

The Levant for Valeriu Anania: A journey of thought and spiritual fulfilment

Abstract: Valeriu Anania, “the hierarch with an American writer’s biography”¹, was a poet, playwright, prose writer, essayist and translator. More than his expulsion from the Faculty of Medicine (the reason why he would never fulfil his dream of becoming a doctor) he was the protagonist of several arrests that culminated in six years in prison. Even though his biography was marked by the Second World War and the difficult years of Communism, his open-mindedness to knowledge never faltered. Moreover, although his life was marked by a series of unfortunate events, Anania was an encyclopedic personality passionate about the acquisition of knowledge, and a traveler of the spirit. In this paper, we will highlight some important milestones that support the above. First of all, we will analyze Anania’s undergraduate thesis, the play *Greul Pământului*, his travels across India and Ethiopia, as well his translations of the Bible and of the *Canon* of Andrew the Cretan.

Keywords: Valeriu Anania, Oriental mysteries, dramaturgy, India, Ethiopia, the Bible, Andrew the Cretan

¹ Ghițulescu, 2000, p. 189.

Anania's theological beginnings: Oriental Mysteries and Christianity

As we know, the Second World War greatly disturbed the course of mankind; in this, Valeriu Anania was no exception. This period saw him studying Medicine and Theology. Expelled from the Faculty of Medicine in Cluj-Napoca in 1946, he would finally finish his studies in Theology, under difficult conditions, in 1948.

In 1948, he arrived in Sibiu from the Pătrunsa Monastery (where he had hidden from the Police), in order to receive treatment for toothache. While in Sibiu, he stayed at the Metropolitan House. His presence was uncovered by professors from the Academy of Theology, who happened to be attending a celebration of N. Berdiaev. The professors invited him to continue his studies: the Rector Nicolae Neaga, together with Bishop Balan, agreed to enrol him. From March until June of 1948, Anania would remain at the Academy House in complete isolation, because the Police investigator in Cluj-Napoca – who had investigated him for the events in 1946 – was named Inspector of the Securitate in Sibiu. In this time, Anania stated that, “I did not even show myself at the gate”². Moreover, there had been a massive series of arrests occurring in May, and Anania spent an entire month sleeping “with his clothes on and holding his bag,” fearing a sudden detention. As such, seven years after beginning his studies in Theology in Bucharest, which he continued in Cluj-Napoca, it was only in June of 1948 that he graduated in Theology, while in Sibiu. His thesis, *Oriental Mysteries and Christianity*, was defended at the Department of Theology and History of Religion, under the guidance of Professor Emilian Vasilescu.

This thesis, presented in 1948, would be published in 2013 featuring a critical edition and foreword penned by Aurel Sasu, by the Eikon Publishing House in Cluj-Napoca. This document is important for emphasizing Anania's natural inclination towards the Levant. According to the publisher, the thesis constitutes “an important chapter of intellectual and political biography”³. In Anania's *Memories*, we can trace the genesis of this text: “since I was in my first year in Bucharest, I began to write a thesis about *Oriental Mysteries and their connection with Christianity*. Theodor M. Popescu praised my work very highly. Ever since, I decided

² Anania, 2008, pp. 167-168.

³ Anania, 2013, p. IX.

to make a complete thesis out of it”⁴. For six years, a young Anania studied every material on the topic; , through the help of some friends, he managed to acquire the newest books on the subject from France, and his draft ran into the thousands of pages. After this, he organized and synthesized the documented material, bringing his own contribution and redaction.

The thesis is not, strictly, a study in Theology. It contains important references to religiosity and cults from Ancient Greece, the Latin Empire, Babylonia, Thrace, Macedonia, Asia, as well as the Persian and Hindu traditions. Indeed, the author speaks about a variety of deities and mythological characters, proving, through a comparative study, that the birth of Christianity represents the natural culmination of more primitive pagan religions.

