

HISTORICAL SENSE AND TRANSCENDENCE IN ANDRÉ SCRIMA'S WRITINGS

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Abstract: The paper discusses an important aspect of André Scrima's writings: the way he uses history from the perspective of the theory of revelation. The paper presents some examples (communism, the situation of Jerusalem seen from the perspective of the conflicts in the Middle East), then analyses the main lines of the interpretive methods used by Scrima in describing and understanding these. The historical sense which observes in time, and through transient institutions, the forms of manifestation of transcendence works from this perspective as a critical and hermeneutic agenda related to events and historical figures.

Keywords: Scrima, transcendence, history, sign

Introduction

The paper proposes a series of reflections about a problem that lies behind several writings of André Scrima: how the "historical sense" is constituted from the perspective of Eastern Christian tradition. In the first stage, I shall try to interpret the way this "sense" is formulated based on Father Scrima's "method" of interpretation, referring to the scenario of "spectral hermeneutics" that he developed while commenting the testamentary letter of the Russian confessor Ivan Kulâgin (Ivan the Stranger) addressed to the members of the Burning Bush group. In the second stage I shall exemplify this method starting from some of the turning points of the 20th century: the Second Vatican Council, or the communist invasion in Eastern

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Europe. In the third stage I shall offer a synthesis of Scrima's ideas about a possible "theology of history" not as a theoretical construct but a way to inhabit the world.

Some biographical data about the figure in the centre of this paper may help to shape the context of the discussion. André Scrima (Gheorgheni, 1925 – Bucharest, 2000) is a special character of 20th century culture. He studied mathematics, physics, philosophy and theology at Bucharest. In the 1940s he belonged to the group of intellectuals, monks and artists who organised regular meetings at the Antim Monastery and called themselves the Burning Bush. There, he had a "destinal" encounter for his entire later life: he met a Russian monk in exile in Romania because of the war, Ivan the Stranger, a carrier of the tradition of the prayer of the heart, which he was "teaching" to the members of the group. He saw the young philosophy student and exclaimed: "Who is this young man? – I feel he needs me!". Andrei Pleșu, who mentioned this episode, noted that "The young man received thus the sign of a spiritual engagement with no return."¹ This spiritual engagement began with his taking up the monastic life, starting his studies in theology (and completed with a thesis on *apophatic anthropology* under the supervision of Dumitru Stăniloae), and continued to the end of his life in an unflinching ascension. The second encounter happened in the 1950s, when, as a librarian of the Romanian Patriarchate and translator of Patriarch Iustinian, he met Mohammad Habib, rector of a university from India. Impressed by the young monk's knowledge of Sanskrit, he proposed him a scholarship to study in India. He could leave one year later with the permission of India's president, Radhakrishnan. In 1956, Father Scrima left for the East, but stopped at the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, then Paris, Athens and Beirut, where he met the great theologians of his time, Christophe Dumond, Marie-Dominique Chenu and Vladimir Lossky. He went to India, and returned to Europe two years later, in 1959. At Constantinople, he had another providential meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, of Aromanian origin, an eager supporter of the approaching of Orthodox Churches to the Church of Rome. This encounter resulted in two significant instances for the life of Father Scrima: the Patriarch appointed him personal representative at the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, which was crucial in the history of the Catholic Church in that it proved a decisive opening towards the Eastern churches and a profound re-evaluation of the relationship of the Church with the

¹ There are several bibliographic references to André Scrima. In Romanian: Andrei Pleșu's *Preface* in André Scrima, *Timpul Rugului Aprins. Maestrul spiritual în tradiția răsăriteană* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2000), or Vlad Alexandrescu's and Radu Bercea's contributions in the book *O gândire fără țărături*, Anca Manolescu (ed.), (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2005). In other languages: Daniela Dumbravă, "Rivelazione e religioni secondo Andrei Scrima," in *La Storia delle religioni e la sfida dei pluralismi. Atti del Convegno della Società Italiana di Storia delle Religioni - Roma, Sapienza, 8-9 aprile 2016*, Sergio Botta, Marianna Ferrara, Alessandro Saggioro (eds.) (Roma: Morcelliana, 2017), 568-580; Dumbravă, "Theology and History of Religions in the Middle East. A Brief Account: Fr. André Scrima, spiritual and peace mediator in Libanon (1970-1980)," in *Religion in the History of European Culture: Proceedings of the 9th EASR Annual Conference and IAHR special Conference, 14-17 September 2009, Messina (Italy)*, Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, Augusto Cosentino, Mariangela Monaca, eds. (Palermo: Officina di Studi Medievali, 2013), 597-610; Paul Ladouceur, "La sainte Roumanie" in *Lumière du Thabor* 27 (2006).

