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## Abstract

‘Liminal’ Orthodoxies on the Margins of Empire: Twentieth Century ‘home-grown’ religious movements in the Republic of Moldova

This article will explore the ‘liminal’ character of Moldovan identities through the prism of Moldova’s ‘home-grown’ religious movements of the twentieth century. For several hundred years the historical Principality of Moldavia nestled precariously between empires and cultural spheres. Moldavia’s powerful neighbor Russia eventually partitioned the territory with today’s Romania, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova each incorporating parts of historical Moldavia. In terms of the Republic of Moldova’s religious culture (the main focus of this paper), the Russian Orthodox Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Soviet atheist state each pursued “civilizing” and “nationalizing” missions that attempted to transform Moldovans into loyal and trustworthy subjects and integrate them into new structures (Dumitru and Negura, 2014). These processes were resisted at a grass-roots level by charismatic and ‘trickster’ religious figures that ‘played’ with dichotomies of the hidden and the revealed, innovation and tradition, and human and divine, succeeding in transforming the subject positions of whole segments of Moldovan peasant society. The resulting forms of ‘liminal’ Orthodoxy that defy resolution and perpetually critique and transgress canonical norms from the margins of the Church have proved enduring and continue to subvert the discourses and narratives that seek to ‘harmonise’ identities and consolidate Nation, State and Church in the Republic of Moldova.

**Key words:** Moldova, Inochentism, Orthodox Christianity, liminality, borders

‘Liminal’ Orthodoxies on the Margins of Empire: Twentieth Century ‘home-grown’  
religious movements in the Republic of Moldova

For several hundred years the historical Principality of Moldavia nestled precariously between empires and cultural spheres, between the Orthodox Christian Russian Empire to the east, the Islamic Ottoman Empire to the south and the Catholic Hungarians and Habsburgs to the west. In 1812, Russia incorporated the eastern half, between the Prut and Dniester rivers, as the Russian Oblast of Moldavia and Bessarabia, with the western half of the territory of the historical principality some years later in 1859 becoming half of the new Romanian state through the unification of Wallachia and Moldavia. Today’s Romania, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova each incorporate parts of historical Moldavia. This article deals with the religious aspects of history and identity in the twentieth century in the eastern half of Moldavia, known today as the Republic of Moldova but historically referred to as Bessarabia.<sup>1</sup> Moldova represents a quintessential anthropological borderland as defined in the work of Rosaldo (1989) and taken up by many others working on the US-Mexico border (see Ballinger, 2004). The borderland is a place where two, or more, cultures or societies overlap, where hybrid populations have the potential to “subversively appropriate and creolize master codes, decentering, destabilizing, and carnivalizing dominant forms...” (Lavie and Swedenburg cited in Ballinger, 2004: 31). We can make sense of this through Szakolczai’s assertion that borders, or the *limen*, fundamentally connect liminality, and liminal activities such as language, trade and sexuality (Szakolczai, 2009: 152), with marginality, being on the edge or the periphery (Szakolczai, 2015: 25), thus creating centres of creative, or destructive, potential out of marginal border regions.

This article explores the ‘liminal’ character of Moldovan/Moldavian religious identities that straddle state and symbolic boundaries through the prism of two of Moldova’s ‘home-grown’ religious movements of the twentieth century, Inochentism and Archangelism. These religious movements emerged in the liminal/marginal time and space of the Moldovan border region at the decline and dissolution of the Russian Empire. Revolution, war and more or less constant political and jurisdictional change were the backdrop to the emergence of charismatic leaders; men and women considered the physical embodiment or incarnation of divine, angelic and saintly persons. The corporeal ‘living’ manifestations of Christ, the Holy Spirit, Mary, the Archangel Michael, the Prophet Elijah and John the Baptist walking the Moldovan countryside represented ‘embodied’ acts of resistance to the emerging totalitarian political regimes and the competing religious institutions of the time that were seeking total control of the religious field and of spiritual life in the region.

The Republic of Moldova is known for its territorial vulnerability, for the ‘frozen conflict’ in Transnistria, a narrow border strip of a wider borderland that declared independence from Moldova in 1990, and the ethnic enclave of Gagauzia that was granted autonomy in 1994 following a brief armed stand-off. Although both of these conflicts have religious dimensions (on Gagauzia, see Kapaló, 2011; on Transnistria, see Matsuzato, 2009), this paper will touch on these regions only tangentially. Instead I focus here on processes of ‘schism’ within Orthodoxy in Moldova as a whole and the production of ‘liminal’ identities that defy resolution. The Republic of Moldova’s religious culture straddles Russian Orthodoxy and Romanian Orthodoxy. Today, the majority of Orthodox believers belong to the Moldovan Orthodox Church, a self-governing Church subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate. A smaller number (difficult to estimate as census data does not ask

respondents to identify which Orthodox Church they belong to) are members of the Romanian Orthodox Church's Metropolis of Bessarabia, which was 're-activated' by the Romanian Patriarch following Moldovan independence in 1992 and was fully recognized by the Moldovan state in 2006. The separation between these two religious communities is not a straight forward one based simply on national, linguistic or ethnic affiliation; very many Romanian-speaking Moldovans belong to the Russian Orthodox Church as do most of Moldova's ethnic minority communities such as the Gagauz and Bulgarians.

