

# André Scrima, Reader of Heidegger: From the Desert of Being to the Desert of the Monastery

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*Little is known about the meeting which took place between Martin Heidegger and André Scrima. Aside from unfolding within the master-disciple framework, it is a witness above all of a fruitful dialogue between western philosophy and eastern theology about a common concern: the desert as the unfolding of our being in the world. It is this concern, the guiding light in fact for this article, which will develop here in several stages: First, by unravelling the hostile meanings of the word "desert." Second, by using it as a reading key to explore the foundations of contemporary civilization and especially by analysing it as a concept for a new topography of Being. The final stage will tackle the foundational link which unites the desert and monastic life. It is this connection which will finally allow us to understand how the love of God, which pushes the monk into the desert, can be so decisive for a new understanding of Being.*

**Keywords:** *desert, Being, monastic life, love, nihilation, technology*

## Introduction

What could a philosopher like Martin Heidegger, a monk like André Scrima and a writer like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry have in common? One could say in response that all three have been confronted with the strange experience of the desert. It haunts practically all of Heidegger's thinking (through one of his most frightening faces which is Technology). Scrima makes it the thread running through his life (through the notion of nomadic existence) and Saint-Exupéry has used it to give us some of the most beautiful pages of literature. To think both philosophically and theologically on the theme of the desert is no easy task especially when the very word lends itself to both antagonist and friendly interpretations. The desert fascinates us just as much as it fills us with dread. It describes the nihilism of modern times just as much as life during the time of the Exodus when the Jews were on the way to the Promised Land. The desert is a place of life but also a place of death. It is on the basis of these two opposing poles that we will attempt to see how

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a theme such as that of the desert can be a key to interpreting the situation in our world and at the same time how this reality, far from being lived as a terrible solitude, can be the opportunity for a more authentic life following the example of those monks who, from the 4<sup>th</sup> century onwards, in the marvellous words of Father Scrima, filled the desert.

We are going to base our arguments on a text by Heidegger which is relatively unknown “Ansprache zum 80. Geburtstag Ludwig von Fickers” (*Speech for the 80th birthday of Ludwig von Ficker*). The choice was made because it is the only text by Heidegger which Scrima commented on.<sup>1</sup> The thinking of the philosopher, although it was for a particular time, is still very present in the writings of Father Scrima. It is not so much an exposition of the texts themselves but rather of the theme which is addressed (namely, that of the desert) and of the philosophical and theological meaning for the two authors. In this regard let us mention that the article by Father Scrima is not like a usual commentary either. What we are witnessing is above all the fruitful and meditative meeting between two ways of thinking about the same theme: that of the desert. It is this fruitful encounter that we want to share in these lines by reflecting on how it can help us to think theologically and philosophically about the meaning of a notion as vast as that of the desert in the world today. The connection which we will establish later with monastic

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<sup>1</sup> The article is based on the text by André Scrima entitled “Pustiul și Ființa—după o rostire inedită a lui M. Heidegger” an article published in the journal *Prodromos*, no. 8-9 (March 1968): 3–7, and republished with some additions in the volume of tributes to the Romanian philosopher Mihai Șora under the title “Parabola unor aproape-întâlniri” in *Dialog și libertate. Eseuri în onoarea lui Mihai Șora* (Bucharest: Nemira, 1997), 279–96. It is this second edition of the article that we will use. The article in itself is therefore a hermeneutics of a text that Heidegger had published in the journal *Prodromos*; it appeared in the March 1968 issue. André Scrima received this text in 1967 when he first met Heidegger in Freiburg-in-Breisgau (cf. “Pustiul și Ființa,” 282). It was therefore an original text for the period in which it was published (the collection of complete works did not get published until the year 2000 in *GA* 16, 563–64: “Ansprache zum 80. Geburtstag Ludwig von Fickers”). This text, which is a celebration speech, was delivered by Heidegger on April 13, 1960 in Innsbruck for the 80th birthday of his friend, the writer and publisher Ludwig von Ficker (1880–1967) with whom he shared a great admiration for the poetry of Georg Trakl (1887–1914). Ludwig von Ficker was the main editor of Trakl’s work in the review he founded in 1910, *Der Brenner*, and Heidegger devoted two important texts to him, not without having first “ruminated” on his poetry for more than forty years: “Die Sprache” (1950) and “Die Sprache im Gedicht. Eine Erörterung von Georg Trakls Gedicht” (1952) in *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959), 11–33 and 37–82. Finally, it should be noted that the translation into French (and by a Romanian) of Heidegger’s celebration speech was by André Scrima and it is to date the only existing translation of this text. *Le Dictionnaire Martin Heidegger. Vocabulaire polyphonique de sa pensée*, eds. Philippe Arjakovsky, François Fédier and Hadrien France-Lanord (Paris: Cerf, 2013), in the bibliography of the notice on “Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de (1900–1944)” indicates this translation by mentioning the title of the journal in which it was published (*Prodromos*), but without the name of the translator.

life will complete this picture for, in the topography of Being, it signifies what can be considered one of its most essential achievements. The monk is a being who seeks to establish in the desert of yesterday and today the love of God as a foundation which can withstand devastation.

