

**POSITIONS TOWARDS A MULTIPLE KNOWLEDGE
OF GOD: INTERPRETING THE RELIGIOUS
EXPERIENCE IN AN ORTHODOX CHURCH**

By
Carmen Maria Manea

Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Supervisors: Prof. Vlad Naumescu
Prof. Marianne Saghy

Budapest, Hungary
2015

ABSTRACT

Current debates on religious knowledge could be characterized, with the risk of essentializing their methods and outcomes, as divided between a classical path opened by Weber and Durkheim and a modern tendency to pull apart the chains of 19 and early 20th century scholarly traditions by contesting their methodological foundations and/or religious and ethical standpoints. The ethical, political and belief foundations of the “intellectualist” British anthropology of religion had a strong impact on the subsequent development of the social studies on religion and kept a breach between anthropology and theology. Only with the writings of Evans-Pritchard, Mary Douglas and the efforts of Victor and Edith Turner to bring Christian beliefs, experiences and emotions to the attention of anthropology beside phenomenological explanations, did anthropology make a significant step in getting closer to theological studies.

These will all be contrasted with my own positionality in what concerns the knowledge about God and the subsequent reading of the experiences, religious practices and language used by the members of the Romanian monastery (Budapest) to show their own understanding of God as He is, as He manifests His presence or as He makes himself knowable to the believer. Thus, this work could be marked as an experiment, albeit all its faults, in an ethnography of spirituality and in self-reflexivity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to my friend and colleague Oana Fuica for her valuable ideas shared along the writing process as well as for her huge moral support which never failed to give me courage to write this thesis. My deep gratitude goes also to Father Nicholas who accepted my request to do fieldwork at the monastery and who was patient and supportive during these months of research. His inspiring words and encouragements enabled me to see more clearly the road that I had to follow while writing this text. Moreover, I appreciate the time he spent in explaining during long debates such delicate issues as our interaction with God and in addressing my own beliefs. Lastly, I would like to express my most sincere gratification to Marianne Saghy and Vlad Naumescu for accepting to supervise my work and for their valuable comments and benevolence.

Contents

ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1. Social scientific positions on the knowledge about God.....	7
1.1 A sketch of the conceptual framework employed	7
1.2 Influential traditions in the anthropology of religion	10
Chapter 2. Knowing God through the ethnographic field	20
2.1 Position in the field	20
2.2 I trust I make myself obscure. The paradoxical knowledge of God.....	25
2.3 The felt knowledge of God	27
Conclusions	45
Appendix 1	47
Appendix 2	48
REFERENCES	51

Introduction

In 1791 was founded on the banks of the Danube an Orthodox church which represented the Romanian, Greek and Aromanian communities existent at that time in Budapest. The dissension between the Romanian and Greek members determined that after a century a new and independent church community was established in the center of Budapest in one of the buildings of the Emanoil Gojdu Foundation, the latter principally dedicated to give financial support to Orthodox Romanian students from Transylvania. Since the 1900s till today the edifice functioned as a Romanian Orthodox chapel and monastery. After being reclaimed in 1989, the monastery had begun a slow process of reconstruction which was only accelerated in the last five years thanks to the funds gathered by the Romanian Orthodox See in Hungary (member of the Romanian Patriarchate) and the Romanian Government. The four members of the monastery, three nuns and one monk (Father Nicholas)- the latter also performing the responsibilities of a priest and confessor for the nuns and the rest of the community- came less than five years ago in Budapest to form the diasporic monastic community. The existence of a Romanian Orthodox community outside the national borders triggered my curiosity to look further especially into the religious life of its members. And, because the Romanian nationalistic component consists of a profound adhesion to Orthodox values which also create a strong Christian identity, I envisioned the possibility to get an insight into the spiritual life of the church and its religious practices.

Into the diaspora, the Romanian community¹ gravitates around an Orthodox church. The monastery is a focal place where national values are enhanced, but, most of all, where everyone

¹ The notion of “community” that I use refers not to a fixed ethnic and religious group (few of them are Hungarians converted to Orthodoxy), but more to a continuous process of “grouping” around the Romanian monastery. It could rather be envisioned as a project which takes time and effort.

seeks his/her own definition and understanding of religious knowledge. Gradually it began to clear up the importance to look for the individual positions of the members in the church, as well as for my own place in the ethnographic field and how this might affect the questions asked, the ideas that I searched and the interpretation of the results obtained. It became clear that the diasporic religious life was the ground where self-awareness as an Orthodox Christian and as a Romanian citizen (who becomes conscious of one's national values) were more acute and visible.

The concept *diaspora* derives from the Greek verb *diaspeirein* which means to scatter or to spread. Yet, although the term was first coined in the Septuagint with reference to the Jews, it gradually began to cover a large spectrum of populations and it also acquired a new set of meanings (Barclay, 2004: 1-8). In their eschatology, the Christian Fathers employed the notion to show the disseminated character of the Christian community on Earth and its real homeland as the heavenly Jerusalem. Nevertheless, as an official church was established in the fourth century, the term began to vanish from the writings of the Christian Fathers (Baumann, 2000: 320). At the same time with its diverse socio-historical usages, the term *diaspora* lost its actual semantic significance. In an older interview with Father Nicholas the notion of “*Romanian diaspora*” was considered to be as an inappropriate reflection of the actual community living in Budapest for more than 200 years. Diaspora was associated with a forced exile, an exodus (in an ancient Jewish sense) while the Romanians were believed to form a traditional and homogeneous community based on a strong national component. This, however, is likewise important for observing the linguistic variations that characterize the discussions with Father Nicholas.

Currently, in Hungary there are more than 22.000 Romanians whereof 8000 are living in Budapest. It is hard to say how many of them actually declare themselves to be Orthodox and, among these, how big is the percentage of those who attend Church services regularly. The

ethnographic observations made during both years of participation in the religious services reveal, instead, a very small number of people frequently attending the Mass and the other Orthodox services. The Sunday Mass, as a more popular service, had no more than 50 people who seemed to know each other for a long time as they were always exchanging greetings at the end of each Sunday. Others came only for the bigger celebrations such as Christmas and Easter as their presence was also a means of rehabilitating their identity as Orthodox Romanians and their reinsertion into the community.

Among the Romanian community created around the monastery, four typologies could be rapidly sketched which will be seen later on in this paper. First of all, Terence is the informant who, even at the very beginning of his job in Budapest, started eagerly to search for the location of the monastery and did not stop till he finally found it and exclaimed more than delighted: “Finally, God, I have found you!” His quest for the church is continued in a fervent spiritual quest as he narrates his strive to find out more about Christianity through religious practices and especially through the readings from the Eastern Christian Fathers. Mary, on the other hand, is the type of Orthodox Christian converted to a more intense faith after difficult periods of loneliness, emotional struggle and insecurities. Her reconstructed belief in God becomes a booster in her life as she is transformed into a more self-confident person and gets better integrated into the Romanian community. Apart from being a central piece in their strive for a more committed Christian life, the community is also, for both Mary and Terence, an essential part in their diasporic life as it preserves the Romanian identity through Orthodoxy and national values. The latter are a component of the sermons uttered and the Romanian festivities encouraged by the two priests, one of whom is the monk and superior, Father Nicholas. Charismatic and always open to debates and curiosities, Father Nicholas is the type of priest admired, loved, and perhaps controversial in the eyes of the more conservative and rigorous

sacerdotal milieu from Romania. After several years spent as a student in the Romanian Academy of Defense, the future-to-be Father Nicholas discovered a more concrete and decisive form of commitment to the Orthodox Christian belief. Shortly after finishing his studies he joined a famous and highly visited monastery from Transylvania. Now, as the superior of the small Romanian monastery, Father Nicholas is the focal point towards which every member and visitor turns his attention. By contrast, Father John, although highly appreciated, remains in a rather shadowy position discernable in the smaller number of believers who gather around him at each agape and in the sermons which are more prosaic and informative. Yet, thanks to the contrasting characteristics between the two priests and the informants it is actually possible to discern, compare and understand the individual trajectories that one has in his/her path towards the communion with God. Although institutionally one might be guided towards a more conservative and a more systematically built religious knowledge through the teachings of the Church on the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition, the multiplicity of the paths used individually to gain knowledge brings out the ways in which the latter is gradually altered, enhanced and “personalized” to create unique modes of representing, experiencing, understanding God and sharing to others the knowledge of the divine. The constitution of various forms of knowledge escape the hierarchical models characteristic of the Church while they are also reshaped by traditions invented by believers. As they seem to have a life of their own, traditions such as those surrounding Father Arsenie Boca have a transforming role on the beliefs, practices and the religious knowledge accumulated by believers. Thus, the various paths of knowledge are opened up to numerous interacting elements: the official Orthodox Christian discourses and interpretations, religious performance, traditions inside the community of believers, individual social and cultural contexts and the relation with the divine that the faithful represent. Yet, to

understand the variable forms of knowledge, it is also important to pay attention to one's own position in the field.

Self-reflexivity is a compulsory tool towards any honest understanding of individual preconceptions and how the investigation process determines the personal set of beliefs of the anthropologist. As it will be seen in the following chapters, positionality has also consequences on the research results, yet, even more important, this also informs on the type of religious knowledge that characterizes the scholar. It is a moment of unveiling one's actual beliefs which, although sometimes not explicitly mentioned in the research, comes to light only at a deeper reading. In the anthropology of Christianity one is supposed to be aware that his/her beliefs or even one's lack of beliefs could distort the actual message that is transmitted during the church rituals, the sermons or in the interaction with other believers. Being also a believer, I began to consider that my own faith could be an obstacle in objectifying the outcome of the ethnographic work or even in taking for granted the experiences and discourses of the informants and leaving them unexplained. During the fieldwork I intended to understand such delicate aspects of a Christian's life as one's dialogue with God during prayer, the manner whereby one knows how to give meaning in Christian terms to his/her life experiences, the unique knowledge that each of us has about God, the importance that believers give to the felt reality and less to words in an effort to make Christianity not a dogmatic knowledge, but a set of livable principles etc. Surely, no one could describe oneself as being a devoted believer, or one who holds a canonical faith. Even among the informants themselves, they are experiencing singular (and at times very syncretic) forms of relations with the divine. No one would claim that he/she has an indestructible and normative knowledge of God, not even the priests.

Everyone finds one's way towards a personal knowledge of God. It is not a competition of who acquires a more scholarly knowledge or an intellectualist abstraction that reduces God to

an ever definable concept, a semiotic fight between scholars. Otherwise researchers would consider only the learning process of religious symbols and language or the acquisition of a specific knowledge, although they are highly important for their results and methodologies. The contributions and faults of 19th century and modern research on religion will be discussed in the first chapter along with the definitions of the concepts employed, while the second chapter will begin with the impact of my personal position in the fieldwork as an Orthodox Christian believer, continuing with a brief Christian theological and mystical introduction to the value of prayer and communion with God for the formation of the knowledge of the divine. Lastly, I will dedicate the ending part of the chapter to the most relevant sermons, informal talks and interviews that form the ethnographic material.

Thus, this research could be viewed as triangular arrangement of positions on the knowledge of God: first of all, the most significant social scientific positions on and interpretations of religious life, secondly, the self-conscious role of individual positionality and thirdly, the informants' own articulation of religious experiences and beliefs that constitute their knowledge of God.

