

# Sacred Art

## Between Tradition and Personal Expression: The Orthodox Icon and Artistical Transgressions of the Canon

ANDREEA STOICESCU 

*University of Bucharest &  
National University of Music of Bucharest, Romania  
E-mail: andreea.c.stoicescu@gmail.com*

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to present a personal reflection regarding the theoretical/philosophical relation between the generally accepted theological grounding of icon painting and other contemporary artistic endeavours to integrate the religious feeling – of Christian-Orthodox inspiration. This reflection is based on a mixture of ideas from different thought-frameworks which have as common ground the need for speculating on issues such as ‘tradition understanding’, ‘personal expression’, ‘art and religiousness’, exactly those key-themes that are constituting the fundamental threads of my argumentation. Hence, my appeal to authors like Lucian Blaga, Leonid Uspensky, Martin Heidegger, Paul Evdochimov, and Christos Yannaras. The point of departure for my study is the powerful and unavoidable conflict between the need for personal artistic interpretations of religious themes – expressed through contemporary artistic techniques and the application of contemporary metaphysical modelings – and the need for attaching oneself to an ‘authentic’ tradition of religious experience and to a community with deep roots in history. My all-round thesis is that this conflict cannot be, at least, clarified by choosing, from the artistic point of view, between two extremes: contemporary secular art on the one hand, and sacred, canonical art on the other hand, but by finding conceptual common pathways.

**Keywords:** tradition; face-image; person; contemporary art; transgression; music; body; dance.

## Introduction

THIS PAPER IS A MEDITATION about the 'community' between the old, liturgical art, of the Orthodox icon and contemporary artistic manifestations spiritually rooted in the Orthodox belief, 'community' in the sense that both coexist in the contemporary cultural landscape and, at the same time, both are shaping our sensibility underlying this understanding of Christianity. For example, in Romania, I argue that, for a 'modern' believer, to pray in front of a traditionally conceived icon and to listen to an orthodox inspired composition such as Paul Constantinescu's *Easter Byzantine Oratorio* are both significant ways of experiencing the Orthodox Tradition, in its broad meaning. This fact is worth analysing through philosophical and theological frameworks because it reveals one of the most important inner tensions of the modern person: the conflict between, on the one hand, the need for sacredness, for cultural 'authentic' roots and for the immersion of oneself within a community of like-hearted thinkers and believers, and, on the other hand, the need for modernity, for creativeness, for openness towards new forms of expression and metaphysical ideas. It is a hard inner tension that is accurately represented by the, sometimes artificial, opposition between the liturgical art of the Orthodox icon, which usually is created after a well-theologically grounded canon, and 'just' religiously inspired art, such as modern musical compositions, paintings, literature, and even choreography. Usually, there are separately pursued, the place of the icon being inside a church, while the place of a modern Orthodox inspired painting being in a gallery, this spatial separation constituting, in fact, a symbol of the theoretical-theological separation between the two. What I propose in this paper is an endeavour to find a space of communication between these two separate fields of creation and expression with the aim of producing a dialogue (between these two types of *logos*). This space can be traced through important concepts from the philosophy of culture, hermeneutics and aesthetics: 'tradition', 'expression', 'transgression', 'person' and 'experience'. Hence, my use of ideas from thinkers such as Lucian Blaga, Martin Heidegger, and Christos Yannaras.

## The Orthodox Icon and its Theological Grounding

### *The Metaphysical Meaning of 'Tradition'*

The manner in which one operates with the concept of 'tradition', both in the field of hermeneutics/philosophy of culture and in the field of Christian-Orthodox theology, is the main ground for the phenomenon of transferability – of forms, ideas and styles – between the art of the icon and the

modern, religiously inspired, artistic manifestations. Tradition is seen as a fountainhead of vitality, which means that 'tradition' can be viewed not only as a rigid assemblage of old norms, practices and objects – needed to be outreached in order to fulfil current different needs and ways of life –, but as an energetic blowing which we breathe as a source of symbols and profundity. Hence, tradition is, at the same time, the root for prejudices, for stylistic predeterminations, for established cultural categories, and a springboard for change, for the generation of new styles and categories. This is the exact meaning which 'tradition' has in the Orthodox belief. It is a core-concept that theologically justifies practices for centuries, including the art of painting icons<sup>1</sup>. This is how the Romanian philosopher and poet – who also studied theology and biology – Lucian Blaga beautifully described the understanding of 'tradition' in the Orthodox belief:

Our tradition is of a more invisible nature; it permits only a metaphorical or metaphysical formulation. Our tradition is more atemporal, it identifies with our creative stylistic potencies, unexhausted, "magnificent as in the beginning". Our tradition is our stylistic matrix, in a blessed state like our motherly ancestry. Sometimes smouldering, yet uninterruptedly lively, it manifests in time, although, measured from our ephemeral horizon, it is above time. Being creative, this tradition of ours has a 'music'<sup>2</sup> character, not a "museum-like" character. In the Occident tradition is a sign of age, mostly a burden; the departure from it means liberating revolution. Our tradition is ageless like the green leaf; as a stylistic matrix it is part of our unconscious logos. A separation from it would mean apostasy.<sup>3</sup>

The theological grounding for Christian-Orthodox iconography springs from the experience, reading and exemplarity of tradition and this fact is the reason why tradition is, at the same time, the strength and weakness of this understanding of Christianity. In the history of hermeneutics, Martin Heidegger (re)discovered the tradition of Occidental philosophy as the bearer of the original meaning and revelation of 'being'. Yet, in *Being and Time*, he makes the observation that tradition can also hide the true origins, it can throw them into oblivion, namely into non-reflective and cliché-like (pre)understanding<sup>4</sup>. Until recently, the Orthodox iconographical canon

---

<sup>1</sup> Leonid Uspensky, *The Theology of the Icon in The Orthodox Church* [in Romanian], introductory study and translation by Teodor Baconsky (Bucharest: Anastasia Publishing House, 1994), 92.