### Can one build “on sand”?

In Heidegger’s poem “Eventide on Reichenau”<sup>2</sup>, the poetic presence of the desert on that little island in Lake Constance which shelters an old VIIIth-century Benedictine monastery, is like a distant echo of the symbiosis between the monks and the desert which occurred at the beginning of the 4th century.

The desert, for Heidegger, is a place of desolation. This view is shared by Father Scrima who sees in the desert “the supreme opportunity for desolation and solitude”.<sup>3</sup> The desert lets nothing grow. It is the very image of the nothingness of life, an active nothingness which engulfs everything in its path, like those black holes from which not a particle of light can escape. For this reason, the desert, as Heidegger will say, is more horrifying than destruction, which at least presumes that there is something to be destroyed.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the desert even denies the possibility of building something, ephemeral though that possibility might be. How can we not hear the seriousness of Heidegger’s words when he calls our century a century of desolation? That is to say that the period in which we are living has not only become barren<sup>5</sup> but it is also an obstacle for those who would like it to progress. The progress in question here has nothing to do with the kind of advancement which comes as a result of “planning and calculating”<sup>6</sup> (“Grown-ups love figures”<sup>7</sup> the Little

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<sup>2</sup> “Eventide on Reichenau” (*Abendgang auf der Reichenau*) is a poem which dates from the period of Heidegger’s youth (1916) and which was published for the first time in 1917 in *Das Bodenseebuch* (Constance, 1917), 152. At that time as André Scrima points out in his 1968 article, “Pustiul și Fiiința,” he was still unknown to the French-speaking public. He learned of the poem only in 1983, on the occasion of the publication of number 45 of the *Cahiers de Herne* dedicated to Heidegger, 119: “*Passage du soir sur Reichenau*”. In English, it was translated much earlier, in 1963, by William J. Richardson in *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, Collection Phaenomenologica 13 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963); fourth expanded edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 1. Finally, let us mention that it can be found in the edition of the complete works of Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 13, 7. For the following quotations from *Gesamtausgabe* we will use the acronym *GA*.

<sup>3</sup> Homily by André Scrima, “*Jesus led into the desert*, Mt 4:1-11,” unpublished text and undated apart from the mention of “Saturday after the Feast of the Transfiguration” (Archives André Scrima – New Europe College, Bucharest).

<sup>4</sup> See: *GA* 16, 563.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, translated from the French by Katherine Woods (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), 29.

Prince of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry will say), because from the point of view of humankind's authentic progress, this always appears as regression, thus explaining the presence of devastation.

Nevertheless, debris remain, and we must in spite of everything make some foundation: "Let love of the towers be the foundation which dominates the sands"<sup>8</sup> Heidegger will say to his friend von Ficker. Letting love be the foundation is understood by Heidegger in the sense of "*laisser-être*" (*Gelassenheit*<sup>9</sup>) of things and people as pure presence.

### The desert in the grip of inevitable ambiguity

The admiration which André Scrima feels for the thinking of Martin Heidegger is explained, no doubt, by the fact that he saw in him one of the last philosophers of "authentic thinking"<sup>10</sup>. For this reason Heidegger's text deserves particular attention, for in the trail of the great thinker, it marks his movement "towards another horizon of transcendence"<sup>11</sup>; "«Other» not on account of heterogeneity but through a breakthrough which is closer to the *same* original word which speaks of the enigma of our belonging to the world."<sup>12</sup> In other words, it is always about saying the *self* (*das Selbst*) from a different perspective. And this perspective, Father Scrima thinks, can be identified as love. No longer being but love!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "Fonde l'amour des tours qui dominant les sables". This quote from Heidegger is taken from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's posthumous novel *Citadelle*, published in 1948. Father Scrima points out that the word "love" appears here for the first time in Heidegger's work. It is more correct to say that it is in this new understanding that it appears for the first time. Although it is not a word used very much by Heidegger, it already appears in the course of the winter semester 1920-1921 on the question of love in Saint Augustine, "*Einleitung in die Phänomenologie der Religion*" (GA 60), or again in § 29 of *Sein und Zeit* where it is presented as *affect*. We can also add this letter from Heidegger to Hannah Arendt, of June 22, 1925: "Let there *be* love, this is the joyful burden whose existence is the only legacy so that *in turn* it may be" (Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, *Lettres et autres documents* [Paris: Gallimard, 2001], 41).

<sup>9</sup> This term, which dates back to Master Eckhart, points the way to detachment and dispossession. It is the opposite of "*eigenschaft*" which translates attachment to things as well as property. *Gelassenheit* comes from the verb "*lâzen*": to leave, to loosen, "to restore all things to their primitive freedom", to recognize them in their "autonomy" (See: Master Eckhart, *Sermons allemands ou la joie errante*, translated and commented on by Reiner Schürmann [Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2005], 31 and 34).