Chapter 1. Social scientific positions on the knowledge about God

1.1 A sketch of the conceptual framework employed

To start with, in order to understand the subsequent pages would be helpful to make a sketch of the notions which will be frequently employed. Along with the definition of religion, my own position in the field should also be conceptualized in relation to the object of study (Lambek, 2013: 3) as it is a methodological tool for understanding the multiple types of religious knowledge. First of all, by retaking and reversing Michael Lambek's inquiry on giving an exhaustive definition on religion, the latter is a cultural form of anchoring truth into reality which provides the means for establishing, discerning and renewing values and virtues (Ibid: 4, 8). While this definition helps to grasp the uses of the notion in the text, positionality in the field is also related to and has an impact on the understanding of the term *religion*. As an Orthodox Christian, my position is central in the relation established with the members of the community who see me through this perspective. However contrasting my position would be, as an insider and an outsider at the same time, it remains through the entire fieldwork my passport among the Romanian community.

On a slightly different level, contrary to the Wittgenstein's view on the inherent insufficiency of language to express God's transcendental attributes (Klein, 2006: 370-371), as God cannot be circumscribed to grammatical and linguistic rules, albeit its limits, the *religious language* used in hymns, prayers, sermons, rituals and in the conversion narratives of the informants (Mary and Terence), is a form of mediation and understanding of the divine. While the performative and dynamic ritual language of the hymns and of specific collective prayers (uttered during Vespers or Sunday services) are not only statements of fact, but also "a doing of something" (Wheelock, 1982: 52; Bauman and Briggs, 1990: 62), making singular events as the

Transubstantiation be actually real for the believers, individual prayers and sermons are a means of communication with the divine and of communicating a specific knowledge. Throughout the following pages, the notion of *religious language* also designates the linguistic trial of adjusting spiritual experiences to the reality of God which for the informants is not only supposed to be rational, but supra-rational and, hence, with an inherent difficulty of giving a stark definition. The same could be said when the informants recount in a descriptive manner certain *religious experiences* that they choose to be representative among other personal events. It is what they consider to be important for the ethnographer (as a believer and a new member of the local Orthodox community) as well as what they believe it was most uncommon in their lives that they narrate in their discourse of spiritual awakening and consolidation. Moreover, their narration has the role of reevaluating their own past and validating their experiences through the lens of the present. This also brings forward the notion of *religious knowledge* which is structured in progressive and qualitative steps. As the subjective prayer has more stages which show the Christian becoming² of the individual through the initial supplementation, the monologue and the invocation of God (Headley, Chapter 6; forthcoming) so does the knowledge of a divine reality. In this paper, religious knowledge is understood as processual and always prone to changes either determined by individual or objective reasons, much as prayer is dramatically placed on shifting grounds. The multiple positions that believers find themselves in their path towards the knowledge of God also correspond to the typical Orthodox emphasis on apophatic knowledge: “the mystical character of faith implies a richness and an infinite complexity of meanings which can never be reduced to any one-sided explanation” (Staniloae, 1980: 213).

² The “becoming” of a Christian resonates with the notions of “praying” and of “converting”, the latter as perhaps a better substitute for the term “conversion”. It is a more accurate portrayal of what the informants have to say about their experiences which always seem to be shifting or consolidating themselves.

The experiences, the prayers uttered and the religious knowledge accumulated also correspond to the entering of the believer into the Church and the architecture that surrounds him/her. Although the Romanian Orthodox Monastery of Budapest is not a conventional place of worship as it has no typical elements of ecclesiastical architecture (for instance, it lacks a classical nave or thematic wall paintings) the spatial imaginary is, nevertheless, discernable for the believer: the progress of the Christian from the nave to the altar is his/her path towards the knowledge of God and the position that the believer finds oneself at a certain time in one's life. Moreover, the experiences and the religious knowledge of the believer are not only intimately built, but, because the believer is inside the Church (as a communion of Christians) and prays along with and for its members, one's faith is permeable to its surroundings.

A *religious life*, as it is understood in this paper is, in an Orthodox theological definition, a renunciation of oneself for the sake of the community (self-sacrifice as a form of personal asceticism) and a time chose for seclusion and personal prayer. The notion *religious* refers, thus, to the overlapping of communitarian and intimate/personal boundaries or to the constant dialogue between the individual and the rest. Again, the analogy made with the role and pattern of the Christian prayer is illustrative. The adjective *religious* as does the notion of prayer, denotes a “‹‹critical boundary between inner and outer››, the point not only of contact but also of coalescence of two domains of experience that are as much related as they are opposed, ‹‹matching public and private worlds in order for them to meet, merge and fuse››” (David Shulman quoted in Headley, Preface; forthcoming).

The converging space of inner spirituality and outer institutional and communitarian life is likewise comparable with the *conversion* narrative of Mary, one of the informants whose religious experiences and spiritual transformations are more explicit than others. Here, the term *conversion* stands for the gradual qualitative ontological changes that occur in the life of

believers as they progressively rebuild their Orthodox Christian faith, without, however, seeing only the ascent of the believer towards a superior form of knowledge of God. Moreover, conversion is a dialogical relationship between God as an active agent of spiritual transformation and the will and efforts of the believer. Finally, as definitional tools used in this research, these notions are key instruments for discerning and comparing their understanding and uses in the anthropology of religion from its beginnings in the 19th century till today.

1.2 Influential traditions in the anthropology of religion

I would say that I learnt more about the nature of God and our human predicament from the Nuer than I ever learnt at home.

Evans-Pritchard, quoted in Matthew Engelke, The problem of belief.

Building up my argument on the sayings of the Late Ancient Christian monk Dorotheus of Gaza, I will try to develop an approach which will fuse both anthropology and theology. Dorotheus envisioned our personal knowledge of God as a path from which we deviate or proceed towards the center represented by God, in an act of communion with the divine. By getting even closer to the center, we become aware of our nearness to the others who follow their own personal way towards God. It is the position in relation to God that we have at a certain time which marks our knowledge of the divine. In other words, according to this positionality, there are innumerable kinds of knowledge. I take position as a methodological tool in the scientific analysis of which the researcher should be constantly aware. It is, moreover, a standpoint (not necessarily a privileged one) wherefrom certain ideas, beliefs, realities, experiences and types of

knowledge could be seen or hidden away from the beholder. Religious knowledge is produced from this individual platform.

Mary Douglas, Evans-Pritchard, Victor Turner and his wife Edith Turner are some of the few anthropologists who did not fear to engage with their own beliefs and feelings during fieldwork or who did not try to deny a priori the possibility of learning new forms of cognition or changing one's values. This engagement with the otherness of local knowledge and emotional behavior caused a methodological imbalance particularly salient in the tradition of the anthropology of religion. In the fieldwork, religion should not be viewed as a painting: as much as the colors and the ratio of shadows and light impress the eye of the beholder, one is not merely a detached spectator. Neither is fieldwork a simple act of cultural mimesis, but it should be a constant endeavor to pass to a felt reality, that is, to be aware of one's positionality in the field and to strive for a more "experiential" (and emotional) observation (Mitchell, 1997: 83). What anthropology succeeded in its theoretical development was to emphasize even more the need to comprehend the position of the ethnographer, while at the same time discerning and making visible the rationality and supra-rationality of religious knowledge.

People with strong religious beliefs use instrumental reasoning for structuring and making comprehensible their faith while at the same time the latter becomes a rational part of their lives. It is not only "the why" but also "the how" of Orthodox Christianity that is reflected in the informants' understanding of their faith. Nevertheless, a social scientific analysis has to include the supra-rational dimension of religious knowledge (the Christian emphasis on revelation) rather than disseminate it as far as establishing as socially constructed or even casting it in the area of mere superstition. Anthropology should not dismiss religious beliefs which emerge from revelation, nor does theology have to cast aside social sciences as intruders. As much as the two are unequal partners of discussion, still their methods could be used to understand conversion,

prayer or the formation of religious knowledge. Another question that immediately follows and represents a methodological concern up until now is the complicated relation that exists between being an anthropologist and preserving or changing one's faith. In his introduction to the book *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, Michael Lambek took the anthropological standpoint as one of many and considered that going native "would be an oxymoron" mainly because "we deal with so many natives who differ from each other" (2013: 2-3). Ethnographical work would be an ascetical act (idem) of contemplation and analysis, remote from the actual religious experiences and emotions that might be transmitted in an overwhelmingly fashion to the anthropologist. Yet, the observations that are filtered through the inquisitive gaze of the anthropologist, either as an outsider or insider of the community (or both), culture or religion studied, does not stand isolated from the substantial impact that the people studied might cause on the initial questions and/or ideas preconceived. The place that one takes in relation to his/her informants and fieldwork observations is crucial as it determines the questions that will be asked by the anthropologist and how one is perceived by the informants as well. But the latter also construct the positionality of the anthropologist as he/she is not "immune" to the inquiries, curiosities and typologies created by the informants. It is also the position that the informants have on their path to knowledge that has an influence on how they themselves see the kind of faith that anthropologists have. In other words, positionality (as much as religious language and knowledge) is flexible as the anthropologist is gradually conditioned to modify one's assumptions, arguments and maybe even beliefs by his/her changing observations and by the reactions that the informants might have to his/her ideas and questions. Thus, it is not the fear of becoming native that haunts anthropology as much as the anxiety of being too skeptical of the reality and rationality that the Other invests in his/her faith.

Nevertheless, up to a certain point, in the field of anthropological research on religious communities and their practices and emotions we should take into consideration the possibility of becoming as one of the natives or of being influenced by all of them in smaller or bigger degree. There should be a compromise between objectification and an interpretative framework that gives access to the own rationality of beliefs that the informants use to explain their religion: "This is usually the fear of religious emotion, perhaps meaning a shyness, an embarrassment with what one has been taught is a phony God. And the feeling is almost sexually unpleasant, related to the dread of fundamentalism, in which one is snatched up and locked into a strict belief and morality system that one has, through Durkheim and Foucault, learned to hate" (Turner, 2003: 110). The incapacity of exoticizing the already known could be both troubling and frustrating.³ While Christianity remained "impossibly" familiar or a "repugnant cultural other" for Susan Harding (Garriott & O'Neill, 2008: 385), anthropology had to learn how to cope with the stigmatized identity associated with its study. One solution envisioned was to isolate one's credo as much as possible from the beliefs and rationality of Christians such as to protect one's values from any kind of alteration. This taboo of going native is also apparent in Tanya Luhrmann's fieldwork on modern witchcraft in Great Britain. Although practicing herself the techniques of witchcraft, Luhrmann continued to remain an observer and concluded that witchcraft was a series of passage rites that lead the practitioner from rational to irrational states and beliefs (Ewing, 1994: 573). This was apparent in her question: "Why do they practice magic when, according to observers, the magic doesn't work?" Luhrmann made it clear that, despite her initiation, she was and remained an observer: "I never have and do not now 'believe' in magic" (Idem). The supernatural

³ Most of the social scientists who took up this challenge, concentrated their research on a very small and insufficient part of Christianity. Fenella Cannell, Webb Keane, Simon Coleman and Tanya Luhrmann, to name only a few, operated only with a narrower and basically protestant conception of the modern individual, whereas Catholicism and, even more so, Orthodoxy were left out of the reach of anthropologists. (Hann, 2007: 383)

either if it is taken as a belief in occult magical forces or in God, is, nevertheless, a state of mind, but not a reality on its own. In a phenomenological and comparative work between the encounter with the supernatural in the USA and Thailand, Luhrmann address the anthropological methodology as follows: “We compare experiences of the supernatural—something inferred to be present but without material form, something that is ‘real’ but not ‘natural’—and argue that the differences we find with regard to the experience of the supernatural in different social worlds can be explained, in part, by local understandings of mind and the way that the mind works, that is, how the mind knows, whether the mind is private or shared, whether moral knowing is different from natural perception” (Luhrmann & Cassaniti, 2011: 38). Yet, as much as it involves social conditions and the mind’s capacity of absorption and learning to tell bad spirits from the good ones, transcendental experiences and spirituality in general are not only the results of learning rules and skills (Luhrmann, 2005: 142-143).

