

Gadamer's Concept of Aesthetic Experience as a Possibility for the Orthodox Biblical Theology

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This article finds its inspiration in the new interpretations of Gadamer's hermeneutics, which underline the turn in his later period, and which focus on the conception of aesthetic experience as an experience of transcendence. The main thesis is that the understanding of artworks, as Gadamer describes them in contrast to the Kantian subjectification of aesthetics, can be paralleled with the way Orthodox biblical theology struggles to approach Holy Scripture in the context of Church and Tradition. The aim of this article is to bring new material to the growing reception of Gadamer among Orthodox scholars, and to initiate further discussion on the topic by showing the parallels and areas where this reception could continue.

Keywords: *Hans-Georg Gadamer, Orthodox theology, hermeneutics, aesthetics, transcendence, interpretation, Scripture, Tradition, Church*

*„Not what we do or what we ought to do,
but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.”¹*

Hans-Georg Gadamer

Introduction

This article follows the new interpretations of Gadamer's hermeneutics, which underline the turn in his later period (last third of the 20th century), and which focus on aesthetic experience as an experience of transcendence. My aim in this article is to bring new building material to the growing reception of Gadamer among Orthodox scholars, and to initiate further discussion on the topic by showing the parallels and areas where this reception could continue. The research hypothesis of this article states that the understand-

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¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, New York 2013, p. xxv-xxvi. (common acronym 'TM' will be used)

ing of artworks² as Gadamer describes them, can be paralleled with the way Orthodox biblical theology struggles to approach Holy Scripture. In order to succeed, I will start by presenting two interpretation modes of Gadamer's relation to theology; this will provide a background from which to explain in detail the revelation of transcendence in the way we perceive art. Further, in the second part of my study, I will sketch Gadamer's reception in Orthodoxy and then point to several suggestions and problems of Orthodox interpretation of Scripture and Tradition.

Gadamer's relation to theology and his 'religious turn'

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), German philosopher, was by confession a Protestant with a Lutheran youth upbringing. His mother had a strong pietistic faith from whom he received, as he says a "vague religious disposition"³, but this religious disposition never became faith. Gadamer regretted that he did not believe in a religious sense of the word, although he did respect the people who have faith.⁴ Gadamer did not consider himself to be as religious as his teacher M. Heidegger considered himself to be, but he asserted being a Protestant and acknowledged Protestantism as an important influence on his thoughts.⁵ We might call him a "closet-Lutheran,"⁶ „nominal Protestant,”⁷ or view his hermeneutics as "disguised Christianity,"⁸ but calling

² I will focus here on paintings, but all works of art are included.

³ Gadamer talks about this in a dialogue held in 1989, see: Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer - eine Biographie*, Tübingen 2000, p. 19. His mother died when he was four and Gadamer remembered her as a person with strong religious and pietistic inclinations.

⁴ In 1993 in an interview for the magazine *Zeit*, Gadamer was asked by his dialogue-partner (Bernhard Borgeest) if he believed in *Jenseits* (eternity). Gadamer answered: "Not me personally. At least not in the sense religion does that." Cited in J. Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer*, p. 21.

⁵ Gadamer gives the impression that he might have done that only in order to distance himself from Heidegger's Catholicism. See: GW 8,126 "Die Aktualität des Schönen". 'GW' stands for H.-G. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Tübingen 1985-1995. For Grondin this is the only reason, J. Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer*, p. 20.

⁶ So Thomas K. Carr, *Newman and Gadamer. Toward a Hermeneutics of Religious Knowledge*, Atlanta, GA 1996, p. 9.

⁷ So Jean Grondin, "Gadamer and Bultmann", in: Petr Pokorný (ed.), *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, Tübingen 2002, p. 123.

⁸ This approach underlines that for Gadamer philosophy is a conversation of the soul with itself, and knowing is a matter of divine grace; Gadamer shows how to "find a way to teach us how to hear the voice – how to converse with God, how to live in a world in which 'what is' has asked us a question and awaits our reply." Edward Tingley, "Gadamer & Light of the Word", in: *First Things* 139 (2004), p. 42.

him agnostic is more appropriate.⁹ Nevertheless, Gadamer was always interested in theology and owed to it a great deal of his account or concept of understanding; his discussion on Christian theology in *Truth and Method* shows that religious topics played a much more important role than Greek philosophy.¹⁰ The usual way of interpreting Gadamer's relation to theology regards Gadamer as a secular thinker and points out that words such as *Gott* and *Göttliche* appear in the titles of only four of his essays,¹¹ and that Christian concepts are used only as arguments in order to explain Gadamer's understanding of the hermeneutical process.¹² In relation to the subject matter of my study, I rate that these standard interpretations make two mistakes: (i) considering *Truth and Method* as the main source of his thinking, and (ii) ignoring the shift in his later works. Let me explain this more thoroughly.

Gadamer's work is available in three forms. First, his main work *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*) published in 1960. Second, Gadamer's retirement in 1968 enabled him to collect his other essays in four volumes of *Small Essays* (*Kleine Schriften*),¹³ which later were overcome by ten volumes of his *Collected Works* (*Gesammelte Werke*), 1985-1995, these constitute the second form of Gadamer's work. These contain his early and late essays, and are often forgotten and overshadowed by *Truth and Method*.¹⁴ However, the *Collected Works* still do not include all Gadamer's works because, as a "tireless world traveller"¹⁵, he lectured around the world and these lectures have

⁹ "He was agnostic because for him religion underscored the impossibility of ever reaching complete understanding." Eberhard Philippe, "Gadamer and Theology", in: *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (3/2007), p. 286. Similarly Chris Lawn argues that the best description is to call him agnostic, as Gadamer does not deny God and its existence, but leaves it as an open question. See: Chris Lawn, N. Keane (eds.), *The Gadamer Dictionary*, London 2011, p. 61.

¹⁰ Topics such as I-Thou relation, *kairos*, application in homiletics and biblical exegesis, incarnation, sympathetic reading of Augustine or Aquinas are only the main examples of Gadamer's theological discussions.

¹¹ Der Gott des innersten Gefühls (GW 9, 162); Über das Göttliche im frühen Denken des Griechen (GW 6, 154); Kant und die Gottesfrage (GW 4, 349); Sein Geist Gott (GW 3, 320).

¹² "Ich bin kein Theologe." Excerpt of 1984 interview conducted by Erwin Koller in H.-G. Gadamer, *Ich glaube nicht an die Systeme der Philosophie: Erwin Koller im Gespräch mit Hans-Georg Gadamer*, interview by Erwin Koller, Schweizer Fernsehen DRS, 2000, videocassette.

¹³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Kleine Schriften*, Tübingen 1967-1977.

¹⁴ Similarly also Grondin: "Wer WM verstehen, ja lesen will, muß das Werk nach, aber auch vor WM mit zu Rate ziehen. Die Komposition von WM hat im Jahre 1960 nicht aufgehört. Sie ist noch im Gange". J. Grondin, *Der Sinn der Hermeneutik*, Darmstadt 1994, p. 23.

¹⁵ GW 10, 346 "Mit der Sprache denken". Gadamer refers to these years as his second youth, see H.- G. Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeship*, translated by Robert R. Sullivan, Cambridge-London 1985, p. 158.

been published separately.¹⁶ These works present the third form of Gadamer's work, including his further works on Hegel,¹⁷ Heidegger,¹⁸ Celan,¹⁹ and the collections *Beginnings of Philosophy*,²⁰ *Beginning of Knowledge*,²¹ and the last one *Hermeneutische Entwürfe*.²² The point of my presentation is that his works in the last third of the 20th century manifest a somewhat different hermeneutics than manifested earlier, and this fact has not been considered in many standard textbooks of Gadamer's hermeneutics, which focus mainly on *Truth and Method*.²³ It is therefore proper to talk about the turn, or even several turns in his later period. First, there is the turn to applied hermeneutics, when Gadamer became more engaged with the practical areas of life (education, medicine, etc.);²⁴ then the turn to language, especially to its boundaries;²⁵ there is also the „poetic turn”²⁶ with essays on Rilke, George and Celan²⁷ and applications of poetic and religious texts.²⁸ Finally, there

¹⁶ All published by Suhrkamp: *Die Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft* (1976), *Poetica* (1977), *Lob der Theorie: Reden und Aufsätze* (1983), *Die Vielfalt Europas. Erbe und Zukunft* (1985), *Das Erbe Europas: Beiträge* (1989), *Über Die Veborgenheit der Gesundheit: Aufsätze und Vorträge* (1993).

¹⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Hegels Dialektik*, Tübingen 1971.

¹⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Heideggers Wege*, Tübingen 1983.

¹⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Wer bin ich, und wer bist du?*, Frankfurt 1973.

²⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *Der Anfang der Philosophie*, Stuttgart 1997.

²¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Der Anfang des Wissens*, Stuttgart 1999.

²² H.-G. Gadamer, *Hermeneutische Entwürfe*, Tübingen 2000.

²³ See for example following the introductions to Gadamer: G. Figal, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: Wahrheit und Methode*, Berlin 2011; J. Grondin, *Einführung zu Gadamer*, Tübingen 2000; Joel C. Weisenheimer, *Gadamer's hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*, New Haven-London 1985; Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, Evanston, IL 1969. Exceptions to this rule are the following books: Udo Tietz, *Hans-Georg Gadamer zur Einführung*, Hamburg 1999; Kai Hammermeister, *Hans-Georg Gadamer*, München 1999; James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, New York 1997.