secular world. Many of Scrima's writings, contributions and conferences were to be dedicated to this event. The second result was that, also with the blessing of the Patriarch, and on the invitation of the group of Orthodox young men from the Lebanese movement *Mouvement de Jeunesse Orthodoxe*, he became the spiritual father of the Saint George Monastery of Deir el Harf, 30 kms from Beirut. Here he wrote the rules of the monastery, held conferences about monasticism and the tradition of the prayer of the heart, received from Father Ivan the Stranger. At the same time, he was a professor at the Saint Joseph Jesuit University of Beirut, where he co-founded the Centre for Islamic-Christian Studies and held lectures on faith, spiritual experience and gnosticism. He travelled a lot to Paris, Huston (where he was a scientific consultant of De Menil Foundation and organized the conference with the Dalai Lama in 1979), Bruxelles (as vice-president, then member of the International Academy for Religious Sciences), Rome (invited to the prestigious Castelli Colloquia). In the 1990s he returned to Bucharest and took part regularly at the meetings of the New Europe College, held conferences and wrote intensively, editing among others also the text which reiterated the initial moment of his itinerary: *The Time of the Burning Bush*.

This short biography may be a starting point for understanding Scrima's way of relating to historical facts in general. He reads every crucial moment of his life as the chance of a providential encounter. When nothing foretells such a thing (like in 1950s' Romania or at his return from India with no precise direction), the miracle happens; and the effect of this miracle is the beginning of an ascending journey. In a horizontal historical time, the miracle of such an encounter marks a rupture where the sign of an attracting transcendence shines through. The improbable, the accidental, the unexpected are, for Father Scrima, signs of divine election, of a direct intervention which summons to itself, dislocating the world's unilateral nature. In time, this tension receives hermeneutical values.

A method: stellar spectroscopy

Even as a youngster, in the 1940s, André Scrima showed great interest in physics, and he published two articles in the newspaper *Ziarul științelor și al călătoriilor* (Newspaper for sciences and travel): one about the electron microscope and one on the effects of electricity. Later, as a student, he studied microphysics and cosmology, as betrayed by his manuscripts. So, understandably, in his commentary to the testamentary letter of Father Ivan the Stranger, he chose an analogy from the field of physics: "I would choose for this type of reflective research an analogy with stellar spectroscopy – that specific method of astrophysics based on the observation that the analysis of light reveals the meaning of the structure and the reality of the most distant stars and galaxies otherwise inaccessible to us. Traces, almost imperceptible, yet relevant fine structures. It took time until we realised that each trait of the spectre reveals a particular element, a state of the elements (temperature, for instance), which is in fact an

identity, a presence in its concrete components.”² In other words, meaning does not come from a frontal approach; it is not an “object” to be known, but a subtle, discrete presence which implies an infinite horizon insinuated in the texture of things and their dynamic mode of being.

Horia-Roman Patapievică identifies³ a series of presuppositions of this spectroscopic method in analogy with the physical phenomenon it comes from: on the one hand, the presupposition of the ontological uniformity of the uttered words with the Word that leaves its traces in them. There is no separation of the worlds, but a secret affinity without immixture, in which transcendence inhabits, constantly and invisibly, every corner of the Earth. On the one hand, this “connection with transcendence” has a privileged “headquarters”: “it is founded on our quality as keepers of the fundamental words / of the Word.”⁴ In other words – and this is one of Scrima’s main theses – *words are methodologies*, roads of access to the horizon which keeps them all together. To conclude, the divine is a paradoxical kind of presence: something invisible of which you cannot take your eyes off, a constant murmur impossible to localise, an almightiness that hides in details and nuances. On the other hand, the things of the world are in a permanent unease, inhabited by a mute strangeness that dislocates them, makes them move, send them beyond themselves, to their unworldly source. From there comes Patapievică’s conclusion: “the fundamental word is only that which is a method as well, a word that allows you to travel with it towards its own original source.”⁵

