**Spiritual Discourse as a Possible Alternative for Personal and Professional Development of Christian Orthodox Teachers**

***1****In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 3Through Him all things were made, and without Him, nothing was made that has been made.* ***4****In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. (John, 1,1,3-4)*

**Introduction**

In this paper, I am tackling the idea of spiritual discourse from a Christian Orthodox perspective. First, I introduce some general notions about the idea of discourse. Secondly, I move towards the historical evolution of spiritual discourse within European society. Then, I narrow my presentation to Christian Orthodox spiritual discourse. Finally, I bring some evidence from my PhD research, namely a case study of a teacher who was inspired in his personal and professional development by the spiritual discourse of some spiritual personalities of his adolescence and youth.

**What Is Discourse?**

Originally, *discourse* has roots in the Latin language, where *discursus* means *running about* (Collins Latin Dictionary & Grammar), or in Late Latin, it means *conversation* (Dictionary ofMedieval Latin). At the same time, the word can be traced back to the cultural background of Greek dialectical communication practised and learned by public speakers. According to Cambridge Dictionary, *discourse* is `a communication in speech or writing` or `a speech or piece of writing about a particular, usually serious subject.` Moreover, in The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy *discourse* is defined as a `continuous stretch of language containing more than one sentence: conversations, narratives, arguments, speeches.`

In addition, Foucault says about discourse that they are `systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, and courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak. ` (Lessa, 2006, p. 285)

**Also, Henry &Tator (2002, p. 25) see discourse as the way in `which** language is used socially to convey broad historical meanings. Language can never be 'neutral' because it bridges our personal and social worlds. `

Therefore, if these definitions are summed up, *discourse* is a collection of sentences which empowers the person who speaks and inspires/influences/consternates the people who listen. The quote from the Holy Scriptures, at the beginning of this paper, highlights the power that a word might have. *Word* has a special meaning in Ancient Greek, where it meant Logos, which has 27 significations, but the main meaning of the word is energy, movement. A person gives to a word positive or negative power according to the way in which it is used. Hence, people who use discourses, a collection of words, acquire a certain power over those who they speak to.

Discourse can take many forms (political, social, cultural, religious), but in this paper, I write about Christian Orthodox spiritual discourse and how this might shape people`s personal and professional lives. As mentioned in the *Introduction*, the paper I am presenting is a piece of the mosaic I have been working on, i.e. my PhD thesis.

**Some Thoughts about the Evolution of Spiritual Discourse across History**

After the French revolution (1789), religion has been considered outdated and irrational (Nigel, 2000; Massimo &James, 2001; Isser, 2001). The positivist philosophers highlighted only the important role of the reason for knowledge. At the same time, they considered that the scientific method as the only way for reaching knowledge.

Before the French Revolution, there were other events that damaged the real meaning of religious/spiritual discourse. One of the events was the Crusades, which have been used for acquiring political power, under the guise of the liberation of the Holy Places under Turkish occupation. Also, the immoral behavior of some of the clergy of the Western Christian Church, indulgences and Catholic Inquisition have turned to ice the hearts of many people in the West Europe. In the Eastern Church, events evolved in a different way because people had other things to fight with: like poverty and defending their country from other countries’ invasion. In addition, the Communism regime put under ban any religious/spiritual speech. Therefore, whoever dared to talk about God in public, or even private spaces, was jailed, tortured and killed, especially priests and monks. Moreover, in recent years, the society moved towards imposing a silence of mention the name of God in public spaces for several reasons, two of which are: indoctrination and discrimination. Hence, the society has reached the point where it prefers to understate the spiritual/religious discourse.

In the next pages, I will present some the features of Christian Orthodox spiritual discourse, after which I will bring forward one case study, which is part of my PhD research.

**Spiritual Discourse in Orthodox Christianity**

In the Orthodox Christianity, the spiritual discourse is paradoxical, as many of the Orthodox teachings and dogma.

As mentioned in the Introduction, a discourse is formed of a multitude of words which have a certain importance, at the same time, for those who speak, and for those who listen. Therefore, a word has an energy within it, either creative, or destructive.

 In Orthodoxy, discourse is seen from two perspectives: the spoken as well as the non-verbal one. In the first case, the discourse could be delivered in a space dedicated to religious life, for instance, a church, in spaces dedicated to theological education, during theological conferences and during religious talks held by religious personalities.