²⁴ Manifested in books Dieter Misgeld et al. (eds.), *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, New York 1992; H.-G. Gadamer, *Enigma of Health*, Stanford, CA, 1996.

²⁵ See his essays „Grenzen der Sprache” in: GW 8, 350-361 and „Vom Wort zum Begriff” in: J. Grondin (ed.), *Gadamer Lesebuch*, Tübingen 1997, pp. 100-111.

²⁶ Chris Lawn, *Gadamer: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London 2006, pp. 95-97.

²⁷ Collected in H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan: „Who am I and who are you?” and Other Essays*, New York 1997.

²⁸ Collected in the volume by Robert Bernasconi (ed.), *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, Cambridge 1986.

is the religious turn that throws light on his entire work, but this theological and religious dimension of Gadamer's thought is yet unremarked.²⁹ Standard textbooks concerning Gadamer have ignored the fact that the outcome of hermeneutics is a "personal encounter with the voice of Being" and that the "religious message of that message is unmistakable, and hardly an accident."³⁰

There are a few examples from the later period on which I base my claim about Gadamer's turn to transcendence. Most sustained published reflections on religion are the dialogues on the island of Capri with Italian philosopher Vattimo and French philosopher Derrida published in a book *On Religion*.³¹ More important is a late essay named *Aesthetic and Religious Experience* (*Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrung*),³² where Gadamer is oriented on the free offer of the Gospel. The task of proclaiming is not connected with the repetition of the message, but with the acceptance of the message; therefore the proclamation of the message must be shared in a way that is accessible to people. Gadamer here shows the difference between proclamation and art - while the understanding of the art can be achieved, in Christian *kerygma*, we are always shown „what we cannot achieve.”³³

Similarly Gadamer writes in one of his other late essays *To Thank and to Think of* (*Danken und Gedenken*),³⁴ where he searches for the divine in his observations about gratitude. He says that giving thanks to someone is always an act that cannot be reduced to a convention, and which always shows an excess, "an experience of transcendence, that is, it always exceeds our expectations on the basis by which we judge human relations."³⁵ Thankfulness reveals the hidden God "that now gains universal significance."³⁶ This universality

²⁹ Zimmerman talks about the third turn and Gadamer's late preoccupation with theology, even speculates with the idea that Gadamer in his old age became much closer to his teacher Heidegger, whom he earlier often criticized as too religious. See: Jens Zimmermann, "Ignoramus: Gadamer's 'Religious Turn'", in: Andrzej Wierciński (ed.), *Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, Münster 2011, pp. 320-322, originally published in *Symposium* 6 (2002), pp. 204-217. I will refer to the 2011 edition. In this important article Zimmermann claims that religion and a feeling of transcendence are very important for Gadamer's hermeneutics. Zimmermann bases his thoughts on the interview he had with Gadamer on February 26, 2002 (three weeks before Gadamer died).

³⁰ See: E. Tingley, *Gadamer & Light of the Word*, p. 41.

³¹ Published as Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Die Religion*, Frankfurt 2001.

³² R. Bernasconi (ed.), *Relevance of the Beautiful*, pp. 140-153.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 153.

³⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, "Danken und Gedenken", in: *Hermeneutische Entwürfe*, Tübingen 2000, pp. 208-213.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 210. Translation according to J. Zimmermann, *Ignoramus*, p. 317.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 212.

is proven also in his last interview with R. Dottori³⁷ where Gadamer claims that philosophical hermeneutics is a search for transcendence, and that a full recognition of transcendence as the limit of human knowledge plays an important role for mutual understanding.

Gadamer's religious turn was not a turn to confessional faith, but to world religions, as Gadamer says to Dottori, "this means that what we must keep in mind here is that transcendence is not attainable anywhere. Transcendence does not simply believe in God, it is something incomprehensible. (...) the *ignoramus* is the fundament of transcendence."³⁸ In other words, the foundation of transcendence is a religiously experienced limit of human knowledge, *ignoramus*, of admitting our not-knowing. In this context the universality of hermeneutics based on language transforms into the universality of the hidden god and into the universality of not-knowing. Transcendence in Gadamer is connected with the limits of human knowledge, as something that is greater than people are, and involves abandoning of dogmatic doctrines and religion. There is more in this than a pure opposition to dogmatism because, for Gadamer transcendence must always be experienced. Therefore he turns to the word *Gefühl* which is, in the Protestant tradition, understood (with Schleiermacher) as a deep sense of awareness.³⁹ As an illustration for confrontation of the limits of our knowledge Gadamer uses the example of the cross. Contemplation of the cross shows our inability to conceptualize it and grasp it, and when contemplating the Cross Gadamer says it feels "like chills running down one's spine"⁴⁰.

Gadamer's notion of transcendence shows several problems, and therefore I need to include several critical remarks. Gadamer places the neo-platonic notion of transcendence as a common ground of humanity, he fails to acknowledge the truthfulness of the particularity of religious faith. My opinion is that he is not even faithful to his own fusion of horizons, because the fusion does not involve the loss of particularity, but the recognition of particularity and otherness. Gadamer also does not see that dog-

³⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Die Lektion des Jahrhunderts: Ein Interview mit Riccardo Dottori*, Münster 2002. I will refer to English translation: *A Century of Philosophy: Hans-Georg Gadamer in Conversation with Riccardo Dottori*, translated by Rod Coltman, Sigrid Koepke, New York, London 2006.

³⁸ R. Coltman (ed.), *A Century of Philosophy*, pp. 78-79. See also: "Transcendence is the absolute limit of our knowledge and allows true conversation to begin", in: J. Zimmermann, *Ignoramus*, p. 315.

³⁹ Not as an emotion, states Gadamer in an unpublished interview with Zimmermann. See: J. Zimmermann, *Ignoramus*, p. 315.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 316.

matics and faith in religion are a matter of practice and a lived faith, not a dead doctrine.⁴¹

While Christianity has a model of revelation in which reality is revealed from beyond down to us, Gadamer acknowledges a human fabricated concept of revelation, where transcendence is rather co-created than revealed, and where the human mind ascends toward the transcendence. Further, there is a difference in the matter of personal encounter. For Gadamer transcendence comes through others, as it involves an I-Thou relationship, but it is still transformed into *something* undefinable, where a personal encounter is not possible. What is missing is the complementation of *Miteinandersein* (with one-another) with *Füreinanderdasein* (for one-another).⁴²

Hermeneutical aesthetic experience as a revelation of transcendence

A very important mark of these new interpretations of Gadamer (among which I also include mine) is the focus on the relation between the aesthetic and religious experience,⁴³ when the religious experience is exemplified by the limited human experience in aesthetics. This is called the “mytho-poetic reversal”⁴⁴ in Gadamer. Even the casual reader sees that the issue of art is very

⁴¹ Zimmerman also give a critique which takes on an example of Levinas and says that this universal concept must be overcome by a religious notion of transcendence. See: J. Zimmermann, “The Ethics of Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Challenge of Religious Transcendence”, in: *Philosophy Today* 51 (1/2007), p. 53. This study was also published in Andrzej Wierciński (ed.), *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, pp. 383-394. I will refer to the 2007 edition. Florovsky describes this with *ut legem credendi statuat lex orandi* (so that the rule of worship should establish the rule of faith). George Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective*, Belmont, MA 1972, p. 84.

⁴² See also J. Zimmermann, *The Ethics of Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 54.

⁴³ Several studies worth mentioning here: Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics*, New York 2006; Eberhard Philippe, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, Tübingen 2004; Walter Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, London 2008; Jeffrey Francis Bullock, *Preaching With a Cupped Ear: Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics for a Postmodern World*, Bern 1999; Kai Hammermeister, “Der Gott der Hermeneutik”, in: Mirko Wischke, Michael Hofer (eds.), *Gadamer Verstehen Understanding Gadamer*, Darmstadt 2003, pp. 268-281; Sean J. McGrath, “Gadamer and the Hermeneutic Problem of Biblical Revelation”, in: A. Wierciński (ed.), *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, pp. 323-338; Fred Lawrence, “Gadamer, Hermeneutic Revolution, and Theology”, in: Robert Dostal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, Cambridge 2002; Martin O’Kane, “*Wirkungsgeschichte* and Visual Exegesis: The contribution of Hans-Georg Gadamer”, in: *Journal for the Study of New Testament* 33 (2010), pp. 147-159.

⁴⁴ Nicholas Davey, “Hermeneutics, Art and Transcendence”, in: Andrzej Wierciński (ed.), *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, pp. 375. See other article by the same author: “Doubled Reflection:

important for Gadamer's hermeneutics,⁴⁵ especially through his overcoming of the Kantian subjectification of aesthetics, which Kant developed in his *Critique of Judgment*. In his response⁴⁶ Gadamer radically refuses the concept that the taste (*Geschmack*) is rooted in our personal inclinations and comes up with the thesis that a work of art is more an event than an object of the aesthetic consciousness; the main question is no longer 'what is it', but 'how does it happen'.⁴⁷ For Gadamer the experience with art is similar to the experience of play in a game: the participant is drawn into an event with his subjectivity and life. Gadamer's new concept is called hermeneutical aesthetics.