The attitude towards the object of study, the load of emotions that we come with or are triggered on the fieldwork site and our personal religious beliefs, the socio-historical context that the anthropologist finds himself in are factors that characterize the position from which the future anthropological observations will be made, welcomed or challenged. Some of the modern explanations of religious phenomena, conversion or belief still owe much to the legacy left behind by the hyper-rational and scientific explanations of 19th and 20th century anthropology. From the Victorian relegation of Christianity into the sphere of “pagan” and inferior forms of human rational behavior, to the Durkheimian stress on religion as socially constructed and the academic struggles of Victor and Edith Turner to put an end to the troublesome relation between anthropology and religion, this field had been marked by continuous ups and downs.

19th century anthropological studies on religion beginning with the works of Edward Burnett Tylor and culminating with *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer regarded and defined

religion in socially and politically downgrading terms. As a living fossil that brought decay in an industrially revolutionized world which was on its unstoppable way towards progress, religion, and especially Christianity, brought Europe both “intellectually and morally to the level of negro Africa” due to “the Roman Church, the bulls of Gregory I X. and Innocent VIII., and the records of the Holy Inquisition” (Tylor quoted in Larsen, 2014: 15). As Comte and later social scientists envisioned the development of human civilization, theology (and more broadly, Christianity) was on the inferior level of civilization while the supreme moment of progress would have been the full growth of science. Such firm belief in the certainty of progress was very soon to be seen among socialist thinkers and then during communism. From this position religion was judged on political and ethical grounds with disdain or contempt for apparently slowing down the inevitable march towards the full individuality, rationality and illumination of the human spirit. Its presence into contemporary world was only a cultural “survival” of humanly invented theological dogmas and fake mystical experiences (due to hallucinations) that lasted thanks to conservatism (Larsen, 2014: 18-19). And yet, Tylor with his anti-ritualistic Quaker background (Ibid: 25-27), as much as agnostic, Catholic or Orthodox social scientists, could not avoid interfering his own beliefs with his writings no matter how objective anthropology thought of itself to be. Moreover, using little to no fieldwork data⁴ and arguments that made injustice to the specificity of religious beliefs and practices as they were weighed up with concerns of economic and political progress, religion from Shamanism to Catholicism was not a reality felt by individuals and guiding their lives, but an incomprehensible set of practices and beliefs. Another failure of the progressive theory of

⁴ As it was a characteristic of anthropology up until Bronislaw Malinowski, James Frazer, as only one example, was dependent and put a great weight on written sources and especially on the data offered by missionaries and colonial officials. Although the ethnographic material provided by Catholic or Protestant missionaries was far from being unbiased by the main evangelization projects, Frazer adopted their descriptions of local customs without having the fear that they might cause substantial alteration to his theories. (Larsen, 2014: 55-56).

society was to consider that religion was a stage fully separated from magic and science, while in fact Orthodox Christianity, to take only an example, still preserves pagan traditions and magical beliefs in its popular forms (the use of white magical practices or the use of the Bible as a prophecy source in present-day Romania).

The “intellectualist” and agnostic tradition in 19th century British anthropology reduced religion to a challenge for modern society. It was only the arrival of functionalist thinking in anthropology that the evolutionist and antiquated views on religion were dropped off (Larsen, 2014: 25). Till then, James Frazer’s works, and especially his successful and much edited work *The Golden Bough* (without forgetting his polemical Christian theological writings), laid even more stress on the incompatibility of religion and modern scientific breakthroughs. In a post-modernist strain, the 19th century anthropologist of religion was a reformer of his time both in ethics and thinking as he, by using comparative methods and taking for oneself the role of judge of his time and history, repeatedly put religion on the list of decaying human inventions (Ibid: 57). The problematical position of anthropologists towards their object of study either as committed Christians or not - although, as it will be seen in the case of Victor and Edith Turner, positionality defined their methodology, writing style and theories - was still unacknowledged as a significant standpoint for the anthropological work.

On the slippery ground of the anthropology of Christianity, Evans-Pritchard gave a new path for future anthropologists. By defending the rationality of the Azande’s mystical notions and the theological sophistication of the Nuer religion (Larsen, 2014: 72, 77-78), anthropology marked a bold step in giving more credit to the rationality of religion and the existing of the supernatural as seen, felt and understood by the natives. Yet, at the time of E-P’s conversion to Catholicism and publication of his writings, social sciences were still divided between the rationalistic legacy of Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim and Weber and the newer form of anthropology

that put on the same scale natural laws and belief in miracles (Ibid: 81). Evans-Pritchard's firm position on the rationality of religious beliefs and his interest in the works of theologians and Biblical scholars (Ibid: 92) was soon to be sustained and reconceptualized by Mary Douglas and the Turners. Raised as a Roman Catholic, Mary Douglas has instead driven herself away from her faith, only to regain and transform it years later (Ibid: 109, 113). Belief changes, either through conversion or just a consolidation of an existing faith, have the role not only to bring about cognitive and ontological shifts, but, in the case of the anthropology of religion, to instill new ways of understanding and writing. Yet, acknowledging the religious upbringing and influence in her books such as *Natural Symbols* (1970) - though to be the most imbedded with Christian ethics and dogma - Douglas ran the risk of being accused of propaganda for the Catholic Church, although, paradoxically, she was herself a critique of the conservative hierarchical organization of the Church (Ibid: 119, 122) as much as Edith Turner was an opponent of authority inside the Catholic Church.

As it is the case with the new post-communist status of the Romanian Orthodox Church, to criticize an institution currently considered to be one of the most trustworthy in the country, would place the anthropologist (even as a Christian), in a double position of insider (for instance, as a practicing Orthodox Christian) and outsider, as mild institutional critique might banish the social scientist into the category of persona non grata. Self-reflexivity adjusts this vacillation between insider and outsider and turns it into an instrument of observation. Double positions as insider and outsider, risky since the anthropologist is contested from both sides, are "manipulated" by the anthropologist for the benefit of anthropological writing as they are methods for grasping the anthropologist's own impact on the community or phenomenon studied and the portrait that is created around him/her. Moreover, as anthropology is not only a

descriptive but an interpretative social science, through this duality it gains the possibility to grasp what people feel and how they themselves explain their religious experiences.

For the Turners, the “experience” become a branch of anthropology itself. As Evans-Pritchard, they converted to Catholicism later in their academic careers facing the hostility of the Manchester School, after a period of embracing agnostic and communist ideas (Larsen, 2014: 157, 163). Their own “experiencing” of the rituals of the Catholic Church, which did not escape however their criticism (Ibid: 166), was translated at times into their vehement criticism of Durkheim and Frazer or in distancing themselves from phenomenological anthropology (Turner, 2011: 125). But most of all, the importance of their methods for this paper resides in the well-known concepts of “*communitas*” and “*liminality*”, which establish not only the rationality but also the supra-rationality of Christian belief. Orthodox Liturgy, as a unique event each time (Headley, Chapter 6; forthcoming) and not an historical act repeated endlessly, is both liminal and an example of *communitas*, as much as prayer is. The liturgical act that brings together time and space is that moment when the rationality and “the indicative mood of ordinary life are transposed into a liminal sphere where possibilities meet”; it is “a striving after new forms and structures” (Turner, 1986:42) where the believer finds oneself in an intimate dialogue with God. But the Orthodox Liturgical act also brings forward, through its communal prayer, an extension of the intimate prayer to the prayers of the Church. *Communitas*, in this sense, is indeed a wholesome and volitional act of knowing God (Fernandez, 1986: 179), where the individual is united with the rest of the Church, as Dorotheus of Gaza would explain in mystical terms 1500 years earlier in the beginnings of Christian anthropology.

The undifferentiated experience of communion, equality and openness to the other is “that recognition of the <<essential and generic human bond>> that periodically occurs as an antistructural reaction to the hierarchical, differentiated and invidious relations of the

structured everyday world” (Idem). The simple “fellowship of people as they are in their unaccommodated selves”, as Edith Turner defines *communitas* (2011: 124), characterizes the religious experiences of the informants as they cannot know God only by their own endeavors, but through the unity that the Church creates. The sense and reality of *communitas* and liminality are an integral and rational part in the process of gaining religious knowledge. As it will be presented in the following chapter, belief is also an important element of method, a starting point for positioning oneself in relation to the topic to be investigated. Simply put, it is a frank gesture of admitting to oneself as a researcher (or believer) the mediated access to a certain kind of religious knowledge and, subsequently, its own limits.

By employing a theological approach to anthropology as well as by incorporating the function of my own positionality in the ethnographic field, I will intend to argue that Orthodox Christians perceive the transcendental reality through completely different emotional, experiential and cognitive perspectives.

Chapter 2. Knowing God through the ethnographic field

2.1 Position in the field

Converted from Judaism to Orthodoxy shortly before his years spent in prison, Father Nicolae Steinhardt bluntly expressed his deep belief that the ways to get access to Christ are infinitely diverse (2000: 53). Knowledge becomes personal as God speaks the “language” of each of us. Hence, religious knowledge is as much adaptable as adapted by the diversity of methods, places and individuals, while the ethnographer does (or tries to) play indeed after the rules of the game. My emotional involvement in the fieldwork depended on the position from which I began the participant-observation: I entered into the monastery not as a non-believer, but as a Christian Orthodox, albeit with a number of “unorthodox” personal beliefs. The anthropological perspective and methodology of a believer and non-believer is synthesized by Evans-Pritchard: “The non-believer seeks some theory—biological, psychological, or sociological— which will explain the illusion; the believer seeks rather to understand the manner in which a people conceives of a reality and their relations to it. . . . On this point I find myself in agreement with Schmidt in his refutation of Renan: if religion is essentially of the inner life, it follows that it can only be grasped from within” (quoted in Burton, 2003: 43). This does not imply a total negation of a “non-believer” scientific approach and contributions towards religion, spirituality or God. Nor could we assume that only “believers” would be a privileged group entitled to study religion. Social studies, functionalist or phenomenological, to name only two of the most successful, cannot reclaim an uncontested definition on Christianity or, more broadly, on religion. As much as religious knowledge is depended on certain positions (for instance my own positionality in the field, or that of the informants), such would be the scientific investigations: they are all limited

forms of knowledge vulnerable to historical contexts and the operational definitions and methods which characterize certain scientific traditions.