One of the complicating factors has been the controversy over the Church calendar. Soon after the territory of Bessarabia passed from Russia to Greater Romania at the end of the First World War, the introduction of the Revised Julian Calendar by the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1924<sup>2</sup> provoked a religious crisis, especially in the western part of Moldavia (which had been part of the Romanian state since unification in 1862) and Bessarabia, both of which had strong monastic institutions with a traditionalist outlook. The introduction of the solar aspect of Revised Julian Calendar in the Romanian Orthodox Church<sup>3</sup> but not in the Russian Orthodox Church created a temporal 'liminal' period between fixed feasts observed by the two Churches, including Christmas, with the Romanian Church celebrating on the 25<sup>th</sup> December (according to the Western Gregorian calendar) and Russians of 7<sup>th</sup> January. Resistance to the new calendar resulted in violent confrontations between the Romanian Gendarmerie and the Stilists, or *Stiliști*, the term used to refer to those who continued to adhere to the old style calendar, in the 1930s with several killings reported. For the Romanian Church and state authorities the calendar was a question of social, moral and religious order of the new nation state (Croitoru, 1936) but for large portions of the Orthodox population it represented a cataclysmic break with tradition, with liturgical time itself, and thus marked a sign of the impending End of Days. Many Orthodox believers in Moldova today have a strong religious attachment to the Old Julian Calendar which was preserved by the Russian Church. The Moldovan Orthodox Church, since gaining autonomy from The Russian Patriarch and being raised to the status of Metropolitanate has also done much to revive local Moldovan Church traditions and Romanian liturgical practices in order to maintain its appeal to ethnic Moldovans.

Both of the Romanian and Russian Orthodox Churches, as well as, of course, the Soviet atheist state, pursued "civilizing" and "nationalizing" missions that attempted to transform Moldovans into loyal and trustworthy subjects and integrate them into new state (and Church) structures (Dumitru and Negura, 2014). They were only partially successful in their aims due to Moldova's continual history of dislocations from states and regimes and temporary integrations into others. The permanent state of oscillation between different poles of gravity, Russia and Romania, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century created extended periods of weakened structures and ineffective, unfamiliar institutional systems, that effectively equated to a state of perpetual crisis or a structureless 'liminal' state, a magical "wonderland" where anything is possible (Szakolczai, 2015: 19-20), especially in religious terms.

It is worth recounting here briefly the extremely complex history of territorial changes and shifting borders that followed the collapse of the Russian Empire as it stands testimony to the assertion that "anything can happen" with regard to borders in this region. The Russian province of Bessarabia established in 1812 was dismembered in 1856, losing three southern districts, only to be reformed in 1878. In 1918 it was occupied by and then ceded to Romania by the Great Powers. Following the loss of Bessarabia the new Soviet regime 'magically' created from parts of Kherson and Podolia Oblasts in western Ukraine, where ethnic Moldavians constituted a sizeable

minority (King 2000, 54), a new Moldavia, the *Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic* (MASSR), parts of which were later absorbed back into the new *Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic* in 1940 when the old territory of Bessarabia was reoccupied by Soviet forces following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. This state of affairs lasted a little over one year until in July 1941, Romania and the Axis powers invaded the Soviet Union. Following the defeat of Romania forces in 1944, the *Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic* came back into being only without two southern counties of Bessarabia, Ismail and Cetatea Albă, and the northern district of Hotin, all of which were gifted to Ukraine. Following Moldovan independence in 1991 the territories of *Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic* (MASSR) that had remained part of *Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic* after 1944, broke away to form the internationally unrecognized *Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic*, or Transnistria as it is widely known.<sup>4</sup>

Amidst these territorial disputes and wars, a religious struggle was also being pursued. The Russian Orthodox Church between 1812 and 1918, intermittently but sometimes vigorously, pursued a policy of Russification of the local Moldavian Church. The Romanian Orthodox Church and state, likewise, attempted to Romanianize the Orthodox Church and the population of the province twice, first between 1856 and 1878 when three southern districts of Bessarabia were returned to the Romanian Principalities,<sup>5</sup> and then between the two World Wars when the whole territory became part of Greater Romania. Mainstream modern Church history of Moldova tends to frame the religious history of the territory in terms of the national struggle of the Romanian-speaking majority for control of the local Church dominated by Russian hierarchs (see for example Popovschi, 1931 [2000]; Nistor, 1991; Păcurariu 1993).