I approach closer to theology with Gadamer's observations that the aesthetic experience has an epiphanic and presentational (*darstellen*) character,⁴⁸ where something reveals and presents itself within the boundaries of the artistic work, where the observers experience the "concretion of the meaning itself."⁴⁹ Hermeneutical aesthetics points to the "appearing of the hidden, the hidden making itself manifest,"⁵⁰ which addresses us with its truth-claim (*Wahrheitsanspruch*) and confronts us irrespective of our willing and doing. This revealing of the meaning means that all our explanations are cancelled, Gadamer even mentions the "impotence of subjective particularity."⁵¹ It is no surprise that Gadamer uses religious art as a paradigm for his aesthetic experience and ontology of a picture - it is not possible to paint God, but what is painted, is the divine so configured, that the divine can address us.⁵²

Gadamer's Aesthetics and the Question of Spiritual Experience", in: Conor Cunningham, Peter M. Candler (eds.), *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, London 2007, pp. 151-173; "Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Transcendence", in: Martin O'Kane, *Imaging the Bible: An introduction to Biblical Art*, London 2008, pp. 191-209; "The Hermeneutics of Seeing", in: Ian Heywood, Barry Sandywell (eds.), *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual*, London 1999, pp. 3-29.

⁴⁵ Developed in: TM, pp. 106-178. See also continuation of these works in "Die Wahrheit des Kunstwerkes" in: GW 3, 240) or "Aktualität des Schönen" in: GW 8, 94.

⁴⁶ Developed in TM, pp. 39-51, chapter titled "Kant's doctrine of taste and genius".

⁴⁷ "My thesis, then, is that the being of art cannot be defined as an object of an aesthetic consciousness because, on the contrary, the aesthetic attitude is more than it knows of itself. It is a part of the event of being that occurs in presentation, and belongs essentially to play as play." TM, pp. 120; GW 1, 121-122.

⁴⁸ Note for example N. Davey, *Hermeneutics, Art and Transcendence*, p. 373.

⁴⁹ TM, pp. 416.

⁵⁰ N. Davey, *Hermeneutics, Aesthetics*, p. 197.

⁵¹ TM, p. 505.

⁵² "A picture is not a copy of a copied being, but it is an ontological communion with what is copied" in: TM, p. 143; GW 1, 147. See also N. Davey, *Hermeneutics, Aesthetics*, p. 196.

Artworks function as symbols that are not self-negating and referring to the exterior as signs do, but as symbols they rather make the meaning present.⁵³ Gadamer claims that the artwork happens in our encounter with it and what comes into appearance is not merely an event that re-produces the original production, but is the emergence of the original self of the art work.⁵⁴ This is called a *Darstellung*, presentation, which “is the mode of being of the work of art.”⁵⁵ What Gadamer means by *darstellen* (to present) is “a universal ontological structural element of the aesthetic, an event of being - not an experiential event that occurs at the moment of artistic creation and is merely repeated each time in the mind of the viewer.”⁵⁶ This presentation, *Darstellung* or performance, is not something incidental or secondary to the artwork, but is the essence itself, because it completes what the work of art already is.⁵⁷ When the presentation becomes an event (*Ereignis*), it transforms itself into the structure; this Gadamer calls the transformation-into-structure (*Verwandlung ins Gebilde*):⁵⁸ the event where the hermeneutic identity takes shape in our experience of it. It is important to say that the *Verwandlung* is not the transformation in the sense of *metamorphosis*, and does not implicate that what existed previously exists no longer; rather on the contrary, it implicates that what now exists is the lasting and true.⁵⁹ The usage of the present and past tense makes the issue clearer, ‘what was’ and ‘what is’, are not contrasted. The truth, ‘what is’, does not change into something else and the ‘what was’ does not cease to exist, it is not as with a butterfly that transforms (*metamorphosis*) from the caterpillar that it was, into the butterfly that it is now.

The term used to describe this identity in difference, as the transformation-into-structure suggests, is the *mimesis*. *Mimesis* is a not-hidden imitation, but it is much more than a copy, it suggests a total transformation; for example, children who wear costumes, imitate, but their transformation is still complete. *Mimesis* does not rely on something beyond the playing and

⁵³ See Gadamer on symbol in R. Bernasconi (ed.), *Relevance of the Beautiful*, pp. 31-39.

⁵⁴ *Sich-Darstellen*. See for example TM, p. 143; GW 1, 147.

⁵⁵ TM, p. 120; GW 1, 120. On *Darstellung* see for example Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, Cambridge 1987, pp. 57-64, or J. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, New Haven, CT, 1985, pp. 101-128.

⁵⁶ TM, p. 159; GW 1, 164.

⁵⁷ “A work of art belongs so closely to what it is related to that it enriches the being of that as if through a new event of being”. TM, p. 147.

⁵⁸ See: TM, pp. 115-124; GW 1, 116-126. On this see for example T. Carr, *Gadamer and Newman*, pp. 36-41 or E. Philippe, *The Middle Voice*, pp. 72-74.

⁵⁹ TM, p. 115; GW 1, 115-116.

does not refer to anything beyond the imitation itself. The play⁶⁰ of children brings forward the true essence of what was before for those who imitate and for those who recognize the imitation. *Mimesis* is recognition (*Wiedererkennung*), not only repetition of what is already known.⁶¹ Gadamer underlines this point by referring to Plato's conception of knowledge *anamnesis*, where „the 'known' enters into its true being and manifests itself as 'what is' only when it is recognized."⁶² Crucial is the difference between the re-presentation (*Vorstellung*) and the presentation (*Darstellung*) - while *Vorstellung* implies a re-presenting of something independent of the work, the notion of *Darstellung* hints at what the art work presents and how the subject matter comes forth to appearance in the image.

As shown, Gadamer's concept of *Darstellung* is opposite to Christian revelation, as it emphasizes that aesthetic understanding is not separable from its instances. Direct application of Gadamer's concept into Christianity would mean that God's revelation is not truly revealed, but that it is co-created. The hermeneutical approach giving a decisive role to the one who accepts the revelation rather than to the one who initiates the revelation opposes the common concept of revelation. Especially the Protestant understanding with the three *sola* gives very little freedom and power to the human, i.e. to those who interpret. At the same time, this notion of Christian revelation creates a metaphysical transcendence totally differentiated from the creation itself. This one can be only re-presented as something different from the world (role of signs that direct to it), but it cannot be actualized within the experience of the people, performed as an event and recognized as important. The only

⁶⁰ The concept of play was of crucial importance for Gadamer (as well as for the European philosophy of the 20th century). Gadamer mentioned it first in the context of art and aesthetic consciousness, but it explains the very structure of understanding and the hermeneutic experience, and is much more helpful than the concept of fusion of horizons. Recent works by Monika Vilhauer and Eberhard Philippe have made a big turnover in interpretations of Gadamer and point out that the theory of play resonates throughout his whole work. Theory of play was in his Salzburg lectures 1974 (published as *Relevance of the Beautiful*) complemented with the concept of 'Ritual.'

⁶¹ TM, p. 118; GW 1, 119. "The play of mimesis and representation is not about an object that the subject possesses and processes - that would be aesthetic differentiation - but about an event that befalls and encompasses the subject who is within it." E. Philippe, *Middle voice*, p. 74.

⁶² TM, p. 118; GW 1, 119. See also "Wiedererkennen ist nicht ein bloßes zweites Erkennen nach einem ersten Kennenlernen. Es ist qualitativ anderes. Wenn etwas wiedererkannt wird, da hat es sich schon aus der Einmaligkeit und Zufälligkeit der Umstände, in denen es begegnete, befreit" (GW 8, 83 "Dichtung und Mimesis"); or: "Mimesis ist nicht so sehr, dass etwas auf ein anderes verweist, das sein Urbild ist, sondern dass etwas in sich selbst als Sinnhaftes da ist." (*Ibidem*, p. 85).

Christian concept which allows the possibility of divinity of creation and that overcomes the strict differentiation between human and divine and that gives a proper role to the actualization of an biblical event in the interpretative community of faith, can be found in Orthodox theology.

There is an important difference between the time characterization of the artwork and the pragmatic time experience of daily life that needs to be mentioned.⁶³ The pragmatic experience of time is a structure that needs to be filled with something (see this when we say - I have time for something);⁶⁴ a different experience is an autonomous time of festivals where every moment is fulfilled.⁶⁵ The work of art is not fixed to a time and space, but it travels, so that particular event comes round again and again, without end, but also without a loss to its singularity. The repetition of the festival is not the repetition of the same, as a festival is never a commemorative event, but is an occurrence in its own "autonomous time."⁶⁶ The festival does not become the past, because its celebration would be only its repetition, but more important is the recurring celebration, "a festival exists only in being celebrated."⁶⁷ The meaning of the festival lies in *what* is celebrated and this *what* is the reason why the festival is repeated. The idea of a festival involves the mode of recovery or restoration of the original elements involved with the original festival, e.g. Christmas, the Lord's Supper, and autonomous time arises only through the recurrence of the festival itself. This experiencing of time creates a contemporaneity, a union of past and present.⁶⁸ Gadamer uses *theoria* in order to explain this participation, especially its original meaning of participation in a delegation sent to a festival for the sake of honouring the gods. Viewing the divine is not a neutral state of affairs, participation-less, but it is a genuine sharing in an event, a real be-

⁶³ Developed especially in his Salzburg lectures (published as *Die Aktualität des Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest*, 1974, now in GW 8, 94-142, English translation in R. Bernasconi (ed.), *Relevance of the Beautiful*, pp. 3-53. But see also elsewhere for the festival, *Über leere und erfüllte Zeit* (GW 4, 137-153) or *Aesthetic and Religious Experience*, R. Bernasconi (ed.), *Relevance of the Beautiful*, pp. 140-153.