How I subsequently experienced the fieldwork ranged from feelings of detachment, complete alienation, strong attachment to the community studied, confusion of beliefs or a sense of amazement and communion with God. At times, a state of discomfort was generated by my inability to have an “adequate” religious language, more salient when I was unable to use properly the greetings employed in the Orthodox Church. In a religious community language is a fine thread which can easily break. As it happened, I had the frustration of not being able to be part of the community. As the rest of the members disciplined their bodies effectively so as to easily “dance” the liturgical ritual⁵, I was clumsy enough to forget when to bow, to make the sign of the cross or to sing, while, at times motivated by the fear of marginalization, I mimetically did the Christian rituals. Yet, although at the beginning the experiences were in the realm of imitation, I gradually began to pass to a felt reality where emotional knowledge was as important as the semiotic shared through preaching, prayers and the reading of the Holy Scripture. I became aware that Orthodox Christianity is not only a “know-how” discernible in behavior or language, or in bodily posture and dressing codes but more than this; the latter corresponds to a rereading of Christianity as more than relations of power and subordination, as discourse, as a learning process⁶ or as a web of meanings. For the members interviewed, it is a transcendental rationality

⁵ The characterization of the liturgical ritual as a dance belongs to Father Nicholas who, describing the beauty and particularity of Solomon’s dance with the covenant, he ascribes the same meaning of the Sunday ritual before God. This comparison enables us to see the ritual performed by the priests and the community in many ways: as a dialogue between the priests officiating the ritual and the bodily responses of the Church members; as an act of “sacrifice” before God; as a means of expressing the joy of being in communion with God etc.

⁶ I do neither believe that, following Asad’s remarks on Geertz, power embodied in institutional relations could bring a more thorough explanation of religion or spirituality. Power exerts its dominion on certain religious ideologies, knowledge or practices, not to forget the determining character of power on experiencing religious truths. Briefly, power gives meaning to religion. Although historical conditions and power relations are important, they address only in a limited way the subjective spiritual meaning that religion has on the individual. (Asad, 1983: 237, 243)

which subverts worldly hierarchies⁷, values and intellectual models and which stresses the importance of an actual and experienced ontological shift through a gradual religious conversion. Nevertheless, Christian Orthodoxy is not an individualistic and self-sufficient belief system, but a dialogic interaction between individuals and between them and God: “All spirituality is a dialogue; a spirituality that is addressed to an anonymous, impersonal companion proves itself by that very fact a lying witness” (Maritain quoted in Danielou, 1957: 68-69).

Like the ritual, the knowledge of God through experiences, emotions and texts is constructed as an ever present dialogue which involves the ethnographer as much as any member of the church. Moreover, it was in the dialogic space and time of this particular fieldwork that the problem of belief arose and, with it, the delicate position I found myself in due to the compatibility between faith and the ethnographic work. As a believer myself, I realized that my own system of beliefs would be altered while they would be a filter through which I could engage with others’ experiences and my own. Rather than taking it as a methodological and epistemological barrier, my position as an Orthodox Christian/insider (and outsider at the same time) enabled me to understand religious language with more ease, as I did not have to put the informants in the uncomfortable position of explaining their own culture in an objectifying language which undermines the possibility of understanding the native’s⁸ point of view and their own interpretation of Christian life (Howell, 2007: 383). Orthodox Christians can be understood in their own terms both at a semiotic (doxa) and an experiential/emotional level (the practices of the church and the responses it has for each individual). The identity lines were blurred and I found myself in a “halfic” position “both as self and other at the same time” (Ibid: 376), making

⁷ It is hard not to fall into the error of essentializing Christianity as an apolitical religion, as it would be equally simplistic to label its principal institution, the Church, as “collaborationist”.

⁸ I use the questionable word “native” as an umbrella concept that encloses multiple types of being actually native.

the ethnographic work adjustable according to the “insider” (as Romanian and Orthodox) and “outsider” (the scientific marginal position) perspectives. It had not been, nevertheless, a privileged position: being a Christian is not enough in a field where the intellectual background and the social status are also significant in building social relations. The acquisition of a certain religious knowledge is equally important as the sensorial experiences (what it means to see, to hear and feel) and the commitment to Christian beliefs. On the scale of participant-observation, I set religious emotions on an upper level along with a sensorial appreciation of the ethnographic fieldwork.⁹ This is also implied in the words of Nicolae Steinhardt: in order to be complete, the word as “letter” (the bookish knowledge of the Pharisee) must be accompanied by knowledge in the Holy Spirit, or the word as “flame” (active or living knowledge); religious knowledge is a paradoxical intermingle between the two. The case of the Pharisee Nicodim is illustrative: an intellectual of his time, he stands disarmed before Jesus in a mental effort to understand semiotically the secrets of the resurrection and of baptism (Steinhardt, 2000: 46). But the rational grasping of religious knowledge is not always effective, although for the informants is highly rational and supra-rational. Tying oneself to the symbolic, to an intellectualist lens, brings only an initial and apparent knowledge. This suggests that the knowledge of God is dynamic/dialogic, sensorial and revelatory as well as personal inasmuch as each of us has his/her own filter to understand religion as she/he has a certain relation to God. The word as “flame” or “power” as Steinhardt describes it denotes an ever present communion with God; theological precepts are not empty, they are not intellectual speculations but must correspond to a lived reality where the believer is in a timeless and active relation with God.

⁹ By sensorial I am referring not only to the visual, but also to the auditory and olfactory perception of the field. As Paul Stoller argues, we should all be aware of our sensorial biases: in an Orthodox church one enters inevitably into a space of fragrances, coral music and richly ornamented ritual clothing displayed all at the same time. Yet, being familiar or even getting impressed by the sensorial scenery, one’s attention could be called away from the message of the ritual. (Stoller, 1992: 9)

Yet, speaking about God involves feelings which are also difficult to pinpoint in a language, let alone in a scientific one; this is one of the reasons why I tried to leave the nativist point of view explicate one's own reality, that is, the experience that characterizes the knowledge of God. As Katherine Ewing described her fieldwork among Sufis in Pakistan, the temptation to become native was strong because part of the people studied (as the two priests interviewed) shared some of my scientific views as well (1994: 577). Yet, inasmuch as possible, at times I intended to detach myself or come near the believers' religious experiences and understand their intensity through my own position in the field. I used participant observation as both a technique for field research (observing the others and seeing their reaction to my presence as participant-observer) and as a state of mind, that is, a framework for living in the field (Baer, 2003: 122).

In the following sub-chapter I will propose a theological approach to the anthropology of Orthodox Christianity: it is an experiment in which informant and ethnographer participate in a complex exercise of self-reflexivity and mutual understanding. I believe it is high time for the anthropology of Christianity to address the inflowing of the sacred into the believer's life giving credit to the latter's own emotions and sensorial perceptions, yet seeking to avoid the traps of overrationalization or sacralization of the ethnographic work. The overrationalized explanations of religion take the sacred out of the believer's own ontology. Thus I will try to analyze the rationality that the informants invest in their religious knowledge. On the other hand, equally harmful would be to dramatize the content of the ethnographic work, creating an unrealistic representation of one's observations or emotions. Criticizing Stephen Tyler's sacralization of ethnography, Edith Turner recommends a more down to earth approach, without transforming fieldwork into a classical fairytale: "I would appeal to anthropologists, let us not suddenly act holy about field material, not sacralize it. Such sacralization is seen in one of Tyler's extreme passages «The break with everyday reality is a journey apart into strange lands with occult

practices—into the heart of darkness—where fragments of the fantastic whirl about in the vortex of the quester’s disoriented consciousness, until, arrived at the maelstrom’s center, he loses consciousness at the very moment of the miraculous, restorative vision, and then, unconscious, is cast up onto the familiar, but forever transformed, shores of the commonplace world»” (Tyler quoted in Turner, 2003: 114). Thus, what I intend to is to offer a balanced analysis of the intermingle between my positionality in the field and the spiritual experiences of the church members as well as an equilibrium between a rational social scientific explanation of people’s spirituality and their own articulation of the felt spiritual reality.

2.2 I trust I make myself obscure. The paradoxical knowledge of God

*I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute
beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold
me by my right hand. You guide me with your
counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.*
Psalm, 72: 22-24

The secret of epiphany or of direct knowledge of God resides in the divine kenosis, that is, in a direct communication between God and people through His incarnation in Christ. It is a visible¹⁰, palpable and real knowledge. The believer, nevertheless, has to earn the true knowledge of God through a hard, exhausting and humble spiritual climbing which presupposes, at the same time, nearness to God and communion with the others while being always self-reflexive and aware of others’ importance in this qualitative ascension. Knowledge is not speculation or “gnosis”, but in a Christian sense it is a “happening”, a living experience of love; knowledge is practical as well as theoretical, it is a lived experiential reality beyond the dialectic rational-

¹⁰ In the language of the Bible the verb “to see” goes beyond mere physical observation; vision (and visibility) is a higher human perception as it becomes a type of knowledge: Jesus saw Mathew as one of the Apostles as profoundly as Saint John the Baptist saw Jesus as the Messiah. The senses are also instruments for the knowledge of God.

irrational. It is union with God as Meister Eckhart described it: “The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine they should see God, as if He stood there and they here. God and I, we are one in knowledge.” (quoted in Happold, 1970: 67). For the believer, this knowledge is a progressive dialogic and intimate union that dissolves the personal boundaries of the self and, even more significant, it is always a singular knowledge; that is why the road towards achieving this knowledge is infinite as it is our own relation to and capacity to understand God (apophatic, in Orthodox theological terms). There is no standard way of experiencing, knowing or talking about God or to give an objective explanation to individual states of absorption.

Destined to understand and communicate with God, knowledge should become effective at the level of social relations; as we approach God and know Him better we likewise gain knowledge of our relationship with others and build more durable ties while we also draw them near to God. On the contrary, as we depart from God, in the same manner we stop being in communion with others. In his treaty, *On refusal to judge our neighbor*, the Eastern Christian monk and abbot Dorotheus of Gaza (6th century AD) imagines in a simple yet evocative way our relationship to God and to one another: “*Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference. Now concentrate your minds on what is to be said! Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the center; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of men. To the degree that the saints enter into the things of the spirit, they desire to come near to God; and in proportion to their progress in the things of the spirit, they do in fact come close to God and to their neighbor. The closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God. Now consider in the same context the question of separation; for when they stand away from God and turn to external things, it is clear that the more they*

recede and become distant from God, the more they become distant from one another. See! This is the very nature of love. The more we are turned away from and do not love God, the greater the distance that separates us from our neighbor. If we were to love God more, we should be closer to God, and through love of him we should be more united in love to our neighbor; and the more we are united to our neighbor the more we are united to God”

(Appendix 1). Our knowledge about God, either if it is sensorial, intellectual, mystical or a complex combination of all,¹¹ situates each of us at a specific distance in relationship to God and to one another. The ultimate level of communion (a blending with the logos) determines a profound knowledge of God: “(...) the Incarnation of the Word is to be the new, eternal covenant. Through it, the Word of God is to be irrevocably united with human nature, once for all and forever, establishing thus between the human and the divine nature a living communion such that nothing could be more intimate” (Danielou, 1957: 90).

The following subchapter will explore the knowledge of God as it was observed during the ethnographic work. Particular relations, understandings, interpretations and experiences will inform on the official/”professional” and “common” (at times even hybrid and contradictory) modes of knowledge.