<sup>2</sup> From the Ancient 'muses'.

<sup>3</sup> Lucian Blaga, *The Mioritical Space* [in Romanian], in *The Trilogy of Culture*, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011), 285; my English translation from Romanian.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and time* [in Romanian], translation and introductory study by Gabriel Liiceanu and Cătălin Cioabă (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2003), §6, 29-30.

was considered unquestionable regarding the practice of icon painting. It contains the ethical and technical prescriptions that constitute the basis for differentiating between *sacred art* – thought of as an embodiment of spirituality – and *religious art* – the secular, un-liturgical expression of religious themes<sup>5</sup>. Although this distinction is an essential theoretical difference that helped to preserve the distinctness of the icon tradition and partially safeguarded it from stylistic intrusions, it also kept it rigidly isolated from the fruitful contact with new forms of painting. If we assume the need for creative and vital participation, implication and modelling effect of the Orthodox belief into the world, then we are obliged to also accept the possibility of a ‘community’ and ‘communion’ between the world and sacred expression. In other words, if one conceives of ‘tradition’ as a still positive and deepening force in contemporary culture and society, then one is forced to bring into light linking paths between what comes from the past and the stance of the present. It is, necessarily, a biconditional relation and the deviation towards one extreme or the other is meant to produce misunderstanding, excessive reactions, extremism and, most important, a spiritual pauperisation. The extreme secular practice of contemporary art – that not only eliminates religious experience as a relevant inspiration for art, but it takes it as a subject for mockery, as a simple grand taboo – is the ‘transgressive art’ as defined and criticised by Anthony Julius in his 2002 book *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*. Hence, the iconographical canon for the Orthodox icon and the transgressive art are two extremes of artistic practice. The first is limited by rigid norms and has as its heart the idea of drawing from exemplary icons of the past and of devotion in front of the represented subject, while the latter is so ‘free’ that it loses its identity, its meaning, its expressive force, and has as its heart the attitude of unlimited ‘avant-gardism’ that, as now is certain, brings art at a dead end. This is the theoretical reason why the need for a more distant and balanced perspective is needed, why the comparative discussion of these two radically opposed practices is relevant. In the center of this opposition is the concept of ‘tradition’ and the key, at least, to disentangle the issue is the strive to trace the metaphysical assumptions about this concept.

Earthly life is determined by metamorphosis, by process, by continuous transformations, temporality itself being a consubstantial condition for life. Ivan Moody, an Orthodox priest and composer renowned for its research about contemporary musical creations inspired by Orthodox Christianity, argues that Tradition would be greatly enriched by the inclusion of paraliturgical realisations. He has a brief article suggestively entitled “Contemporary Art as Theophany” in which he claims that “Christian art” should be much

---

<sup>5</sup> Michel Quenot, *The Icon: A Window Toward the Absolute* [in Romanian], translation, preface and notes by Pr. Dr. Vasile Răducă (Bucharest: The Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1993), 55.

wider than “liturgical art”: “I have, to be brutally honest, no time for the idea that we must wall ourselves off and live in a beautiful ghetto. That is not what Christianity is, and if that is the case, then Christian art must as a consequence be larger, wider, than the liturgical arts”<sup>6</sup>. Hence, this entwining of different domains of artistic practice is not unnatural or impermissible for a Christian artist, on the contrary, is what constitutes the flexible and lively part of Tradition. As Leonid Uspensky puts it: “Christianity absorbs from the surrounding world anything it can use as means of expression” and “People around the world who are hearing the call of the Church are bringing with them their culture, their particular national characteristics and their creative faculties. The Church is forming its sacred language by choosing from this lot of contributions everything that is more clean, more true and more expressive”<sup>7</sup>. This is the perspective about the past that suits contemporary hermeneutical methodologies, such as Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, in which he advocates for the importance of accepting the dynamics between interpretation – which is always a strive from the ‘present’ of one particular person – and past ‘texts’ – literary texts, sacred texts, philosophical texts, the musical score or, by extension, the entire field of human products because they encapsulate meanings.

### *The Canon and the Image of Transcendence*

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were important attempts at systematising and popularising the theology – and, implicitly, the metaphysics – behind the painting of icons. Leonid Uspensky’s books are classics in this regard. For a short exposition of the main threads of argumentation, I will have as background works by Uspensky, Pavel Florensky, Vladimir Lossky, Paul Evdochimov and Michel Quenot. Thereby, the main theoretical-theological ideas that are forming the essence of the canon are:

1. The artist should have *an ascetic way of living* because only by this outer and inner self-purification he could attempt to depict through painting the spiritual reality. This ‘cleansing’ permits a true vision of the world that goes beyond everyday factuality and material shapes.

