discussion with the gods about what he does have, and a demonstration of his virtue." Maxime of Tyre, *The Philosophical Orations*, trans. Michael B. Trapp (Oxford (GB): Clarendon Press, 1997), 49, which might indicate that it "has a Greek origin". However, in Plato's *Symposium* (203.a1–4), the expression ὁμιλία καὶ διάλεκτος has a completely different meaning: διὰ τούτου πᾶσά ἐστιν ἡ ὁμιλία καὶ ἡ διάλεκτος θεοῖς πρὸς ἀνθρώπους, καὶ ἐγρηγορόσι καὶ καθεύδουσι· – "God does not mix with man, but every conversation and dialogue of the gods with men, whether awake or asleep, is mediated by the *daimonic*." Here, it is about "*daimons*" (δαίμονες), whose existence makes it possible for the gods to have, in general, a conversation and dialogue with humans through oracles and dreams. Therefore, it is not about the prayer addressed to the gods by humans, but about oracles and dreams sent

expanded this philosophical definition by introducing the intellect as the subject of prayer and emphasizing its cardinal role. He further defined prayer as the "ascension (*anabasis*) of the intellect towards God."[77] The centrality of the intellect and its ascent distinguishes Evagrius from Neoplatonism, particularly the theurgical tradition of prayer based on the principle of "the union of the like with the like"[78] and the concept of the soul's "return" (*epístrophē*)[79]. Furthermore, his imageless prayer theory bypasses the theological and exegetical context of the Lord's Prayer[80], harmonizing ascetic and monastic principles with transcendent thought[81].

by the gods through "*daimons*". The formula appears, therefore, inverted. André Méhat suggests the hypothesis that this inversion might be the work of Aristotle himself, who was the author of a treatise *On Prayer*, which is completely lost (except for a phrase preserved by Simplicius). "It is very probable, concludes Méhat, that in the literature 'of prayer,' which has been transmitted to us by pagan and Christian authors, "*topoi*" originating from Aristotle are found, for example in the discussion "whether one should pray" which opposed the Cyrenaics and the Platonists in the 4th century before being treated by Maximus, Clement, and Origen. In the absence of precise references, research remains uncertain." See André Méhat, "Sur Deux Définitions de La Prière," in *Origeniana Sexta. Origène et La Bible: Actes Du Colloquium Origenianum Sextum, Chantilly, 1993*, vol. 30 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995), 115–20. (119) The fact remains that the Bible offers numerous examples of human conversations with God, and Clement of Alexandria applies the term ὀμιλία to Moses (cf. *Stromata* VI 12.104.1). Cf. Clément d'Alexandrie, *Les stromates. Stromate VII*, 140–141, n. 3.

77 *De oratione* 36.

78 For Iamblichus's theory, see Andrei Timotin, "La Théorie de La Prière Chez Jamblique: Sa Fonction et Sa Place Dans l'histoire Du Platonisme," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 70, no. 3 (2015): 563–77, https://doi.org/10.7202/1032792ar., 563–577.

79 Plotinus recognizes, in a rare passage in the *Enneads* regarding prayer, only this: "Let us speak of it in this way, first invoking God himself, not in spoken words, but stretching ourselves out with our soul into prayer to him, able in this way to pray alone to him alone" – ἀλλὰ τῇ ψυχῇ ἐκτείνασιν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς εὐχὴν πρὸς ἐκεῖνον, εὔχεσθαι τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον δυναμένους μόνους πρὸς μόνον. *Enneads* 5.1.6.10–11; Plotinus, *Enneads V.1-9*, trans. Arthur Hilary Armstrong, Plotinus (Cambridge, Mass./ London: Harvard University Press/ W. Heinemann, 1984), 29. Prayer, in this context, is understood as *epistrophē*, the "return" towards the reunification of the second hypostasis (*nous*) with the first hypostasis (*to hen*). Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Limit of the Mind (Noῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh," 299.

80 On how Origen compares Christian prayer with that of the pagans, in his effort to demonstrate the superiority of the former over the different expressions of the latter, see Lorenzo Perrone, "Prayer in Origen's 'Contra Celsum': The Knowledge of God and the Truth of Christianity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 55, no. 1 (2001): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.2307/1584733.

81 Cf. Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Poetic Performance of the Praying-Mind: Evagrius Ponticus' Theory of Prayer and its Legacy in Syriac Christianity," in *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Sciences Religieuses*, ed. Andrei Timotin and Philippe Hoffmann, vol. 185 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 327–44, https://doi.org/10.1484/M.BEHE-EB.5.120039.

Prayer – "a state" of the intellect

For Evagrius, *nous* is the highest dimension of man, the image of God in us.[82] Being oriented by creation towards its Prototype,[83] the Intellect is most capable[84] of knowing God[85], and prayer[86] is the most natural act of the human being.[87]

From this perspective, the intellect becomes the center of the human being, the equivalent of the "inner man" (*esō anthrōpos*)[88] in Pauline theology:

> When the intellect (*noûs*), having taken off the old man (*palaios anthrōpos*), puts on clothes itself with the one from grace (*ek charitos*) [cf. Col 3.9–10], then at the time of prayer (*kata ton kairon tēs proseuchēs*) it will see (*horaō*) its own state (*heautou katastasis*) resemble sapphire or sky-blue (*ouranio chromati*) – which Scripture also calls 'the place of God' (*topos tou Theou*), seen on Mt Sinai by the elders [cf. Ex 24.9–11].[89]

In *Reflections* 2, Evagrius emphasizes that, "if one wishes to see the state (*katástasis*) of the intellect, let him deprive (*sterēsátō*) himself of all representations (*noēmáton*)."[90] Considering the intellect as the cardinal entity that prays, Evagrius will develop a theory in which prayer is understood as a "state of the intellect," rather than a spoken text or a request addressed to God[91]. Thus, prayer is no

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[82] Cf. *Skemmata* 34.

[83] Cf. Bunge, "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus," 153.

[84] According to G. Bunge, Evagrius, based on Scripture and Tradition, teaches that man, endowed with "*logos*," was created, "in the beginning," in God's image, as his icon. (cf. *Epistula ad Melaniam* 12 sq.) The essence of this likeness to God is correlated by Evagrius especially with the capacity for knowing God (cf. *Kephalaia Gnostika* 3.32, 4.34), in personal being and the capacity to enter into a direct relationship with the Person of God. As Bunge explains, the meaning is not "intellectualist," but deeply personal and excludes any emanation. The intellect, as the image of God, is receptive (*deiktikos*) to its divine Prototype, cf. *Epistula ad Melaniam* 16. Cf. Ibid., 163–4 and n. 158.

[85] *Praktikos* 49.

[86] Cf. *De oratione* 84.

[87] Cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, "The Sapphire Light of the Mind," 513–4.

[88] *Capita cic auctoribus discipulis Evagrii* 58 Évagre le Pontique, *Chapitres Des Disciples d'Évagre*, ed. Paul Géhin, Sources Chrétiennes 514 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007), 158.

[89] *De malignis cogitationibus* 39: Ὅταν ὁ νοῦς τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον ἀποδυσάμενος τὸν ἐκ χάριτος ἐνδύσηται, τότε καὶ τὴν ἐαυτοῦ κατάστασιν ὄψεται κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς προσευχῆς σαπφείρῳ ἢ οὐρανίῳ χρώματι παρεμφερῆ, ἥντινα καὶ τόπον θεοῦ ἡ γραφὴ ὀνομάζει ὑπὸ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ὀφθέντα ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους Σινᾶ; cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 114.

[90] *Skemmata* 2: Εἴ τις βούλοιτο ἰδεῖν τὴν τοῦ νοῦ κατάστασιν, στερησάτω ἐαυτὸν πάντων τῶν νοημάτων Harmless and Fitzgerald, "The *Skemmata*," 521.

[91] The essential role of the intellect in prayer, for Evagrius, also appears in the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:1, where he deviates from earlier approaches by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, offering "a remarkable example of his new approach." Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Poetic Performance of the Praying-Mind," 331.

longer merely an activity of the intellect; it becomes *katastasis*: "a state of the intellect, destructive of every earthly representation (*noema*)"[92] and "that comes to be from the single-light (*phōs*) of the Holy Trinity (*Hagia Trias*)."[93]

This state of prayer reflects a "imperturbable habit" (*héxis apathēs*) which, through supreme eros (*éros akrotáto*), raises (*apartízō*) the "spiritual intellect" (*pneumatikòn noûn*), even if only for a moment, to its natural state (*kátastasis*) – that is, to the "noetic heights" (*eis hypsos noeton*)[94]. This ascension (*anabasis*) of the praying intellect to God[95] involves a transformative inner experience.[96]

Following the Greek philosophical tradition, Evagrius identifies the intellect (*nous*) as the seat of "representations" (*noēmata*). Spiritual contemplation (*gnōsis pneumatikē*) takes place through the means of "representations" (*noēmata*). Evagrius differentiates between representations that leave an "imprint" upon the intellect and those that leave no imprint:[97] "Among representations (*noēmata*),

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[92] Cf. *Skemmata* 26: Προσευχή έστι κατάστασις νοῦ, φθαρτικὴ παντὸς έπιγείου νοήματος (Harmless and Fitzgerald, "The *Skemmata*," 526).

[93] Cf. *Skemmata* 27: Προσευχή έστι κατάστασις νοῦ, ὑπὸ φωτὸς μόνου γινομένη τῆς ἁγίας Τριάδος (Ibid., 526).

[94] Cf. *De oratione* 52: Κατάστασίς έστι προσευχῆς ἕξις ἀπαθής, ἔρωτι ἀκροτάτῳ είς ὕψος νοητὸν ἀπαρτίζουσα τὸν φιλόσοφον καὶ πνευματικὸν νοῦν; cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 192.

[95] Cf. *De oratione* 36: Προσευχή έστιν ἀνάβασις νοῦ πρὸς Θεόν. Evagrius did not envision this spiritual ascent as a literal skyward elevation, in the manner of Christ's ascension (Acts 1.9). Instead, as Hausherr indicates through comparisons with *KG* 4.49, 5.40, 5.60, and *Letters* 39 and 58, this progression ought to be conceived as a "mountain climb" – Mount Sion or Mount Sinai. See Irénée Hausherr, "Le *Traité de l'Oraison* d'Évagre Le Pontique (Suite)," *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 35, no. 138 (1959): 121–46. (145–146) Cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 235, n. 17.

[96] Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Limit of the Mind (Noûs): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh," 301. Cf. Ann Conway-Jones, "'The Greatest Paradox of All': The 'Place of God' in the Mystical Theologies of Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius of Pontus," *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* 5, no. 2 (October 25, 2018): 259–79, https://doi.org/10.1515/jbr-2018-0006.

[97] The Evagrian term νόημα designates the image evoked by the perception of a sensible object (αίσθητὸν πρᾶγμα), similar to what the Stoics called φαντασία, a term usually translated as "representation". The verb τυποῦν denotes the "imprinting" (τύπωσις) left by this image upon the intellect, thus echoing the Stoic idea reported by Diogenes Laertius (*Vitae philosophorum* 7.45.10–7.46.1). In Aristotle, νόημα is based on the image produced by the perception of a sensible object (φάντασμα), but it differs from this in that, once received by the intellect, the image is in a certain sense "conceptualized" (see *De anima* III, 431b–436a). Probably, this conceptual dimension explains Evagrius' preference for the Aristotelian term νόημα over the Stoic one, φαντασία. The Stoics made a distinction between φαντασία (the representation stemming from the direct perception of sensible objects) and φάντασμα (the image of an absent object, but recalled from memory, or of an unreal object, like one in a dream) (cf. *Vitae philosophorum* 7.50.1–9). In this context, Evagrius' terminology aligns more with that of Aristotle, who used the term φαντασία to designate imagination. Evagrius uses this term, in the plural, to indicate the "imaginations" (φαντασίαι) that appear during sleep (*Praktikos* 54), but also for the images of objects retained in memory (*De malignis cogitationibus* 4; 2). See Guillaumont, "Introduction," 24–8.

some imprint (*typoō*) and shape (*schēmatizō*) our governing faculty (*to hēgemonikon*), and others only provide knowledge (*gnōsis*), without imprinting (*typoō*) or shaping (*schēmatizō*) the intellect (*nous*)."[98]

Unlike *logismoi*, which often carries a pejorative sense in Evagrius, and was preserved after him,[99] the term *noēmata* has a more neutral connotation, referring to mental images originating from either external sources (sight, hearing) or internal sources (memory, temperament).[100] The moral character of these "representations" depends on how the intellect uses them, either for good or ill. Some "representations" can leave a "form" deeply "imprinted" in the intellect, like a calligrapher writing on a wax tablet. This "imprinting" can be difficult to erase, especially in the case of visual images.[101]

The "representations" (*noēmata*) that leave an imprint on the intellect arise from the sensory perception of sensible objects (*pragmata aisthēta*). However, when the gnostic ascends from sensible objects to the contemplation of their "reasons" (*logoi*) – understood as the ontological basis and the explanatory principle – the representation becomes devoid of imprint or form. When the intellect transitions to the contemplation of incorporeals (*asōmatos*) – wether their essence (*ousia*) or their "reasons" (*logoi*) – the representations also lack any imprint on it; here, Evagrius speaks of "representations" (*noēmata*) only by analogy, referring, in fact, to "contemplations" (*theōrēmata*)[102]. The term

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[98] *De malignis cogitationibus* 41.1–3: Τῶν νοημάτων τὰ μὲν τυποῖ τὸ ἡγεμονικὸν ἡμῶν καὶ σχηματίζει, τὰ δὲ γνῶσιν παρέχει μόνον μὴ τυποῦντα τὸν νοῦν μηδὲ σχηματίζοντα; cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 115.

[99] Evagrius identifies "thought" so closely with the demon that he frequently uses the two terms interchangeably (see *Praktikos* 7–14). Cf. Antoine Guillaumont, "Un philosophe au désert: Evagre le Pontique," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 181, no. 1 (1972): 29–56, https://doi.org/10.3406/rhr.1972.9807.

[100] *Skemmata* 17: "There are four ways (τρόποι) by which the intellect (νοῦς) grasps representations (νοήματα). The first way is through the eyes (ὀφθαλμῶν); the second, through the ear (ἀκοῆς); the third, through memory (μνήμης); and the fourth, through temperament (κράσεως). Through the eyes, it grasps only representations (νοήματα) that imprint a form (μορφοῦντα). Through the ear, it grasps representations that either imprint a form (μορφοῦντα) or do not imprint one, because a word (λόγον) (can) signify both sensible objects and contemplative objects (αἰσθητὰ καὶ θεωρητὰ πράγματα). Memory (μνήμη) and temperament (κράσις) follow the ear but each one either imprints a form (μορφοῦσι) on the intellect, or does not do so, in imitation of the ear (τὴν ἀκοήν)." Cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, "The *Skemmata*," 523–4.

[101] *Skemmata* 55: "Of the (various types of) thoughts (λογισμῶν), some imprint their form (μορφοῦσι) on the discursive thought (διάνοια); others do not. The ones that imprint their form (μορφοῦσι) are from sight (ὀράσεως); the ones that do not (οὐ μορφοῦσι) are from the other senses (αἰσθήσεων) that travel along with us." Cf. Ibid., 528. Cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, "The Sapphire Light of the Mind," 515.

[102] *De malignis cogitationibus* 41.29–30 Évagre le Pontique, *Sur les pensées*, 294–5: "Once more, of contemplations (θεωρημάτων) that do not imprint (τυπούντων) on the intellect (τὸν νοῦν), some signify the essence (οὐσίαν) of the incorporeals (ἀσωμάτων), others signify their reasons (τοὺς λόγους)." (Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 115.)

theōrēmata, frequently used in the plural, fulfills, within spiritual contemplation (*theōria*), the function that *noēmata* serves in the process of sensible knowledge (*aisthētē gnōsis*). In the expression "*to noēma tou Theou*"[103], the word *noēma* no longer signifies a "representation," but rather the "idea," "concept," or "thought" of God — *hē mnēmē tou Theou*, "the memory of God,"[104] as described in the *Chapters to Evagrius' Disciples*[105].

"Pure Prayer" (kathará proseuché)

Evagrius warns that the intellect (*nous*) must avoid any form of contemplation that might "imprint" a form upon it, because, even after surpassing the contemplation of corporeal nature (*theōrían tēs sōmatikēs physeōs*)[106], the intellect remains caught in the multiplicity of intelligible things (*noēta*).[107] At

[103] *De malignis cogitationibus* 41.17. The expression τὸ νόημα τοῦ θεοῦ – which appears only here and in the *Scholion 1 on Psalm* 140.2(1): "τὸ δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ νόημα" – may seem strange: the word νόημα takes on the meaning of "notion," "idea," or "concept" here rather than that of "representation." Cf. Évagre le Pontique, *Sur les pensées*, 293, n. 7.

[104] Cf. *Capita cic auctoribus discipulis Evagrii* 61.6 (Évagre le Pontique, *Chapitres Des Disciples d'Évagre*, 162). The formula ἡ μνήμη τοῦ Θεοῦ is another way, biblically inspired, of designating the state of prayer. See *Scholion 22 on Psalm* 118.55: "for the evil thought (λογισμὸς), lingering in the discursive thought (τῇ διανοίᾳ), distracts the intellect (τὸν νοῦν) and separates it from the memory of God (τῆς μνήμης τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ)." Cf. Ibid., 162, n. 61. "The memory of God" plays an important role in Evagrian spirituality, as evidenced by *Admonitio paraenetica* 3. This expression stands in opposition to "passion-laden memories" (cf. *Praktikos* 34.1: Ὧν τὰς μνήμας ἔχομεν ἐμπαθεῖς), which include bad thoughts and the distractions arising from people and worldly affairs. Cf. Joseph Muyldermans, ed., *Evagriana Syriaca: Textes Inedits Du British Museum et de La Vaticane*, Bibliothèque Du Muséon 31 (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1952), 87, 126, 157.

[105] Cf. Guillaumont, "Introduction," 21–2.

[106] Evagrius frequently explores the concept of contemplation (*theōria*) throughout his *Kephalaia Gnostika* (*KG*). In *KG* 3.19 (S1), for instance, he differentiates between "Primary Contemplation" (Πρώτη θεωρία) and "Secondary Contemplation" (Δευτέρα θεωρία). The distinction lies not in the contemplative subject (the intellect, here termed "the seer"), but in the nature of the object: Primary Contemplation focuses on the immaterial, while Secondary Contemplation engages with the material (Ramelli, *Evagrius's* Kephalaia Gnostica, 152). Further, *KG* 1.27 presents a broader classification of five distinct forms of contemplation. The highest of these is the contemplation of God the Trinity, followed by the contemplation of incorporeal realities (second), bodies (third), the Judgment (fourth), and divine providence (fifth); cf. Ibid., lii, and 27. See also Guillaumont, "Un philosophe au désert: Evagre le Pontique," 44.

[107] Cf. *De oratione 58*: "Even if the intellect (ὁ νοῦς) rises above (ὑπὲρ) the contemplation (τὴν θεωρίαν) of corporeal nature (τῆς σωματικῆς φύσεως), it has not yet perfectly beheld (ἐθεάσατο) the place of God (τὸν τόπον τοῦ θεου); for it can exist within the knowledge of Intelligibles (ἐν τῇ γνώσει τῶν νοητῶν) and be diversified (ποικίλλεσθαι) by it." Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 192. Evagrius writes in *Kephalaia Gnostika 4.77* (S2): "Objects are outside the intellect, but the *theōria* concerning them is established inside it. But it is not so concerning the Holy Trinity, for it alone is essential knowledge." Cf. Evagrius of Pontus, *The Gnostic Trilogy*, 349. When contemplating the Holy Trinity, the distinction between subject and object dissolves, and the intellect (*nous*) participates in the non-numerical unity

the time of prayer, the *nous* must completely detach from the senses (*anaisthēsian ktēsamenos*),[108] because the intellect cannot perceive the "place of God" within itself until it has surpassed all mental representations[109] related to created things: "The intellect would not see the place of God (*ho topos tou Theou*) within itself (*en heautō*), unless it has been raised higher than all the representations (*noēmata*) of objects (*pragmata*)."[110]

Thus, Evagrius will define prayer as "a state of the intellect destructive of every earthly representation (*noēmatos*),"[111] meaning any image of a sensible object. It does not stop at the level of introspection, but becomes an inner experience[112] through which the intellect is freed from the mental representations that leave imprints (*typoō*) upon it[113], with a view to "approaching the Immaterial

characteristic of God (cf. *Epistula fidei* 7: ἡ δὲ μονὰς καὶ ἑνὰς τῆς ἁπλῆς καὶ ἀπεριλήπτου οὐσίας ἑστὶ σημαντική. – "'One and Only' is the designation of the simple and uncircumscribed essence." Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 48. God is uncircumscribed, and the knowledge of him remains an experience that cannot be encompassed or understood: "But only our intellect is incomprehensible to us, as is God, its creator. Indeed, it is not possible to understand what a nature receptive of the Holy Trinity is nor to understand the unity, that is, essential knowledge." (*Kephalaia Gnostika* 2.11, S2; cf. Evagrius of Pontus, *The Gnostic Trilogy*, 213). Cf. Conway-Jones, "'The Greatest Paradox of All'," 272.

108 *De oratione* 120: "Blessed is the intellect that at the time of prayer attains total freedom from perception (ἀναισθησίαν κτησάμενος)." cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 198. Cf. *De oratione* 118.

109 Cf. *De oratione* 70.

110 *Skemmata* 23: Οὐκ ἂν ἴδοι ὁ νοῦς τὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τόπον ἐν ἑαυτῷ, μὴ πάντων τῶν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν νοημάτων ὑψηλότερος γεγονώς (cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, "The *Skemmata*", 525). Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Limit of the Mind (Noũς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh," 302.

111 *Skemmata* 26: Προσευχή ἑστι κατάστασις νοῦ, φθαρτικὴ παντὸς ἐπιγείου νοήματος; cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, "The *Skemmata*," 526. Evagrius emphasizes that man will not be able "to pray purely" (προσεύξασθαι καθαρῶς), "while being tangled up with material things and shaken by unremitting cares. For prayer is the setting aside of "representations" (προσευχὴ γάρ ἑστιν ἀπόθεσις νοημάτων)" (*De oratione* 71; Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 193). Those who desire pure prayer (καθαρᾶς προσευχῆς), he exhorted, must keep watch over their anger (θυμὸν) – that is, over "the power of the soul capable of destroying thoughts" (Θυμός ἑστι δύναμις ψυχῆς, φθαρτικὴ λογισμῶν, cf. *Skemmata* 8) – control their belly, limit their water consumption, keep vigil in prayer [...] knock at the door of Scripture with the hands of virtues. Then *apatheia* of the heart (καρδίας ἀπάθεια) will dawn for you and you will see, during prayer, the intellect shining like a star (νοῦν ἀστεροειδῆ ὄψει ἐν προσευχῇ)." Cf. *De malignis cogitationibus* 43; Évagre le Pontique, *Sur les pensées*, 298-9.

112 "an inner technique," cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald, "The Sapphire Light of the Mind," 518.

113 This state of prayer assumes that the intellect is devoid of any representation, of any "form" – not only of sensible things and any created reality, but even of God Himself. See *De oratione* 67: "Never give a shape (Μὴ σχηματίσῃς) to the divine as such when you pray, nor allow your intellect to be imprinted (τυπωθῆναί) by any form (μορφήν), but go immaterial to the Immaterial (ἀλλὰ ἄϋλος τῷ ἀΰλῳ πρόσιθι) and you will understand (καὶ συνήσεις)." Cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 193. Any representation of God, Christ, or angels that might appear at this moment can only be a deception of the demons, especially the demon of vainglory; cf. *De oratione* 116: "The source of a wandering intellect is vainglory (κενοδοξία), by which the intellect is moved to try circumscribing the divine by a shape or figures (σχήμασι καὶ μορφαῖς

One in an immaterial way."[114]

To attain this "imageless prayer," ascetic practices are necessary, the struggle with passions, the overcoming of evil thoughts, and a total renunciation, aiming at mastering the irascible (*thymos*) and desiring (*epithymia*) parts of the soul and eliminating "impassioned representations", as well as those originating from perception (*ex aisthēseōs*), memory, or temperament.[115]

> The intellect (*nous*) could not see the "place of God" (*topos tou theou*) in itself (*en heautō*), unless it had become loftier than all representations (*noēmata*) from things/ objects (*pragma*). But it would not become loftier, unless it had put off the passions (*pathē*) that bind it to sensible objects (*aisthēta pragmata*) through representations (*noēmata*). It will put aside the passions through the virtues (*aretē*); it will put aside the bare thoughts (*psiloi logismoi*) through spiritual contemplation (*pneumatikē theōria*) it will even put aside contemplation itself, when there appears (*epiphainō*) to it that light (*phōs*) at the time of prayer (*proseukhē*) which sets in relief (*ektypoō*) the place of God.[116]

As it advances in knowledge and ascends from one contemplation to another, the intellect reaches, at a privileged moment, "true prayer"[117] or "pure prayer."[118]

περιγράφειν)." Ibid., 198. Cf. Antoine Guillaumont, "La Vision de l'intellect Par Lui-Même Dans La Mystique Évagrienne," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 50 (1984): 255–62.

