

A word about somebody I met in Bulgaria (from the primacy of matter over spirituality to the primacy of spirituality over matter)

Abstract

Postponed by almost a decade, this article focuses on Mr. Olivier Peregrino, a French man I met in the Balkans, and whose conversion to Catholicism impressed me. The following lines also address certain facts concerning atheism, as well as spirituality.

Keywords: Olivier Peregrino, Balkans, Communism, Spirituality, Conversion

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Opinion

The kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give (Mt 10,10).

On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He said, "Who are you, sir?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what to do" (Acts, 9,3-6).



Built in the 10th century and massively restored in the second half of the 15th century, the Monastery of Saint Ivan of Rila helped the Bulgarian culture (and language) to survive the half millennium of Muslim oppression. (Photo taken by the Author)

Roaming across the Balkans

This article has been postponed by almost a decade, for reasons that are beside the point. The time has come to get on with the task at hand and some words definitely need to be said about somebody I met in Bulgaria in the autumn of 2009. I was in the second half of my forties and decided to roam across the Balkans according to no established plan; a chain of events hard to explain led me to Rila, Bulgaria's most

famous monastery, where I stayed a couple of days as a guest. After one of the ceremonies I had the opportunity to attend – during which poetry, music and visual arts praised the Creator in perfect Bizantine unity –, a man in the middle of his thirties visibly wanted to speak to me. And so he did. Olivier was his name and French his nationality, notwithstanding a Bulgarian background. His Bulgarian grandfather was still alive, and that was one of the reasons why he was there, at that time, in that ex-communist country. Devoted both to communism and to atheism (which is its corollary), Olivier's parents did their best to keep him away from religion. During three decades or so, they were extremely successful in convincing their child that mater was the only thing that really mattered, and that the only immaterial being to be worship was the State – almighty entity revealed by Danton, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Guevara, Pol Pot and other "prophets" of the Revolution. In their bringing about the "socialist paradise", what they really did was to establish hell on earth, provoking the death of more than 150 million people; in the eastern side of the Iron Curtain alone, communism claimed the lives of no less than one million people – never forgetting that "*Communism is fascism, without fascism's ability to make the trains run on time*"¹.



"Keep your face always toward the sunshine, and shadows will never fall behind you" (Walt Whitman).

Photo taken by the Author in the outskirts of Skopje, Macedonia

Olivier was the one who advised me to go to Albania, arguing that a trip through the Balkans would not be complete without visiting

¹Robert Kaplan. *Balkan Ghosts*, Nova York, Picador, 2005, p. 76; see also Stéphane Courtois et alii. *Le Livre noir du communisme*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1997, p. 15 et passim.

that tiny strip of land facing South Italy. In Albania, the inexistence of God was stated by the very Communist Constitution, and Albania's religion (if I may put it that way) became "Albanianism". In the words of the Albanian poet and writer Lasgush Poradeci (1899 - 1987), "Nuk ka Zeus, as nuk ka zot, / Ferr, Lugat t'imagjinuar, / po ka popull të paditur, / popull q'ende s'është zgjuar." ("There is no Zeus, there is no Lord / No Hell, no Monsters of the Imagination / But instead a people who has not seen the light of day / And still is not yet awakened").² Free from its 47 years of communist rule since 1992, Albania, just like Olivier said to me, is definitely a place where people "will go out of their way to help you".³



Centre of Tirana (Albania) (Photo taken by the Author)

Olivier's conversion

Due to the spiritual blockade imposed by Olivier's parents, the very name *God* remained unknown to him until he attained maturity and became full grown. One day, leafing through a dictionary, he came across the word "God". Astonished by the attributes of "creator" and "ruler" of the world,⁴ Olivier "fell of his horse" (Acts 9,4) and, following the example of the Apostle of the Gentiles did two millennia before him, he decided, from that moment on, to live according to the purposes of God. Self-taught, he learnt the Catholic teaching, along with Latin, Greek, English and some other languages. In the middle of this process of changes, he received the Sacrament of Baptism and, afterwards, his First Holy Communion.



Olivier Peregrino at the time we met, at the Monastery of Saint Ivan of Rila (Photo taken by the Author)

Ties with the past were sharply broken; not only did Olivier leave his home in France, but he also decided not to use his family name anymore. A new man was born: Olivier *Peregrino* – a name that could

²Quoted by Mirela Bogdani et alii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irreligion_in_Albania.

