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Foolishness-for-Christ in Byzantine Spirituality and the Russian Tradition. Historical-Theological Contextualization and Comparative Conceptualization

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Abstract

Foolishness-for-Christ is a rare, unconventional, challenging and often controversial ascetic practice in Orthodox spirituality. Emerged in the monastic space as an extreme way of acquiring humility, it has transmuted into the urban world, ostentatiously and provocatively, but at the same time humbly and providentially, promoting its role of awakening consciences and calling to a rediscovery of Christian dignity transfigured by the martyr condition. The present study aims to trace the specificity of this rare and eccentric necessity within the Byzantine spirituality in which it emerged and developed, but also in the Russian tradition in which it manifested itself as a true phenomenon. The concepts of *salós* and *yurodivy* will be comparatively analyzed, which designate in the two spiritual traditions these devotees of the "holy foolery", the comparative study focusing not only on the etymological meaning but also on the specific meaning of each Christian space analyzed and especially on the essence of this need.

Keywords

foolishness-for-Christ, desacralized societies, vocation, martyr condition, provocateur, *salós*, *yurodivy*

I. Introduction

Foolishness-for-Christ is a particular need in the Orthodox spirituality with a special and providential character, in which the metanoic dimension

is combined with the ecclesial and social vocation. Having similarities as a form of expression and purpose with the prophetic and symbolic dimension of some prophets of the Old Testament¹, based textually but also theologically on the meaning of the holy foolery of which St. Paul spoke, opposing it to the false human wisdom that was autonomizing itself in relation to God², *foolishness-for-Christ* developed as a vocation with a catharsis function in desacralized societies that no longer preserved the confessing condition and the holy fervour of early Christianity.

The *foolishness-for-Christ* first manifested itself in the monastic space, with the aim of acquiring humility through a profound act of self-assumption of extreme humility, by simulating a lack of reason, a demonic state or impassivity, all in order to extinguish the inner ego, to attract the scorn of others and to attract the grace of God through the profound humility thus gained, the first case known in the hagiography being that of St. Isidora³ of Tabenisi⁴ Egypt.

¹ By their "foolish" behavior, by their seemingly shameful but symbolic and prophetic deeds, some prophets have been considered as forerunners of fools for Christ; By the Lord's command, the prophet Isaiah will walk naked and barefoot, to foretell the servants that will be brought by the king of Assyria from Egypt and Ethiopia (cf: Isaiah 20, 2-4); The prophet Ezekiel the prophet was commanded by God to imagine the coming siege of Jerusalem, symbolically standing 390 days on the left side (picturing the iniquities of the house of Israel) and then another 40 days on the right side (picturing the transgressions of the house of Judah (Ezekiel ch. 4); to the prophet Osee (Hosea), who, also at the Lord's command, ends up marrying a harlot, to symbolize the betrayal that the people of Israel had committed against the true God (see: Osee, ch. 1 and 2).

² "If any man thinketh that he is wise in this world, let him be foolish that he may be wise" (I Corinthians 3, 18). The true New Testament basis for foolishness for Christ is the very humble condition of the apostles who foole themselves "as the refuse of the world" (I Corinthians 4, 13) in order to win others for the Kingdom of God.

³ The name appears in the expanded version of the *Lausiac History*; see PG 34, 1101-1107, apud Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Terapeutica bolilor mintale. Experiența creștinismului răsăritean al primelor veacuri*, transl. Marinela Bojin, Editura Sofia, București, 2008, p. 180; PALADIE, *Istoria lausiacă (Lavsiaconul)*, transl. Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2007, pp.75-77; Her feast is on May 1, and in the *Lives of the Saints*, her life is described on May 10; see: *Viețile Sfinților pe luna mai*, Ediția a II-a, Editura Mănăstirii Sihăstria, 2005.

⁴ Tabenisi is the first public monastery founded by St. Pachomius between 320-325. Next to it, St. Pahomies sister Mary founded a convent of nuns. The monasteries at Tabenisi (Egypt) were a true spiritual oasis and the monks and nuns here were renowned for their harsh asceticism as well as for the pure and holy life they led.

From the confined space of the wilderness, the *foolishness-for-Christ* was transmuted into the world, taking on a profound ecclesial and social vocation, manifesting itself in a deliberately provocative and scandalous way, in an ambivalence of manifestations that foole it very difficult to understand and especially to assimilate both by the ecclesiastical world that preached harmony and good order, but also by the secular structures that strove to preserve the so-called “social peace”.

In Byzantine spirituality, the foolishness-for-Christ will have two important stages, the Syrian (Emessa Syria, 6th century), represented by St. Symeon the Fool for Christ⁵, and the Constantinopolitan (Constantinople, 10th century), represented in particular by St. Andrew Salos⁶ and St. Basil the Younger⁷. From Byzantine spirituality, *the foolishness-for-Christ* will pass into the Russian tradition, where it will become a real phenomenon. Here it developed in three main stages: the early phase, of its appearance in the monastic area of Pecerska Kiev, through the Venerable Isachy of Pecerska or St. Procopius of Ustiug, the medieval, when in Novgorod and Moscow it experienced a particular development, through St. Mikhail Klopsko, St. Nicholas Salos or St. Basil Blazhenii, and that of Russian modernity, with St. Xenia of St. Petersburg or St. Theophil of Kitaev,

⁵ For the life of St. Simeon the Fool for Christ see: LEONTIUS DE NEAPOLIS, *Vie de Symeon le fou et vie de Jean de Chypre*, Édition commentée par A.J. Festugiere en collaboration avec Lennart Ryden, Paris, 1974 (critical edition); Derek KRUEGER, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, London, 1996; in Romanian see: *Viețile sfinților pe luna iulie*, Ediția a III-a, Editura Mănăstirea Sihăstria, 2006, pp. 426-457.

⁶ For the life of St. Andrew the Fool for Christ see: NICHIFOR, *The Life of St. Andrew Salos*, PG 111, 628C-888D; J. GROSDIDIER DE MATONS, “Les thèmes d édification dans la Vie d' André Salos”, in: *Travaux et Mémoires*, IV, Paris, 1970; in Romanian: *Viața Sfântului Andrei cel nebun pentru Hristos*, transl. Ștefan Nuțescu, Editura Evanghelistos, București, 2002; also, a valuable study regarding the old manuscripts of the Life of St. Andrew Salos in Romanian: Cătălina VELCULESCU, *Nebuni întru Hristos, Viața Sfântului Andrei Salos în vechile manuscrise și tipărituri românești*, Editura Paideia, Bucharest, 2007.

⁷ See: *Viața Sf. Vasile cel Nou*, transl. Laura Enache, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2020; the volume has a valuable introductory study by Byzantinologist Petre Guran on the meaning of foolishness for Christ in Byzantium, and the framing of St. Basil the Younger in this category.

when this phenomenon was isolated with in Russian society⁸. Also knowing an Athonite phase within the so-called “popular hesychasm” through Saint Maximus of Cavesokalyvites⁹ or Saint Sava of Vatopedi¹⁰, *foolishness-for-Christ* manifested itself (admittedly, with less intensity and representativeness) in the contemporary Greek space, through Tarso or Steliana (20th century)¹¹, in the Georgian one, through St. Gavril the Georgian (XX century)¹², and in the Romanian spirituality through the “Cuviosul” Gherontie the fool for Christ (XX-XXI century)¹³.

In order to understand this phenomenon and its place in Orthodox spirituality, it is imperative to know its specifics, the causes of its emergence and the way it manifests itself, especially in Byzantine spirituality where it emerged and developed and in the Russian tradition where it has become a true social and ecclesial phenomenon. Starting from the premise, certified by aghiographical and theological research, that authentic foolishness-for-Christ has always been a vocation and not an arbitrary choice of ascetic practice, that it arose and manifested itself as a reaction to the desacralization of formal Christian society and to the formalism and relativism manifested in ecclesial life, it is essential to know the historical-theological context

⁸ Russian hagiography has neither the systematization nor the rigor of the Byzantine; see: Г. П. ФЕДДОВ, *Святые Древней Руси*, сост., примеч., вступ. ст.: С. С. Бычков, Мартис SAM & SAM, Москва, 2000, especially chapter 13 entitled “Юродивые” (Foolishness for Christ); also for the characteristics of Russian spirituality conducive to the development of *foolishness-for-Christ* see: George P. FEDOTOV, *The Russian Religious Mind*, Harper Brothers, New York, 1960. As an important source on the lives of the saints who were fools for Christ in general and for those of the Russian tradition in particular, see: † Lazarus PUHALO (coord.), *God's fools. The lives of the holy “Fools for Christ”*, transl. † Varlaam Novakshonoff, Sinaxis Press (The Canadian Orthodox publishing house), Dewdney, Canada, 2017.