Within Christian Orthodox faith there is the practice of visiting renowned spiritual personalities who have lived an ascetic life and now they are sharing their spiritual experiences. At the same time, priests living in society, but distinguished by their spiritual experiences, are inquired about existential questions. Obviously, this is not a tradition of the Christian Orthodoxy only, as many people belonging to other religions or spiritualities search for a mentor/ wise man/guru who might be able to answer their existential questions. Yet, within Orthodoxy, the spoken word is not as much emphasised as the way in which it is said. People feel attracted by the vivid word, which is a sharing of an experience beyond the material world. It is what ordinary Jewish people perceived when Jesus Christ was talking to them. They were asked by the scribes and Pharisees why they listen to Him. Their answer, which was straightforward and honest, summarises the way in which the Apostles and their disciples have preached the word of God: `because He taught as one who had authority (Matthew 7:29). The noun `authority` reveals the experiential character of the spoken words. (Chrysostom, 1994). If the spoken words are not according to a mystical experience with God, they might have a contrary effect on those who listen to the speaker. This is one aspect of the spiritual discourse in Orthodoxy. It is said but embeds the speaker`s personal and spiritual experience which goes beyond the material world. Hence, this type of discourse could influence a person in development, or even to re/direct their ways in life.

However, the second aspect of the Christian Orthodox spiritual discourse, the non-verbal, is given a bigger importance. Although it does not contain the audible part of the word, this type of discourse embeds what is presented within each word before being said: the thought and the emotion. Yet, in Orthodoxy, the thought and the emotion existing before the word do not express exhaustively the spiritual experience of the one who speaks.

In order to better understand the non-verbal and the authoritative aspects of the Christian Orthodox discourse, I will retell a story from a monk`s life, Saint Seraphim of Sarov (Motovilov, 2010). He was a hermit living the last years of his life near Diveevo monastery, in Russia (the XIXth century). He was one of those wise men visited for their wisdom by people within the world to find answers to their existential questions. Motovilov was interested in the Christian life purpose. Yet, the question `which is the purpose of my life/of human life` is present in many areas of knowledge.

Here is the story:

*"The Lord has revealed to me," said the great Elder, "that in your childhood you had a great desire to know the aim of our Christian life, and that you continually asked many great spiritual persons about it."*

*I must say here that from the age of twelve this thought had constantly troubled me. I had, in fact, approached many clergies about it; but their answers had not satisfied me.*

*"But no one," continued Father Seraphim, "has given you a precise answer. They have said to you: 'Go to Church, pray to God, do the commandments of God, do good—that is the aim of the Christian life.' Some were even indignant with you for being occupied with profane curiosity and said to you: 'Do not seek things that are beyond you.' But they did not speak as they should. And now poor Seraphim will explain to you in what this aim really consists. Prayer, fasting, vigil and all other Christian activities, however good they may be in themselves, do not constitute the aim of our Christian life, although they serve as the indispensable means of reaching this end. The true aim of our Christian life consists in the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. As for fasts, and vigils, and prayer, and almsgiving, and every good deed is done for Christ's sake, they are only means of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God.*

*"What do you mean by acquiring?" I asked Father Seraphim. "Somehow I don't understand that."*

*"Acquiring is the same as obtaining," he replied. "You understand, of course, what acquiring money means? Acquiring the Spirit of God is exactly the same. You know well enough what it means in a worldly sense, your Godliness, to acquire. The aim in life of ordinary worldly people is to acquire or make money, and for the nobility, it is in addition to receiving honours, distinctions and other rewards for their services to the government. The acquisition of God's Spirit is also capital, but grace-giving and eternal, and it is obtained in very similar ways, almost the same ways as monetary, social and temporal capital.*

*"Father," said I, "you speak all the time of the acquisition of the grace of the Holy Spirit as the aim of the Christian life. But how and where can I see it? Good deeds are visible, but can the Holy Spirit be seen? How am I to know whether He is with me or not? Can I know that I am in the grace of the Holy Spirit?*

*Then Father Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said: "We are both in the Spirit of God now, my son. Why don't you look at me?"*

*I replied: "I cannot look, Father, because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and my eyes ache with pain."*

*Father Seraphim said: "Don't be alarmed, your Godliness! Now you yourself have become as bright as I am. You are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God yourself; otherwise you would not be able to see me as I am."*