Anania did not agree with the Protestant rationalisms created in the school of *Die Religionsgeschichtliche Methode*. They considered that Christianity evolved as a development of primitive religions, borrowing various different elements that the Christians later interpreted in a novel fashion. After an incursion into Graeco-Roman philosophy and an account of the Eastern Mysteries – which are presented in a descriptive and analytical manner – he arrives at the main subject of his dissertation, an analysis of the relationship between the Eastern myths and Christianity.

Valeriu Anania begins his demonstration from the historical argument of the documentary existence of Jesus Christ: “Christ has not only a transcendent existence, as the Son of God, born of Him before Eternity, but he also had an earthly existence, recorded by eyewitnesses. His Birth, Death and Resurrection were historical events, precisely situated in time and certified by authentic chronicles”⁵, unlike the tutelary personages of ancient mysteries who had a mythological rather than a historical existence. Anania rely on the Apostle Paul, at the doctrinal, terminological and liturgical level, demonstrating the convergent points, but especially the divergent ones, between the old ancient religions and Christianity. All this is demonstrated in the light of the Christian dogma to which he is faithful, a fact that makes him state about Paul “that his distaste for pagan religions went as far as ignorance. In fact, not ignorance – but a kind of emptying of his spirit of any foreign factor, precisely in order not to confuse the teachings of Gospel with what could have compromised its novelty and sanctity”⁶.

The general tone of the work could be viewed in the light of what

⁴ Anania, 2008, p. 176.

⁵ Anania, 2013, p. 106.

⁶ Anania, 2013, pp. 103-104.

was earlier stated by Mircea Eliade, who believed that “Christianity means the overthrow of all values”⁷. Despite certain similarities with the religions of Antiquity that preceded Christianity, the root causes that generated these similarities are altogether different. The ritual forms of Christianity are based on metaphysical motivations superior to other religious forms. However, the real value these religions should not be denied - o in the spirituality of their time. Therefore, Anania believes that we can speak of a certain similarity of form, while the underlying substance is completely different. In Christianity, the author sees a religious manifestation that implies the fulfilment of Man not only on a sensory and intellectual level, but also transcendently: “The Christian consciousness did not lead to despair. On the contrary, hope was both the moral support and one of the theological virtues that drove away any trace of despair – to distinguish it from the mysteries of Antiquity that, through that believed in *fatum* – which is the source of the tragedy of ancient Man”⁸.

This is an early work of youth, with a pronounced philosophical and mythological character, even though this aspect is approached from the perspective of Christian dogma. It nevertheless reveals theologian Valeriu Anania’s natural inclination towards Oriental mythologies, who, ever since his youth, rejected the isolation inherent in the theoretical space of Christian metaphysics, being more generally open to any form of knowledge.

The Levant in Anania’s dramaturgy

Oriental influences can be found in many of Anania’s plays, but the most relevant from this point of view is *Greul Pământului*, subtitled “Wallachian myth in the making”. This is one of the most important plays written by Anania, for which he received the Romanian Writers’ Union Award in 1982.

The play’s characters are identifiable as belonging to the late 12th and early 13th centuries, with the period of the drama set during the time of the Second Bulgarian Empire, led by the Vlach-Bulgarian Asănești family. The entire action swings between the south-Danube formation and the Byzantine Empire, which was grievously torn by internal power struggles as well as by attacks from outside.

In the play, the two levels of the mythical and the historical are closely interwoven and abundantly seasoned with influences of popular

⁷ Eliade, 2001, pp. 50-51.

⁸ Anania, 2013, p. 116.

heresy or with structures specific to the Church language of the Psalter. Regarding this play, Anania stated in 1984 that it was: “not history [that was] the starting point, but rather the poetic idea, into which history is organically integrated and to which it is called to serve”⁹.