⁹ *Sfântul Maxim Arzătorul de colibe, isihast și văzător cu duhul din Sfântul Munte*, transl. diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2004.

¹⁰ Sf. FILOTHEI KOKKINOS, *Viața Sfântului Sava Vatopedinul cel nebun pentru Hristos*, transl. Ierochim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Editura Evanghелиsmos, București, 2011.

¹¹ For the lives of the fools for Christ in contemporary Greek see the study: Νεκτάριος Ἀντρά, *Δογμα και ηθος στους βίους των δια χριστον σαλων*, Θεσσαλονικη, Θεσσαλονικη, 2010.

¹² Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Sfântul Gavriil Georgianul cel nebun pentru Hristos*, transl. Marinela Bojin, Editura Sofia, București, 2016.

¹³ Dorin OPRÎȘ, Monica OPRÎȘ (eds.), *Cuviosul Gherontie cel nebun pentru Hristos*, Editura Episcopiei Devei și Hunedoarei, vol.1-6, Deva, 2019-2023.

both in the Byzantine and Russian space, which led to the work of the fool for Christ. It is also necessary to analyze the terminology that has permanently accompanied the aghiography of the Fools for Christ as well as a comparative conceptualization between the two spaces of spiritual manifestation.

II. Terminology and meaning. *Salós* and *yurodivy*

Byzantine Hagiography created a specific terminology for naming the fool for Christ. Even though it also used biblical concepts and for a while we find them used interchangeably with the hagiographical ones, it is nevertheless the term *salós* (σαλός) that generically defines foolishness-for-Christ. Speaking of the folly of the Cross and of preaching, the Apostle Paul uses the term *morós* (μωρός), but he connects it with the expression *δια Χριστόν* so that *moria* receives a much deeper meaning, of witnessing to Christ Crucified and Risen, even if this witness is counted as folly in the eyes of the world and becomes *μωροί διά Χριστόν* (*foolishness for Christ*)¹⁴. *Biblioteca hagiografica graeca*, referring to avva Silvanus¹⁵, uses both terms but with the same pejorative meaning. In the language specific to Byzantine hagiography, however, *morós* will become *salós* and *moria* will become *salía*, as designating foolishness-for-Christ with a positive meaning, of sanctifying need, of one's own person and of those around.

Hagiographical research on the etymology of the terminology of "holy foolery" mostly records a Syriac origin of *salós*, with two main aspects in mind: the Syriac translation of Epistle 1 to the Corinthians uses the term *sakla* as a translation for the Greek *morós*-u; then the etymology of Syriac origin would be justified historically and theologically by the fact that the first time *foolishness-for-Christ* first manifested itself in its provocative

¹⁴ *Novum Testamente Graece*, Nestle-Aland, Edited by Barbara and Kurt Aland, 28 Revised Edition, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012, p. 524: "Ἡμεῖς μωροί διά Χριστόν" ("we are fools for Christ").

¹⁵ F. HALKIN (ed.), *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique*, in: coll. *Biblioteca hagiografica graeca*, Bruxelles, 1957, apud Serghei A. IVANOV, *Sfinții nebuni pentru Hristos, o perspectivă istorică*, transl. Dorin Garofeanu, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2019, pp. 39-40.

and public form in the Syriac parts of the empire. P. Hauptmann, who also connects the term *salós* with the Syriac term *sakla*, which translates the old biblical *morós*¹⁶, is on the same line. Tomáš Špidlík also points out a particular linguistic nuance by mentioning that the term *sàlos* with different accent designated a restless person (suggesting the connection between the term and the person described)¹⁷. Sergey Ivanov brings to attention the different views of scholars on the etymology of *salós* but also emphasizes the likelihood of the Syriac origin of the word¹⁸. Against the etymology of the Syriac *sakla* is J. Grosdidier de Matons, who points out that the Greek texts about the Egyptian wilderness unbelievers actually transliterate the Greek term and do not use the Coptic one¹⁹, and L. van Rompay points out that the Syriac version of the *Life of St. Symeon the Fool for Christ* renders the Greek term and not the supposed Syriac etymological root²⁰, which is also noted by Derek Krueger who also builds up a rather complex picture of possible etymologies²¹. Incidentally, Derek Krueger says that at the end of the Hellenistic period, still *salós* or *salía*, did not clearly designate “holy foolery”, this term later becoming specifically established in Hagiography and Theology²². Beyond these linguistic observations, which are necessary, from a theological point of view, it is worth mentioning the spiritual dimension of the term and its profound biblically based meaning, which Hristou Stamouli develops, considering St. Paul the Apostle as the

¹⁶ P. HAUPTMANN, *Die Narren un Christi Willen in der Ostkirche*, apud S. IVANOV, *Sfinții nebuni pentru Hristos...*, p. 37.

¹⁷ Tomáš ŠPIDLÍK, “Fous pour le Christ. En Orient”, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité. Ascétique et mystique. Doctrine et histoire* Paris, 5 (1964), c. 753.

¹⁸ S. IVANOV, *Sfinții nebuni pentru Hristos...*, pp. 36-42.

¹⁹ J. GROSDIDIER DE MATONS, “Les thèmes d’édification dans la Vie d’André Salos”, p. 279.

²⁰ L. VAN ROMPAY, “Life of Symeon Salos”, in: A. SCHOORS and P. VAN DEUN (eds.), *First Soundings, Philohistor; Miscellanea in Honorem C. Laga Septuagenarii*, Louvain, 1994, p. 396.

²¹ Derek KRUEGER, *Symeon the Holy Fool...*, p. 54; Derek Krueger notes that *Peshitta* uses „shatayya” in 1 Corinthians 4, 10 („We are fools for Christ’s sake”), although the version used by Ishodad of Merv in his ninth-century commentary used “sakla” here.

²² See the chapter “The Word Salos and Holy Folly” at: Derek KRUEGER, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius’s Life and the Late Antique City*, University of California Press, 1996.

true father of the concept of *salós*, even if he does not use it textually, and Nectarios Antra emphasizes the significance of the mission of the fool for Christ to awaken consciences, pointing out that in Greek dictionaries the term *σαλός* comes from the verb *σαλεύω* which means to move, to shake, to disturb²³.

It was Leontius of Neapolis, bishop of the city of Neapolis in Cyprus, who was the second biographer of St. Symeon the Fool for Christ, who would generically introduce the term *salós* into Byzantine hagiography to describe these devout. It is noteworthy that in the *Life of St. Symeon Salos* it is related that on his entry into Emessa, dragging a dead dog behind him, children who see him call him *moros* not *salós*²⁴, but Leontius will admirably use the couplet of terms *morós-salós* saying that Symeon simulates *μωρία* for the sake of Christ, while arguing this way of unselfishness with the words of St. Paul the Apostle: “We *are* fools for Christ’s sake” (I Corinthians 4, 10). He would enshrine for the whole aghiography after him the terminology for this holy necessity, attaching to it the positive meaning, which, moreover, some of Simeon’s fellow-citizens recognize. Leontius develops for the first time the concept of “holy foolery”, which even if intuited by his predecessors had not been explicitly expressed nor developed as he would do. The great merit of Leontius is not that of using the term *salós* used by other hagiographers, but that of giving it the meaning of holy foolness by linking it to the expression *διὰ Χριστόν*, so that the pretended foolman considered without judgment in the patristic literature before him becomes the holy foolman, who assumes and fulfills the sacred mission to which he has been called. The way was thus open for the transformation of foolishness-for-Christ from an isolated practice to a true vocation in Byzantium.

The term *salós* which designated the *Fool for Christ* will be taken up in Slavonic-language literature textually, for a long time circulating in translations of the *Life of St. Andrew the Fool for Christ* without being

²³ Νεκτάριος Ἀντρά, *Δογμα και ηθος στους βιους των δια χριστον σαλων...*, p. 17 .

²⁴ PG 93, 1708 C; Life of St. Simeon the Fool for Christ in: *Viețile sfinților pe luna iulie*, Ediția a III-a, Editura Mănăstirea Sihăstria, 2006, p. 441: “And the children, many of them gathered together, ran after him, crying out: A fool monk! A fool monk! (μωρός)”.

translated. The earliest translations of the *Life of St. Andrew Salos* appear in the Russian tradition²⁵ as early as the Kievan period, and certainly the widespread circulation and popularity of this *Life* in the Russian space²⁶ was an important factor in the development of this phenomenon in the Russian Church²⁷. Incidentally, St. Nicholas of Pskov (16th century), will remain in Russian aghiography and in the Russian synaxarion as St. Nicholas Salos, which shows that Russians, even if they have created their own terminology, will always appeal to *salós* and the meaning of this concept, referring to the Byzantine paradigm.

