

# The Orthodox Charismatic Gift

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## Abstract

Based on ethnographic research conducted in a number of Orthodox parishes in Bucharest, this article discusses different conceptions of *har* among Bucharest Orthodox believers, practitioners, and clerics. *Har* stands for ‘grace’, ‘charisma’ or ‘gift’ depending on the context. An ethnographically grounded analysis of this emic concept, I argue, is essential for two main reasons. First, understanding grace through gratuity allows us to grasp diverse forms of religious change, such as committed church attendance and the detachment from communal religious life, in contemporary Romania. Second, seeing through the looking glass of Orthodox practice allows for unexplored insights into the workings of charismatic authority. The article ends with a seeming paradox: grace is ‘something extra’, an addition which is best grasped apophatically, that is, through subtraction.

**Keywords:** Bucharest, charisma, gift, grace, gratuity, Romanian Orthodox Church

Many said of the elder Zosima that, having for so many years received all those who came to him to open their hearts, thirsting for advice and for a healing word, having taken into his soul so many confessions, sorrows, confidences, he acquired in the end such fine discernment that he could tell, from the first glance at a visiting stranger’s face, what was in his mind, what he needed, and even what kind of suffering tormented his conscience; and he sometimes astonished, perplexed, and almost frightened the visitor by this knowledge of his secret even before he had spoken a word.

— Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*

This article provides an ethnographic exploration of the concept of *har* among Orthodox Christians in Bucharest. Depending on the context, the Romanian word *har* stands for the ‘divine grace’, ‘charisma’, or ‘gift’ that descends on priests and monks as a result of ordination or as a special quality granted directly by God. The alleged lack or abundance of *har* in different clergy informs distancing from or commitment to the communal life of the church, respectively. Believers who argue that priests have no *har* anymore—that is, no vocation for the priesthood—do so to express their disappointment with parish priests asking high sums of money



to perform life-cycle rituals, or to justify the infrequency of their church visits. On the other hand, those few clerics considered charismatic attract many faithful Orthodox practitioners seeking spiritual direction, going to confession, or eager to receive advice from their problems.

My fieldwork in Bucharest took place between 2015 and 2016 and focused on the boom in church building since the end of socialism.<sup>1</sup> I settled a few hundred metres away from my main case-study, the People's Salvation Cathedral, which officially became the world's tallest Christian Orthodox cathedral on the day of its inauguration in November 2018. While the religious complex was inaccessible due to the hectic construction works, the chapel originally built for the workers of the construction site soon became a popular destination. In order to cement a community of faithful around the new cathedral, Father Ciprian Gradinaru was sent from the famous Moldavian monastery of Sihastria to the heart of Bucharest. Contrary to those parish priests who are seen as petty bourgeois with a family, a salary, and attraction for money just like laypeople, Father Ciprian's growing popularity is due to his reputation of monk 'full of *har*'. The words and deeds of the churchgoers thronging to Father Ciprian's chapel reveal not just local perceptions of the materiality of grace but also what it takes to be a popular and charismatic cleric.

This article draws on Julian Pitt-Rivers' (1992) understanding of grace as based on gratuity to discuss the role of *har* in regulating both the privatisation of faith and active participation in the communal life of the church. If greed (for money, power, or visibility) is associated with a lack of vocation for priesthood, humility is the core value that qualifies popular clerics (Pop 2017: 80; Tateo 2020: 128) as they are able to give solace, understanding, and advice, asking nothing in return. Since *har* condenses ideas of grace, charisma, gift, and gratuity in one word—not so differently from the almost homonymous *hau*—an anthropological reading of it brings into discussion both the legitimisation of charismatic authority (Csordas 1997; Lindquist 2001; Shils 1968; Tambiah 1984; Weber 1978) and gift economies (Edwards & McIvor, this volume; Gregory 1980; Mauss 1973; Parry 1986).

Situated at the crossroads of these two strands of research, *har* emerges as a sort of 'charismatic gift' which cannot be reduced either to that of Neoprotestant born-again movements (Coleman 2004) or to Catholic Charismatic Renewal (Csordas 1997). Seen through the prism of Orthodox practice, grace is a social relationship that is experienced materially and communicated through verbal and non-verbal means. Gratuitous and transient in essence, it is better defined by negation: it is not quantifiable, opposed to calculation, unrelated to merit, resistant to categorisation. To condense all this in an emic expression: grace is 'anti-geometric'.