From this statement, we can infer that the writer did not seek to restore historical truths with the meticulousness of an archival researcher, but instead had the creation of a literary work of fiction that bore his mark in his sights. In this perspective, the historical setting was only the crucible wherein the entire unfolding of the play took place. This idea is also supported by the title, which does not make any reference or allusion to the historical setting, but instead chooses to highlight the myth, more precisely the “myth in the making,” to preserve the playwright’s own expression. However, the accuracy of the historical data and the historical context that Anania re-created in the play must also be noted. The action is set in the 12th-13th centuries, with the atmosphere of the Constantinople era being recreated through reference to characters whose historical existence is undeniable: Isaac, the emperor of Byzantium; his son, Caesar Alexius; and the emperor's brother, Alexius Angelos III. Anania depicts a world of moral decay, suffering from a lack of principles, which gives rise to conflicts in the heart of the Byzantine Empire. This decrepitude is put on full display, and added to by showcasing the bankrupt expansionist policy of Angelos and of his son-in-law, Komnenos. This led to the draining of the empire's resources and to a series of stinging defeats. Sensing the difficulty in which the court in Constantinople found itself, the two brothers Petru and Asan launch a revolt against the Basileus, and establish the Vlach-Bulgarian Empire. Angelos blinds his brother and takes his throne, but he is left powerless before the Crusader forces that conquer Constantinople in 1204, with Baldwin of Flanders becoming king over Byzantium. The degrading situation which Byzantium reached is summarized by Ioniță, who states that “Byzantium is no longer worthy of itself”¹⁰.

The Byzantine Empire’s vulnerability, culminating in the occupation of Constantinople by the Crusaders, afforded the possibility of the creation of a Vlach-Bulgarian state south of the Danube. It, moreover, reveals the existence of the south-Danubian branch of the Vlachs, this being the space that Anania chose for the creation of a mythical world, replete with metahistorical myths and rituals that would have constituted the foundation of this civilization. Neither does the play lack the historical characters that marked the short existence of the Vlach-Bulgarian Empire,

⁹ Anania, 2008, p. 78.

¹⁰ Anania, 2010.

such as brothers Petru and Asan or Boril (who, in the play, became a merchant).

From the *Mistica Pământului*, (*Mystique of the Earth*), an article published in the United States in 1969, we can deduce the author's reasons for resorting to the symbolism of the earth. The incident is related to the time spent by the writer in the United States: "the requests that moved me to the point of an earthquake by Romanians between the two great Word War to bring them land from Romania. Soil from a pit, soil from near a church, soil from a garden..."¹¹. Moreover, the writer himself, across the ocean, carried with him a bag of Romanian soil; later, he would declare that he wanted his body to be buried in Romanian soil, "not out of patriotic reasons, but because this is the only one that keeps you warm"¹². This idea is reiterated through the mouth of Borilă, the merchant, in dialogue with the Basileus Isaac: "Here is earth from the land of your roots; bury yourself in it and keep yourself warm"¹³. Therefore, the character created by Anania is meant to be the exponent of an ancestral tradition of the South-Danube Vlachs, and not just a personal flight of fiction.

In the author's view, the earth does not materialize in contradiction with the spirit – as argued, for instance, by Cioran – but in harmony with it. The earth is alive, and represents the link between the two planes. The scene where Ioniță is carried by his mother to his father's grave to light a candle is revealing in this regard. The gesture scandalized the young man, who did not understand the significance of lighting a candle for a dead person, lying in a dead ground. The mother's explanation includes the quintessence of their way of living:

"‘The earth is alive, both for those here and for those beyond... the earth is also alive for the dead, for everything will rise from it.’ ‘But aren't the dead in heaven?’ ‘I am in the sky and I am also on the earth, child, because the earth and the sky always embrace and penetrate one another, and one cannot be without the other’ ‘Mother, where is the heart of the earth?’ ‘Place your ear on this grave, and listen...’ And I put my ear to the ground, and I heard the heart of the earth beating, as I knew my mother's heart was beating when I bent my head on her chest”¹⁴.

¹¹ Anania, 2008, p. 46.

¹² Anania, Sasu, 2009, pp. 107-108.

¹³ Anania, 2010, p. 390.

¹⁴ Anania, 2010, p. 405.

This perspective is not new; it also appears in the work of Mircea Eliade, who speaks about the binomial *Homo-Humus*, “which should not be understood that Man is dust because he is mortal, but that Man could be alive because he derives from the earth, because he was born from it and will return to the *Terra Mater*”¹⁵. In an interview with S. N. Nicolaescu, Anania stated that *Greul Pământului* is “a myth of the earth, the myth of the earth that becomes the sky, in the sense that it is transfigured and realizes what Blaga rightly called ‘the transcendent that descends’”¹⁶.