2.3 The felt knowledge of God

Our knowledge of God depends on our own readiness to recognize the presence of God. This suggests that we either interpret the presence of God as an actual phenomenon (as a transcendental reality whereto there is access) or as if it were a mere illusion triggered, as Father

¹¹ As monk, Father Nicholas refrains from giving examples or details about mystical experiences, most of all because an ascetical religious life presupposes humbleness, as a definable characteristic of a Christian life. His intellectual and sophisticated manner of articulating his knowledge conceals mystical experiences, while for Terence and Mary sensorial encounters with the divine solidify and give more meaning to their knowledge.

Nicholas illustrated, by taking “expired medicine”, thus persuading oneself that it was the actual cause of sensorial experiences. Interpretation is one of the paths towards knowledge, but the first step made in order to take this path is either to recognize God or to pass by. When the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles they began unexpectedly to speak languages that they never believed they could ever know; shortly after, this was commonly interpreted as nothing else than blurring of the mind by drunkenness.

“And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others were mocking and saying, "They are full of sweet wine. "But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day" (Acts 2:12-15).

Interpreting counterintuitive facts depends also, in the first instance, on the learned capacity to discern between the sources of unnatural messages (divine or evil inspired) and, only then to be able to become aware of the content of the messages themselves: what they want to tell, what would be the action that one should take in his life, how it changes the relationship with the others.

The knowledge of God depends on how His occurrence in the life of a believer could be interpreted: by which means (religious books, dogma, sermons), by whom (through the official dogma by priests or by simple believers) or when (in which context). Singular keys of interpretation gradually produce individual forms of knowledge. It is a long process which presumes patience, perseverance, hope, a constant self-inquisition and God's intercession, because knowledge presupposes a dialogic interaction between the believer and God as agent. Father Nicolae Steinhardt synthesized the agency of God in this process of knowledge as a battle which ends or not in our being conquered by God: “I fervently pray to be conquered by our Lord Christ (...) I believe in miracles and that Jesus Christ, with a hunter's instinct, will have pity on me, although I let myself so hardly borne down by His endless love” (2000: 136). Thus, even

before acquiring certain means of interpreting one's experiences, the road towards knowledge implies a desire to seek and get near God. Because the individual is endowed with free will, he has the agency to aspire towards the knowledge of God or to reject it. To accept the "battle", as Nicolae Steinhardt portrays it, would be to enter a continuous face to face interaction and to accept or not His will. The knowledge of God would fundamentally consist of four aspects which make this type of knowledge a continuous present: interpretation (the keys to discern the divine will or God's presence), a felt reality, the intervention of the saints and a permanent ability to communicate with God through rituals (especially through the Holy Communion as a reenactment of Christ's sacrifice for humanity) and prayer. The latter is both individual, as an intimate confession of the believer and united in a single communal talk to God (through the Holy Liturgy, the Psalms recited during vespers etc.). It is a true testimony about the love of the faithful towards God and vice versa, as well as an integral part of our knowledge about Him.

(...) there are a lot of people who pray very much, who say the prayer "Our Father" many times during the day, but they don't pay attention to see if they are in peace with their peers. They see prayer as an isolated act by itself, as if you're working in a factory and you have to produce an accessory and a prayer is a simple piece and the more you produce, the bigger your pay will be. (...) Prayer is as the love testimony which the lovers make. This testimony, its values, does not reside in the beauty of the words uttered, but in the truth of the words. And, as much as those words were artful and beautiful but they do not come from the soul, from happiness they bring disgust. (*Father Nicholas, sermon 13th of April 2014*)

Prayer is a constant circulation of emotions and words from the individual to God and back, but it is, moreover, a knowledge which infers communion not only with God, as it will be a selfish relationship, but intercommunion with the others. Roles are interchangeable, as God is both a careful listener and a speaker. A short but relevant story tells that an Orthodox woman was complaining that she constantly spoke to God, but He did not answer her; what she did not do was to let God address her. Søren Kierkegaard reminds us that the act of belief is when the heart of the person does not hear itself when praying, but hears God confessing Himself as the Truth (Steinhardt, 2000: 44). So prayer is a dialogue whereby the believer attempts to neutralize his/her

voice in order to let the other person speak (God) and be careful to His words, as Simone Weil described it: “Prayer being only attention in its pure form” (2002: 120). No one has to monopolize the act of communication: in fact, the believer could exert his/her own free will and refuse to listen to God. That is why the Christian prayer is not an act of oppressive imposition from above, but an egalitarian communication in which the believer, hearing the voice of God, will be the only one entitled to open the door of his heart or keep it locked (Revelation 3:20).

“In prayer we must not have in view any particular thing, unless by supernatural inspiration, for God is the universal being. To be sure, he descends into the realm of particular things. He has descended, he descends in the act of creation; as also in the Incarnation, the Eucharist, Inspiration, etc. But the movement comes from above, never from below; it is a movement on God’s part, not on ours. We cannot bring about such intercommunion except when God decrees it. Our rôle is to be ever turned towards the universal” (Weil, 2002: 47). This form of knowledge that the believer achieves is gained in a quiet, intimate and secluded dialog between two interlocutors who face each other and pay great attention to the words uttered or the manifested signs. It is a secretive prayer (unlike the Pharisee’s)¹² which takes place in the solitude of the heart: “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew, 6:6).

What is even more important is that prayer, along with other religious forms of knowledge, is natural and sincere.

(...) How does God answer to our prayers? Awww, in many ways, God is very creative. I believe this is a big redundancy, because God is the creator par excellence. He has a lot of ways: through the thoughts He puts into your mind, through feelings or simply through the things you ask for and He gives to you. It is a discussion between two persons. (...) Prayer is a real action, it’s not

¹² Discretion/secrecy, linked to humility, is one of the fundamental characteristics of a good Christian who acknowledges that all the good deeds he/she makes for others are, in fact, the intervention of God and He’s mercy bestowed upon us.

a symbol. I actually go to speak with God. I am not interested in how He is, where He is, how He sits, if He has blue eyes or not, if He smiles or He is serious. For us Orthodox is very easy because we have icons and they are windows towards the Heaven. Icons remind me that Christ is present and that He's hearing and answering me. (...) I believe that when one alone advances spiritually-by this I mean also the presence of the Holy Spirit-he beings to change his behavior, and then the dressing style, the ways of eating, sleeping, of reading...everything. You change your entire life, that is what "metanoia" means. But this is a natural process. (...) Life in Christ is life and resurrection, not a continuous happiness and dance. As you become more industrious in the spiritual life, the more the evil one intensifies his attacks and the traps become even greater. (*Father Nicholas; interview 20th of March 2014*)

For Father Nicholas, communication is a humble, patient and individual form of entering in contact with God and not a set of mysterious sings and words waiting to be decoded through elaborate schemes and a time consuming effort. Simplicity in words and gestures of faith is the key note through which Father Nicholas addresses the Christian knowledge of God. Unlike the highly intellectualized and sophisticated knowledge of the Pharisees, the word as "spirit" or "flame" is the completely antithetical understanding of God's mysteries: "The Holy Spirit does not talk in parables, seraphically and grandiose; it guides us honestly and safely and does not appreciate in a special way the insinuating style, the hands piously entwined or the blatant morality" (Steinhardt, 2000: 135). Thus, knowledge is not demagogical nor forcibly breaking in the life of the believer; rather, it is unadorned but intense. Prayer, as a form of knowledge, is the feeling that one gets of the existence of a divine reality:

Prayer is the talk of man with God, and to talk to God has to do with each of us; everyone has his own way to communicate what he's feeling. (...) If one goes out off track of monasticism-because there are even these cases of people who do not understand monasticism-they come into the monasteries and do not play after the rules of the game but instead make their own rules and end up by going astray. This does not mean that monasticism in itself is a producer of errors, but it means that those people did not use effectively the experience cumulated in hundreds of generations. (...) When it comes to expressing your love towards God there are no rules, there is no baffle gab through which to express your love, or you could do this only through writing or orally, but, indeed, when things belong to something felt. (...) I am not interested in extraordinary things, unusual. I believe that life in God belongs to naturalness, to something unvarnished. Man is created in the image of God. One of the great Romanian confessors said that to be a Christian it is innate. Because your hands go stiff during your prayer this does not show if you are a Christian or not. (...) From my point of view, there cannot exist more truths and from the point of view of a Christian the truth is not even a philosophical idea. The truth is a person because Christ says: "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John, 14: 6). Christ is the truth! (*Father Nicholas, interview 23rd of February 2014*)

Father Nicholas is a very charismatic priest who recognizes himself as the “shepherd” of the Orthodox flock and who knows too well the strength and the convincing effect of his words. Yet, charisma has also a particular meaning in the Orthodox tradition: it is the gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed upon the priest when entering his ministry while the priest is himself the sacramental icon of Jesus as emperor after His second coming (parusia).¹³ It comes only from God and brings legitimacy and authority to its holder, although priests are viewed by the community as having more “charisma” (har) than others. Max Weber argued that charisma comes from an “irrational” type of authority (1946: 296) of a person who stands outside the worldly life (1968: 21) through his/her extraordinary qualities. Yet, although is alluring its power on people, for Weber “charisma” is a delicate quality which is always on the brink of disappearing.

Charisma, apart from being the sum of spiritual qualities observed and sometimes bestowed upon or invented and intensified by the community (as the controverted figure of Father Arsenie Boca, reinvented and changed by believers), is also a traditional hierarchical position that the priest finds himself in after the moment of being ordained. In the Eastern Christian theology, the priest represents “the pharynx and the teeth of the Church” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa quoted in Răducă, 1996: 313).

As priest and monk in a rather unusual setting (a monastery in the very center of Budapest), Father Nicholas is historically bound (as priest of the community) and, at the same time, outside history. The mystical asceticism that characterizes monasticism, which is meant to be a departure from the world, actually takes places in a modern urban context. This duality of being himself an insider and outsider, much as the anthropologist, is also a strong part of his

¹³ Although his daily clothes are the black ones of a monk, during the Sunday Mass Father Nicholas wears the richly decorated priestly robe traditionally used in the Eastern Christian Church. As Father Nicholas explained, although people would prefer to see a more modest apparel worn by priests, when officiating the holy services priests represent Jesus as an emperor in the kingdom to come. It is Jesus in all His glory that they represent, not the Jesus who died on the cross. This suggests that symbolical meanings are never stable, but redefined and in conflict with one another.

charisma among the Orthodox believers as he is perceived as having an uncontested authority. His charisma consists also in bringing together two forms of sacred functions in an unconventional social reality and time. As a monk, he is constantly put into a liminal time when structures and hierarchies are set aside, a time that is nevertheless broke by leadership obligations (as representative and symbol of the Romanian community).

As a single event outside common history (as it has a divine source) Charismatic authority does not necessarily have to be an extraordinary gift¹⁴ opposed to the institution of the Church (Zizioulas, 2009: 287), in a kind of mystical seclusion far away from Christian communities as Weber would consider.