Referring to the scriptural text and translating the ancient Greek *morós*, the Old Slavonic translations of Saints Cyril and Methodius used the term *buiak*²⁸ with the root *bui*, which had a strong offensive overtone in common usage, but biblically meant the one without judgment (as we find in the translation of 1 Corinthians 4:10, and as it appears in an Old Slavonic text from the 13th century translating the *Life of St. Basile the Younger*. Tomáš Špidlík also mentions in the ancient terminology of the phenomenon of foolishness-for-Christ in the Slavic space the term *pohab*²⁹, which is used in the translation of the *Life of St. Andrew the Fool for Christ*, the most widespread life of a Byzantine fool for Christ in the Russian space³⁰. Another term used in Russian aghiography in connection with fools for

²⁵ For ancient Slavonic translations of the life texts of St. Andrew Salos see: A. CARILE, "Byzantine Political Ideology and the Rus' in the Tenth-Twelfth Centuries", in: *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 12/13 (1988/1989), pp. 400-408.

²⁶ A Russian cult of St. Andrew Salos is first attested in the second half of the 14th century. In 1371, in the Siteckii-Andreevskii monastery in Novgorod, a church dedicated to St. Andrew Salos was built, which probably contained an icon of St. Andrew Salos. The oldest surviving Russian icon of St. Andrew Salos (apart from the Pokrov iconography) dates from the mid-16th century.

²⁷ Priscilla HUNT, "The Fool and the King: The Vita of Andrew of Constantinople and Russian Urban Holy Foolishness", in: Priscilla HUNT, Svitlana KOBETS (eds.), *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New perspectives*, Slavica Publishers, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2011, p. 152.

²⁸ *Gruzinskii khronograf 1207-1318*, apud S. IVANOV, *Sfinții nebuni pentru Hristos...*, p. 211.

²⁹ Tomáš ŠPIDLÍK, *Mari mistici ruși*, transl. pr. Nicolae Necula, Editura Dunării de Jos, Galați, 1997, p. 136.

³⁰ S. IVANOV, *Sfinții nebuni pentru Hristos...*, p. 212.

Christ is the term *blajenii* (блаженный) which has acquired over time a much more positive nuance than the old *buiak*, somewhat similar to the Greek *makarios*³¹, and which also entered into the name of St. Basil of Moscow, fool for Christ (16th century). Interestingly, depending on the linguistic root to which it referred, *blazhenyi* took on either a meaning of pretense from the root *blaz* or a theological sense of law through the root *blago*³², and the term *blazentsvo* means buffoonery³³, mean a pretended behavior, which comes very close to the meaning of *foolishness-for-Christ*.

But the term that will come to be consecrated to define *foolishness-for-Christ* is *юродство* (*iurodstvo*) and the unbeliever *юродивый* (*yurodivy*), the Greek expression *δια Χριστόν σαλότητα* becoming in Russian *юродивый Христу ради* (*fool for Christ's sake*). The etymological meaning of *yurodivy* is quite rough. *The Vasmer's Dictionary of the Russian Language* gives both the secular meaning of the etymology of *iurodivyi* as a man with mental genetic deficiencies, and the spiritual meaning of a pious person who performs crazy deeds³⁴. The etymological meaning of *yurodivy* from the root *egg-rod* was rather harsh and meant literally “runt”, “cast out”, Ewa Thompson emphasizing it in *Mastislav's Gospel* (12th century)³⁵, pointing to the theological meaning of holy foolness of a person cast out, cast away to the fringes of society, a human condition which the fool for Christ not only did not bypass but also assumed chenuotically. Over time, the first meaning is removed from theological language, and in the 17th century it takes on the positive meaning of a person practicing “holy foolery”.

³¹ S. IVANOV, *Sfinții nebuni pentru Hristos...*, pp. 213-214.

³² S. IVANOV, *Sfinții nebuni pentru Hristos...*, p. 214.

³³ Ioan Dumitru POPOIU, *Nebuni pentru Krishna și nebuni pentru Hristos, o fenomenologie a formelor de devoțiune extremă*, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2020, p. 212.

³⁴ In fact, the term “*blazennyj*”, according to the etymological *Dictionary Vasmer of the Russian language*, derives from the Old Slavic noun “*bòlogo/blago*”, meaning something good, rich, a tasty food, not suitable for fasting; <http://vasmer.info/66/болого/>, 24.08.2025.

³⁵ Ewa Majewska THOMPSON, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture*, University Press of America, Minnessota, 1987, p. 13.

III. The historical and theological context of the emergence and manifestation of foolishness-for-Christ in Byzantine spirituality

Foolishness-for-Christ will gradually transform itself from an isolated ascetic practice (done with a purifying purpose and a metanoic dimension)³⁶, as it manifested itself early on in Egyptian monasticism, or from a work of a strictly vocational character, individual and non-generalized asceticism in the service of others (practiced sequentially by some ascetics who went out into the world)³⁷, in a phenomenon that would fully manifest itself in the Byzantine space, a space so complex in its social and spiritual structure and so conducive to the development of extreme ascetic practices, but which had Christian perfection as their goal.

These two types of manifestation of *foolishness-for-Christ* are somehow identified with the phases or stages of development of this practice: the monastic phase, in which this practice does not leave the hermit or cenobitic space, and the urban phase, in which the manifestation of “foolishness” is foole in cities, towns, in a provocative way and with a profound ecclesial and social dimension. We will see that the Byzantine urban phase of the *foolishness-for-Christ* will also have two important phases: the early phase, originating in the Syrian part of the Byzantine Empire³⁸, and the Constantinopolitan phase³⁹.

The emergence and development of the practice of *foolishness-for-Christ* was clearly determined by the manifestation of the Christian life in the complexity of different historical, cultural and especially spiritual contexts. Starting from the essential premise of the study of this phenomenon, i.e. the

³⁶ We have seen in this regard in the previous chapter the examples of St. Isidora, Avva Amona, Avva Moses; in their case we have seen that it is either strictly isolated manifestations of “holy folly” or a general attitude in order to acquire humility.

³⁷ St. Serapion the Sidonite and St. Visarion (both from the Egyptian monasticism of the 5th century AD); neither of them fully fit with the life in the “pattern of foolishness-for-Christ”, but only have manifestations of this devotional practice with a pronounced social and ecclesial character.

³⁸ Represented by St. Simeon of Emessa Syria (6th century), whose life would become the prototype for the aghiography of the Fools for Christ.

³⁹ Represented by St. Andrew the Fool for Christ and St. Basil the Younger (both of whom are in 10th-century Constantinople).

fact that foolishness-for-Christ has always been a living and challenging reaction of the ecclesial body on the one hand to the desacralization of social life and on the other hand to the secularization⁴⁰ (not in the historical sense of the term in modernity, but in the symbolic⁴¹) of religious life, the superficiality of ecclesial life into which relativism and lack of confessing condition permeated, we can observe that the fools for Christ worked both to purify the “Church from the world”, from society, and “the world from the Church”. Renouncing by divine call the asceticism of the desert, after acquiring its impenitence, they transmuted the “Christianity of the desert” into the “paganism of the city”, this contrast Vladimir Soloviov presents as a specificity of the Byzantine space⁴², revealing itself as a purifying and always creative dimension.

Sergey Ivanov, analyzing the *foolishness-for-Christ* in the Byzantine world, analyzes it through the broader spectrum of the manifestation of spiritual life, the impact of various social structures in the lives of

⁴⁰ Although the terms “desacralization” and “secularization” in an ideological sense appeared with modernity, which was a reaction to the world of the Middle Ages, which was permeated by religiosity (not necessarily spirituality, the two terms here being delimited not only conceptually but also ideologically), the phenomenon of “pre-secularization” was present long before in human history, the sacred-prophetic tension and attempts to delimit the temporal and material space from the spiritual and eternal being present ; D. Hervieu-Lèger speaks of the fact that Christianity, in the consciousness of human society, has expressed both theological and institutional logic. The first, legitimized the desacralization of the world because it almost identified the world with the divine, and the second gave birth to the opposite reaction by upholding the net superiority of Christian values over any cultural or ethical structure ; cf: D. HERVIEU-LÈGER, *Vers un nouveau christianism*, apud Pr. Vasile VLAD, *Asumarea (Post) Modernității, o perspectivă teologică asupra istoriei*, Editura Universității “Aurel Vlaicu”, 2010, p. 107.