The etymological analysis of the name of the character of Ioniță Caloian could well answer the question: “Why did Valeriu Anania choose this period of history to stage a myth of the earth?” The historical character is recorded in scholarly treatises under the name of Ioniță the Beautiful or the Good (Caloian), (cf. Greek, καλός – beautiful, good; Ιάnnης - John), the leader of the Vlach-Bulgarian Empire between 1197 and 1207. At the same time, the tradition of the *caloian*, “a small statue imitating a man, crafted by girls or (young) wives in times of drought, from earth or clay, and buried by them accompanied by lamentations invoking the rain, is well-documented in communities both south and north of the river Danube. The term has a number of variants, such as *caluian*, *caluian*, *calian*, *scaloian*, *coloian*, etc. It is likely either related to the skv (*kalu*) or *clay* (the *caloian* being made from this material) and, perhaps, even represents a subordinate adjective: *kalenu*, “of clay”¹⁷. The phonetic overlap of the two etymons, which effectively have different roots (that themselves denote different entities) in the Romanian language is probably a stylistic decision consciously chosen by Anania to transpose the historical character of Ioniță the Beautiful into a “Wallachian myth in the making,” after having already transformed myth into history in *Steaua Zimbrului*.

From the United States to India and Ethiopia

In addition to his passion for writing, Anania was a tireless traveller, even if such travels were often forced on him. Between 1968 and 1974, Valeriu Anania received the right of residence in the United States, where he performed several church functions. As an American resident, on January 1st, 1969 he boarded an Air India aircraft bound for Bombay, and arrived in India before the delegation of the Romanian Patriarchate led by Patriarch Justinian. The Romanian delegation was comprised of the

¹⁵ Eliade, 1993, p. 149.

¹⁶ *Cultura*, 1998, p. 32.

¹⁷ *Dicționarul limbii române*, 1949, p. 53.

Patriarch, Metropolitan Bishops Nicolae Mladin of Transylvania and Nicolae Corneanu of Banat, and Assistant Bishop Antim Nica. As translator for the Romanian delegation, he met Paul Verghese near the Seminary of Kottayam, where the delegation of the Patriarchate was accommodated. Here, the Catholicos Patriarch Augen I emphasized that this was the first visit of an Orthodox Church to be represented by its head since the Synod of Chalcedon (451). Indeed, as Anania himself recounted, this visit was perceived “as an extraordinary event”¹⁸.

While in the subcontinent, Valeriu Anania became fascinated with the Indian world. Regarding the province of Kerala, Anania wrote: “I saw the clean cities with well-kept streets, men in simple white suits [...]; elegant women in their colourful costumes; children in a disciplined frolic; students going to university or leaving classes in the same decent manner; boys always walking on one sidewalk and girls, without exception, on the other. Kerala is the only Indian state where more than 90% of the citizens are literate, largely due to the schools and institutions of higher education created by the Christian Churches, in particular the Catholic Church. For maintenance, all these cultural settlements (including the Orthodox Seminary of Koattayam) were endowed with rubber tree plantations that would bring them a sufficient income with minimum effort”¹⁹.

On January 11th, 1969, the delegation visited the city of Kothamangalam, the metropolitan centre of the Church in Malabar, where they were welcomed by a crowd of 50,000 people. At an ecclesiastical level, Anania bore witness to a highly important historical moment for ecumenical dialogue between the churches. It was here he that met the Paul Verghese, who “recognized that the Syriac translation of the main Chalcedonian formulation, which states that the two natures of Jesus Christ, Divine and human, function unmixed and unchanged, undivided and unseparated, was ambiguous – hence the flawed interpretation”²⁰.

Ethiopia

Anania’s visit to Ethiopia began on January 15th at Addis-Ababa Airport, and concluded on January 24th. This visit was the expression of good relations between the Romanian and Ethiopian Churches, and was also a response to the visit Haile Selassie had made to Romania in 1964.

