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YEARBOOK of THEOLOGY and PHILOSOPHY

Volume 4

Finitude and Death

E I K O N

BUCHAREST, 2021

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«*La mort: passage ou limite ?*»
Introductory note on the methodology
of an unpublished lecture
offered by André Scrima
at the Saint-Joseph University in Beirut (1978)

DANIELA DUMBRAVĂ 

Institute for the History of Religions, Romanian Academy
E-mail: daniela.dumbrava@gmail.com

Abstract

The proposal for an extremely original lecture – *La mort: passage or limit?* – will be developed in the classroom of the Faculty of Religious Studies, in the academic year 1978, at Saint Joseph University, Beirut. This course was transcribed by students of the Department of Religious Studies in Beirut in 1978. The recent discovery of this unpublished manuscript in the Augustin Dupré La Tour S.J. archives prompts me to make its first presentation to the academic world here. The Orthodox monk, from Romanian origins, André Scrima basically suggested that the theme of death should develop into various elements of reflection related to the comparative study of religions and modern thought in comparison to the Christian faith. Therefore, if the theme of death arises in a historiographical context related to the study of the History of Religions, the history of reflection on death in Western philosophical thought also plays its interpretative part. Finally, with respect to the two perspectives a third one is instilled: the problem of death for man from the point of view of Christian anthropology. The article also aims to contextualize the conceptual diagrams with which André Scrima works in his exposition on death through two parameters: the limit of the discourse on death – *frontière logique* – and the limit of death for itself – *frontière existentielle*. The subject is divided by Scrima into two conceptual diagrams: a. *en deçà* – death both as a subject within a discourse, of an observed fact, and as part of a noetic, reflexive exposition and questioning within consciousness and by our consciousness; b. *au-delà* – death as a mystery: the non-talking of death in itself; the invention of a “grammar” of the death of the human being.

Keywords: interreligious studies, history of religions, philosophy of religions, comparative studies, phenomenology, death studies, André Scrima, Middle East.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.¹ THE MANUSCRIPT I am about to present here belongs to the *Augustin Dupré La Tour S.J. Archive*, at the *Résidence des Pères Jésuites* in Beirut.² It is a transcript of a course that Father André Scrima gave between 6 March and 29 May 1978, at the Faculty of Religious Sciences, *Saint Joseph University* in Beirut. The full name of the manuscript is: “Death: passage or limit? Elements of Reflection proposed by the comparative study of religions and modern thought, in the face of the Christian faith [La mort: passage ou limite? Eléments de Réflexion proposé par l’étude compare des religions et la pensée moderne, face à la foi chrétienne]”³, listing 51 pages. While I was on a research mission in Beirut in February 2020, one of the fathers in charge of the archive, granted me the immense courtesy of entering and setting out to search for various manuscripts belonging to Father André Scrima, who taught many courses in Lebanon during the civil war there. I was very fortunate in that, after almost an hour of searching, I found myself in front of a box containing almost all the transcripts of Scrima’s Lebanese courses. They are all manuscripts that Scrima never wished, thought or reasoned to publish, but rather to present himself as one who reflects on a proposed theme, in a courtly atmosphere filled with extremely curious students of different backgrounds, ethnicities and faiths, mainly Muslim and Christian.

Returning to the subject of the type of document, it is a transcript produced by the students, in a form never revised by the lecturer, never

¹ This article, one of the first publications that I intend to devote to the courses offered by Scrima in Lebanon, was the result of a mission to Beirut, therefore, had the benefit of various funding provided by the following institutions: Spandugino Foundation (Bucharest), “Agentia de Credite si Burse de Studiu”, “Accademia di Romania”, Rome; “1 Decembrie 1918” University, Alba-Iulia, Dep. Doctoral Studies, Faculty of Theology.

² The *Résidence des Pères Jésuites* in Beirut is the place where many scholar priests of the *Societatis Jesu* spend their last days, greatly gratifying visitors, mostly researchers or volunteers in humanitarian missions. In the building, there is still the famous Centre for Islamic-Christian Studies (CEDRAC), founded by Fr. Samir Khalil Samir S.J. and other Jesuits. The first surprise was to see his name among those who were already in the building, and then to see how available he was to spend hours talking together. It was the shadowy presence that mediated access to his colleague and collaborator’s archive during the years of the most stifling university atmosphere in Beirut. Pr. Samir knew and met Fr. Scrima during the years of the civil war in Lebanon and quickly understood how valuable any help would have been to me. I would never have written these lines if I had not felt that I wanted to reward, even in a small way, the efforts of those who helped me enormously during my time in Beirut: my colleague Alexandru Tofan, my colleagues and friends from Cluj, Ruxandra Cesereanu and prof. Corin Braga, Laura Ilea, the very efficient Houda Kassatly and the welcoming Abouna Youseff Abdallah (Deir-el-Harf), to the generous Emma and Basil Khoury, Rizk and Tony Khoury, to the Jesuit Fathers of the *Résidence des Pères Jésuites*, Beirut, to my friends Mirella Pintilie Jaber, Moufak and Gabi Aliwi, last but not least, Fr. Zacharias Zacharou, St. John the Baptist Monastery in Essex, Mrs. Lavinia Spandonide (Spandugino Foundation), Pr. conf. habil. Jan Nicolae, and the staff of the doctoral office of the University “1 Decembrie 1918”, Alba-Iulia.