*Then, bending his head towards me, he whispered softly in my ear: "Thank the Lord God for His unutterable mercy to us! You saw that I did not even cross myself; and only in my heart I prayed mentally to the Lord God and said within myself: 'Lord, grant him to see clearly with his bodily eyes that descent of Thy Spirit Which Thou grantest to Thy servants when Thou art pleased to appear in the light of Thy magnificent glory.' And you see, my son, the Lord instantly fulfilled the humble prayer of poor Seraphim. How then shall we not thank Him for this unspeakable gift to us both? Even to the greatest hermits, my son, the Lord God does not always show His mercy in this way. This grace of God, like a loving mother, has been pleased to comfort your contrite heart at the intercession of the Mother of God herself. But why, my son, do you not look me in the eyes? Just look, and don't be afraid! The Lord is with us!"*

*"And so, your Godliness, I have now told you and given you a practical demonstration of all that the Lord and the Mother of God have been pleased to tell you and show you through me, poor Seraphim. Now go in peace. The Lord and the Mother of God be with you always, now and ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen. Now go in peace."*

*And during the whole of this time, from the moment when Father Seraphim's face became radiant, this illumination continued; and all that he told me from the beginning of the narrative till now, he said while remaining in one and the same position. The ineffable glow of the light which emanated from him I myself saw with my own eyes. And I am ready to vouch for it with an oath.*

As seen in the text, Saint Seraphim does not try to answer to Motovilov`s questions only verbally, but he makes him take part in his daily mystical experience. Motovilov is amazed and `hears` and understands in the depth of his heart Saint Seraphim’s answer.

This answer highlights the non-verbal and authoritative aspects of spiritual discourse. Therefore, meeting a spiritual personality might be crucial for the formation and shaping of one`s personality and profession, one might support and influence the other (Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe, 1994; Ball and Goodson, 2005; Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996). Even though the space is not formal, like in other types of discourse, the spiritual discourse might be of the same or even bigger importance. Many times formal education does necessarily answer one`s inner or existential needs, but rather either to some external requirements that exist within society at some point in history or to some political demands, like in the case of dictatorial regimes, which shape every single reality of society according to the doctrine it promotes.

In Orthodox Christianity, even in the academic education of adults, it is emphasised personal development first, by engaging in a spiritual rhythm, meant to help one to develop personally and spiritually, at the same time. Therefore, it is considered that such a formation is more important because it could support later the professional development, as whoever reached a certain level of spiritual development might be able to cope with personal and professional challenges.

In the next section, I will present the case study of one of my participants in the research I have been conducting in Romania, for my PhD studies.

**Case Study: Father George**

Father George is in his fifties, father of three, two daughters, one aged 27 and one 18 and one son aged 23 and, at the same time, grandfather. He was born in a countryside village, in Vrancea Mountains, located in the [Curvature Carpathians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sub_Carpathians) of eastern [Vrancea County](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vrancea_County), in [Romania](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romania), where he lived with his parents until he went to University, in Bucharest, probably age of 23. Since he was 11 years old he has started and deeply enjoyed spending time reading from world literature, Dostoyevsky (Karamazov Brothers), Tolstoy, Hugo (Miserables), Stow (Uncle`s Tom Cabin) and the Bible for Children. Actually, his father was reading to them (to him and his brothers) from the Bible for Children. During the interview, he told me why and where he got this passion for reading, which continued during high school and university. All knowledge gathered during his study life will help him later, when he becomes a teacher in a vocational high school, where together with two of his closer friends, successfully tried to change the teaching paradigm. Since he began high school, along with two of his best friends from that time, started what he was calling `the spiritual itinerary`. It has been called this way because he formed himself as a person during a period of 10 years each summer following the same itinerary, visiting every year three priest-monks from three monasteries in Moldavia, but adding each year another monastery where they settled for a summer. At the monastery they had settled he had every year different jobs. In fact, he was even thinking to live a monastic life. I will come back to analyse how the priest monks I have mentioned influenced Father`s George spiritual, personal and professional choices.

As said previously, Father George met during his life many people who influenced him and who modelled his personality. I will talk about them in chronological order, not in the way he mentioned them, in order to create an image of his growth to my readers.

The first people were his parents. His father used to read to him and to his brother from the Bible since they were five years old. However, his father was often impulsive so Father George, being very sensitive, could not fit his father tough personality. Therefore, he attached to his mother, who was the opposite, full of love, kindness and gentleness. He often speaks about her, mentioning that being gentle and embracing people from the church, especially his spiritual children, is his mother`s merit.