[114] Cf. *De oratione* 67. The contemplative realizes that, in his reality as a creature, the fundamental dimension is not his material body, but his immaterial intellect (*nous*). This intellect, created and perfectly adapted, has the purpose of knowing the Immaterial, that is, God as non-numerical Trinity and perfect unity. The intellect thus becomes the "immaterial icon of the Immaterial God." Cf. Driscoll, "Introduction," 15.

[115] Cf. *De oratione* 54: Οὐ μόνον θυμοῦ καὶ ἐπιθυμίας δεῖ ἄρχειν τὸν ἀληθῶς προσεύξασθαι βουλόμενον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἑκτὸς νοήματος ἐμπαθοῦς γενέσθαι – "It is necessary for one who hastens to pray truly not only to rule his irascibility and concupiscence, but also to become separated from impassioned representation." (Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 192); *De oratione* 62: Ὅταν ὁ νοῦς σου τῷ πολλῷ πρὸς θεὸν πόθῳ κατὰ μικρὸν οἷον ὑπαναχωρῇ τῆς σαρκὸς καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐξ αἰσθήσεως ἢ μνήμης ἢ κράσεως νοήματα ἀποστρέφηται, εὐλαβείας ὁμοῦ καὶ χαρᾶς ἔμπλεως γενόμενος, τότε νόμιζε ἠγγικέναι ὅροις προσευχῆς – "When your intellect in great yearning for God as it were withdraws by degrees from the flesh and, being filled with piety and joy, deflects all representations from perception, memory or temperament, then reckon that you have come near to the boundaries of prayer." (cf. Ibid., 192). Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Poetic Performance of the Praying-Mind," 332–3.

[116] *De malignis cogitationibus* 40; cf. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 114–5.

[117] "Pure prayer" (*De oratione* 70, 72), which Evagrius also calls "true prayer" (cf. *De oratione* 53, 55, 59, 60, 64) is the highest level of contemplation. Cf. Tobon, "*Apatheia* in the Teachings of Evagrius Ponticus," 51.

[118] *Capita cic auctoribus discipulis Evagrii* 78 presents a synthesis of Evagrian teaching regarding the exercise of the *nous*, illustrating how the entire monastic path culminates in "imageless prayer:" "As the intellect progresses in *praktikē*, it holds its representations (τὰ νοήματα) of sensible things (τῶν αἰσθητῶν) lightly; but as it progresses in *gnosis*, it will have varied

This "pure prayer" manifests as an intense, transitory process in which the intellect (*nous*), liberated from images and concepts, enters a "formless" state – achieving direct communion with God without intermediaries. This iconoclastic noetic experience also reflects a gnoseological movement from multiplicity to simplicity.[119]

Despite similarities in the definitions of prayer between Evagrius and his Greek philosophical predecessors,[120] Evagrius's concerns were distinct.[121] He fundamentally changed the understanding of prayer, focusing it primarily on a personal, inner communion that belonged more to the realm of the self than to the ecclesial institution. He conceived it as an "inner technique" to intensify self-attentiveness and draw near to God. He expanded the philosophical vision by introducing the fundamental idea that prayer is the "activity of the intellect (*nous*)."[122] While Origen, in his treatise *On Prayer,* shared several notions of "spiritual exercises" with Late Antique philosophical schools, he did not develop the concept of contemplative prayer or what might be termed "the praying *nous*." Evagrius's significant contribution, therefore, was to understand prayer as the driving force of the *nous*, awakening the intellect to exercise its

contemplations (θεωρήματα); but as it progresses in prayer (ἐν τῇ προσευχῇ), it will see its own light more brightly and more radiantly (λαμπρότερον καὶ φαιδρότερον ὄψεται τὸ ἴδιον φῶς)." Évagre le Pontique, *Chapitres Des Disciples d'Évagre*., 174. Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Poetic Performance of the Praying-Mind," 334.

[119] *De oratione* 85: ἡ δὲ προσευχὴ προοίμιόν ἐστι τῆς ἀΰλου καὶ ἀποικίλου γνώσεως – "And prayer is a prelude to the immaterial and simple knowledge." Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Limit of the Mind (Noῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh," 300.

[120] On prayer among Greek philosophers, see Édouard des Places, "La Prière Des Philosophes Grecs," *Gregorianum* 41, no. 2 (1960): 253–72. On cultic prayer among the Greeks, see Édouard des Places, *La Religion Grecque. Dieux, Cultes, Rites et Sentiment Religieux Dans La Grèce Antique* (Paris: A. et J. Picard, 1969), 153–70.

[121] For instance, the late 2nd-century Platonic philosopher Maximus of Tyre questioned prayer's sense and effectiveness. This led him to distinguish prayer: for philosophers, it is "is a conversation (*homilia*) and a dialogue with the gods about the things one has and a demonstration of one's virtue," while others ask for what they lack. Cf. *Orationes* V 8, 188–190 Maximus Tyrius, *Dissertationes*., 45. Many early Christian writers adopted this definition but did not restrict it solely to philosophers. Clement of Alexandria, for example, discussed prayer in a polemical context, linking it to the self-identity of the *gnostikos* – the true Christian – in contrast to others. On the definitions of prayer in Clement of Alexandria and Maximus of Tyre, see Méhat, "Sur Deux Définitions de La Prière," 115–120; Alain Le Boulluec, "Les Réflexions de Clément sur la prière et le traité d'Origène," in *Alexandrie antique et chrétienne: Clément et Origène*, by Alain Le Boulluec, ed. Carmelo Giuseppe Conticello, Collection des études augustiniennes 178 (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 2006), 137–49.

[122] Cf. 1 Cor. 14:15, where the Spirit (πνεῦμα) and the intellect/ mind (νοῦς) appear as the two praying faculties: "I will pray with the Spirit, but I will also pray with the mind; I will sing with the Spirit, but I will also sing with the mind." – προσεύξομαι τῷ πνεύματι, προσεύξομαι δὲ καὶ τῷ νοΐ· ψαλῶ τῷ πνεύματι, ψαλῶ δὲ καὶ τῷ νοΐ.

highest and purest function.[123] Thus, Evagrius marks a radical shift in the conceptualization of "inner prayer" and a transformation of Eastern Christianity's discourse on this spiritual practice in Late Antiquity.[124]

Evagrius' "pure prayer" teaching represented one of Late Antiquity's most stimulating and innovative mystical theories.[125] His work, *Chapters on Prayer*, written for a close and learned friend,[126] is a masterpiece of the period's mystical and philosophical literature, where he developed a comprehensive terminology and theory for this contemplative prayer, naming it "pure prayer" and integrating it into his complex mystical system. The terminology he introduced became widely known and was adopted as normative by Greek, Latin, and Syriac authors of Late Antiquity and later periods.[127]

Conclusion

This article explored the deep and distinctive understanding of prayer within Evagrius Ponticus's spiritual system, particularly emphasizing his notion of "pure prayer." We observed how Evagrius perceives prayer in various forms, notably defining it as "a work befitting the dignity of the intellect" and, importantly, as an authentic "state" (*katastasis*) of the purified *nous*. This interpretation framed prayer not merely as a text or request directed at God but as the intellect's highest and purest function.

The journey toward this state of pure, imageless prayer represents the culmination of Evagrius's coherent spiritual path, built upon the foundation of

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123 *De oratione* 83–84. Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Limit of the Mind (Noῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh," 297–9.

124 Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Poetic Performance of the Praying-Mind," 329.

125 Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, "Theories of Prayer in Late Antiquity: Doubts and Practices from Maximos of Tyre to Isaac of Nineveh," in *Prayer and Worship in Eastern Christianities, 5th to 11th Centuries*, by Derek Krueger and Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 10–33. (20: „Viewing Evagrius's theory in the larger context of Late antique Christian and non-Christian discourse on prayer reveals its radical originality.")

126 Bunge [Gabriel Bunge, "The 'Spiritual Prayer': On the Trinitarian Mysticism of Evagrius of Pontus," *Monastic Studies* 17 (1987): 191–208.] supports the hypothesis that Evagrius addressed his treatise *On Prayer* to his teacher, St. Macarius the Great, although there does not seem to be consistent evidence for this, cf. Antoine Guillaumont, *Un Philosophe Au Désert: Évagre Le Pontique*, Textes et Traditions 8 (Paris: Vrin, 2004), 129. R. Sinkewicz [Robert E. Sinkewicz, ed., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 184] suggests Rufinus, at his monastery in Jerusalem, as a possible addressee.

127 Cf. Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Limit of the Mind (Noῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh," 293–4 and n. 14.

ascetic practice (*praktiké*) aimed at achieving impassibility (*apatheia*) and detachment from the senses and mental representations (*noemata*). Evagrius's in-depth exposition of the intellect's activity and its obstacles revealed the rigorous internal discipline required for the *nous* to return to its pristine "state" and engage in authentic, unmediated communion with God.

Evagrius's systematic articulation of the "praying *nous*" and his emphasis on prayer as an "imageless" encounter with the immaterial God represented a seminal contribution to Christian mystical theology. By providing a detailed experiential model and practical instructions for the intellect's ascent towards contemplation (*theoria*), Evagrius not only synthesized earlier ascetic and philosophical strands but also significantly reshaped the discourse on inner prayer for centuries to come. His legacy lay in this powerful vision of "pure prayer" as the ultimate expression of the intellect's potential and the apex of the spiritual life.

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Orthodox Christian Ethics and Artificial Intelligence: Anthropological and Theological Challenges

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ABSTRACT. In an era increasingly shaped by Artificial Intelligence (AI), Orthodox Christian theology is called to engage critically and constructively with the ethical, spiritual, and anthropological challenges posed by this technological transformation. While AI excels in data processing and simulation of human behavior, it fundamentally lacks personhood, freedom, and spiritual discernment—elements essential to the Orthodox understanding of the human being as created in the image of God. This article explores how Orthodox theology, grounded in the patristic tradition, offers a distinct framework for evaluating AI: one that upholds human dignity, relationality, and the sacredness of embodied and sacramental life. Rather than rejecting AI, the Orthodox approach calls for discernment—embracing technology as a tool for ministry and human flourishing, but resisting its use when it undermines communion, spiritual depth, or the mystery of divine grace. The question is not whether AI will change the world—it already has—but whether this change will align with the vision of the Kingdom of God. Orthodox Christianity offers a prophetic voice in the digital age, proposing that true transformation comes not through algorithms, but through theosis—our journey toward divine likeness through love, prayer, and communion with God and neighbor.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence**,** Orthodox Theology**,** Personhood, Orthodox Christian ethics, AI Ethics

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is among the vital drivers of global transformation, reshaping every aspect of human life, from daily interactions to global systems. AI innovations have revolutionized various sectors,

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including education, finance and healthcare, among others.[1] Theologians have drawn analogies between the impact of AI and the historical transformations brought by writing and printing, both of which reshaped not only culture but also theology, signaling that AI could inaugurate a comparable paradigm shift in religious thought.[2] Technology consistently reshapes not only practices but also the very understanding of human identity and community, thereby posing fundamental questions for Christian theology.[3]

From a technical point of view, AI refers to a broad field of computer science that designs systems capable of performing tasks that, at least historically, required human intelligence, such as classification, prediction, pattern recognition, or language understanding. Today, most widely deployed AI systems rely on machine learning, that is, algorithms that learn statistical patterns from large datasets instead of following hand-crafted rules. Within machine learning, deep learning uses multilayered neural networks to extract increasingly abstract representations of data. Large language models, which have recently shaped much of the public debate on AI, constitute only one specific family of deep learning systems, primarily trained on vast textual corpora. They should not, however, be conflated with AI as a whole, which also encompasses, for example, computer vision systems, recommender systems, and reinforcement-learning agents in robotics.[4]

AI has enhanced personalization of learning and research experience, and it has provided instant feedback and concise decision-making through data analytics.[5] The integration of AI in human life raises profound questions on balancing algorithmic structures with theological norms.[6] Generally, some key aspects of the ethical debate surrounding the adoption of AI include moral responsibility, bias, privacy, erosion of the social framework, and respect for human rights.[7] Technology itself contains forces that transcend human intention, since "nothing is good or bad in itself; the use and application of new technology in practice can reveal what ought to be done, beyond any utilitarianism." This suggests that the ethical dilemmas posed by AI cannot be addressed solely

1 Christos Papakostas, "Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education: Ethical, Pedagogical, and Theological Perspectives," *Religions* 16, no. 5 (2025): 563, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050563.

2 Sotirios Despotis, "Studying the Bible in the age of Artificial Intelligence," *Synochi* 2 (December 2023): 172, https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.41994.

3 Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 80.

4 Stuart Russel and Peter Norvig, *Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2021).

5 Ebenezer Olawale Kayode, Michael Olusegun Abodunrin, and Godwin Ayodeji Abodunrin, "Biblical Ethics and Artificial Intelligence: Towards A Model of Integration in Theological Education," *Jos Journal of Religion and Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (2024): 108.

6 Papakostas, "Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education," 563.

7 Karslı, "Ethical and Theological Problems," 1.

through regulatory codes, but demand deeper ontological criteria.[8] The ethical implication of this technology has disrupted both the secular world, causing struggles, such as job displacement, and theological frameworks of the Christian doctrine.[9] In the case of the Christian Orthodox tradition, faith is deeply rooted in the incarnation, theosis, and the sanctity of creation.[10] These doctrinal bases raise critical dialogue in the face of AI algorithms. While AI in religion evokes optimism in various ways—such as through AI-driven records digitization efforts—there are also potential threats, including doctrinal error, the erosion of authenticity resulting from the automated generation of doctrinal commentary, virtual religious counselling, and sermon writing, as well as the marginalization of pastoral care.[11] A theologically responsible approach must therefore hold together both dimensions: it should acknowledge concrete ways in which AI can support education, administration, and even certain forms of pastoral communication, while at the same time scrutinising where such tools risk undermining human freedom, discernment, and genuine communion. The Orthodox tradition already possesses interpretive tools for evaluating technology through the patristic heritage. Holy fathers such as Basil the Great, John of Damascus, and Maximus the Confessor engaged the technologies of their time with discernment, acknowledging their benefits when serving health and salvation, yet setting boundaries when they threatened to secularize human life or weaken the relationship with God. This patristic approach offers a criterion today: AI may be useful insofar as it serves the purpose of theosis and does not replace or distort the personal encounter with God and the neighbor.[12] In essence, faith in Orthodox Christianity is more than literal intellectual agreement to a set of beliefs. Faith is linked to personal devotion, involving spiritual practices as part of the transformative journey towards God. This process changes the entire being into being like God. Theosis involves a human-God relationship, where God transforms the person in a kind of synergy.[13] Similarly, the belief in the Holy Trinity lay a strong foundation for a debate about the

8 Stavros Giagkazoglou, "Theology and Artificial Intelligence," *Theologia* 91, no. 3 (2020): 103.

9 Lluís Oviedo, "Artificial Intelligence and Theology: Looking for a Positive—But Not Uncritical—Reception," *Zygon* 57, no. 4 (2022): 938.

10 George Mastrantonis, "The Fundamental Teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church," *GOARCH*, 2015, https://www.goarch.org/el/-/the-fundamental-teachings-of-the-eastern-orthodox-church.

11 Papakostas, "Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education," 563.

12 Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron,* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1895); Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua to John*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); ohn of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1899).

13 Ioannis Romanides, *Patristic Theology* (Thessaloniki: Parakatathiki, 2004), 42.

theology within algorithm. Furthermore, Orthodox Christianity holds firm to a view about human nature as having been created in the image of God.[14] This nature is unique and special, fixed and inviolable, making the Christian thought instinctively resistant to AI because it conflicts with the operational nature of the AI algorithm. This way, the great question in Christian Orthodox tradition is not whether AI will change the world, but how it conflicts with this theology grounded in the Triune God and relational nature of humanity, particularly how this theology can bring responsible and ethical development in the face of AI. This article focuses on two interrelated questions. The first concerns whether artificial intelligence, however advanced, can be regarded as a person in the Orthodox sense – capable of bearing the image of God and participating in theosis. The second concerns how the deployment of non-personal AI systems in education, pastoral practice, and wider social life affects human personhood, relationality, and dignity. The argument unfolds in three steps: first, the Orthodox anthropological basis for denying personhood and deification to AI artefacts is outlined; second, the ethical challenges of bias, privacy, and the diminishment of personhood that emerge when algorithmic systems mediate human relationships are analysed; and third, some theological principles are sketched for a discerning and "transfigured" engagement with AI that resists both technological idolatry and uncritical rejection.

2. The Orthodox Anthropological Basis

Orthodox theological engagement with AI always begins with a proper understanding of the human person.[15] Some Orthodox thinkers stress that AI should not be understood as "artificial intelligence" in the strict sense but rather as "intelligence assistance," which highlights its auxiliary role and underscores that true intelligence remains tied to the human person as "image of God".[16] In orthodoxy theology, the human being is beyond an intellectual being; created in the image and likeness of God, humans have a body and soul.[17] This image assigns distinctive abilities to human beings, including making humans creative,

[14] Zachary R. Calo, "AI, Medicine and Christian Ethics," in *AI and the Rule of Law* (Edward Elgar Publishing eBooks, 2024), 220, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802205657.ch13.

[15] John Zizioulas, "Ἀπὸ τὸ προσωπεῖον εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον. Ἡ συμβολὴ τῆς πατερικῆς θεολογίας εἰς τὴν ἔννοιαν τοῦ προσώπου," in *Χαριστήρια εις τιμήν του Μητροπολίτου Γέροντος Χαλκηδόνος Μελίτωνος* (Thessaloniki: Patriarchal Foundation for Patristic Studies, 1977), 287.

[16] Despotis, " Studying the Bible," 194

[17] Nicuşor Morlova, "The Impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on Spiritual Life, From the Perspective of Christian Orthodoxy," *Pro Edu International Journal of Educational Sciences* 5, no. 9 (June 21, 2023): 230, https://doi.org/10.26520/peijes.2023.9.5.25-37.

rational, and relational.[18] The body was created first and received life, after which God found the world perfect. Thus, the perfect creation of human nature has the material and spiritual worlds.[19] This way, a human person is not a mere aggregate of data points or a biological machine that can be processed based on algorithms and patterns to make decisions. The human person is a unique being, called into communion with God and with others. AI systems risk creating the illusion of relationship without authentic reciprocity, which directly challenges theological understandings of personhood as communion.[20] Giagkazoglou warns that the "technophysis" created by humans through AI generates a new type of civilization, in which "the axis of life no longer has any ontological or meaningful content and purpose, apart from the insatiable and nihilistic hedonism of programmed pleasures." Such a distortion of existence stands in stark contrast with the Orthodox understanding of the human person as created in the image of God.[21]

Within this anthropological horizon, a first and much-discussed question is whether advanced AI systems could themselves ever be considered persons in the Orthodox sense. From a doctrinal perspective, this possibility must be rejected, but the reasons require some care. Orthodox theology understands personhood (prosopon/hypostasis) as the unique mode of existence of an ensouled, embodied being created by God in the divine image and called to communion with God and neighbour. Personhood is thus not reducible to functional capacities, informational complexity, or the successful simulation of relational behaviour. Artificial systems, however sophisticated, are artefacts constructed by human ingenuity; they lack a soul, are not called into existence by a personal divine act of creation, and cannot receive uncreated grace. Contemporary AI – including large language models that generate apparently meaningful theological discourse – operates through statistical pattern recognition and large-scale data processing. It can imitate certain external features of human intelligence and communication, yet it does not possess interiority, freedom, or the capacity for love and spiritual discernment. For this reason, any talk of "AI persons" within an Orthodox framework can only be metaphorical or legal, not ontological.

As soon as this is acknowledged, a natural objection arises. If AI systems were one day to display linguistic, emotional, or social behaviour indistinguishable from that of humans, would it not be arbitrary to deny them personhood? This

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[18] O. L. Sokolovsky, "Anthropological Dimension of Perfection in Orthodox Theology," *Bulletin of the Ivan Franko Zhytomyr State University. Philosophical Sciences* 2, no. 94 (2023): 38, https://doi.org/10.35433/PhilosophicalSciences.2(94).2023.34-42.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

[21] Giagkazoglou, "Theology and Artificial Intelligence," 112.

line of reasoning reflects influential functionalist accounts of mind and strong-AI expectations according to which sufficiently complex information-processing is enough for consciousness and moral status. From an Orthodox perspective, however, such arguments overlook what is most decisive: that personhood is grounded not merely in observable behaviour but in the mystery of created freedom, embodied existence, and participation in uncreated divine life. Even if future AI systems were to simulate human reactions with far greater subtlety than today's models, they would still lack the sacramental and ecclesial dimensions of personhood that are constitutive for an Orthodox understanding of the human being.

In Orthodox Christian Tradition, the relationality emphasis in the *"image of God"* goes beyond the concept of truth understood by the AI. According to the Orthodox doctrine, truth is not a logical algorithm or a set of facts, but is ultimately a person: Christ.[22] Jesus Christ is truly God who shares in the same reality as the Father and the Spirit, and He is truly man who shares with us all that is human. As the unique God-man, Jesus Christ has restored humanity to fellowship with God. Thus, Christian living is a call into a personal relationship with God. Since AI has no capacity to engage relationally, incarnate faith, empathy, or participate in spiritual discernment, it is unable to express the fulness of truth through algorithms and data.[23] Similarly, it cannot offer communion and embodied experience. As metropolitan Nikolaos of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki emphasizes, AI fundamentally lacks the capacity for authentic spiritual discernment and cannot replace the living pastoral relationship essential to Orthodox spiritual formation.[24] The mechanical processing of theological concepts through algorithms cannot capture the dynamic, relational nature of Orthodox theological understanding, which emerges from lived experience within the Church community." These core features are intrinsic to Orthodox Christianity and are not reducible to algorithmic efficiencies. These contrasts are not meant to inflate AI into a rival to God or to the human priest, but to clarify why, even when AI tools are employed in pastoral or theological settings, they cannot occupy the sacramental and relational place of the human person.

Another concern of AI that poses a theological and ethical challenge is its tendency to rest upon a reductive, naturalistic mentality. In contemporary culture, AI is often tied to eschatological visions, such as 'digital immortality' or the transhumanist ideal of a technological superhuman. These aspirations substitute the Orthodox hope of the Resurrection with a technological soteriology. The

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22 John 14:6.

23 Papakostas, "Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education," 563

24 Nikolaos Chatzinikolaou, Metropolitan of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki, "Artificial Intelligence: How Intelligent and How Wise?" *Ekklesia* 11 (December 2019): 1080–1092.

Church is therefore called to reveal that true hope is not found in the storage of consciousness as data, but in participation in the Body of Christ and the life of the age to come.[25] Naturalism refers to the reductive philosophy holding that everything can be explained through natural sciences.[26] The naturalistic account of humanity has failed to reconcile with the Christian idea that every person has a soul loved by God. This way, AI may threaten to destabilise many core aspects of Christian thought, particularly those related to human communion with God, human nature, and human uniqueness.[27] The play of AI in this context raises critical questions, such as, if machines can replicate the rational capabilities of a person, how does it stand as a central claim that human beings were created for a special relationship with God? What does *"image of God"* mean if AI and robots display almost same characteristics as human beings?[28] A more specific approach to these questions is to assess whether a given use of AI respects human dignity and facilitates authentic development.[29] In this case, perhaps the leading question must be Does AI elevate or diminish that which is essentially human? In either case, Orthodox Christian scholars hold that there is a fixity to human nature that will always remain unique and unchangeable; thus, AI can neither acquire nor take away the dignity placed on human beings by God.[30]

Generally, the personhood emphasized in the Christian Orthodox tradition can be described in three anthropological concepts that lay the foundational debate about theology within the algorithm. These concepts include embodiment and relationality.[31] The concept embodiment describes the inherent human, not merely as having thoughts, memories, and emotions. This means a person is not simply a mind, such that their memories can be captured and uploaded onto a supercomputer to endure forever. Instead, humans are enfleshed and embodied creatures. The body plays a crucial role in Christian ethics in light of the doctrines of incarnation and resurrection, and human destiny is not found in found in overcoming the body but in the body remade and glorified.[32] Based on the Christian theological anthropology, humans are embodied characters of persons, and this body possesses an intrinsic dignity that needs to be respected.

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[25] Ronald Cole-Turner, ed., *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011); Martin Heriot-Maitland, "Digital Immortality and the Orthodox Critique of Transhumanism," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 36, no. 2 (2023): 214–230; John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

[26] Calo, "AI, Medicine and Christian Ethics," 221.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid, 222.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid, 223.

[32] Ibid.

