Epiphany and Otherness in the Vision of Father André Scrima*

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Father André Scrima emphasized in his works the unanimous and universal duty of discovering the necessity of otherness or alterity as the exigency of our own path to God. He often spoke of the encounter and “askesis of the dialogue” that consists of the effort to open completely and without reserve to the other. From this point of view, we could consider André Scrima the visionary who intermediates the unveiling and the Revelation that, regardless of confession and religion, every human being has the chance to develop an authentic relationship with the divinity. Also, he advocates an indispensable condition or the most basic ethical argument required to get closer to God, namely recognizing the universal quality of all humankind as equally capable to be vessels of God’s grace, and hence they should be appreciated as such.

Keywords: *André Scrima, dialogue, otherness, openness, Revelation*

Faith is not complete without knowledge, and knowledge implies a permanent evolution both on the vertical axis of the revelation of God hidden in the evangelical commandments and precepts, and on the horizontal axis of the relation with our neighbour.

The Gospels abound with appeals to know the person near us and to acknowledge and be open to the other, to the one who does not share our own beliefs or even opposes the “command of love”. Even in this case, the imperative of knowing the “other” remains true.

A remarkable Romanian theologian, often overlooked, is Father André Scrima (1925-2000). He was gifted with an incredible memory and an outstanding capacity to bring together information from different fields of knowledge – the so-called classical culture – with cultural universal elements, patterns, traits, or institutions that are common to all human cultures worldwide, presenting them in a theological interpretation. As a student at the Faculty of Physics he was noticed for his contributions in the field of Optics, but his life took a strange turn when he met Father Ivan Kulighin. Father Kulighin was a refugee hieromonk who between the years 1945 and

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1947 animated the spiritual adventures of the Christian Association “the Burning Bush” – a reference to the event described in Exodus 3. This encounter would forever change the life of the young student, who subsequently embraced the monastic way of life. However, the limitation to this context thins out the results of the scholarly research of this restless interpreter who was always looking for an elementary rationality.

A series of unexpected encounters would lead him out of Romania on a very winding journey to India. The experience he acquired traveling the world, encountering other cultures, and the inner strength and disposition to see the common traits of the geographical, spiritual, and cultural spaces of other religions, made him always and everywhere mindful of the signs of the same universal calling which is addressed to all humankind. He acted as the personal representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras to the Second Vatican Council, and afterwards he spent almost 20 years in Lebanon teaching at the French University of Beirut. He was also the founder of the Deir El-Harf Monastery. In 1995 he returned to Romania for good, spending the last five years of his life there¹.

André Scrima dedicated half his life to the knowledge of the “other”. A monk, professor of religious comparative studies, he was first a traveller on the path of the Eastern Christian tradition seeking the boundlessness of God, but also a traveller through the geographical, spiritual, and cultural spaces of other religions. He was always and everywhere mindful of the signs of the same universal calling which is addressed to all humankind.

The experience gained during his long cohabitation with people belonging to other cultures, religions or nationalities has opened new perspectives, giving him the possibility to compare and establish parallels that have

¹ For more biographical details see Andrei Pleșu, “Prefață,” in André Scrima, *Timpul Rugului Aprins. Maestrul spiritual în tradiția răsăriteană*, ed. Anca Manolescu (București: Humanitas, 1996), 5–15; Olivier Clément, “Note biographique,” *Contacts* 55, no. 203 (Juillet-Septembre 2003): 243–45; Marius Oprea, *Adevărata călătorie a lui Zabei. V. Voiculescu și taina Rugului Aprins* (București: Humanitas, 2008), 70–76; Nectarie (Vlad) Dărăban, “André Scrima (1925-2000). Eșeu bio-bibliografic,” *Studia Doctoralia Andreiana* 3, no. 2 (November 2014): 154–67. A biographical sketch can be found also by Daniela Dumbravă, “Rivelazione e religioni” secondo Andrei Scrima,” *Quaderni di Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 18, Supplemento al n. 83, no. 1 (2017): 568–80. Still, the lack of biographical information regarding André Scrima is noted by every one of his acquaintances. Soeur Noëlle Devilliers underlines this trait of him: “C’était un homme secret, qui ne parlait jamais de lui,” in “Ce que fut dans ma vie la rencontre du père André Scrima,” *Contacts* 55, no. 203 (Juillet-Septembre 2003): 263. This is why a precious source is his autobiographical interview conducted by Roxana Sorescu in 1995, and published only 22 years later: “Un autoportret, mai multe identități: Andrei Scrima,” *Viața Românească*, no. 8 and 9 (2017), <http://www.viataromaneasca.eu/revista/2017/08/un-autoportret-mai-multe-identitati-andrei-scrima/>, accessed August 20, 2020.

confirmed his intuition that the fellow man – regardless of religion or ethnicity – is the key to a genuine relationship with the divine.

Embracing the monastic vocation as a perpetual traveller, Father André Scrima emphasized the unanimous and universal duty of discovering the necessity of otherness or alterity as a prerequisite of our own path to God. He often spoke of the “askesis” of encounter and dialogue that consists of the effort to open completely and without reserve to the other. Throughout his work, the concern for reaching an availability to reveal the other and the epiphany of the completely different one runs like a red thread.

The attitude of Father André Scrima proves to be a model for any Christian, engaged in a dialogue about faith, carried out not from defensive, apologetic positions but with genuine interest in the otherness and in the peculiarities of the interlocutor – who is also an image/icon of God. This “image” must be discovered within the “other” and accepted as a form of revelation of the attributes of the divine Archetype.