The orientation in such a semiosis of transcendence is the result of a fundamental gesture: the access to the space (the place) that the text creates in its own world, where meanings are created. The text does not speak *about* something, but *it is* itself the result, the trace, the persistence of that something. In order to understand it, one must follow it, linger with it, run forward with it, or return to the starting point in the rhythm and divergences imposed by the words. But the open “place” is a space that allows these senses and intensities to unfold. After interpretation, neither the text nor the interpreter remain in their initial situation. They are both absorbed into a common itinerary, revealing their possibilities by mirroring the transcendent horizon that surrounds and overflows on them.

History: a web of signs

The 1980 text entitled *Jerusalem: reflections on a unique and universal castle for monotheistic traditions*⁶ can be regarded as the preamble to the theology of history for André Scrima. The

² Scrima, *Timpul rugului aprins*, 23.

³ Patapievică, “Asupra unui aspect a ceea ce Părintele Scrima ne-a lăsat ca moștenire: despre stilul discursului său și despre metoda sa de cunoaștere,” in *O gândire fără țărături*, Manolescu (ed.), 25-34.

⁴ Patapievică, “Asupra unui aspect a ceea ce Părintele Scrima ne-a lăsat ca moștenire,” 28.

⁵ Patapievică, “Asupra unui aspect a ceea ce Părintele Scrima ne-a lăsat ca moștenire,” 30-31.

⁶ Scrima, “Ierusalim: reflecții asupra unei cetăți unice și universale pentru tradițiile monoteiste,” în Scrima, *Teme ecumenice*, (București: Humanitas, 2004), 29-73.

subject of the insertion of the absolute in the web of the world is revisited at a different level and acquires a strong political meaning. For this reason the article, which appeared in the journal *Concilium*, was not signed, and the editors mentioned that the author, an Orthodox monk, chose to keep his anonymity. The archive of the New Europe College from Bucharest preserves notes and analyses of Father Scrima proving that he opposed the western “reading” of the political situation of Jerusalem. His main thesis is: biblical interpretation cannot support any one solution regarding the status of the city. The meaning of Jerusalem lies not only in history, as it is also not placed exclusively in a trans-historical horizon. Moreover, the attempt of religions to claim their secular rule over it using the arguments of spiritual tradition is “an alibi, hardly disguised, of a too obviously humanly project to take possession over its territory – in front of which we can only deplore this appetite for eternity diverted into tireless worldly disputes.”⁷

Jerusalem is actually an eschatological place: it is, in all Abrahamic religions, the place where revelation occurs, the centre of historical being and a direction, a meaning of Messianic expectation. As a result, it is an “intersign” – Father Scrima claims. Its function is critical, not foundational: any pretension to establish or assume a substantial identity is cancelled by the founding event of the city, of “the dawn of Jerusalem”: this is Salem, and its king, Melchizedek, is a true trace of transcendence in the biblical history. Father Scrima stops at Genesis 14,18–20, where Abraham receives the blessing of Melchizedek and explains it as the insertion of transcendence, of the vertical orientation within the horizontal axis of history, in the “settling” of the Hebrews in the promised land. Moreover, returning mysteriously in the Letter to the Hebrews, the king of Salem closes an arch of revelation, projecting its significance to the enlightened expectation of the Son who redeems history by his sacrifice. Madeea Axinciuc synthesises the double significance of Jerusalem which Scrima also discusses in his text: “We understand therefore that Melchizedek personifies the eternal priesthood by way of which the Messiah will come, before and beyond the institution of priesthood ordained by Levitical descent, on Aaron’s line. This is the witnessing of a high and edificatory significance of the meaning of Jerusalem. The place of peace, as harmony between the sky and the earth, is nothing else than the place of the divine presence. The Great Priest represents this presence through mysterious mediation. He unites the sky and the earth. Melchizedek speaks about the eternal Jerusalem beyond time, immortal, guaranteeing our connection with heavens. This Jerusalem descends to us in the temporary, mortal instantiations of the worldly Jerusalem, and it is expected to return, from another time and forever, in a Messianic perspective.”⁸