In this lens, broader technological projects of human augmentation, some of which make use of AI components, risk interfering with this human nature of embodiment and therefore generate critical theological concerns. Practically, there is always a need for physical human fellowship, even when digital technologies supplement some spiritual practices. Digital communication platforms, sometimes assisted by AI-based tools such as automated translation or personalised recommendation of liturgical material, can enable forms of virtual participation in church life. However, when such virtual experiences substitute rather than complement physical presence, they raise serious concerns about the spiritual significance and authenticity of worship. However, if these virtual experiences substitute physical presence, it raises concerns about the spiritual significance and authenticity of such practices. Therefore, there is a need for Christians to navigate the tension between embracing technological advancements and upholding the embodied nature of worship. Although AI may support catechesis or theological education, it cannot replace the sacramental life of the Church. The Eucharist, Baptism, or Confession require materiality, community, and personal presence; they cannot be virtualized without losing their very essence. The incarnation of Christ demonstrates that salvation takes place through the body and matter, not through immaterial algorithms.[33] Sacraments such as Baptism cannot be virtualized, since they require material elements like water and the presence of a real community to witness and affirm faith formation. In such cases, AI may not comprehend such grace. A place like this, requires a human person to experience the grace of God in a communion.

The second anthropological element of personhood is relationality, simply defined as the capacity to be in a relationship, involving encounter with the natural world, other people, and God. It also points to the ways in which a person experiences and expresses freedom through relationships with others and with God. From an Orthodox perspective, relationality is therefore one of the privileged modes in which human dignity is manifested and fulfilled, but not a condition for possessing that dignity. Even those whose capacity to communicate or to enter into recognisable relationships is severely diminished – such as persons with profound cognitive or communicative disabilities – remain fully human, bearers of the divine image and unconditional dignity. This way, theological and ethical perspectives challenge the use of AI in interfering with the relationality aspect of human nature, despite its positive contributions to theological development.

[33] Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973); John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006); Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 5, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012).

3. Ethical Challenges: Bias, Privacy, and the Diminution of Personhood

Once it is recognized that AI systems are not persons in the Orthodox sense, the central ethical question becomes how their design and deployment affect human persons and communities. The practical aspect of AI raises various ethical challenges through the lens of Orthodox theology. One of the most critical is algorithmic bias. Due to the way AI systems are developed from human-generated data, they mimic, inherit, amplify, and transmit the existing bias related to socio-economic status, race, and gender. Practically, AI draws from every dimension of cosmic existence and adopts the training and data points in its algorithms that humans made a choice to use. This data constitutes all the conscious and unconscious biases that humans bring along with them.[34] Such bias conflicts with the Orthodox conviction that every human being, created in the 'image of God,' possesses unique dignity and equal worth. Algorithmic systems require an ethics of responsibility and accountability rather than mere technical regulation, particularly when they affect human dignity.[35] The Christian mission to transform the world in the light of God's Kingdom requires legitimate, free-of-bias, equitable, and necessary scientific research.[36] Therefore, Orthodox the perspective challenges AI development to be guided by the principle of universal human dignity. This challenge extends to addressing what Orthodox theologians identify as the fundamental incompatibility between algorithmic logic and the mysterious nature of divine grace. Unlike human intelligence, which Orthodox theology understands as participatory in the divine *logos*, AI operates through purely mechanistic processes that cannot access the transcendent dimension essential to authentic theological understanding.[37] The concern is not merely about bias in data, but about the fundamental limitation of algorithmic systems to apprehend spiritual realities. "Spiritual Intelligence is the only one that can control Artificial Intelligence". The proper governance of AI requires spiritual wisdom and discernment that transcends mere technological capabilities.[38] In this case, AI and its advancement will reach all creation, to all life, and to every dimension of cosmic existence while actively working to mitigate bias and ensure equity and fairness. In theological contexts, large training corpora may reproduce doctrinal, gender, or cultural biases, emphasizing the majority worldview while marginalizing others. For example,

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34 Constantine Psimopoulos, "Artificial Intelligence: Bioethical Considerations and Limitations," *Public Orthodoxy*, December 26, 2024, https://publicorthodoxy.org/2024/10/15/artificial-intelligence-bioethics/.

35 Luciano Floridi, *The Ethics of Information* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

36 Psimopoulos, "Artificial Intelligence: Bioethical Considerations."

37 Chatzinikolaou, "Artificial Intelligence," 1088-1089.

38 Nikolaos Chatzinikolaou, Metropolitan of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki, "Spiritual Intelligence is the only one that can control Artificial Intelligence," *AI Report Magazine*, 21.

a model trained on protestant sources will tend to underrepresent Orthodox, Catholic, or Global South interpretations.[39]

Beyond bias, AI systems also raise significant concerns regarding data privacy. AI models require large amounts of personal data to function, which lead to ethical concerns related to surveillance and the commodification of private life. For example, AI platforms often collect sensitive data on pastoral struggles, belief, and conscience which commercial providers may process and share these data beyond the intended purposes.[40] There are several ethical concerns related the collection of this personal data. First, there is a risk of such data being misused or falling into wrong hands, which could pose a great ethical and legal issues. Secondly, there is a higher risk of failing the commitment to confidentiality and ethical openness.[41] For example, many AI-fused educational sites run in business modes involving commodification of users by utilising or trading their data with external providers. This is a common strategy in secular technological space, but challenges religious institutions with commitment to pastoral care, confidentiality, and ethical sincerity. Thirdly, there are risks of data breaches through unauthorised access, or disclosure of confidential data and confessions, which can destroy public trust of the involved institutions. With all these vulnerabilities, Orthodox theology view the indiscriminate collection and use of personal data as a potential erosion of personhood. This challenge becomes even more pressing when considering the question of data ownership and the principle of data minimization. Educational and personal data should be used exclusively for the purposes for which they are collected, with full transparency, and ideally ownership should remain with the individuals who provide them. Moreover, the GDPR principle of data minimization often conflicts with the functional demands of AI, which tends to operate more effectively the more data it processes. This tension highlights a fundamental ethical conflict between efficiency and the safeguarding of human dignity.[42] As part of respecting human person, the private inner life of a person, including thoughts, spiritual journey, and struggles must be protected from technological exploitation. Therefore, Orthodox theological foundations call for transparent algorithms using diverse training sets and informed consent protocols to ensure that AI serves formation rather than distortion.[43] The Orthodox Church's recent engagement with digital

[39] Papakostas, “Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education,” 563.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ioannis Ladas, “Safeguarding Privacy in Educational Data: Ethical Challenges and Implications of Artificial Intelligence,” in *Artificial Intelligence in Education: Proceedings of the 1st Scientific Conference*, ed. Zoi Vazoura and Nikolaos Samaras (Athens, 2024), 459–60.
[43] Papakostas, “Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education,” 563.

technologies demonstrates a careful approach to preserving theological authenticity while embracing technological benefits. As noted in contemporary Orthodox discourse, the Church must maintain vigilance against the commodification of spiritual life through data mining and algorithmic manipulation of religious content.[44] This requires not only technical safeguards but also spiritual discernment to distinguish between tools that enhance authentic theological formation and those that merely simulate it. Recent developments in AI-powered educational and pastoral platforms illustrate that these concerns are not merely theoretical. Systems that collect detailed behavioural, spiritual, or performance data in order to generate predictions, profiles, or risk scores can create extensive personal dossiers; when such datasets are inadequately protected or repurposed without consent, they expose vulnerable persons to concrete risks of data misuse, theft, and commodification and call for stronger safeguards and a robust theological critique of technological exploitation.[45] The ethical dilemmas of AI can be evaluated analogically to the four foundational principles of bioethics: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Applied to AI, these principles raise questions about whether human autonomy and oversight are preserved, whether privacy and personal data are protected, whether AI contributes to the common good, and whether social justice and fairness are maintained.[46] Relevant institutions must ensure AI technologies comply with international data privacy regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) adopted in the European Union.

Finally, there is the risk of diminution of personhood through AI algorithm. When AI takes over tasks that require empathy, relationality, and human creativity, it can cause psychological and spiritual impoverishment. The idea of treating AI systems as replacement of human relationships and interactions leads to loss of dignity and diminishes the sense that human beings have inherent worth.[47] For example, certain Protestant churches and denominations have incorporated AI-generated prayer responses into their websites. At the end of the prayer request chain, there is a living person, but any immediate relief to the requestor is left on AI. This role would best serve the requestor if it would be done through intercession based on Christian fellowship. Increased reliance

44 Chatzinikolaou, "Artificial Intelligence," 1084-1095.

45 Ladas, "Safeguarding Privacy in Educational Data," 461–62.

46 Vasileios Fanaras, "Ethical Dilemmas of Artificial Intelligence: Ethical Machine or Ethical Use?," *Ecclesiastikos Kirykas* 26 (2020): 224.

47 Sterling Martin Allen and ChatGPT, "The Theological and Ethical Dangers Associated with Using Artificial Intelligence in Christian Religious Settings," *Firebrand Magazine*, May 23, 2023, https://firebrandmag.com/articles/the-theological-and-ethical-dangers-associated-with-using-artificial-intelligence-in-christian-religious-settings.

on AI in spiritual practices can distort perceptions of human dignity within the context of church life. Moreover, AI technology can easily contribute to devaluation of human life and the erosion of authentic human connection. For instance, if a church-endorsed online resources depend heavily on AI systems for interpersonal interactions, it undermines the essence of human relationships and lower the value of community and fellowship in religious contexts. From an Orthodox theological perspective, God's creative act in granting human beings freedom rather than treating them as remotely controlled instruments underlines the irreducibly personal character of revelation and spiritual communication. When AI is used to generate biblical exegesis, sermons, prayers, or other theological texts intended to address the depths of the human person, there is a real risk that such communication becomes impersonal and mechanised, lacking the ascetic struggle, discernment, and accountability that normally accompany pastoral speech. This is a strong ethical concern, especially in the Christian Orthodox tradition.[48] The challenge lies in the balance between technological convenience and the depth of personal engagement. Despite the potential benefits of AI, such as administrative efficiency, AI must never replace the dialogic, relational, and formative aspect of learning the faith.[49] This way, the use of AI-powered chatbots for religious counselling raises concerns about the meaningfulness and authenticity of the counselling experience. Human counsellors offer unique, empathetic, and spiritual guidance that AI algorithm cannot replicate.[50] These reservations do not attribute to AI any independent spiritual agency or quasi-divine status; rather, they highlight how an artefact that lacks personhood can nonetheless reshape patterns of interaction in ways that either support or undermine authentic Christian community. Therefore, over-reliance on AI for core tasks such as spiritual direction or sermon preparation risks reducing the humanistic character of pastoral ministry and instrumentalising the sacred, by replacing the living pastor–congregant relationship with a largely impersonal and deterministic process. Similarly, the integration of AI into daily life generates pressing ethical dilemmas, which demand the establishment of clear deontological norms and a human-centered approach to prevent violations of human freedom and dignity.[51]

A Christian ethical matrix has been proposed that centers on principles such as *agape* (unconditional love), stewardship, human dignity, justice, and the common good. These values offer evaluative criteria for AI applications that go beyond technological performance, emphasizing that AI must not dehumanize, discriminate, or undermine human relationships. Instead, it must promote human

48 Ibid.
49 Papakostas, "Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education," 563.
50 Allen and ChatGPT, "Theological and Ethical Dangers," 2023.
51 Grekas, "Artificial Intelligence and the Human Being," 72–73.

flourishing, inclusivity, and social cohesion. Such values are in resonance with the Orthodox emphasis on relationality and personhood, further supporting the imperative of aligning AI development with the moral vision of the Church.[52]

4. Theological Principles for a Transfigured World

Although these challenges are significant to think through and ensure a responsible AI system, the Orthodox perspective does not reject technology. It calls for a theological framework for identifying and adopting the proper use of AI to serve the human person and God's creation.[53] Orthodox thinkers articulated it well that the Christian mission is to transfigure the world in the light of God's Kingdom, and not to escape it.[54] Orthodox Christian theology does not reject technology—indeed, it regards it as a gift of God to humanity—but emphasizes the necessity of integrating it within an ontological and spiritual framework that respects human dignity and freedom. In practice, this means that AI applications that, for example, improve medical diagnosis, facilitate access to education for marginalised communities, assist in environmental monitoring, or support administrative tasks in parishes and dioceses can be welcomed as genuine gifts, so long as they remain transparently governed and subordinated to a person-centred ethic. Recent theological discussions have in fact emphasised the possibility of a cautiously positive, though never uncritical, reception of AI within Christian thought.[55] As highlighted in the message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church: "The Orthodox Church avoids encroaching upon scientific inquiry and does not take a position on every scientific question. It gives thanks to God, who bestows upon scientists the gift of unveiling unknown dimensions of divine creation."[56] This balanced approach recognizes that scientific advancement, including AI development, can serve divine purposes when properly oriented.

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[52] Saif Ahmed, Ayesha Akter Sumi, and Norzalita Abd Aziz, "Exploring Multi-Religious Perspective of Artificial Intelligence," *Theology and Science* 23, no. 1 (2024): 111–12, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2024.2436783.

[53] Mikhail V. Vinichenko, Marina V. Rybakova, Galina Y. Nikiporets-Takigawa, Oxana L. Chulanova, and Natalia V. V. Ljapunova, "The Influence of Artificial Intelligence on the Human Potential Development: The Views of Orthodox Clergy and Parishioners," *Cuestiones Políticas* 37, no. 65 (2020): 410, https://produccioncientificaluz.org/index.php/cuestiones/article/view/33325.

[54] Psimopoulos, "Artificial Intelligence: Bioethical Considerations."

[55] Marius Dorobantu, "Artificial Intelligence as a testing ground for key theological questions," *Zygon - Journal of Religion and Science* 57 (2022): 984-999. https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12831.

[56] *Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church* (Crete, June 2016), https://www.holycouncil.org/message_el.

At the same time, however, the Orthodox Church clarifies that the revelation of the human person is primarily the work of divine grace and personal ascetic struggle. Consequently, AI may function in a supportive role but can never substitute for divine providence or the individual's spiritual journey. The danger of replacing the human person with so-called "intelligent" systems, which lack both consciousness and freedom, is consistently underscored in Orthodox theological discourse.[57] In an interview, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew highlighted that the absolute priority in AI development must always be to the person over systems. While not opposing technological advancement, Bartholomew emphasized the need for innovation to remain human-centered.[58] Additionally, he emphasized the need for education that cultivates and supports the spiritual nature of humanity. This is the central call for Orthodox theology: that AI and robotics must be employed through theological perspectives on human free will, uniqueness, and spiritual nature.[59]

A central axis of patristic anthropology is the *nous* (mind or intellect). AI, despite its functional resemblance to human reasoning, cannot be meaningfully related to the *nous* as it is understood within the Orthodox tradition. In patristic thought, the *nous* is not identified with logical processing, much less with "computational intelligence." Rather, it is associated with the human capacity to know and to commune with God.[60] To avoid possible confusion, it is clarified that no fundamental or essential affinity appears to exist between AI and the *nous*, as it has been understood consistently in the thought and theology of the Fathers.[61] Unlike human intelligence, which Orthodox theology understands as participatory in the divine *logos*, AI operates through purely mechanistic processes that cannot access the transcendent dimension essential to authentic theological understanding. This theological distinction is crucial for maintaining proper boundaries in AI applications within religious contexts.

Consequently, the Orthodox Church generally advocates the responsible use of AI in tandem with the cultivation of "spiritual intelligence".[62] As metropolitan Nikolaos of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki has emphasized, "Spiritual

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57 Vinichenko et al., "The Influence of Artificial Intelligence," 410.

58 Derek Gatopoulos and Petros Giannakouris, "Orthodox Church Leader Says Faith Is Humanity's Safeguard Against the 'Impending Robotocracy,'" *AP News*, June 2, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/greece-automation-religion-robots-orthodoxy-2d5765621d591fa4e58ac8f60df1a3d4.

59 Ibid.

60 *Proceedings of the 2nd Bioethics Conference of the Ecumenical Patriarchate*, §4 (Rethymno, November 29–December 1, 2024).

61 Ibid.

62 "Opening Address of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the International Conference 'Artificial Intelligence, Technoethics and Youth' (Marasleios School, Friday, December 20, 2024)," *Orthodoxia* 8 (October–December 2024): 110–15.

Intelligence Is the Only One That Can Control Artificial Intelligence".[63] This perspective underscores that the proper governance of AI requires spiritual wisdom and discernment that transcends mere technological capabilities. The concern is not merely about technical optimization, but about ensuring that AI serves the deeper purposes of human spiritual development and communion with God.

A key distinction factor is the difference between the person and the machine. The development of AI models must be committed to justice, human dignity, and the ultimate purpose for life, which is to have communion with God. This requires collaboration among diverse stakeholders to develop ethical guidelines that move beyond a secular human-centered approach toward a theological person-centered perspective. In the same spirit, theological reflection emphasizes that scientific and technological endeavors must be judged in light of the "will of God" and their soteriological orientation. Applications that serve human health—prevention, diagnosis, and therapy—or that are clearly defensive in character and proportionately ordered to the protection of human lives can, under strict ethical and legal constraints, be regarded as morally valuable and compatible with Christian ethics. By contrast, uses of AI that are directed primarily to aggressive military action, indiscriminate destruction, or terrorist purposes remain, from an Orthodox theological standpoint, gravely problematic and often theologically unacceptable, insofar as they contradict the ultimate goal of human salvation and peace. This soteriological criterion provides a clear framework for evaluating AI applications, ensuring that technology serves the ultimate goal of human salvation and spiritual development.

Despite the generally accepted considerations outlined above, the Orthodox Church is composed of fifteen local autocephalous Churches and has not adopted an official and unified position regarding the applications of AI.[64] Nevertheless, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has issued the document *"For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church,"* which contains the first official reference to new algorithms and AI. In paragraph seventy of this text, the following statement appears: "At present, it is impossible to predict the extent—whether of benefits or of harms—that the new era of rapid global interconnectivity may bring. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the damage will likely be no less than the magnitude of the benefits, and indeed may increase in many unforeseen ways. In this regard, the Church must remain vigilant, anticipating the consequences of new technologies and acting with wisdom to counter their most detrimental effects. The Church must also remain continually

63 Chatzinikolaou, "Spiritual Intelligence is the only one," 18–23.

64 *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos (last accessed June 20, 2025).

informed about major developments in other or related fields of research, such as new algorithms for AI or new techniques of genetic engineering. How well the Church succeeds in mobilizing her pastoral resources in the face of accelerating scientific progress will undoubtedly determine how effectively she can provide a meaningful spiritual refuge for all who seek God and His love in the modern world."[65]

This pastoral approach calls for continuous theological reflection and dialogue between the Church and the scientific community. The development and deployment of AI must therefore be guided by theological wisdom, pastoral sensitivity, and prophetic courage. The Church's mission in the age of AI remains fundamentally unchanged: to proclaim the Gospel, to nurture spiritual growth, and to advocate for human dignity and divine truth. However, the context in which this mission is carried out requires new forms of theological reflection, pastoral care, and prophetic witness. As the Orthodox Church continues to engage with the challenges and opportunities presented by AI, it must maintain its commitment to the theological principles that have guided Christian thought for two millennia while remaining open to the ways in which technology can serve the divine purpose of human salvation and cosmic transfiguration. Only through such an approach can technology truly serve the vision of a transfigured world where divine grace and human creativity work together for the glory of God and the salvation of humanity.

5. Conclusion

In an era increasingly shaped by AI, Orthodox theology offers a critical and constructive lens through which to discern the ethical and spiritual implications of emerging technologies. Rather than dismissing AI outright, the Orthodox tradition calls for a nuanced engagement—one that safeguards the uniqueness of the human person, rooted in the image of God, and preserves the sacredness of embodied, relational, and sacramental life. AI, though powerful in its computational capacities, remains limited in its inability to love, commune, or discern spiritually. It cannot replace the liturgical, pastoral, or theological experience of the Church.

This exploration has illuminated a fundamental truth: technology, however sophisticated, cannot replicate the essence of what it means to be human. The image of God remains inviolable, not as a abstract concept but as the living reality of personhood expressed through embodiment, relationality, and the

[65] Ibid, §70.

capacity for theosis. AI may process information with unprecedented speed and analyze patterns beyond human capability, but it cannot participate in the divine life that transforms the human person into the likeness of God. The Orthodox response to AI is neither rejection nor naive enthusiasm, but rather a mature theological engagement rooted in patristic wisdom. Just as the Church Fathers evaluated the technologies of their time through the lens of salvation and human flourishing, contemporary Orthodox theology must bring this same discernment to AI.

The ultimate question is not whether AI will transform our world—it already has—but whether this transformation will serve the purposes of God's Kingdom or become another form of technological idolatry. The Orthodox vision of transfiguration offers a compelling alternative to both uncritical techno-optimism and fearful rejection. Technology, like all of creation, can be sanctified when oriented toward love, justice, and the flourishing of human persons in communion with God and neighbor. This requires not merely ethical guidelines but a fundamental reorientation of how we conceive AI's role in human life. Instead of viewing AI as a replacement for human capabilities, Orthodox theology suggests approaching it as a tool that, when properly ordered, can free human persons for deeper engagement with their essential calling: the journey toward theosis through prayer, sacramental life, and loving service. AI is therefore neither a quasi-divine rival nor a trivial gadget: its spiritual significance lies precisely in the disproportion between its modest ontological status as a human artefact and the profound ways in which it can reshape human self-understanding, social relationships, and practices of worship.

Perhaps most significantly, the dialogue of the Orthodox Church—and of world religions more broadly—reveals a prophetic responsibility in an AI-dominated future. The intersection between AI and religion has increasingly emerged as a pressing topic across multiple traditions. The Orthodox tradition must stand at the forefront, proposing a responsible integration of AI grounded in its core ethical and theological principles. At the same time, major world religions also articulate distinct ethical and theological perspectives on AI. An interreligious examination reveals significant points of convergence, suggesting that—amid the apparent diversity of views—it would be possible to establish an interfaith ethics committee on AI.[66] Such an initiative could provide the foundation for the development of a shared interfaith ethic of AI (*Interfaith AI Ethics*).

[66] Ioannis Ladas, "Interreligious Bioethics: Challenges and Perspectives," *Arhe* 21, no. 42 (2024): 203–20, https://doi.org/10.19090/arhe.2024.42.203-220.

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The Church's *Liturgical Idiom*: Between Tradition and Modernity*

Radu HAGIU**

ABSTRACT. The liturgical language of the Orthodox Church stands at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, poised between reverence for inherited forms and the impulse toward renewal. This study seeks to transcend that polarity through the lens of Saint Sophrony of Essex's notion of the *liturgical idiom*. Far from being a mere instrument of communication, liturgical language is portrayed as a vessel of divine energy – a manifestation of the creative power of the Logos. It constitutes a sacred, mystagogical register whose ultimate aim is not semantic clarity but communion with God. Within this framework, the question of intelligibility assumes a spiritual dimension: understanding arises not from linguistic simplicity but from the believer's inward receptivity, as the idiom gestures toward realities that elude discursive thought. The argument unfolds through a reflection on the ontological status of divine names as verbal icons and on the anagogical, poetic vocation of liturgical utterance. In the end, the *liturgical idiom* emerges as a transformative mode of speech – one that elevates the soul, nurtures an unworldly ethos, and enables a genuine partaking in divine life, engaging the heart more profoundly than the intellect.

Keywords: Sophrony Sakharov, hermeneutics, semiotics, mystagogy, onomatodoxy, liturgical language

This paper originates from the pastoral concerns of a friend, a priest ministering to the Romanian Orthodox diaspora in the United Kingdom, who

* The present paper is based on the lecture "The *Liturgical Idiom* Between Tradition and Modernity: How Can We Rightly Understand the Language of the Church?" presented in Romanian on September 20, 2022, at the Orthodox Parish of Saint John the Baptist and Holy Martyr Alban in Luton, UK. The text has been subsequently revised for publication.

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observed a need to address several practical issues within his community. While the initial lecture was conceived with a Romanian-speaking audience in mind, and certain examples may resonate less with an international readership, I believe the central theme that animated this inquiry is relevant to all Orthodox Christians, irrespective of the familiar language in which they offer worship to the Living God. In response to these pastoral needs, this article will explore several key aspects of the Church's distinct language – or, as Saint Sophrony the Athonite aptly termed it, the 'liturgical idiom.'[1]

Perhaps at least a few of the readers have wondered at one time or another, more or less profoundly or superficially, about the relevance of the way we speak to and about God. Some may have heard of the now-abandoned Western theory of 'sacred languages.' While first emerging within a Judeo-Christian framework, the concept of sacred languages ultimately denotes a principled mode of engaging with a text regarded as revealed and divinely inspired – a mode latent throughout human history and recurring in several long-standing religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism (with Sanskrit) or Islam (with Qur'ānic Arabic). This concept has sometimes been taken to extremes within religions like Judaism, where certain phonetic forms were absolutized (the Hebrew language is called by some Jews *Lashon Hakodesh*, 'the tongue/language of holiness'). The most well-known example is the replacement by the rabbis, even before Christ, of the sacred Tetragrammaton *YHWH* (the name by which God reveals Himself to the Prophet Moses on Mount Horeb[2]), which translates as *He Who Is*, with the somewhat generic term *Adonai*, 'the Lord,' in order not to transgress the commandment against taking the Name of the Lord in vain – a very interesting discussion in itself, which we will not delve into now, although I will try to return to some aspects of the issue of God's Name, which is closely related to hesychastic prayer.