Out of the desire to restore as authentically as possible a part of this outstanding theologian’s thinking, we will insist on some quotations from the studies and courses he gave, composing a synthesis of Father Scrima’s perspective on otherness.

Some biographical observations. The evolution of his concern for otherness

„Leaving Romania in completely absurd conditions”², Father Scrima absorbed the information to which he had access without any restrictions. He demonstrated an extraordinary awareness and a keen sense of observation that, given his vast culture, allowed him to make a series of connections between disparate and seemingly unrelated elements. During his activity that spanned four decades there can be noticed a remarkable evolution in the way he developed his ideas. For example, in the texts of his youth there is a need to theorize (especially the monastic life³) and to insist on the development of an idea that grows from a premise to a conclusion. His direct contacts with the West, the Far East, and the Middle East presented him with the opportunity to manifest his ability to identify similarities and differences, to compare and perceive patterns between the great cultures of the world. The clarity with

² André Scrima, “Scrisoare către V. Anania,” in idem, *Ortodoxia și încercarea comunismului*, ed. Vlad Alexandrescu, trans. Vlad Alexandrescu, Lucian Petrescu and Miruna Tătaru-Cazaban (București: Humanitas, 2008), 442.

³ His main work is “Prolegomene la o ontologie a stadiului monahal (*bios angelikos*)” [Prolegomena to an ontology of the monastic order (*bios angelikos*)], published posthumously in Scrima, *Ortodoxia și încercarea comunismului*, 25–49.

which he formulates opinions regarding the realities encountered in these corners of civilization is proved by the published fragments of his “diary”⁴.

Returning to Paris in 1960, André Scrima applied for French citizenship, which he obtained through the presidential order signed by Charles de Gaulle in 1963 – two years earlier than usual – following a remarkable doctoral dissertation on the Degrees of Apophysis⁵. In 1961 another moment took place that marked the destiny of Father Scrima, the providential meeting with the ecumenical patriarch Athenagoras (1886-1972). Against the backdrop of Pope John XXIII’s convening of the Second Vatican Council, the ecumenical patriarch was looking for a cleric in whom erudition, spiritual life and openness to dialogue coincided and who could represent the patriarchal throne in the proceedings of the Council⁶. Being in the “graces of Patriarch Athenagoras” André Scrima, “finds himself at war with and consumed by a mutual envy of some Greek monks or hierarchs, who do not look favourably on his ultimate ascension”⁷. On the other hand, the patriarch of Macedo-Romanian origin⁸ saw in the young monk, also a Macedo-Romanian, a trusted collaborator, forming on the basis of this ethnic affinity a compact minority within the small Orthodox community in Phanar. Andrei Pleșu underlines that before meeting André Scrima, Athenagoras felt the amplitude of the Second Vatican Council and he guessed its implications for the Eastern Christianity, but he was alone in his efforts to reach out, and his own council of bishops looked at him with suspicion⁹. Scrima was one of the few who knew and understood the vision of “the loner of Phanar”¹⁰.

⁴ These are the notes edited by Vlad Alexandrescu under the generic title “Gânduri între două lumi,” in Scrima, *Ortodoxia și încercarea comunismului*, 93–151.

⁵ Pleșu, “Prefață,” in Scrima, *Timpul Rugului Aprins*, 11.

⁶ Dărăban, “André Scrima (1925-2000),” 160.

⁷ Informative note from 28.12.1964, in Florian Bichir, *Andrei Scrima, poștașul lui Dumnezeu* (Sibiu: Agnos, 2014), 80.

⁸ Informative note from 1.07.1971, in Bichir, *Andrei Scrima*, 238: “the patriarch Athenagoras, who is likely a Macedo-Romanian and he knows the Macedonian-Romanian dialect quite well, but he also speaks Romanian”. Although we can’t find the informative note a reliable source, Arsenie Papacioc, Scrima’s friend and confessor before he left the country in 1957, confirms this information: “He completely conquered Athenagoras, the greatest patriarch of the century, who wanted to be followed by him as patriarch. Well, Patriarch Athenagoras was Macedo-Romanian, Romanian like us, and Andrei was also Macedo-Romanian. But the Greeks didn’t want to.” Cf. Ioanichie Bălan, *Ne vorbește părintele Arsenie*, vol. 3 (Sihăstria, 1998), 20–21. Scrima’s Macedonian-Romanian origins are widely debated by Alexandru Gica, *Timpul unei întâlniri: Andrei Scrima și obârșia celui fără de obârșie* (București: Cartex, 2020).

⁹ Pleșu, “Prefață,” in Scrima, *Timpul Rugului Aprins*, 11.

¹⁰ Olivier Clément, “Cuvânt înainte,” in André Scrima, *Duhul Sfânt și Unitatea Bisericii*. „Jurnal” de Conciliu, ed. Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban (București: Anastasia, 2004), 11.

It is certain that during the sessions of the Second Vatican Council, Father Scrima began to take more and more seriously the problem of otherness, a theme that he approached from different angles with personal touches and nuances until the end of his life. It could be said that in this incipient phase the concern for the understanding of the “other” is limited to the interfaith aspect.