⁶⁴ R. Bernasconi (ed.), *Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 41. We are bored if time is not filled, and when there are too many tasks to do, time is overfilled.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 42: "We all know that the festival fulfils every moment of its duration and the time. This fulfilment does not come about because someone has empty time to fill. On the contrary, the time only becomes festive with the arrival of the festival. (...) It is of the nature of the festival that it should proffer time, arresting it and allowing it to tarry."

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ TM, p. 126; GW 1, 129.

⁶⁸ R. Bernasconi (ed.), *Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 46.

ing present.⁶⁹ *Theoria* is not a look at the world from a distance, but is one of affinity and participation, "is a true participation, not something active but something passive (pathos), namely being totally involved in and carried away by what one sees."⁷⁰

The aesthetic experience as epiphanic, where something reveals and presents itself from within the boundaries of the artistic work, helps to illuminate our understanding of transcendence and revelation. If we can understand something of the hermeneutical content of the aesthetic experience, we can understand an aspect of the transcendent as given with the religious experience. Davey, in his recent articles, asks how it is possible that a painting reveals a new aspect each time we look at it. He believes that this is not because the image describes the transcendence, but because images can address us and our understanding of revelation is illuminated as a result of being spoken to.⁷¹ For Gadamer therefore there is no difference between the Bible and art, both are modes of language that use symbols to evoke similar subject matters, such as questions of mystery, eternity, life, etc. Gadamer's approach to art is anti-representationalist.⁷² If the artwork is considered as a representation of something else, it will become only a vehicle of what it represents, a carrier of meaning, abandoned as soon as the story is grasped; that would be self-negating for the artwork itself. The artwork therefore must have autonomy and cannot be substituted or reduced to a sign, as a kind of reduction would displace and silence the inner meaning, which is seen when Gadamer puts the case in favour of the autonomy of spiritual experience.⁷³

When I look at this epiphanic character of aesthetics, I see there three main consequences for theology: (i) transcendence is a part of our experience, (ii) hiddenness and disclosure are not exclusive, and (iii) the experience always involves a transformative element. First, transcendence is not something beyond the human experience, but is included in it; does not contain even a reference to something extra-experiential or an entity beyond our present

⁶⁹ See H.-G. Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, Cambridge, MA 1981, pp. 17-18.

⁷⁰ TM, p. 127; GW 1, 130.

⁷¹ N. Davey, *Hermeneutics, Aesthetics*, p. 191. As Gadamer says in conversation with Carsten Dutt: "I maintain that a work of art, thanks to its formal aspect, has something to say to us either through the question it awakens, or the question it answers. A work of art, says something to someone." Robert Palmer (ed.), *Gadamer in Conversation: Reflections and Commentary*, New Haven & London 2001, pp. 69-70.

⁷² N. Davey, *Doubled reflection*, p. 160. See also R. Bernasconi, *Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 69.

⁷³ See on this also N. Davey, *Doubled reflection*, p. 161.

experience, but on the contrary, it is a part of its very topography.⁷⁴ Transcendence is connected with the shallowness of our knowledge and the extent to which our experience can expand. When we read a book for the third or fourth time or look at the painting again, we see what we did not see for the first time and marvel over the things that are revealed to our eyes, at the same time we come to see the blindness of our previous judgments. This, Davey says correctly, is the experience of transcendence which Gadamer has in mind, which “changes our senses of self by both expanding its possibilities, reveals the limits of its understanding and shows *that our understanding and sense of self is utterly dependent upon that which transcends our individual being*.”⁷⁵ I agree with this statement in my interpretation of Gadamer. Second, disclosure and hiddenness are not mutually exclusive for Gadamer. Davey shows that philosophy has forgotten how to defend hiddenness and darkness without moving into duality;⁷⁶ I add that theology has forgotten how to see God as personal and active in the world without making of God a friend, or on the other side, how to leave God his majesty without making him unreachable. This is where Gadamer helps. When Gadamer says that art speaks to us and as an event brings something new into experience from unconcealedness,⁷⁷ this does not mean annihilation of concealedness *per se*, but it still continues to exist as hidden, the tension must remain.⁷⁸ This includes that the metaphysics is broken, that which is hidden is not another order of being (something higher somewhere else), but although hidden and beyond our grasp, it is still present. As Davey says, “the withheld is not *not*”⁷⁹, it is not *deus absconditus*. Actually that which is withheld upholds the understanding. In the way the withheld upholds the upheld, it serves as a hermeneutic foundation for what

⁷⁴ See N. Davey, *Hermeneutics, Aesthetics*, p. 201; N. Davey, *Hermeneutics, Art*, p. 378.

⁷⁵ N. Davey, *Hermeneutics, Art*, p. 378. Similarly also in his book *Unquiet Understanding*, p. 8: “Transcendence does not betoken surpassing the range or grasp of human experience. It does not concern what lies beyond experience but what lies within it or, much rather, it has to do with experiencing those fundamental shifts within passages of experience that can quite transform how such passages are understood. Hermeneutic transcendence involves the transforming experience of coming knowingly to see, to think, and to feel differently.”

⁷⁶ N. Davey, *Hermeneutics, Aesthetics*, pp. 203-207, or Idem, *Hermeneutics, Art*, pp. 379-382.

⁷⁷ “No one can ignore the fact that in the work of art, in which a world arises, not only is something meaningful given to experience, but also something new comes into existence with the work of art itself. It is not simply laying bare of truth, it is itself an event.” H.- G. Gadamer, “The Truth of the Work of Art”, in: *Heidegger's Ways*, New York 1994, p. 105.

⁷⁸ “Disclosure is not just a discontinued hiddenness but a revelation of continued concealment.” N. Davey, *Hermeneutics, Art*, p. 382.

⁷⁹ Idem, *Hermeneutics, Aesthetics*, p. 206.

is said and presented, and as an ontological basis for the possibility of transcendence. Third, aesthetic and spiritual experiences share a strong transformative capacity for meaning. Gadamer's aim is to free the aesthetic experience from being reduced to the hedonism of the aesthetic consciousness and to save it from being condemned as nothing more than a sequence of pleasurable mental states.⁸⁰ Art, when understood as a dialogical encounter with another who speaks through art, implies that the viewers are dialogically opened to its address and also open to the risk of transforming its self-understanding. Both aesthetic and spiritual experiences share the assumption that the experience always leads to a new experience and betray a life that does not aim for anything outside itself.⁸¹

Reception of Gadamer's hermeneutics in the Orthodox context

Although the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer marked the last third of the 20th century, it took a while until it found its way into Orthodox theology. One of the reasons is that his conception of hermeneutics had a philosophical background and was not automatically recognized even by Protestant and Catholic theologians as helpful to complement theological concepts.⁸² Orthodox theologians working in the West first began to implement Gadamer's thoughts since those in the East had no access to his writing.

I will present the reception of Gadamer by *Andrew Louth*, who provides one of the best interpretations of Gadamer's work, and then two theologians of a younger generation: *Assaad Kattan*, who during the last few years has frequently referred to Gadamer, and a Romanian theologian *Nicolae Turcan*, who sees in Gadamer's hermeneutics a critique of traditionalism.

Andrew Louth (b.1944), the professor of Patristic and Byzantine studies at the University of Durham, in his *Discerning the Mystery*⁸³ grasps Gadamer's thinking as „one of the most interesting attempts to reflect on the distinctive approach of the humanities” and contains „a profound and far-reaching attempt to reorient the humanities.”⁸⁴ Louth rates positively several of Gadamer's issues. First, it is a critique of the scientific method as a way of reaching

⁸⁰ See on this also N. Davey, *Doubled reflection*, p. 162.

⁸¹ TM, p. 363.

⁸² David Tracy, Kevin Vanhoozer, Anthony Thiselton, Werner Jeanrond, Heinz-Günther Stobbe, Bernd Jochen Hilberath, Peter Stuhlmacher, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Bernard Lonergan, are only some of the names important for application of Gadamer's hermeneutics into theology.

⁸³ Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery. An Essay on the Nature of Theology*, New York 1983.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

the truth that ignores the one who approaches this truth, and that attempts to discover meaning as existing independently of the process and subject of understanding.⁸⁵ The Enlightenment's paradigm of a method raised resistance to this claim and it is only Gadamer, who has provided the most radical way of resisting this totalitarian claim.⁸⁶ The attempts of Vico, Dilthey and Romanticism did not succeed, because for them the meaning is not the sense of the literary text itself, but the sense behind the text, in the mind of an author and his/her world. The reconstruction of the original historical context includes that the personality of the one who understands is ignored. Gadamer calls this false objectivity - the reconstruction of the original meaning is not possible, as the interpreter has a historical context of his/her own.⁸⁷ Louth sees it as very helpful that Gadamer sets the notion of an understanding as agreement between two people about something, where the reader does not engage with the writer himself, but with the subject matter of the text.⁸⁸ The implications are very clear – the individualistic approach, which attempts to abstract the individual from the historical context and presupposes a presupposition-less understanding, is broken in the favour of understanding as an engagement with the tradition, not an attempt to escape from it.⁸⁹ Therefore, the second area positively evaluated by Andrew Louth involves a recovery of tradition, which he sees as similar to the pattern of the Fathers of the Church, since for the Fathers the knowledge of God could be found only within the Tradition of the Church.⁹⁰ In the movement from the Enlightenment and Romanticism there is a tendency to break the thread of tradition as being something that confuses and falsifies. For Louth tradition is the continuity of a human

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. xii.