### **Har: Grace, Charisma, Gift**

The Romanian word *har* comes from the ancient Greek 'karis', which means grace, and is also at the base of the English word 'charisma'. *Har* is, first of all, the divine grace that descends on priests once they are ordained. In Orthodox Romania this

ritual is called *hirotonie*, that is, the ‘stretching forth the hands’ through which the new priest becomes a medium of divine grace. In this general sense, all clerics have *har*. In a narrower sense, though, only a few have *har*, understood not as grace following the ritual of ordination but as a charismatic gift appointed by the hand of God, cultivated through prayer and devotional practice, and recognised by other people. This elective gift of grace from God is what Stanley Tambiah defines as the Judeo-Christian source of charisma, as opposed to the Buddhist tradition, which identifies its source in the disciplined attainment of the Dhamma (Csordas 1997: 135; Tambiah 1984: 78). As with the charismatic leader portrayed by Weber, the ‘recognition on the part of those subject to authority...is decisive for the validity of charisma’ (1978: 242). It is thus the popularity of such spiritual guides among both younger clerics and laypeople that justifies their reputation as charismatic: ‘in a free and informal fashion, others begin to come to him or her for advice and direction’ (Ware 1974: 297).<sup>2</sup>

But who are these charismatic figures, and what makes them so popular? Let me first briefly introduce the clerical structure of Orthodox pastoral communities. According to the Orthodox tradition, the clergy consists of bishops, priests, and deacons. Bishops are drawn from the ranks of the monks and are thus required to be celibate. Alongside celibacy, monastics take three other vows: obedience, poverty, and stability. Priests and deacons, by contrast, are called ‘secular’ in a literal sense: they don’t live secluded in monasteries, but in the ‘world’ just like laypeople, and just like the laity, they are usually married.

It is customary among the faithful to identify a spiritual guide (*duhovnic*) who would assist them during the sacrament of confession and give spiritual direction. Thus, the majority of churchgoers have a confessor. Eastern Orthodox theologian and bishop Kallistos Ware distinguishes between the spiritual father (*starets*, pl. *startsi*)<sup>3</sup> and the priest-confessor: ‘the starets gives advice, not only at confession, but on many other occasions.... The ministry of the starets is deeper, because only a very few confessor priests would claim to speak with the former’s insight and authority’ (Ware 1974: 297). If confessors can be found in every single parish, charismatic spiritual fathers are rare. They are the exception rather than the norm (*ibid.*). This is true for Orthodox Romania as well, as those figures considered charismatic by a large number of believers can be counted on one hand: the most famous are Arsenie Boca (1910–1989), Paisie Olaru (1897–1990), Ilie Cleopa (1912–1998), Arsenie Papacioc (1914–2011), Justin Pârvu (1919–2013), and Constantin Galeriu (1918–2003). All these (but the latter) were monks: it is also due to the presence of a charismatic elder that monasteries often become popular pilgrimage destinations, and not just when the cleric is in life but also after his death, as is the case of the Prislop monastery, where the tomb of Arsenie Boca still attracts thousands of faithful each year (Bănică 2014; Grigore-Dovlete 2020).

Bearing in mind the distinction between ‘secular’ priests and the typical seclusion of monastic communities, it should be no surprise that charismatic figures are usually monks: alterity, as Galina Lindquist (2001: 7) notes, works as a source of legitimacy of charisma. This is true in the case of monastics conducting a frugal

life dedicated to God as much as for the Russian charismatic healers studied by Lindquist. These healers claimed to have mastered exotic and unique curative techniques. Lindquist's approach draws on Thomas Csordas' critique of the Weberian understanding of charisma as a quality of the leader's personality, and not as a quality *imputed* to the leader. If the theologian identifies the source of charisma in divine action and the humanist in the human spirit, Csordas locates it in the leader's persuasive performance (1997: 136–145).

The ultimate purpose of the charismatic gift, at least in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement described by Csordas, is the 'upbuilding of the community' (ibid.: 133). This indeed seems to be the main reason for Father Ciprian's move from the remote monastery of Sihastria to the heart of Bucharest: to grow a large community of believers around the new national cathedral (still under construction at the time of this writing), and convert an area which was radically transformed by the erection of the House of the People in the 1980s into a spiritual hub for Romanian Orthodox Christianity.<sup>4</sup> While the financing of the whole religious complex—which will include exhibition halls, council rooms, and the museum of Romanian Christianity—is provided by the state, the presence of Father Ciprian guarantees a constant flow of the faithful (and their donations) which is destined to grow once the cathedral is finished.