The idea of Father Scrima is to interpret the whole history of the separation and rediscovery of the Churches in terms of a dialectic of otherness; which shapes a vision of ecumenism as a spiritual treatment of Christian memory. This would mean an effort to discover the other in the very one who performs the discovery; a transition from the identification of the other as a radical and dangerous alien (ultimately heretical) to the inner presence of the other as an otherness proper to the one who discovers himself.¹¹

Convinced of the importance of openness to the “other,” André Scrima made considerable efforts to bring the Orthodox Church closer to the Roman Catholic Church, being one of the architects of the historic meeting in Jerusalem between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras (1964), and of the solemn declarations of December 7, 1965, by which Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI lifted the mutual anathemas thrown in July 1054¹². Through this “act of justice and mutual forgiveness” an indispensable step was taken towards the future restoration of unity. Perfectly aware of this exceptional calling

Scrima himself admits that he worked hard for the meetings between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras, both in 1964 in Jerusalem and in 1967, which took place in Constantinople and Rome. He also said that because of his good relations with the Vatican, the Greek Church, in particular, accuses him of being an agent of Catholicism. Against these accusations, he said that he had a noble mission for the reconciliation of the Churches, and that history will record in its pages.¹³

¹¹ Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban, “O perspectivă răsăriteană asupra unității Bisericii”, in Scrima, *Duhul Sfânt și Unitatea Bisericii*, 5.

¹² In 1054 A.D. the communion between the Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Churches. The mutual excommunications took place on July 16 (pronounced by Cardinal Humbert of Silva Candida) and July 20 (pronounced by the endemic council of Constantinople led by Patriarch Michael Cerularius). This event was the culmination of theological and political differences which had developed during the preceding centuries between Eastern and Western Christianity and led to an ever-growing estrangement.

¹³ Informative note from 28.11.1967, in Bichir, *Andrei Scrima*, 173. Contrary to the opinion that these informative notes should be dismissed as unreliable, they show the particular accusations brought to the “target” under surveillance.

For this reason, he was reproached for “preparing a great career in church politics,” elaborating “a kind of church diplomacy,”¹⁴ which at that time had a unique tone in the world of Eastern Christianity.

The true dimension of this “eccentric” vision will take shape during the time Father Scrima spent teaching in Lebanon. Here he developed his conception of the role of the “other” in keeping one’s faith vibrant and he focused on the interreligious valency of otherness, developing a theology of religious pluralism in an environment that demanded it. In this jigsaw puzzle of closely related cultures, Father Scrima found a favourable environment that challenged him and at the same time helped him to understand such a complex dynamic of the relationship with the “other”. He himself was an “other” and considered himself as such, especially by virtue of the monastic life he had embraced; he had fully assumed this state, often saying “that he has no country, no home, no family”¹⁵.

Despite his constant preoccupation with the theme of otherness, Father Scrima did not dedicate any special work to this subject in which to formulate his particular views explicitly and systematically¹⁶. However, among the articles, essays, courses, and letters published so far, we find fragments and intuitions from a coherent vision drawing bold directions that need to be experimented, not just studied. In trying to give a precise shape to these thoughts, one must consider the evolution in time and space that the inner universe of Father Scrima goes through. His discreet intuitions on otherness during his participation in the Second Vatican Council are largely confirmed in Lebanon, in such a different political, cultural, religious, and social context. Although he is in a new geographical framework, Scrima insists on a universal tendency of every human to preserve his own spiritual identity to the detriment of the Revelation by which man is approached by God directly and indirectly, through his fellow man. The unfinished, or rather improvised aspect of the statements on the topic of otherness, but also on other topics, is due to the predominantly oral character of these explanations made at the request of those attending his courses. On the other hand, “his intellectual productivity became a discourse only in relation to the other,

¹⁴ Informative note from 1.07.1971, in Bichir, *Andrei Scrima*, 237. The informative notes underline the lack of understanding of the ecclesiastic life. The efforts done to restore the communion are considered as means to ensure Scrima a higher position in the Church’s bureaucracy.

¹⁵ Informative note from 13.05.1968, in Bichir, *Andrei Scrima*, 192.

¹⁶ Anca Manolescu confirms Father Scrima’s reluctance to consolidate an authorial corpus: “He himself said that he had never written as an author who conceives, autonomously, a work”, cf. “Introducere,” in André Scrima, *Teme ecumenice*, ed. Anca Manolescu (Bucureşti: Humanitas, 2004), 10, note 1.

only in dialogue,” drawing attention to a model of encounter, a model of appearance and “passing” of knowledge between lively people, with lively, common questions; after all, a model of tradition”¹⁷.

These remarks on otherness will be formulated more elaborately, rather as final sentences or fragments of his last will, in one of Father Scrima’s last interventions “An ultimate test of the religious fact” – the dialogue with Andrei Pleșu, revised by André Scrima and published in 1998-1999 before his death († 19 august 2000).

The experience acquired among different cultures and people could only enrich Scrima’s natural openness and particular vision on otherness formed during his apprenticeship around the Antim Monastery, which ‘had among its members people sensitive to the trans-confessional nature of God’¹⁸. This experience only confirmed André Scrima’s ‘prophetic sensitivity’ cultivated by his Abbot Benedict Ghiuș, as shown by a significant episode recalled by the globetrotter monk:

At the end of a Sunday conference, with many secular people in attendance, where Djalal-od-Din Rumi and Ramakrishna had also been discussed, a monk stood up and said: “Forgive me. You quote a Muslim, someone else quotes a Hindu. But what are we doing here then?” And Father Benedict Ghiuș answered very simply: “If God said that at the end of time, He would take all the sheep, how can I rule them out? How can I reject someone who talks about Him like that? How can I not listen to him?”¹⁹

Epiphany–“Was not our heart burning within us, while he spoke to us in the way?” (Lk. 24.32)

A *topos* of Father Scrima’s thinking is the longing for God that lies deep in faith.

But this longing for God can be read in two ways, in two directions. In a first sense: first God is the one who desires man, who seeks man, this is what constitutes the presupposition of faith. In the second sense: I, a man, am in search of the object of my desire. And the two desires meet.²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Anca Manolescu, *Modelul Antim, modelul Păltiniș* (București: Humanitas, 2015), 106.