What ought to be emphasized regarding the so-called 'sacred languages' – which, in the Judeo-Christian sphere, refer to Latin, Greek, and Hebrew – is that, on the one hand, the Church rejected this concept in its absolutist form as early as the 9th century. This rejection occurred in the context of the evangelization of the Slavic peoples, when Saints Cyril and Methodius translated both the Gospel and the Liturgy into the local tongue (today known as Church Slavonic),

[1] The theme originates in the chapter "Литургический язык" from Saint Sophrony's spiritual autobiography, *Видеть Бога как Он есть* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2025). All references in this paper are to the Romanian edition, Archimandrite Sophrony, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, Romanian translation from Russian by Hieromonk Raphael (Noica) (Bucharest: Sophia, 2004). While not ideal, I have provided my own translations for the relevant passages, as the currently available English edition of the book omits this chapter.

[2] Exodus 3:14.

despite the protests of certain Roman clerics. On the other hand, as the erudite Archimandrite Julius Scriban observed in the early 20th century, once the Church's principal liturgical texts were translated (into Romanian, as into any other language), the very idiom of worship underwent a process of 'churching,' of ecclesial metabolization: it acquired, to some degree, an iconic and archetypal character, embodying a "past [that] carries with it sound ordinances and worthy forms," for

> "language ... is bound to our soul from our earliest childhood. For this reason, speech in its native idioms reaches deeper than all the poultices and patches from other tongues that we might lay over our inherited speech";

the arbitrary adoption of a lexicon foreign to this ethos, he warned, puts us in danger of being "swept away by the torrent of perilous innovations."[3] Between these two extremes – on the one side, the conservative absolutization of archaic forms, and on the other, the relentless drive toward neologizing modernizations – the 'liturgical idiom' of the Church seeks to find the balance of the patristic 'royal path.'

1. The Word: Life-Bearing Energy

Before moving on to more specific issues, I would like first to define a concept essential to our discussion: what is *the word*. We know from Saint John the Evangelist, whom the Church has honored with the title (sparingly granted) of 'Theologian,'[4] that in its essential sense the Word (in Greek, *Logos*) is one of the names of God, through whom "all things were made, and without Him was not any thing made that was made".[5] We also know that man is made in the image of God and after His likeness,[6] and this 'image,' this divine icon in man, includes the creative capacity (on a human scale) of words. As Saint Sophrony the Athonite remarked,

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[3] Iuliu Scriban, *Datoria preotului către limba bisericească* [*The Priest's Responsibility for the Ecclesiastical Language*] (Sibiu: Editura Revistei Teologice, 1938), 5-6. He also refers to the "idiom of the ancient Cazanii [Homiliaries]" as "the beautiful gift which the Church possesses in the language with which she has worked until now in the bosom of the nation. [...] In the language of the Church books, we hold a treasure that we must cherish and from which we ought to draw inspiration."

[4] In Greek, *θεολόγος* means literally *God's word-bearer*, someone who expresses the words of God.

[5] John 1:3.

[6] Genesis 1:26.

> "The human word is an image of the pre-eternal Word of the Father: 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made... For He spake, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast' (Psalm 32:6,9). And our word carries creative power. 'The word of our God shall stand for ever' (Isaiah 40:8); and our word touches eternity, if it is uttered in the ways of His will."[7]

Father Raphael Noica develops this thought further, noting that in the context of the creation of the universe,

> "The 'word of God' may be understood, in our [human] language, I would say, as energy, creative energy. But what is the word of man? If man is the image of God, an image capable of attaining likeness with God, then the word of man is an energy ... – an energy that lives in God Himself."[8]

This is why Adam receives from God the responsibility of a 'name-giver,' assigning names to "all the animals and all the birds of the air and all the wild beasts".[9] This is why

> "Christ speaks to us words not of a superior ethical code, but as God, 'words of eternal life.' ... Insofar as man allows himself to be partaker of the word of God, he finds in this word God Himself, a life-giving energy."[10]

In the same vein must be understood the dogmatic disputes of the early Christian centuries (and later as well), in which a series of terms were defined, essential for understanding the mystery of the Triune God and His relation to the world – terms such as *consubstantial*, *hypostasis*, *nature*, *procession*, *theandricity*, *synergy*, *uncreated energy*, *theosis*, and so forth.

Ecclesiastical Terminology Between Convention and Analogy

I will make here a parenthesis, because our discussion reached a very actual issue: the nature of the concepts, statements, and words through which divine truths are expressed. In the case of God, knowledge is antinomic, surpassing human reason; therefore, the Church Fathers emphasized, on the one hand, the disanalogy between God and man (to avoid anthropomorphizing

7 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 362.
8 Rafail Noica, *Cultura Duhului* [*The Culture of the Spirit*] (Alba-Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2006), 9.
9 Genesis 2:20.
10 R. Noica, *Cultura Duhului*, 12.

the divine), yet, on the other hand, they did not entirely eliminate the analogy between God and man (to prevent regarding revealed names as arbitrary). In our days, this concept of arbitrariness is generally found in philosophical and theological currents that reduce words to mere conventions, denying their ontological adequacy to a supra-intelligible reality. For example, in certain Neo-Protestant circles it is argued that the title of 'Father' attributed to God is a social-historical convention and that Divinity has an androgynous character; therefore, God could just as well be called 'Mother.'

The adequacy of divine names and attributes is, however, determined and confirmed by their use by Christ, God incarnate as man. The names of 'Father' and 'Son' are not arbitrary designations; all that is divine constitutes archetypes for humanity and for the cosmos/creation: divine fatherhood is the model of human fatherhood, without being exhausted in the human, and human fatherhood carries a (admittedly limited) value as a symbol/image for the divine. In Orthodoxy, this issue gave rise, on a different but similar level, to the onomatodox dispute of the early 20th century in Mount Athos, regarding the nature of the name of Jesus Christ, as used in the practice of the Jesus Prayer (a controversy that led to the conclusion that the name of God the Son is neither of divine essence, nor a mere human convention; it is human, yet ontologically connected to His Person) – a matter to which I will return later in this paper.

2. The Nature of the 'Liturgical Idiom'

Returning to the central thread of our topic, I would like to move on by defining the concept of 'Church language', or 'liturgical idiom,' one that is intimately connected with the capacity of words to carry creative energy and to express, as faithfully and appropriately as possible, a given reality (in the case of liturgical language, this refers to the realities of the "plan and language of the Divine Revelation, of prayer, of theology, and of the manifold links between God and men – of the Liturgy"[11]). As Saint Sophrony observes, each form of language has its own specialization, determined by the purpose it serves: some are suited for daily life, others for politics, science, philosophy, or poetry. Every language, by its very nature as a "conditionally reflexive" medium, seeks to bring the recipient into the domain it addresses. For this reason, the Church is entitled to its own specialized linguistic mode, which performs the highest function among all forms of human expression: that of

[11] Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 359.

> "giving birth in the minds and hearts of those who pray to the feeling of another world, of the world above; ... it helps the faithful to abide in the consciousness of the Perfect One and contributes to their fuller participation in Him."[12]

In the second half of the 20th century, the issue of updating, renewing, or even simplifying ecclesiastical language became increasingly prominent throughout the Christian world. Within this context, Saint Sophrony had experienced first-handedly the tragic consequences of the

> "change of the liturgical idiom in the Anglican Church: Thus, the introduction of the simplest vernacular into its services has extinguished to some extent the experience of prayer, leading to a considerable decrease in the number of the faithful."[13]

Against the argument advanced by proponents of adopting everyday speech in worship – that contemporary people no longer understand ecclesial terminology – Saint Sophrony points out that, in fact, nearly all moderns now receive formal education, with the theoretical level of today's schooling being among the highest in history. Just as many strive with determination to master the technical vocabularies of science, law, technology, or even philosophy and poetry, it would be entirely natural to expect at least some effort in learning the 'liturgical idiom,' "which, in a wondrous manner, corresponds to the great mysteries of the Divine worship," conveying "the highest forms of theology and its spiritual experiences."[14]

Moreover, the distinctive features of Church language foster the cultivation of the unworldliness in our lives, drawing us away from any concerns unrelated to the plane of Divinity.

> "The words of the Liturgy, and especially of the prayers, are not merely human, but given from Above. The language of the Church belongs to the realm of the Divine Being; it must articulate the Revelation of the Spirit and the visions of the mind born of that Revelation."

For, concludes Saint Sophrony,

> "through the 'hearing of the word of God' (cf. Romans 10:17), man is inspired to believe, and it is faith that 'overcomes the world' (1 John 5:4; cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:13)."[15]

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12 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 360.
13 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 360, n. 1.
14 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 361.
15 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 362.

The Hellenistic Synthesis of Orthodoxy

I would like to make here another brief digression in order to clarify the nature of certain spiritual terms. Without implying anything immutable or intangible, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that, by God's providence, the language in which the Church's liturgical patrimony was composed (the scriptural texts, the prayers of the Divine Liturgies and Church Services, but also a good part of the ascetical-dogmatic terminological apparatus) is Ancient Greek. This Hellenistic character of Orthodoxy is not a mere historical accident; as Saint Sophrony (a Russian, by the way!) remarked,

> "the Greeks, through philosophy, attained the highest measures of development of the spirit and, through language, forged the most perfect possible form of expression of the human word."[16]

The great Russian theologian Georges Florovsky takes the point even further, stating that "Hellenism can be said to have become a perpetual dimension of the Church, having been incorporated into the very fabric of Church life as an eternal category of Christian existence,"[17] which is why the theology of the Church Fathers represents, among other things, a "Hellenistic synthesis."[18]

Without entering into the debate – raised by some contemporary authors[19] – that such an approach might appear somewhat limiting, insofar as it seems to exclude the Syriac, Latin, and other patristic traditions, it should nevertheless be noted that Florovsky appears to understand the 'Hellenism' of Orthodoxy less as a linguistic characteristic than as a conceptual one: namely, the capacity to articulate certain 'metaphysical' realities with a richness of nuance and at the highest level of human expression.

What, then, is the relevance of this 'Hellenistic character' of Orthodoxy for our present discussion? It lies in the fact that many of the Church's most significant theological terms – such as those mentioned earlier, and many others besides –

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16 Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, 360.

17 Georges Florovsky, 'Breaks and Links', in: Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 168.

18 G. Florovsky, 'Preface to *In Lingo Crucis*', in: B. Gallaher and P. Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky*, 68. Fr. Florovsky draws a conclusion as harsh as possible regarding the importance of this Hellenistic character: "Today a renunciation of the 'Greek heritage' can only signify suicide of the Church" (172).

19 See Paul Ladouceur, "'Hellenism' and 'Byzantinism'", in his volume *Modern Orthodox Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 419-422.

are, to a considerable degree, 'calques' of the Greek language. This has profound spiritual significance, both because, as Fr. Raphael Noica observes, "today, if Greek [texts] were lost and you were to translate word for word from Slavonic, you would fall almost exactly on what was before – [and] this, too, must be the case for Romanian"; and also because this terminology "expresses in a worthy manner what it wants to express."[20]

3. The 'Liturgical Idiom' in its Romanian Expression

Let us now turn briefly to the issue of ecclesiastical language in its Romanian utterance. Since the 16th century, the Church in Romania has exhibited the particularity of sharing to a certain extent its liturgical language with the 'vernacular'. I say 'to a certain extent' because the early ecclesiastical translators consistently displayed a preference for certain words and an avoidance of others, while also striving to coin new terms capable of expressing spiritual realities as worthily as possible. This overlap was, on the one hand, a strength, as it greatly facilitated the preaching of the Word of God and the incorporation of the faithful into the Church through language; yet on the other hand, it also constituted a weakness, for it was not a finished work but an ongoing process – leaving room for occasional 'deviations' at particular historical junctures (I am thinking, for instance, of the forced Latinization of Church language within the 'Transylvanian School' and the Uniate movement in Transylvania of 18th century[21]).

The importance of ensuring that liturgical language expresses eternal realities as worthily as possible was exemplified in the work of St. Paisius Velichkovsky, the founder of the 'Neamț School,' where it reached its fullest maturity on the threshold of modernity. The translators of Neamț Monastery,

[20] R. Noica, *Cultura Duhului*, 145-146.

[21] In an article entitled *Limba liturgică. O hotărîre care poate fi un nou obstacol în calea unirii bisericilor* [*Liturgical Language: A Decision That May Pose a New Obstacle to the Union of the Churches*], signed by A. C. Albinus for the Greek-Catholic publication *Unirea*, XXXVII, 14, published on Saturday, April 2, 1927, in Blaj, the author says: "The Consistory of a Uniate eparchy has denied approval for a prayer book, because the liturgical text was written according to the 'Dumnezeeștile Liturghii' ('Divine Liturgies') printed at the Seminary in Blaj, in 1807, and not according to the last edition of the 'Liturgier' from 1905. Consequently, the replacement of the words [of Slavic origin] was requested: *vreme, ceas, rob, rod, preacinstitul, vrăjmașul, protivnicul, cinste, milostiv, se cade, milă, gând, dragoste, biruință, glas*, etc., with [neologisms of Latin origin]: *timp, oră, serv, fruct, preaonoratul, inimicul, contrarul, onoare, îndurat, se cuvine, îndurare, cuget, iubire, învingere, vers*, etc." It is also worth mentioning the conclusion of the article: "There is no doubt that the Romanian liturgical language, to which our Orthodox brethren are so devoutly attached, is a precious treasure."

all highly proficient in both Greek and Romanian, continued the creative work of their predecessors. The Romanian Church remains indebted to this day to the 'Neamț School' for its liturgical, scriptural, and patristic texts.

The significance of this endeavor was further demonstrated by the fact that the first confrontation between modernity and the Church concerned precisely this language – the revised editions of liturgical books (and more) produced between 1870 and 1910 were analyzed in detail by Professor Constantin Chiricescu, Dean of the Bucharest Faculty of Theology, at the beginning of the 20th century in the context of the so-called 'scandal of the Church books.'[22] The challenges faced by the Church at that time, brought about by modernizing trends and the gradual distancing from the traditional Orthodox ethos among the elites, were compounded by the advent of communism, through which society was officially secularized, further weakening the fragile spiritual thread that connected it to the linguistic heritage of the past.

Therefore, Romanian 'liturgical idiom' remains one of the languages that has not undergone radical changes since the first translations of sacred texts (Scripture and the Liturgy) in the 17th and 18th centuries, passing through the pinnacle of the 'Neamț School' in the 19th century, and on to the modern 20th-century versions. This 'sociolect,' both in terms of morphosyntactic structure and lexical content, can, with varying degrees of effort, be understood by a contemporary reader without needing to study it as a foreign language – unlike Church Slavonic or Ancient Greek, which are far less accessible to today's Russians, Serbs, Bulgarians, or Greeks. Nonetheless, in certain circles, there exists a somewhat depreciative tendency towards the Romanian ecclesiastical idiom, which is often considered outdated, archaic, or even elitist (in the negative sense of the term).

The Problem of Intelligibility

At this point, I would like to make a few lexical clarifications highly relevant to our topic. First, we must avoid confusing 'archaic' with 'old': the linguistic age of a word does not automatically imply its obsolescence (see, for example, the well-known list of terms of Dacian origin: *barză* [stork], *varză* [cabbage], *viezure* [badger], *mânz* [colt], etc.). As the distinguished philologist Octavian Gordon notes, "it is more appropriate to evaluate a word as archaic (or not) based on its degree of usage within the system to which it belongs, rather

[22] Constantin Chiricescu, *Răspuns Prea Sfințitului Atanasie Mironescu, Episcopul Râmnicului Noului Severin* [*Reply to His Grace Atanasie Mironescu, Bishop of Râmnic – New Severin*] (Bucharest: Tipografia Cărților Bisericești, 1905), 79-132; see especially 122-123.

than in relation to its use in another linguistic system"[23] – in other words, for instance, the formula "Blagosloviți" (as opposed to "Binecuvântați", both meaning "Your blessing!"), is improperly deemed archaic, since it has never ceased to exist in the ecclesiastical sphere, within a "linguistic system that is autonomous, well-established, and a continuator of the old Romanian literary language."[24]

Second, we cannot speak of a true stagnation of liturgical language; a simple comparison of textual versions from the 19th and 20th centuries shows that the 'liturgical idiom' is in a state of "perpetual renewal – not ... a complete adjustment to the everyday language, but a renewal that nevertheless preserves the defining distance of a non-secularized mode of expression."[25] In Romanian, we no longer say *Troiță*, but *Treime* (for *Trinity*); not *Bogoslov*, but *Teolog* (for *Theologian*); not *Blagovești*e, but *Bunăvestire* (for *Annunciation*) – and the list could continue. 'Renewal' of this kind, along with other changes at the level of morpho-lexical translation options, represents rather a process of refinement, of metabolization and maturation of the liturgical texts.

This brings us, thirdly, to the issue of intelligibility – the same issue addressed by Saint Sophrony in the text to which I referred previously. Octavian Gordon also concludes: "Practically, we may discuss the need to renew ecclesiastical language where it becomes unintelligible. But unintelligible for whom? For everyone? For the uninitiated?"[26] Intelligibility, he observes, also depends on the degree of cultivation of the recipient:

> "The demand for intelligibility in liturgical language is absurd for very profound theological realities, yet it is legitimate for more prosaic aspects. ... These realities [expressed in liturgical and scriptural texts] are 'supranatural,' 'beyond mind,' and – as all who have sung them in words testify – inexpressible, ineffable."[27]

Indeed, Christ Himself does not address everyone plainly and comprehensibly, but He often speaks to people in parables; He explains to His disciples:

> "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest [I speak] in parables, that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand. ... Therefore *take heed how you hear*. For whoever has, to

[23] Octavian Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc – între vechi și nou" ["Romanian Ecclesiastical Language: Between Old and New"], in: *Mișcarea literară*, XVII, no. 2 (66), 2018, 122.
[24] O. Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc...", 125.
[25] O. Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc...", 123.
[26] O. Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc...", 123.
[27] O. Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc...", 123.

> him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him."[28]

The intelligibility of Christ's words, and more generally of spiritual texts, thus depends on "the readiness of the audience, on their will – or, rather, on the lack of readiness and will,"[29] not on the form of the message itself.

The distinction between everyday language and ecclesiastical language, noted by Saint Sophrony (or, if you prefer, the issue of apparent unintelligibility discussed above), can be assimilated to the distinction made by Saint Basil of Caesarea between *kērygma* and *dogma*: the former represents the Church's public teaching, which could be communicated to the unbaptized (pagans or catechumens); the latter pertains to the liturgical and mystical life of the Church, as well as to the spiritual meanings of these practices, of which only Christians sacramentally initiated through Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist could partake.[30]

Thus, the use of modern, everyday language can be justified in a missionary context, for the proclamation of Christ's message in a form comprehensible to those not yet incorporated into Church – or, at most, tangentially connected to it – as a kind of "milk" feeding, suitable for those still unlearned in "the first principles of the words of God",[31] those not yet versed in the terminology and spiritual meanings, who can receive only preliminary and less profound aspects of the mysteries of eternal realities. Within the Church, however, "solid food" is required "for the mature",[32] which is expressed in this regard through a mystagogical language: far more nuanced, rich, and profound, appropriate to those with the spiritual capacity to receive and comprehend the mystical meanings of the Godhead.

In brief,

> "the realities indicated (without being exhausted) by ecclesiastical language are, on the one hand, profoundly theological and, practically, inaccessible to our mind – or at least inaccessible through linguistic means"

(as in certain liturgical expressions such as *ἀνεπαίσχυντα ... τὰ τέλη τῆς ζωῆς*, *ἔμψυχος κιβωτός*, etc.), and

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[28] Luke 8:10,18; Matthew 13:11-12.

[29] Constantin Coman, *Dreptatea lui Dumnezeu şi dreptatea oamenilor* [*Divine Justice and Human Justice*] (Bucharest: Editura Bizantină, 2010), 321.

[30] See Milton V. Anastos, "Basil's Κατὰ Εὐνομίου. A Critical Analysis", in: Paul Jonathan Fedwick (ed.), *Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic. Part One* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1981), 131-132.

[31] Hebrews 5:12.

[32] Hebrews 5:14.

> "on the other hand, prosaic realities, accessible to the human reason. Among the latter, some linguistic expressions are specific to ecclesiastical language and define it as such. For these to be intelligible, they simply need to be learned"

(for example, expressions such as *στάμνος χρυσοῦς*, *ὁρθρίσωμεν ὄρθρου βαθέο*, *δυνατὸς ἐν ἰσχύϊ*, etc.).[33]

The Name and Essence of God

I shall now make one final parenthetical remark, which I consider important, regarding the nature of the Name of God. This issue was the subject of a very fierce dogmatic dispute that took place before the First World War in Mount Athos and Russia, called the onomatodox dispute – the identification made between the name of God and His Person. Without delving into historical details, I will highlight only a few theological aspects that emerged from this controversy.[34]

A name ('Jesus Christ,' for example) is not merely a conventional sign, but a symbol that signifies or points to another reality, which it invokes through a physical medium. The syllables and sounds of this name (which, in our case, indicates God Himself) are only the external 'envelope' of the symbol, which resides in the meaning or reference of the syllables and sounds, not in the syllables and sounds themselves. What a symbol invokes is somehow present within the symbol itself: thus, God is present in a mystical way in His Name, without, however, identifying Himself with it. From this perspective, the Name of God may be considered a verbal icon. Saint Sophrony states that all the revealed Names of God possess a special quality: "We know that not only the Name 'Jesus' but also all the other Names revealed to us are ontologically linked with God. And we know this by experience in the Church."[35]

Saint Sophrony points out that every Mystery – and indeed the whole of Christian worship – is performed through the invocation of the divine Names and, above all, of the Name of the Holy Trinity. He further states that the name *Jesus* existed before the creation of the world, not being a human invention:

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[33] O. Gordon, "Limbajul bisericesc românesc...", 125.

[34] I wholeheartedly recommend to those interested the excellent work of Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Holy Mystery of the Church. Introduction to the History and Problems in the Debates on the Onomatodoxy* (Saint Petersburg: Oleb Abyshko Edition, ²2007).

[35] Archimandrite Sophrony, *Sa Vie est la mienne* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1981), 133. The English version differs significantly, therefore I am compelled to rely on a translation of this French edition (passages which we owe to P. Ladouceur).

> "The Name 'Jesus Christ' was given by revelation from on high. It originates in the divine and eternal sphere and is in no way the product of human intelligence, even though it is expressed by a created word."[36]

The distinction between the divine essence/nature and the uncreated energies/actions of God represents the key to understand the significance of the Name of God, and especially of the name *Jesus*:

> "As a vehicle of meaning and knowledge, as an 'energy' of God in his relation with the world and as his proper Name, the Name 'Jesus' is ontologically linked with him. ... For us it is a bridge which unites us to him; it is channel by which we receive divine strength. Coming from the Holy God, it is holy and sanctifies us when we invoke it. ... God is present in this Name as in a receptacle, as in a precious vase filled with perfume. Through it, the Transcendental becomes perceptibly immanent. As divine energy, it proceeds from the divine Essence and is itself divine."[37]

Saint Sophrony is careful not to attribute any magical power to the words of prayer themselves, including the Jesus Prayer, but he emphasizes the stresses of the disposition of the one who prays:

> "When pray conscious of what we have just said, our prayer becomes a formidable act, and at the same time a triumphant one. ... We do not attribute magical power to the words [of the divine Names] as such, as audible phenomena, but when they are pronounced as a true confession of faith and in a state of fear of God, reverence and love, then in truth we have God together with his Names."[38]

He also speaks of the power of the Name from personal experience that can only be called mystical:

> "Now that the most profound sense of all divine Names has been unveiled by Christ's coming, we also should tremble – as this happens to numerous ascetics among whom I had the possibility of living – when we pronounce the holy Name of Jesus. An invocation of the divine Name fills our entire being with the presence of God, transports our intellect to other spheres, communicates a special energy and a new life to us. A divine light, of which it is not easy to speak, accompanies this Name."[39]

> "I remember starting the Lord's prayer, 'Our Father', and my soul swooned in blissful awe. I could not continue. My mind stopped, everything in me fell silent.

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36 Archimandrite Sophrony, *Sa Vie est la mienne*, 137.
37 Archimandrite Sophrony, *Sa Vie est la mienne*, 132-133.
38 Archimandrite Sophrony, *Sa Vie est la mienne*, 133.
39 Archimandrite Sophrony, *Sa Vie est la mienne*, 133.