Attributing to charismatic leadership, the consolidation of a community of the faithful may seem to conflict with the conception of charisma as a disruptive force, another inheritance of the Weberian approach (Shils 1965; 1968). The case of Father Ciprian here analysed is far from being an instance of revolutionary and disruptive charismatic authority. Rather, his arrival in the capital is an example of how charismatic figures can be marshalled by higher religious authorities (whose authority is of a different kind, not charismatic but institutional) to attain specific goals such as increasing the popularity of a controversial major work. Yet, in the recent history of Romanian Orthodoxy, charismatic priests have been treated as a possible threat to ideological conformity. Also because of their sympathy for the Iron Guard,<sup>5</sup> popular clerics like Arsenie Papacioc, Arsenie Boca, and Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa (the list would be longer if I included other denominations) were arrested and jailed during the harshest period of anti-religious persecution (1948–1964).

Lastly, the third side of *har*—gift—does not only consist in the elective gift of charisma. The perceived gratuitous attitude of clerics sets an important difference between those priests who are thought to lack *har* and popular *startsi* considered charismatic. While *har* is recognised through an act of giving (understanding, advice, solace, etc.) that expects nothing in return, the performance of life-cycle rituals like baptism, weddings, and funerals is understood as an overpriced commodity by those believers who complain about the alleged greedy attitude of parish priests. Although a high-rank monk (archimandrite) like Father Ciprian actually earns a salary twice bigger than an average parish priest, the former is perceived as offering generous, disinterested care while the latter are often criticised for asking for donations too insistently. Nevertheless, the gratuitous availability of Father Ciprian is still reciprocated by most of the faithful through an offer handed in

discreetly while kneeling in front of the monk. As observed by Nofit Itzhak and Hans Steinmuller in this special issue, the moral economy of grace seems to be poles apart from notions of accountability and measurement.

### **'Priests Don't Have *Har* Anymore'**

Among Bucharest Orthodox believers, anti-clerical sentiments often begin with the same remark: 'priests do not have *har* anymore'. Corruption and sex-abuse scandals, Patriarch's reputation as a manager rather than a spiritual figure, and money-oriented parish priests have fostered both anti-clerical sentiments and a more critical approach towards the church and its representatives (Cîrlan 2019: 49–51). As Joyce Riegelhaupt (1984: 97) observes, criticism of religious specialists is many-sided; it can address both high and lower clergy for different reasons and comes from a range of different actors. When the target is the whole cosmological order of a given religion, 'anti-clerical' attitudes are framed in wider 'anti-religious' claims. When, instead, the religious institution and its human component are addressed, anti-clericalism is 'anti-church' or 'anti-priests', respectively. It is on this specific type of anti-clericalism I will dwell on in this section.

Those who complain about the lack of vocation of the current generation of clerics are Orthodox believers—more or less committed practitioners—who do not question their religious identity. As reported in other countries with an overwhelming Orthodox majority like Russia (Agadjanian 2011) or Bulgaria (Ghodsee 2009), religious and national identities are thought and expressed as inseparable entities: identification with one implies the adoption of the other. When my interlocutors were critical towards the clergy—no matter whether with the next-door parish priest or with renowned hierarchs—they clarified immediately that they were Christian Orthodox and believed in God.

While the last census confirms the marginality of self-declared atheist (0.2 percent in 2011), more recent surveys (IRES 2016, Vulcan 2017) have reported that the trust in the Romanian Orthodox Church's representatives has been falling steadily in recent years. A survey conducted in Bucharest in May 2016 gives similar results (Neagu 2016). The members of the Holy Synod, the ruling body of the church, appeared to be concerned by this trend and admitted in January 2016 that 'we need growing co-responsibility and cooperation between the clergy, laity and believers in a secularised society that becomes more and more hostile to the Church' (Apostol 2016).<sup>6</sup>

The social phenomena I address here—that is, the decreasing authority of clerics expressed through the absence of *har*—is part of a wider process of the erosion of traditional religions induced by the 'pluralization of life-worlds' (Berger 1990; Gog 2007), first by (at times ineffective) socialist atheist policies chasing fast modernisation, and later by the opening of the 'spiritual' market. The result is that privatised faith takes over communal religious life and young generations seem less attracted by institutionalised religions and more by new spiritualities (Gog 2016). A new kind of privatised faith emerges: it is 'anchored in personal experience, expressible

as belief-statements, dependent on private institutions and practiced in one's spare time' (Asad 1993: 207).