¹⁹ André Scrima, “Un test ultim al faptului religios,” in idem, *Teme ecumenice*, 114.

²⁰ Idem, “Conștiința credinței exercită ea o funcție critică față de «ordinea lumii»?,” in idem, *Funcția critică a credinței*, ed. Anca Manolescu (București: Humanitas, 2011), 41.

Therefore, if faith is “a conscious and free response to the gift, to the call, to the will of God”²¹ it presupposes the recognition of the existence of the Other, who manifests his freedom as self-limiting when “he puts something different from Him. He institutes what philosophers call otherness, another [...] He makes place for something else, distinct from Himself not by place, but by nature.”²²

Once the certainty of the existence of Another has been acquired, it is necessary to relate to Him:

The encounter with the Other is the constitutive gesture of being «on the way», mobile and decisively oriented towards the heavens: the Other, first of all, in the radical hypostasis of God, then in that of the existential proximity of the «neighbour».²³

Therefore, there are two hypostases of otherness (of God and the neighbour), closely related to each other, whose “meeting” is decisive for the religious act, for the spiritual experience that is authentic only if it progresses continuously and becomes an *epektasis*, “a tension towards perfection that gives birth without ceasing to another perfection.”²⁴

Under the auspices of this double encounter, Father Scrima perceives the spiritual experience as a continuous itinerance within the ineffable presence of God. During this ascent and simultaneous growth man is accompanied by “Revelation” or “Apocalypse,” which literally means the discovery or revelation of things hitherto unknown and which could not be known in the absence of this revelation.

Another term used especially by Father Scrima is “epiphany,” described as “a descent, most often personal, of God.”²⁵ Revelation is essential to the spiritual experience because in order to advance on the path of faith “this opening of the Spirit itself is necessary first, which in a Greek word we call epiphany, revelation, or opening to.”²⁶

Emmanuel Levinas advocated also that the transcendence of the self implies “the epiphany of the other” but does not explicitly affirm the supernatural character of this revelation²⁷. Exploring the stratified meanings of the

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*, 47–48.

²³ Ioan Alexandru Tofan, *Omul lăuntric. André Scrima și fizionomia experienței spirituale* (București: Humanitas, 2019), 113.

²⁴ Scrima, “Epifania în tradiția liturgică bizantină,” in idem, *Biserica liturgică*, ed. Anca Manolescu (București: Humanitas, 2005), 165.

²⁵ Idem, “Conștiința credinței,” 61.

²⁶ Idem, “Experiența spirituală și limbajul său. Tradiția creștină,” in idem, *Experiența spirituală și limbajele ei*, ed. Anca Manolescu (București: Humanitas, 2008), 57.

²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Montpelier: Fata Morgana, ²1987), 42–57.

word “epiphany,” Father Scrima goes far beyond Levinas’ vision and points out that the term has always designated a religious event, representing

an appearance of a supernatural power, comprising certain essential characteristics that constitute the religious meaning of the word: – surprise – epiphany is not the result of a human effort [...] Epiphany is the consequence of freedom. It cannot be provoked by the human act [...]; – the “tempestuous” character of eruptive force. The epiphany causes a certain power to appear suddenly, irruptive. [The epiphany] is active. [The epiphany] produces a result; – [The epiphany] is evanescent. Disappears quickly. [The epiphany] cannot be held.²⁸

Being simultaneously initiative and response, the epiphany seals in history the “desire” that “always carries me to Another,”²⁹ Who was the one who first engaged in this relationship, bringing me into existence out of nothing³⁰. Thus, Epiphany is the testimony of otherness because, “the Different, the completely Different [...] is revealed, He crosses the distance of difference [...] The Absolute difference, crosses the distance to become effectively human.”³¹

Only in this way does the “Revelation make sense, because there is a distance to travel, as there is in any communication from one being to another. Communication always means – formally, existentially, intellectually – crossing a distance, overcoming a border, a chasm,”³² and this epiphanic act of God continues today. Since we are creatures limited by space and time, we need an interval, that is, a “difference, as a place where the Other can insinuate himself and speak without his voice being distorted.”³³

But the reception of Revelation necessarily presupposes an opening on the part of man in order to be able to recognize the Other and to be willing to meet Him: “to see God means to be close to Him, not in a physical, material closeness, of course; it means to obtain the capacity to perceive His Presence and to assume it within one’s own being.”³⁴ But again, God contributes significantly by supporting man’s effort: “where a revelation takes place there is a discovery, a communication, a knowledge, a gift is given, an «initiation» in the sense of «an entry and welcome deep inside» a space previously inaccessible.”³⁵

²⁸ Scrima, “Epifania în tradiția,” 129.

²⁹ Idem, “Experiența spirituală,” 122.

³⁰ Idem, “Conștiința credinței,” 41; idem, “Experiența spirituală,” 203.

³¹ Idem, “Experiența spirituală,” 123.

³² *Ibidem*, 126.

³³ Tofan, *Omul lăuntric*, 123.

³⁴ Scrima, “Experiența spirituală,” 73.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 84.

However, according to Father Scrima, the complete reception of the Epiphany is conditioned by an “itinerant initiation”. Therefore, the full meaning of Revelation “can be caught, perceived, understood only by the one who is in a state of itinerance, in the limitless expansion of the Spirit.”³⁶ That is why he uses in the hermeneutic reading of Father Ivan Kulîghin’s letter³⁷ the phrase “the found seekers” to designate those people who “assuming the condition of a perpetual inner pilgrimage, find God because He finds them first.”³⁸

Faced with Revelation, with the dazzling Epiphany, the found seeker faces the inevitable temptation to preserve this moment, to make the discovery his very own, and uses the fragment of truth he glimpsed to define his own identity, in contrast to the attributes of the “other”.