It is not represented as an individualistic and irrational quality which appears out of the blue. On the contrary, its sacramental and spiritual functions are reachable only through the unity with the Church. In Pauline theology, charisma functions and reaches its aim only through communion with the Church as institution and unity of its members (Ibid: 295). The varieties of gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit, either eloquence, wisdom or gentleness, become visible in the communication and interaction that the priest or monk has with the members of the Church. To overturn Weber's argument, to be charismatic is not a retreat from the mundane, but, paradoxically, it is a holy gift that settles the individual in the ordinary of day-to-day life. Succinctly put, it is making the extraordinary an everyday day characteristic of Christian life.¹⁵

¹⁴ "Charismata" are only given through the agency of the Holy Spirit, they are not individual qualities. Even such qualities as Father Nicholas' convincing and moving oratorical style is, seen through the interpretative lens of Orthodox theology, an objective attribute only enhanced by individual efforts.

¹⁵ The usual dichotomy between extraordinary (the uncommon and paranormal) and ordinary (the historical bound realities) is hard to pin-point in Christianity. Apparently each sacred ritual, from the ordination of priests to the Eucharistic act, are conventional ecclesiastic moments and yet they are only a perceptible glimpse of the supra-realities that occur each time they are performed. The extraordinary enters the ordinary in both space and time through ritual, but also through what we define as "paranormal". The story narrated by Father Nicholas of a monk who, unknowingly, spoke on the telephone with his already passed away mentor and spiritual father, is still a part of what would be an ordinary Christian life. What the anthropologist assumes to be extraordinary is in fact the true reality of Christianity.

Father Nicholas' charisma manifests itself also through rhetorical abilities: he is a "speaker" who enjoys preparing his sermons and structuring them carefully enough so that anyone could sense the reflection of their own life in their message. Although the sermon is a complex interpretation of the New Testament, its message reaches every corner of the church and every individual experience. Through his language, Father Nicholas exerts a kind of gravitational force which draws one near him, makes one repent his faults or feel blessed. It is a "temptation" that gets its force from the inner-oriented message. Yet, after more than a year, I understood how to avoid this "trap" and, instead, in our discussions I tried to focus more on those ideas and concepts that trigger his intensive reflection and emotions. There is, nevertheless, a point where the common language used by theologians and priests in the Orthodox Church and anthropologists, on the other hand, is still dividing them both epistemologically and, above all, ontologically: "Anthropologists can report difference and demonstrate to people that it is real, but they cannot very easily get their readers to put difference to use in their own lives. (...) Theologians mock anthropologists by the confidence they have that the differences they find are really fundamental ones that point to wholly different ways of living" (Robbins, 2006: 288). It should not be viewed as a concentrated effort to convince others of a different reality: theology does not intrude in one's life, it does not take it by force. The language (of Father Nicholas, for instance) through which the Christian knowledge is transmitted becomes convincing because it responds to a deeper personal spirituality and it gives space for the freedom of the other, calling for one's individual commitment or denial. In fact, Christian Orthodoxy does not have a historical and official mission of converting the unbeliever, it is all the responsibility of God who, nevertheless, does not defy one's free will. Anthropology could learn from theology, if it is aware and accepts its Christian origins (ibid: 286). For Father Nicholas, Christian knowledge is a step by step guide towards God, which presupposes a series of qualitative and adaptable "spiritual age

groups”. In order to comprehend the paradoxes, the knowledge of God has to be gradual and “digestible” even more when one has to share it to someone else¹⁶: time, concentration and practice are necessary in knowing God.

When you start building something, you have to speak kindly to the beginners; you have to tell them the beautiful things, to feed them with milk as the Apostle Paul says, because they are children in their faith. (...) Later, he says, there comes the time when the child grows up and has to eat meat which is more difficult to digest. Then you find out things which you must be aware of at a different level. (...) Christianity presupposes also paradoxes: you are a son and potentially an emperor, but at the same time you’re a slave; you’re free-and God never breaks your freedom-and, at the same time, you’re a sheep. Each of these things must be understood and taken out from the context of the world. You can’t know God only intellectually, because His message is not addressed to your intellect, but to your heart. Christianity is not a philosophical idea, but a way of life...otherwise, we fight over ideologies and we make party meetings. (...) Graphically speaking, the ascent towards God is a ladder, but one in spiral with floors. At the beginning you have faith, one at the level of the ground floor, and you have love at the level of the ground floor, that is, you are actually kind of selfish...and you are addicted to all sorts of passions. Then you start to get closer to God, you start praying, fasting, and to make good deeds. (...) and they will be far away from perfection, but you’ll do them at your level, that is, at the ground floor. Little by little you start growing and reach the first floor: you have faith, patience and love...everything a little bit more, but compared with perfection you have to climb 200 floors. (...) If you’re studying without practicing, God will never show you what it’s in the Scriptures. (*Father Nicholas, interview 20th of March 2014*)

This knowledge which comes by prayer and through a gradual moral and ontological ascension is an intense and ever present process which can only take place in the Church as a place of *communitas*. The Holy Communion, the prayer and the rituals performed during the Holy Liturgy are all not only a display of faith, but a mode of sharing knowledge in an endless present time, uniting centuries and people not symbolically, but spiritually. The knowledge of God is not a string of elaborate metaphors waiting to be deciphered. It is a living knowledge which transgresses time, spaces or humanly intellectual instruments. It is a “now” and “here” (as in the *liminal* time of Liturgy) for all believers without discrimination.

(...) saints are alive. God defines Himself as: “I am who I am” (Exodus, 3: 14) If you read from the Scriptures, Christ speaks now and here and all the chants from the primes and from the vespers-unfortunately believers do not really come- there we chant: “today the deliverance of the world is done”, the hymn does not say “2000 years ago the salvation of the world was done”. He who knows what the Holy Liturgy is, he who knows what is happening...is each time a reliving of the entire life of Christ. But it is a reenactment, not a celebration. It is not: “aw, Christ has died 2000 years ago, let us remember how it was”. For us He lives today. During a prayer, even during the Holy Liturgy he says: “Who are in the heaven with the Father and here together with us beyond vision”. The believer communes with the holy body and soul of Christ, which we did not keep in a jar for 2000 years. He is now, today...today Christ has sacrificed himself on the holy table. As Paul

¹⁶ It is significant also to see who deserves to know about God and when: “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces” (Matthew, 7:6)

Evdokimov says: “Christ is in a permanent state of sacrifice” (*Father, Nicholas, interview 23rd of February 2014*)

Finally, the knowledge of God is an exhausting but fulfilling way of life: it has all the efforts of an intellectual understanding but also all the hardship of putting life principles into practice. It is, thus, a courageous act of self-overcoming and a bold action towards an ontological shift in one’s life and relationship with the others.

(...) one of the remarks of those who were the followers of scientific atheism was that the Church or the faith keeps or tries to keep the people in the dark and they were relying on the Holy Scripture which says “believe but do not inquire”. First of all, it is not true. The Scripture does not say anywhere, if you can find it somewhere, because I could not. Instead, Christ says exactly the opposite: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew, 7: 7-8). In another place Christ says that the kingdom of God is for those who take it by storm. So, faith is not a passive work...you stay calm after the principle: “we work, we don’t think” (*Father Nicholas, sermon 18th of May 2014*)

The official/”professional” understanding of what the knowledge about God is supposed to mean for the believer is continued by Father John. Unlike Father Nicholas, Father John seems to be cosmopolitan, visible in his desire to open his mind towards any kind of scientific knowledge coming also from Western Europe: he is the Enlightenment type of personality who reads Descartes or Albert Camus and who constructs his sermons around Western philosophical ideas. He is less religiously conservative as he is taking information on the history of the New Testament from the book *An Introduction to The New Testament* by protestant (evangelical) scholars D.A.Carson and Douglas Moo (2009). Religious knowledge is infiltrated with the results in the modern debates in Biblical Studies which make his understanding more complete, logical and more accessible for the members of the community. He makes an effort to achieve a complete understanding of the scholarly debates in Christianity but, most of all, Father John is constructing his own spiritual path towards the knowledge of God. Unlike Father Nicholas brought up in a Romanian Orthodox milieu, Father John, although spending a few years as an Orthodox in Transylvania, came to study in a Catholic high school (the Piarists Order dedicated

to the education of children and the poor) from Hungary where the majority of his classmates were Catholics or Protestants. From 1985 till 1989 he studied at the Orthodox Seminary in Sibiu (Transylvania).

C: Do you think people understand what is happening during the Sunday Mass?

No, I believe they don't. Indeed, it is the duty of the Church to bring these sacraments more close to the people. (...) Many times when someone comes to a baptism (...) actually they are almost at the lowest level (of understanding) and we have to give explanations. I have the intention to start a series of preaching on the explanation of the Holy Mass. (...) Even in the diptych some add in a parenthesis "for a job" or "for success at an exam". I believe that in this case everything must be left to God, because He knows what we need and, on the other hand, man must learn to accept the will of God. (...) When we communicate with God we try to compare ourselves with this divine perfection. (...) but this dialogue does not ask for an immediate answer...we need to have spiritual ears in order to listen the answer. (...) Even now, after 20 years of being a priest I did not receive some answers. (*Father John, interview 26th of March 2014*)

Father John introduces the problem of syncretism in the "popular" forms of religious knowledge that part of the members seem to have. Because knowledge is shared from one believer to another, this also entails that this process also changes how Christians make sense and interpret religious knowledge in their own terms. The last two interviews are partial illustrations of the transformations which occur during the acquisition and transmission of religious knowledge. The latter becomes a personal statement of the Christian belief system.

Attending to the church masses for more than eight years since he first came to Budapest, cantor Terence (60 years old) is an honest and lively Christian believer. His faith, compared with that of Father Nicholas, is much more syncretic, contradictory, yet down to earth and categorical. First of all, for Terence, prayer is more effective as it is shared in a community of believers. He has also a very dynamic and dialogic type of faith.

I like the community prayer. As it is said, when you fight in an army you are much stronger, so to say. You attain many things as when you are alone. And, in the Holy Church I believe what Christ says: "*For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them*" (Matthew, 18:20) (...) I bear in mind the words of Saint Seraphim of Sarov when he was asked by someone: "Father, why do you still read the New Testament? You already know it by heart! Yes, my brother, but there in the New Testament I found some words that say '*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away*'. So to what should we stick to? Not to that which does not pass away?" Then, he's words entered into my heart and I read with a lot of pleasure. (...) I pray according to certain circumstances, for instance in case of an illness- to Saint Nektarios the

Thaumaturg, for children-to Saint Pantelimon, for loss and other misfortunes-to Saint Mina, for help and success in what you want to achieve. (...) When I fell and had the accident with the bike was after some days I read the Hymn of Saint Cyprian and when I fell, I then uttered: "Satan, you have brought me down!" I have started a battle with him which was unfair. (...) It is a fight then, man does not know, but Satan knows you started a battle against him. (...) No, and I don't even want to hear such things (voices), let God go to those who are more worthy. Because immediately when you hear them, you fall into the sin of pride. God knows why. (...) Satan, you found the right time! (...) Dreams are like miracles and happen there where there is no faith, so that it may be strengthened. (...) I imagine God only as Jesus Christ is, like a man, of course, with all His divine power...with all His kindness, all His justice, all His humbleness, all that's divine virtue. With fear of God, not that He is a tyrant, but because you should not lose Him. As a child is frightened because he might lose his mother and cries...in this sense with should get near Him. I see Him like a good and forgiving father and who does not always give you what you're asking for. (...) Many times I feel His presence, especially during communion and I think: "God, you are among us, but we don't see you!" And He is here, you should know...on the table, looking as He is described in the Apocalypse with "His eyes are like blazing fire" (Revelation, 19:12) (*cantor Terence, interview 16th of February 2014*)

His knowledge is transparent: one sees his faith struggles, his efforts of interpretation and his longing for feeling the presence of God closer to him. He is the "seeker" par excellence. Mary, as well as Terence, has a communicative style of knowledge: her communion with God is inseparable from actual talking to Him. The knowledge about God bears a strong resemblance to interpersonal relationships: the more one begins to understand and love the other, the more intimate the relationship would be. And intimacy with God brings new forms of expression (dialogic, personal) and experiences (a sense of bliss).