The avoidance of communal religious life and the consequent tendency to take care of one's own spiritual needs privately is a form of secularisation labelled in the sociology of religion as 'individualisation of faith' (Davie 1994; Hervieu-Leger 1999). By contrast to other secular contexts in Europe, where this subset of the privatisation of religion (Casanova 1994; 2006) goes hand in hand with a growing secular normativity that delimits religious symbols in the public space (Engelke 2012), the last three decades in Romania have seen an impressive growth in terms of religious visibility: about ten thousand houses of worship, including over thirty cathedrals and several religious monuments installed in the capital. As I detail elsewhere, this church-building industry—which draws mainly on the public coffers—benefits from a benevolent legal framework mostly set up in the mid-2000s (Tateo 2020).

By sidestepping church attendance and the authority of priests, faith tends to become a more personal issue and ritual practice becomes sporadic. In this context of nominal belonging to Orthodoxy, life-cycle rituals remain crucial and represent one of the few moments of interaction with religious specialists. *Rites de passages* like baptisms, weddings, and funerals still play a crucial role in the social life of individuals, regardless of the strength of their faith. It is when the financial costs associated with such rituals are deemed too high that laypeople blame priests for being greedy.<sup>7</sup> Sacramental gifts are thus subject to negotiation and treated as commodities in the (ritual) market.

Let me bring an example from the field. Mrs Chelaru was my landlord in Bucharest. A member of the Bucharest upper-middle class, she knew I had come to Romania to research the new national cathedral. As such, she began to share with me her (not so flattering) opinion of many Orthodox parish priests. On one occasion, for example, she recounted her shock at having heard that some priests were asking for five hundred euros to celebrate a marriage. This, she pointed out, was the average monthly wage. Although she qualified her disapproval by noting that not every priest was greedy or worldly, she also stated that those who weren't—the 'humble ones (*cei smeriți*)'—were in the minority. Mrs Chelaru was one of many people I met who presented herself as a religious person without being a proper practitioner. As in the sociological paradigm previously noted, her religiosity reflected a self-guided departure from certain forms of institutionalised religion. She wouldn't fast before Easter, for instance—an important feature that distinguishes a committed Orthodox from a nominal one—but preferred to go to church when she felt a personal need, as well as during the main religious feasts (see Tateo 2020: 133).

Mrs Chelaru deemed the priests' speculative attitude unjustified considering that they already receive a salary from the state (actually 65 percent to 80 percent of a salary comparable to schoolteachers, the rest of it is usually raised through the faithful's offers) and the churches they manage benefit from tax exemption. Mrs Chelaru's opinion of Orthodox priests is common among non-practitioners and, generally, in local popular culture. Jokes like the following reflect lingering social

conflicts in an ironic manner and, at the same time, provide an example of folk anti-clericalism:

Three Orthodox priests discuss how they manage the money they get from the churchgoers. The first says: 'I draw a circle on the ground, then throw the money in the air: what ends outside the circle goes to God [that is, to religious purposes], what ends inside the circle, I keep for myself'. The second goes: 'That's too complicated, I just draw a line on the ground, then throw the money: I keep away for God the money ending on the right side and keep for myself what ends on the left side'. Lastly, the third one: 'Guys, you make it too complicated: I just throw the money in the air, what remains in the air goes to God, the rest I keep it for myself!' (Tateo 2020: 134)

Since the priest is a clearly recognisable public figure, priests often feature in proverbs and folk wisdom. For instance, a famous Romanian saying goes: 'do what the priest says, not what the priest does', which indicates that priests should not be seen as role models, but rather judged for the pastoral activity they perform. Ethical direction should be found—beyond the obvious exemplarity of Christ, developed in the Orthodox theological tradition through Nicholas Kabasilas' (1319/1323–1392). 'On the Life in Christ'—in the life of saints and in what Simion Pop (2017) describes as 'charismatic exemplars', that is, ethical models that are pedagogically emulated in function of their outstanding charismatic gifts. Paradoxically, for the very same reason these exemplars cannot be imitated: charisma is an elective gift, and, as such, it cannot be attained solely by practice and devotion.