⁴¹ Pr. Vasile VLAD, *Asumarea (Post) Modernității...*, p. 107: “Attempts to desacralize the world are not peculiar to the modern period of human history. Ever since the Greek philosophers of antiquity there has been a tendency to autonomize the mystical and the religious, even though they were organically interwoven in the existential context. In fact, until the emergence of the modern state, the social and the religious were, on the one hand, intertwined and mutually conditioned and, on the other hand, there was a permanent attempt to clarify, in the sense of a decantation of identities”.

⁴² Vladimir SOLOVIOV, *Fundamentele spirituale ale vieții*, transl. Ioan I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Alba Iulia, 1994, p. 166.

Christians, but especially related to the manifestation of martyrdom or on the contrary the lack of it:

“As we have observed, the foolishness in Christ arises where Christianity is not subject to persecution and where the Christian state is not threatened by unbelievers: when the self-sacrifice, the spirit of frontism, the ambiguities and unpredictability of early Christianity gradually yield to conformity and compromise”⁴³.

We will see that after the Syriac period, represented by St. Symeon the Fool for Christ (6th century), will follow a period in which almost nothing is heard of fools for Christ, until its Constantinopolitan phase, represented by St. Andrew Salos. The same Sergey Ivanov speaks of three important causes⁴⁴: in the middle of the 7th century the Arab invasion occurs, by which part of Christian Syria was conquered (Emessa, Amida, where the Fools for Christ manifested themselves, including the great theological and exegetical center of Antioch falling into the hands of the Arabs) and also Byzantium lost the whole eastern Mediterranean, thus Christianity was forced to reconsider its confessing vocation; the emergence of false fools for Christ, who, taking advantage of the honour and popularity of the genuine unbelievers, copied their behaviour outwardly, of course for petty purposes, and which prompted the Church to react through canon 60 of the Trullan Synod of 692⁴⁵, unfortunately often extended thereafter in the life

⁴³ S. IVANOV, *Sfinții nebuni pentru Hristos...*, p. 116.

⁴⁴ S. IVANOV, *Sfinții nebuni pentru Hristos...*, p. 116-117.

⁴⁵ Arhid. Ioan FLOCA, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe*, note și comentarii, Ediția a treia, Sibiu, 2005, p. 154; The Trullan Synod was concerned, among other things, with combating pagan and superstitious practices that survived in Christianity, and which, naturally, were not in conformity with Christian morality. It is in this context that canon 60 appears with the following text: “Since the Apostle proclaims that he who cleaves to the Lord is one spirit with him (I Corinthians 6, 17), it is also taught that he who surrenders (unites) himself to the adversary (becomes) one by being united to him. For this reason also those who pretend to be (simulate) the poor, and by reason of the corruption of their customs (morals), in a cunningly devised way imagine those (deeds), it seemed good (to the synod) in every way to reprove them with the same severe necessities and labors to which the truly poor are justly subjected, to free them from the work of the devil”. It should be noted that the text of the canon makes no

of the Church, to the whole phenomenon of *foolishness-for-Christ*, with the true fools for Christ often being condemned and marginalized; thirdly, the eighth century was marked by the struggle against iconoclasm, which brought back the martyrdom which generally eliminated the spiritual neglect so prevalent in times of “religious peace”⁴⁶.

The Byzantine world had a very diverse structure⁴⁷, Nicolae Iorga describing the “Byzantine organism” as that complex combination of factors that created Byzantine man: the Hellenistic heritage, Roman law on which Orthodox Christianity was superimposed⁴⁸. But Byzantine man was characterized by an abiding preoccupation with the spiritual world, which is why, as Steve Runciman points out, secular issues often took a back seat to the great theological controversies⁴⁹ in which much of Byzantine society was involved. The same renowned Byzantinologist noted that the Church of Byzantium, which did not enjoy much sympathy from the Western historians, was, unlike Western Christianity (more rational and organized), constantly preoccupied with the state of grace, of entering into communion with God through a life of prayer, and monasticism in the Byzantine space

textual reference to the fools for Christ, although the term “salós” which designated them was already known and established. Nevertheless, in the practice of church life, this canon was used in the argumentation of those who criticized and condemned the whole phenomenon. Moreover, observing the following two canons (61 and 62), we see that the concern of the Synod was for the whole phenomenon of pagan reminiscences, of the pantomime shows that were present at the time and of carnivals with a clearly pagan and idolatrous tinge. The commentary by Ioan Floca on canon 61 and canon 62 is edifying in this regard.

⁴⁶ The classification of the three causes of the decline of the phenomenon of foolishness-for-Christ belongs to us, as a synthesis of the situation described by Sergey Ivanov; see the historical picture and religious context described by Ivanov; S. IVANOV, *Sfinții nebuni pentru Hristos...*, pp.116-118.

⁴⁷ For the specifics of the Byzantine world and the manifestation of spiritual life see: Louis BRÉHIER, *Civilizația bizantină*, transl. Nicolae Spinescu, Alexandru Foolgearu, București, Editura Științifică, 1994; Alain DUCÉLLIER, *Byzantines - histoire et culture*, transl. Simona Nicolae, București, coll. *ANNALES*, Editura Teora, 1997; Nikolaos A. MATSOUKAS, *Istoria filosofiei bizantine*, transl. Pr. Constantin Coman, Nicușor Deciu, București, Editura Bizantină, 2011.

⁴⁸ Nicolae IORGA, *Bizanț după Bizanț*, Editura Enciclopedică Română, București, 1972, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Steve RUNCIMAN, *Civilizația bizantină*, transl. Damian Anfile, Ediția a II-a, Editura Basilica, 2023, p. 161.

was stubbornly based on the importance of the state of repentance and mystical living⁵⁰.

In Byzantium, the phenomenon of *foolishness-for-Christ* manifested itself, in its two major phases, the Syriac stage⁵¹ (6th century) and the Constantinopolitan stage (10th century), as a reaction to the weakening of lust and the decay of morals. But they did not stop at this, but worked on the improvement of the spiritual life.

In the 4th century and especially in the 5th century, one could observe in Byzantine society a tendency to identify the Church with the world, the tendency of the ecclesiastical world to become statist and the imperial interference in Christian doctrine increasingly blurring the boundary between the Church and the world. Justinian's attempts to redefine the relationship between the State and the Church, which has gone down in history as the "Byzantine symphony"⁵², succeeded only in part, because after 531 his assiduous attempts to reconcile with the Monophysites made him change his attitude to a more authoritarian one, so that the age of Justinian did not mark the beginning of a new era but rather the end of another. Emperor Heraclius's attempts to create unity between Chalcedonians and Monophysites were also attempts to keep an ethnically

⁵⁰ Steve RUNCIMAN, *Civilizația bizantină...*, p. 194: While Western Christian thought focused on eschatology, Eastern Christianity was concerned with the state of grace, of entering into communion with God here on earth;.... once a believer had acquired mystical knowledge of God, all other aspects of theology seemed unimportant. There was a sense that every Christian must work out his salvation within the limits of the orthodox faith of the synods. There was no rigid scholasticism telling him what and how to believe".

⁵¹ Syriac theology has been rightly considered "the third strand of the Christian East"; cf: Sebastian BROCK, "The Importance and Potential of SEERI (St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute) in an International Context", in: *The Harp*, 1-2/1997 , p. 47. Syrian Christology of the 5th and 6th centuries is an important treasury of theological thought and the theological mysticism developed by St. Ephrem Sirulus and St. Isaac Sirulus is a reference in Orthodox spirituality. Christian Syria is also the starting point for ascetic asceticism in the history of Christianity, such as stylites (which appeared in the 5th and 6th centuries in Syria) and foolishness-for-Christ (relatively speaking, in the same period). On Syriac theological thought see: diac. Ioniță APOSTOLACHE, *Hristologie și mistică în teologia siriană*, Editura Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2014.

⁵² M. BERANGER, *Les nouvelles de l'Empereur Justinian*, apud Pr. Emanuil BĂBUȘ, *Bizanțul, Istorie și spiritualitate*, p. 75.

and linguistically diverse empire united in the face of external threats. In Egypt and Antioch, on the other hand, Monophysitism was dominant, with only the Palestinian parts and Edessa of Syria remaining orthodox. The Emessa of Syria (present-day Homs), the site of St. Symeon the Fool for Christ, was a conglomerate of ethnic and religious population, a result of the imperial policy of population exchange, reflected by Leontius of Neapolis, St. Symeon's hagiographer. Neapolis, a city in Cyprus⁵³, where Leontius was bishop, preserved the characteristics of a classical city of late antiquity, typical of the Byzantine world. Derek Kruger considers that the image of Emessa, the site of the action of the life of St. Symeon (in its second part, relevant for us) was in fact also the image of Neapolis in Cyprus, the identification of the hagiographer with the condition of the holy hero he describes being a common practice in Byzantine hagiography⁵⁴. This is the religious and social context in which the *foolishness-for-Christ* makes its appearance in its provocative form and urban phase.