Shifting state and religious boundaries such as these demand that actors, be they political, economic or religious, engage in 'boundary work'. The religious actors discussed in this article frequently crossed borders between states, between religious communities and between ethnic groups, displaying considerable ingenuity and creative spirit acting as mediators, translators, smugglers and masters of disguise. If traditionalism can be considered a characteristic of identities in the region, particularly the largely agrarian territory of Moldova, this should be complemented with an appreciation of the ingenuity and mutable character of identities forged in border regions (see King, 2000).

This article briefly presents two cases that illustrate a complex picture of grass-roots religious agency and fluid religious identities that emerged against this shifting backdrop. I introduce two charismatic religious leaders who in some sense displayed characteristics of the 'trickster' (see Horvath 2008), or had these characteristics projected onto them by their adversaries. These are figures that 'played' with dichotomies of the hidden and the revealed, divine and human, and this world and the next world, and who succeeded in transforming the subject positions of significant segments of Moldovan peasant society. The resulting forms of what I term 'liminal' Orthodoxy, religious tensions that defy resolution and groups that perpetually critique and transgress canonical norms from the margins, have proved enduring and continue to subvert the discourses and narratives that seek to 'harmonise' identities and consolidate Nation, State and Church in the Republic of Moldova.

My research on religion in the Republic of Moldova is grounded in periods of ethnographic fieldwork amongst religious communities as well as archival research. Drawing on anthropology, folklore and history, I explore vernacular knowledge, folk practices and local memory as a counterpoint to national romantic narratives that tend

to wash over religious, folk and local cultural meanings. This article draws mainly on historical sources but my appreciation of the enduring significance of the characters and movements discussed here come from ethnographic observations of contemporary Moldovan society.

### **Religious Charisma and Romanian Vernacular Religiosity**

In the short space available in this article it will be difficult to do justice to and explore in any detail the two characters that I present as examples of charismatic ‘trickster’ figures in Moldovan religious history. Before I go on to give a brief biography of the two leaders, I outline what I mean by ‘charisma’ and ‘charismatic religion’ in the context of ethnic Romanian vernacular or folk religious culture out of which my main protagonists emerged. Géza Vermes, taking Weber as his starting point, identifies and names a distinct and enduring current within Judaism that he referred to as ‘charismatic Judaism’ (Vermes, 1973). This form of Judaism relied on direct contact with the divine, “on the highest level, this stream was represented by revelation based prophetic Judaism” whereas on the popular, grassroots level of folk or vernacular religion it was “marked by charismatic manifestations of ecstasy and wonder”. This brand of Judaism gave to early Christianity many characteristic features (Vermes, 2012: 2-3); spirit-possessed prophetic ecstasy, healing and exorcism, wonder-working, bodily suffering to bring one closer to God, and embodied divinity are all characteristics that Christianity inherited from the prophetic tradition of Elijah, Elisha, Samuel and many others.

Romanian popular religion is suffused with tales from and references to Jewish and Christian apocrypha that inform a rich folk cosmology with numerous supernatural and divine characters.<sup>6</sup> This tradition which is revealed in both biblical and post-biblical literature, and expanded on in later Christian apocrypha and hagiography, found its way into the Romanian vernacular tradition through the manuscript tradition of the monasteries and the publication of chapbooks. Popular books rich with apocryphal legends and the lives of saints were largely responsible for the appearance of theological themes in Romanian folklore as the borders between oral and written culture were particularly fluid (Jiga Iliescu, 2006: 18-37 see also Kapáló, 2011: 117-153).

Of the wonder-working ‘Men of God’ of charismatic Judaism who heal, produce rain and multiply food, Elijah and Enoch, stand out as they were carried up bodily into heaven without dying. In this sense they are peculiarly powerful figures with the power to intervene in human affairs directly. Their unique status as ‘undying’ prophets explains their association in the Romanian tradition with the passage in Revelation in which ‘two witnesses’, described as prophets, will prophesy for 1,260 days before being killed by the Beast from the Abyss, and, after three days rise up on a cloud to Heaven (Revelation 11: 3-12). In Romanian apocryphal literature, Elijah and Enoch will herald in the end times by unveiling Satan’s attempt to destroy the world and battling with him until they are killed (Gaster, n.d.: 162). Badalanova Geller (Badalanova Geller, 2010: 3) has highlighted the deep and enduring significance of the ‘Enoch Epos’ on Slavonic Christian, and hence also Romanian, culture and thought. In particular she points to the association of living visionaries and saints in the Balkans with the name of Enoch which represents “a continuous and unbroken cognizance of the story of Enoch within the religious imagination of the region” (Badalanova Geller, 2010: 11). In the book of Genesis, Enoch is referred to as having “walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away” (Gen. 5: 24). The fact that the Pseudoepigraphic Second Book of Enoch survives in more than twenty manuscript forms dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries is an indication of its popularity and a clue to understanding Enoch’s widespread reception into the vernacular tradition. The most

popular apocryphal narratives in the Romanian tradition close with the End of Days when “The Antichrist will come to enchant the world and to kill Enoch, Elijah and Saint John and after three days they will be raised and the End of the World will begin. The powers of Heaven will move and all will be scattered” (Gaster n.d.: 177). The narrative of the End of Days is a powerful and integral aspect of Romanian vernacular religiosity and folk narrative and represents a period of transition when divine and human meet on earth.