### **Being Full of *Har***

Father Ciprian Gradinaru is considered one of the most popular spiritual figures currently alive in Romania (one Facebook group dedicated to him has fifty-four thousand 'likes'). The small chapel where he preaches is the only house of worship that I have never seen empty: even late at night, dozens of people queue for confession or to ask him advice on personal concerns. The faithful come from every part of Bucharest and, during the main feasts, even further afield. In July 2016, for instance, a group of pilgrims came from the northern region of Maramureş to venerate the icon of the St Mary Prodromiţa, have a chance to visit the newly built cathedral, and meet Father Ciprian.

Unlike other charismatic personalities who stand out for their physical traits, at first glance Father Ciprian looks like any other Orthodox monk: a not-so-tall man in his late forties, with a long beard and a very tranquil gaze, who has spent half of his life at the Sihastria monastery. For ten years, he had been as a disciple of Father Cleopa Ilie, the abbot of the monastic community and one of the most important Romanian Orthodox spiritual elders of the twentieth century. Spiritual fathers like Father Ciprian do not simply carry on pastoral or liturgic duties. As a famous saying goes, 'what the psychologist is for the rich, the priest is for the poor': they are trustworthy guides offering advice, assistance, and spiritual guidance. However,

some confessors are considered to have special gifts and are therefore particularly popular.

Ware identifies three main gifts typical of charismatic elders. The first is the gift of insight and discernment, that is, the capacity to ‘perceive intuitively the secrets of another’s heart, to understand the hidden depths of which the other does not speak and is usually unaware....As each person comes before him, [he] knows...what it is that this particular individual needs to hear’ (1974: 301–302). This gift encompasses the capacity of foresight, which was attributed to Father Ciprian because he was able to address the faithful’s concerns before they started to talk—as it was reported to me a few times while queuing. This alleged ability of Father Ciprian is called *harul clarviziunii* (the gift of foresight).<sup>8</sup> The gift of insight can also be ascribed to Father Ciprian’s own spiritual guide, Father Ilie Cleopa, due to his renowned talent to use words with power (Grigore-Dovlete 2020: 118–120).

Ware (1974: 302) clarifies that the gift of insight is not simply a kind of ‘extra-sensory perception or a sanctified clairvoyance but the fruit of grace, presupposing concentrated prayer and an unremitting ascetic struggle’. As reported in his ethnography of monastic novitiate in Western Ukraine, Vlad Naumescu shows how the formation of Eastern Christian monastics like Ciprian is ingrained in a number of ascetic practices aimed at experiencing deification (*theosis*). These include finding inspiration in the ‘Philokalia’ and the ‘Sayings of the Desert Fathers’, two collections of theological writings on spiritual perfection, and practicing the Hesychasm, a form of contemplative prayer that leads to an ‘experiential knowledge of God’ (2012: 230).

The second gift consists in the ability ‘to love others and to make others’ sufferings their own’ (Ware 1974: 302), while the third is the power to transform the human environment: ‘the gift of healing, possessed by so many of the staretsi, is one aspect of this power. More generally, the starets helps his disciples to perceive the world as God created it and as God desires it once more to be’ (ibid.). Arsenie Boca, a highly controversial figure and undoubtedly one of the most popular charismatic monks of Romania, was also famous for his alleged healing skills. As with other charismatic figures, the efficacy of his persuasive performance resided also in his penetrating gaze and physical appearance. Just like the charismatic healer described by Galina Lindquist (whose role model was another famous charismatic leader, Grigori Rasputin), Arsenie Boca had blue eyes and black hair, and is described by many female pilgrims as a ‘very beautiful man’ (Grigore-Dovlete 2020: 106). His photo as a young monk is among the most sold religious objects at the shop of the Prislop monastery.

Parish priests often have an ambiguous attitude towards the halo of mysticism surrounding charismatic figures. Some bitterly question the folk religiosity of some churchgoers thronging the monasteries during pilgrimages. Others, instead, are able to attract a larger number of faithful thanks to their skills as confessors. For Father Nicolae—a retired parish priest who also had a prestigious position in the Bucharest archbishopric—foresight is nothing too mysterious. It is rather a very



refined way to observe and empathise with the faithful, gained through years of experience as a confessor:

Father Ciprian has indeed a special *har*, he is a pious man who is able to sense what's in the faithful's mind. However, I think it's incorrect to call this 'foresight': it is rather a kind of intelligence and empathy that enables him to understand what the emotional condition of his interlocutors is. After many years of experience, priests learn to grasp what worries the churchgoers: either through questions, bodily attitudes or other [non-verbal] signs....It has happened to me as well to grasp the believers' concerns beforehand: 'Father, you understood what my fear was before I could tell you!', they would say to me.