Mary (65 years old) was born in a small and obscure village in Transylvania and raised, without much affection, in an Orthodox family. Being the most sensitive and talented from her siblings, she went to study Arts but could not afford to follow an academic career. Rather introverted, she explains her great pain of not having the love of her mother which, perhaps, developed later on in her emotional instability. Many times during the interview she fixes carefully her kerchief. She tries not to leave her hair coming out from the kerchief. Her mechanical gesture which I saw repeating itself during the masses, reminds me of a booklet (with the sayings of Father Arsenie Boca) distributed by Mary in the church after a Sunday Mass: one of the most important sins, that of being lustful, was as important as not covering your head (as a

woman) when attending the church services. After the interview she confidently explains that without suffering there is no salvation while she repeatedly mentions the dominant figure of Father Boca.¹⁷ Her strong affection for Father Boca is reflected also in the numerous books she bought and read about him: “I was bound to Father Arsenie Boca”. She recounts with great excitement some of the most impressive miracles done by Father Arsenie: levitation, unexplainable and sudden disappearance from the communist labor camp where he was held prisoner and forced to work, teleportation on a distance of more than 200 km or going up in flames without his skin or clothes being burned. Her language is transmitting a sense of transformation and assimilation of the moral values and theological precepts of the Orthodox Church and informs about the weight that reading practices have for believers. Not all religious books are equally instructive or helpful. As Mary points out, the Orthodox special hymns (acatiste) are for “simple people”, while she prefers to read books which are at “higher level”. Her case is illustrative to see how her Christian identity is forming: which practices she adopted, how she interprets and gives meaning to her experiences with the cultural resources she acquired, how self-reflexivity is conditioned by religious knowledge etc. Mary is also an example of a progressive conversion to a more substantial and dedicated form of Orthodox Christianity, while her ontological shift is a lens through which she analyses her past and of those around her.

I managed to understand a lot of things, even to apply them. God, please forgive me! I don't want to praise myself, but you cannot compare what I was and what I am now. (...) Only through the Church, only through confession, prayer, through the books read. I need a lot of prayer and I always pray. Sometimes I fail. If I don't pray, I immediately feel that I fell into something, that I was trapped in a cage and then he (the devil) catches and gets hold of me. But God doesn't abandon me and the next day “God, I feel such sweetness in me and that God has examined me!” It's something extraordinary. And, yet, I realize again that my heart is sick and that I have to cure myself. (Mary)

¹⁷ Father Arsenie Boca (1910-1989), one of the most popular contemporary Romanian Orthodox monks, is still a controversial and enigmatic personality. Blessed by the Holy Spirit with the gifts of insight, prophecy and miracle-making, he is taught by the people to be the new saint in the Romanian Orthodox calendar, but the opinion of the official Church is not so categorical; sainthood, is not a plebiscite, but an institutional decision. Nevertheless, the original sayings and those attributed to Father Boca have a huge impact on the religiosity of Romanian Orthodox people.

The only way in life, from my point of view...I cannot find anything else then the Church. From my siblings- I have 3 brothers and one sister-who don't go to church and speak ill of the priests, I think to myself: "God, how much they go astray!" Because they do not participate in church services, they don't know what they are doing and saying and they consider me a bit insane. (...) In my case, if someone should come to me and tell me that I would receive the whole world, I would have the whole at my feet, but that I should not go to church and practice and pray...no, I will tell that I don't need it. Better to die of hunger, but I will not give her up (the church). "Because you speak ill of the priests and you don't go to church because priests are somehow thieves", but I could not give it up, because there in the church you find treasures you can't even speak about. (...) Sometimes, at the Holy Liturgies God dignifies me to feel myself as if I were in Heaven. But it is only seldom. (...) Extraordinary, it can't be expressed, but it happens now and then. Yet, I'm going and not giving up. Sometimes my heart is like a stone. (...) But the evil one breaks in and doesn't let you. (...) When I saw how that priest was moving the incensory and the nuns how they were singing, I just thought...God, what I felt in my soul! Then, no one can take them from me and nothing interests me. And then I went again and I felt the sweetness: I felt that I wasn't flesh and body, that I was only... I didn't exist from here upwards. I was air, I was immaterial (*she strongly presses her hands upon her chest, lifts her eyes up-which begin to be more bright- while she smiles peacefully; she seems transfigured; n.a.*). How can one live such a thing? It can only be in the church. At home it happens to me, but not the same...but it happens increasingly. I feel that God is in my soul and He judges me and the Mother of God...as if she's my friend, my mother. Indeed she is with me and I feel that she wants me, helps me and loves me. And for this you have to take pains. It's a trial, but the gift comes. It's a battle. (...) God put into my hands the book *Following Jesus*.¹⁸ (Mary, interview 13th of April 2014)

The feeling of a profound communion that accompanies knowledge becomes an actual communication. Also it is a reality that, as much as it is transcendental, it could be experiential and sensorial as well. The examples given try to expose the importance of positionality in acquiring a specific form of religious knowledge. The means of interpretation and individual historical background define their singular forms of knowledge and built up their personal conversion to a more radical commitment to Orthodoxy.

Observing the strong religious revival that marked north-American Protestantism during the 19th century, William James remarked with amazement that "conversion is one of man's most curious peculiarities" (James, 2002: 181), usually due to its radical ontological transformations, although it is only one of many types of religious experiences. In Mary's case, as well as for Terence's religious experience, her thirst for an even more spiritualized life is lightened not in a dramatic episode, although there is an initial moment of conversion in a biographical context of

¹⁸ It is the well-known book written by Thomas a Kempis, written in late medieval period.

cumulated social and personal distress, but it is a gradual and self-reflective “pilgrimage” (Rambo, 1993: 146) which has equally upwards and downwards spiritual movements. But, most of all, in Orthodox Christian theology it is an act of personal will to even desire to know God. In other words, to use a more clarifying analogy, the acquisition of religious knowledge through the initial act of conversion and its further steps resembles the drops of rain falling onto the earth: in its most deep levels, the earth with its substances makes the water a nourishing element for its development.

In Orthodox theological hermeneutics it is the downwards motion of God towards man (through self-depletion or kenosis) which makes possible the eventual encounter of man with the divine, without annihilating one’s free will of accepting or rejecting God’s intervention. Saint Augustine refers to the grace of God which operates and makes possible the future cooperation of man and his journey on the road towards Him; man can only go freely on this road, he can either go astray or manage to follow the target, but is only God who places man on the spiritual path. This is likewise transferable in the sphere of the intellectual knowledge of God through the interpretation and internalization of religious texts: *Whoever takes another meaning out of Scripture than the writer intended, goes astray, but not through any falsehood in Scripture. Nevertheless, as I was going to say, if his mistaken interpretation tends to build up love, which is the end of the commandment, he goes astray in much the same way as a man who by mistake quits the high road, but yet reaches through the fields the same place to which the road leads. He is to be corrected, however, and to be shown how much better it is not to quit the straight road, lest, if he get into a habit of going astray, he may sometimes take cross roads, or even go in the wrong direction altogether*” (Saint Augustine, 1200). The singular path of the Holy Bible is essentially good and goes directly to the word of God, but anyone could choose to deviate from

the initial road, the same way as each individual has a particular knowledge of God and conversion.

Paradigmatic cognitive changes such as emotional and behavioral shifts are possible through a processual trilogy of “tension” (cultural values which are questioned or are being altered), “crisis” (of a psychological or social nature), and, finally, of a “hierophany” (a solution to faith uncertainties and life meaning). Mary stresses her persistent life crisis, but, unlike Terence, her sufferings pay an important part in her spiritual rebirth as well as in Orthodox theology. *Epektasis* (the progress towards the knowledge of God through grace) is centered on the mystery of the cross as a symbol of suffering and salvation. Through the first, understood both spiritually and physically, the believer is, paradoxically, healed and led towards completeness. Assuming her suffering as a purposeful act of healing, Mary inscribes it inside the frame of knowing God. In other words, it is the sum of historical events and the crossing of cultural, social and spiritual boundaries during the conversion process (Pelkmans, 2009: 12-13) and the subsequent reactions, although the latter could be easily distorted by the emotional responses that have taken place since the initial conversion moment (Stromberg, 1993: 17).

What conversion emphasizes is the need for spiritual equilibrium which is fulfilled through the personal efforts of the “religious seeker”, of the Orthodox Church as an institutional mediator and an elementary footstep for spiritual growth (through church services, religious practices and the official interpretation of the Holy Scripture) which also shape the nature of the conversion experience and the knowledge thus formed (Rambo, 1993: 34) and, most of all, of God as an active agent who initiates the dialogical relationship with man. Starting from the linguistic definition of religion given by Pierre Bourdieu, the religious institutions such as the Orthodox monastery, are instruments of communication and knowledge (1971: 295), through which a specific kind of religious knowledge can be acquired. The latter is the product of

subjective endeavors, institutional mediation and divine presence. In the orthodox theological formulations, because God is Person (the divine revealed), He cannot be known without His own initiative (Stăniloae, 2002) while man actively answers to the call of God. In the Orthodox theology, God “discovers” himself to the individual and only after that the latter can begin ones journey to his/her personal knowledge of God.

On the other hand, unlike the strict delimitations made by William James at the beginning of the 20th century and largely based on Protestant conversion narratives extended to the rest of the religious spectrum, there is no essential institutional religion and ecclesiastical knowledge, while a separate personal religion would presumably transact in a business-like manner religious acts, experiences and knowledge in an almost complete seclusion (Ibid: 28, 29-30). The positionality of the individual in the sphere of religious knowledge is a product of theological/official knowledge, of churchly rituals and of a personal self-adjustment. For Mary, the conversion narrative brought to light a progressive recovery and consolidation of her Christian faith and a repositioning into the sphere of the knowledge of God. Her conversion takes the form of a reorientation of oneself (Proudfoot, 2004: 39) in uneven steps upon which her self-reflectivity is always present. Becoming Christian is an ungoing process (Rambo, 1993:7). As the anthropologist and Orthodox priest Stephen Headley points out: “As one evolves, as one desires to pray, one exceeds one’s preceding identities. And so does the manner one identifies God” (Chapter 6; forthcoming). Being a process, this experiential as well as intellectual knowledge is both practical in its form and contemplative, the latter being determined by the level of faith that each believer can reach (Staniloae, 2002: 257).