Another important period of his personal and spiritual development is what he calls, *the monastic period.* This period influenced categorically his future *destiny*, by meeting significant people. I will name them even though for English academic world their names mean nothing, their names might be known to some of the Romanian academics, due to their fame in the religious life of Romanians. Regarding Father George`s second period of growth, he and one of his best friends have started from their first year as students in a vocational high school, to visit some renowned priest monks from monasteries in North Romania. Each one of them had a gift, different from others. First one, who influenced him, was father Elijah Cleopa who had the speech charisma. He was known by many people for his ascetic life and for the way in which he was spreading God`s gospels and Elders and Fathers of the Christian Church teachings. Father George was impressed by the intertwined reality when he was talking from the fathers of the Christian church and had the impression that Father Cleopa is truly living what he was saying.

*Many Christians were coming to him during the communist regime and he always had...he was choosing a theme from Patericon, but also topics from Christian life, like fasting, fighting passions and so on. The feeling that you had when you were listening to father Cleopa was that he was living the spiritual reality like a profound reality. Therefore, for father Cleopa, between the seen and unseen world, there was* no *abyss. The intertwined reality, when he was talking about fathers of Christian Church you had the feeling that he was truly living what he was telling. So, it was the speech charisma which has persuaded us by some realities that we might have perceived them as legendary, mythological, or as imagination. There was something more.*

Another important monk in Father`s George life was elder Paisios Olaru, who impressed him in a different way. This man was a monk in a hermitage, hidden in mountains, far from any human settlements. He had feeble body, with a warm voice. He impressed father George by his spiritual presence and by the blessing he was giving to anyone who might have come to him.

*Elder Paisios Olaru, who that time, in 1979, was a spiritual father at Sihla hermitage, had the charisma of spiritual presence in which he was meeting people. He had a feeble body, which always seemed powerless, a warm voice, sometimes a little bit weak but warm and mild. He was renowned for the blessing he was giving. So, he was saying to all pilgrims who came to Sihla a blessing prayer `Lord bless you, purify you, save you. `Sometimes he was adding `Lord gives you a little corner of paradise. ` He was...err...yes...and when you were leaving father Paisois, you were feeling the hermit, something that was giving you so much peace.*

The next person who brought his contribution to Father`s George personal and spiritual development was another priest-monk, his name Elephterios, from a monastery situated close to the first two mentioned monasteries. The qualities that made father George appreciate this monk were generosity and the openness in which he was talking to them about the relationship with their wives and their families when they will be priests. In addition, every time they went there they received a rich and tasty meal, but also a big amount of money for their personal needs as students. Furthermore, maybe the most important thing was that they got father`s Elephterios attention. They were spending even 2-3 hours talking about many topics.

*And the love he was showing to us, he had that compassion, I mean inviting you to have dinner, spending with you 2-3 hours...yes...it was overwhelming because it is true we used to go to other spiritual fathers as well, but usually they did not spend much time, but the father was dedicating you a time in which...anyway...he made you] understand that he was paying you much attention. Spending 2-3 hours...and we were two or three of us every time. All these were special. And finally, he was giving to us, what we used to name a blessing, an amount of money. The amount was substantial, in those communist times, 100 lei it was a big amount...given that not many people could earn that money monthly...it was quite a big amount. So, every time.*

These three men had a big impact on Father George`s formation. One taught him that everlasting teachings within Christian Orthodox Church are meant to be lived truly, starting from earthly life; another one, showed him that no matter how weak your body might be, you still can be spiritually strong and have an incommensurable love for every person you meet; finally, the last one was a lesson of material and spiritual generosity. In his opinion, meeting significant people in one`s life is far more important than reading about how to live life or other life`s issues, even religious readings. As he said, those 10 years of repeated summer pilgrimages, was just a beginning of a spiritual itinerary, which continued during his degree and postgraduate studies.