Father Ciprian's growing reputation as a man of outstanding gifts is one of the reasons why the chapel was never empty when he was around. Before the pandemic, he would wait for the faithful sitting on a chair in the choir. The faithful would approach him with deference, kissing his hand, handing in an offering, and kneeling in front of him. The pandemic hasn't stopped people thronging the chapel, but it has imposed some formal adjustments: confessions are now held in a large gazebo, where the faithful are supposed to collect a ticket and wait their turn distanced from one another and wearing a mask, just like they would while queuing at the post office. Some young churchgoer takes the chance to study for the exams, a young professional sits with her laptop, many others socialise or just pray in silence. When mothers with a baby join the queue, they are given precedence to get their children blessed.

Yet most people still throng in front of the sliding door separating the confession room from the rest of the gazebo, kiss icons when they enter the chapel, kiss the priest's hands, and take communion the customary way (that is, using the same spoon for all the faithful). This is because—with the words of Father Nicolae—'if you are a believer, you cannot avoid the body and blood of Christ....Nothing bad can come from communion, because the one who believes is indeed protected'. A similar logic applies to the interaction with sacred objects like icons and with kissing the hands of priests. The latter is customary in Orthodoxy, as it reflects the veneration of the Holy Orders of ordained priests. Nevertheless, the way most believers approached Father Ciprian was not comparable to the everyday respect that churchgoers show to clerics. Appearing before him, they expressed great devotion and often became emotional, both because of their reverence for the monk and the sensitive topics they brought up during the conversation.

On one of the few occasions when I managed to talk to him, after queuing for hours, I experienced first-hand his capacity to make his interlocutor immediately calm. His 'persuasive performance' (Csordas 1997) worked through both verbal and non-verbal means. After clarifying that I was not Orthodox, I told him a personal concern I had at the time. He took my hands into his own, giving an immediate sensation of warmth.<sup>9</sup> He established eye contact and held it throughout our meeting. He asked some personal questions and combined them with theological

references and insights about human psychology, all while maintaining an empathic and listening attitude.

Simina, a woman in her early thirties who had only recently started visiting the chapel, told me that this very same sensation of warmth made her burst into a liberating cry, overwhelmed by the stressful period she was living through. Impressed by the experience of a friend—apparently Ciprian had guessed her occupation without any clue—she went to him seeking advice. While Father Ciprian's answer to her concerns was vague and of little help, it was his non-verbal capacity to convey understanding and care that encouraged her—to the point she became a regular visitor to the chapel. As reported in another ethnography of lived religion in Orthodox, reasons to consult charismatic priests vary substantially: for instance, among revival communities the interaction with spiritual fathers is part of an everyday ethical commitment to pray (Pop 2017). Yet, many of the people coming to Father Ciprian did so either to get a blessing or to ask for advice about important decisions they had to make. Rather than the quest for salvation, everyday believers would set forth mostly practical concerns related to health issues, social stability, or personal relationships—as for young fiancées who asked whether their partner was the right one to marry, or whether they would ever find one at all.

Every single time Father Ciprian left his usual place in the chapel's choir, he was followed by a group of the faithful, mostly elderly women. Women were the majority within the walls of the chapel, and so it was in most of the parishes I visited. One woman, a regular in the chapel, would spend hours in the church or in the courtyard while her daughter would play with other kids outside. She once told me she had been waiting the whole morning in order to get Father Ciprian's blessing for her family. Pointing to her daughter, she described her having been 'blessed from her toes to the top of her hair...because Father Ciprian is full of *har*... You have to know that he was the apprentice of Father Cleopa, the most important *duhovnic* of Romania' (Tateo 2020: 51).

Describing Father Ciprian as 'full of *har*' and visiting him frequently to benefit from his blessing, this woman revealed a quasi-material understanding of grace. As a consequence, grace is treated as transferable through contact. Believers were always thronging around Father Ciprian during the liturgy and weekly religious services. A group of faithful would stand under his stole when he was uttering the final blessing. During this part of the ritual, everybody in the chapel was connected to one another by putting their hands on their neighbour's shoulder. The divine grace which descends through the Holy Spirit on Father Ciprian is thus imagined as propagating by means of physical contact among the participants, who feel protected and delivered from evil.