The second phase of the *foolishness-for-Christ* in the Byzantine space, represented by St. Andrew the Fool for Christ⁵⁵ and St. Basil the Younger, will come after the iconoclastic period, in which the martyr condition (which reappears) makes the spiritual life of Christians authentic and fruitful, something that would not be maintained in the 9th and 10th centuries in Byzantine society, which, although it would flourish during

⁵³ On 7th century Cyprus see: Costas KYRRIS, *History of Cyprus: With an Introduction to the Geography of Cyprus*, Nicosia, 1985, pp. 160-180.

⁵⁴ Derek KRUEGER, *Symeon the Holy Fool...*, p. 10.

⁵⁵ The dating of the life of Andrew the Fool for Christ has aroused great interest in Byzantine hagiography. Although the hagiographer suggests by biographical and naming landmarks the saint's life in the 5th century, the historical elements and descriptions of social life converge on the 9th-10th century. John Wortley dates the work to the late ninth or early tenth century; cf. John WORTLEY, "The Political Significance of the Andreas-Salos Apocalypse", in: *Byzantion*, 43, 1973, pp. 248-263. Cyril Mango argued for a late seventh-century date for the composition, which most other scholars considered unlikely; cf. Cyril MANGO, "The Life of St. Andrew the Fool Reconsidered", in: *Rivista di studi bizantini e slavi*, 2, 1982, pp. 297-313; Authoritative and relevant opinions are also to be found at: John F. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. XXII; Lennart Rydén dates the work to the 950s; cf. Lennart RYDÉN "The Date of the Life of Andreas Salos", in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 32, 1978, pp. 127-156;

the Macedonian dynasty, was no longer as much imbued with the spirit of confession which cultivated, but above all required, an authentic moral life and a real commitment to the Christian endeavor of Christian perfection.

The ideal of the spiritual life promoted in this period by the writings of St. Simeon the New Theologian would also be followed by the Fools for Christ of the Constantinopolitan period, but at the practical level of life. If the disciples of St. Simeon the New Theologian sought tranquility, union with God, the sight of the uncreated light, the sense of grace, without which one could not call oneself a genuine Christian, the Fools for Christ of this period were seeking to fight human passions and the vices of a society that was far from the ideal of the Byzantine mystics.

Gradually, the phenomenon of *foolishness-for-Christ* would diminish in intensity after the 10th century, the period of the Crusades and the permanent Turkish danger once again creating the condition for a confessing Christian life. On the other hand, the reservations about such a need were evident both at the top of the ecclesiastical structure and in theological writings. One such example is even that of St. Symeon the New Theologian, who expressed his puzzlement at the popularity enjoyed by the fools for Christ in Byzantine society in Constantinople in his time, though, about his spiritual father, Symeon the Pious, it is said that he sometimes feigned the state of impiousness in order to hide his holiness and to lure some people out of their sins⁵⁶, and in the obsequies of his monastery there comes at one point a Western bishop, who, having killed a man by mistake, will take the cross of *foolishness-for-Christ* in order to atone for sin. Gradually, the importance of this need for Christ will diminish in Byzantine society, their role being taken over by the Athonite community in direct connection with isihasm, but the aims and content of the foolishness-for-Christ being different.

⁵⁶ NICHITA STETHATOS, *Vie de Symeon le Nouveau Theologien*, apud S. IVANOV, *Sfinții nebuni pentru Hristos...*, p. 153: "He felt no more for the bodies around him than a corpse feels for the dead, yet he pretended to be seized with passion, hoping in this way to hide the treasure of his impiety, and also to save some or all, if it were possible, by stealth".

IV. Specificity of the Russian world, the *iurodstvo* phenomenon and its social and ecclesial dimension

If in Byzantium the *foolishness-for-Christ* did not become a generalized practice, in the area of Russian influence this practice became a real phenomenon, especially in 16th century Russia, the period of maximum flourishing of this phenomenon. John Kovalevsky emphasized that just as the Russians had officially received Christianity from the Byzantines, with the appropriation of Christian doctrine they also appropriated the ascetic practices of Orthodox spirituality, including the ascetic practice of *foolishness-for-Christ*⁵⁷. Christian Münch, analyzing the phenomenon of *foolishness-for-Christ* in Russia, considers that there are both external and internal factors that have determined the development of this phenomenon in the Russian tradition, even more so than in its Byzantine area of origin⁵⁸. The external factors are determined in particular by the influence of Byzantine spirituality on the Slavic world through Christianity of Eastern origin, but also by the special place in the early Slav aghiography of the life of St. Andrew the Fool for Christ, which led to the particular liturgical development of the feast of Pokrov (the Covering of the Mother of God). The internal factors are no less important, because the specificity of the Russian world, with its particular sensitivity to the spiritual life, to sometimes extreme ascetic practices⁵⁹, the mystical-national dimension

⁵⁷ Ioan KOVALEVSKY, *Fericiții nebuni pentru Hristos*, transl. Boris Buzilă, Editura Anastasia, București, 1997, p. 141.

⁵⁸ Christian MÜNCH, *In Christo närrisches Russland, Zur Deutung und Bedeutung des „iurodstvo“ im kulturellen und sozialen Kontext des Zarenreiches*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Bristol, 2017, p. 81.

⁵⁹ In the works of some scholars of Slavic culture, there are references to the fact that even before the Christianization, a pagan form of asceticism was known in Russia, the so-called “verigon-bearers” or “kaliks”, who roamed the roads, wearing heavy, metal chains on their bodies, and inflicted various kinds of mockery and humiliation in their speech as “spiritual training”. This is consistent with some practices in other religions. It seems that this kind of asceticism shows the Russian spirit’s predisposition for various kinds of extreme or unconventional asceticism; cf: Ivan KOLOGRIVOF (Ieromonakh), “Les fous pour Christ’ dans l’hagiographie russe”, in: *Revue d’ascetique et mystique*, 25 (1949), pp. 426-437; also: Ivan KOLOGRIVOF, *Essai sur la sainteté en Russie*, Beyaert, Bruges, 1953.

of the Russian people with its proclaimed spiritual and historical destiny, all of which are included in the famous expression “Russian soul”, have meant that the fooliness for Christ, obviously appropriated with Byzantine Orthodoxy, has found fertile ground for affirmation and development⁶⁰. The same paradigm of Byzantine influence superimposed on the religious specificity of the Russian world is also remarked by Svitlana Kobets, who at the same time emphasizes that the *Russian iurodstvo* imitates the *Greek salós*, with the specification that in the space of the Slavs and later Russians, the prominent role of the fool for Christ will not be ascetic but social⁶¹. In fact, the communion between the monks of Greece and those of Russia was manifested from the very beginnings of Russian Christianity, and this explains the appropriation of rare ascetic practices that originated in the Byzantine world, such as: locking, stylites or foolishness-for-Christ⁶².

The dynamics of socio-cultural change transform the “holy craze” from a religious and social phenomenon into a phenomenon that determines the national identity of Russian culture as a whole⁶³. The way Russians react to historical changes is specific to them, in a complex approach to their own spiritual options and civilizational structures, in a history that John I. Ică jr. calls “complex and fractured millennial history”⁶⁴.

⁶⁰ See in this regard: Francis J. THOMPSON, *The Reception of Byzantine Culture in Medieval Russia*, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Brookfield, 1999, pp. 107-139.

⁶¹ See in these senses: Svitlana KOBETS, “The Paradigm of the Hebrew Prophet and the Russian Tradition of iurodstvo”, in: Oleh ILNYTSKY (ed.), *Canadian Contributions to the XIV International Congress of Slavists, Canadian Slavonic Papers/ Revue canadienne des slavist*, Ohrid, Macedonia, 50: 1-2, 2008, pp. 3-16; Svitlana KOBETS, “Folly, Foolishness, Foolery”, Review of Sergey A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, in: *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 56: 3-4, 2008, pp. 491-497.

⁶² Ioan KOVALEVSKY, *Fericîții nebuni pentru Hristos...*, pp. 142-143.

⁶³ For the social role of the Fool for Christ in Russian society see: Mikhail PETROVICI, “The Social and Political Role of the Muscovite Fools-in-Christ”, in: *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte*, Berlin, 1978.