The tension between the “heavenly Jerusalem”, established in the mysterious horizon of the revelation, and the “worldly Jerusalem” conceived as a historic promise crosses the centuries. Father Scrima sketched the forms of this tension, interpreting the permanent conflict of the city as a sign as its unsettling and continuing lack of identity with itself. The Temple, the Mosque and the Holy Sepulchre stand together not as vestiges of different

⁷ Scrima, “Ierusalim,” 30.

⁸ Madeea Axinciuc, “Melchisedec și Noul Ierusalim,” *Dilema veche*, 3-9 August 2017.

religions all of which claim their primacy, but as signs in the texture of the history of transcendence which, from time to time, dislocates the time and the political projects of ruling over it. Father Scrima concludes that the destiny of the city is in fact the revelation of the horizon of transcendence under the unseen, impossible-to-represent form of the Spirit, which is not closed into any one confession, but traverses all religions in different forms. It is the one that ensures the fundamental gesture of the creation of the earthly Jerusalem, as a sign and receiver of the heavenly presence; the hospitality that André Scrima considers to be a fundamental dimension of the spiritual experience: “A city closed or open? A citadele hospitable or inhospitable? The entire Abrahamic tradition clearly betrays that the answer is how the Jerusalem that will arrive will be received within the walls of the terrestrial city.”⁹

“Intersign”, a sign of the interval between the sky and earth and also of a spiritual presence delivered only as a journey, a mobility, Jerusalem is a place of history par excellence, of meeting with the limits that are constitutive of it: the horizon of transcendent freedom. In this sense, Father Scrima has a revelatory story:¹⁰ conquering Jerusalem, Caliph Omar rides into the castle on a camel, in shabby clothes – he is not an emperor, but a pilgrim. Patriarch Sophronius invites him to pray to his God in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Omar refuses, saying: if I prayed in your church, you would lose it, for the Muslims would take it away from you, saying: this is where Omar had prayed. As he often does, Father Scrima rejoices over the beauty of the hermeneutic gesture: both Sophronius and Omar see history as an interval and an opportunity to read the traces of transcendence. They are seduced not by the events as such (a victory is not just a victory, a loss is not equal to annihilation), but by their meaning, the presence of the unworldly breeze. And they also know that idolatry is the worst answer to the freedom of the Spirit that shrouds everything.

The historical sense is thus identical to delicateness, to the attention to details that hide treasures, to an ironic attitude to any kind of necessities and causality, and to the “influences” that people seriously think the things of the world and especially their own actions exert.

Examples

The first example I shall make reference to is the problem of communism. Soon after he left the country in 1956, at Bossey, Father Scrima wrote in French his *Simple reflections on communism*.¹¹ To describe communism, even from the beginning of these pages, means to recognise the fact that “the most trivial empirical reality suddenly becomes loaded with metaphysical meaning.”¹² For Father Scrima, it is not simply a political regime, but a revealing

⁹ Scrima, “Ierusalim,” 55.

¹⁰ Scrima, “Ierusalim,” 63.

¹¹ Scrima, “Simple reflecții despre comunism,” in Scrima, *Ortodoxia și încercarea comunismului* (București: Humanitas, 2008), 155-198.

¹² Scrima, “Simple reflecții despre comunism,” 155-156.

moment of the immanence of the Apocalypse in history, a concrete proof of the end that crosses every moment. It is, as the text tells us, not the “lyrical” communism of Russia, which bursts into a revolution of crucial dimensions, but the “mature” communism imposed on the countries of Eastern Europe in the 1940s–1950s. This latter kind, dramatically penetrating the texture of society, is the one that truly represents a hermeneutical problem. The former, in its radical strangeness and violence, opens up a space for unseen rhythms and mechanisms and their subtle persistence: “it is confusing, baffling, complicated, and, even so, structured by a unitary *spirit* which inhabits, or rather haunts it.”¹³