Another particularly honored and almost ubiquitous figure in Romanian vernacular religious imaginary, and also closely associated with the End of Days, is the Archangel Michael. In some of the most widespread narratives Michael is the companion and guide of the Mother of God and of Saint Paul in their respective journeys through hell,<sup>7</sup> he combats demons in the most well-known exorcism texts and healing charms,<sup>8</sup> and he sounds the trumpet at the End of Days, he is the prince of angels, a warrior and taxiarch of the heavenly hosts who casts down Satan at the beginning of creation and as he does again at the End of Days.<sup>9</sup>

As already mentioned, the monasteries of the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia played an important role in transmitting and disseminating these narratives and ideas. The charismatic legacy of Judaism and late antiquity, which established a legitimate counter-point to the clerical hierarchy, has passed to the Holy Men and wonder working *Starets* of Orthodox monasteries. This has been described as a “paradoxical feature of Eastern Christianity” (Paert, 2010: 10). Elders within the Russian Orthodox tradition, but especially the Moldavian tradition,<sup>10</sup> “straddle the boundary between the Church and the world” offering a perpetual counterpoint to the “bureaucratically rationalized institution” (Paert, 2010: 12). They can be understood as mediators or “boundary-workers” between the world of local vernacular knowledge and learned culture. This particular relationship between the Holy Men of monasteries, who may or may not also be holders of positions of rank, and Church bureaucratic power unfolded over several centuries in Orthodoxy and is not a straightforward one. As Paert explains, “Charismatic authority was a legitimate and sanctioned element of the Church’s theology and practice” and yet they could also represent an “anarchic force” (Paert, 2010: 9).

The idea of charisma in vernacular Romanian religiosity, therefore, is peopled by undying, ever-present supernatural characters from Jewish and Christian apocrypha who are destined to play central roles as embodied actors in the drama of the End of days and that find their living reflection in the monks, exorcists, healers and miracle-workers of the contemporary monastic tradition.

### **Inochentie of Balta**

An Orthodox monk of Moldavian peasant origin, Ioan Levizor who took the monastic name Inochentie, fits perfectly the model of a charismatic leader in the vernacular tradition outlined above. The earliest, most comprehensive and authoritative account of Inochentie’s life and movement is by the Romanian Church historian Nicolai Popovschi published in 1926 (Popovschi, 1926). It contains a wealth of detail collected from contemporary written and oral accounts and, given the fact that it was written at a time when Inochentism was considered a dangerous and subversive sect in Romania by both the state and the Orthodox Church, is largely impartial and tries to take an objective view. The other key source, largely overlooked by historians because it contains some historically dubious events and numerous miracle stories, is the “folk” hagiography published by his followers, the *Short Life and Deeds of Father Inochentie of Balta (În scurt viața, 1924)*. Most other sources on Inochentie and Inochentism are anti-sect and



heresiological Church publications or Soviet anti-religious propaganda materials, which are very problematic as sources but nevertheless give us important insights regarding state and Church attitudes, perceptions and discourses.<sup>11</sup>

As already mentioned above, Bessarabian society in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century passed through a period of unprecedented change. In terms of the religious landscape, the traditional dominance of Russian Orthodoxy was challenged by Tsar Nicholas's Edict of Religious Toleration of 1905. Introduced during the 1905 Revolution as a concession to appease his opponents, it opened the way for diverse groups such as Baptists, Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses to gain legal recognition and at least nominal acceptability, adding significantly to religious diversity in the region (Baran 2014, 15). Rural Bessarabia in particular became especially diverse, having already received German protestant settlers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as waves of Russian Orthodox dissenters, Old Believers, Molokans and Skoptsy (Zhuk, 2004: 6-18), Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses were successful in proselytizing significant numbers of local peasants.

In 1909, the religious revival sparked by Inochentie set the Bessarabian countryside alight. Born in the northern Bessarabia village of Cosăuți in 1875, as a young man he was inspired by visions of the Mother of God and having taken on the identity of a "Holy Fool" he wandered far and wide to the monasteries of Russia and Ukraine, including the famous Kievan Lavra of the Caves (Popovschi, 1926: 1-8; Clay, 1998: 253) where he was praised for his "Angelic voice" (*În scurt viața*, 1924: 11). The religious revival was initially centred on the cult and relicts of a holy man called Feodosie Levitzki (see Popovschi, 1926: 10-19) creating a 'Moldavian Lourdes' at the monastery in Balta (see fig. 1), a small provincial town close to Bessarabia in the Russian province of Kherson (Clark 1927, 108). Soon, however, the pilgrims came to be focused on the apocalyptic preaching, exorcisms and charismatic healing ministry of Inochentie himself. Much controversy surrounded the few short years of Inochentie's revival between 1909 and his death in 1917. The movement troubled the Russian Orthodox Church in the region to such an extent that the Church removed Inochentie to the Russian Far North and the Tsarist authorities and Church missionaries hounded his followers, soon labeled dangerous 'sectarians' (see Clay, 1999; King, 2000: 74-75).