<sup>10</sup> Scrima, "Pustiul și Ființa," 286.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 287.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> By positing love instead of being (*Seinden*) as the foundation of our being in the world, we do not seek to raise here issues that would distance us from what we see above all as an intuition rightly noticed by Father Scrima and which also allows us to think of Heidegger's

But how should we understand this affirmation? Is it now love which is the basis for this transcendence under which *Dasein* moves, or rather should we be saying that it is through this that *Dasein* is achieved? Like Heidegger, Scrima in his turn, understood that the destiny of Greek metaphysics was only an endless ruse for concealing the fundamental question of Being. “Authentic thinking” (to which Heidegger is linked, and before him Nietzsche, but also poets such as Hölderlin and Trakl) aims at restoring to the field of the enigmatic what metaphysics has constantly considered according to the observation by Father Scrima, as always something “close”, “familiar” and “known”.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense the following sentence of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry can find a particular resonance in the works of Heidegger concerning the question of Being: “The genesis is never completed [...] it is the solutions which mislead us.”<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, what proves to be one of the characteristics of the desert is just exactly that: the unmasking of the instability of its structures, which under other skies (as ours dominated by Technology), give the impression of something that is rock solid. The truth of the desert is that our best systems and theories are only mirages of being, an illusion of being. For this reason, one can evoke the ambivalent role of the desert: on the one hand that of causing devastation on the other, that of bringing to birth. Moreover, Father Scrima noticed correctly the causal link which exists in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry between the arrival of the *Little Prince* and the prior existence of the desert. So, we need a place of this kind, austere and stripped bare, so that what is to come and what is to emerge can happen: “Lord, my solitude at times is as cold as ice. And I am pleading for a sign in the desert of abandonment.”<sup>16</sup>

So the desert unsettles every bit as much as it allows something to emerge. In more philosophical language one might say it allows Being to emerge, whilst at the same time threatening its foundations. It is both origin and *eschaton*. The work of Saint-Exupéry is important in the sense that it uses the theme of desert as a criterion for discerning experiences of Being.

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own questioning of the word “Being” going as far as a form of renunciation of its use which makes it suddenly unpronounceable: “*Wobin* mit dieser Frage fragen? In die *W*” (*Whither* with the asking of this question? Into the *W*) (Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings II-VI. Black Notebooks 1931-1938* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), § 36, 13) (*GA* 94, § 36, 16).

<sup>14</sup> Scrima, “Pustiul și Ființa,” 287.

<sup>15</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des hommes*, quoted by Scrima, “Pustiul și Ființa,” 287.

<sup>16</sup> Idem, *Citadelle* 213, 1948, Epub edition.

Father Scrima will go on to say that his whole work simply describes the link which already exists between the desert and a new understanding of what is real. In other words all authentic knowledge will have to be closely linked to the desert as a place where it can be exercised freely without any obstacles<sup>17</sup>: Thus, in St. Matthew's Gospel we learn "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Mt 8.20) not that he would need this but because he must remain free of all attachments. Being, as emerging freedom, begins in the desert. For that reason the very mission of Christ must be preceded by the salutary experience of the desert (Mk 1.12-13; Mt 4.1; Lk 4.1). In truth, the desert is the only virgin territory where one can contemplate afresh "the purity of the original deed"<sup>18</sup>, where genesis is always at work: "«What makes the desert beautiful» said the little prince «is that somewhere it hides a well...»"<sup>19</sup>. There we have the reason why the desert remains ambivalent, since for the one who does not know where to look it becomes in effect a place of death and desolation: "Today only the Sahara is a desert"<sup>20</sup>, a sublime sentence by Saint-Exupéry and transcribed by Father Scrima in his article in order to rightly highlight the de-sacralisation of this place.

### Desert as Mirage and Love as Charity

The key sentence commented on by Heidegger in his celebration speech is taken from the posthumous book by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Citadelle*, and it concerns the only answer which can put a stop to such devastation: "*Fonde l'amour des tours qui dominent les sables*" ("Let love of the towers be the foundation which dominates the sands"). Henceforth such is the mission of philosopher and poet: to dominate the empty sands by rising above that which threatens at any moment to dissolve Being. Love of the towers is a positive way of translating what, in a negative register, could mean nihilation (*Nichtung*). Let us really understand this paradox: nihilation is the same as the foundation of towers. For making a foundation in the middle of the desert is only possible at the cost of an act of nihilating things and people. To "found" is therefore, in a certain sense, to "destroy". For Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, victory over the desert (building towers) is equivalent in Heidegger

<sup>17</sup> See: Scrima, "Pustiul și Ființa," 288.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> A. de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Idem, *Terre des hommes*, 114, quoted by Scrima, "Pustiul și Ființa," 289. Baudelaire already in *Spleen (II)*, will say of the desert: "- Henceforth, o living flesh, you are no more! / You are of granite, wrapped in a vague dread, / Slumbering in some Sahara's hazy sands," (Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil, Spleen (II)*, trans. James McGowan [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 149).

to the “*laisser-faire*” of the force of devastation (*die Verwüstung*). For this reason, when he comments on Saint-Exupéry’s sentence, Heidegger is praising what, in fact, can only be obtained at the cost of inevitable nihilation.