⁸⁷ “Both the writer and I who seek to understand him belong in history: I cannot reconstruct his historical situation and think myself into it, as if I had no historical context myself”. A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, p. 30. See H. – G. Gadamer: “In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror”. TM, pp. 288-289.

⁸⁸ “It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all.*” TM, p. 307.

⁸⁹ A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, p. 37. This is quite opposite to the concept of the Romanticism that had a concept of a hermeneutical circle as just a provisional state, which ends with perfect understanding. For Gadamer the circle is the description of interplay between text and our subjectivity.

⁹⁰ Louth quotes Cyprian's words from *De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate*: “Habere iam not potest Deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem: he who no longer has the Church for his mother cannot have God as his Father” see: A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, p. 64.

communication of an experience, it is not something that limits our freedom, but it is the context in which one can be and is allowed to be free.⁹¹ There is no antithesis between tradition and reason, quite the opposite, tradition is an act of reason; there is therefore no need to forget our prejudices. This is similar to Gadamer's effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), which includes not only awareness of the historical context, but moreover includes awareness of history in the effect it bears on the present historical situation of the interpreter.⁹² Tradition as *Wirkungsgeschichte* is a process of self-discovery that can never be complete, a process of revising our preconceptions and not seeking to escape them.⁹³ The effect of all this is that the act of understanding is seen in a wider context than the historical method allows us, and we are in better position to appreciate the traditional way of understanding the "Scriptures as it is found *par excellence* in the Fathers, a way of understanding that sees not one but many senses of Scripture"⁹⁴. Louth makes use of Gadamer's note about a process of *undeception* - we have been deceived, but we are now freed from deception, we are oriented toward new experiences.⁹⁵ This growing in experience is primarily not an increase in knowledge, but it is rather an escape from what deceived us,⁹⁶ it is learning by suffering, *pathei mathos*, a concept that Gadamer uses for the process of undeception and exploration of human finitude.⁹⁷

Behind Gadamer's reflection about the nature of understanding lies an analogy between understanding and genuine conversation, where the reader (interpreter) not only recognizes the otherness of the other (as in a therapeutic conversation), but also recognizes the claim over partners in the conversation and listens to what each has to say to the other). In other words, when I listen, I do not try to understand the other and so to gain dominance over him, but I try to listen to what he has to say and to learn from him. This is analogous to read-

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

⁹² "In fact the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding. It is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us". TM, p. 308.

⁹³ A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, p. 37.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 37; TM, p. 365.

⁹⁶ "The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfilment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself." TM, p. 364.

⁹⁷ "Thus experience is the experience of human finitude. The truly experienced person is one who has taken this to heart, who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future. The experienced man knows that all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain." TM, p. 365.

ing the past that Louth recommends – we must accept the validity of tradition not simply in a sense of acknowledging it, but to listen to what it says to us.⁹⁸ Gadamer also says that interpreting of the work is not an attempt to reconstruct the original historical context, but rather a matter of listening across a historical gulf, which is not empty, but filled with the tradition that brings this work to us.

Assaad Elias Kattan (b.1967), a German Orthodox theologian of Lebanese background, is a theologian who recently has very often referred to Gadamer's thinking.⁹⁹ First, he focuses on the application of Gadamer's hermeneutics in the iconology and liturgy of the Orthodox Church. He takes as an example icons, where the main struggle is whether believers kiss the piece of wood or they kiss the Christ. Traditionally it has been argued that the honour from the image passes to the archetype,¹⁰⁰ but Kattan argues that this might not be enough and claims that the icon is "endowed with the divine character."¹⁰¹ This approach does not have many proponents, therefore Kattan argues with the help of Maximus the Confessor, according to whom Christ became a symbol himself and the visible part is united with the divine part as an "unbreakable unity."¹⁰² There is a reciprocal relationship wherein the symbolized dwells in the symbolizing and symbolizing accomplishes the presence of the symbolized, but without confusion or change. This Christological argumentation of a symbol is close to Gadamer's concept of the symbol from *Relevance of the Beautiful*, according to which the work of art is not simply a symbol that points to something existing outside itself, but rather makes the object pres-

⁹⁸ A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, p. 41.

⁹⁹ Most important studies are: "Hermeneutics: A Protestant Discipline for an Orthodox Context?", in: *Theological Review* 23 (1/2002), pp. 47-57; "Orthodoxe Hermeneutik und moderne Hermeneutik", in: *Catholica* 59 (2005), pp. 67-86; "La théologie orthodoxe interpellée par l'herméneutique moderne: La question d'un critère théologique absolu revisitée", in: *Contacts: Revue française de l'orthodoxie* 234 (2011), pp. 180-196; "The Christological Dimension of Maximum Confessor's Biblical Hermeneutics", in: *Studia Patristica vol.XLII*, Louvain 2006, pp. 169-174; "Revisiting the Question on an Absolute Theological Criterion: Orthodox Theology Challenged by Modern Hermeneutics", in: Ioan Tulca, Cristinel Ioja (eds.), *Accents and Perspectives of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology as Part of Church Mission in Today's World*, Arad 2008, pp. 128-143; "Die Byzantinische Ikone: Ort des Dialogs zwischen Theologie und moderner Kultur", in: *Catholica* 60 (2006), pp. 197-207.

¹⁰⁰ One of the mentioned is A. Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, New York 2002, p. 209.

¹⁰¹ Assaad-Elias Kattan, "The Byzantine Icon A Bridge between Theology and Modern Culture", in: Assaad-Elias Kattan, Fadi Georgi (eds.), *Thinking Modernity: Towards a Reconfiguration of the Relationship Between Orthodox Theology and Modern Culture*, Münster 2010, p. 171.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, p. 172.

ent.¹⁰³ The hermeneutical task is therefore not to refer to a reality or to search for the reality that is beyond, but to create a new reality. It is interesting that Gadamer supports his argumentation with Luther's teaching on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist developed in the struggle with Zwingli; Kattan applies not only Orthodox theology to Gadamer's concept of artwork, but also Luther's Eucharistic teaching. Icons and art works are real symbols in the sense that they carry out the presence of the symbolized objeconomy. In order to support his argument more strongly, Kattan could have also used a concept of another Protestant thinker Paul Tillich about religious symbols, according to whom the symbol opens hidden reality and takes part in its meaning.¹⁰⁴ Something similar is visible when we ask how the events of salvation history can become a part of the liturgy. For Orthodoxy the celebration of the liturgy is always a participation in the event itself - every Eucharist is a direct participation in the Last Supper, each celebration of Easter is participation in the resurrection, etc.¹⁰⁵ These thoughts directly correlate with Gadamer's concept of the festival explained earlier, which interrupts the pragmatic experience of time and embeds the experience of mystery into the festival. Gadamer illustrates this in the example of Christmas that occurred in history once a long time ago, but which is repeated every year, because the festival, the celebration of Christmas, creates its own time which interrupts our daily perception of time. The words of N. Berdyaev and S. Bulgakov about the category of „trans-historical“, that involves salvation events and re-presents them in the liturgy, reflect exactly the same hermeneutical experience that Kattan describes with Gadamer.¹⁰⁶

In his lecture of 2010 named *Essentialism Reconsidered*¹⁰⁷ Kattan sees three existing patterns of relation between hermeneutics and Orthodox the-

¹⁰³ Rebengiuc similarly puts Gadamer's concept of icon in the centre. He sees the Orthodox concept of icon as very much connected with the incarnation, so the icon not only presents the divinity, but makes the divinity present. This view of icon Rebengiuc sees as similar to Gadamer's description of image that is never separated from the represented objeconomy. Image is the emanation of the original and exists as a part of it. This ontology helps to explain the question of sacredness and irreplaceability of icon. Tudor Rebengiuc, *The Nature of Language in Orthodox Church Architecture: A Hermeneutical Approach*, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH 2010.

¹⁰⁴ See his book *Dynamics of Faith*, New York 1957.

¹⁰⁵ So Michael Prokurat, "Orthodox Interpretation of Scripture", in: Kennet Hagan (ed.), *Bible in the Churches: How Various Christians Interpret the Scriptures*, Milwaukee, WI 1994, p. 63.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁷ This presentation was made at the International Conference of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies: Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Post-Patristic Theology: Can Orthodox Theology be contextual?, June 3-6, 2010, still unpublished.

ology: (i) one that stresses the insufficiency of the hermeneutics, (ii) one that depicts the Holy Spirit as the link between the past and present, (iii) and one that is challenged by Gadamer. He chooses the third possibility and underlines very directly that some aspects of the Orthodox way could be challenged and revolutionized by Gadamer's insights, since, as he is aware, this has not yet been done in Orthodoxy. He has in mind especially a challenge by Gadamer's analysis of the impact of temporal distance and involvement of an interpreter's individuality in the act of understanding – both elements have not satisfactorily been analysed in the Orthodox hermeneutics of Tradition. Especially inspiring is Gadamer's concept of temporal distance, which presupposes that the act of understanding is not possible without the fore-structure and the fact that the interpreter belongs to the act of interpretation, this Kattan sees as very important. Gadamer frees prejudices from the Enlightenment's captivity and makes them a starting point of rehabilitation of the tradition. The popular notion of tradition among the Orthodox sees it as a closed and unchangeable entity and this needs to be challenged, says Kattan, and to see it as a dynamic and open testimony of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Tradition in Gadamer's view seems, on one side, to be conservative, as he returns to the Greek-Roman paradigms, but on the other hand, he rehabilitates it in the way that he shows reading of the text in the wide horizon of tradition. There is a critical potential in the form of temporal distance as a *sine qua non* of every understanding. If this is true, then the need emerges to reconfigure how the writings of the Fathers are used. They can no longer be ready recipes for current problems, also it is not possible to ignore the achievements of psychoanalysis and uncritically endorse anthropologic paradigms. Gadamer's insights and Kattan's interpretation invite us to see tradition with new eyes. Gadamer uses a metaphor, fusion of horizons, in order to underline an interpreter's involvement in the interpretative act. This fusion happens as an application, which is an integral part of the understanding, and involves the fact that the interpreter's presuppositions are not static entities, but must be verified and adjusted. If we elevate subjectivity to the rank of the hermeneutical principle for truth, how legitimate is it then to regard tradition as highly objective, infallible and absolute? Kattan thinks that this sensitivity to the role of the interpreter might contribute to a healthy and fruitful discussion among the Orthodox over the limits of tradition as an argument of the truth.