**Figure 1.** Map showing the place of origin of the Inochentist movement on the border between the Russian provinces of Podolia, Kherson and Bessarabia.

Inochentie and his movement were considered so dangerous for a number of reasons. Firstly, the movement took place in the sensitive border region described above amongst the Moldavian ethnic minority and so it was interpreted in political terms, as a reflection of Moldavian national aspirations, as well as religious terms (see Niculescu 1941; Nistor 1991; Clay 1998; Bâtcă 1999). Inochentie was a great orator in the local Moldavian language, which certainly added to his appeal and charisma, at a time when the local idiom was considered subversive by the state and Russian Orthodox Church. He was, however, also well versed in Russian Church culture following his wanderings through the monasteries of Russia and Ukraine and in this sense he was able to mediate local vernacular culture and elite Church culture.

He was considered to have a “harmful influence” over the pilgrims visiting the monastery in Balta because he encouraged them to prepare for the End of Days and to forego marriage and sexual relations, overturning the sexual norms of peasant society (Popovschi, 1926: 23). He also elevated women to positions of authority (see Kapaló forthcoming 2017), endowing them with the honorific title of the Mother of God and granting them priestly apparel and status (see fig. 2). The most characteristic belief associated with the movement was that the End of Days is very close indeed, a view believed to have been “borrowed from Baptists and Adventists” (Botoșăneanu, 1929: 51). In 1912 and 1913, followers of Inochentie calculated the time of the Final Judgement in a matter of weeks and months and when this failed to come to pass they considered that mankind was merely enjoying a reprieve thanks to the power of the prayers of Inochentie. According to reports gathered by Popovschi “Their belief remained unshaken, even more so, as they interpreted actual events in their lives as signs of proof of their beliefs”, the outbreak of the World War being one such incontrovertible proof (Popovschi, 1926: 136). According to the testimony of

Inochentie's followers, as human evil "becomes more terrible and the Devil entangles man in his nets, demons can enter people because of their sins and for this reason 'sin reigns in the world', and all of this 'can be perceived most clearly through the suffering of the sick' " (Popovschi, 1926: 137). The Inochentist conception of illness and possession has some unique characteristic elements that differ from the standard Orthodox view. Many of Inochentie's followers experienced an unusual condition of extreme spiritual distress. This "tension, for those of weak nervous disposition, easily became a state of illness" (Popovschi 1926, 124). This condition became so widespread that it warranted a special commission ordered by the Governor of Kherson province and the local Bishop Dimitri, to investigate the religious "mass psychosis" taking place on their territory (Clay, 1998: 261) according to which "the suffering of the 'possessed' were redeeming the world and preparing the way for the Kingdom of God" (Clay, 1998: 255). The psychiatrist who undertook to examine those who were falling victim to this strange sickness, V. S. Yakovenko, published his finding in an article in the Russian Journal of Psychiatry, *Sovremennaya psikhiatriya*, in 1911 (Yakovenko, 1911). The possession cult that emerges from these accounts bears one of the key hallmarks of I. M. Lewis's category of "peripheral possession" (Lewis, 1989). Lewis regards certain forms of possession, those that are most often found amongst women and marginalised communities, and that are initially considered as an illness, as "thinly disguised protest movements", a kind of "clandestine ecstasy" that can be targeted against the dominant sex and power structures (Lewis 1989, 26).<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 2.** Photograph published in the Romanian newspaper *Romania* on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1938. The caption reads "Ion Levizor (Inochentie) with one of his women adepts" (Hoinaru 1938)

More dangerous still than this intense apocalyptic fervor and the possession cult amongst teenagers and young women, was the identity of Inochentie himself. The fervent apocalyptic expectation amongst Inochentie's followers intensified following his exile on the orders of the Holy Synod. He was first sent to the monastery of Kamianets-Podilskyi in 1912, then to Murmansk monastery in Olonets at the end of 1912, then to prison in Petrozavodsk in 1913, before finally being interred in 1914 in the dreaded Solovetsky monastery, the notorious prison for Orthodox dissenters in the Russian Far North and the model for the Stalinist Gulag of later decades, after his refusal to stop preaching to the hundreds of Moldovan pilgrims that had trekked thousands of kilometers across Russia. The outbreak of war in 1914 added to the general apocalyptic fervor amongst Inochentists. Whereas initially followers of Inochentie spoke of him as a teacher and a holy man endowed with special gifts of healing and prophecy (Popovschi, 1926: 142), as the persecution of Inochentie and his followers intensified, Inochentie came to embody important characters in the scriptural and Romanian vernacular narratives of the End of Days, most notably the prophets Elijah and Enoch, the person of the 'Spirit of Truth' revealed in the Gospel of John and the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. As already mentioned above in Romanian apocryphal literature, Elijah and Enoch will herald in the end times by unveiling Satan's attempt to destroy the world and battling with him until they are killed.