Thus, we arrive, through this kind of reasoning at the only possible response which, according to Father Scrima, allows us to decipher the paradox of life and death which characterizes the desert: it is the sign of the cross, symbol of the contradictory union between humanity and God to which we only gain access by paying the price of constant nihilation of our creaturehood in order to live forever in God<sup>21</sup>. The formulas used by Father Scrima in his writings express quite well this paradox of being: “on the contradictory arms (of the cross) the human being meets his Creator by letting himself die into God for eternity in order to be raised to new life and to live forever in Him”<sup>22</sup>; similarly, this paradox is articulated in another passage, which is an interpretation of Revelation 5.6: “The lamb slaughtered before the throne (Rev 5.6), is an image of the Resurrected Christ”<sup>23</sup>.

Thus, the desert speaks, on condition that creatures are silent. Or better still, one could say that it speaks of them when they disappear into the silence of the night. In “Eventide on Reichenau”, the poem of Heidegger’s youth, the philosopher contemplates in the manner of a Proust plunged into “gentle, relaxing darkness”<sup>24</sup>, nightfall: “in the summer-weary, dew-damp gardens / Falls, like a lover’s word withheld, / The night”<sup>25</sup>. This moment when there is no distinction between people and things, is it not an invitation to savour in a different way what is before our eyes? Night is “a lover’s word”, meaning that in its very power to dissolve and displace, it does not annihilate but lets things be (*Gelassenheit*) in a different way. Better still, it allows to rest and breathe that which is normally caught up in constant planning and calculation.

Applied to man, this image appears as a choice to be made between two opposite directions: to follow the desert route or to yield to its mirage, to opt for journeying, or to settle for the status quo.

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<sup>21</sup> We read for example in the hymn in Philippians (2.5-9) this proclamation: “In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus. His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself (ἐκένωσεν) [...] he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names”.

<sup>22</sup> André Scrima, *Antropologia apofatică* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2005), 97.

<sup>23</sup> Idem, “Jérusalem: Réflexions sur une cité «unique et universelle» pour les religions monothéistes,” *Concilium* 155 (April 1980): 124.

<sup>24</sup> Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, tome 1: Du côté de chez Swan (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Heidegger, “Eventide on Reichenau,” 1.



## Just when everything seems to be falling apart, a voice cries out in the desert

The desert devastates, but in a way which aims to unmask “the bewitchery of the world”<sup>26</sup>, i.e. the illusion that this world has a hold over us, making us believe that it is the ultimate reality and truth about humankind. This is what Heidegger will call “forgetfulness of Being”, a defining characteristic of European metaphysics for nearly twenty-five centuries. Thus, we see that what is specific to the desert cannot be attributed to a nihilistic operation from the moment when its aim is creative: it is “nothingness by excess” (“néant par excès”), Stanislas Breton will say<sup>27</sup>, “the not” (*das Nichts*)<sup>28</sup> of Being for Heidegger. Seen from this perspective the nihilistic and devastating desert, which we envisage as negative, is that which, in reality, characterizes our towns, our western civilization, our super-powerful technology.<sup>29</sup> It represents the domain of the apparent, of illusion, things which fade in the midday sun. In a passage in *Biserica liturgică*, Father Scrima speaks of the hour of the god Pan, namely the moment in the day when man becomes suddenly aware of his nothingness and his finiteness<sup>30</sup>; it is the hour of “panic”. For Father Scrima, it is the time which corresponds in the Bible to the moment of man’s first sin when he succumbs to the ruse of the serpent. For all that, where the temptation would be to sink into the madness of despair (“Everything falls apart” Rilke will say in the *8th Duino Elegy*) Father Scrima sees the opportunity for yet another re-creation of man, his restoration to the purity of his existence in Paradise, his “first beginning”. And who can make this recreation possible if not the Word incarnate, the One who at the sixth hour when he himself sat, wilting and weary, on the rim of Jacob’s well (a moment so marvellously captured by the contemporary artist François-

<sup>26</sup> Scrima, “Pustiul și Ființa,” 289. We find this same term in Heidegger who speaks of “*Verzauberung*” (*Bewitchery*) to define the domination of technology which goes hand in hand with the absence of questioning (See: Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie [Vom Ereignis]*, GA 65, § 59, 124).

<sup>27</sup> Stanislas Breton, *La Pensée du Rien* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992), 55.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?,” *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeil (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 92, (GA 9, § 13, 116). “The not” is not a simple negation but the nothing of the Being on which is based, according to Heidegger, the negation of being as one of the possibilities of manifestation of “the nihilation of the nothing” (*das Nichten des Nichts*).

<sup>29</sup> See: Idem, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York, Evanston, London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968), 30 (GA 8, § 31, 36): “The devastation of the earth can easily go hand in hand with a guaranteed supreme living standard for man, and just as easily with the organized establishment of a uniform state of happiness for all men.”