2. The Christological grounding of the icon, of the visual representation in the Christian-Orthodox thinking, is the holy fact of Incarnation, which, unlike in the Old Testament, it demonstrates the *effective and efficacious presence* of God in the finite world through a Face-Image. This fact, historical and mysterious at the same time, permitted *the visualisation of transcendence*

---

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Moody, “Contemporary Art as Theophany,” *Orthodox Arts Journal* (10 february, 2015), accessed at the adress: <https://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/contemporary-art-theophany-2/>.

<sup>7</sup> Uspensky, *The Theology of the Icon in The Orthodox Church*, 52–53; my English translation from Romanian.

through the hypostatic Person of Christ as God-Human: God was truly seen by man at a face-to-face encountering.

3. The Pneumatological grounding is complementary to the Christological one because it refers to the opposite process of the human being who is sanctified, the reverse and the aim of the Incarnation. Is *the eschatological dimension, the promise of Parousia*, of the Kingdom, which the icon can hint at, proclaim and confess through the reality of the Incarnation and of the Hagiographies, both handed over from centuries through the holy Tradition.

4. Hence, the authentic icon must be a vision of the concrete, material, sensible presence of the one represented, yet at the same time it must be a vision of sacredness, which means, paradoxically, *a vision of the invisible, of the transcendence that is emanated through the transfigured corporality of those depicted*. This is the reason why the style of Byzantine-Orthodox iconography is labelled *symbolical realism*, because it expresses both the physical nature of those painted and their sanctified nature. Thus, the icon is neither abstract, nor naturalistic, but a confessional revelation of faith and of the promise for delivery:

The icon is an image of a human truly blessed with a spirit wholly purified of sufferings. This is why his flesh is represented in an entirely different manner than the ordinary, meant to perish, flesh. The icon is the sober conveyance, without passion, of a certain spiritual reality. If holiness fully illuminates a man, in such a way that his spiritual and physical being is infused by prayer and, thus, it remains within the divine light, then the icon catches and keeps still in a visible manner this man who became a living icon towards true semblance with God. The icon does not represent sacredness, but indicates man's participation to the divine life.<sup>8</sup>

5. The face is the expressive center of an icon and, due to its theological charge, its essential purpose. The icon (re)presents a Person, a word that etymologically means 'the-fact-of-having-a-face', of facing the otherness. Christ is a Person, consubstantial with the other two of the Trinity, God and the Holy Spirit, and, thus, by his nature a *divine Person*, unlike human beings who, because they are created, they are *created persons*. Christ is invariably God by nature, while humans can become sanctified through the process of holy transfiguration. Man cannot have access to God's nature, but only to His manifestations, His energy.

6. Christ is, at the same time, True-God and True-Human, which symbolise the fact that he is the uncreated, invisible and fully spiritual Face-Image of the Father, and has his own humanly, physiognomic Face after

---

<sup>8</sup> Uspensky, *The Theology of the Icon in The Orthodox Church*, 115; my English translation from Romanian.

his earthly mother. *Due to this hypostatically united double-nature (the dogma from Chalcedon) Christ can also be embodied through an icon.* The significant mention is that within a painted icon *one does not represent entirely his godly nature*, because it is contradictory with the sense of 'transcendence', *and, one does not paint entirely his human nature*, because it would be sheer naturalism and, so, an un-truly rendering. However, *what one tries to paint is the Person or the Hypostasis which unifies both natures:*

The icon does not represent either the nature, or the person. [...] When we represent our Lord we do represent neither his divineness, nor his humanity, but the Person who, in accordance with the dogma from Chalcedon, unites in Itself, in an unlimited manner – “unmixed and undivided” – both natures.”; and “This is God’s overflow of praise or God’s kenosis: He who cannot be accessible to the creature, He who cannot be either described, or depicted by any means, is The One who becomes accessible, describable and depictable, assuming a human body. Jesus Christ’s icon, the icon of the God-Human, is the visual expression of the dogma from Chalcedon: it truly represents the Person of God’s Son who became human, of the one who is co-being with the Father by his nature and co-being with us by his human being: “altogether like us, but without sin” – as the written words of the dogma are stating.<sup>9</sup>

7. In the iconic representation functions *a relation of participation, through semblance, to the archetype.* Even in the concept of an ‘image’ is presupposed the difference between a subject of representation and the image. The icon is not adored as idolatry (*latreia*), but only used as a foothold for worship (*proskunèsis*). As Uspensky writes, there is *a difference of nature and an identity of persons*<sup>10</sup>. This is the reason why keeping the historical truth about the physiognomic identity of those represented, as archetypes, through tradition, is a necessity, this chain being labelled by Pr. Ioan Bizău “*iconic succession*”<sup>11</sup>.

These (re)presentations are embodiments that retain a power of transmitting a feeling of the transcendence, with the aim of inviting us to contemplate the beauty of this encountering and to surrender in front of the nostalgic promise of finding our original, spiritual, sanctuary. Lugian Blaga poetically describes this feeling near the presence of the transcendence in Byzantine art as ‘sophianic’:

---

<sup>9</sup> Uspensky, *The Theology of the Icon in The Orthodox Church*, 83–84 & 104; my English translation from Romanian.