However:

the divisions in spirit (mentalities, perceptible sensibilities, different conceptions of God and the world) determine, according to a classical process, self-enclosure. And this enclosure meant to preserve what appears as a definition of self in faith is in turn easily transformed into a defensive reflex, if not aggression.³⁹

Father André Scrima makes a series of statements on the biblical meanings of the sedentary and the nomad, respectively, which he sets up as the centre of his vision of otherness: the other is the stranger, the unstable nomad. But at the same time the sedentary is the one who, under the pretext of civilization and evolution, abandoned the “path,” he institutionalized the religious message of Revelation, opposing the stagnation to the itinerant initiation, the institution to the event, the immobile idol to the astounding prophecy.

A sedentary person wants to acquire steadfastness on earth, to settle down, to take root. But he ignores the depth, the vertical dimension of the earth, while a nomad, an itinerant, remains a stranger on earth, he is not bound, limited by any earthly reference.⁴⁰

Halting in his journey of growth, the man “stranded” in faith resembles the Israelites, wandering in the wilderness, trying to keep the heavenly man-

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 170.

³⁷ Father Ivan Kulîghin’s letter was addressed to his disciples from Antim Monastery in autumn 1946. This document contains his last teachings. Apprehended by the Bolshevik armies, in January 1947 he was investigated and sentenced to ten years of forced labor, being sent to the Soviet Union. Soon, every trace of his existence was lost.

³⁸ Scrima, “Lectura hermeneutică a scrisorii,” in *idem*, *Timpul Rugului Aprins*, 34–35.

³⁹ *Idem*, “O «Facultate de Științe Religioase» în spațiul uman și cultural al Libanului și al Orientului Apropiat,” in *idem*, *Teme ecumenice*, 172.

⁴⁰ *Idem*, “Experiența spirituală,” 169.

na for the next day (Exod. 16.20), trusting more in their foresight than in Providence. This kind of human ignores his vocation as a nomad, as a wanderer engaged in a purifying journey and succumbs to the temptation of civilization and “sedentation”.

In this sense, Father Scrima sees in the biblical account of Cain and Abel the reference to a set of fundamental archetypes, already distinguishing “a first polarity, well defined: the shepherd (nomad) and the worker of the earth, related to the earth (sedentary).”⁴¹ Through his earthly preoccupations Cain fails to know God even in his sacrifice, he fails to be a partaker of Revelation:

The human type accepted by the divine, the one recognized by him and whose sacrifice is invested with an ascending and effective meaning, is that of the nomad Abel. The sedentary Cain is not accepted by God. The smoke of Cain’s sacrifice spreads horizontally across the earth, not up into the sky. The condition of the itinerant seems to have more chances to assume the perspective of recognition, with its double sense of mutual knowledge and gratitude, than the condition of the sedentary has; the former seems to have access to the mystery of the divine.⁴²

For this reason, Cain perceives his brother as a rival in a competition for the divine favour. From the perspective of the sedentary there is no place for the “other,” not even before God, an attitude which ends up justifying the crime, the extermination of otherness. Religious sedentarism or “installation” in the faith has almost inevitably the consequence of defining one’s own identity, which can be an indispensable step in detecting otherness. Another consequence can be also the perception of a state of insecurity or fear in front of the “other”.

“Self-definition almost requires the denial of the other.”⁴³ In the dimension of religious life, the delimitation of one’s own specificity is achieved by appealing to the revealed truth, respectively to a series of prohibitions and prescriptions. These negative and positive principles particularize the content of one’s own faith, distinguishing it from the religious beliefs of the other. But at the same time, they latently contain the ambition to unify all humanity and to crystallize all consciousness in a single set of beliefs⁴⁴. This

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 178.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 179.

⁴³ Idem, “Cuvânt înainte [la traducerea volumului F. Schuon, *Despre unitatea transcendentă a religiilor*, Humanitas, 1994],” in idem, *Teme ecumenice*, 145.

⁴⁴ Andrei Cornea, *Ecclesiocrația. Mentalități culturale și forme artistice în epoca romano-bizantină (300-800)* (București: Teora, 1998), 41.

temptation to nullify the difference or the otherness ignores an essential aspect of faith, namely:

The capacity to receive, to give place in oneself, to open the being: the expansion of the being. Living, authentic, lucid faith can only happen in an act of receiving. It is present only where there is reception of the gift made by the absolute Other who is God.⁴⁵

Instead of proving the openness necessary to accept first the possibility of difference and all the gifts that derive from it, the human circumscribes the Revelation that he distorts according to his limitations:

We are always tempted to have a vision of God from our own human perspective, which definitively circumscribes the meanings and the truths, while claiming that this is His only revelation [...] when I am in difficulty to understand, «discern» a «new coming», a «Visitation» of God towards me – different from what he had assumed, as a form, until then –, it is not appropriate to reject it, to stop, to embitter myself. He comes to take me beyond His previously established image of Himself.⁴⁶

Therefore, what was supposed to be a “paradoxical encounter, never conclusive, of the Other”⁴⁷ is changed into a stagnation or stillness on the path of faith, called the “Way” (ὁ ὁδός – cf. Acts 22.4). This stumbling on the way can also be considered “an almost inevitable effect of our temporal condition,” “resulting in a decrease of «the zeal»: the vigilance of the spirit, of which Christ speaks, weakens, and faith «withdraws».”⁴⁸ But the spiritual sedentarism or the stranding in faith means at the same time the failure to encounter God, all the more so since we make “the living God an idol when we close Him in ourselves with our sufficient meanings.”⁴⁹

Clinging to shallow certainties, man settles down around his own zone of “spiritual” and mental comfort in which nothing provokes him anymore and does not disturb his peace with dilemmas or existential questions. And he builds his religious identity according to this truncated reality.