<sup>30</sup> See: André Scrima, *Biserica liturgică* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2005), 277–78.



Xavier Boissoudy<sup>31</sup>) and asks the Samaritan woman to give him a drink? For André Scrima, the water which Christ asks for is the symbol of the new life which is the presence of God's Spirit in man at the moment when the latter is in danger of falling apart. To drink that water is to find true, authentic life, all the more so as this water is the source of "eternal life" (Jn 4.14). In the desert, man lives therefore in a sort of spiritual 'communion' with the Spirit of God, he re-discovers the foundational experience of faith through the suppression of the separation which is, we might say, the shattering of its idols, the necessary "disenchantment"<sup>32</sup>, the authentic removal of their hold over us. From then on, the word of God can be heard again, as once happened in the past with John the Baptist: "the word of God was addressed in the desert to John, the son of Zechariah" (Lk 3.2). In the desert John the Baptist receives (*audire*) the Word and the Word goes to meet him, for the distance of the spell of enchantment has been removed and its power overcome. At midday, the world's mirage vanishes under the glare of the sun. It is in such a way that the desert unmasks what can be considered as one of the most hidden secrets of the world and which Father Scrima has so clearly indicated: the complicity of our world with nihilism.<sup>33</sup>

Now we are better able to understand the wish expressed by Heidegger to his friend von Ficker "Let love of the towers be the foundation which dominates the sands". But what are his sands if not those which form our "century of devastation"?<sup>34</sup> And how do you make a foundation<sup>35</sup> in such a place which, by definition, is opposed to any other coming into Being? Simply by going to make a foundation in another desert. In the same way,

<sup>31</sup> François-Xavier Boissoudy, *Résurrection, Miséricorde. Lavis d'encre sur papier, 2014-2016*, text of François Boespflug (Editions de Corlevour, 2016), 44–45.

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, GA 65, § 59, 124: "Die Entzauberung".

<sup>33</sup> See: Scrima, "Pustiul și Ființa," 290.

<sup>34</sup> GA 16, 563: "wir im Zeitalter der Verwüstung leben".

<sup>35</sup> In *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, § 188 and § 189, 307–9, we can see that "to found" goes hand in hand with "to decide" (which is always a decision in favour of the experience of "historical being" which alone allows the passage and the arrival, in all tranquility, of "the last god" (*der letzte Gott*). In Heidegger's critique of the actual "spiritual" as an attachment to things past (*Contributions of Philosophy [Of the Event]* [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012], § 189, 245: "the «spiritual» as well as the «political» viewpoints are limited to the superficial and the hitherto\*") and, consequently, as a closure before any new experience of God, should we not also read the advent in the 4th century of monastic life in a context of installation and institutionalization of the faith?

\*The adverb "hitherto" which translates from German "*bisherig*" should be understood here in a temporal sense, as in the expression "up until now". We can also refer to the French translation of *Beiträge* (*Apports à la philosophie. De l'avenance* [Paris: Gallimard, 2013], 354) which is more explicit on this subject by translating as: what has been "*depuis longtemps consacré*" ("for a long time sacred") and in a sense, has become immutable.

that a diamond is used for cutting a diamond, so too only a desert can prevent the devastation of another desert.

### Monastic life: an original “founding”

“To found”, according to Father Scrima’s explanation, comes before “to make”, which strictly speaking, is secondary to the first verb. Consequently, “to found” corresponds more with the possibility of “putting down roots”, with presence, and with “being” in the middle of the desert. The miracle of the burning Bush which burns “without being consumed” (Exod. 3.2) is more indicative of “presence” than of “action”. A presence of fire “sewn” by Pascal into the lining of his coat! This is how Father Scrima will link the figure of the Spiritual Father to the notion of “the original fertility”<sup>36</sup> of the desert (as pure presence of the Truth of Being in its coming). We know that this fertility is not tied to an institutional structure but to the charismatic expression of faith. In this sense, as his title shows, the role of the Spiritual Father is not so much to create as to engender, by making possible “the fertility of future flowerings of being.”<sup>37</sup> By describing it as a “pillar”, Father Scrima here picks up on the spiritual relationship between the figure of the Father and the presence of God in the Exodus, guiding his people. Henceforth, the Desert Father will take on, in part through ‘fragmentation’ (scissiparity), this same divine presence which personally guides the new ‘people’ of the monks, “the true Israël” according to the words of Saint John Cassian (362-432)<sup>38</sup>, “the eschatological Israel”<sup>39</sup>, adds Father Scrima.

We must return to Saint-Exupéry’s injunction (“Let love of the towers be the foundation”) in order to understand the meeting place which brings together Heidegger’s ideas and the birth of monastic life. And this place is not so much the desert per se, which, seen in this bare light will always be too abstract, but the possibility of what the desert hides, leading to the advent of the full essence of Being. And this possibility is love: “Make love the foundation”, the new horizon of transcendence in order to think in the same way. Love, Heidegger will say, deepening its meaning, is: “letting be (*Sein-lassen*), which as a result brings forth being.”<sup>40</sup> His interpretation is

<sup>36</sup> Scrima, “Pustiul și Ființa,” 291.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> Jean Cassien, *Conférences cénobitiques* 21,28, SC 64 (Paris: Cerf, 1959), 103 (PL 49, 1207A).