<sup>10</sup> Uspensky, *The Theology of the Icon in The Orthodox Church*, 85.

<sup>11</sup> Ioan Bizău, “Incursions into the Theology and the Art of the Icon” [in Romanian], in *What is the Icon?*, edited by Leonid Uspensky, Boris Bobrinskoy, Stephan Bigam & Ioan Bizău, translated by Vasile Manea (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea Publishing House, 2005), 106.

Generally, Byzantine art, much vigorously in painting, and, excepting the architecture, is sophianically oriented. How should we understand this general affirmation? In Byzantine art the figures are elementary stylised, rhythmically constructed, soaked into an air of magnificent simplicity and monotony. The figures are not sketched either by following their own lines of individuality, or by following their Platonical ideas, of embellished contours. Through their expressions, the figures are declaring themselves the bearers of transcendence; a reflexion of eternity has descended on them. As earthly figures, they are imbued by the Heaven dropped in them. They are crossed by a severe calm, from beyond this world. These creatures seemed touched by an invisible blessing, not so much due to the symbolical marks that surround them, as due to the manner itself in which they are rendered. The figures are neither naturalistically individualised, nor Platonically idealised, but sophianically transfigured. The creatures seemed to be forms of a transcendence that sprang inside them. The sophianically stylised creatures are manifesting a quietness of a supreme density, being free of any striving, remote from any volitional act; they somehow gain the praise from above and are only static, receptive forms, of reconciliation, of orderliness, and of the higher wisdom.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, the iconographical orthodox canon, though severe, it is filled with a kind of feeling from which the contemporary artist tends to be alienated. From a cultural point of view, this alienation is a great occasion for grief, yet it also is a great occasion for recontextualising the canon in relation with new forms of expression and new concepts.

## **The complexity of religious experience and the complexity of contemporaneity**

### *Person and expressivity in the Orthodox inspired philosophy*

The term 'person' comes from *prosopon*, which refers to the individual face-image of somebody<sup>13</sup>, and it is the source both for an important theological concept and for an important psychological concept, namely that of 'personality'. It is the notion that implies the fact of relatedness, the fact of ek-stasis, the openness towards an alterity and the unique dynamic of a face-to-face relationship. It is the notion that forms the basis for a 'personalist' understanding of humankind, which means the understanding of

<sup>12</sup> Blaga, *The Mioritical Space*, 219–220; my English translation from Romanian.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, (Anastasia Publishing House, 2000), 21, for more details.

'this individual' in its own being. A type of thinking which proposes this concept in its core (The Hypostasis is a Person) and which grants every soul with significance, has by its nature conceptual flexibility for accepting 'personal' expressions.

The philosopher and theologian Christos Yannaras, in his volume *Person and Eros*, develops this notion within a network in which he weaves phenomenological, neo-Aristotelian, and Heideggerian methods and concepts with Christian-Orthodox ones, thus creating an 'Orthodox derived metaphysics'. To actually *be* a person presupposes *to be in relation* with others. The 'others' can be either those which are in the world, or persons. Beings are manifesting, they appear *as* something, they show themselves – the etymology of 'phenomenon' as that which sparkles, that which is showing –, yet only in a *personal relation*, only in front/in the face of another one which turns its gaze towards them. *The most intimate personal relation that accomplishes this ontological structure is the interpersonal relation*<sup>14</sup>. The most important impulse towards another person, towards another ontologically similar to ourselves, yet very different in its 'personal' exhibitions and inner cosmos, is *eros*, love<sup>15</sup>. This is the reason why in the Orthodox faith, the notion of 'truth' does not refer to objective, intersubjective verifiable information, but is itself personified, it refers to a spiritual experience of a person, who 'sees' the immaterial reality, and the Person who eminently proved the validity of this type of truth was the Person of Christ: "Truth does not respond to the question *what?* but to the question *who* is he truth? He is a person that has a face. This is why the Church does not only *speak* about truth, but it also *shows it* through the image of Jesus Christ"<sup>16</sup>. It is an 'ethical truth' – from 'ethos' –, ostensive definable through a way of life. *This is the type of truth also emanated by the work of art because in art one is expressing the complexity of interpersonal relationships*. Art is the place where all uncertainties, needs, emotional intensities, difficult situations and profound crisis are expressed. Maybe sacred art is the purest type of art, yet it is also the most distant from human concrete life because by its nature it does not concern itself with concreteness. By representing ideals and models, the icon is a schema, is "elementary", as Blaga wrote. However, human life is not elemental, and the person-to-person relation is a complicated mystery, as is the creation of a personal style in art:

Even though we distinguish the energy or human action from nature and nature from persons, we do not relate any synthesis to nature itself, which means we do not divide and break nature into persons and actions: persons and actions are neither "parts" or "components", nor "accidents" of nature, but nature's *mode*

---

<sup>14</sup> Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Uspensky, *The Theology of the Icon in The Orthodox Church*, 59.