On the same day as their arrival, they held discussions with

¹⁸ Anania, 2008, p. 450

¹⁹ Anania, 2008, pp. 450-451.

²⁰ Anania, 2008, p. 451.

members of the Ethiopian Synod in order to bring the two Churches closer together. On this, Anania notes: “The hosts declared themselves open to dialogue, saying that, like their colleagues from India, the main problem of the non-Chalcedonians towards the Chalcedonians lay in the difference of translation and interpretation of the diplophysite formula. This was the core of our visit to Ethiopia. The Emperor constructed us a sightseeing schedule as great as his generosity and possibilities”²¹.

Literature and travels as initiations for his most important work – the translation of the Bible

Attempting to tackle the sacred text of Christianity represented a turning point for the writer. He confessed that, “since I started working on the Holy Scriptures, my literary work stopped being of interest to me”²², believing that the strength gained over the six decades he devoted himself to literature was merely a preamble to his final great project. Associating the words of Nicolae Iorga, who said that the Bible was “the book that can replace an entire literature”²³, with the writer's assertion above, we are not exaggerating in claiming that it is only the translation of the Book that can give the true measure of the writer Valeriu Anania. In his endeavour, he refused to limit himself to the translation, or to solely bringing the sacred text up to date, as his predecessors had done. Here, we can review the similar profile (both theologian and writer) of Gala Galaction, who instead proposed modernising the text into the modern Romanian language, supplemented by many enlightening pieces of information. Anania instead claimed that he “opted for a literal (not literary) version of the Bible; that is, one on which exegesis (a very rigorous control of terms employed) can be carried out, asking the writer to lend the text the transparency of a Byzantine icon. If the icon differs from the painting, it is due to the fact that the Face shines through the faces”²⁴.

The initiative to translate the Bible belonged to Dumitru Fecioru, who proposed a tandem translation to Anania being convinced that “not only the Church, but also Romanian culture is in need of a new translation. [...] It is a duty of conscience.” And Fecioru said to Anania: “And I thought that only the two of us could do it; I as a Hellenist, and your Holiness as an expert in the Romanian language. You hold Arghezi's

²¹ Anania, 2008, p. 452

²² *Sfânta Scriptură în limba română*, 1994, p. 100.

²³ Iorga, 1999, p. 32.

²⁴ *Sfânta Scriptură în limba română*, 1994, p. 97.

certificate; and that is no small thing”²⁵. The project did not ultimately materialize owing to Dumitru Fecioru’s unexpected death, whereupon the entire responsibility fell on Anania’s shoulders.

In *The Clarifying Word on Holy Scripture* (*Cuvântul lămuritor asupra Sfintei Scripturi*), the translator expresses the form in which he viewed the assumption of the relationship between theology and philology in his approach:

“With Adamic man, the Creator spoke in one language; the man did not understand the speech of the angels; and, later, Moses remembered that it was him, the stammerer, that God was sending to speak His words to the people: ‘How will I do it, Lord, since I am slow of speech and tongue?’ ‘You are, indeed; but Aaron, your brother, is not. I will tell you; you will tell him; he will tell the people; and, thus, you will be to him what I am to you. ‘The Word had become words. Theology had become philology”²⁶.

In the aforementioned interview, Anania stressed:

“I want to underline the fact that the writer has in mind his literary goal, being primarily interested in the beauty of his language, while the Biblical translator is obliged to carefully weigh the consequences of each word, because it is meant to become an act of faith. It is a great responsibility”²⁷.

Continuing the tradition inaugurated in the Romanian space in 1688, Valeriu Anania did not limit himself to merely bringing the sacred text up to date, according to the *Septuagint*, but succeeded in creating a unique work in the Romanian language through his numerous footnotes and the rich introductions afforded to each chapter. Anania attempted a fair balance between philological norms and theological canons. The author's introductions to each book of the Bible contain numerous references to literary texts. The role of these references is none other than to shed further light upon the text, which by itself can often seem outdated. The reason why this led Anania to turn to the *Septuagint* is “the big break that occurred in 1936” through the translation co-authored by Gala Galaction, Vasile Radu and Nicodim Munteanu, who turned to the Masoretic

²⁵ Anania, 2008, p. 658.