This spirit is essentially anti-Christian, not in a banal, oppositional, but in an internal and destructuring way. Just like with the West, which it imitates in a sterile manner, communism simply mimics Christianity as well, placing a man deprived of ontological substance in place of the infinite God who lives in the secret interior of the world. In an almost Dostoevskyan language, Father Scrima describes the agents of this evil that, beyond the concrete annihilation of man, aim at the dislocation of his soul (like in the case of the Pitesti phenomenon) and the suppression of his essential freedom. Moreover, the devilish inversion of the love of one’s fellow in the absence of the love of God is also a daily experience of communism. Consequently, the history of the “spirit” that haunts Europe is for Father Scrima a sign of an “inverted” transcendence, of the occultation of the horizon of spirit. The answer to this could be to embrace man’s liturgical existence and recover its apophatic centre. Sterility (as a sign of limit, of the rupture of the vital connection to the Spirit) is opposed to the rebirth of the life of the Spirit and the restoration of the ascending vector of existence.

Along with transcendence, history is also distorted in communism, Father Scrima claims: “communism refuses and at the same time denies the interiority of man as an active support of history and eternity as his ultimate target. All his attention, power and effort are pointed towards conquest, that is, the recreation of history, since that is what decides, in his view, both the ontological state of the human being and the achievement of eternity, which, for him, means an indefinite lingering in time”.¹⁴ Communism substitutes a theology of history in order to illegitimately take over its mechanisms and send them towards an opaque immanence. It gives an apparent sense of time, but understands it as a self-reproduction of its own substance; it mimes the quality of “a pole of history”, but in terms which are foreign to the space in which this idea was born, the European one; it speaks about a “progress” which however lacks freedom and is thus reduced to a simple accumulation and reproduction of ideas which are foreign to it.

The way André Scrima speaks about communism as a deviation of the relation between history and transcendence is significant for his “method” of interpretation. Another moment seen as the re-establishment of this relation was the Second Vatican Council. The exaltation of Father Scrima about this event is felt in each line he writes on it: again, he does not regard it as a fact in itself, but as a modulation of a certain relation between transcendence

¹³ Scrima, “Simple reflecții despre comunism,” 157.

¹⁴ Ibid., 165.

and time. First of all, its meaning cannot be restricted to certain decisions (like the initiative of Pope John XXIII). Several signs (increased tolerance, the tendency of the West to rediscover the East, the appearance of providential people like Patriarch Athenagoras) subtly reveal the great encounter of traditions in 1960s' Rome. These signs are in fact insertions of the horizon of the Spirit in the opaque texture of time; they make visible the apparently accidental *kairos* of the encounter of the two Christianities, they outline it and convey its special *colour*. In effect, they mark the nodal points of a "dialectic" which unfolds beyond history: "the dialectic of ecumenical synods. Their profound unity which supports an exterior historical evolution identifies itself with the acceptance and formulation of the mystery of Incarnation (...) It could be said that the first Roman-Catholic Council is the Vatican Council, as it consecrates the characteristic passage of the West from the canonical to the dogmatic (the *catholic* sense of dogma is returned precisely through repositioning in the context of the College of Bishops, that is, in ecclesiastical spirituality)."¹⁵ The mystery of Incarnation, which is pneumatologically fulfilled and sealed, is rhythmically revealed in the temporal distribution of councils (synods), indicating in fact the meaning of the understanding of biblical revelation. Hence comes Father Scrima's important idea that the unity of Christianity is not accomplished, but discovered. History does not proceed in a void of novelty, but constantly returns reflectively to the spiritual horizon that surrounds it and mobilises its meaning. In a vaguely Hegelian understanding, historical "evolution" is a passage from the "not yet" to the "always already" of the spirit. Consequently, the Vatican II event in Father Scrima's interpretation is not a product of historical causality, nor is it simplistically regarded as an effect of the arbitrary "decisions" of transcendence. Rather, the "historical sense" at play in the understanding of the meaning of the Council lies in the education of the gaze to see the transparency of certain facts, their sign-like character.