*I think that there started a spiritual itinerary that has had an everlasting impact on my life. Therefore, the presence of great fathers taught me that beyond readings, of any nature they might be, the most important is the presence of a person. Beyond everything father, Cleopa and father Paisios and father Elephterios were charismatic presences. They were people who..and we in Orthodoxy...I understood later...err...I would like you to know that we emphasise a lot meeting providential personalities. Meeting a providential personality is essential, the meeting from person to person. It is true that reading is helpful but never can be replaced a person by their writing because something is being lost on the way.*

This was Father George’s first period of transformation called by him the monastic period. He even confessed at this point that he had the intention to become a monk. Going to one of Moldavia monasteries, as usual, he met many people (historians, artists, poets, writers, cultivated people) who used to meet there during the communist regime (they were afraid of meeting in cities because there were many people spying on the intellectuals). One of those people, recommended Father George to go and meet father Dumitru Staniloae. This person, a historian, seeing that he was a gifted young man, want to convince him to study history, but as he was more a philosopher, recommended him to meet Father Staniloae who in those times was already retired. Although an important University from Greece gave in 1975 to Father Staniloe the title of Doctor Honoris Causa and even though he was internationally renowned, the University of Theology from Romania never invited him to have a lecture on political reasons. Meeting Dumitru Staniloae was for Father George one of the most beautiful periods of his life. It was a meeting that changed his life path, because he was a role model for him and, at the same time, helped him with resources and guidance for his degree dissertation and afterwards, encouraged him to do postgraduate studies abroad, in Greece. Albeit the hard life during the communist regime, when old people were dying frozen in their homes and were queuing from 1 a.m. in a freezing cold to buy essential food (like bread), and churches were demolished, it was for him, thanks to father Staniloae one of the most essential periods of his life.

*...I think that the period of time when I met father Staniloe was providential...and... besides the suggestion he made regarding my degree dissertation, Person and Communion, we worked together on the plan, he gave me two manuscripts. His books, Human Person in Eternal Dialogue with God and The Immortal Icon of God, when I first read them I was excited and nervous, they were typewritten, not published yet...and for me...it was an extraordinary period. Even though theologians were considered negative or they were marginalised, Christian church as well...let us not forget it was the period when churches were demolished, even in Bucharest dozens of churches were demolished, it was an agitated period, but yet it was a period of searching. In this context, I discovered books forbidden by the communist regime, philosophers, metaphysicians, and so on. So this continued with father Staniloae...could you imagine...the fact that he closely guided me, and after encouraged me to do postgraduate...and I remember when I was accepted for postgraduate studies in autumn 1988...God helped me...he was so happy for me, it was a great joy...you know.*

Finally, another important person in Father George`s life was his spiritual father. In Orthodox Christian confession the spiritual father is very important because he is considered to be a kind of tool through which God works in a person`s life shaping of his/her personal and spiritual identity.

 Thus, between a spiritual father and a Christian has to be a compatibility, meaning that a spiritual father (priest to whom one is confessing) with a certain personality is suitable for a Christian with a similar kind of personality. Often, within Orthodox spirituality, Christians are recommended to pray to God for a spiritual father. This is also Father George`s case. When he arrived in Bucharest as a student he chose to confess to a priest renowned for his eloquence as a professor at University and for his intense spiritual life, but he did not feel that they fit. So, he looked for another priest, this time a very gentle one, from whom I might assume he inherited the gentleness and kindness that he shows to all people who want to have a discussion with him, especially young people.

*...to be honest first time (in Bucharest) I confessed, the only time, to father professor Constantin Galeriu, who was a spiritual father with many spiritual children, but...I think it was an incompatibility, he did not suit me, as a spiritual father. However, he was extraordinary as a professor and as a spiritual father, but he did not suit me. It was a structural incompatibility. Instead, father Sofian Boghiu who did not give advice, but he was a gentle presence. His gentleness attracted me to Antim monastery. And I used to go and confess myself to father Sofian. He was listening to me...Also, sometimes he was giving me some advice but beyond all when he was touching my head with his hand (this is the practice in Orthodoxy), his love and his kindness were those which have healed me.*

There were many people from different backgrounds who have carved Father George`s personality and spiritual identity, from family to monks, priests, poets, historians. His experience and even the way in which he talked about the people he met in his past, shows how much a person and the living experience of meeting a certain person at a certain time might shape one`s personality and even how much the life path of that person could be determined by that meeting.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I tried to present some features of the Christian Orthodox spiritual discourse and how this could be a possible alternative for Christian Orthodox teacher`s personal and professional development. I brought forward the case of a teacher who shaped his personality and profession being inspired by the spiritual discourse of some people he met during his adolescence and his youth.

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