²⁶ *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, 2001, p. 7.

²⁷ *Sfânta Scriptură în limba română*, p. 95.

text. For his part, Valeriu Anania pleads for a return to the furthest original sources, i.e., for a translation according to the *Septuagint*. However, “this does not mean that the Hebrew Version – says the translator – is to be despised or ignored; on the contrary, a correct redaction of the Biblical text is inconceivable without its consultation and use, both for highlighting some nuances of language, and in particular for the transcription of Hebrew proper names, both patronymic and toponymic...”²⁸.

The translator indeed made extensive use of several versions of the Scriptures, among them *La Bible de Jérusalem*, *La Bible* traduite par Emile Osty, the English-language Bible in its King James, Revised Standard and Today’s English versions, or the *Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible*. The footnotes, moreover, contain many references to other works offering more in-depth explanations of the text itself.

Being aware of the difficulties and requirements of producing a new version of a translation, Anania began with the translation of the New Testament because, on the one hand, it did not entail so many difficulties, and on the other, because he was afraid that he would die soon thereafter. (He began translating the Bible at the age of 69). The translator published fragments of it, in order to gauge its reception by the public and also to be able to modify certain controversial terms, especially in the Old Testament “where it is not only a review, but also a restauration”²⁹.

Towards the close of *The Clarifying Word on Holy Scripture*, the author provides readers with the key in which he would like his translation to be read: “True reading and a correct interpretation of the Bible can only be done through the relationship between text and context; that is, by reading and conceptualizing the text (verse) according to what was said before and after it, as well as according to its connections with very distant yet similar texts. The part can never be separated from the whole. If, for example, a scholar today claimed that his work can only be understood if it is read in its entirety, how much more – incomparably more – so is the Bible or Holy Scripture!”³⁰.

The Canon of St Andrew the Cretan

Following his translation of the Bible, which represented the confirmation of Anania's vocation as a translator, the author did not deny himself, and offered those readers that love religious texts a masterpiece

²⁸ *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, 2001, p. 11.

²⁹ *Sfânta Scriptură în limba română*, p. 93.

³⁰ *Noul Testament*, 1993, p. 12.

of Byzantine hymnography, composed by Andrew the Cretan. The Canon of Andrew the Cretan, with an important liturgical significance in the Orthodox rite has, according to the translator, a special importance for three reasons: “its depth of thought, its beauty of expression and the great number of *troparions* (211 in total).”³¹

Just as he had done with the translation of the Scripture, Valeriu Anania did not limit himself to merely correcting the exiting text, instead providing additional notes on the side of the text; this time, the references only point to passages from the Bible that could better clarify or deepen certain meanings. Unlike his work on the Bible, here Anania limited himself to the biblical space only, withholding references to parallels or associations found in secular literature.

Conclusions

Attracted to science in his youth, when he wanted to become *a priest and doctor*, Valeriu Anania managed to dedicate himself to literature throughout his life, in no small part because writing was part of his being. His many arrests and years in prison were mere delays; they did not stop him from putting down on paper what he thought and felt. An encyclopaedic spirit, Anania refused to settle with only the field of theology, forging deep friendships with famous writers such as Arghezi or Blaga. In this way, he forged bridges between theology, the arts and the sciences.

These experiences and his travels, which we have analysed in this paper, served to shape his understanding of faith and the world under the sign of dialogue between different cultures and domains. Many of them were, as Anania himself testifies, *a preparation for the translation of the Bible*, which he endowed with a rich critical apparatus consisting of introductions and explanatory notes in which notions from literature, art, science and theology can all be found. Moreover, Anania was not only an apostle of the spirit, because he agreed “that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians, 3:6). He was also a man of real interaction, concerned with Otherness, with the real existence of his neighbour. Through this attitude, he proved not only his tolerance, but also a great desire to understand the Other. This explains his special interest for the Oriental cultures and civilizations that have fascinated him ever since his youth.

³¹ Sf. Andrei Cretanul, 2004, p. 6.

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