³ From now on, I will use [MPL] abbreviation for the unpublished manuscript *La mort: passage ou limite*.

intended to be published. However, it is important to point out that the manuscript is conceptually perfectly coherent, without any syncope or omissions. I think that the lecturer's oral exposition was perfectly edited by the students, most likely equipped with a tape recorder. So far, I have not found any recordings of the manuscript, but the acuity and coherence of the text induces the idea of a perfect transcription. Another clarification should be made: many of the texts relating to the courses held by Scrima in Beirut are to be found also in the André Scrima Archive, at the New Europe College, Bucharest. Among these texts there is correspondingly a manuscript, with the same title *La mort: passage ou limite?*⁴, but only 2 typewritten pages in 3 copies and 13 personal notes by Scrima, most likely related to the course we are dealing with. At a later stage, I also propose to supplement the Beirut manuscript with the one in the A. Scrima archive, at the NEC, Bucharest, as I propose to publish an edition of it.

“An inexhaustible subject... [un thème inépuisable...]” As for the structure of the course, it comprises six lectures accompanied by a short presentation and here I will only name their titles⁵: “What to say; 2. Who dies? 3. Itinerary in absence; 4. The null point; 5. A nothing of oblivion; 6. The “empty Grave”.”⁶ All these major points are well explained from a methodological point of view by Scrima: it is first of all a matter of signalling, of positioning, of creating a space for reflection in the systematic knowledge of the subject of death. It is not at all a treatise on Thanatology and not even a treatise on death from the point of view of the history of ideas, but rather a reflection on it, a personal and sensitive, existential involvement, a willingness of the being to open itself to a subject that concerns *au-delà*, to grasp the reverberations in the being in comparison with such a subject. It is therefore a type of hermeneutics that does not leave out being as a whole, holistically, where the comparative history of religions creates the theoretical framework for a reflexive departure from the subject. Rather ironically, Scrima recalls André Malraux's saying: “Where there is the tomb, there is Religion [là où il y a le tombeau, il y a la Religion]”, because he is aware of the fact that death can never be just a cultural topic or in the history of thought. “The grave [le tombeau]” reflects an infinite semantics if we consider the diachronic dimension of its evaluation of funerary practices, but equally the place that generates, perhaps for the first time in human history, a reflection of its mystery. And this is the direction Scrima is pointing in,

⁴ *La mort: passage ou limite?* Course structure and bibliography (Faculté de Sciences Religieuses. Université Saint-Joseph; Beirut), 2 pages typescript (3 copies) and 13 pages handwritten notes, March – May 1978, CNP 1.1 - CNP1.23, at the NEC, see the index written by prof. Anca Manolescu.

⁵ I will attach an annex the facsimile images of their presentation and the analytical bibliography of the course.

⁶ 1. Que dire?; 2. Qui meurt?; 3. Itinéraire dans l'absence; 4. Le point nul; 5. Un rien d'oubli; 6. Le “Tombeau vide”.

[...] where there is the tomb in the History of Man, there is a certain relationship with the dead... and this relationship is not indifferent: on the contrary, it is the most meaningful source since it signifies a space called the urn (the funerary urn where the ashes are deposited according to certain religions that practise incineration).⁷

Reflection is therefore directed towards the signs that surround, delimit, close or open the tomb space, even though times and spaces have a thousand-year history, but all of them point to a single mark, a single frontier: the door to transcendence. How else could one explain the effort to build or construct sophisticated tomb sites, to leave the marks that are often found on sites where there are funerary artefacts, as well as ritualistic signs that even detect ashes, if not to signal a passage between the world and the other world, into the afterlife? They are signs of a conception that indicates a reflection on death and transcendence. Therefore, this is the hermeneutic prevalence, the interpretative horizon with which Scrima operates.

As for the nuances of Scrima's hermeneutics used in the MPL, one immediately notices that everything is centred on language, spanning from paradoxes such as the discourse on death being made by a living person, death as the absolute absence of words, by inference one brings into play the sense and absence of sense in language arising from the question of death. This is as far as "What can be said [*que dire*]?" is concerned. Moreover, death being observed and the observer is always located outside of it. In this case, destiny encloses death, but it is also the destination of human life that is directed towards death, and this is the hermeneutic aperture for the question of "Who is dying [*qui meurt*]?". "Western thought", understood as the centre of knowledge that is disseminated in schools, institutions tout court, languages, means of communication, the entire organisation of events and customs, socio-political ideologies and technological culture in the European and American contexts, determine an extremely precise context in which illness, death and the entire Western thanatological institution is placed. Clearly, Scrima outlines an itinerary of the thanatological phenomenon in Western thought, where he investigates and tries to construct a variety of hermeneutic approaches that converge in a metaphor: "the itinerary in absence [*l'itinéraire dans l'absence*]."⁸

Another type of hermeneutic approach he uses is the death perspective, the passage of death into the divine, transcendental world, from the perspective of the comparative history of religions. It is a question of

⁷ "[...] là où il y a le tombeau dans l'Histoire de l'Homme, il y a un certain rapport avec le mort... et, ce rapport, n'est pas indifférent : il est, au contraire, la source la plus lourde de sens puisqu'elle signifie un espace qui s'appelle l'urne (l'urne funéraire où l'on dépose les cendres selon certaines religions pratiquant l'incinération)", MPL, folio 2.

⁸ MPL, folio 8.