*of existence.* The bringing into personal fulfilment of every act “indivisibly” (*ameros*) and “unitarily” (*henoeidos*) synthesises the entire action of nature, in the same way the person synthesises the whole nature, is the existence of nature. The *how* of the willing act (or of the efficient act, or of the act of loving, or of any other act) naturally synthesises the *what* of the willing act; nature’s possibility of willing exists and it manifests itself only through the alterity of personal volition. Music, painting, sculpture are actions or efficient energies (creative) of human nature, yet they exist only as manifestations of personal alterity, as Mozart’s music, Van Gogh’s painting, Rodin’s sculpture etc. But anyway, it does not exist some other manner of manifestation or of determining the essence or the nature beside its active, working, ek-stasis in the fact of personal alterity.<sup>17</sup>

Paraliturgical creations of artists in different fields are examples of personal interpretations of the Tradition, and these types of creations, though not implied in the liturgical ritual, can be seen as an alterity to the consecrated creations, in which the icon is the most symbolically significant. These artists had tried a personalisation of the Christian-orthodox system of ideas and, thus, they had disseminated this spiritual framework within the limits of their craft, feelings, intentions, and originality. The concept of the ‘icon’, in this context, does not refer only to its narrow meaning – namely that of a painted or sculpted object realised after a specific technique –, but can be generalised in such a way as to correspond to its more speculative philosophical and theological meaning, which is that of an archetypal ‘face-image’, the face which cannot be seen with bodily eyes, the most comprehensive sense of ‘image’ as ‘(re)presentation’, as *bringing into presence through material means even that which is only spiritual, nonmaterial*. If we theoretically rethink the fundamental concepts of the canon through this metaphysically generalised perspective, then, by extension, we can indirectly view any type of human creation as an incarnation of the personal energy of man, and as a (re)presentation of God’s blessing that accompanies, fills and guides man’s creative inspiration. As Paul Evdochimov writes:

By being expressive, art can transmit varied contents. Free, it can still coincide with the icon – like a canvas by Rembrandt –, as it can also distance itself from any religious content; in the extreme case, it can move towards the pure fiction of a sign or it can become only an aesthetic object, an object of art for art’s sake, decoration; finally, it can change its nature and cease to be art.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, 73–74; my English translation from Romanian.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Evdochimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, translated by Grigore Moga and Petru Moga (Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House, 1992), 81; my English translation from Romanian.

Hence, art is a complex endeavour of expressing deep experiences and needs of humans, among which the religious feeling has an ancestral, privileged place. Secular culture, as religiously disengaged as it may seem, can still be interpreted, from a theological stance, as a mirror of God's 'image' because, necessarily, it must contain elements of theophany. Again, in Evdochimov's formulation: "If every man, made after God's image and semblance, is His living icon, then earthly culture is the icon of the heavenly Kingdom"<sup>19</sup>. This is a path on which sacred art and secular art can find points of osmosis and, thus, permit reciprocal influences.

### *Music and plastic art influenced by the Orthodox Tradition*

Music has its place in the Church, yet is as (pre)determined by theological norms as icon painting. Thus, the same line of argument concerning 'tradition' and 'personal expression' can be followed in this case and, furthermore, another observation must be made: the historical assumption made when a rigid system of stylistic constraints is held is the isolation against influences from ideologies and movements of thought specific to every epoch. It is true that sacred art created in the Byzantine shadow was less altered in its forms by these socio-cultural interactions than in the Roman-Catholic lineage, for instance, yet it is only a difference of degree, itself determined by a special cultural, geopolitical and historical context. For instance, in Romania, after the consolidation as a modern national state in the middle of the nineteenth century, there were ample discussions about the necessity of culturally sustaining this achievement through the 'construction' of a national school of composition and a national church music. The 'national church music' had to be, quite paradoxically, at the same time an expression of modernity – because it was meant to argue for 'nationalism', a concept with specific modern connotations – and an expression of 'authenticity' – which means of 'pure', 'autochthonous', 'original' roots. For this purpose, even in the case of church music, education through Occidental techniques and principles became necessary: "The combination between Oriental melodicality and Occidental harmony would reflect, on the one hand, the Eastern roots and the aspirations of a modern European nation, and, on the other hand, the Orthodox character and the noble Latin descendance"<sup>20</sup>. Hence, although maybe not in an easy, overtly, detectable manner, especially for an untrained ear, Orthodox church music was also influenced by the Occident through music education, as many

<sup>19</sup> Evdochimov, *The Art of the Icon*, 66; my English translation from Romanian.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Costin Moisil, "Constructing a National Church Music" [in Romanian], in *New Histories of Romanian Musics*, edited by Valentina Sandu-Dediu and Nicolae Gheorghiuță (Bucharest: The Musical Publishing House, 2020), 222; my English translation from Romanian.

icon painters were, actually, trained and, thus, influenced, in occidental techniques.