Nicolae Turcan (b.1971), in 2010 an Orthodox theologian from Cluj-Napoca, published a study *Church Tradition: Reflection on Hermeneutics and Holiness*¹⁰⁸ that contributes to the issue of challenges of Gadamer's philo-

¹⁰⁸ Nicolae Turcan, "Tradiția Bisericii sau despre hermeneutică și sfințenie" (Church tradition: Reflection on hermeneutics and holiness), in: *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai – Theologia Orthodoxa (Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai – Orthodox Theology)* 1/2010, pp. 227-237.

sophical hermeneutics. This study is about the Orthodox concept of Tradition and Gadamer is used to help him to understand better: "How can I, as an Orthodox thinker, understand Church Tradition related to Gadamer's thought? Can we use Gadamer to better understand our Church Tradition?"¹⁰⁹

For Gadamer there is a dialog with the texts of the tradition and there is a dialog with the 'you' of the text. For theology this dialogue goes further, because the 'you' of the sacred text is the 'you' of prayers, God. The author agrees with Gadamer regarding this, but also emphasizes the difference and sees that the religious experience is more than the hermeneutical. Turcan marks a difference between traditionalism and Church Tradition, and offers an analysis of these from the perspective of contemporary Orthodox theology. Gadamer's understanding of tradition as a *living*¹¹⁰ dialog with the texts stays between traditionalism („the dead belief of the living people”), and the Tradition of the Holy Spirit who remains in the Church even now („the living belief of the dead people”). Traditionalism is seen as a disease, as a form of dead hermeneutics Church tradition, in contrast, is revealed as a tradition of the Holy Spirit, which the hermeneutical discourse moves in an inevitable way to prayer and ecclesiastical life. The consequence of such understanding is that it diminishes the differences between those who keep tradition and those who create it, underlining the idea that both are created by the Tradition. In his conclusion, Turcan sees Gadamer as an important moment of our theological thinking of Church Tradition and his hermeneutics can be a good critic of traditionalism, but it must be overcome by the theological moment; the dialog with the texts must become a dialog with the divine, the inspirer of these texts.

Interpretation of the Bible in the Orthodox context

As my research shows, the most common way of development of hermeneutics in the Orthodox countries has been in the field of biblical studies,¹¹¹ although not in the sense of exegesis or critical interpretation. Orthodoxy does not see Scripture as an independent object, but as part of a much wider

¹⁰⁹ Writes author in a personal email to the author of this article on 07.11.2013.

¹¹⁰ Italics by author.

¹¹¹ The explicit history of Orthodox hermeneutics started in the 1970s with two international conferences: *First international conference of Orthodox theologians* in 1970, arranged thanks to the activity of the Orthodox Theological Society in America at the Holy Cross Seminary, Hellenic College, Brookline, Mass., and *First Orthodox Conference of Hermeneutical Theology* in 1972, organized by the Inter-Orthodox Center of Athens at the monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos in Pentelikos.

unity: Scripture, Church and Tradition.¹¹² Therefore, the questions of canon and the list of books are not so important and are more indicative than definitive.¹¹³ Many current theologians emphasize the voice of God speaking to us through the Bible¹¹⁴ and strongly point to the liturgical use of the book.¹¹⁵ But there is also a reductionist approach which reduces the role of Scripture to *mere* moral and ethical issues, *only* to feeding on Scriptures as a „source of knowledge, wisdom and spiritual sensitivity.”¹¹⁶ More realistic voices bring the balance, for example Breck’s saying that the Orthodox kiss the Bible, but do not read it,¹¹⁷ or bishop Alfeyev’s analysis of a situation in Russia, where the Bible is not a part of the life of Orthodox Christians.¹¹⁸

According to my understanding this variety depends on the question of what the Bible is, where its authority lies and what its uses are.¹¹⁹ There are two understandings of Scripture: (i) as a collection of texts of various authors, where it is the role of exegesis to come closer to the original meaning; (ii) and as an inspired book, whose authors spoke in the name of God (2 Peter 1:21), here it is the Holy Spirit who stands behind the process of writing, and also behind the process of interpretation.¹²⁰ One way of overcoming this dualism is to say that the authority of Scripture does not lie so much on the inspiration, but on the reception by the Church as the prophetic witness to Christ, which John Breck introduced to Orthodoxy as the third meaning of *theoria*.¹²¹ The

¹¹² See for example the title of the following article: Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, “Scripture and Tradition in the Church”, in: M.B. Cunningham, E. Theokritoff (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, Cambridge 2009, pp. 21-34.

¹¹³ A. Louth, “Inspiration of the Scriptures”, in: *Sobornost: incorporating Eastern Churches Review* 31 (1/2009), p. 42.

¹¹⁴ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood, NY 1979, p. 109.

¹¹⁵ A. Louth, *Inspiration of the Scriptures*, p. 31.

¹¹⁶ Boris Bobrinskoy, *The Compassion of the Father*, Crestwood, NY 2003, p. 130. To this reductionist approach I would put all approaches that reduced the message of Bible to one element only and so ignore the complexity of its meanings and uses.

¹¹⁷ John Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, Crestwood, NY 2001, p. 16.

¹¹⁸ Hieromonk Hilarion Alfeyev, “Orthodox Theology on the Threshold of the 21st Century”, in: *Ecumenical Review* 52 (2000), pp. 314-315.

¹¹⁹ Scripture has various uses in the Church: liturgical, homiletical, catechetical, devotional, doctrinal and scholarly use of Scripture. According to T.G. Stylianopoulos, *Scripture and Tradition*, pp. 26-29.

¹²⁰ See Georg Galitis, “Die Kirche als Spenderin des Heils”, in: Georg Mantzaridis, et al. (eds.), *Glauben aus dem Herzen: Eine Einführung in die Orthodoxie*, München 1987, pp. 75-76.

¹²¹ This focus on reception is visible already in Bertrand Margerie’s work: *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis* on patristic exegesis and *theoria*, where he underlines a shift from a

other way, more convenient, is to point to the divine-human nature of Scripture and on the divine-human nature of its interpretation.

The theandric nature of the Bible keeps in mind that Scripture is not only a work of God, but also the work of people from different times and places. Divine-human communion is the “first principle upon which all theological thinking is grounded”, it goes back to the patristic period and is in the heart of the theologies of Lossky, Florovsky, Stăniloae, Yannaras and Zizioulas.¹²² A paradigm for this divine and human character is the incarnation that helps in describing how a human and the divine can be united and permeated together, but still each remain itself. The Bible is therefore a “fully divine and fully human”¹²³ product of divine collaboration and cooperation both in its writing, as in its interpretation. Vasile Mihoc answers differently that the words of the Bible are not divine and cannot capture divinity, but have a certain ability to give us some knowledge about God.¹²⁴ Correspondingly, interpretation of Scripture has the same characteristics as the nature of the Bible. It is a divine-human enterprise based upon synergy or cooperation between the divine spirit and human creative efforts. If the spiritual perspective is ignored, then the scholar receives only what is on the surface. The

prophetic intention to a prophetic fulfilment, according to which fulfilment does not happen in chronological history, but within the liturgical life of the Church. In this sense *theoria* becomes also a vision of a post-biblical exegete, not only a vision of a prophet or a New Testament author. Bertrand Margerie, *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis*, Petersham, MA 1993, p. 180. This inspired the work of John Breck who introduced Margerie's thoughts into the ecclesial community of the Church and connected it with the concept of Orthodox pneumatology. See especially John Breck, *The Power of the Word in the Worshipping Church*, Crestwood, NY 1986, pp. 25-116; Zdenko Širka, “The role of *theoria* in Gregory of Nyssa's *Vita Moysis* and in *Canticum Canticorum*”, in: *Communio Viatorum* 54 (2/2012), pp. 142-163; and A. Louth, *Inspiration of the Scriptures*, p. 39.

¹²² Even in spite of the differences between Lossky and Zizioulas, their theology of personhood is remarkably similar, and for both it is the most adequate form of expressing divine-human communion. There are accusations that the theology of personhood is a result of Western influence on Orthodox theological discourse, but Papanikolaou radically states that it is not and that the Orthodox theology of personhood is the clear manifestation of thinking as tradition and a logical development of divine-human communion. See: Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Tradition or Identity Politics: The Role of the ‘West’ in Contemporary Orthodox Theology”, in: *Teologia* 3-4 (2010), pp. 18-25.

¹²³ Thomas Hopko, “The Bible in the Orthodox Church”, in: *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 14 (1-2/1970), p. 74.