Therefore, any prophetic interventions, disturbances or challenges are considered new elements and are automatically perceived as heterodox, which threatens the fragment of truth to which an absolute value has been erroneously attributed by ignoring the relative, conditioned, limited nature

⁴⁵ Scrima, “Conștiința credinței,” 42.

⁴⁶ Idem, “Un test ultim al faptului religios,” in idem, *Temă ecumenică*, 110.

⁴⁷ Tofan, *Omul lăuntric*, 178.

⁴⁸ Scrima, “Un test ultim,” 111.

⁴⁹ Idem, “Cuvânt înainte [la traducerea volumului F. Schuon],” 152.

of the other aspects or attributes of the Truth which, in the Christian conception, is Christ Himself.

Because he refuses out of fear and convenience to accept and know anything else outside the narrow circle in which his conscience is trapped, man stagnates in this affective (in)disposition towards what is not his own.

The rejection of the other, the exclusivism becomes once more an impossibility, an enclosure in yourself for «defence» (masked aggression), provincialism, apprehension and fear and, ultimately, the distortion of the living image of God in you, which is pathetic.⁵⁰

Legitimized by the interruption of the plenary communion with the divinity, the refusal of the other includes also the fear, justified or not, of the one considered not only *alter* (other), but also *alienus* (foreign, enemy). Therefore, otherness means not only difference, but also competition, rivalry, even in terms of spiritual beliefs. Within this competitiveness, two congruent tendencies are manifested: the affirmation of the superiority of one's own position (even spiritual) and the demonization of the other: "the other is always considered the weed, not me. The cockle is always the other, it's not me."⁵¹ The other "is the depository of all evils, the champion of all transgressions."⁵²

This attitude of "intolerance," which can cover the whole range of hostile attitudes, from defamation to physical violence or even murder in the name of faith,

returns to the terrible error of considering faith reducible to opinion and expression, since he who adopts another opinion and another expression within faith must be suppressed [...] So violence and monolithic expression of faith instead of opening dialogue and the risk of freedom, that terrible freedom to be contradicted.⁵³

Most of the time the very comfortable settlement in a biased form of the doctrine inevitably leads to the idolatry and deformation of a fragment of revealed truth⁵⁴ and therefore one arrives at

⁵⁰ Idem, "Un test ultim," 108.

⁵¹ Idem, "Conștiința credinței," 185.

⁵² Pleșu, "Prefață," in Scrima, *Timpul Rugului Aprins*, 14.

⁵³ Scrima, "Ideologie și utopie," in idem, *Funcția critică a credinței*, ed. Anca Manolescu (București: Humanitas, 2011), 225.

⁵⁴ Further on this topic see: Fr. Prof. Dr. Dorin Oancea, *Curs de Filozofia Religiei* (Sibiu: 2013), 51–64 and Alina Pătru, "Dorin Oancea's Chrystocentric Personalist Pluralism. A Christian Orthodox Theology of Religions," in *Meeting God in the Other. Studies in Religious Encounter and Pluralism in honour of Dorin Oancea on the occasion of his 70th birthday*, ed. Alina Pătru (Wien: LIT Verlag, 2019), 77–78.

the sin of those for whom «faith» is the suspension of interrogation, of search, of spiritual awakening. They wear the truth on their lapels, they have eternal life assured, they no longer need a «way». They can sleep peacefully in the comfort of self-justification. They understood, they know that they are the keepers of a bag of certainties, capable of making any probing, any internal crisis, any insomnia, a pure waste of time.⁵⁵

Paradoxically, possessed by the certainty of his own values, stuck on the journey of faith and in an arbitrary interpretation of Revelation, the human does not miss any opportunity to prove his narrow-mindedness in approaching more nuanced themes, placing himself categorically in one of the extremes, in order to ultimately act contrary to the principles he displays and promotes⁵⁶.

Father Scrima criticises this stagnation:

Simply put, one of the causes that would make us feel negative is, paradoxically, our great familiarity with our own religious ambiance; its inseparable reverse is our ignorance of the others. Ignorance is shallow, prompt, and sufficient; knowledge – long, patient, modest. On the other hand, familiarity dispels mysteries; that which we hold «transcendent» in order to keep us in our references, in our own religion, decays easily in everyday life, integrates fully into the terrestrial landscape, even ends up becoming a simple sector of human social and cultural life.⁵⁷

Accusing our present fear of the gifts of the Spirit and of the “tendency to rush into our well-known little shelters,”⁵⁸ Father Scrima shows that “once faith is systematized, it itself risks reaching a situation close to ideology or even ideology.”⁵⁹

This state can only be a “bad faith,” the immobility eliminating at the same time, in one way or another, to one degree or another the interpellation that arouses it, which comes from God. As such, it no longer answers the question, but is in a state of sufficiency. And since man, without realizing it, remains in this state of self-sufficiency of faith, he is also in a state of self-sufficiency. He feels good, justified, established in his faith, either individually or collectively. Without realizing it, he slips from the position

⁵⁵ Pleșu, „Trei cuvinte ale Părintelui Scrima,” in *Dilema veche*, nr. 738, 12-18 aprilie 2018.

⁵⁶ See also: Dragoș Boicu, “Intrad denominational Religious Conflict and the Need for Self-Assertion,” *European Journal of Science and Theology* 15, no. 4 (August 2019): 87–102.