> ... Only once did it happen to me with such force. ... Some time afterwards, something similar happened to me when I was invoking the Name of Jesus Christ. I was obliged to stop pronouncing his Name: the effect was too much for me: my soul, without word, without thought, trembled at the nearness of God. ... The following day I celebrated the Liturgy and Christ-God was in me and with me and outside of me and in the holy sacraments of his Body and Blood. And the divine Name and the words of the liturgical texts issued from my mouth like a flame. I continued in this state for three days."[40]

4. The 'Liturgical Idiom' between Lexical Clarity and Mystagogical Poetics. An Attempt of Conclusion

Returning to the main theme of this paper, I would like to unfold the significance and the stakes of this 'liturgical idiom' from a quite pragmatic perspective. Much has been said about the issue of intelligibility – the capacity of the post-modern individual to grasp the meaning of ecclesiastical language. The *phronēma* of the "whole Adam"[41] has undergone an irreversible change within the dynamics of the Fall, a change rendered even more acute in our age. Certain realities, which we, in Romania, experience with a kind of 'historical latency' compared to the West, nevertheless overflow upon the whole of humanity and, sooner or later, reach everywhere – and, above all, at the level of the spirit. Even we, those within the Church, are affected to some extent by this condition (to some extent, I say, because on the spiritual plane we are sustained by grace, and on the rational plane by the vision of the Fathers' tradition). From this perspective, the desire that ecclesiastical language should not be gratuitously cryptic, nor defined by a meaningless hermeticism, is entirely understandable. In a word, it ought to resemble iconostasis, which does not divide but unites the heavenly and the earthly.

At the same time, the ecclesiastical idiom necessarily requires continuity with the past – a continuity that is not static ('frozen in its project,' and thus bound to fail), but one that is creatively renewing, involving the reception of what is to be received, the abandonment of what is to be abandoned, and the forging of what remains to be forged. Yet all of this must be undertaken within the mind (*phronēma*) of the Fathers. What is at stake is the worthiness of words to express, withing the framework of a correct understanding, those unworldly,

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40 Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 47.

41 A key phrase in Saint Sophrony's theology, signifying the wholeness of humankind; see, for instance, Archimandrite Sophrony, *St Silouan the Athonite* (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 47-48, 108, 222, 240.

eternal, and ineffable realities – in other words, to constitute a kind of 'specialized language,' as one might speak of medicine, history, or law, in the manner suggested by Saint Sophrony. Behind every word stands an energy, a creative spiritual potential. The Cappadocian Fathers – whose use of language was never a mere exercise in rhetoric or intellectual play, but rather an outpouring of the Life they experienced – had a capacity to discern linguistic nuances far subtler than us moderns. The 'energy' behind a word does not lie in its form, but in its potential. There are two modes of energy or operation in a word: the general or potential, and the hypostatic or personal. A word born within an ethos alien to Orthodoxy is, from the very outset, impoverished and weaker – no matter how much it may be enriched by the spiritual state of the one who utters it (though such enrichment is indeed possible). Moreover, certain ancient linguistic forms (retained in the liturgical idioms of other local Churches as well) serve precisely the purpose to lift the mind away from worldly concerns, to "be separate",[42] and to introduce another Spirit than the spirit of the age, the spirit of the world. Finally, ecclesiastical texts in general – and prayers in particular – do not have an informative or academic function, but a spiritual and catanyctic one. Alongside the theological realities apprehended by reason, both soul and heart are sweetened, contrived, and filled with the energy of these words – as Fr. Raphael Noica puts it: "and the words themselves understand you!"

Beyond its evident rational and dogmatic dimension, the 'liturgical idiom' also bears an important, one might say, poetic character. I use the term here with the words of Saint Porphyrios of Kafsokalyvia in mind: "He who wishes to be a Christian must first be a poet."[43] Likewise, I recall Saint Sophrony of Essex's exhortation to his community: "Oh, how I wish you could all be poets!" (And, as Father Raphael explains, Saint Sophrony always had in mind also the Greek, etymological sense of *poietēs* – that is, 'maker,' 'creator').[44] The language of the Church, especially that of prayer, carries a poetic spirit, inspired and life-giving, that is, *a maker unto eternity*.

Therefore, the 'liturgical idiom' is, above all, something alive: it moves the heart, it does not merely satisfy the mind. Clearly, it depends on the 'mystery of the person' (on someone's readiness and disposition) how much each a man partakes of and is benefited by the Church language. Father Raphael, speaking about the significance of the words we use in prayer, affirmed:

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42 2 Corinthians 6:17.

43 *Ne vorbeşte Părintele Porfirie* (Galaţi / Alexandria: Bunavestire / Biserica Ortodoxă, 2003), 181. This is the Romanian edition of the Greek classic Γέροντος Πορφυρίου Καυσοκαλυβίτου, *Βίος καὶ Λόγοι* (Χανιά Κρήτης: Ἱερὰ Μονὴ Χρυσοπηγῆς, 2003).

44 See Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Convorbiri duhovniceşti* [*Spiritual Conversations*], vol. 1 (Alba-Iulia: Reîntregirea, ²2011), 242.

> "God, through the energy of the word, tries to contact man. Man, through the word of prayer, tries to respond to God. Man shows his freedom and free will when he responds to God in prayer, when he can say 'Amen' to God, to His call. But what saves man is not what man does in his weakness, but what the word of God accomplishes dwelling within us. I would summarize what I have tried to say so far: we understand the word, in its deepest sense, as energy; and I would like all of us to understand this, so as not to remain at the level of the word as mere information. In the spiritual life, the word is participation."[45]

The stake of the 'liturgical idiom' for the spiritual life, therefore, is precisely that of Life itself – us in He, and He in us.[46] For the very unerring voice of Christ promises us: „If you abide in Me, and *My words abide in you*, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you, ... that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."[47]

[45] R. Noica, *Cultura Duhului*, 10.
[46] John 15:3-4.
[47] John 15:7,11

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Legacies of Orthodox Christianity from the Communist Period to the 21st-Century Romania

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ABSTRACT. This paper brings to light three instances in which the forty-two years of communism in Romania in the 20th century left lasting spiritual and existentialist legacies in the 21st century. The most important instance from a spiritual point of view is the canonisation of sixteen Romanian martyrs and witnesses of Christ who lived during the communist years in 20th-century Romania, thus constituting a spiritual legacy. The other two instances derive from the autobiographical prose poetry of Lidia Vianu, i.e., *Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop* and *Vântul și Pescărușul/ The Wind and the Seagull/ La Mouette et le Vent* .... One of them brings to the fore *metanoia* or the changing of the mind, constituting a propaedeutic for bettering readers' lives. The other emanates the craving of the author to form a union with her soulmate, the University Professor George Constantin Săndulescu, in the difficult circumstances of her soulmate leaving the country because of the communist regime, thus, leading the author to literary digest an existentially traumatic perspective on love life. All three cases are potentially iterative as, although they originate in real biographies, they may well reverberate in the lives of other people marked by the communist years in Romania.

Keywords: canonisation, martyr, witness of Christ, repentance, soulmate, union.

Introduction

Ever since the year of 1579, the Oxford English Dictionary defines an extended use of the noun «legacy» as "A tangible or intangible thing handed down by a predecessor; a long lasting effect of an event of process".[1] In what

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1 OED | Oxford English Dictionary. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/legacy_n?tab=meaning_and_use#39634814. Accessed: 4th April 2025.

follows, the concept of «legacy» is exemplified by focusing on three quite different arguments—mostly related to the way of life—in direct relationship to the politics of the time, on a personal level, or in interpersonal relationships. They have derived from the existence of a totalitarian communist regime in Romania, which lasted for almost fifty years in the twentieth century, and have been the result of either extremely traumatic life experiences as in the case of sixteen Christian men who have been recently canonised, or a life marked by a persistent traumatic recollection of the dissolution of a romantic relationship in youth years, because of the partner in the relationship who left communism and never returned.

Trauma in figurative use[2] can come as a lack of fulfilment of one's life as expected to unfold. This can happen in innumerable ways. For example, it may happen as a result of a relationship which was not found trustworthy as expected (Taft et al., *Trauma* 23). It may happen as a result of a course of life which led the subject astray from happiness, as was the case of Charles Foster Kane, who, despite great fame and fortune, on his deathbed, uttered the word «Rosebud», which greatly puzzled those who knew him. However, diligent research has led to the identification of the word with the name of his childhood sled, which is now believed to symbolise loss of a soulful connection with his entourage, if not even the loss of innocence (Grumet, "The Rosebud Phenomenon").

However, a rather gruesome way trauma takes when life is brutally cut short or exposed to persecution, as was the case of the martyrs and witnesses of Christ who lived in the twentieth century in Romania. Their lives in prison and their condition as political outcasts are described on a plethora of articles posted on internet sites, such as: "Romanian martyrs ...", in *Fericiţi cei prigoniţi pentru dreptate.net*; „Sfântul Preot Mucenic Liviu Galaction Munteanu ..." [in Romanian], in *Chilia „Buna-Vestire"*; „Sfântul Cuvios Mărturisitor Arsenie de la Prislop" [in Romanian], in *DOXOLOGIA.ro*; etc.). It is precisely their traumatic lives which made them become the most spiritually important legacy of Orthodox Christianity from the communist period to the 21st century Romania, as it led to the canonisation of sixteen Romanian martyrs and witnesses of Christ („Comunicat ..." [in Romanian], "Holy Synod ...").

The other two cases derive from Lidia Vianu's autobiographical fiction novel *Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop* (2023), and her prose poem *Vântul şi Pescăruşul/ The Wind and the Seagull/ La Mouette et le Vent* ... (2022). The novel—through literature—introduces *metanoia* or the changing of the mind and, thus, constitutes a propaedeutic for bettering the life of its readers. The prose poem—through poiesis—constitutes the digestion of the traumatic

[2] "Trauma, N., Sense 2.b." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8021223195. Accessed: 13th March 2025.

recollection of the aspiration to form a union with a soulmate in marriage in the difficult circumstances created by the soulmate who needed to leave the country because of the communist regime. All these cases are potentially iterative as, although they refer to real biographies, they may well reflect the lives of others marked by communism in Romania.

The canonisation of sixteen martyrs and witnesses of Christ

Since the dawn of the 21st century, a rather significant connection between religion and politics has been revealed by the way politics as pursued by the former communist government in Romania inflicted multifarious kinds of trauma. A particular kind of trauma is the loss of life for the Name of Jesus Christ. In this respect, at the pinnacle of recent times are the martyrs and witnesses of Christ who lived during the forty-two years of communism in Romania. No less than sixteen of such martyrs and witnesses of Christ have been canonised („Comunicat ..." [in Romanian]/ "Holy Synod ..."). The proclamation of their canonisation was carried out on the occasion of the Celebration of the Anniversary of the Centenary of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, on the 4th of February 2025, and was celebrated after the Divine Liturgy, at the Patriarchal Cathedral in Bucharest, with the participation of the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, a large part of the Holy Synod, and a wide Christian public („Moment istoric ..." [in Romanian]/ "Romanian Orthodox Church ...").

Below are their names before the canonisation followed suit by their titles as Saints and their commemoration days:

- Archimandrite Sofian Boghiu, abbot of St Anthimos Monastery in Bucharest, with the title Confessor Saint Sofian of St Anthimos Monastery, commemorated on September 16;
- Father Dumitru Stăniloae, theology professor in Sibiu and Bucharest, with the title the Holy Confessor Priest Dumitru Stăniloae, commemorated on October 4;
- Father Constantin Sârbu, with the title the Holy Priest-Martyr Constantine Sârbu, commemorated on October 23;
- Protosyncellus Arsenie Boca, with the title Confessor Saint Arsenius of Prislop, commemorated on November 28;
- Father Ilie Lăcătuşu, with the title the Holy Confessor Priest Elijah Lăcătuşu, commemorated on July 22;
- Hieroschemamonk Paisie Olaru, confessor of Sihăstria Monastery, with the title Saint Paisius of Sihăstria, commemorated on December 2;

- Archimandrite Cleopa Ilie, abbot of Sihăstria Monastery, with the title Saint Cleopas of Sihăstria, commemorated on December 2;
- Archimandrite Dometie Manolache, with the title Saint Dometios the Merciful of Râmeț, commemorated on July 6;
- Archimandrite Serafim Popescu, abbot of Sâmbăta de Sus Monastery, with the title Saint Seraphim the Enduring of Sâmbăta de Sus, commemorated on December 20;
- Father Liviu Galaction Munteanu, theology professor in Cluj-Napoca, with the title the Holy Priest-Martyr Liviu Galaction of Cluj, commemorated on March 8;
- Archimandrite Gherasim Iscu, abbot of Tismana Monastery, with the title Venerable Martyr Gerasimus of Tismana, commemorated on December 26;
- Archimandrite Visarion Toia, abbot of Lainici Monastery, with the title Venerable Martyr Bessarion of Lainici, commemorated on November 10;
- Protosyncellus Calistrat Bobu, confessor at Timişeni Monastery and Vasiova Monastery, with the title Saint Callistratus of Timişeni and Vasiova, commemorated on May 10;
- Father Ilarion Felea, theology professor in Arad, with the title the Holy Priest-Martyr Hilarion Felea, commemorated on September 18;
- Protosyncellus Iraclie Flocea, exarch of the monasteries of the Archdiocese of Chişinău, with the title Saint Heraclius of Bessarabia, commemorated on August 3;
- Archpriest Alexandru Baltaga with the title the Holy Priest-Martyr Alexander of Bessarabia, commemorated on August 8 ("Holy Synod ...")

In certain cases, their lives were cut at one point by their non-conformity with the political doctrine of atheism of the communist regime as was the case of the Holy Priest-Martyr Liviu Galaction („Sfântul Preot Mucenic Liviu Galaction Munteanu" [in Romanian]/ "Holy Priest-Martyr Liviu Galaction of Cluj", „Comunicat ..." [in Romanian]/ "Holy Synod ..."). Their commitment to their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, their courage to confess publicly that they are authentic and faithful Christian people, and their determination to act in accordance with their deeply held convictions are legacies of a most important effect not only on the belief systems or faith of other people, but also on the role of the Orthodox Church in the state.

On the occasion of the proclamation, Daniel the Patriarch of Romanian Orthodox Church said that:

> Their canonization is an act of recognition of the holiness of their lives, which transcends any political context, underlining the fact that true Christian confession does not uphold fleeting worldly ideologies, but the eternal values of faith and love of God. („Moment istoric ..." [in Romanian]/ "Romanian Orthodox Church ...")

The politics of the communist regime in Romania during the 20th century bent the lives of people who were pro-active adepts of the Orthodox Christianity faith. The sublime effect of their lives is that, by enduring tribulations and hardships under communism, these people became Saints and acquired the grace of intercession for all of us—the rest of the people—as per the biblical example of Onias who prayed "for the entire nation of the Jews" and Jeremiah who prayed "for the people and the holy city" (2 Maccabees 15:12–14):

> **12** In his vision, Judas saw Onias, who had been high priest and was virtuous, good, modest in all things, gentle of manners, and well-spoken. From childhood he had learned all things that properly belong to a good moral life. This man had his hands extended to pray for the entire nation of the Jews.
> **13** Then in the same manner, another man, noteworthy for his gray hair and dignity, appeared with astonishing and splendid glory.
> **14** Onias said, "This man is one who loves his brothers and sisters and prays many prayers for the people and the holy city: God's prophet Jeremiah.

Leading a holy life which transcends any political context and safeguards the eternal belief in, and love of, God against any fleeting worldly ideologies is worthy of not only transcending earthly life towards an eternal one but also of marking one's fellow human beings with a spiritually charged stamp. Moreover, these saints carry on the torch of Christian faith and have the power to shape the lives of other people by the sheer example of their own lives. This spiritual leadership which obtains through sanctification could be viewed as the ideal of the intersection of politics and religion.

Metanoia at the end of Lidia Vianu's novel Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop

Written throughout a period of thirty years, spanning through both communism and post-communism in Romania, Lidia Vianu's novel *Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop* is an autobiographical fiction novel as the author declared herself in a television interview. According to the author, the fiction in her autobiography means that although the novel features authentic connections of the author yet they appear rather disguised or, perhaps, even fictionalised in the novel (Vianu "Interview" [in Romanian]). However, in terms of depth and extension, a paragon of her kind of autobiography is Goethe's *The Auto-biography*. Speaking about his autobiography, Goethe presumes that biography is concerned with describing a person in close relation to their time. Time for them means all

those elements—social, political—which can interfere with inner motives, desires, and aspirations, and ultimately determine their way of life. Goethe thinks that a person might grow into a different person altogether were they to be born in another time—even just ten years apart. This is how he justifies his involving lots of persons and events into his autobiography (*The Autobiography* vi–vii). Lidia Vianu's autobiographical fiction novel browses through her early childhood years, her teens, her student years, her professional and career aspirations with the tribulations caused by communism and the mores of the time, and resolves itself into equanimity during her retirement years. The novel is a lyrical text which makes it almost a poem in prose in several places.

The first thing which interests this paper with regard to Lidia Vianu's novel *Kaleidoscope Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop*—as a kind of «legacy» of the Orthodox Christian faith which passed even beyond the atheistic years of communism—is found at the end of the book. A scarce two-line leitmotif from John Donne's poem "A Hymn to God the Father" concludes the novel by opening up a meditation (Donne):

> *When thou hast done, thou hast not done,*
> *For I have more.* (528)

Thus, the end of the autobiographical fiction novel becomes an invitation for the reader to continue the gist of the novel by looking into their own psyche to find whatever is there. In what follows, by parsing these two verses to reflect on their role in praying for forgiveness to the Divine Being or "God the Father", a propaedeutic for confession with its effect on reaching a state of *metanoia* or change of mind will hopefully ensue. Confession is important because the repentant can ask for forgiveness from "God the Father" only by confession. However, in order to be able to confess, the repentant has to have a thorough knowledge of the thing to be forgiven. In the following paragraphs, we shall see how confession is deconstructed, first, in the modern times, and then in Hegel's finding of the "the reflection of thought within itself" in his writing about the philosophy of history (Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, translated by Brown and Hodgson, 416).

Man's confession to a priest is extolled by Horia-Roman Patapievici in an interview given to Cristina Teleanu at the Trinitas TV. He explains confession in relation to a presumptive analysis of man's depression. Unwilling to minimise the harm of the malady of depression, Patapievici attempts an excursion in defining it as being profound, as depending on how man perceives his metaphysics and his inability to see the multiple blessings his life offers, and, ultimately, as residing in an imbalance in the relationship between man's past and his faith in his future.

This makes him inadequate in his present. Although Patapievici sees the malady to be rather metaphysical or spiritual—which would qualify it for treatment by confession—, he adds that he views confession as the inspiration and the initiator of the modern secular practice of psychoanalysis and psychodynamic therapy (Patapievici 37:37–39:30).

To clarify what confession is as it has been for almost two thousand years, since the beginning of Christian tradition, Patapievici presents it as the examination a man should take all along his life in order to constantly check that his state has not abated from "the project of eternal life". In order to do so, he has to find out what his sins, deviations, or misses of his target are. Thus, Patapievici brings us to the part in the Lord's prayer in the Gospels where we ask for forgiveness. Though the words in *King James Version* are "forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12), or "forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us" (Luke 11:4), Patapievici specifies that the Greek wording for debts, or sins, is "missing the target". He insists that being on good terms with yourself means understanding your inadequacies, your misses, your sins, and confessing them as such—as they are. Confessing them requires bringing them to consciousness. Or, Patapievici continues, you truly know what they are if and only if your project of eternal life is alive and functioning. Therefore, depression is the absence of the future, and you have no future because your relation to your past has been altered by the absence of the future (Patapievici 39:30–41:54).[3]

When Patapievici is asked by Cristina Teleanu to specify which of the two orientations in confession—religious or secular—is more effective, Patapievici responds in a liberal mode that whoever has faith in the eternity of their soul would go to the priest and whoever disregards their eternity would go to secular assistance. Importantly, though, is the utter necessity of letting yourself be helped in this respect, irrespective of the chosen way: religious or secular. According to Patapievici, either confession to an Orthodox Christian priest whom one has as their sole and permanent confessor, or sessions led by psychiatrists, are sine qua non encounters with an external institution which, alone, has the potential to elevate to consciousness the status quo of how we perceive reality and manifest ourselves in it. It is only in this way that you can reach a more profound understanding of yourself and let your sins, inadequacies, and missing the target reach the conscious level. To finish off his answer, Patapievici adds that it is only the priest who can absolve you from sins, inadequacies, or missing the target. He also confesses that an encounter with a priest is "a great

[3] All Bible references are from the King James Version, https://www.biblegateway.com/.

encounter", stressing with aplomb the word «great». To lay even more emphasis on this aspect he adds as well that it is utterly important "to find a priest" (Patapievici 41:54–43:55).

Confession is a live work involving two, where the priest, or the psychiatrist for that matter, has the potential to help you unravel aspects hidden in the soul and entangled in the mind. Nevertheless, both confession and poiesis can benefit from "the reflection of thought within itself" to ferret deep into the soul to bring out the emotions there and into the mind to bring out whatever is there. Once, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel explored the activity of Socrates he found the "emergence of thought". Analysing the Greeks, Hegel found that the way they lived was based on "custom and practice" and that the Greeks—

> lacked a knowledge of the principle of subjectivity and conscience—*the reflection of thought within itself* in such a way that what ought to count as true confirms itself through *my* reason, through the witness of *my* spirit, through *my* feeling. Thus what is lacking here is the infinitude of spirit—spirit as an inner tribunal before which everything validated has to be justified. (*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, translated by Brown and Hodgson, 416) (Emphasis added for "the reflection …".)

The Sophists employed thought for all kinds of topics and referred everything to the human beings, thus leading to the telos of living to be restricted to a matter of personal preference—

> Thus the essential thing, the science of the Sophists, remains the art of 'dialectic', which must seek and recognize something as a fixed end (*festen Zweck*). They situated this fixed end in human beings; thus humans in their particularity have become the goal and end of all things, and utility the highest value. So the final end (*letzten Zweck*) is a matter of one's personal preference. This 'dialectic' regarded itself to be universally valid, and has done so [again], even today. In this way objective truth is denied. Thought makes everything vacillate depending on the preference of subjectivity. (*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, translated by Brown and Hodgson, 416–417)

Once Hegel reaches Socrates, he finds at him the independence of thought. Thought is no longer a mere projection of man's preference but rather an operator acting on man's own will to explore himself inwardly to find and judge whatever he finds there—

> Being-in-and-for-itself came to be recognized as the universal, and thinking as the final end, as what is valid, in that human beings are able to discover and recognize from themselves—not from their own preferences but from themselves as

> universal and thinking beings—what is right and good, and that everything that is to be valued has to justify itself before this inner tribunal of thought. (*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, translated by Brown and Hodgson, 417)

Ethics as customary and eminently external ways of living in communities give way to moral values which spring from the operation of thought bent upon itself in each and every man:

> In this way Socrates discovered what is essential (das Eigentliche), what is called morality. […] [T]he Greeks knew well what was ethical. Ethical life was present in the entire objective content [of their society] and was known in every relationship. But the position at which Socrates arrived is that human beings must essentially seek and find this within themselves, determining it from conviction and reasons for action. He is no mere agitator (Aufregender) and pedagogue (Bildender); rather conversation (das Gesagte) is his essential principle. (Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, translated by Brown and Hodgson, 417) (Emphasis added for "within themselves".)

Therefore, since Socrates, thought has the quality to sieve through good and wrong in relation to the subjectivity of the person. Only since Socrates, Hegel maintains, and particularly through his "conversation (das Gesagte)" as a proper manner of bringing up at the level of consciousness what is found good as differing from wrong—which is eloquently predated through Plato's *Dialogues*—, has man learned to use thought as a utensil in his spiritual enlightenment by exposing his inner waves of soul and mind.

Hegel clarifies his findings further by actualising the dichotomy between man's "inner world" and the "sole objective world" (or "the prior actual world"). The latter turns into an interviewee, as it were, for the thought, and is opposed to the "inner world", the thought becoming the arbiter of what is right between these two "worlds":

> By this principle, the discontinuity in which an inner world has found firm footing is expressed, an inner world that sets itself apart from what previously has been the sole objective world. The prior actual world is now defined as exterior *vis-à-vis* this interior world. [. . .] [H]uman beings find their tribunal in their inwardness [. . .]. Thought began to want the validity of everything to be justified in its own eyes. (*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, translated by Brown and Hodgson, 417)

In deconstructing the process of inner examination in preparation for confession, but in Hegel's terms, thought—viewed as an interviewer, to round off the former metaphor—has the mission to examine everything it finds in the "inner

world" as marks or stains or streaks in the form of memory and imagination of all the thoughts, utterances, and actions of man in the "sole objective world". Further on, thought has to validate the good, set apart the wrong, and hold the latter for confession. Once validation has segregated the good from the bad, the bad has been elevated to the level of the consciousness and, at this stage, it is imperative that the bad be subjected to confession as soon as possible. The urgency is dictated by the surreptitious tendency of the "inner world"—this time also involving consciousness—to conceal part or even all of its content. Concealing allows lapses to occur, which renders the examination ineffective and requires a resit.

Let us see now Donne's approach to confession in "A Hymn to God the Father". The poem is made up of three sestets—we use the word sestet for the stanza of six-line in Donne's poem.

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin, and made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year or two, but wallow'd in, a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done;
I fear no more.