Popovschi asserted that "The harder Inochentie was pursued by the authorities the more his followers amplified their opinions on his personality. Ideas such as Inochentie is the Holy Spirit first arose when he was sent to Murom", when he was sent into exile (Popovschi, 1926: 143). The missionary manual penned to combat Inochentist ideas dedicates considerable attention to the problem of refuting the Inochentist claim that Inochentie is Elijah, Enoch, the Spirit of the Truth or John the Baptist walking the Earth again (Chirica and Skvoznikov, 1916).

As the pressure on Inochentie's followers mounted, Popovschi realized, they became less willing to openly discuss their beliefs.

And here you have to keep in mind that Inochentists reluctantly confided Inochentie's teaching. From this fact, some researchers conclude that Inochentie suggested to his followers, that they should not confide and say much in front of the parish priests (Popovschi, 1926: 63-64).

And as the Church authorities progressively silenced Inochentists through their missionary campaigns, it was noticed that an iconographic tradition was emerging which represented visually the ideas that the Church was condemning as heretical.

In keeping with these ideas, Inochentists used icons with the image of Inochentie. So, in 1913, in some villages in Bessarabia, an "extraordinary envoy" of Inochentie, whose identity remains unknown, showed a photograph to the Moldovans in which are pictured God the Father, God the Son, and in the place of the Holy Spirit, the monk Inochentie with an image of a dove at his breast (Popovschi, 1926: 151).



**Figure 3.** Photograph of a mass produced lithograph icon with Inochentie enthroned in heaven next to Christ with a dove at his breast symbolising the Holy Spirit. This photograph was taken in the home of an Inochentist in the village of Lipetcoe, Ukraine. Photo © James Kapalo, 2012.

Such images (see Figure 3.) became widespread and exist in multiple variants in the homes of Inochentists today. Archimandrite Antim Nica, who was sent as a Romanian Orthodox missionary to the area around Balta when it was occupied by Romania during the Second World War,<sup>13</sup> observed that “the image of Inochentie, in painted or photograph form, can be seen in Transnistria in many Moldovan families, placed between icons in the East corner of the house” (Nica, 1942: 41) and adding later that “More clearly than in their pious writings, the beliefs of Inochentists are reflected in their iconography” (Nica, 1942: 47).<sup>14</sup>

When Inochentie was finally released from exile in the spring of 1917 following an appeal to the Holy Synod on the part of his followers and aided by the events of the February Revolution, he returned to his home region and the subterranean community his followers had dug in his absence near the village of Lipetcoe in Kherson province. Arriving in June of that year where, according to his hagiography, he began once again to preach the Gospel of Christ, do great miracles and heal the sick (*În scurt viața*, 1924: 55-59). He died soon after on December 30th 1917 (Popovschi, 1926: 54). He was buried on New Year’s Day 1918 in a small underground chapel prepared specially to receive his remains. Many pilgrims continued to visit his remains until the community at *Grădină raiului*, the Garden of Paradise was destroyed by the Bolsheviks in September 1920.

One final miraculous episode is recounted in a later, revised version of his *Life and Deeds*. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1920 the Bolsheviks are said to have removed his remains from his tomb only to find his body, after almost three years, entirely intact as if he were alive and giving off an unearthly aroma of spices. When the commissar of the Bolshevik troops tried to rip the priestly cross from around Inochentie's throat he rose up from his coffin. The commissar fled in panic. Inochentie's body was taken that evening to the hospital in Ananiev, a local town, and when the doctor was about to cut into Inochentie with his scalpel Inochentie began to breathe and his was "pink, pink like a rose..." In panic the soldiers resealed the coffin and shut the room placing two men on guard whilst they telephoned Odessa to call a senior doctor. In the middle of the night, after being knocked out senseless by a loud sound of lightning, the soldiers came round to witness a cloud that rested above the hospital in which a great light shone. From the light came a great pillar of fire from the ground up to the sky. The body of Inochentie rose out of the coffin and into the pillar of fire and was raised up to Heaven in great glory (*Pre scurt viața*, 2010: 70), a final refraction of his identities as Enoch, Elijah and the Holy Spirit embodied at the End of Days.

Inochentie's miracles, his life, and his suffering at the hands of the Tsarist authorities and the Bolsheviks were translated into a powerful narrative full of biblical parallelisms.<sup>15</sup> These were visually and textually disseminated by creating a new divine narrative for the changed political and social reality; divinity once again walking the earth and heralding in the End of Days. Out of the liminal crisis of revolution, "imitative processes suddenly multiplied" (Szakolczai, 2015: 19), not only mimicking biblical narratives but also producing new models of Tsar or Emperor. In a process Bodin (2009, 89) describes, the "typologisation" of events in this way achieves a "levelling" or "annihilation" of history in which "temporality itself is abolished. History merges with the eternal".