It is, in this sense, a hermeneutical council¹⁶ which teaches the rereading of the tradition of the Church and the "signs of the times", opening thus a gap in the opacity of events – which Father Scrima names "the imaginary of the council". The imaginary is seen here not as a phantasm or an image, but as a space of play which surrounds a reality and relativises its limits, placing it into a perspective which unveils its virtues and meanings. For instance, Father Scrima says, Vatican II introduces a specific temporal perception, that of the "longue durée" (long duration), into the understanding of the life of the Church. It reiterates the idea of apostolic mission inherent to the notion of "conciliarity" in order to find the original plenitude of original Christianity, which persists discretely beyond the ruptures and divisions which occupy and define the historical succession of events.

The history of the Second Vatican Council is in fact identified with its transcendent meaning. It describes the way this transcendence is re-embraced in time, seen as its meaning

¹⁵ Scrima, "Jurnal de conciliu," in Scrima, *Duhul Sfânt și unitatea Bisericii. Jurnal de conciliu* (Bucharest: Anastasia, 2004), 227.

¹⁶ Manuscript note ND 409 from the file "Ecumenism, Conciliu Vatican II" in the André Scrima Archive of the André Scrima Fonds of New Europe College, Institute for Advanced Studies, Bucharest.

and “pole axis”. The ecclesiastical plenitude transparent in concrete institutional structures and articulations is the stake of the practice of historical sense, as Father Scrima understands it throughout many of his pages.

Conclusions: historical sense as a function of criticism

In his lecture held at Beirut in 1980 on the “critical function of faith”, Father Scrima says: “I will quote the definition of a contemporary French author who said: faith is work, beliefs are the capital. Very well said. Faith is work, or in other words, there is activity, life in it. Beliefs are like deposits, products, derivatives, possibly behavioural, which derive from living faith.”¹⁷ By analogy with this distinction, the same can be said about the historical sense, briefly discussed above: the historical sense is the work by which the meanings of history are deposited, understood and transformed into knowledge. It has the function of making visible the signs of transcendence in the world. It is a reading of the surface of events, which open up to the horizon of the Spirit by their significant details and nuances. The establishment of communism in Eastern Europe in irreducible tension with Orthodoxy, or the Second Vatican Council at the crossroad of divergent evolutions of the two – Eastern and Western – Christianities is only possible if the two events are regarded not merely in themselves, but as forms of encounter between the axis of transcendence and the horizontal axis of history.¹⁸ Only this way, in parallel with the phenomenon of faith, is it possible to look at them with a critical eye (meaning with “discernment, judgment”), to place them on a certain sense of time and understand their relationship. Acting as a “judgment” of time, the historical sense poses thus a twofold, so-to-say topological problem: that of the absolute meaning of the phenomenon from the perspective of the transcendent centre of the world; and that of the relative meaning of the phenomenon, in relation with other similar phenomena: “on the other hand, the world itself endures a critical situation. It is first of all questioned by its own becoming, by its own crises, its own inadequacies. But it is also questioned in the name of a different truth which, from inside the world, pretends to represent the absolute, unprecedented, lofty truth of man, namely that man cannot be reduced to the world.”¹⁹

A kind of symbolic thinking sensitive to the mysterious relations between the things and the discrete crossing of levels of reality, the historical sense opposes the ideology of history, a “cultural product” of the 19th century. The latter falsifies reality in a reductionist way: history is everything, and the fundamental stakes of man are played within it. On the contrary, the historical sense dislocates this totality: the event is historical only inasmuch as it is interpretable from the perspective of the spiritual horizon that surrounds it. Otherwise it is

¹⁷ Scrima, *Funcția critică a credinței* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011), 39.

¹⁸ I discussed these aspects in Ioan Alexandru Tofan, *Omul lăuntric. André Scrima și fizionomia experienței spirituale*, forthcoming at Humanitas Publishing, Bucharest. See the Introduction.

¹⁹ Scrima, *Funcția critică a credinței*, 172.

simply a mechanic, repetitive occurrence, a petrified nature. The ascending direction, the dynamism (the “itinerary”, to use a term loved by Father Scrima) are signs of authentic life which gives significance, colour and meaning to the world. The historical sense, in its critical function, is at the same time a restoring gesture: of the clarity of transcendence mirrored in things, and of the earthly in the generosity and spontaneity of the forms that it represents.

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