⁵⁷ Scrima, “Cuvânt înainte [la traducerea volumului F. Schuon],” 151.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 154.

⁵⁹ Idem, “Ideologie și utopie,” 221.

of living faith to a faith stopped in place. In the sacred texts it is called dead faith: not the absence of faith, infidelity, paganism, unbelief, but a dead faith.⁶⁰

Ultimately, “the closed religious experience, within a consciousness that turns its back on the perceived real, objectively becomes a hypocritical consciousness.”⁶¹

As a form of counter-Revelation, the settlement in faith harms man’s spiritual experience, affecting his relationship with the two instances of otherness, and self-sufficiency leaves no room for “the longing for God” in either of the senses evoked by Father Scrima⁶². By limiting Revelation, we do not limit ourselves only, but create “limitations” that “express complacency with our own limits, complicity with them, solidification of their restrictive power. Limitations represent self-assertion through the exclusion of the other.”⁶³

The need to meet the other

But if the limitations represent as many failures to find the one next to us, the “limits” are constitutive of the otherness because they “configure, propose to you, but do not impose on you. The limits offer you a face [...] the face is exactly the first way out of the limitation, the first overcoming of the limitation. Because the face is directed «to the other,» beyond its own individual limitations.”⁶⁴ Accepting one’s own limits shows us most clearly that the “other” is part of the answer to the search for Revelation⁶⁵.

This next instance of otherness is approached in the studies and courses of Father Scrima on several levels:

- a) interpersonal;
- b) interreligious;
- c) interconfessional;
- d) intraconfessional (intrad denominational).

The range of nuances with which André Scrima approaches each of these levels is very rich, and the shades that define the three hypostases of the religious “other,” (b, c, d) separating the human from the fellow man in general (a) are so fine that the elements intertwine and often overlap. If the study of Father Scrima’s vision of the religious other still requires further research,

⁶⁰ Idem, “Conștiința credinței,” 49–50.

⁶¹ Idem, “Experiența spirituală,” 33.

⁶² Idem, “Conștiința credinței,” 41; idem, “Experiența spirituală,” 122–23, 203.

⁶³ Idem, “Întâlniri în jurul unui pelerin străin,” in idem, *Timpul Rugului Aprins*, 45.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, 46.

⁶⁵ Idem, “Timpul Rugului Aprins. Grupul de la Antim,” in idem, *Timpul Rugului Aprins*, 163.

we can emphasize in this section his perspective on otherness on the interpersonal level pointing out the attitude with which we need to relate to him.

According to Father Scrima, it must be accepted that the very existence of one's fellow man is a form of natural Revelation before which – if we look at it honestly and without prejudice – we will be overwhelmed with amazement.

The capacity for wonder immediately awakens the being. To perceive the cosmos and macrocosmic aspect of reality, or the living presence of the other, or to have the intuition of one's own interiority, any of these can awaken in us the perception of the extraordinary unity of meaning and being of reality.⁶⁶

At the same time, the existential proximity of the “neighbour” is what guarantees the preservation of objectivity in relation to the Revelation and to all fields of human activity. This ‘other’ is distinct from me and the person whom I am talking to, “you”. That is why Father Scrima states that:

The real person is the third: He. [...] The meeting between «I» and «you» is of great beauty and it can be truly fulfilled, but there is always the danger of a camouflaged movement of the ego from one to the other. While the third person cannot be attached to the ego.⁶⁷

The presence of the other fills the existence of his fellow man with meaning and becomes an opportunity and a means of self-knowledge:

Consciousness cannot directly perceive its presence; it cannot reach a presence with regards to itself. I am present to myself only through another. The shortest path to myself passes through another, this other being the physical experience, the perception or the living response of love, of sympathy, of antipathy of another living being [...] man cannot directly reach a presence of himself that completely satisfies the desire, the dream of absolute fullness.⁶⁸

A recurring idea of Father Scrima is that in order to truly reach the destination through Revelation but also to self-knowledge, it is mandatory to meet with the other:

Self-discovery today necessarily passes through the other and is fulfilled in his presence. Superiority isolates, distrust creates blockages.⁶⁹

Self-discovery goes through the other [...] Let us not close ourselves in self-sufficiency. It is impossible to know ourselves if we continue to ignore and reject the other. [...] We must discover the

⁶⁶ Idem, “Experiența spirituală,” 97.

⁶⁷ Idem, “Întâlniri în jurul,” 42.

⁶⁸ Idem, “Experiența spirituală,” 35.

⁶⁹ Idem, “«Jurnal» de conciliu,” in idem, *Duhul Sfânt și Unitatea Bisericii*, 224.

other – in pain and joy – as the other half of us. Let us make room for him inside us.⁷⁰

Meeting the other is not only a constitutive necessity but also an imperative “so that I will say with joy that from now on you can reach your fullness only through the other.”⁷¹

That other is much more than a means of spiritual perfection but really gives meaning to my existence, is a vector of the life of spiritual experience and at the same time is its objective witness – a living consciousness and memory of my existence. The relationship with the other, which Father Scrima calls “agent of Providence,”⁷² defines man before the divinity, but also before his own conscience.