### **Alexandru Culeac, the Archangel Michael**

My second example is Alexandru Culeac who unlike Inochentie was a lay person with no connection to Orthodox Church institutions. In 1920 this 19-year-old boy from the village of Todirești in a remote corner of northern Bessarabia had a vision in which, after several trials and tribulations, he became endowed with the symbolic attributes of the Archangel Michael and took the title of "sfântului Duh arhangelul Mihail" – the Holy Spirit Archangel Michael (*O vedenie*, 1924: 26). Alexandru had four brothers; Ion, who became identified with John the Baptist and was referred to as "Tătunea Ion" or dear Father John; Grigore, who according to his own visions was Christ embodied on earth and was referred to by his followers as "Dumnezeul viu pe pământ", the Living Lord on Earth; and Petru and Gheorghe, who were both modeled as saints and disciples of their brothers. The Culeacs, especially Alexandru, Ion and Grigore, went on to publish their visionary experiences and immortalize themselves in icon paintings and numerous devotional images and photographs, spreading their message of repentance, divine immanence and the end of days throughout Bessarabia. The Culeac brothers, according to Soviet propaganda sources, convinced some of Inochentie's followers that had been driven underground in Romania and the Soviet Union to recognize them as his spiritual heirs and hence inherited an already existing network of followers. The movement, most commonly referred to Archangelism, went on to constitute the most widespread and, from the perspective of the authorities, one of the most troubling (alongside Jehovah's Witnesses) illegal underground religious group in Moldova. This is evidenced in the volume of anti-Archangelist propaganda publications, newspaper articles and even documentary films published by the Soviet authorities.



Alexandru's visionary career began in 1920 when he experienced a long and complex set of visions and dreams that he published in a 36 page booklet in 1924 under the title *A Vision that appeared in the year 1920 (O vedenie, 1924)*. Grigore, his younger brother by one year, also had visions that he published under the title *The visions of Grigore Culiac and his sufferings for the confession of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (Vedeniile lui Grigore Culiac, n.d.)*. Alexandru, Ion and Grigore drew on the capital associated with their forerunners, Inochentie and Feodosie Livitsky, the holy man around whose relicts Inochentie had built his flock, and in their visionary texts these two 'prophets' herald in the future mission of the Culeacs. Alexandru's vision opens with a preamble that sets the stage for appearance of the Archangel Michael on earth.

And this is how it is said, the sound of the trumpet of the Last Judgement. So it is said that the Archangel Michael will come to wage war with the Antichrist, and this he has done now and this is the witness of the two. As it was told 10 years ago by Father Inochentie and Saint Feodosie, and he is now doing in Bessarabia. It is said that the Holy Trinity in three persons, two of them were the Father and the Son and the third the Spirit of the Holy Archangel Michael.

And to ensure there was no doubt about the identity of the Archangel Michael on earth, he adds:

And these two great and powerful prophets, Father Inochentie and Saint Feodosie prophesied and said that there will come to Bessarabia young and old, great and small. They said there will come a youngster 17 years of age after him [Inochentie]" (*O vedenie, 1924: 6*).

Grigore too, after introducing his own visions as "heavenly [visions] of the second coming of Jesus Christ on earth in the flesh" refers to his forerunners, imploring Christians to have faith in Inochentie as Elijah and Feodosie as Enoch, the two great and powerful prophets who "prophesied and found the path to judgment" (*Vedeniile lui Grigore Culiac, n.d.*).

Taking on these divine identities, the brothers initiated parallel networks. According to later Soviet reports they divided up the territory of Moldova between them. At a meeting in a village in the district of Rezina, Alexandru Culiac announced that "he embodied the spirit of the "Archangel Michael", and that the spirit of "John the Baptist" had entered his brother Ion" and the decision was taken to "share the territory of Moldova into spheres of activity of the new "saints"" (Alexandrov, 1958: 22). "Ion Culiac, who was proclaimed 'Tătunea Ion', left with a group of sectant-preachers to the district of Bălți, Grigore Culiac – to Bender district, George – to Cahul district, Petru – to Soroca district, while Alexandru was reserved the districts of Rezina and Orhei" (Alexandrov, 1958: 22). The movement, however, divided roughly in two with Ion Culiac, "Tătunea Ion", heading the *Tătuniștii*, literally "Fatherists", and Alexandru Culiac "Arhangel Mihail" forming the "Archangelists" sect (Alexandrov, 1958: 22- 23). The closing passage of Alexandru's vision of 1920 establishes three principle persons of the new movement, himself as Archangel Michael coterminous with the Holy Spirit, his brother Ion as John the Baptist and his wife as the Mother of God.

The whole mystery of all the beloved of the Lord of Hosts and our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit Archangel Michael. The Consubstantial Trinity undivided which is working today on Earth in the flesh, and John the Baptist and the Mother of God (*O vedenie, 1924: 26*).