¹²⁴ He uses Nyssa's term *anakrasis* which expresses the way Logos is “mixing” with Biblical words, but the mixture is imperfect, because human words are limited. Vasile Mihoc, “Principles of Orthodox Hermeneutics”, in: André Lemaire (ed.), *Congress Volume Ljubljana 2007*, Leiden 2010, pp. 298-299.

human character of the Bible demands and justifies a historical-grammatical interpretation, and the spiritual character of the Bible demands spiritual exegesis. The consequence of this approach, which I see as very helpful, is that the theandric nature of Scripture does not exclude critical thinking, however it is still neglected in the Orthodox world. The important objection against critical thinking is that modern biblical criticism derived in the West from the secular renaissance, humanism and Enlightenment philosophy, and not from the Church, ecclesial life or from prayer. Moreover, biblical criticism even ignores the ecclesial life and spiritual dimension of the Bible and according to Orthodox thinkers ends up in a dead end, because it loses the balance between the principles of Scripture and of Church.¹²⁵

An example of an Orthodox thinker who uses critical thinking as a part of the divine-human relation, is *Theodore G. Stylianopoulos*, a well-known American Orthodox biblical scholar from the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology and one of the most visible protagonists of Orthodox biblical studies within the last 30-40 years.¹²⁶ Stylianopoulos sees the problem of contemporary hermeneutics¹²⁷ in a damaged balance between biblical scholarship and „theological emptiness” and “spiritual dryness,”¹²⁸ which are an inevitable part of biblical exegesis. While John Breck sees the hermeneutical problem in actualization of the text,¹²⁹ Stylianopoulos sees the hermeneutical challenge in the relation between faith and reason.¹³⁰ Reason has its role,

¹²⁵ Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective, vol. I Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics*, Brookline, MA 1997, p. 74.157.

¹²⁶ See also his other works: *Encouraged by the Scriptures*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press 2011; “Comments on Chrysostom, Patristic Interpretation, and Contemporary Biblical Scholarship”, in: *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 54 (2009), pp. 189-204; “Perspectives in Orthodox Biblical Interpretation”, in: *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 47 (2002), pp. 327-338; “Holy Scripture, Interpretation and Spiritual Cognition in St. Simeon the New Theologian”, in: *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 46 (2001), pp. 3-34.

¹²⁷ An objection must be made against Stylianopoulos that his overview of the hermeneutical crisis in the West is very general (much more general than his overview of modern orthodox hermeneutical attempts). When he mentions Western hermeneutical fathers (such are Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer), he does not use primary sources but relays on secondary sources, and primary sources do not appear even in the bibliography. His poor knowledge of Western theology is also visible when he talks about *sola scriptura*, where he obviously does not know that there are three *sola* in reformation theology that must be understood together. See on this especially A. Kattan, *Orthodoxe Hermeneutik*, pp. 67-86.

¹²⁸ T.G. Stylianopoulos, *Holy Scripture*, p. 25.

¹²⁹ *Scripture in Tradition* (2001) and *The Power of the Word in the Worshipping Church* (1986).

¹³⁰ T.G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament*, p. 88.

for sure, but cannot override faith, is limited and cannot rationally analyse or prove the existence and acts of God. Both, faith and reason, need to remain in the balance, otherwise we will have either rationalism or fanaticism. Similarly as Florovsky called for neo-patristic synthesis, Stylianopoulos calls for neo-biblical synthesis.¹³¹ In his synthesis Stylianopoulos says that biblical studies involve three aspects: (i) *historical* (the exegesis, descriptive aspect), accomplished by contextual and grammatical interpretation that pay attention to the author's intent, language, genre; this approach is not only historical, because as Stylianopoulos says, it is also a matter of „religious convictions, theological truths and spiritual insights”¹³²; (ii) *evaluative* (interpretative aspect), where the emphasis is moved from the biblical author to the reader as he is aware that much of the content of Scripture depends on a reader's own faith, willingness, worldview and presuppositions; (iii) *applicatory* aspect,¹³³ an application of biblical texts to personal lives, but also to the Church and world; Stylianopoulos strongly emphasizes that by application is not meant a narrow applicability in terms of devotion or liturgical use. Stylianopoulos concludes that the exegetical, doctrinal and contemplative aspects are all presupposed and required, and that an ideal interpreter is one who integrates all three aspects, who is a scholar, theologian and saint in one person.¹³⁴

The original Orthodox contribution to the problem of interpretation and hermeneutics lies in its hermeneutical keys: Church, liturgy, Tradition. Ecclesial reading of Scripture is the unique Orthodox suggestion to a hermeneutical debate in the ecclesial dimension of biblical scholarship¹³⁵. Words of leading Orthodox hermeneuticians are very clear: “the Church is the proper locus for the interpretation”¹³⁶, and the “faith community, which holds Scripture as its own sacred treasure, is the final interpretative authority of the Bible”¹³⁷. Ecclesial reading points to the crucial role of the Church in hermeneutics and is based on several premises, the main premise is the non-institutional account of the Church. This is similar to what Bulgakov writes in his

¹³¹ Largely expressed in chapter 7 of T.G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament*.

¹³² T.G. Stylianopoulos, *Holy Scripture*, p. 27.

¹³³ Called *transformative* in T.G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament*, p. 214.

¹³⁴ T.G. Stylianopoulos, *Holy Scripture, Interpretation and Spiritual Cognition in St. Symeon the New Theologian*, p. 29.

¹³⁵ Simon Crisp, “Orthodox Biblical Scholarship between Patristics and Postmodernity: A view from the West”, in: James D.G. Funn et al. (eds.), *Auslegung der Bibel*, Tübingen 2000, p. 130.

¹³⁶ John Breck, “Orthodox Principles of Biblical Interpretation”, in: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 40 (1996), p. 88.

¹³⁷ T.G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament*, p. 36, note 24.

famous words from *Orthodox Church* in the opening lines of the first chapter: "Orthodoxy is the Church of Christ on earth. The Church of Christ is not an institution; it is new life with Christ and in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit. (...) The essence of the Church is the divine life, revealing itself in the life of the creature; it is the deification of the creature by the power of the Incarnation and of Pentecost."¹³⁸ Implications of this statement are several: the Bible was not given to the people to grasp theological truths or to receive moral and ethical commands and norms, but to experience the life of communion that exists in God.¹³⁹ It means also that Scripture and the Church cannot be separated and they presuppose each other; Bible passages should be placed and understood within the context of the Church. The life of communion is addressed to each person individually, therefore the reading of Scripture is personal, but cannot be separated from the community: the book and community are inseparable. Their relationship is double: (i) Christians *receive* Scripture in and through the Church, the Church has canonized it and decided the writings; (ii) second, Christians also *interpret* the Bible in and through the Church.¹⁴⁰

Liturgical reading is the next hermeneutical key according to which Scripture should be interpreted in corporate worship, as the liturgy is the framework within which Orthodox Christians encounter the Gospel. The basic presuppositions that we must take into account when talking about Orthodox liturgical hermeneutics are: (i) Scripture was and is liturgical, *Sitz im Leben* of the Bible is liturgy; this means more than that the liturgy *is* Scripture, but much stronger - what was once a liturgy, became Scripture; (ii) the Eastern Christians experience the Bible and its interpretation primarily as a liturgical celebration.¹⁴¹ Florovsky describes this with *ut legem credendi statuatur lex orandi* (so that the rule of worship should establish the rule of faith).¹⁴²

¹³⁸ S. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, Crestwood, NY 1988, p. 1.4.

¹³⁹ See also Petros Vassiliadis, "Canon and Authority of Scripture: An Orthodox Hermeneutical Perspective", in: S.T. Kimbrough, Jr. (ed.), *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice*, Crestwood, NY 2005, p. 28.

¹⁴⁰ P. Vassiliadis, *Canon and Authority of Scripture*, p. 29.

¹⁴¹ According to Michael Prokurat, *Orthodox Interpretation of Scripture*, p. 62.

¹⁴² G. Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective*, Belmont, MA 1972, p. 84. Similarly Florovsky: "Christianity is a liturgical religion. The Church is the first of all a worshipping community. Worship comes first, doctrine and discipline second", quoted in Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, "The Witness of the Orthodox Church in the Twentieth Century", in: *Sorouzh* 80 (2000), p. 9. Breck adds that "In authentic Orthodox experience, the Word comes to its fullest expression within a sacramental context. (...) the Word of God is primarily communicated – expressed and received – by the ecclesial act of celebration, and in particular, celebration of the Eucharistic mystery." J. Breck, *The Power of the Word*, pp. 17-18.

Although private quests for meaning could be proceeded individually, its manifestation can be achieved only in the communal context. Fr. Breck mentions two dimensions of the Orthodox understanding of the liturgy: (i) horizontal, historical, paschal, or anamnestic - participating in a liturgical worship as the past (salvific events of Bible), present (re-living those events in the worship) and future (anticipation of events to come)¹⁴³; (ii) pentecostal, epicletic, vertical, or transcendent – occurs as the Holy Spirit draws the believers into experiencing these redemptive acts in the liturgical and Eucharistic celebration.¹⁴⁴ This liturgical participation in the Tradition as well as in the eschaton prevents the disconnection of the study of liturgy from the study of theology.¹⁴⁵

Reading from the Tradition, as the third hermeneutical key, cannot be isolated from Scripture, but must be understood together as the 'Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition',¹⁴⁶ which is a concept known in hermeneutics as a hermeneutical circle. The circularity in a relationship between Scripture and Tradition is visible when we say that Scripture is the criterion according to which the Tradition is judged,¹⁴⁷ but on the other hand, the Bible has been created within the Church and Tradition. The Church confirms the authority of biblical books based on Tradition, and through this Tradition the Church interprets the Bible. At the same time, out of the Bible, Orthodoxy proves its own authority.¹⁴⁸ John Breck's project called 'Scripture in Tradition' provides a good explanation of how to preserve circularity and tension. Rather than seeing Scripture and Tradition in opposition (such as the Protestant form, Scripture *or* Tradition) or co-joined (the Roman Catholic form, Scripture *and* Tradition), the Orthodox approach can be described as Scripture *in* Tradition – the Biblical books are part of Tradition and born out of it.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ "Again and again the Church recalls and relives the past in order to take part *now* in the eschatological grace of the future". J. Breck, *The Power of the Word*, p. 128.