That is why Father Scrima emphasizes “the absolute need to question ourselves beforehand in order to open the epistemological space of the meeting, freeing them from any pre-judgment in which would be inscribed, without realizing it, our tendency to control the other.”⁷³

The sincere intention to know the other, the cultivation of an affective disposition towards otherness can be considered in this sense an absolutely necessary criterion for self-knowledge: “we begin to realize that questioning the other involves first questioning yourself.”⁷⁴ Stepping outside the circle of his subjectivism, man contemplates in the other “the true face of the world, distorted by the modulation of his own knowledge.”⁷⁵

But the most important effect of accepting the other is that it keeps man “in the Spirit,” for “you cannot truly be a believer without a continually going out of and beyond yourself, in the Spirit. A visibly marked path is not required here: the one who calls us and leads us forward is the other, the one different from myself.”⁷⁶

“Being in the Spirit” and being in a relationship with the other are two acts that seem to be inter-conditioned:

He who loves cannot be afraid of the presence of the other. Usually, when I reject the other person’s presence, I do so for fear that he will not accept my presence. But if I am in the Spirit, the presence of the other can no longer disturb me, even if it does not conform to a certain cliché, to a familiar pattern.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 216.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 214.

⁷² Idem, “Întâlniri în jurul,” 32.

⁷³ Idem, “Religii ale mântuirii și mântuire în Iisus Christos,” in idem, *Teme ecumenice*, 99.

⁷⁴ Idem, “Cuvânt înainte [la traducerea volumului F. Schuon],” 143.

⁷⁵ Tofan, *Omul lăuntric*, 201.

⁷⁶ Scrima, “Cuvânt înainte [la traducerea volumului F. Schuon],” 152.

⁷⁷ Idem, “Experiența spirituală,” 168.

From this passage it follows that to be open to the other presupposes to be already “in the Spirit,” but on the other hand, as long as man does not open himself to another, he remains deprived of the experience of the Spirit: “Fighting the other is not always the surest way to discover and maintain yourself. The Luciferic inverse of unity: to live in isolation from the gifts of the Spirit, not to trust the other.”⁷⁸

The simple coexistence with the other or tolerance is not enough, and Father Scrima insists on this aspect showing that the “state of coexistence” is often portrayed as a spontaneous tolerance between the various ethnic, cultural or religious components of the region. It is indispensable then to take into account [...] the double meaning of tolerance. The first which can be called passive tolerance is defined at the level of spontaneous cohabitation, «natural» and sometimes leads to a kind of psycho-social complicity.⁷⁹

Tolerance should not be automatically perceived as the diametrically opposed attitude to intolerance, because tolerance itself has a negative connotation that leads to indifference or condescending indulgence, the expression of which is an incomplete acceptance and rather forced by circumstances (such as the inability to abolish otherness), but this does not mean understanding the differences, much less recognizing any equality between the factors involved:

The still frequently present difficulty of finding a place for «the other» in our familiar universe: to dismiss him as an «alien», a «pagan», an «exotic», remains the simplest way not to change ourselves.⁸⁰

That is why André Scrima insists on a second meaning of tolerance, much more appropriate than the first:

The second (meaning), the conscious and active tolerance [...] it is the one that, allowing me to discover the originality of the other vis-à-vis with my own, makes possible the deep dialogue, mutual questioning, sober confrontation with the challenges of time and finally the creative answer.⁸¹

Therefore, although very important, formal contacts and coexistence are not enough for a genuine relationship with each other. Much more is needed, the cultivation of a “prophetic sensibility”⁸² which “involves a free and living

⁷⁸ Idem, “«Jurnal» de conciliu,” 214.

⁷⁹ Idem, “O «Facultate de Științe Religioase,” 167.

⁸⁰ Idem, “Cuvânt înainte [la traducerea volumului F. Schuon],” 153.

⁸¹ Idem, “O «Facultate de Științe Religioase,” 167.

⁸² Idem, “Un test ultim,” 111.

transcendence of the self; not the transcendence of the other, but towards the other.”⁸³

This implies a sacrificial opening to one's fellow man, including accepting the possibility of being hurt by the other: “The asceticism of dialogue: to die for the other in order to be reborn with him; to become the other, to no longer be afraid of him, to no longer be distrustful.”⁸⁴ But trust in the other, the “human correlate of faith,”⁸⁵ is at the same time a great vulnerability, an assumed vulnerability, and a crucifixion of one's own prejudices and conservation instincts in an “unprecedented openness to the careful desire to receive the unpredictable of God, free from all blockages.”⁸⁶ And the hardest cross of conscience is “recognizing that we are all equidistant to God from now on, that the open-being of the other is the inalienable place where God Himself can appear.”⁸⁷

Conclusions

Father André Scrima fully identified himself with his vocation as a wandering monk, meant to meet in his itinerary new partners of dialogue and new opportunities for knowledge. Genuinely preoccupied with the importance of meeting/finding the “other,” the Romanian theologian correlated in his articles and course materials the epiphanic act of divinity and the imperative of openness to otherness, an essential condition for man to reach perfection. Probably influenced by the ideas of French culture developed in the 60's and 70's of the last century (Emmanuel Levinas – the epiphany of the other), André Scrima emphasizes the importance of otherness which is essential since “the true person is the third one.” But the broader nature of Father Scrima's clarifications on otherness will serve as a necessary premise for the development of a series of criteria and observations on religious inclusiveness. Invoking the legitimacy of religious pluralism, he maintains an elegant balance between recognizing the spiritual value of other religions and affirming “the conscious and lucid faith in Christ, the «unique and total revelation» of God.”⁸⁸

⁸³ Idem, “Introducere [la volumul Contemplation and Action in World Religions],” in idem, *Teme ecumenice*, 190.

⁸⁴ Idem, “«Jurnal» de conciliu,” 214.

⁸⁵ Idem, “Întâlniri în jurul,” 32.

⁸⁶ Idem, “Ierusalim: reflexii asupra unei cetăți «unice și universale» pentru tradițiile mono-teiste,” in idem, *Teme ecumenice*, 57.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ Idem, “Christos și religiile necreștine,” in idem, *Teme ecumenice*, 80–81.