The first two sestets end with two identical verses—which appear as a leitmotif. The end of the novel *Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop* consists of the two lines repeated at the end of the first two sestets of Donne's poem:

When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more. (528)

There is an implicit prayer in these two verses, and that is part of man's life-long programme of repentance. In a conference for students, Daniel the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church paraphrased Isaiah 59:2 and other prophets in describing sin: "What is sin? It is a wall between you and God, says the prophet Isaiah, it is a disgrace before God, it is a rupture in the connection with God as other prophets say. And, ultimately, it is a failure in love—in love for God and for people". Then, Daniel relates the fight against sin with the strive to obtain the peace and joy of the heart: "All the hermits' ascetic strive is an effort to remove the obstacles which hinder the heart from having peace and joy in itself, and impede the heart's love for God and for people. Repentance is a life-long programme for every Christian" (Daniel, „Pocăința" 9th December 2024, 9:05–10:05 [in Romanian], English translation).

However, calling Donne's above quoted poetic prayer just a «repentance program» is too narrow—and we shall see why it is so narrow. The first two stanzas of the poem contain a prayer addressed to the Heavenly Father for forgiving the personal sin. The personal sin is recognized as such and the stages of its manifestation are also disclosed.

In the first line of the first sestet, Donne shows the recognition of the existence of sin from the very beginning of one's life (Genesis 3:9–19) and pleads for its absolution:

> Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun, (Donne, line 1)

Then, the conscience admits to having sinned:

> Which was my sin, [...] (Donne, line 2)

starting right from the original sin—aspect suggested by the time adverb "before":

> [...] though it were done before? (Donne, line 2)

The bible introduces the notion of original sin, but Donne goes beyond reaffirming the bible. He shows that he is «aware» that he has a conscience of sin.

To pinpoint what consciousness is in Donne's lines—instead of iterating divisions and differences between the phenomenological aspects of consciousness which is currently the major object of the study of mind (Van Gulick "Consciousness")—, a return to the consciousness found by Hegel amongst the Greeks suffices to understand Donne's viewpoint. Whereas Socrates' contemporaries used to make resort to a "customary morality"—meaning that they obeyed a statutory propriety and kept themselves free from any interpretation or judgement of such customs—, and after Anaxagoras "had taught, that Thought

itself was the absolute Essence of the World", along came Socrates who posited that "The moral man is not he who merely wills and does that which is right—not the merely innocent man—but he who has the consciousness of what he is doing". By diligent conversation, Socrates shows his friends the difference between thinking attached to external things and thought which reflects upon itself, and teaches them how to discern the right from wrong:

> The principle of Socrates manifests a revolutionary aspect towards the Athenian State; for the peculiarity of this State was, that Customary Morality was the form in which its existence was moulded, viz.—an inseparable connection of Thought with actual life. When Socrates wishes to induce his friends to reflection, the discourse has always a negative tone; he brings them to the consciousness that they do not know what the Right is. (*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, translated by J. Sibree, 281)

Therefore, to reveal his aptitude to see within himself and appreciate what is right and what is wrong, Donne appropriates the original sin in line 2. After these two verses, there are two others that iterate, in a canonical construction, a request for forgiveness spurred by the sin once committed:

> Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run, (Donne, line 3)

and which has a continuation, in which, despite the existence of the consciousness of committing the sin once, the poet admits that he has not freed himself from it, but continues to commit it:

> And do run still, (Donne, line 4)

He commits the sin even if he abhors it, even if he regrets it:

> though still I do deplore? (Donne, line 4)

After this first quatrain—we should call it a quatrain because although the stanza has six lines, the first four are distinctly placed on the page as opposed to the last two. Therefore, they can be called quatrains—with the two lines concluding the sestet being, in fact, the same two lines which conclude the novel *Καλειδοσκόπιο*/ *Kaleidoscope*/ *Caleidoscop*. They represent a prayer of particular beauty. Its beauty as well as force emanates from the power of the poet's faith in the merciful love of Christ which is described by Daniel the Patriarch as "an unassuming and kind-hearted and generous love" (Daniel, „Cuvântul" 7:30–7:40 [in Romanian], English translation). This prayer is the poet's faith in God's forgiving nature ("*When thou hast done*"); but also the belief in the human

being's desire to cleanse their mind as shown by the Greek-originating word *metanoia*, meaning through repentance or a change of the habits of mind. That is why it is also the recognition of the fallen nature of man who—once forgiven—falls again ("*For I have more*"), and again asks God for forgiveness ("*thou hast not done*").

These lines at the end of Vianu's novel are a profound conclusion to an in-depth, soulful meditation, and they emphasise something which Horia-Roman Patapievici told Eugenia Vodă in an interview on the *Profesioniştii* programme. He argues that, when we lower our perception of the things around us, we become open to more diaphanous perceptions, which, however, exist all the time alongside us. We do perceive such things when we are confronted with suffering, love, illness, betrayal—any kind of existential problems (*Profesioniştii* 1:01:58–1:03:27 [in Romanian], English translation). Amongst the last lines in *Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop* there is one which testifies to the above: "While I was blinded by my being alive, nothing began and nothing ended. Only now can I see without eyes" (Vianu 528).

The placement of the *metanoia*-inspiring verses at the end of the autobiographical fiction novel reveals a special kind of denouement as, with its structure lacking a proper epic, the novel calls for a poetic finale. Such an ending is apt to transfer its message right away towards the reader, and can have formative influences on them not only through John Donne's verses, but also through the propaedeutic proper of the autobiographical novel.

On the different paths taken by the Professor and the author, his student

The metaphor which was to become «the wall» in the poem *Vântul şi Pescăruşul/ The Wind and the Seagull/ La Mouette et le Vent* ..., and develop into a poetic device has its roots in two contexts in the novel *Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop*. With the kaleidoscopic distribution of the autobiographical passages in the novel, the metaphor appears in a time-reverse order. The first mention of «the wall» appears in relation to a letter received by the author from her Professor in their late age, when the author has already regained contact with him. Remembering her Professor's conditional sentence which he told her not long before his leaving the country, namely, "I had the feeling that, if I did not call you today, I would never see you again", which is twice present in *Vântul şi Pescăruşul/ The Wind and the Seagull/ La Mouette et le Vent* ... (22, 80) and seven times in *Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop* (288, 312, 350, 402, 452, 504, 526), the author continues to ask herself in Chapter 145:

> Where are you, Den-Disco, this summer Sunday afternoon, while I watch the seagulls circling the blocks? There were no seagulls in Bucharest back then. They only lived by the sea. Like you, now. *(Kaleidoscope* 404*)*

Then, she inserts her Professor's letter which is followed by the wall metaphor:

> No seagull can ever fly over the wall between what was and what could have been. We are both running away. Now. *(Kaleidoscope* 406*)*

She refrains to comment on her Professor's letter—his doubts in his old age about another course of life in his former years—but she devises «the wall» as the most telling stance in the situation. More about this stance is to be expected from its development in the poem *Vântul şi Pescăruşul/ The Wind and the Seagull/ La Mouette et le Vent* ... which, however, is programmed to enter another paper or article.

The very next chapter—146, after Chapter 145—brings the memory of the kaleidoscope the author received as a present from Layla—a maid living close to her family's place when the author was just a child: "Layla — who gave me a kaleidoscope" (*Kaleidoscope* 412). This memory is meant to bring in the sentence: "I dropped it". (*Kaleidoscope* 412). No causal relationship exists between the broken kaleidoscope and the author's life, although she perceives her life as a broken succession of events "My entire life is a Kaleidoscope" (*Kaleidoscope* 412), which she strives to mend by creating a series of literary works—her series of prose poetry parallel texts. Lidia Vianu admits to her novel being a recreation of her life out of disparate fragments of living moments: "My soul keeps gluing it back whenever I remember I have broken it. My entire life is a Kaleidoscope" (*Kaleidoscope* 412). If we consider the author's life—which she deems unravelled and in dire need of reconstruction—a figurative kind of trauma, which she can digest in order to feel good about herself, then the mere writing of the novel *Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop* is the proper kind of therapy according to modern psychological treatments (Muller, "Written Exposure Therapy"; Jensen, "I've Never Been Poetic Like This Before").

The novel continues with Chapter 147 which starts with the encouragement of the author's father for his daughter and her future-to-be writing work. There is another statement of the author about her father's encouragement told to Professor Sorin Ivan in an interview. There, Lidia Vianu says she abhors rhyme verses. It seems that her hate for rhyming verses sprang from her father's few verses he showed her in order to teach her how to write (Vianu, „Între Profesie .../Between Profession ..." 20). Here are the author's father's few words in *Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop*:

> "*You do not know much about me. Here are a few of my memories. I have put them down for you. They might come in handy sometime.*" (412)

They are followed by a rounded story written by the author's father. The next chapter, 148, consists of a series of the author's diary entries written between the summer of 1965, when the author became of age, and the summer of 1969, just before the end of her fourth year at the faculty. In June 1969, with one more exam to sit, the then-student Lidia Vianu was to go to an international conference at Snagov. There, she totally unexpectedly meet Professor Den-Disco. Right after this encounter, the author recalls in her novel a short mention made on the 29th of July 1969 when she met her Professor for the last time before his leaving the country. The as-if-a-diary entry begins with the Professor's conditional leitmotif statement: "I had the feeling that, if I did not call you today, I would never see you again" (*Kaleidoscope* 452). Immediately after that comes the metaphor «the wall» when they part:

> He left without a word. My mind swam in frozen darkness. No words could cross the wall that I felt rising between us.
> The never-again. *(Kaleidoscope* 454*)*

And only a little while later, the diary entry on the 6th of September in the same year of 1969 shows the author's heartbreak:

> *Saturday 6 September*
>
> Where is he, what is he doing, who is with him.
> It was never-again.
> "You run away sometimes."
> No. I did not run. I am here. He ran.
> That moment of a Seagull flying in a dream, carried by the Wind over the blue sea. That Seagull was and will never again be — me. *(Kaleidoscope* 454*)*

The above poetic—albeit written in prose—passage recaptures at once the astral—crucial—moments between the author and Professor Den-Disco. It has a circularity between the wondering moment of start—"Where is he, what is he doing, who is with him"—in which the author finds herself alone and the last image—"That Seagull was and will never again be — me"—in which she sees herself again irremediably alone. In between, the novel reiterates, as in a poem proper, the cardinal moments. First, the author repeats the phrase «never-again» from the construct "The never-again" (*Kaleidoscope* 454), which marked her good-bye separation from the Professor on the 29th of July. It did not seem to be a true «never-again» when it was first thought of—perhaps just a grey premonition—, but it turned out to be a real «never-again» when it was written after it happened. The phrase appears again on the 6th of September 1969, after

the Professor left the country. Only when the author relives the feeling of separation from the Professor and recaptures it in writing, later, when she writes the novel, does the feeling which accompanies the «never-again» phase acquire the valence of a painful truth, which is expressed elliptically as in a lyric poem from which the feeling emerges as an effluvium: "It *was* never-again" (*Kaleidoscope* 454).

The above conjectural writing is a faithful mirror of an act of purging the traumatic feeling of whole-life separation of the author from the Professor. By putting aside, in writing, the tension lent by the feeling of separation, the author gets closer to the state of *theosis* or the union with God[4] (Archimandrite George, *Theosis* 15). The entire series of parallel texts, originating in the autobiographical depiction of the author's life, with a stress on her unfulfilled union with the university Professor George Constantin Săndulescu, who left the

[4] In the introduction to his book on *theosis*, Archimandrite George from the Holy Monastery of Saint Gregorios in Mount Athos, Greece shows that it would be a haughty enterprise for a writer to write about such a subject unless he has attained *theosis* proper. However, because *theosis* is the true purpose of man in life he has opted to write about it:

> This is done so as not to hide from our Christian brothers the highest and ultimate purpose of our life; that for which we were created.
> This is done so that it will become clear that the only truly Orthodox form of pastoral guidance is that which is intended to lead to Theosis, and is not, as in Western Christianity, aimed at a moral perfection for man which does not depend on God's Grace. (*Theosis* 15)

The point of departure in his endeavour is the Scripture, where it is written that man was created in the image of God:

> Our life's purpose is declared in the first chapter of the Holy Bible, when the Holy author tells us that God created man "in His image and likeness." [...] He does not wish [man] simply to be a being with certain gifts, certain qualities, a certain superiority over the rest of creation, He wishes him to be a god by Grace. (*Theosis* 19)

He continues with an enumeration of the 'charismata' by which man is created by God 'in His image':

> a logos-related *nous*,* conscience, and individual sovereignty, i.e. freedom, creativity, eros, and the yearning for the absolute and for God, personal self-awareness, and anything else which puts man above all other living beings in creation and makes him a man and an individual. That is to say, everything that makes man a person. (*Theosis* 20)

Archimandrite George avows that *theosis* is the union of man with God because, since man has been 'endowed "in His image", man is called upon to be completed "in His likeness". This is Theosis. The Creator, God by nature, calls man to become a god by Grace' (*Theosis* 2). He says that the Church Fathers have reasoned that 'God became man in order to make man a god. If God had not taken flesh, man would not be able to achieve Theosis' (*Theosis* 24). In another place, Archimandrite George specifies that, since Lord Jesus was both man and God, He 'has two perfect natures: divine and human', which 'are joined "without change, without confusion, without separation, and without division" in the one person of Christ [...]' (*Theosis* 28). Then, he adds that 'because Christ is the eternal God-Man through the hypostatic union of the two natures in the person of Christ, human nature is irrevocably unified with the divine nature because Christ is eternally God-Man' (*Theosis* 28).

communist country in order to pursue an international academic career—with settlements in Stockholm and Monaco—, is an attempt at digesting her life's story by transposing it into literary accomplishments (Vianu, „Între Profesie ...⁄ Between Profession ..." 9–10).

Then, there comes the putting together of the Professor's words "You run away sometimes" with the author's thought-response "No. I did not run. I am here. *He* ran". Finally, the «never again» leitmotif is brought back by the author's remembrance of her feelings when she left the international conference with careful help and caressing gestures of the Professor, whom she metaphorically saw then as «the Wind»: "That moment of a Seagull flying in a dream, carried by the Wind over the blue sea", and her finding herself alone again: "That Seagull was and will never again be — me" (*Kaleidoscope* 454).

"That moment of a Seagull flying in a dream" may well signify a metaphoric expression of the foretaste of Heaven, of the lived-before-lived spiritual experience of the soul who has been permitted to enter Heaven. The sea was blue not for its normally perceived colour, but for the author's own perception of the blue colour, which she relates when she recounts her imagination with respect to the kaleidoscope crystal colours. She defines her spiritual perception of the colours she dreams about, and she pinpoints blue as the colour of flying: "Blue: fly" (*Kaleidoscope* 6).

Another significant blue moment is when the author describes the way she used to perceive the colours of the diamond on the ring worn by her mother's father the moment he "died in the street":

> I like looking at the many colours in which it reflects light. If I can see blue, my wish is sure to come true. I often make a wish before I look at its blinding triangular facets. *(Kaleidoscope* 314*)*

Blue also appears as if to strengthen the momentary feeling of certainty the author had when—seeing the Professor's hand waving to her with kind gestures when she was leaving the conference venue—she imagined herself as a seagull carried by a propitious wind over an endless sea. The blue colour of the sea must symbolise the fulfilment of the author's wish for a complete union of two mating souls—hers and the Professor's.

> Eighteenth of June 1969. Eighteen more days and I will be twenty-two.
> My body will continue the life that it has begun. This car is taking me home at midnight.
> But I will always be THERE... Where Den-Disco's eyes follow me. His waving hand has found my wings.

> Now I am dreaming about it. I soar. The endless sea is below me. There is no ending. The peace. The smile. The certainty. All blue.
> My wings. His wings.
> Two — flying — One. (*Kaleidoscope* 340)

All in all, the two had to take their proper roads in life. Daniel the Patriarch of Romania sees the road taken by a person in life as the result of the necessary three factors which determine the youth's early development in life. The youth should be raised spiritually in love, taught intellectually in truth, and practically educated to do good deeds. The first of these three factors can be further developed as not just a raising of the youth in love by the natural parents, but also by the spiritual parents—educators, teachers, confessors—as well as sisters, brothers, friends, and the Church, and the Homeland. The youth should not just be loved by all these factors; he should also be taught to love them in return. Only then is the youth fully raised spiritually in love (Daniel, "Tineretul" 1:40–3:41 [in Romanian], English translation).

Or, as for the Professor, we learn from his student that he had to make at least a choice between his love life and his life of work. In his letter sent to the author after they found each other again, long after communism in Romania was abolished, the Professor mentions the way he perceived his youthful choice at the time: "*Should I have cared enough to postpone defecting? Married you, maybe*?" (*Kaleidoscope* 404). But then he declared his hatred for the communist regime. With respect to the work aspect of his life, the Professor lacked at the very least the love for the country of his birth. It was all because of the political regime of the time when he decided to leave the country for good:

> Not with my intense hatred of the regime, although — Did you have any idea? No, you would not — I did everything to protect myself. I did not spare anyone who could harm me. But, shshsh... this is only for me to know. I can't tell you. Nobody can ever trust anyone. This is a tricky world. (*Kaleidoscope* 404)

According to the thoughts in the homily of Daniel the Patriarch, the Professor did not have the least inclination to do his best in terms of good deeds in a country where the regime was imposed forcefully (Daniel, "Tineretul" 1:40–3:41 [in Romanian], English translation). He had to choose a life in a country with a liberal regime. And he chose the Western Europe, where he finally established himself in the Monte Carlo part of Monaco, as we learn from the interview given by Lidia Vianu to Sorin Ivan („Între Profesie .../Between Profession ..." 9 –10) and also from the poem *Vântul şi Pescăruşul/ The Wind and the Seagull/ La Mouette et le Vent* .... In the latter, we find the Professor by the author's metaphorical name for him: «the Wind»:

> Once upon a time, there was a monks' city, on the top of Monte C, facing the sea. Once upon a time, there lived in this city a Wind [...] *(The Wind* 80*)*

We also learn about his passing away at long last on the very spot he had chosen for his life:

> 123 ∞ 7 breaths is what it took to climb the Monte. The harmony of Il Monaco's ascended soul, the pity for that breathing body, farther and farther away, till the drop of blood is the tunnel, into ∞ (*The Wind* 144*)*

It seems that the Parable of the Talents (Mat. 25:14–30) with its significance of the responsibility to increase the value of the talents received at birth, or, put differently, a place where the best good deeds in life could be done—as expected from a birth endowment—led the Professor to leave the country of his birth. In Christian terms, this is the most reasonable translation of the Professor's decision provided that he had envisioned a successful career in the liberal world—far away from the political regime in communism. However, the union the author of the novel *Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop* was expecting with the Professor was drastically severed by his defection.

As a redemption of equanimity, Lidia Vianu launched into a process of poiesis which led to her volumes of prose poetry—for there are several of her books related to this traumatic unfolding of events. Aiming at how people live together and perceive events differently—that is, subjectively, what connects to themselves, whereas, objectively, what every man partakes of others' lives according to their canvases, Arthur Schopenhauer distinguishes between objective and subjective perceptions of events and deftly connects subjective perception with poiesis—the creation of literary works, particularly poetry:

> [...] all the events in a man's life are connected in two fundamentally different ways; first in the objective causal connection of the course of nature, secondly in a subjective connection that exists only in reference to the individual who experiences them. It is as subjective as his own dreams, yet in him their succession and content are likewise necessarily determined, but in the manner in which the succession of the scenes of a drama is determined by the plan of the poet. (*Parerga and Paralipomena I* 220)

Lidia Vianu's prose poetry is thus a channel for purging unresolved issues, or, rather, for suppressing the reverberating recollections of the utterances of desires, unfolding over along almost half a century. Ultimately, they bear the stamp of unfulfilled Christian love on account of the political regime, and impact their reader as a «legacy» of Orthodox Christianity and the communist regime in the 20th century Romania, which persisted into the 21st century.

Conclusions

This paper aims at highlighting a palette of effects of the interconnectedness of Orthodox Christianity and the communist regime in Romania between the years 1947 and 1989. We should name the effects a palette since the effects range at various levels of value—from spirit to adaptation. The strict prohibition of open confession of the Christian faith during the communist period and the harsh conditions applied to those who dared to oppose the system led the system to allow the growth of holy individuals who have been canonised and entered the gallery of Orthodox Christian Saints—either as martyrs or as witnesses of Christ („Comunicat ..." [in Romanian], "Holy Synod ...").

Another effect of the interconnectedness between Orthodox Christianity and communism led Lidia Vianu to write an autobiographical fiction novel which deconstructs the pillars of education—high school and higher education—under communism and ends with a propaedeutic of bettering the readers' lives through the process of confession, which is single in its ability to lead to *metanoia* or changing of mind as a better condition of the human psyche. A final effect revealed in this paper is the poiesis which the author has approached in the literariness of the two bilingual books—*Καλειδοσκόπιο/ Kaleidoscope/ Caleidoscop* and *Vântul şi Pescăruşul/ The Wind and the Seagull/ La Mouette et le Vent* ...—written in English and Romanian—so as to digest the lack of fulfilment of her union with Professor George Constantin Săndulescu on account of the political regime in Romania of the time.

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The Psalmic Image of the Development of the Body in the Womb (Ps 139:13-16) – From Intuition to Knowledge

Stelian PAŞCA-TUŞA*, Cătălin-Emanuel ŞTEFAN**

ABSTRACT. The complexity of the human body has fascinated humanity since the beginning of time. Varied approaches to the human body can be observed in founding myths, visual arts, legends, writings, and religious celebrations. Historically, the body was not the central focus of ancient peoples but rather a recurring motif. In antiquity, the human body was not viewed as an isolated entity with parts to be studied in detail. Instead, it was seen as a whole that reflected the complexity of both the material and spiritual worlds. Therefore, the emphasis was on understanding the entirety of the body and its relation to other aspects of reality rather than dissecting its components. Nonetheless, some texts reveal insightful observations about the body, one of which is Psalm 139:13-16. Although this text features images characteristic of antiquity, it should not be regarded merely as a fragment of Eastern cultic literature; a higher level of knowledge inspires it. This study emphasizes how the psalmist captures the theological dimension of the body's development in the womb.

Keywords: body; Psalm 139; womb; embryo; God

1. Introduction

This psalmic fragment has been examined from an anthropological perspective, serving as one of the key texts underlying the scriptural conception of humanity. In our study, we will focus solely on the development of the human body, as emphasized in this psalm, to better understand the inspired character of this anthropological text. Other specialists have explored this direction as

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well. Notably, biblical scholars like Michael D. Goulder[1] and Konrad Schaefer[2] draw attention to Hebrew anatomical terms and provide extensive descriptions from an anatomical perspective. Researcher Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher[3] has sought images of the human body in the Psalter; although she examines Psalm 139, her analysis is not explicitly focused on it. She explores the role of these images and their specific language but tends to treat the subject too generally. She has aimed to identify patterns in using these images, occasionally neglecting the particulars of each psalm. Another essential contributor to this theme is Leonard P. Maré[4]. His work closely resembles the previously mentioned biblical commentaries but uniquely concentrates on verses 13-18 to discuss anatomical imagery concerning creation. However, his focus is not on fully exploring these anatomical images' significance but establishing the context necessary for a complex anthropological understanding. Therefore, his study instrumentalizes the anatomical imagery without giving it standalone importance. Lodewyk Sutton's article[5] shares a similar approach; while it may appear to address a different theme within Psalm 139, it emphasizes creationist imagery in verses 13-16 and seeks to illustrate the connection between the psalmist's constitution and his cry to God, which he considers paradigmatic in the context of Holy Scripture. Although anatomical imagery is not the primary focus of his research, it provides valuable insights into how the psalmist relates to his own body. Lastly, Sutton published another study focusing on the human constitution as a unified whole, exploring the link between the human body and the rest of creation according to ancient conceptions.

It is important to note that the studies cited either analyze verses 13-16 of Psalm 139 from an anthropological standpoint, treat the anatomical dimension too generally, or focus on the connection between the body and the world. In this paper, we intend to focus exclusively on the anatomical elements within this psalmic fragment. Our goal is to understand the ancient author's perspective on the human body, particularly on its development in the womb. We also aim to highlight several insights of the psalmic author that he arrived at without access to contemporary medical research. We believe that examining these aspects can enhance our understanding of specific issues that, although significant, remain underexplored.

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1 Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return (Book V, Psalms 107-150)*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1998, p. 241.

2 Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2001, p. 326.

3 Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, „Body Images in the Psalms", *JSOT* 28, 3 (2004), pp. 301-326.

4 Leonard P. Maré, „Creation Theology in Psalm 139", *OTE* 23, 3 (2010), pp. 693-707.

5 Lodewyk Sutton, „The anthropological function of the outcry 'When God searches my heart' in Psalm 139:1 and 23 and its later use in Romans 8:27", *STJ* 4, 2 (2018), pp. 243-263.

To accomplish this, we will employ various research methods. First, we will familiarize ourselves with the internal structure of Psalm 139. As mentioned, our focus will be verses 13-16 rather than the entire psalm. To explore this sequence in-depth, it is essential to consider the psalm and the context in which this passage appears. Once we understand these aspects, we can delve deeper into the specific interest section.