From a strictly theological point of view, divine grace is not transmitted by simple contact: the Holy Spirit, rather, goes where believers demonstrate devotion through faith and prayer. The same applies to another mediator of divine grace: the icon. Just like priests, icons are mediators between God and the faithful through grace: as soon as they are blessed, they are matter full of *har*. According

to Orthodox theology, what actually makes miracles is the ‘prototype’, that is, the saint or holy figure that is made visible through the icon and not the object itself (Lossky and Ouspensky 1999). Yet, just like there are charismatic figures that stand out among the clerics, there are icons that are more venerated than others. The saints, martyrs, Christ, or the Virgin Mary are all the object of veneration by means of icons. The ethnographic data here presented—together with similar examples of vernacular religiosity among Orthodox Romanians (Bănică 2014: 365)—shed light on a specific understanding of grace as substance-like: *har* is thus experienced as an ‘energy’ (Grigore-Dovlete 2020: 97) infusing charismatic figures and sacred objects. As such, it can be transmitted through contact and is able to protect, heal, and restore the body, the soul, and the psyche.

While Weber was the first to assimilate charisma not only to grace but also to the domain of vital energies at large—juxtaposing it to *mana*, *orenda* and *maga* (Csordas 1997: 134)—Pitt-Rivers associated grace to the Arabic *baraka*, popular in Sufi mysticism. Abrahamic religions would thus share an idea of grace as a blessing with divine origin (*berakhah* in Hebrew), an energy which is also substance-like, as it is conveyed through contact by means of human and non-human mediators (saints and sacred objects, for instance). *Baraka*, *hau*, *har*, *prasad* are all forces based on gifting that imply mediation; yet the exceptionalism that has at times imbued the anthropology of (Pentecostal) Christianity has perhaps impeded understandings of grace and charisma in a more comprehensive fashion: ‘the stress that Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity place on the mediation that allows people to experience some of heaven’s power on earth is what makes them stand out from many other kinds of Christianity’ (Robbins 2009: 62). If grace has a ‘mediative function’ (Pitt-Rivers 1992), this article has cast light on how the failure or success of some mediators—Romanian Orthodox clerics—is weighted and understood in terms of grace and gratuity, contributing to detachment or rapprochement to collective religious practice.

### **Conclusion: Grace Is ‘Anti-geometric’**

Thomas Csordas (1994, 1997) and Simon Coleman (2004) have investigated the workings and sources of charismatic authority among the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement and the Neoprotestant ‘Prosperity Gospel’, respectively. This article adds to the anthropology of charismatic authority by introducing the notion of *har*—a charismatic gift of grace—as it is understood, embodied, and experienced among Orthodox Christians in Bucharest. The values attributed to Orthodox charismatic elders, I argue, shed light on previously unexplored sides of charisma. The characteristics associated with *startsi* in Orthodoxy seem to be antithetical to those attributed to charismatic leaders in Pentecostal born-again movements. The former wait for the faithful in the chapel or in the monastery, have a mild voice and a meek attitude; the latter, instead, are by definition missionary, their attitude is energetic, and they persuade the faithful with a powerful voice.

One further antithesis resides in the employment of (non)verbal means. Csordas defines charisma as based on rhetorical mastery, influenced by his study of the 'Word of God' movement (Csordas 1997: 145). In his deconstruction of charismatic authority, Csordas locates the source of charisma in the leader's persuasive performance. While I am sympathetic to this approach, charismatic action cannot be reduced to rhetorical and verbal performances. Similarly, the Swedish 'Faith ideology' members analysed by Coleman understand grace as a spiritual substance transferred by words, within a wider 'charismatic economy of exchange involving people, words, and objects' (Coleman 2004: 426). Had Orthodox charismatic monastics been better studied within our discipline, we would have understood grace and charisma in wider terms: 'most teachers and preachers talk far too much,' says Kallistos Ware with reference to everyday Orthodox clerics, while 'the starets is distinguished by an austere economy of language' (1974: 302). If some churchgoers are charmed by the alleged capacity to see things happening beforehand and to advise accordingly; others experience the monk's *har* indeed as an energy—or warmth—and find solace in the embodied practices of the monk rather than in his words.

In the context of postsocialist Bucharest—where forms of individualisation of faith coexist with a permanent overlapping of religious and national identity—church attendance, religious belonging and spiritual practice are all subject to the perceived presence (or absence) of divine grace. In his postscript to *Honour and Grace in Anthropology*, Julian Pitt-Rivers finds in the notion of gratuity the 'importance of the derivatives of grace outside the realms of theology' (1992: 216). It is through the looking glass of gratuity that grace makes itself most visible, emerging as an important value that separates charismatic clerics from other monks and priests.