¹⁴⁴ J. Breck, *The Power of the Word*, p. 131.

¹⁴⁵ See a very important study by Philip Zymaris, "The Forgotten Connection between Liturgy and Theology", in: *Praxis* 12 (1/2012).

¹⁴⁶ For Galitis Scripture and the Tradition are two sides of the same coin, two forms in which the mystery of faith is revealed. Galitis, *Die Kirche als Spenderin des Heils*, pp. 77-78.

¹⁴⁷ Tradition "provides the hermeneutic perspective by which any biblical writing is to be rightly interpreted". V. Mihoc, *Principles of hermeneutics*, p. 308.

¹⁴⁸ See on this V. Mihoc, *Principles of hermeneutics*, p. 308 and J. Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, p. 11.

¹⁴⁹ "Rather than to see Scripture as the original and primary medium of revelation, and Tradition as mere human reflection upon its witness, we need to give full weight to the fact that *Scripture as written text is born of Tradition*". J. Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, p. 10.

Conclusion

In this article I draw a parallel between artwork and Scripture and I point to the way the hermeneutics aesthetic experience gives several possibilities for interpretation of Scripture, based on similarities and differences between the two concepts. Gadamer contributes to this debate with his relational character of understanding, where the hermeneutical process is described horizontally as a dialogue or play in which transcendence is a result of cooperation and relation, and appears within the horizon of human understanding. Gadamer calls this shift, from a finite and limited subject to the ungraspable, inexpressible and uncontrollable power that reaches beyond them, a mystery or a miracle of language.¹⁵⁰ Gadamer thoroughly investigates transcendence as it appears horizontally in history, but he does not investigate it thoroughly in relation to the divine and here modern Orthodox hermeneutics and its emphasis is needed. Modern Orthodox hermeneutics is also relational and brings a strong sense of belonging to the community and Tradition as the main elements of their hermeneutics. Transcendence is here revealed, rather than created, and always transcends this world and human nature. Transcendence is not a result of cooperation between the human and history, but comes to this relation from outside, as the Holy Spirit, and divinizes the world. The problem with this conception is that vertically understood transcendence divinizes too much and does not leave a space for the human element, for suspicion, otherness, and critical thinking. There is no valid criterion for evaluation of these elements, the same as for differentiating the tradition from customs or differentiating voices of people from the call of the Holy Spirit. The horizon of understanding, where the human and transcendence encounter, needs to take the role of humans into account more seriously and this is where Gadamer helps with his model.

Therefore, my argument in this study about the possibility of assimilation of Gadamer's hermeneutical method in the Orthodox interpretation of the Bible is based on five conditions. (i) The first is that there is a neglected aspect of Gadamer's later work which very explicitly deals with the universality of transcendence, recognition of limits of our knowledge and universality of knowing. Transcendence according to Gadamer's understanding is not a metaphysical transcendence, but it is very closely connected with the human experience, more closely with the finitude of human experience, as described in the concept of *ignoramus*. To accept the existence of transcendence means

¹⁵⁰ For miracle of language, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Discourse on Matter Hermeneutics and the 'Miracle' of Understanding", in: *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (1/2005), pp. 5-37.

to admit our own not-knowing. (ii) The second condition for the possibility of the assimilation of Gadamer's hermeneutical method in the Orthodox interpretation of the Bible is a particular area of Gadamer's work, the concept of hermeneutical aesthetics, which I here propose to connect with the religious experience and the revelation of transcendence. Especially important are the parallels between them. The hermeneutical concept of aesthetics (very plainly said: the act of standing in front of an artwork and trying to understand it) brings several interesting features: the subject matter of the artwork reveals itself to us, our own role in this act is very small, and this revealing of the subject matter does not occur as delivered information, but as an event or performance. This performance of subject matter occurs within the experience of human observers, moreover, it can be revealed only with the help of this human experience. Therefore we can talk about a personal encounter with the subject matter and about the decisive role of human subjectivity, because the subject matter of the artwork (i.e. transcendence) is completed in this encounter with the human subjectivity (more precisely, with our recognition of our human finitude). Gadamer supports his thoughts with concepts known already in patristic hermeneutics – *mimesis* and *theoria*. I especially see three main impacts of hermeneutical aesthetics for theology: (i) transcendence is a part of our experience, (ii) hiddenness and disclosure are not mutually excluded, (iii) and finally, the experience of transcendence always includes transformation of the one who observes/interprets. Gadamer's concept of hermeneutical aesthetics, when paralleled with the religious experience, helps to overcome the clash between the divine and human, between the creation and metaphysical transcendence, keeps the personal encounter with God without making God a friend, and on the other side, leaves God his majesty without making him unreachable. (iii) The third condition for the possibility of the assimilation of Gadamer's hermeneutical method in the Orthodox interpretation of the Bible lies in the reception of Gadamer's work in Orthodoxy. Although, we can still talk only about the pioneer work in this field of research, these few existing works (Louth, Kattan, Turcan, Rebengiuc) together with Gadamer's hermeneutical method support my argument about the possibility of application of Gadamer's concept of hermeneutical aesthetics in Orthodox theology. (iv) The fourth condition for the possibility of the assimilation of Gadamer's hermeneutical method in Orthodox theology is further supported by the current struggle of Orthodoxy to grasp the *kerygma* of the Scripture authentically. I call this 'a struggle' because there is no satisfying and universal answer which everybody agrees on about how to remain faithful to the Orthodox tradition and still to be open and to keep in step with academic theology (in order to avoid the accusation of being pre-critical

and unscientific). Hermeneutics in the Orthodox context has been developing in three directions (as patristic hermeneutics, as biblical hermeneutics and as hermeneutical theology), but the most common development is within biblical studies. Scripture is considered as a part of a much wider context (Scripture, Church, Tradition), but in reality it is neglected and oppressed, Orthodox believers though they kiss the Bible, do not really read it. There are several reasons for that: in contrast to Protestantism (who use the Scripture as a main tool), there is a focus on spirituality as a unique Orthodox element, perception of the Bible as an inspired book and not as a historical document, or anti-Westernism aiming to deliver Orthodox theology from 'captivity'. This struggle calls for the need of a hermeneutical method, for example Gadamer's. (v) the fifth condition for the possibility of assimilation of Gadamer's hermeneutical method in Orthodox theology points to several attempts that have been developed in order to overcome this struggle. One of them is to put emphasis on the reception of the biblical events by the Church in the liturgy as a decisive element in hermeneutics (concept of *theoria*); the role of the Holy Spirit has traditionally been a decisive role in the Orthodox context, but actually this role points to a continuing interpretation which never ends, but continues in the new generations of believers and changes with them. Even more important is to point to the divine-human nature of the Scripture and correspondingly to the divine-human nature of its interpretation. The argument is that the divine character of the Scripture demands spiritual exegesis, but the human character of the Bible justifies a historical-grammatical interpretation. However both are needed and justified and do not exclude one another. It is the divine-human nature of the Bible and its interpretation that lets Western hermeneutical thinking into Orthodox theology and that has a direct influence on developing of hermeneutical theology or biblical hermeneutics.

Orthodoxy has developed a hermeneutical circle between Tradition and the Church which often has a tendency to divinize the whole process, even to forbid personal encounters with God. What we have here proposed is humanization of the divine in Orthodox theology that allows an interpreter's involvement in the interpretation process, for example by referring to the reception of biblical events by the interpretive community within a celebration of Eucharistic liturgy here and now.

Gadamer provides a concept that allows this balance within Orthodoxy, so that it falls neither in human subjectivism, nor in radical divinization. For example, his understanding of artworks can be paralleled with the way Orthodox biblical theology struggles to approach Holy Scripture in the context of Church and Tradition, especially how the subject matter of the

artwork reveals itself within the event of observing the artwork so that the human factor remains important, as the revealing happens within the borders of human experience. Especially, Gadamer's notion of festival and time, which prevents repetition of the past and loss of singularity, since it focuses on the actual celebration as the place where the *what* of the festivals and biblical events occurs as an event. It helps to describe how the Eucharist or Christian festivals (Christmas, Easter, Saints days) can keep their singularity, but still not become a mere repetition of the original event by taking into account the actual interpretative community, i.e. Orthodox believers gathered at the Liturgy. Opposite to the common aesthetic theory that art is a result of human subjectivism, Gadamer brings together the horizon of human understanding with the horizon of transcendence by saying that subject matter reveals itself within the human experience. Opposite to the traditional Orthodox theology that focuses primarily on the act of God, the hermeneutical method in Orthodoxy shows that the interaction between human and divine better describes how biblical truths become alive within the Orthodox Liturgy.**

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