<sup>39</sup> André Scrima, *Despre isihasm* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2003), 26.

<sup>40</sup> GA 16, 564. In Heidegger, love has nothing to do with sentimentalism. In *Zum Ereignis-Denken*, GA 73.2, § 12, 916, he defines it as follows: “Love: it is the initial relationship to the truth of being” (*Die Liebe: ist der anfängliche Bezug zur Wahrheit des Seyns*). Likewise, in

based on an expression which he attributes to Saint Augustine but which is rather a paraphrase “*«amo: volo ut sit»*, I love, I want the one I love to be who he is”<sup>41</sup>. Heidegger thus underlines the two fundamental dimensions of love which for Father Scrima will resonate with 1 Jn 4.10: *to institute* (“it is he (God) who has loved us”) and *to make a gift* (“he sent his Son as a sacrifice of pardon for our sins”).<sup>42</sup> A theologian whom André Scrima particularly likes, Nicolaus Cusanus, will say in a profound statement: “And since Your seeing is Your being, I exist because You look upon me. And if You were to withdraw Your countenance from me, I would not at all continue to exist”.<sup>43</sup> This look can only be a look of love which, if need be, sets itself up as the foundation for being. Let us underline that, for in Heidegger’s terminology the foundation (*das Grund*) is not a concept which can be explained in terms of cause and effect (the foundation being bottomless, *Abgrund*) but it still dwells in the *Dasein* which it founds. For this reason, if God were to turn away, being would fall to pieces immediately.

“*Amo: volo ut sit*”. Thus, the only thing which can dominate the desert is that self-giving love, given so that the other might grow and put down roots in his turn. Love is the only reality which enables a man to pit himself against the devastation of the desert. Let us not lose sight of how love helps in resisting the advance of this devastation: love is expressed through *Gelassenheit*, *laisser-être*, *letting be*, which is the only condition for a truly authentic existential growth. Master Eckhart defines it as the way we turn towards things<sup>44</sup>, in short, an attitude which imitates how God looks on his creatures: they come to life through the act of contemplation, it is the “look” which creates them: “God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good” (Gen. 1.31). There one could suspect a passive attitude, content simply to state that things exist, whereas it is actually the opposite which is true when we rediscover in love the real force behind the movement of everything in the universe! As Father Scrima underlines, it is a matter of going beyond the concept of love envisaged in Nietzschean terms of “willpower” which would

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GA § 58, Blatt 3, 185, it is considered “as a fundamental motif of phenomenological understanding” (*Liebe als Motivgrund des phänomenologischen Verstehens*).

<sup>41</sup> GA 16, 563. The expression, although of Augustinian inspiration, is not found literally in this form in Augustine (See: *Le Dictionnaire* Martin Heidegger, “Amour”). However, one can imagine that Heidegger relied on similar expressions like the one Augustine uses in *Confessions* 10, 23, 34 (PL 32, 794) and that he quotes in his course on “Augustine and neo-platonism,” *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 147 (GA 60, § 10, 199-200): “Hoc quod amant velint esse veritatem” (what they love they want to be the truth).

<sup>42</sup> See: Scrima, “Pustiul și Ființa,” 291.

<sup>43</sup> Nicolaus Cusanus, *De visione Dei* 4, quoted in Scrima, *Biserica liturgică*, 164.

<sup>44</sup> See: *Le Dictionnaire* Martin Heidegger, “*Gelassenheit*.”

inevitably finish by imposing its control over what should always remain as freedom to grow. With regard to this, one really ought to wonder about the true sense of Nietzsche's aphorism "God is dead", wrongly considered as an attack on Christianity, whereas the explanation derives, quite clearly, from this other sentence: "*We have killed him* – you and I!"<sup>45</sup> Failure to see a link between what Heidegger was denouncing as man's subjection to the power of "planning and calculating", and the death of God, could distract our gaze from the real problem and let the desert not only grow again but what is even more serious, deepen.<sup>46</sup>

### Monastic Life and Itinerant Being

The fruit of the desert is love. This is true even in the process of nihilation, which is different from total devastation! That love implies such nihilation on the part of God and of man, we have seen in the verse from 1 Jn 4.10, and we find it again in another verse which is just as clear—Jn 12.24: "unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest of fruit". The death of Christ on the Cross is the grain of wheat which, having fallen to the ground, becomes the seed of life. The experience which the future Christian lives at the moment of baptism is the experience of passing from death to life. That is the true fertility of the desert as the place where the new being emerges. So, would that be the bottomless foundation of being which would allow the new Christian to live beyond the finitude even of his own state of being? For Father Scrima, it is certain that "The emergence through the desire of love of an irrepressible and founding birthplace for what of being will remain «eternally», could be construed as the departure point for a new meditative wandering beyond its present horizon."<sup>47</sup>

For this reason we ought to specify that the emergence of monks in the desert cannot be explained simply by historical facts of nature. Their appearance must have its roots in this new journeying of the being which takes as its reference point the supreme love of God who "so loved the world" (Jn 3.16) that he did not spare his Son: "the monk is always moving through the desert whose great test for potential growth is not so much corporeal austerity as thirsting for the living word of God who has to excavate his heart

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<sup>45</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §125, 119–20.