While we will not conduct a detailed analysis of all four verses, we will concentrate on the anatomical elements present in them. This involves identifying the main biological concepts and examining the language used to express these ideas in the two sources of the psalm: the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint. We will also investigate how these concepts contribute to the primary imagery in this psalmic sequence. To gain a broad perspective on these anatomical images' role, depth, and significance, we will consult modern scholarship and the traditional interpretations of Jewish and Christian exegetes, specifically the rabbis and the Church Fathers. Given that Jewish exegesis has predominantly focused on the philological study of Scripture, we will frequently reference the analyses provided by Jewish interpreters.

Finally, after exploring these elements, we will attempt to outline how the author of Psalm 139, as a representative of a distant historical and cultural context, understood the formation of his own body.

The paper is organized into several sections. The first part discusses the general aspects of the chosen psalm and the specific section under consideration. The following section analyzes the anatomical content of verses 13, 15, and 16 and how it has been interpreted over time. In the final section, we will synthesize and systematize the information gathered to outline the key features of the anatomical perspective in Psalm 139.

2. The internal structure of the Psalm

Thematically, Psalm 139 is divided into two main parts: the first part is doxological, while the second is petitionary[6]. Verses 1-18 form a complex hymn of glory directed towards God, highlighting attributes such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence that evoke human awe. In contrast, verses 19-24 shift the focus from God to the psalmist's enemies and even include an imprecation against them.

[6] Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014, p. 581.

A detailed analysis reveals that the verses can be grouped into several structural units. Modern scholarship does not have a unified approach regarding grouping these verses, with scholars generally proposing between four and seven sections. Walter Brueggemann, William Bellinger Jr., Leslie C. Allen, and Michael Goulder are among those who divide Psalm 139 into five sections. They commonly segment the first part of the psalm into verses 1-6 and 7-12 while differing in their treatment of the latter half. Brueggemann and Bellinger Jr. break down sections 13-18, arguing that verses 17-18, which discuss "the friends of God," should not be viewed solely as a conclusion for verses 13-16 but rather as a summation for the entire psalm[7]. Allen supports the division of verses 13-18 but segments the petitionary section (vs. 19-24) into two distinct ideas: the destruction of the wicked (vs. 19-22), which he considers unrelated to the primary themes of the psalm, and the psalmist's request for God to examine and guide him (vs. 23-24)[8]. Goulder presents a similar segmentation[9].

In the initial part of our study, we noted that some of the referenced articles focus specifically on verses 13-16, while others consider the broader sequence of 13-18. This variation is attributable to differing approaches to segmenting the psalm. The segmentation is not of ultimate importance; instead, it serves as a tool to facilitate our future analysis. Now that we have outlined the main sections of the psalm, we can proceed to a deeper examination of the chosen passage.

3. Intrauterine constitution of the body (v. 13)

This verse contains three essential elements: the verb "to weave," the imagery of the kidneys, and the womb image. Contemporary scholarship primarily relies on the Masoretic Text, which underscores the significance of the idea that man is תְּסֻכֵּנִי – "woven"[10]. Scholars from recent centuries contend that this term encapsulates the process of fetal development. They believe that the term chosen by the Septuagint translators (ἀντελάβου – "to support") does not fully express the depth of the original text's imagery. For these scholars, the verb "to weave" effectively conveys the harmonious integration of the various anatomical components, such as bones, muscles, veins, and others[11].

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7 Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms*, p. 583.
8 Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (WBC 21), Word Incorporated, Dallas, 2002, p. 582.
9 Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, pp. 242-246.
10 *New American Standard Bible*, The Lockman Foundation, La Habra, 2020, p. 659.
11 Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 245; Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, p. 328.

We must also consider the implications of the two biological details in the verse: the kidneys and the womb[12]. These anatomical elements symbolize immediate physical realities and the psalmist's deeper contemplations. Scholarly interpretations vary widely and often reflect subjective viewpoints. Gillmayr-Bucher emphasizes the wonder the psalmist experiences when observing his composition, advocating for a literary understanding of both elements[13].

In Jewish thought, these organs are viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, the most common interpretetion views the kidneys in a literal manner, but with nuances. Rabbis argues that the psalm does not refer to the organs themselves but rather symbolizes the internal components of humanity – those aspects that remain hidden or in the dark[14]. Since the ancients could not see internal organs while a person was alive, these organs were shrouded in mystery. The second perspective offers a figurative understanding of these organs, attributing different meanings to them. Jewish exegesis also emphasizes that the womb serves as a setting for a mysterious process – the development of the fetus[15]. Rabbis view a person's intrauterine growth as a collaborative act between God and human physiological processes, a notion that is mirrored in patristic exegesis as well[16].

4. The pre-embryonic stage when "matter" or "bones" are formed (v. 15)

Verse 14 does not present any anatomical depiction, serving instead as a doxology that responds to what has been articulated in the previous verse. Thus, it is irrelevant to our study, leading us to the next verse. Here, we encounter several anatomical elements, although they differ across the basic textual versions. Despite variations between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, this does not impede our research, as both provide profound anatomical perspectives, as will be discussed shortly.

Goulder argues that the four verses under review (vs. 13-16) build on the preceding one (v. 12). He argues that this verse illustrates the emergence and development of humanity in two stages, presented in reverse chronological

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12 Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, p. 327.

13 Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, „Body Images in the Psalms", p. 317.

14 Avrohom Chaim Feuer, Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms) – a new translation with a commentary anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic sources*, vol. 5, Mesorah Publications Ltd., Brooklyn, 1996, p. 1639.

15 Norman H. Strickman (ed.), *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary on Books 3-5 of Psalms: Chapters 73-150*, Tuoro College Press, New York, 2016, p. 500.

16 Cuv. Eftimie Zigabenul and Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinților Părinți*, vol. II, trans. Ștefan Voronca, Egumenița, Galați, 2006, p. 738.

order[17]. Verses 13 and 14 describe the intrauterine formation of a person, while verses 15 and 16 recount the formation that occurs before this in the "lowest parts of the earth." Thus, we can identify an embryonic stage in which a recognizable human develops, alongside a pre-embryonic stage where "matter" or "bones" are formed, likely corresponding to the initial creation of humankind. Goulder underscores that it is significant that the psalm addresses these matters, suggesting that verse 15 indicates a dual origin for humans in the Jewish perspective: one stemming from the union of flesh and the other from dust[18].

In contrast to previous vers, the differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, in this instance, are more pronounced. Although the vocabulary of the two versions is relatively similar, their meanings diverge slightly. For the rabbis, the term עָצְמִי – "nature"[19] holds a different significance than what Greco-Roman culture assigns to it. Rather than signifying the ontological essence of an individual[20], rabbis interpret it as referring to a distinct inner reality. In Targumic thought[21], this term denotes "the latent power that nature has placed in human beings"[22]. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra does not explicitly define this "power" but notes its latent nature, suggesting it is something an individual is born with, becoming apparent later in life. He connects it to the images of the facial hair of a teenager or the capacity of speech in a newborn child[23]. Modern Jewish commentators have further defined this power, viewing it as a range of energies and inherent talents while also considering a more literal interpretation where the same term may also refer to the "skeleton"[24].

The phrase "lowest of the earth" is interpreted by modern Jewish exegetes, including some medieval ones like Rashi, in a figurative manner. The rabbis suggest that this expression serves as a metaphor for the womb, where the embryo develops. They argue that the psalmist metaphorically references his intrauterine growth[25]. The comparison is deliberate, as the womb nourishes and supports the child in the same way that the earth facilitates the germination and growth of a seed[26]. According to these exegetes, the psalmist presents profound

17 Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 245.
18 Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 245; Leonard P. Maré, „Creation Theology in Psalm 139", p. 700.
19 *New American Standard Bible*, p. 659.
20 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, Institutul Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 2010, p. 371.
21 Chair Avrohom Feuer, Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms)*, p. 1640.
22 Norman H. Strickman, *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary*, p. 502.
23 Norman H. Strickman, *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary*, p. 502.
24 Chair Avrohom Feuer, Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms)*, 1640.
25 Norman H. Strickman, *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary*, p. 502.
26 Chair Avrohom Feuer, Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms)*, p. 1640.

insights that align closely with modern medical understanding of human development.

Some Church Fathers, such as St. Athanasius the Great[27] and St. Isidore of Pelusium[28], offer an intriguing perspective on these elements. They connect verse 15 back to Adam and Eve, interpreting the "bone" as referring to the woman and the "nature" as referring to the man. In this interpretation, the psalmist states that his "bone" was made secretly, reminiscent of how the woman was formed. Furthermore, these Church Fathers believe that the preceding verses discuss the creation of man in general, with verse 15 elaborating on how the first family came into existence: Eve was created "in secret" from a rib, while Adam was formed "in the lowest parts of the earth."

5. God's penetrating vision and the unfinished stage of embryo formation

The concluding verse of this section also contains anatomical language. As Goulder observes, verses 13-14 pertain to the embryonic stage, while verses 15-16 reference an earlier developmental phase[29]. While this symmetry is apparent, it is not perfect; verses 15 and 16 are more closely related than their counterparts. Scholars from recent centuries argue that the ideas presented in verses 15-16 are so complex that they cannot be fully expressed in a single verse. These verses introduce significant concepts like "my bones," the notion of creation "in secret," "nature," and "the lowest of the earth".

In this context, the Masoretic Text differs noticeably from its Greek translation. The concept of begetting is rich within Jewish thought. Rabbis commenting on this verse emphasize that the term refers to the earliest moments of human existence. The original term גֻּלְמִי does not focus on time but carries a more personal connotation. In modern terms, it could be translated as "embryo", though it denotes an amorphous mass[30]. With this understanding, contemporary rabbis highlight the depth of the term, suggesting that from a particular perspective, the human embryo can be likened to a piece of wood waiting to be carved or clay to be shaped. Although neither the embryo nor the materials mentioned have a definite form yet, they already possess the properties of their eventual form[31]. Thus, the

[27] Sf. Atanasie cel Mare, *Tâlcuiri la psalmi*, trans. Parascheva Enache, Doxologia, Iassy, 2021, p. 408.
[28] Cuv. Eftimie Zigabenul and Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinților Părinți*, p. 738.
[29] Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 245.
[30] Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, p. 328.
[31] Chair Avrohom Feuer, Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms)*, p. 1640.

term used in verse 16 is complex and profound, underscored by the fact that it is used only once in the entirety of Holy Scripture (making it a hapax legomenon)[32].

Some medieval Jews also spoke about several aspects in Psalm 139, particularly in the verse 16, that led them to think of Adam. Thus Rabbi Meir proposes an interesting interpretation of the phrase "Your eyes saw me in the womb (when I was unborn)." He connects the notion of indefiniteness to the tradition that God gathered dust from the earth's four corners to create the first man. He asserts that the Lord would have known Adam even while gathering the scattered dust for his creation. Rabbi Meir emphasizes a literal interpretation of the phrase, suggesting it reflects the most undefined stage of human existence – when man was merely dust and not just any dust, but widely scattered. This interpretation highlights the complexity and marvel of God's action in creating the first man since it is harder to envision a "final product" when the "base matter" is dispersed than when it is more unified, as in the case of the embryo[33].

The Church Fathers also pay special attention to the term "unformed". For instance, St. John Chrysostom interprets it to mean that God has known humanity since its formation in the womb or that the Lord is aware of human deeds from the outset: "Your eyes have seen my unformed substance"[34].

6. Knowing the mystery of the making of man through divine revelation

To understand the role of anatomical imagery in this selected section, we will briefly examine the entire doxological part of the psalm (vs. 1-8). In this segment, the author reflects on his relationship with God. He begins his meditation by considering divine omniscience, which he describes in verses 1-6. Next, he discusses another aspect of his relationship with the sacred: God's omnipresence, elaborated on in verses 7-12. The third important aspect focuses on the psalmist himself. In this section, the author contemplates his internal composition and how it was formed. He references kidneys, the womb (verse 13), bones, and the nature (or, more specifically, the embryo from which he developed) (v. 15). The doxological part of Psalm 139 concludes by addressing the psalmist's relationship with God as manifested through his connections with other people, as seen in verses 17-18.

Although each strophe has its theme, the psalm is interconnected by a "red thread" that links them. The doxological section revolves around a single theme expressed in various nuances. The psalmist explores four elements

[32] *Septuaginta. Psalmii, Odele, Proverbele, Eclesiastul, Cântarea cântărilor*, vol. 4/I, eds. Cristian Bădiliță et al., Polirom, Bucharest/Iassy, 2006, p. 328.
[33] Chair Avrohom Feuer, Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms)*, pp. 1640-1641.
[34] Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilii la Psalmi*, trans. Laura Enache, Doxologia, Iassy, 2011, pp. 633-634.

crucial for his relationship with God: divine omniscience, divine omnipresence, human's own person, and the other people. These elements reveal a progressive understanding of reality[35].

At first, the believer realizes that the Lord sees and knows him, but this knowledge is somewhat external (as God observes actions, the "way," etc.). As he draws closer to the divinity, he understands that the Lord sees everything and is in the midst of it all. This expanded perspective shifts from viewing God as distant to experiencing Him as closely intertwined with life[36]. Then, man gains an even deeper understanding: God knows everything and is everywhere and has ensured that man possesses a harmonious composition, having cared for him from the beginning. This revelation elevates their relationship to its peak. Man naturally feels a deep connection to the Lord upon realizing that God has worked within him, not just in the external world[37]. As he acknowledges that he is "such a marvelous creature" (v. 14), the thought arises that perhaps others share this exact wondrous nature. Consequently, even as his relationship with God becomes profoundly intimate, he feels compelled to broaden that relationship to include others.

Given all this, we recognize that our specific section (vs. 13-16) holds a privileged position within the psalm. The psalmist's relationship with God evolves throughout the text. Initially, he has a more distant connection, knowing only some aspects of God (vs. 1-6). He feels closer as he realizes that the Lord first approached him (vs. 7-12). Finally, his relationship with God reaches an extreme level of intimacy, revealing that God is not only near but also intimately knowledgeable about his inner self as the one who has made him. At this point, their relationship achieves its highest degree of closeness. The psalm follows an intriguing logic: it starts with general acquaintance, progresses to the notion of presence, and culminates in intimacy, considered the ultimate goal. Consequently, specialists regard verses 13-16 as the "crowning" moment of what precedes them[38].

Now that we have examined the overall logic of the doxological part, we will take a closer look at its central focus, specifically verses 13-16. This group of verses has its internal logic. Two of the four verses are primarily descriptive (vs. 13 and 15), while the others are mainly meditative (vs. 14 and 16). Each meditative verse reflects a natural reaction in the psalmist's soul after realizing the implications of the preceding verse. This section reverses the description of

35 Lodewyk Sutton, „The anthropological function", p. 561.
36 Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 245.
37 Lodewyk Sutton, „Darkness as an Anthropological Space: Perspectives Induced by Psalms 88 and 139 on the Themes of Death, Life and the Presence of YHWH", *OTE* 32, 2 (2019), p. 565.
38 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 371.

the human body's development stages. It accounts for four elements: the kidneys (v. 13), the skeleton, the embryo (v. 15), and finally, God's thoughts recorded in His book (v. 16).

The text begins with the kidneys because, in Jewish thought, they and other internal organs are crucial in developing the human body. These vital organs are given special significance. The psalm then mentions the skeleton. In ancient understanding, the skeleton was viewed as more structural than physiological; it was believed to form before the other organs and was considered less important.

Next, the text refers to the "embryo"[39], indicating a stage when the skeleton had not yet formed. At this point, humans were thought to be amorphous masses but contained the characteristics of their future bodies. However, the psalm does not stop there. The final stage mentioned is when a person is not an embryo but a thought in God's mind. Before creation, the reasons for a person's makeup already existed in His "book."

The four stages presented in the psalm provide a beautiful chronological perspective. In the first stage, the Lord establishes a new person's features. Then, God translates His thoughts about the person into a physical form, creating the embryo. Though from a material standpoint, the body may appear undeveloped, ontologically, it contains all the elements that confer personhood, as it is endowed with the image of God and incorporates divine traits that will guide its development[40].

The Church's understanding is clear: When God chooses to create a new human being, He does not see them in stages. Instead, He has the perfect image in mind from the very beginning[41]. Thus, in the divine plan, the embryo is viewed not as a mere amorphous mass but as the manifestation of the perfect image of humanity in the material realm, albeit in an unfinished form[42]. The third stage refers to when the body begins to develop. In Jewish thought, development starts with the appearance of the skeleton, which provides form to the body. Once the skeleton is formed, the person God intended begins to take shape. The final stage described in the psalm is when the body reaches perfection. At this point, the body has its outward appearance (determined by the skeleton) but still requires internal perfection by forming organs vital for biological life. These organs, represented by the kidneys, are fragile yet crucial, which is why they are mentioned last. Although this perspective has some shortcomings from a biological standpoint, its overall message is profound. It discusses the gradual

39 *Septuaginta. Psalmii...*, p. 328.
40 Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, p. 328.
41 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 372.
42 Lodewyk Sutton, „Darkness as an Anthropological Space", p. 565.

formation of a human being in the womb, reflecting reality, the unity in the emergence of a person, and the divine orchestration of this process.

Now that we understand this, we might wonder why the psalm presents the four elements in reverse order. The answer lies in the psalmist's reflection on his existence, starting from what he is most familiar with – the perfect state of his body – and working backward to the moment when the Lord decided how to create him. Thus, the psalm creates a deep introspection based on personal experience[43].

Conclusions

Sequences 13-16, through their language and imagery, create a distinctive picture of how the ancients understood the development of the human body in the womb. Modern research has uncovered several textual nuances that confirm the psalmist possessed deep insights despite lacking medical knowledge. Following the Tradition of the Church, we believe these insights are not mere human speculation but stem from the psalmist's interaction with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to contemporary research, we have highlighted how two traditional categories of exegetes – the rabbis and the Church Fathers – have also identified textual features that enhance our understanding of human development. Jewish interpreters, examining the Masoretic Text, emphasize elements such as man's “kidneys” (which include both the organs and the desires that arise from them), the period spent in the womb (v. 13), the bones, and the concept of “nature” (which refers to the embryo, the earliest stage of human development, v. 15). The Church Fathers, viewing the text through the lens of the Septuagint, place less emphasis on anatomical terminology. Instead, they focus on the gradual emergence of humanity, interpreting verses 13-14 as a depiction of humanity's overall development, while verse 15 details the unique way each of the two original parents was brought to life. Though the Patristic interpretation leans more toward an anthropological rather than a biological understanding, it does contain elements that support our perspective.

In addition to analyzing the language, this paper also explores how the imagery presented by the psalm contributes to a broader understanding of human development. The structure of the stanzas reveals a gradual approach of humanity to God, mediated by four main elements: His omniscience, omnipotence, the individual, and others. As demonstrated, the closer one is to God, the deeper one's understanding of one’s nature becomes. Therefore, verses 13-16 hold a

[43] Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 372.

special significance within the psalm. We have found that these verses comprise two descriptive lines (vv. 13 and 15) and two reflective ones (vv. 14 and 16). The descriptive verses trace a reverse path of human evolution as the psalmist reflects on his body from the stage of perfection back to its most rudimentary form, the embryo. This study shows that the psalmist's discourse reveals remarkable insights about his composition even without precise medical knowledge. Hence, it is evident that a lack of medical knowledge did not preclude a profound understanding of reality articulated in relatively simple language for ancient people.

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Saint Peter Chrysologus versus "Arius ... the pitiful man"

Dragoş BOICU*

ABSTRACT. This paper focuses on a witness to the gradual consolidation of the authority of the Council of Nicaea, in the form we know it today, namely Saint Peter Chrysologus. In his homilies delivered before the Christians of Ravenna, he draws attention to the Arian teachings which, even a hundred years after the condemnation of Arius, continued to spread and deeply divide the Church. In his polemic against Arianism, Saint Peter Chrysologus appeals to elementary logic, affirming that the attributes "Father" and "Almighty" are sufficient to believe that God has, from eternity, possessed the quality of Fatherhood in relation to the coeternal Son.

Keywords: Peter Chrysologus, Ravenna, Arianism, Council of Nicaea, Christology, Apologetics

The celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council provides a fitting opportunity to once again emphasize the importance of doctrinal debates and the impact of the decisions made by the bishops gathered at Nicaea. Although the authority of the 318 Holy Fathers' rulings is now recognized by almost the entire Eastern and Western Christendom, the years and decades following the conciliar event of 325 were far from such consensus. Rather, we can speak of a period of vehement contestation to the Nicene vision and of a long process leading toward the unanimous acceptance of a triadology purified from the various subordinationist nuances of Arian or Pneumatomachian type.

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As often happens, our bias prevents us from seeing the uncomfortable problems —especially when we take the easy path of projecting contemporary realities onto the past, instead of striving to study and understand it by seeking convincing evidence and testimonies of the historical phenomena we perceive.

A witness to this rather lengthy process of accepting the Nicene decisions is Saint Peter Chrysologus, who led the Church of Ravenna in the first half of the fifth century (436–450 AD). Given that more than a century had passed since the Council convened by Emperor Constantine the Great (Nicaea, 325), and about five decades since the Second Ecumenical Council (Constantinople, 381), one might assume that Arianism had already been definitively defeated. Nevertheless, when we read the homiletic works of Saint Peter, we are surprised to find that the threat of Arius' heretical teaching was still quite present, prompting the bishop of Ravenna to preach against it.

1. The Presence of Post-Nicene Arianism in the Western Part of the Roman Empire

Although the doctrinal formula summarized in the Nicene Creed should have definitively put an end to the theological debates provoked by Arius's subordinationist teaching, the events that unfolded in the following decades proved that it was both insufficient and far from popular. The exile of Arius, Theognis of Nicaea, and Maris of Chalcedon to Illyricum was not only a punishment but also an opportunity for the spread of their heretical teaching, leaving its mark on future bishops from the diocese of Pannonia[1]: Ursacius of Sirmium, Valens of Mursa, and Germinius of Sirmium, the latter two standing out as the authors of the "Blasphemy of Sirmium," that is, the second formula of faith approved at the council held in Sirmium in 357. Its radicalism scandalized even several Semi-Arian factions.

The attempt to impose throughout the entire Roman Empire the *homoian* formula (*homoion te kai aparallakton auton kata panta tō patri*), approved at the councils of Ariminum (359) and Seleucia (360) and confirmed at Constantinople (360), came to an end with the death of Emperor Constantius († November 3, 361).

Outside Illyricum – the Arian stronghold in the western half of the Empire – Arian bishops appeared only in exceptional cases, such as that of Auxentius of Cappadocia, who became bishop of Milan (355–374) with the

[1] Nicolae Chifăr, *Istoria creștinismului*, vol. 1 (Editura Universității "Lucian Blaga" din Sibiu, 2007), 147.

support of Emperor Constantius and remained at the head of the church during the reign of Valentinian I, despite numerous councils and confrontations that demonstrated his heterodoxy.

Although, following the Councils of Aquileia (381), Mediolanum (381), and Rome (382), the Nicene teaching seemed to have triumphed definitively in the West, the death of Gratian († August 25, 383) and the regency of Justina – a fervent supporter of Homoiousianism (*Arianae haereseos alumna*[2]) – favored the strengthening of the Arian position, even though their number was relatively small compared to that of the adherents of various Arian currents in the East. Less than a year after Gratian's assassination, in the summer of 384, Justina openly expressed her support for subordinationism by bringing to the imperial residence a certain Mercurius of Durostorum († c. 400), an Illyrian bishop who would take the name Auxentius, after the former Semi-Arian bishop of Milan († 374), both to benefit from his authority and to escape the poor reputation he had gained in Scythia[3].

An expression of the imperial support enjoyed by the subordinationists is the document of Homoian content published on January 23, 386. Based on the dogmatic formula adopted at the Council of Ariminum (Rimini, 359) and confirmed by the Council of Constantinople (360) –according to which "the Son is like in all things (*ho homoios kata panta*) to Him who begot Him, and the term 'substance' (ousia), being unscriptural, should be set aside" –the decree granted the right to assemble in liturgical communities to those who shared this doctrine, while threatening those who would oppose the enforcement of the new decision[4].

If the attempt to seize the Portiana Basilica in the spring of 385 had failed due to its illegality, the decree of January 386 provided the subordinationists with the necessary legal framework to secure their own places of worship. Consequently, another attempt was made to confiscate the same basilica on Palm Sunday, in March 386. The presence of the imperial guard heightened the tension between the Nicenes and the Homoians to such an extent that Saint Ambrose feared the heretical priests might be lynched[5]. A second siege of the basilica took place after Easter, though it was not successful. Establishing a clear chronology of these events is extremely difficult, just as identifying the precise location of this basilica still raises many unresolved questions[6].

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2 Tyrannius Rufinus, *Historiae ecclesiasticae libri duo*, II, 15, *PL* 21: 523.

3 Daniel H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 202-204.

4 *Codex Theodosianus* 16.1.4 (386 January 23).

5 Ambrose of Milan, *Epistula XX*.5, *PL* 16:995: See also Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End*, p. 210.

6 See for example the different presentations of events by Williams, *Ambrose of Milan*, 203-214 and Hervé Savon, *Ambroise de Milan* (Desclée, 1997), 201-222.