This brief yet important observation opens one up for accepting the idea that if sacred art was, more or less, influenced by 'external' techniques, principles and concepts, then, also, there must be works of art that contain influences of Orthodox spirituality, in their case this mark of the transcendence being integrated within a complex personal and artistical network. In Romanian music, there are such obvious cases where compositions have a direct relation with the Orthodox tradition, like Paul Constantinescu's 1943 *Easter Byzantine Oratorio* and 1947 *Christmas Byzantine Oratorio* – 'obvious' only in the sense that even the unprofessional musician can trace the Byzantine character, yet, on the other hand, the way Constantinescu conceived these works, as a combination of the Occidental 'oratorio' form and Byzantine contents, is not that obvious –, but there are uncanny situations in which the composer has a more difficult to grasp spiritual and intellectual vision, like Ștefan Niculescu:

If Ștefan Niculescu's theoretical system steams from three cardinal ideational sources, namely the relation between One and Multiple, the theory of musical syntax – with an accent on heterophony –, and the *coincidentia oppositorum* principle, his music has only one assumed spiritual root: the Christian-Orthodox faith. The sphericity, luminosity and clarity of Niculescu's music is due to an authentic religious tremor, which confers it ontological heaviness, sacredness and seriousness, characteristics that are manifesting at the musical level through personal compositional techniques: the clear formal cut, chained in *Ison I* (1971-73) and *Ison II* (1975-76) and in the *Third Symphony – Cantos* (1984), in which he partially flirts with the spectral technique; then, synchrony as an heterophonic form in *Synchrony* (1982), *Duplum II* (1986), *Synchrony II – Hommage à Enesco et Bartók* (1981); the unison as a soteriological compositional strategy in *Hétérophonies pour Montreux* (1986), *Invocatio* (1989), *Axion* (1992), and *Psalms* (1993); complex harmonical mixtures in the *Fourth Symphony – Deisis* (1993) and in the *Fifth Symphony – Litanies* (1995); and also his paradoxical infra-melodical chorales from *Sequentia* (1994) and *Undecimum* (1997-98). In this way, Ștefan Niculescu's music can be assimilated to a music of the lithosphere, with sonorous volcanos and cliffs that are configuring a tectonic of the soul, a petrified prayer floating between earth and sky, with an underlying, striking and redeeming psychic force, as is revealed in his last opus, *Commemoration – A Romanian Requiem* (2007), a twin echo of Krzysztof Penderecki's *Polish Requiem* (1984).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Dan Dediu, "Romanian Compositional Contributions After 1960" [in Romanian], in *New Histories of Romanian Musics*, edited by Valentina Sandu-Dediu and Nicolae

As Ștefan Niculescu's compositions are pointing, there are unexpected ways in which musical techniques can combine themselves with religious feelings in order to produce something that is uncanonical both from music history's perspective and from sacred art's perspective. More than this, Niculescu's case is especially relevant because he is regarded – maybe surprisingly in the context of this article – as one of the avant-gardists of Romanian music. Usually, avant-gardism is understood as a type of attitude opposed to religiousness, the only manner of reference to religious themes being through critique, satire or even mockery. Yet, it is not always the case. The radically negative approach of religious experience is crucial to transgressive art – which, according to Anthony Julius, has as one of its major elements of identification the radical dismissal of the religious representation, or at least the subversive critique of the veracity and sacrality of these representations<sup>22</sup> –, but is not a trait of every avant-gardist conception, and Niculescu's musical thinking is an eminent example for this distinction. Hence, this is the reason why in the title of the present paper I use the term 'transgressions', not because these contemporary creations, like Niculescu's, are 'transgressive' in Julius's full terms, but, because, in a smoother sense, they are an alterity and an alternative to extreme transgressive art while at the same time retaining the characteristic of 'transgression' in its etymological sense, namely as a crossing over the canon's borders; they overrun the established limits and, at the same time, they develop, reinterpret, deepen and integrate the canon within contemporary artistical means. The question, from the theological perspective, is whether or not these creations are inspired, are blessed with the filling of transcendence, are relatable to the liturgy and are, truly, a sign of God's presence in the world? Another question is whether to be truly a sign of God's presence in the world presupposes a definite, rigid and strictly controlled artistic style? It is, I argue, unrealistically in respect to human nature and to the beauty of human's capacity of creation to limit an artist's means of expression

---

Gheorghiuță (Bucharest: The Musical Publishing House, 2020), 359; my English translation from Romanian.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* [in Romanian], translated by Tatiana Șiperco (Bucharest: Vellant Publishing House, 2009), 75–76, the under-chapter in which Julius is describing the way transgressive artists had positioned themselves towards religious themes and representations from the history of Western art; it is true that Julius speaks mostly about plastic art and literature, music being an art form in which these direct, and sometimes even cruel, transgressive gestures are much more improbable, but the common idea of linking any type of 'true' avant-gardism with the transgressive attitude has been extended to all artistic domains because, in many cases, the fact of dismissing religious themes is seen as a dismissal of old and repressive taboos; hence, this link, though in some cases is justified – everything depending upon the subject matter and the way the issue is raised –, as for example in contemporary discussions about feminism and sexuality, in most cases is misunderstanding, intolerance, and scarcity of spirituality; it is a very, conceptually and culturally, delicate matter...

only to old, well defined and canonical accepted techniques, an affirmation which does not sustain that the 'new' is intrinsically good and what is labelled as 'obsolete' is intrinsically bad, but which proposes, as this entire study, a more nuanced, balanced, and, ultimately, correct understanding of this issues. Another example, from Greece, is the music made by Michael Adamis, who is determined in his compositional thinking by his faith, while applying modern and contemporary compositional principles:

In many senses, then Adamis's *oeuvre* is indeed "morphologically at the opposite pole from Western Art". Not only are its spiritual premises derived from the Eastern Christian tradition, but that very fact determines the way the music exists in time or, rather, out of time. There is no "development" of the kind found in the canon of Western art music. If one begins with the premise of the reordering of the cosmos made explicit by the Resurrection of Christ, the vanquishing of death, how can time, and therefore "development" of that time, have any meaning? The endless possibilities and simultaneities of Adamis's poly-metric, polyrhythmic, polymelodic technique may then be the only adequate response. Indeed, such a technique also reflects the basis of Orthodox anthropology as being the individual, man as an ontological hypostasis whose very distinctiveness is the image of God, in communion with his fellow Christians, his potential fulfilled in a way impossible in spiritual isolation. One might, then, view this as an analogue of the individuality of each human being, every one fully assumed and completed by the mystery of the Second Coming.<sup>23</sup>

In music there are many other important examples, like Sofia Gubaidulina and Igor Stravinsky from Russia, Alfred Schnittke from Russia and Germany – considered one of the most important postmodern composers –, Sir John Kenneth Tavener from England, and Arvo Pärt from Estonia – one of the pioneers of musical minimalism –, all greatly inspired by Christian-Orthodox feeling and analysed by Ivan Moody in his book *Modernism and Orthodox Spirituality in Contemporary Music*.

Regarding painting, a significant case is the personality of Olga Greceanu, for two reasons: first of all, her art is of a personalised Neo-Byzantine style, and, secondly, she can be remarked both as *an important feminist figure and an important supporter of the Orthodox faith*. Olga Greceanu studied chemistry and plastic arts and wrote important treatises and essays about art and, specifically, about mural painting, proving a serious intellectual capacity and a significant mastering of her art's technique. Among her most impressive realisations are the mural assemblage of the Holy Synod's halls from

---

<sup>23</sup> Ivan Moody, *Modernism and Orthodox Spirituality in Contemporary Music* (ISOCM, Institute for Musicology of SASA, 2014), 43–44.

Bucharest and the mosaics of Monastery Antim's hallway from Bucharest, yet her portfolio includes many other works, in varied techniques beginning with mural painting and oil painting, until pastel or the painting of stained glass, inspired by religious themes and spread in many locations<sup>24</sup>. The fact is that all these works are not subject to the 'canon', yet having withal a Byzantine stylistic genealogy. Her book, *Meditations on the Gospels*, is a reminder of her deep, sincere and essentialised relation with the Christian-Orthodox faith and, what is extraordinary in the literal and symbolical sense, this book is actually the collection of her own preaching, held in different places from Bucharest. A woman-preacher is something rare and is still a personal and 'feminist' gesture. Her advocacy for the recognition of women is explicit in the documented fact that she was one of the founders of the interwar association "Women Painters and Sculptors" (1916)<sup>25</sup> and in the writing of a book entitled *Unknown Women-Painters* – an especially contemporary study because only since twenty or thirty years ago this kind of research has visibility and impact. Hence, I interpret that Greceanu's case is another one of 'avant-gardism', of transgression, not in the destructive and easy sense, but in the deepening, complex sense, and in the literal sense of 'being ahead' her time.

### *Dance and the transfiguration of the body*

Christian experience is integrally filling the human being, body and soul. Since his beginnings, the human is earth and spirit. Sufferings, joys, beliefs, nostalgies, are all belonging in the same degree to the body and to the soul. The Incarnation is the fact that promised the transfiguration of matter through the transfiguration of the human body, considered the jewel (*kosmos*) of matter. The icon is not abstract, exactly because it presents a physiognomy. The Person is the Face-Image. Dance is the art that elevates, educates and expresses the reality of our soul through the reality of our body. Corporality is valorised in Christianity, and, as such, dance's expressive force should be, simply put, used. As the postmodern choreographer Merce Cunningham said in an interview, a choreography cannot be abstract because the body cannot be abstract. The body has a definite shape and, hence, it is limited by this shape, exactly the philosophical status of the icon: neither fully symbolical, nor fully naturalised. The body simply *is*, and, moreover, it is always the body 'of someone'. The body, when is animated, lively, and, especially, in movement, *has uniqueness and infinitesimally identifies itself with the person*. This is why, through the expressive

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Adina Nanu's Preface for Olga Greceanu's book *Meditations on the Gospels* [in Romanian] (Bucharest: Sophia Publishing House, 2010), 7–8.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Ioana Cristea and Aura Popescu, *Ladies of Romanian Fine Arts: who distinguished themselves between the two World Wars*, trilingual album (Bucharest: Independent Company "Official Monitor", 2004), 80.

gesture, the dancer conveys an aura of meaning. *In dance, the human body is metaphysical*, beyond mere physicality, similar with the way in which the body is transposed towards transcendence in the icon. *In dance it exists the possibility of embodying a theology through a relational act*, or, in other words, *our own organism can become the place of epiphany*:

God wants of His Epiphany to be perceived by the whole man. Palamas underlines the idea of human being's integrity in which "even the body has the experience of those that are godly". Beside the *kosmos noetos* (the intelligible world) Tradition puts *kosmos aisthetós* (the sensible world) – the whole domain of the mysteries, of the liturgy, of the icon, and of the experience of God. [...] According to Saint Maximus, the powers of the soul are opened through the *senses*. The soul hears, sees, feels, tastes. This is why are created organs for perception – the senses. The human is a totality, spiritual and sensible at the same time, in the service of the Incarnation. The accomplished senses are sensibly perceiving the Unsensible or, better said, Trans-sensible. Beauty appears as a sparkling of the mysterious depth of being, of this interiority that confesses the intimate bond between body and spirit.<sup>26</sup>

For example, the Romanian choreographer Ioan Tugearu made a short dance piece inspired by a Greek prayer (interpreted by Simona Șomăcescu) and the body of the dancer was all expression, waving different feelings and intensities according to an inner narrative. This symbolic density of the movement is as powerful as a painted image, or even more. Another example, though not linked with the Orthodox tradition – this type of choreographic representation being, unfortunately, extremely rare –, yet compelling for the stunning effect a religiously driven choreography can produce, is the famous dance-spectacle *Revelations* by Alvin Ailey, in which the technique of classic and modern dance is infused with specific afro-american religious feeling<sup>27</sup>.

## Conclusions

This essay-article was the development of a personal reflection about a critical contemporary topic: the relation between sacred art and modern artistic expressions. Although the central sacred artistic practice from which I begun is icon painting, during the text I exemplified and argued

<sup>26</sup> Evdochimov, *The Art of the Icon*, 30; my English translation from Romanian.

<sup>27</sup> For example the second scene from this spectacle danced upon a song entitled *Fix me Jesus*, is essentially like a moving icon; the scene is accesible for watching to the following youtube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CXk1mQVCgI>.

for modern and contemporary multi-artistical practices, such as music composition and choreography. The icon is, symbolically, a visualisation of the core-values and ideas of the Christian-Orthodox tradition, and any study who commits itself to deal with sacred Orthodox art should, thereby, start from the theology of the 'icon'. The Face-image, the transfiguration of the body, the elemental Byzantine style, the type of spirituality, and the entire aura of the icon is a pictural systematisation of the Orthodox grounding regarding religious experience. My text is specifically concentrated on this cultural tradition due to a personal interest I have in it, yet the general idea of finding a metaphysical, hence conceptual, common ground between sacred art and secular expressions of religious feelings is a crucial investigation with bearing on contemporary arduous cultural problems. In the Christian-Orthodox thinking, concepts such as 'tradition', 'face-image', 'person', 'relation', have great potential for opening a creative dialogue with contemporary philosophies and, from the opposite direction, contemporary artistical techniques and ideas can reveal new depths of religious experience.

## References

- Bizău, Ioan. "Incursions into the Theology and the Art of the Icon." [In Romanian.] In *What is the Icon?* Edited by Leonid Uspensky, Boris Bobrinsky, Stephan Bigam & Ioan Bizău. Translated by Vasile Manea. Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea Publishing House, 2005.
- Bлага, Lucian. "The Mioritical Space." [In Romanian.] In *The Trilogy of Culture*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011.
- Cristea, Ioana and Popescu, Aura. *Ladies of Romanian Fine Arts: who distinguished themselves between the two World Wars*. Trilingual album. Bucharest: Independent Company "Official Monitor", 2004.
- Dediu, Dan. "Romanian Compositional Contributions After 1960." [In Romanian.] In *New Histories of Romanian Musics*, edited by Valentina Sandu-Dediu and Nicolae Gheorghîță. Bucharest: The Musical Publishing House, 2020.
- Evdochimov, Paul. *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*. Translated by Grigore Moga and Petru Moga. Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House, 1992.
- Greceanu, Olga. *Meditations on the Gospels*. [In Romanian.] Bucharest: Sophia Publishing House, 2010.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and time*. [In Romanian.] Translation and introductory study by Gabriel Liiceanu and Cătălin Cioabă. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2003.
- Julius, Anthony. *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*. [In Romanian.] Translated by Tatiana Șiperco. Bucharest: Vellant Publishing House, 2009.
- Moisil, Costin. "Constructing a National Church Music." [In Romanian.] In *New Histories of Romanian Musics*, edited by Valentina Sandu-Dediu and Nicolae Gheorghîță. Bucharest: The Musical Publishing House, 2020.

- Moody, Ivan. "Contemporary Art as Theophany." *Orthodox Arts Journal* (10 february, 2015), accesed at the adress: <https://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/contemporary-art-theophany-2/>.
- . *Modernism and Orthodox Spirituality in Contemporary Music*. ISOCM, Institute for Musicology of SASA, 2014.
- Quenot, Michel. *The Icon: A Window Toward the Absolute*. [In Romanian.] Translation, preface and notes by Pr. Dr. Vasile Răducă. Bucharest: The Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1993.
- Uspensky, Leonid. *The Theology of the Icon in The Orthodox Church*. [In Romanian.] Introductive study and translation by Teodor Baconsky. Bucharest: Anastasia Publishing House, 1994.
- Yannaras, Christos. *Person and Eros*. [In Romanian.] Bucharest: Anastasia Publishing House, 2000.