<sup>46</sup> "The desert can no longer grow: it is everywhere. But it can still be deepened" (*Appel*, Proposition 1, 2003 manifesto by a group of anonymous authors affiliated with the Current of Thought of the French review *Tiqqun*: <http://bloom0101.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/appel.pdf>).

<sup>47</sup> Scrima, "Pustiul și Ființa," 294.

until there gushes forth the water of baptism which is the Holy Spirit.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, what did these monks go into the desert to search for if not the love of God, even at the price of the nihilation of their own being? In the *Sayings* of the Fathers we find this story:

A young man was seeking to renounce the world but often, after he had set out, his *logismoi* turned him back, involving him in affairs, for he was also rich. One day, after he had set out, they crowded in on him raising a great cloud of dust to turn him back again. But he suddenly stripped and, throwing his clothes aside, he ran off naked to the monasteries. The Lord revealed to one elder: “Get up and receive my athlete”. The elder got up and met him. He was amazed on hearing the matter and put the habit on him. When some people came to the elder to ask about *logismoi* of all kinds, he answered them: “If it is about renouncing the world, you are to ask the brother”, he would say.<sup>49</sup>

The radicalism imposed by the choice of religious life, the total renunciation of things and to a certain extent, of one’s own life (I belong no longer to myself, but to the One whom my heart has chosen<sup>50</sup>) can only be explained in the light of this foundational reality which is love. In Christian language, only the logic of the Cross allows us to understand that it is necessary to take the path of nihilation in order to be reborn into life. That is why on several occasions Father Scrima will say that, in the crucifixion of Christ, what is unspeakable is the “disfigurement” and the “dissolution”<sup>51</sup> of his face, name-

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<sup>48</sup> *Testimony* of Father Élie concerning a 1960 text sent by Father Scrima to the monks of Deir-el-Harf (*Contacts* 55, no. 230 [July-September 2003]: 247–48).

<sup>49</sup> *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, ed. and trans. John Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), no. 51, 49. Father Scrima points out to us that even today, in the Orthodox Church, when the novice is preparing to receive the tonsure which marks his entry into monastic life, he is asked this question: “Brother, why did you come?” and he replies: “Out of desire for the desert” (André Scrima, *Ortodoxia și încercarea comunismului* [Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008], 281).

<sup>50</sup> In no way do we affirm this in an affective register, because the heart is, in every spiritual tradition (with its roots in the Bible) an organ of knowledge, the central seat of being and, for the hesychast tradition, the heart is the focal point of *hesychia* (peace of heart). Finally, we mention this very significant piece of information from Gérard Guest about the existence of the following biblical inscription on the door of Heidegger’s house, in Zähringen: “*Behüte Dein Herz mit Allem Fleiß, denn daher gehet das Leben*” (*Watch over your heart with extreme care, for this is where life comes from*, The Book of Proverbs 4.23) (*Le Dictionnaire Martin Heidegger*, “Christianisme”).

<sup>51</sup> The word used by André Scrima in Romanian brings out better this idea of the loss of being as a result of death: on the Cross, the face of Christ is “*des-fînțat*”, the particle “*des*” indicates deprivation, a separation as in the word “dis-member”, while “*fînțat*” comes from the word “*fînța*” which means “being”. Christ, who loses his being, becomes nothingness,

ly, his absence from our world. Moreover, we can notice the same thing in “Eventide on Reichenau”, where “Nothingness becomes, in this way, the supreme attestation of Being”.<sup>52</sup> Being is vouched for in yet a more original manner by what at the outset is perceived as a threat from God. In “Eventide on Reichenau”, the topic of night is not addressed under the sign of death (ultimate devastation) but rather under that of vigilant waiting which characterizes the “rest” or “repose” of nature: “And the yield to me of shining summer day / Rests like heavy fruit”.<sup>53</sup> Without anticipating the length of the night and of the dawn which await us, “the grey desert” of Heidegger reinforces, while we are waiting for the dawn, the feeling of peace and quiet. Its unusual colour contrasts with that of the desert which is generally golden. There is a mixture of black and white, at the borderline between day and night, where the grey symbolizes the already and the not-yet of the between-two-worlds! We discover “the threshold” (*die Schwelle*) at which the traveller in Trakl’s poem *Ein Winterabend*<sup>54</sup> finds himself or even “the sail”<sup>55</sup> so characteristic of the nomadic condition and of the ceaseless wandering towards the One who reveals himself by hiding himself.