⁶⁴ Diac. Ioan I. ICĂ JR., “Rusia și filozofia ei, lecție pentru mileniul trei” (studiu introductiv), in: Tomáš ŠPIDLÍK, *Spiritualitatea Răsăritului creștin, IV. Omul și destinul său în filozofia religioasă rusă*, transl. Maria Cornelia Ică jr., studiu introductiv și postfață diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2002, p. 5. Here the reputed theologian paints a picture of Russian spirituality that preserves its specific character and constitutes exceptional ways of approach in religious and philosophical thought.

Russia has never ceased and never ceases to arouse extreme passions ranging from fascination and boundless ecstasy to horror and total rejection. The same feelings inevitably dominate the attitude towards Russian culture, which has faithfully mirrored the dilemmas and contradictions of the “Russian soul”, the choices and syntheses that its representatives have expressed in exceptional artistic creations and philosophical works of unique prolificity and monumentality, in forms of undeniable fascination and provocative originality. They eloquently reflect the “Russian exception”, an exception generated, on the one hand, by the specificity of the Russian soul, and, on the other hand, by the peculiarities of the historical, spiritual and cultural development of Russia, which has oscillated and passed many times in its history from Christ to Antichrist, from the Russian monk to the Bolshevik commissar, from Orthodoxy to Communism, from the Church to the Party.

Although the pre-Christianity paganism will still linger for a long time in the Russian social strata and in their consciousness, the taints of a pagan way of thinking and customs accompanying the Orthodoxy of the ordinary Russian, “liturgism and asceticism, worship and monasticism, together with the unconditional support of the state and its work of centralization and expansion, elements specific to the Byzantine Orthodox Church, will soon become characteristic features of Russian Christianity”⁶⁵.

The famous monastery of Pecerska-Kiev will give Russia almost 50 bishops and will become, as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann said, the measure of all Russian life. Although until recently seen as the incipient phase of Russian Christianity⁶⁶, the period of Kievan Rus is regarded by George Fedotov as the purest period of Russian religiosity⁶⁷.

After the Kievan period, in a different historical and spiritual context, the idea of “Holy Russia” emerges, as the one that takes over from Byzantium the destiny of preserving Orthodoxy and fighting against evil, in whatever way it may be incarnated. Moscow thus becomes, in

⁶⁵ Diac. Ioan I. ICĂ JR., “Rusia și filozofiile ei...”, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Alexander SCHMEMMANN, *O istorie a Bisericii de Răsărit*, transl. pr. Vasile Gavrilă, Editura Sophia, București, 2016, p. 365; Alexander Schmemmann emphasizes that the Muscovite kingdom did not necessarily mean the maturation of Russian Christianity but a stage that differs structurally from the early Kievan one.

⁶⁷ G. FEDOTOV, *The Russian Religious Mind...*, p. 412.

the Russians' conception, "the third Rome" and the last, the great destiny of the Russian people being both a binding force and a burden in the history to come, the pravoslavnic empire gradually transforming Orthodox spirituality into an ideology that Father Professor Ioan I. Ică jr. describes as a state policy⁶⁸, in a millenarism promoted at state level, described by Florovsky as a crisis of assumption of Byzantine spirituality in the Russian world⁶⁹. Incidentally, George Florovsky, in *The Ways of Russian Theology*, remarks that Byzantine theological thought was not sufficiently assimilated into Russian spirituality⁷⁰ which would form its own system of theological thought and expression, the substance of faith often departing from the tradition of the Church and the sobriety of Byzantine theology to make way for Russian ritualism and sentimentalism.

The prophetic visions of the period of Kievan Rus, which at the beginning had only a spiritual dimension, would gradually take on a state-like form. One such legend relates that around 1070, in Kiev, one such "visionary" said that "the Greek land", i.e. Byzantium, would be where Russia is, and Russia would be where Byzantium was⁷¹. Antoaneta Olteanu evokes in *Myths of Ancient Russia* these legends with an eschatological and ethno-national character, which later developed the ethno-phyletism so prevalent in Russian society⁷², which we can glimpse since the dawn of

⁶⁸ Diac. Ioan I. ICĂ JR., "Rusia și filozofiile ei...", p. 6: "After 1492, the eschatological ideology of the third Rome and Holy Russia will be transformed semiofficially into a state millenarianism...sacralized Russia folds back proudly and isolationist in a fatal complex of religious and national superiority, against the background of what Father George Florovsky called the crisis of Byzantine culture in the Russian soul".

⁶⁹ Diac. Ioan I. ICĂ JR., "Rusia și filozofiile ei...", p. 7: "Episodically and insufficiently assimilated, Byzantine culture was, beginning in the second half of the 15th century and continuing into the 16th century, recreated and replaced in Tsarist Russia by a hysterical and messianic national and state religion, by a «sui generis» Orthodox Christianity, at the same time ritualistic-triumphalist, sentimentalist-pietistic and populist-national"; Here the father professor, on the basis of George Florovsky's substantive observations, remarks that the Russians gradually created their own way of expressing and living Christianity.

⁷⁰ George FLOROVSKY, *Ways of Russian Theology*, Part One, in coll: *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, v. 5, Nordland Publishing Company, 1979, pp. 1-31; see the whole of chapter I suggestively entitled "The crisis of Russian Byzantinism".

⁷¹ Philip LONGWORTH, *Crearea Europei de Est. De la preistorie la postcomunism*, transl. Eugen Stancu, Editura Curtea-Veche, București, 2002, pag. 241.

⁷² Antoaneta OLTEANU, *Miturile Rusiei clasice*, Editura Paideia, București, 2015, pp. 207-215.

Kievan Rus, when Metropolitan Illarion (whom George Fedotov sees as a representative of Russian Byzantinism⁷³) in a famous homily on *Law and Grace* superimposed the image of glorious Kiev on the image of the holy city of Jerusalem, Paul Evdokimov seeing in these images of early Russia the tendency to consider the Russian people as sharers in the universal history of salvation⁷⁴. The idea of a “Holy Russia” with a providential destiny developed especially in the 16th century during the time of the Great Cnezzate of Moscow when the principle “the second Rome has fallen, the third is Moscow and the fourth will never exist” became not only a paradigm of Russian society but also a state and national precept⁷⁵. This idea seems to have its origin in a vision of a monk named Philotheos from the monastery of St. Lazarus in Pskov, contained in a letter to the Moscow governor in the time of Tsar Basil III⁷⁶, which presented the Church of Russia as the sole guardian of Orthodoxy and the Russian people as the keepers of a great messianic destiny⁷⁷. This idea took shape and state weight

⁷³ George Fedotov counts Metropolitan Hilarion of Kiev among the three great personalities who marked Russian culture in the pre-Mongol period: Clement Smolyatitiks, Hilarion of Kiev and Cyril of Turov; see: G. FEDOTOV, *The Russian Religious Mind...*, p. 63.

⁷⁴ Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Hristos în gândirea rusă*, transl. Pr. Ion Buga, Editura Symbol, București, 2001, p. 52.

⁷⁵ A. SCHMEMANN, *O istorie a Bisericii de Răsărit...*, p. 386: “Russian religious Messianism was truly born in an eschatological turmoil and unrest. But external events vindicated it...Old Rome faltered in its orthodoxy and the empire switched to New Rome...hence the hypothesis that Moscow would be the Third Rome was conceived”.

⁷⁶ The letter is reprinted by Nestor Iskander, in “The story of the conquest of Tarigrad”. His prophecy that one day the holy city will be liberated by Christians is a spiritual substantiation of the idea of the rise of Muscovite power as a new hope of Orthodox Christians; cf: Florian BICHIR, “A treia Romă - mitul veșnic al panslavismului”, in: *Art-Amis Academy*, nr. 2/2017; Florian Bichir concludes here that “The New Jerusalem - Moscow, was the symbol of the holy Russia, of the new eshaton. The Russians would prove to be the prophets of this new world. Such a prophetic consciousness is to be found in many of the Russian writers, led by Dostoevsky”.

⁷⁷ Dimitri BOLENSKY, *Un commonwealth medieval: Bizanțul. Europa de Răsărit (500-1453)*, transl. Claudia Dumitriu, Editura Corint, București, 2002, p. 395: “Know, most noble tsar, that all the tsarates of the Orthodox Christian religion will gather in your tsarate. You are the only tsar of Christians all over the world. [...]. All Christian tsars have been gathered in your tsarate. After this, we await the Tsar which will have no end. [...]. Two Romes have fallen, but the third stands, and the fourth shall not be”.

when, reformulated, it was addressed directly to Tsar Ivan the Terrible⁷⁸, and religiously grounded a sharply despotic tsarate to which the *Yurodivs* (fools for Christ) reacted in Russian society. With the condemnation of Maxim the Greek⁷⁹, social monasticism and the concept of the *State Church* triumphed over monasticism of the Isist tradition in Russian society⁸⁰, the crisis of the troubled times, of the absolutist despotism of Ivan the Terrible followed, during which period, we shall see, the role of the Fools for Christ in Russian society would be providential. For example, St. Nicholas Salos is the only one who dares to confront the cruel Tsar Ivan the Terrible by convincing him through the gift of prophecy not to destroy the city of Pskov, St. Basil Blazheny obediently listened to him when he with the gift of insight read his thoughts, while Metropolitan Philaret II condemned him to death for a moralizing sermon⁸¹. While the tsar behaved despotically towards the ecclesiastical authority, towards the *Yurodivas*, whom the Russian people honored and cherished as their most sincere and disinterested servants, the tsarist despotic power had a mysterious fear. To a fool for Christ St. Basil Blazheny, the Tsar himself would humbly carry his coffin to his burial.