The two civil wars waged by Emperor Theodosius the Great against Magnus Maximus (388–390) and Eugenius supported by Arbogast (392–394) could have favored the development of an ecclesial environment in which the *fides Nicaena* might have eliminated all forms of Arianism from the western part of the Empire. However, at the beginning of the fifth century, the Thervingi Goths entered Italy under the leadership of Alaric. The treaties concluded between barbarian chieftains and the imperial authority –such as the one signed between Wallia (415–418) and Emperor Honorius (395–423) – included provisions for the enlistment of Gothic tribes in the service of the Empire, while also granting them the right to freely practice their Arian religious traditions.

Neither the transfer of the imperial residence to Ravenna (402–403) nor the reorientation of barbarian troops toward Gaul excluded the possibility of stable and substantial contacts between Emperor Honorius's entourage and the envoys of these migrants, who had been Christianized in the Homoian Arian form through the mission of Wulfila († 383).

The occasional presence of the Goths in the Italian Peninsula would favor the emergence of Arian communities even in the vicinity of Ravenna, especially during the reign of the usurper John (423–425), who had previously held the office of *primicerius notariorum*.

After the arrival in 425 of the expeditionary forces sent from Constantinople under the command of Ardabur, Aspar, and Candidianus, the usurper's rule came to an end: the Western troops betrayed the tyrant and proclaimed as legitimate Augustus the six-year-old Valentinian III, nephew of Honorius. In the following years, the young emperor was under the regency of his mother, Galla Placidia, and under the protection of General Aetius, whose troops were composed of *foederati*—Goths, Vandals, and Huns. Their leading officers, being Arians, were stationed near the imperial palace alongside elite barbarian units serving as bodyguards.

Therefore, we may assume that a fairly well-established Arian community existed in Ravenna at the time when Saint Peter Chrysologus carried out his pastoral ministry – nearly five decades before the Ostrogothic conquest of the Italian Peninsula.

Reading through the homiletic corpus attributed to Bishop Peter Chrysologus, we obtain confirmation this assumption, especially in the sermons focused on the *expositio symboli* or the interpretation of the Creed, delivered during Lent, on the Sunday preceding the Feast of the Resurrection. These sermons represented a central part of the process of *traditio et redditio symboli*—two essential practices that involved the transmission of the Creed and its interpretation by the catechist, respectively its reproduction or recitation by the catechumen before the bishop in the week preceding Baptism.

These homilies explained the Creed article by article, but not the one formulated at Nicaea in 325; rather, they expounded upon the Old Roman Creed (*R*)—one of the earliest formulations of faith to take shape in the West, accepted and used as an ancient baptismal confession by the Church of Rome. From this formula of faith derived, over time, several other confessions or symbols, including the Apostles' Creed, whose *textus receptus* (*T*) appeared in southwestern Gaul in the seventh century[7].

We may ask ourselves: *why, more than a century after the formulation of the Nicene Creed, was the Roman Creed still being used in Ravenna?*

In fact, this situation is not only found in Ravenna, but was found in the vast majority of Churches in the Western Roman Empire. As early as the end of the fourth century, Latin authors such as Rufinus expressed the conviction that only in the Church of Rome had the old Apostolic Creed been preserved in its "original"[8] and "primitive"[9] form—an idea that echoed the statement of Saint Ambrose of Milan, who wrote to Pope Siricius: "Let the Apostles' Creed be believed, which the Roman Church has always guarded and preserved intact."[10]

According to J.N.D. Kelly, the Roman Creed exhibits the structure, phraseology, and content characteristic of the confessions of faith from the early third century, as can be seen from its similarities to the creed contained in the Apostolic Tradition composed by Hippolytus toward the end of the pontificate of Zephyrinus (199–217 AD)[11]. The similarities between these two texts can be explained by their close kinship, converging like members of the same family, and they form the most convincing argument that the origin of the Roman Creed must be sought even earlier, in the second century, when no single formula of faith yet held a monopoly in baptismal practice[12].

The wide use and reception of the Old Roman Creed can be inferred from the numerous *expositiones symboli* based on this text. In the case of Saint Peter Chrysologus's explanations, it is particularly interesting to observe how he combats Arianism without employing the concepts and terminology of Nicaea.

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7 Daniel Benga, "Simbolul Apostolic". In Ştefan Buchiu, Ioan Tulcan (eds.), *Dicţionar de Teologie Ortodoxă* (Basilica, 2019), p. 837.

8 J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Continuum, ³1972), 105.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 106.

10 Ambrose of Milan, *Epistula XLII*.5, *PL* 16:1125: „credatur symbolo Apostolorum quod ecclesia Romana intemeratum semper custodit et servat".

11 Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 17; Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed. Origin, History and Some Early Commentaries* (Brepols, 2002), 65-68.

12 Westra, *The Apostles' Creed*, 66-67. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 119.

2. Saint Peter Chrysologus and the Disproof Against Arianism

Although the peak of Bishop Peter Chrysologus's pastoral activity falls between the Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), it is surprising to find so many references to Arianism in his sermons on the Creed. In fact, out of the eight surviving homilies from the *Expositio Symboli* cycle, six contain explicit references to Arian subordinationism[13].

Sermo	LVII	LVIII	LIX	LX	LXI	LXII
Section	4	3	4	4; 6	6	6; 8

One might suspect this to be a recurring topos in the structure of the Creed's exposition, yet these passages are not isolated. We find references to Arianism in other sermons of Saint Peter Chrysologus as well, as follows:

Sermo	XXIV	LXXXVIII	CIX	CXLV
Section	3	5	4	6; 9

Since the golden age of patristic literature (ca. 313–ca. 450) – to which Peter Chrysologus also belongs – was characterized by authors' tendency to focus on the immediate doctrinal, social, or moral issues faced by their communities, we can conclude that the attention paid to Arianism by the bishop of Ravenna is fully justified by the religious context of that time. This is evident in the way he constructs his arguments.

If we attempt to identify the elements Saint Peter uses to refute subordinationism, we first notice his emphasis on two attributes affirmed in the first article of the Creed: *Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem* ("I believe in God, the Father Almighty").

By attributing to God the quality of "Father," we reach the monotheistic essence of the spiritual reality in which we recognize the One, Living, True God – who is One, but not solitary, since the very attribute of Fatherhood implies that He has a Son. In opposing Arian doctrine, the bishop stresses that this begetting takes place outside of time; otherwise, we would be asserting a process of becoming within the immutable divinity, which is nonsense:

[13] The division of the homilies is reproduced after the critical edition made by the Benedictine scholar Alejandro Olivar in *Sancti Petri Chrysologi Collectio sermonum*, pars I-III, col. *Corpus Christianorumm Series Latina*, XXIV-XXIVB (Brepols, 1975, 1981, 1982).

> "*I believe in God the Father*. (*Credo in Deum Patrem*) The man who names Him Father should already acknowledge the Son. For He who has wished to be called a Father, to be denoted as a Father, is kindly making clear that He has a Son, whom he did not receive at any point of time, or beget in time, or have in His care merely for a time. Divinity does not take a beginning, or admit an end, or any succession; it is incapable of any waning. Not amid any pains does God bring forth His Son; He manifests that because of His powers the Son is existent. He does not make as something outside Himself that Being which is from Himself, but he generates that Being; while the Being is inside Himself, He discloses and reveals the fact. The Son has proceeded from the Father, but not withdrawn from Him. Neither has He come forth from the Father as one destined to succeed the Father, but as one who will remain always in the Father. Hear John's words: 'He was in the beginning with God.' [1John 1:2] And elsewhere John says: 'What was from the beginning.' [1John 1:1] Assuredly, that which already was did not come by addition later on; clearly, that which was did not later take a beginning. 'I am the first, and 1 am the last', He says [Apoc.1:17; Isaiah 44:6]. He who is the first is not after someone else; He who is the last does not leave another behind Him. When He utters those words, He does not exclude the Father, but He concludes that all things are in both Himself and the Father."[14]

What is essential, when contemplating this relationship of divine paternity and filiation, is to accept by faith that the relationship between God the Father and the Son is far beyond our power of understanding, and it would be mistaken to apply to it attributes proper to human existence.

> "*I believe in God the Father Almighty*. (*Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem*) The one who has professed the Father also professes the Son, because without the Son, he cannot be called Father. And because there can be no increase or addition to God, the Son always was, because the Father also always was. The Son cannot have a beginning, be cause the Father cannot have an end; the Begotten does not grow, where the Begetter does not grow old. The substance of the Father and the Son is eternal and coeternal, and that substance must not be judged according to human stages of growth, but according to divine powers."[15]

Indeed, he warns both catechumens and baptized Christians that probing into the nature of the relationship between Father and Son using human paradigms is an improper act of irreverence.

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[14] Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* LVII.4, in *Saint Peter Chrysologus Selected Sermons & Saint Valerian Homilies*, Vol. 1, Translated by George E. Ganss (The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 105-106.

[15] Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* LVIII.3, in *St. Peter Chrysologus Selected Sermons*, Vol. 2, Translated by William b. Palardy (The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 222-223.

> "We believe in God, and we profess that this same God is Father, and so let us believe that he always had a Son: but that he had a Son not begun at conception, not separated from him at birth, not increased in time, not diminished in rank, not changed by age, but an Offspring abiding eternally within the eternal Begetter. 'I am in the Father,' he says, 'and the Father is in me.' [John 14:11] We have heard the Father, let us believe [that he has] a Son by divine power, not by human arrangement; by the mystery of God, not by earthly means; not by the law of the world, but by heavenly might. What it is right to know, it is not right to debate; what it is appropriate to believe, it is inappropriate to subject to an exhaustive analysis; for it is for this reason that we have called the Lord 'Almighty,' inasmuch as we consider nothing to be impossible for God."[16]

Furthermore, the bishop of Ravenna cautions his audience not to pry into the mystery of the Father's existence by imagining hierarchies or ages before and after the begetting of the Son. Saint Peter forcefully refutes the objections raised by the Arian heretics, who speculated on this matter to support their erroneous teachings. Such speculations, he explains, are silenced once we understand that divinity is not subject to human rules or logic—something already implied in the attribute "Almighty."

> The next word is *Father*. The one who believes in the Father, professes that there is a Son. The one who believes in the Father and the Son is not to think of ages, nor to consider ranks, nor to make hypotheses about periods of time, nor to inquire into conception, nor to understand a birth. The one who believes in God has professed divine not human matters. But the heretic says: 'How is he a Father if he does not precede? How is he a Son if he is not subsequent? How does the Begetter not provide a beginning? How does the Begotten not take his beginning from the Begetter? This is what reason teaches, this is what nature manifests.' You are wrong, O heretic! This is what human reason holds, but it is not what divine reason holds. This is what worldly nature proposes, this is not what the divine nature disposes. Human frailty is conceived and conceives, it is produced and produces, it is begotten and begets, it has a beginning and transmits death, it receives and it gives back, and preserves in its offspring whatever pertains to its own condition and nature. God the Father, however, did not beget in time, because he does not know time; he who knows no beginning did not give a beginning; he did not transmit an end because he has no end; but he generated the Son from himself in such a way that everything that was in him was and remained in the Son. The honor of the Begotten is an honor for the Begetter; the perfection of the Begotten is the image of the Begetter; any diminution of the Begotten brings dishonor on the Begetter. But when you hear these things, O heretic, do not say: 'How do these things happen?' You have said,

[16] Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* LIX.4, vol. 2 (2004), 226.

> *God*, you have believed in the Father, you have professed that he is Almighty. If you doubt, you have lied. If you say, *I believe*, how is it that you do not believe but you raise objections? If you think such things are impossible, then you have removed the omnipotence that you professed. But let us, who profess that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have one majesty and glory, now speak about our faith concerning the Lord's Body."[17]

"Omnipotence," as a property of divinity, should suffice to end all rational inquiry, opening instead the window of faith to the mind. At the same time, the bishop warns the catechumens – and not only them – that investigating God's relationship with His Son, or questioning the Father's existence prior to the Son's appearance, is futile so long as we believe that God is Almighty, having the power to exist and act in ways beyond human comprehension.

> "*I believe in God the Father*. There is devotion in God, there is always affection in God, Fatherhood abides permanently with him. So believe that there was always a Son, lest you blaspheme that there was not always a Father. But you say: 'If he begot, how did he always have [the Son]? If he always had him, how did he beget him?' You who ask such questions deny the faith that you profess. *I believe*, is what you said: if you believe, where does that 'how' come from? 'How' is the word of one who doubts, not of one who believes. *I believe*, you said, *in God the Father Almighty*. If there is something he cannot do, he is not almighty. But you suppose that he begot his Son from something else, since you profess that he made everything from nothing; it certainly would have been from something else, if it had been a temporal action. But if the Father is not subject to time, the Son knows no beginning. But what a travesty it is that you make him temporal who has seen fit to make you eternal. Therefore, the Father begets the Son for us, not by a conception within time, nor by fleshly passion, but insofar as he reveals it."[18]

By emphasizing the reality of the Savior's passion and death, the bishop shows that His death was not merely apparent, nor was His endurance of it a sign of weakness. On the contrary: fear of death belongs to human nature, whereas resurrection is the expression of the Son's full divine power.

> "Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried. (Qui sub Pontio Pilato crucifixus est et sepultus) You hear the name of the judge, that you may not be ignorant of the date. You hear that He was crucified, that you may learn what kind of death He suffered, and what He paid for your sake. It was for you that He took upon Himself all the pain of such a death. You hear that He was buried, that you may

[17] Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* LX.4, vol. 2 (2004), 232-233.
[18] Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* LXII.6, vol. 2 (2004), 242.

> know that His death was a true one, and not one unworthy to be taken seriously. To be reluctant to die is typical of human fear; to have arisen from death is a mark of divine power. So, do not be shocked at hearing of His death; in this case the glory of His resurrection blots out the harm done by death."[19]

In defending the consubstantiality of the divine persons, the bishop of Ravenna addresses quite sharply those who still dare to pry into this mystery.

> "Whether it is Christ's human generation, or whether it is his divine one, both generations are indescribable, so what surge of water, O man, what tidal wave has brought you to such a shipwreck? What wind has propelled you to fly through the air to your ruin? The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one deity, one power, one eternity, one majesty. But whatever inferiority the Son has, whatever he receives, whatever he does not know, comes from my body, not from his substance. Or are you surprised, O man, that he invokes his Father in heaven while deeming it fitting to have a mother on earth?"[20]

At times, Saint Peter's homilies include overtly polemical passages in which he directly confronts the Arians who denied the fullness of the Son's divinity and His consubstantiality with the Father.

> "'And many of the children of Israel he shall bring back.' [Luke 1:16] To whom? Let the angel tell, that the heretic6 may be silenced in his blasphemies and denials. Let the angel tell, that the faithful soul may hear and rejoice. Let the heretic believe and return. 'He shall bring back.' To whom? 'To the Lord their God,' the text says. Who is this God? He is the One of whom the Prophet states: 'This is our God, and there is no other apart from him. He found out all the way of knowledge and gave it to Jacob his servant, and to Israel his beloved.'[Bar 3:36-37] When did He give it? Then, indeed, when he wrote on the tablets of the Law a rule for the whole of life and a norm of disciplinary control. Be attentive, my hearer, that you may know who this our God is, apart from whom there is no other. Who is He? 'Afterwards He was seen upon earth and conversed with men.' [Bar 3:38] Who else was seen upon earth save Christ, who conversed in our flesh? And who else conversed with men, save He who tarried with men in His human body? And if He is since you will not have Him, whom will you have? 'There is no other,' Scripture says, 'apart from Him.' [Bar 3:36] And now do you not say: 'Where, therefore, is the Father?' The Prophet says: 'There is no other apart from Him.' [Bar 3:36] And where is He [the Father]? Assuredly, in the Son, because the Father is not apart from the Son. 'I am in the Father,' He says, 'and the Father is in me.' [John 14:10] Wherefore, too, the Prophet did not say: 'There is no other'; what he said was: 'There is no other apart from Him.' This is to

[19] Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* LXI.6, vol. 1 (1953), 113-114.
[20] Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* LXII.8, vol. 2 (2004), 243.

> say: There is Another, but He is in Him. But you object: 'And if He is in Him, how is He Another?' O heretic, He is Another in regard to His Person, in such a way that He Himself is the substance; and He Himself is the substance in such a way that the Trinity is not something put together. There is a unity of the Trinity in such a way that there is no separation in the Godhead. The Father is in Himself in such a way (and without Him the Trinity is not complete) that a distinct personality is in the Father and one in the Son and one in the Holy Spirit, but not a separate divinity"[21].

Moreover, Peter Chrysologus highlights the fact that the initiators of subordinationist heresies believed themselves to be defenders of a monotheistic purity when they emphasized the monarchy of the Father and the uniqueness of God, yet in doing so they only diminished His omnipotence.

> "Arius thinks that he does a service to the Father by blaspheming the Son. And while he is attributing a beginning to the Son, the pitiful man is putting a limit upon the Father. Photinus, while denying that the Son is co-eternal with the Father, is elaborately explaining how the Father was not always existent precisely as Father. So it is with all the heresies. While they are spread to the insult of God, and lie about the Trinity through their terms, they further blasphemies."[22]

Conclusions

The conciliar event of Nicaea in 325 is certainly of great importance, and over time it has often been credited with achieving a decisive and final victory over Arian subordinationism. Nevertheless, the series of subsequent councils in the East (Constantinople and Antioch – 330 AD; Tyre and Jerusalem – 335 AD; Ancyra – 358 AD) and in Illyricum (Sardica – 343 AD; Sirmium – 348, 351, 357, 358 AD) revealed both the fragility of the doctrinal consensus reached by the Nicene fathers and the weak reception of the decisions formulated at the First Ecumenical Council. The authority we now ascribe to that council is rather a projection into the past of an attitude that developed later — especially beginning in the sixth century, during of John II Cappadox (518–520), patriarch of Constantinople, who in 518 was compelled by the faithful to enforce the doctrinal authority of the Council of Chalcedon together with that of the previous Ecumenical Councils[23].

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21 Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* LXXXVIII.5, vol. 1 (1953), 141-142.

22 Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* CIX.4, vol. 1 (1953), 174.

23 W.M. Sinclair, "Joannes Cappadox, bishop of Constantinople". In Henry Wace & William C. Piercy (eds.), *Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century* (John Murray, 1911), 558-559.

A witness to this gradual consolidation of the authority of the Council of Nicaea, in the form we know it today, is Saint Peter Chrysologus. In his homilies delivered before the Christians of Ravenna, he draws attention to the Arian teachings which, even a hundred years after the condemnation of Arius, continued to spread and deeply divide the Church. The homiletic pragmatism of the period reveals a pressing need to combat Arianism—this was not merely a rhetorical topos inserted into the *expositio symboli*, especially considering that the Creed he expounded was the Old Roman Creed, which lacks the explicit anti-Arian clarifications found in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. This detail also reflects how limited the impact of the Constantinopolitan formula of faith still was in the liturgical life of the Universal Church.

Therefore, in the first half of the fifth century, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was far from being the doctrinal standard it has since become—whose universal acceptance we tend to project back into earlier centuries.

In his polemic against Arianism, Saint Peter Chrysologus appeals to elementary logic, affirming that the attributes "Father" and "Almighty" are sufficient to believe that God has, from eternity, possessed the quality of Fatherhood in relation to the coeternal Son. Omnipotence itself reveals the mysterious and miraculous way of this birth which to us, as finite creatures, is incomprehensible through reason, but at the same time is within our reach through faith which does not unnecessarily scrutinize and does not apply human paradigms to intratrinitarian relations.

From this perspective, the position of Bishop Peter of Ravenna remains profoundly relevant today, perfectly illustrating the balance between rational understanding and reverent wonder before the divine mystery—two dimensions that together nourish the faith of every Christian.

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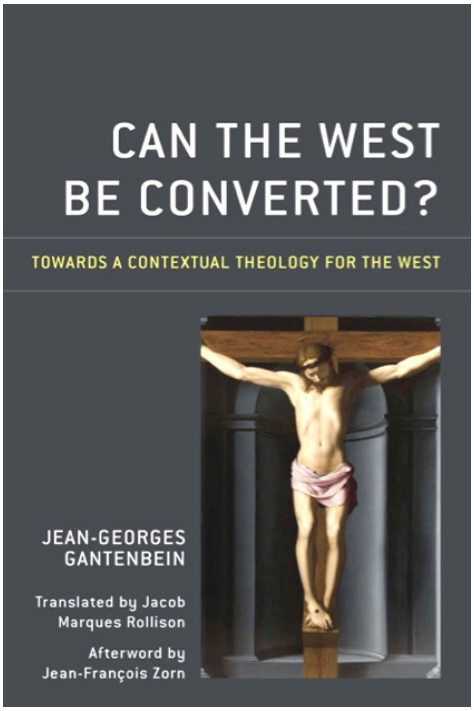
Book Review:

Jean-Georges Gantenbein, *Can the West Be Converted? Towards a Contextual Theology for the West* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 387 pp.

Reviewed by Fr. Prof. Dr. Cristian SONEA*



Jean-Georges Gantenbein's *Can the West Be Converted?* is one of the most thoughtful contributions to Western missiology in recent years. In it, the author advocates for a contextualised missionary theology that responds to the challenges faced by post-Christian Europe. Combining rigorous sociological analysis, interdisciplinary methodological reflection, and a theologically grounded proposal centred on the Cross and eschatology, this book addresses the theological academy and ecclesial communities with urgency and clarity.

It opens with an epistemological introduction that explores the fragmentation of theological discourse in Western academia and the marginalisation of mission within theological curricula. Drawing on the insights of David Bosch and Lesslie Newbigin, Gantenbein argues

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that any renewal of Western missiology requires methodological revision and theological reorientation.

The core of the book presents a comparative analysis of four European contexts: France, the United Kingdom, Romania, and Eastern Germany. These case studies illustrate the various interconnected manifestations of religious decline and transformation. France is presented as an example of institutional secularism, characterised by the exclusion of religious expression from the public domain and the emergence of alternative spiritualities. The United Kingdom is presented as a pluralistic post-Protestant society where "believing without belonging" is the prevailing trend. Eastern Germany is presented as a post-atheist society that is still shaped by the legacy of enforced secularism under communism. Romania is presented as a more complex and ambivalent case, combining high levels of declared religiosity with emerging religious pluralism, an undefined public theology, and signs of increasing individualisation of faith.

This analysis provides a foundation for the book's central theological contribution: a proposal for a missionary theology that is rooted in the Cross and shaped by eschatological hope. Gantenbein proposes a series of theological criteria to guide Western missiology. These include the reaffirmation of theology's missionary character, the incorporation of lay voices in theological discourse, the existential reinterpretation of soteriology, and the transition from apologetic strategies to a witness grounded in humility, presence, and hospitality.

Perhaps the most compelling chapter is the one dedicated to the theology of the Cross as the foundation for a credible mission in contemporary Europe. Gantenbein proposes that, in a continent characterised by historical trauma—including nazism, communism, colonialism, and ecological crisis—the Church is no longer able to articulate a discourse of moral authority; rather, it is compelled to speak from a position of solidarity with human suffering. The mission of the Church, therefore, is not to restore Christendom, but to embody a cruciform, humble, and hopeful presence.

The book concludes without proposing simplistic solutions or prescriptive strategies. Instead, it calls for a *metanoia* of ecclesial identity and theological method. The invitation offered is not of an ideological nature, but rather eschatological in essence: to rediscover the Church not as a dominant cultural force, but as a sacrament of the Kingdom, attentive to the silence of God and the wounds of the world.

While the book addresses the Western context with depth and nuance, its approach could be enriched by a more detailed engagement with the Eastern European experience, particularly as these societies are now part of a shared European spiritual landscape. In the context of Romania, for instance, the subject is perceptively treated as complex and ambivalent. Gantenbein highlights Iuliana

Conovici's thesis on a paradoxical trajectory: following the fall of communism, the Orthodox Church reclaims public visibility and national symbolism, yet may also unwittingly advance secularisation by shifting its focus from transcendence to sociopolitical concerns. Conovici's argument, drawing on Olivier Clément, is that nationalism constitutes a form of secularisation in Orthodox countries. This is contrasted with Olivier Gillet's view that the Byzantine model of a harmonious relationship between Church and state can act as a safeguard against secularisation. (p. 79) In his conclusion, Gantenbein rightly acknowledges the ambivalence of Romania's "religious restoration," emphasising the tension between statistical religiosity and genuine belief, and recognising that the Church's public presence may either inhibit or accelerate secularisation.

This nuanced account is valuable and insightful. Nevertheless, the richness of the Romanian case — and, more broadly, the wider Eastern Christian experience — could have benefited from further development, particularly in dialogue with Orthodox theological and liturgical traditions. The spiritual resources of Eastern Christianity, which are rooted in communal memory, martyrial witness, and sacramental life, might offer important perspectives for a truly pan-European missiological vision.

Can the West Be Converted? succeeds in offering not merely a diagnosis of decline, but a framework for renewal. It is a courageous, theologically grounded, and pastorally sensitive book that will be of great value to theologians, missiologists, church leaders, and all those engaged in reflecting on the future of Christian witness in Europe.