The monastic life is born out of this desire for conformity between the life of the monk and that of God.<sup>56</sup> This conformity, however, is not possible without travelling through the space which separates him from the object of his desire. Thus, we come back to the spiritual meaning of the desert which is only in a way a metaphor for the inner journey. In the desert the monk tries to become “a new being in Christ”<sup>57</sup>. And how can one do that without undergoing the ultimate test which is death? In the desert the monk dies to himself, to others and to things so as to be clothed as a new being. The desert is the ultimate nihilation and it is in this way that it becomes the source of new life. Such a reasoning which is not dialectical must always be based on the logic of the Cross, which means recognizing in the man a part of nothingness (*das Nichts*) co-originating from being such as it is.<sup>58</sup>

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but in this precise case, nothingness must be understood as a new way of attesting to “his existence” beyond being itself.

<sup>52</sup> André Scrima, *Timpul rugului aprins: maestrul spiritual în tradiția răsăriteană* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012), 53, 89, 90; idem, *Ortodoxia și încercarea comunismului*, 45.

<sup>53</sup> Heidegger, “Eventide on Reichenau,” 1.

<sup>54</sup> *Die Sprache*, GA 12, 14–15.

<sup>55</sup> André Scrima, *Experiența spirituală și limbajele ei* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008), 78–82.

<sup>56</sup> See: Idem, “À l’intérieur du mystère de l’unité: le moine,” *Cahiers de la Pierre-qui-vire* (1962): 189.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>58</sup> While recognizing here the validity of the two fundamental dispositions which manifest the nothing (or the nothingness) that are *boredom* and *anxiety* (See: Heidegger, *What is*

“Let love of the towers be the foundation which dominates the sands”. How can a monk interpret this injunction if not as constant spiritual warfare against the attacks of the devil<sup>59</sup>, the utter devastation of being and from which, to use Heidegger’s words, “Only a God Can Save Us”<sup>60</sup>? To consider the asceticism of monks simply as a moral discipline is to miss the ontological meaning which is being played out: embracing the new life of Christ, thus going against what, in each monk, remains as the passion for the “taste of non-being”<sup>61</sup>. That is what they went to search for in the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine. From then on, we should probably have been able to understand in a nonmoral sense the following words of Saint Anthony: “Personally, I am no longer afraid of God because I love him and «love drives out fear»”<sup>62</sup>.

In one way, union with God really ought to nihilate something in man and yet, in this nihilation, whose final goal is transfiguration, nothing is taken away from him, for “love drives out fear”.

## Conclusion

We acknowledge Heidegger’s debt to theology and the importance of this “theological background” for his thinking as he himself recognized in his Dialogue with a Japanese monk: “Without this theological background I should never have come upon this way of thinking. But origin always comes to meet us from the future”.<sup>63</sup> The reflection on the topic of the desert is a good example of the way a philosophical notion is sustained and explored while at the same time being enriched by theology. Together, Heidegger and Scrima laid the foundations for a meditation on a topic that is always apt

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*Metaphysics?*), would there not be in love a sort of third “disposition” to face this nothingness that the Resurrection would then attest as the highest realization of the unfolding of “the truth of being”? We always think of Christ’s kenosis and his voluntary choice of death on the Cross, mysteries which are only illuminated in the light of the Resurrection. Love, lived in the hope of the Resurrection, would thus anticipate almost of itself the surge of nothingness by going to meet it. It is for this reason that Father Scrima will say that “the ultimate meaning of the monastic desert is paschal” (Scrima, *Despre isihasm*, 26).

<sup>59</sup> Scrima, “Prolegomene la o ontologie a stadiului monahal – Βίος ἀγγελικῶς,” *Orthodoxia și încercarea comunismului*, 28: “the presence of the disciples of Anthony, of the hermits and of the cenobitic monks is that which prevents the forces of Satan from descending on the world and swallowing it up”.

<sup>60</sup> Heidegger, “Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten,” *Der Spiegel* 30 (Mai, 1976): 193–219.

<sup>61</sup> Scrima, *Despre isihasm*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Phrase quoted in part by André Scrima in *Despre isihasm*, 38, and found in *Patericul ce cuprinde în sine cuvinte ale sfinților bătrâni* (Alba Iulia, 1999), 12.

<sup>63</sup> Heidegger, “A Dialogue on Language Between a Japanese and an Inquirer,” in *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 10 (*GA* 12, 91).



for reconsideration. And the question that always needs to be re-thought is about Being at the point where oblivion deepens. For André Scrima, love, as the transcendent horizon of Being, calls for new foundations. Thus, he shares with Heidegger a common concern about the devastation of the world and its effects. If Heidegger's response is above all a philosophical one which translates as a fresh rapport with the world (*Gelassenheit*), that of Scrima is characterized by a return to the world's origins, seeing in monasticism a way of being authentically rooted in the human being. There is perhaps something which differentiates them: where in Heidegger love is expressed as the most noble possibility commanded by our finitude, in Scrima's death, the culmination of that same love (for it also needs this finitude, the Cross, for man to live authentically), is nonetheless the sign of a new beginning whose promise shines forth on the third day, on the morning of the Resurrection.