⁷⁸ Petre GURAN, *Sinuciderea celei de a treia Rome*, <https://senspolitic.ro/sinuciderea-celei-de-a-treia-rome-i/>, 29.08.2024.

⁷⁹ Greek by origin, educated as a young man at prestigious universities in Italy (Venice, Padua, Ferrara), a monk and trained at Holy Mount Athos in the tradition of Isichasm, St. Maxim the Greek fulfilled his mission as a missionary of the Russian people by translating many valuable texts of the patristic tradition, his translation of the Psalter was received with great enthusiasm in the Church of Russia at the beginning of the 16th century. George Florovsky considers him to be a leading representative of Byzantine humanism.

⁸⁰ On the religious level, some historical research speaks of a long-standing conflict in Russian society which had serious spiritual underpinnings and which inevitably transmuted itself into the conception of the state. The followers of Joseph of Volokolamsky represented the vision of a strongly socially involved monasticism with large estates and a prominent role in state politics. On the other hand, the abbots on the other side of the Volga, along the lines of Nil Sorski, preached a monasticism of the Isishatic tradition, a spirituality that was strongly ascetic, which fooled the Church not so much a political, state or social factor, but rather the image of the eternal kingdom. We should note here, however, that not all historians and theologians absolutize this spiritual conflict between the two visions of monasticism and its role. Both St. Joseph of Volokolamski and St. Nil Sorski are considered to be fathers of Russian monasticism in their time, and both spiritual currents have their place in Russian Orthodox spirituality.

⁸¹ I. D. POPOIU, *Nebuni pentru Krishna și nebuni pentru Hristos...*, p. 212.

After the Russian Church became a patriarchate in 1589, the Tsarist power tried to use its power and influence, even leading to open conflicts in the 17th century. On the other hand, the Uniate” crisis led to the reaction of the Orthodox Church, which gradually materialized in a scholastic apologetics, Father George Florovsky defining this stage as a Westernizing “pseudomorphosis”, which created the premises for a pietist reaction in both the Ukrainian and Russian areas⁸². The schismatic crisis of the “raskolniks”⁸³, a movement that was born as a reaction to authoritarianism and ecclesiastical centralism and as a challenge to absolutist power, but which turned into a sectarian, anti-ecclesiastical and anti-statist ideology of a sectarian type, increased the identity confusion of the Russian space and especially its unity, and unfairly and arbitrarily tried to assume the *iurodstvo* phenomenon in Russian society. This historically and theologically complicated context Alexander Schmemmann in sees caused by Moscow authoritarianism with roots in theologically unassimilated Byzantine theocracy⁸⁴.

The absolutist and despotic period determined the conditions for the development of the practice of *foolishness-for-Christ* in Russia. In medieval Russia, *foolishness-for-Christ* became such a phenomenon that foreign travelers visiting the country in the 16th century marveled at its extent and at the honor given to these Christ-crazed people in society and in the world of the Church. Thus the Englishman Fletscher described the atmosphere: “strange men, walking through the streets with their hair loose over their shoulders, an iron chain round their necks, and nothing

⁸² Diac. Ioan I. ICĂ JR., “Rusia și filozofile ei...”, p. 8.

⁸³ The Raskolniks, or “Old Believers”, are a schismatic group that broke away from the Russian Church in the mid-17th century as a result of the liturgical reform imposed by Patriarch Nikon. The schism had far-reaching and damaging effects on Russian society, with whole villages burned, churches destroyed, books of worship burned and many followers of the schism even sentenced to death, a situation that persisted until the time of Peter the Great.

⁸⁴ A. SCHMEMMANN, *O istorie a Bisericii de Răsărit...*, p. 408 : “The schism was but the price paid for Moscow’s dream of a consecrated pattern of life and of a perfect incarnation in history and on earth of the last kingdom. On a deeper level, it was the price paid for the radical anti-historicism of the Byzantine theocracy which rejected Christianity as a way and a creative process, and which wanted to stop history by the eternal repetition of a single all-embracing mystery”.

but a piece of cloth round their kidneys for their only garment”⁸⁵. If an Englishman, who was not very familiar, at least at first, with the Russian Orthodox space, was astonished at this sight, all the more interesting is the consternation of an archdeacon turned chronicler, Paul of Aleppo, who, accompanying the Patriarch of Antioch on a missionary visit to Moscow, saw Patriarch Nikon sitting at table with such a foolman for Christ, who, almost naked, was served by the Patriarch himself⁸⁶.

The obsession with foreign models for Russian spirituality and the need to modernize society led to the autocratic despotism of the Muscovite kingdom being replaced by bureaucratic absolutism based on the German and Western models during the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725). It was not by chance that George Florovsky said that just as Patriarch Nikon blindly and literally wanted to reform Russian books of worship on the Greek model, so Peter the Great was obsessed with the German organizational model⁸⁷. The period of modern Russia, with the reforms of Peter the Great, with the accentuated secularization of Russian society, sometimes also seen in the attitude of the ecclesiastical authorities, who no longer distinguished the “false foolishness for Christ” from the true vocation to this need, also meant the regression of this phenomenon (not because there were no more foolmen for Christ but because they were severely punished and driven out of the cities). The phenomenon, however, continued to manifest itself in isolation, both in the monastic and in the lay world, with a vocational and providential manifestation in the Georgian space in almost contemporary times, through St. Gavril the Georgian.

Against the backdrop of the numerous conflicts that Russia experienced in the 19th century accompanied by the repression of internal revolts, after the period of the “mystical” Tsar of Nikolai I who failed to alleviate social tensions and the serious consequences of the First World War, the Pravoslav Tsarate would metamorphose into the “autocratic empire of the

⁸⁵ G. FLETSCHER, *Of the Russian Common Welth*, apud T. ŠPIDLÍK, *Mari mistici ruși...*, p. 140.

⁸⁶ T. ŠPIDLÍK, *Mari mistici ruși...*, p. 140.

⁸⁷ G. FLOROVSKY, *Ways of Russian Theology...*, p.79: “later Peter the Great had a passion for rewriting everything in German or Dutch. They are also united by this strange facility of breaking with the past, this unexpected non-existence, premeditation and artificiality in action”.

communist soviets”⁸⁸ which would, however, produce numerous martyrs of the Russian Christian and national resistance. Russian philosophy and thought of the 19th century (Solovyov, Homiakov, Dostoevsky) predicted the downfall of Russian society, but also its inner strength of resistance. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn describes the spiritual state of Russian society at the end of communism so well in his essay *Russia under the avalanche*⁸⁹, and Father Ioan I. Ica jr. remarked that “the task of rebuilding Russian society on authentic foundations is overwhelming”⁹⁰.

V. *Salós* and *yurodivy*, two paradigms in the same kenotic and providential dimension

After this necessary incursion into the history of Byzantine and Russian spirituality, it is useful to place the phenomenon of foolishness-for-Christ within the historical and religious framework of Christian society. The Byzantine paradigm accompanied the manifestation of the foolishness-for-Christ also in the Russian space. Just as in Byzantium, the *foolishness-for-Christ* arose and developed when the martyrdom condition disappeared and the fervour of the Christian faith was no longer fervent in the often desacralized and only formally Christianized societies, so in the Russian tradition the *yurodivy* its presence felt in historical periods and in secularized societies in which the tendency towards desacralization was accentuated, and in the ecclesial space ritualism and liturgical formalism took the place of the authentic doctrinal and mystical background of Christianity.

For our study, knowledge of the religious, social but also political and economic context is of great importance in order to be able to frame the *foolishness-for-Christ* on the one hand in the Byzantine aghiography but also in the analysis of the phenomenology of this particular need in the Church. We have seen that the majority of researchers of this phenomenon

⁸⁸ Diac. Ioan I. Ică Jr., “Rusia și filozofiile ei...”, p. 9.