³John Lee et alii. *Europe on a Shoestring*, Victoria/Oakland/London, Lonely Planet, 2005, p. 47.

⁴See, for instance, Jane Bradbury et alii. *The Collins-Cobuild English Dictionary*, London, HarperCollins, 1995, p. 723.

not be more appropriated, given that he became a pilgrim and his first pilgrimage was to the shrine of Saint James Apostle, in Spain (*Santiago de Compostela*), where people called him *El Peregrino* (*The Pilgrim*).⁵ In the Old World, it would be hard to find a sacred place where Olivier Peregrino has not been at least once, *always travelling by foot*. In Mount Athos alone, notwithstanding the formalities to enter, he has been many times. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux's Sanctuary and the Grotto of Lourdes are places he knows better than the back of his hand. By the time we met, he had just visited the shrines e seen with his own eyes the relics of Saint Paraskeva of the Balkans, who lived between the 10th and 11th centuries.⁶ Veneration of saints has been a widespread practice in Eastern as well as in Western Christianity, since at least the 4th century, a time when the Church triumphed over ancient paganism. Referring to the uncountable saint martyrs of Christendom in general, Saint Gregor Nazianzus (329-390) – who, together with Saint Basil of Caesarea (329/330-379) and his brother Saint Gregor of Nyssa (335-395), forms the triad of the Great Cappadocian Fathers⁷ –, puts that "The bodies of such martyrs have the same power as their souls, whether when we touch them, or whether when we revere them".⁸



Lisieux (France) (Photo taken by the Author)

⁵About the importance of medieval peregrinations for the European culture as a whole, see, for instance, Santiago Alcolea. *La catedral de Santiago*, Madrid, Plus-Ultra, 1958, p. 7 et passim; and Javier Iturbide Díaz et alii. *Cuando las cosas hablan: la historia contada por cincuenta objetos de Navarra*, Pamplona, Gobierno de Navarra, 2015, p. 238 et passim.

⁶"She was born in the town of Epivates (close to today's Istanbul) on the shore of the Sea of Marmara. She was half Serbian and half Greek. (...) Legend says that when she was a child, Paraskeva heard in a church the Lord's words: 'Whoever wants to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me' (Mark 8,34). These words would determine her to give her rich clothes away to the poor and flee to Constantinople. Her parents, who did not support her decision to follow an ascetic, religious life, looked for her in various cities. Paraskeva fled to Chalcedon, and afterwards lived at the church of the Most Holy Theotokos in Heraclea Pontica. She lived an austere life, experiencing visions of the Virgin Mary. Her voyages took her to Jerusalem, wishing to spend the rest of her life there. After seeing Jerusalem, she settled in convent in the river Jordanian desert. When she was 25, an angel appeared, telling her to return to homeland. She returned to Constantinople, and then when she was 25, lived in the village of Kallikrateia, in the church of the Holy Apostles. She died at the age of 27" (Nicholas Valentine Riasanovsky et alii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parascheva_of_the_Balkans).

⁷"The Cappadocians advanced the development of early Christian theology, for example the doctrine of the Trinity, and are highly respected as saints in both Western and Eastern churches. (...) The fathers set out to demonstrate that Christians could hold their own in conversations with learned Greek-speaking intellectuals and that Christian faith, while it was against many of the ideas of Plato and Aristotle (and other Greek philosophers), was an almost scientific and distinctive movement with the healing of the soul of man and his union with God at its centre (...). They made major contributions to the definition of the Trinity finalized at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 and the final version of the Nicene Creed, finalised there" (Johannes Quasten et alii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cappadocian_Fathers).

⁸Quoted by Pierre André Sigal. *Les marcheurs de Dieu. Pèlerinages et pèlerins au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1974, p. 25.

Like St Francis of Assisi...

Like St Francis of Assisi, the man I met in the Balkans abdicated all the material privileges money could buy; money itself means little or nothing to him. Olivier and I kept in touch until 2016 or so, when he decided to renounce to modern technology, what obviously included internet, telephone and so on. “Man is a social being”, say the philosophers in unison since, at least, the times of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.).⁹ Hermit by his own choice, Olivier Peregrino is far from being “lonely”; having decided to store the kind of treasures “that moths and decay cannot destroy, neither thieves steal” (Mt 6,19-21), he is in a better company than most of us.



Drawing made by the Author, after Giotto's Saint Francis

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

⁹See, for instance, Aristotle. *Politics*, 1253a; 1278b.