First, it is the principle of gratuity that regulates the distribution of charisma. Even though divine grace descends on every cleric at the moment of his ordination, only some charismatic monks are believed to be endowed with special powers. Charismatic clerics are thus gifted twice, once during their ordination through the descent of the Holy Spirit, and again by the gifts that God grants them. These gifts are translated also as *haruri* (pl. of *har*), so that this polysemic term encompasses notions of grace, charisma, and gift at the same time.

Second, and most importantly, gratuity sets the difference between 'graceless' and 'graceful' priests. At a time when life-cycle rituals are treated as commodities, spiritual guidance is treated as a gift: not just from God to charismatic priests but also from the latter to the faithful. The difference lies thus in (not) asking. Those priests who are criticised for asking high sums of money to perform rituals, or for seeking donations too insistently, do not embody the moral order the way some believers would expect them to. While every churchgoer is aware that monetary contributions are important to make ends meet within the church walls, the problem of asking how much and how often was a significant one for many of the parish priests I met in Bucharest. To the persistent demands of some, one

could compare the gratuitous service offered by Father Ciprian. Even though many faithful would still hand in an offering while kneeling in front of him, charismatic figures like him are described as *duhovnici* who don't ask but rather give—care, suggestions, understanding, energy, and comprehension.

At a closer look, the real obstacle to grace it is not even asking per se but rather asking after calculation. Theoretically, it is forbidden by canon law to set prices for ritual services, as donations should always be free. The malpractice of some priests in this respect pushed the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church to restate that funeral service are not subject to a fee (Holy Synod Decision nr. 13.842, 22 December 2014). There cannot be a fixed price for performing a ritual simply because divine grace 'allows no payment, no explanation, and...no justification. It is not just illogical, but opposed to logic, a counter-principle, unpredictable as the hand of God' (Pitt-Rivers 1992: 231). Maybe it is because of its fleeting nature that grace is better defined apophatically. Standing at the opposite of the 'impersonal arithmetic' typical of monetary exchange (Graeber 2011: 14), it exceeds quantification.

'What's the main difference between Eastern and Western Christians?' I asked Sorin Dumitrescu, a renowned icon painter and expert on early Christian theology, sitting in his workshop in Bucharest. 'You Westerners,' Sorin replied, aware of how essentialist my question might be, 'tend to look for meaning anywhere, to categorise everything, as if there was no grey zone. Your way of thinking is so...geometric'. Let me indulge in this apophatic exercise one last time: grace is anti-geometric.

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## Notes

1. Some of the ethnographic material presented in this article is discussed more thoroughly in the monograph I have dedicated to the swift resurgence of religious infrastructure in postsocialist Romania (Tateo 2020).
2. Theoretically, charismatic authority in Orthodoxy is not limited to male figures: '[the charismatic figure] may be a simple monk, not in holy orders, or a nun, a layman or laywoman' (ibid.).
3. Note that the Russian *starets* is translated in Romanian as *duhovnic*, as the Romanian word *stareț* rather corresponds to the head of monastery/abbot.
4. Let me bring another example of how the popularity of charismatic priests can be mobilized to convert, in this case, people rather than places: Arsenie Boca, one of the most famous charismatic monks of twentieth-century Romania, was sent by Orthodox hierarchs to the Prislop monastery (where his miracle-working grave is currently located) in order to convert to Orthodoxy the local Greek Catholic population after that their religion was officially disbanded by the socialist regime.
5. The Legion of the Archangel Michael was a fascist movement and political party founded in Romania in 1927. The Iron Guard was founded in 1930 as a military wing but later became synonymous with the Legion (Iordachi 2006).
6. I have not included a more recent survey by INSCOP—which shows that the Romanian Orthodox Church is the institution with the highest percentage of trust—because it was conducted together with the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs, which, I believe, constitutes an evident conflict of interests and undermines the scientific validity of the survey.
7. Reasons of space mean I will not present here the point of view of everyday parish priests. The most common answer to those who complain about the prices for main rituals is that churchgoers do not realize the impact of hidden costs such as compensations for assistants and choir or that tax exemptions do not include utilities.
8. Simion Pop (2017: 78) reports a different translation of this gift, 'văzător cu duhul', literally, s/he who sees with her/his spirit.
9. It is common among the faithful to associate the energy of charismatic elders with the sensation of warmth, as for the case of the pilgrims visiting Arsenie Boca's tomb (Grigore-Dovlete 2020: 97–124).

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