During this process of “conquering one’s personal salvation” (Richardson, 1985: 166), the individual is not an isolated player outside the official religious discourse of the Romanian Orthodox Church either, nor is she/he supposed to match one’s experience with a standard of

religious renewal. In its communitarian form, the church and the monastery make possible the union in Christ and a new form of religious knowledge through the experience of the many (Zizioulas, 2009: 294). For that matter, in a Christological theology, the church as the body of Christ enhances and makes real the individuality of its members (ibid: 293) without suppressing or altering the process of attaining a certain knowledge about God. The conversion of Mary as well as Terence to a more spiritually committed life is, nevertheless, inscribed into a canonical/official Orthodox language which synthetizes the meaningful changes in their religious life and creates a reality of religiously driven emotions, while at the same time being a medium of a face-to-face communication with the divine. Thus, religious knowledge is individually shaped but not isolated from the community of believers. As Dorotheus of Gaza expressed in his teachings, the communal character of knowledge takes shape through the encounter with God and the others at the same time.

Conclusions

For the Orthodox Christians studied, knowledge is a natural (almost self-evident) act of faith and will; for some of them it is a sensorial experience (a felt reality) along with a semiotic understanding of the Christian system of beliefs. Will, on the other hand, is an individual readiness to accept God with all that He entails for the believer while it also implies God's agency in the process of acquiring religious knowledge. In addition, as I tried to show, knowledge is influenced by the position wherefrom it is sought and gained.

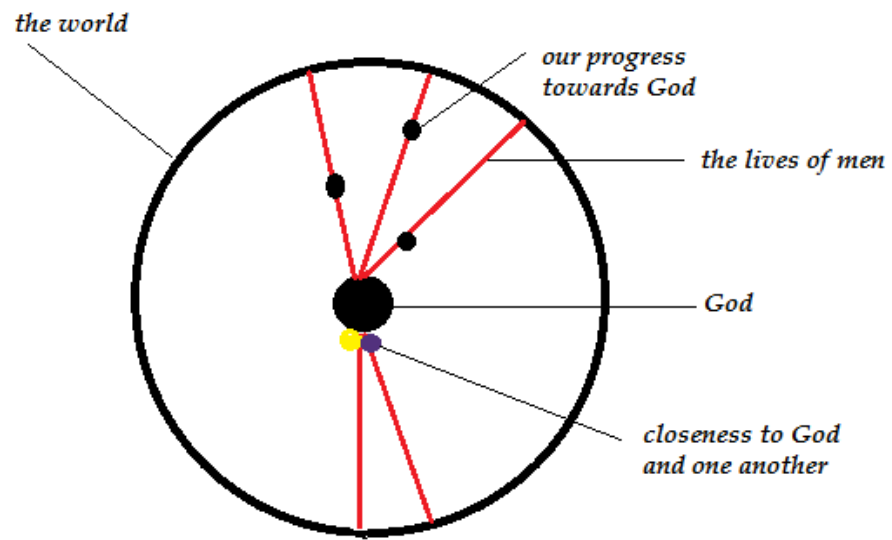
Writing about my own Orthodox beliefs was a hard but necessary stage of self-awareness that made me pay attention to the dangers and benefits of emotional participation in the fieldwork. As I intended to argue in the first chapter, the epistemological standpoint and the definitions used make all the difference when having to choose the research questions which should be asked or in investigating the results obtained.

This would be the particularity of the anthropology of Christianity: as one seeks to grasp the religious understandings of the informants, one sees the reflection of his/her beliefs and is confronted with the possible impact of his/her own religious credo. Firstly, this type of ethnographic research should not start from the idea that the negation of oneself could be very useful; it would be a false assumption that fieldwork should consist of an emotional and cognitive detachment. Secondly, I believe that ruling out the possibility to be changed by the beliefs of others minimizes the anthropologist's efforts to integrate oneself in the field he/she is studying and creates a barrier between particular forms of native exegeses and the scientific interpretation. These suggest that positionality (the system of beliefs, the intellectual and cultural background etc.) could leave important marks on the interpretation of the ethnographic work and

produce certain types of knowledge. My attempt was, subsequently, to make a brief presentation of what I believed to be the most significant social scientific approaches to the study of Christianity, observing how much the production of a specific knowledge about God and religion depends on the questions asked, the methods and the set of interpretations used. These are also valid for my own relation to the studied topic: before and during the fieldwork experience I sought to undertake a frank test of my own Christian commitment such as to see how much it might change the actual religious knowledge of the informants. It became clear that the anthropologist's beliefs are a filter which cannot be ignored or suppressed from the start. The only method envisioned was to adjust the "pre-knowledge" (the system of beliefs) to the personal experiences, emotions and/or epistemological changes that could happen during the fieldwork and to see it as an anthropological instrument.

Finding equilibrium and a coherence between personal involvement as a Christian Orthodox and the scientific and emic knowledge production was a demanding process both emotionally and scientifically. In the end, what resulted was an attempt to make sense of my positionality, of the informants' syncretic or official knowledge of God and the scientific understanding of how objective analysis should be used in the subtle field of Christian studies.

Appendix 1



The paths towards God as explained by Dorotheus of Gaza. The dots represent individual trajectories towards a complete communion with God.

Appendix 2



The interior of the Romanian Orthodox chapel. Sunday Mass (March 2013)



The feast of Annunciation (25th of March 2013)





Both pictures were taken during the annual Romanian Day of Gastronomy (16th of June 2013)

REFERENCES

Sources:

Biblia [The Bible]. 2009., translation. Bartolomeu Anania. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Renasterea.

Dorotheus of Gaza. 1980. *Filocalia*, vol. IX, translation. Dumitru Staniloae. București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române.

Saint Augustine. *The City of God*, in Philip Schaff (ed), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 2*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.html>.

Secondary Literature:

Asad, Talal. 1983. "Anthropological conceptions of religion. Reflections on Geertz." *Man*, vol. 18 (2): 237-259.

Baer, Hans A. 2003. "Dilemmas of Ethnographic Research on Sectarian Movements: A Confessional Account", in Stephen D. Glazier & Charles A. Flowerday (ed), *Selected readings in the anthropology of religion: Theoretical and methodological essays*, London: Praeger.

Barclay, John M.G. 2004. *Negotiating diaspora: Jewish strategies in the Roman Empire*. London: T&T Clark International.

Baumann, Martin. 2000. "Diaspora: Genealogies of semantics and transcultural comparison". *Numen*, 47 (3): 313-337.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1999. "Chapter four. Postmodern religion?" in Paul Heelas. *Religion, modernity and postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Bauman, Richard and Charles Briggs. 1990. "Poetics and performance as critical perspectives on language and social life". *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19: 59-88.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1971. "Genèse et structure du champ religieux. *Revue Française de Sociologie*", 12 (3): 295-334.

Burton, John W. 2013. "Answers and Questions: Evans-Pritchard on Nuer Religion", in Stephen D. Glazier & Charles A. Flowerday (ed), *Selected readings in the anthropology of religion: Theoretical and methodological essays*, London: Praeger.

Daniélou, Jean. 1957. *God and the ways of knowing*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Durkheim, Émile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.

Engelke, Matthew. 2002. "The Problem of Belief. Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on «the inner life»". *Anthropology Today*. 18(6): 3-8.

Ewing, Katherine. 1994. "Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the temptation to Believe." *American Anthropologist*, 96 (3): 571-583.

Fernandez, James W. 1986. "The Argument of Images and the Experience of Returning to the Whole", in Victor Turner & Edward M. Bruner (ed), *The Anthropology of Experience*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Garriott, William and O'Neill, Kevin Lewis. 2008. "Who is a Christian? Toward a

dialogic approach in the anthropology of Christianity”. *Anthropological Theory*. 8: 381-398.

Goldstein, Warren S. 2009. “Secularization patterns in the old paradigm”, *Sociology of religion*. 70 (2): 157-178.

Hann, Chris. 2007. “The Anthropology of Christianity per se.” *European Journal of Sociology*, 48 (3): 383-410.

Happold, F. C. 1970. *Mysticism. A study and an anthology*. London: Penguin Books.

Headley, Stephen. *The Hidden Ear of God. A Christian Anthropology of Verbal Icons and Iconic Words*. “Forthcoming”.

Howell, Brian M. 2007. “The repugnant cultural other speaks back. Christian identity as ethnographic «standpoint»”. *Anthropological Theory*, 7 (4): 371-391.

James, William. 2002. *Varieties of Religious Experience. A study in Human Nature*. London: Routledge.

Klein, Terrance W. 2006. “The supernatural as language games”. *Zygon*, 41 (2): 365-379.

Lambek, Michael and Janice Boddy (ed.). 2013. *A companion to the anthropology of religion*, Wiley Blackwell.

Larsen, Timothy. 2014. *The Slain God. Anthropologists and the Christian Faith*. Oxford University Press.

Luhrmann, Tanya and Cassaniti, Julia. 2011. “Encountering the Supernatural. A Phenomenological Account of Mind.” *Religion and Society: Advances in Research*, 2: 37–53.

Luhrmann, Tanya M. 2005. "The Art of Hearing God: Absorption, Dissociation, and Contemporary American Spirituality". *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, 5 (2): 133- 157.

Mitchell, Jon P. 1997. "A moment with Christ: the importance of feelings in the analysis of belief." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 3(1):79-94.

Pelkmans, Mathijs (ed). 2009. *Conversion after socialism. Disruptions, modernisms and technologies of faith in the former Soviet Union*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Proudfoot, Wayne (ed). 2004. *William James and a Science of Religions. Reexperiencing the Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rambo, Lewis R. 1993. *Understanding religious conversion*. Yale University Press.

Răducă, Vasile. 1996. *Antropologia Sfântului Grigore de Nyssa. Căderea în păcat și restaurarea omului*. București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR.

Richardson, James T. 1985. "The active versus passive convert: paradigm conflict in conversion/recruitment research". *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24 (2): 119-236.

Robbins, Joel. 2006. "Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?" *Anthropological Quarterly*, 79 (2): 285-294.

Stăniloae, Dumitru. 2002. *Ascetica și Mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*. București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR.

Stăniloae, Dumitru. 1980. *Theology and the Church*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Steinhardt, Nicolae. 2000. *Dăruind vei dobândi*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia.

Stoller, Paul. 1992. *The taste of ethnographic things. The senses in anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Stromberg, Peter G. 1993. *Language and self-transformation. A study of the Christian conversion narrative*. Cambridge University Press.

Turner, Edith. 2011. "Our Lady of Knock. Reflections of a Believing Anthropologist". *New Hibernia Review*, 15 (2): 121-125.

Turner, Edith. 2003. "Fear of Religious Emotion versus the Need for Research That Encompasses the Fullest Experiences", in Stephen D. Glazier & Charles A. Flowerday (ed), *Selected readings in the anthropology of religion: Theoretical and methodological essays*, London: Praeger.

Turner, Victor W. 1986. "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience", in Victor Turner & Edward M. Bruner (ed), *The Anthropology of Experience*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Weber, Max. 1946. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weber, Max. 1968. *On Charisma and Institution Building*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Weil, Simone. 2002. *Gravity and grace*. London: Routledge.

Wheelock, Wade T. 1982. "The problem of ritual language: from information to situation",

The journal of the American academy of religion, 50 (1): 49-71.

Zizioulas, John D. 2009. *Communion and Otherness. Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*. London: T&T Clark.