⁸⁹ See: Alexander SOLJENIȚIN, *Rusia sub avalanșă*, transl. Inna Cristea, Editura Humanitas, București, 2000.

⁹⁰ Diac. Ioan I. Ică Jr., “Rusia și filozofiile ei...”, p. 14.

treat *foolishness-for-Christ* as a purifying and prophetic reaction on the one hand to the secular social world, and on the other hand to the ecclesiastical world, the aim of the fool for Christ being always the same: to gain one's own salvation and to serve one's neighbor. They were never reformers or revolutionaries. There is not a single example among genuine Fools for Christ who had schismatic or heretical tendencies; on the contrary, they were great defenders of the right faith, even if they had their own particular ways of doing so. They also did not challenge the social order although they had great influence in society. Their goal was not to change the political or social order, not even to change the behavioral paradigm in the ecclesial environment, but to change man, and they were constantly working towards this goal.

Salós in Byzantium generally comes in times of intense secularization of Christian life. It appears at a time when the conventional criteria of society measure the morality of the Christian faith by measures of social decency rather than by the evangelical ethos. This is the case of St. Symeon in the cosmopolitan world of Emesa or of St. Andrew Salos in the great and complex city of Constantinople. The lack of any trace of vain glory, the continual humiliation that they not only accepted but sought, the service of their fellow men through their graces, the ideal of *apathy* in a desacralized and fallen world, make the *Salós* in Byzantine spirituality not only an eccentric, often demeaning and apparently irrational ascetic, but above all a providential messenger of the fool love of God that should in fact characterize every Christian. He comes to remind us how irreconcilable man's salvation is with the gratification of social prestige, and he always denounces the hypocrisy of conventional life. He therefore rejects the false cloak of holiness, knowing that individual morality creates self-satisfaction, deciding to lift the cross of the Church on his shoulders to save sinners and marginalized people. And he knows this can be done by exposing the false facades of conventional decency that annihilate otherness and personal freedom, pulverizes established hypocritical styles and illusory evaluations. The saints fools for Christ of the Byzantine period will thus become landmarks for all subsequent hagiography in Orthodox spirituality.

Compared to the Byzantine *salós*, which manifested its ecclesial vocation in the Christian space of manifestation but did not confront the secular authority (the context being totally different), the Russian *Yurodivy* showed a strong social dimension of their vocation, assuming a role of defenders of the oppressed. Interestingly, at certain times even secular authorities recognized this role. What is specific to the phenomenon of the *foolishness-for-Christ* in the Russian space is the emphasized social role of the *Yurodivyi*”, the assumption of his prophetic role, especially in periods when the ecclesiastical structure was subject to the state structure, which was felt not only in the theological expression but especially in the Russian society represented by the simple people who no longer felt protected and protected by anyone. Although the Byzantine paradigm of *salós* will be the model and foundation for the Russian *yurodivy*, the *iurodstvo* phenomenon will involve a much wider range of expression here than in the Byzantine space. In fact, the lives of Russian “fool saints” sometimes reveal significant differences from their Byzantine equivalents. They contain features seemingly incompatible with the Byzantine “fool saint” paradigm and endow their heroes with features that make them distinguishable not only from representatives of the Byzantine paradigm, but also from each other. Thus, some *Yurodivites* are fool in name only or only at certain moments (for example, St. Abraham of Smolensk or the Curious Isachy Isachy of Pecerska), while in the lives of others “holy foolery” occupies a central place. Some of the *Yurodivists* are monks or nuns (Michael of Klopsko, Pelaghia of Diveevo), others are laymen (St. Basil Blazheny), some of them are aggressive, with a provocative character like those of Byzantium (St. Basil of Moscow), but many are meek (John of Rostov). Many *Yurodivy* are portrayed as men of great learning (Abraham of Smolensk, Michael of Klopsko), although this contradicts the very definition of their newness. After all, the “holy fools” rejects worldly wisdom and erudition of any kind, if it departs from the essence of Christian life. The lives of some Russian *Yurodivy* conform to the requirements of the traditional hagiographical genre, while the lives of others have a fragmentary structure, consisting of a series of episodes.

With all this George Fedotov in *Saints of Old Russia* speaks of 36 Fools for Christ who have been canonized in the Russian Church⁹¹, but there are also such devout who have local honor. George Fedotov has even given a philosophical understanding of his concept of the Fool for Christ, writing that “the emergence of the holy fool coincides in time with the extinction of princely sanctity. The new century called for a new asceticism on the part of the Christian laity. The holy fool thus became the successor of the holy prince in social service”⁹². However, this explanation, although attractive in concept, of the time of the emergence of the Russian “holy foolishness” only partially corresponds to reality. The commemoration of the “holy foolery” we find in Kievan Russia and, of course, in the citadel of its spirituality, in the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev, we refer of course to the blessed Isaac⁹³. Where Fedotov is right is in the fact that in the beginning the *foolishness-for-Christ* manifested itself only partially and conjuncturally, and was for the purpose of acquiring humility and hiding virtues, and did not have the powerful social role of later. Thus, one cannot speak of a phenomenon of foolishness-for-Christ until it left the strictly monastic environment and asserted itself in the cities. In this way the Byzantine paradigm is preserved: at the beginning, *foolishness-for-Christ* manifested itself in its “quiet” form, in a monastic and ascetic environment, as in the case of St. Isidora of Tabenisi (4th century in Egypt), St. Isac (11th century, in Pecerska, Kiev) and only later did it develop with a provocative and social character in cities and predominantly urban localities (St. Symeon Salos, 6th century, in Emessa Syria) and St. Procopius (13th century, in Ustiug).

Another dimension in which the Byzantine paradigm of “holy foolishness” is respected in the Russian space is that of its providential character, with strong ecclesial and social accents. Just as the *foolishness-for-Christ* developed in the Byzantine world in periods of relativization of

⁹¹ The Russian scholar says here that the heyday falls in the 16th century, somewhat behind monastic holiness: the 17th century is still writing new pages in the history of Russian stupidity. By centuries, the revered Russian holy foolish Russian saints are divided as follows: 14th century - 4; 15th - 11; 16th - 14; 17th - 7; see Г. П. ФЕДДOTOV, *Святые Древней Руси...*, especially chapter 13 entitled “Юродивые” (Fools for Christ) .

⁹² See: Г. П. ФЕДДOTOV, *Святые Древней Руси...*, chap. 13.

⁹³ Татьяна НЕЕДОСПАСОВА, *Русское юродство XI-XVI веков* , Москва, 1997, p. 34.

Christian living and weakening of the confessing condition of the right faith, so the “holy foolery” manifested itself in the Russian tradition especially in the period of despotic autocracy, of the submission of the Church to the state, the removal of the ascetic ideal from the monastic life, the Fools for Christ restoring the spiritual balance that had been disturbed, as they were perceived on the one hand as the voice of God for the faithful people and on the other as the voice of the people who no longer felt protected either by the authoritarian state or sometimes by the ecclesiastical structures subject to despotic power.

VI. Conclusions

Foolishness-for-Christ cannot be presented as a monastic ascetic model, nor as a way forward for a Christian in the world. It is a vocation that comes from a divine call or entrustment in times of relativization of faith, of the dilution in society of the evangelical ethos and of the lack of the martyr condition.

The terms *salós* and *yurodivy* define by their etymological structure the meaning of this particular need as a “holy foolery”, a self-assumption of suffering, a kenosis of Christian devotion and service of one’s fellow men in a profound ecclesial and social vocation. The New Testament *morós* (μωρός) will be received into the patristic thought and ascetical tradition of the Church, transforming itself into the Byzantine *salós* (σαλός) and the Russian *yurodivy* (юродивый), to define this ascetical need with profound social and ecclesial implications in formally Christian but desacralized societies terms of the practice of the spiritual life.

Foolishness-for-Christ is thus the non-conventional reaction of the ecclesial body to the metamorphosis of the Christian paradigm into the essence in societies devoid of the martyr condition. The paradigm of “holy foolery” developed in Byzantine spirituality as a reaction both to the moral decadence of the formally Christianized society and to the formalism and relativism of ecclesial life. In the Russian tradition, although the Byzantine paradigm will be followed in its essence and purpose, the mode

of manifestation and contextual framing will be different, the Russian Yurodivy acquiring real social valences, their prophetic role in times of absolutist despotism being striking.

Challenging and eccentric, demeaning and apparently rational, difficult to understand and all the more difficult to assimilate, authentic *foolishness-for-Christ* is not at all a practice outside reason but going beyond it. It does not docilely conform to social rules, but kenotically but also doxologically transfigures a call which is essentially addressed to every Christian, and is expressed devotionally by the Apostle Paul: “To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (I Corinthians 9, 22).