The evolution of the related but distinct groups the Culiacs founded is difficult to piece together but following the death of Ion in 1945, the Archangelists and Tătunists appear to have merged into one network under Alexandru and Ion's wife Ecaterina Stechi (Shvedov 1959, 3).

Already by 1924, Alexandru had grasped the power of the image, and of photomontage and collage in particular, to convey his message of divine election and embodiment. In the image that appears in the frontispiece to his *Visionary text, O vedenie* (see Figure 4.), he is pictured as the Archangel Michael endowed with symbolic attributes, including a dove at his heart to indicate the composite identity of *sfântului Duh arhangelul Mihail*, The Holy Spirit Archangel Michael.



**Figure 8.** A copy of a photo-collage icon of Alexandru Culeac, the 'Archangel Michael', reproduced from the frontispiece of the 1924 edition of 'A Vision that appeared in the year 1920' (*O vedenie* 1924)

Until the death of Ion Culiac, "Tătunea Ion", in 1945, the two networks existed side by side. However, according to Alexandru Culiac's confession published in 1959 "Before his death he asked that those who believe in him follow him to the next world and that he will open the gates of heaven for them. This started the mortification of many innocent people" (Carpunina and Sibiriakov, 1959: 29), and Alexandru successfully united the two groups into one network together with Ion's wife Ecaterina Stechi who was modelled the Mother of God (Shvedov, 1959: 3). In 1946 the KGB reported the widespread presence of the "so-called Inochentist sect", which by this stage largely comprised Archangelists and Tātunists, "in almost every locality of Moldova" (Pasat, 2009: 200).



The Culeacs were masters of “border crossing”. They crossed not only the literal territorial borders between Romanian Bessarabia and the Soviet Ukraine, proselytizing and trafficking between communities first established by Inochentie around his movements strongholds in Balta and Lipetcoe (reports of their illegal activities across the border can be found in the press in the interwar period, see for example “Apostolul” 1937), but more significantly the border between human and divine. One of the ways they did this, as with Inochentie before them, was through the use of evocative visual imagery in order to collapse sacred time with contemporary history and events. They also utilized the folk songs and charms texts of vernacular tradition as a powerful resource to gain authority (See *O vedenie* 1924). Another important aspect of their role as “mediators”, something I have not had space to explore in this article, was between Orthodox monastic culture and Orthodox parishes. Inochentists and Archangelists engage in a critique of the Church that constantly seeks to call Orthodoxy back to its pure roots reflected in the monastic tradition.

## Conclusion

Transitions “from one polity to another” characterize the last two hundred years of the history of Moldova (Dumitru and Negura, 2014: 3). The various state formations attempted to assimilate the territory nationally and religiously and to socially engineer the population in order to integrate Moldova into new state systems; in this context the loyalty of the population was always an issue (Dumitru and Negura 2014, 4). As Dumitru and Negura point out, the models of “political governance and identification” were always “imported from the outside and were not an “autochthonous” production of the indigenous elites” (Dumitru and Negura 2014: 3). Indigenous Moldovan leadership emerged in the religious sphere in the form of charismatic monastic and peasant actors. In this article I have briefly introduced two of them although there are several others that could be included in such a study. Leadership amongst marginalized and colonized peoples during times of crisis often finds expression through religious charisma and possession cults in particular (Lewis, 1989). Weber explicitly links the emergence of “charisma” to periods when there is a “suspension of the ordinary course of life” when crises or dramatic events need resolution. With “charisma” comes the “prophet” who works as a counter point to priestly “routinized” religion giving rise to sects and heterodox positions (Szakolczai, 2000: 12-13). In vernacular Orthodox culture in Moldova the potential for the emergence of such figures during times of crisis is enhanced by the availability and popularity of narratives that prophesize the intervention of divine and supernatural actors in worldly affairs.

Inochentie Levizor and Alexandru Culeac, the founders of Inochentism and Archangelism respectively, are significant characters as they succeeded in achieving a certain “decentering” of Orthodox authority through their bodily, material and visual cultural interventions. They established “liminal” movements that remained nominally within the Orthodox Church whilst critiquing contemporary Orthodox institutions and practices. The Orthodox Church in both Romania and Russia in the twentieth century has a history of compromise and entanglement with state politics and power. The “liminality” of Inochentism and Archangelism arose at a time of extreme crises and change which has defied political resolution, just as the permanent culture of critique of Orthodoxy from its own margins also defies resolution.

What I term “liminal” Orthodoxies are those which, according to their own self-representation and self-identification, occupy a space of critique of the “Church of this world” from a marginal position that is focused on the next world and stands at the threshold of the End of Days. Liminality deals with what happens during times of

passage, times of change and times of crisis. In Orthodoxy, the structural relationship between magic (or the popular miraculous), the prophetic agency of the monasteries and the institutional priesthood presents a particular situation in which “liminality” is prone to take on a fluid permanency. Liminality has an innovative or generative quality that is in tension with an attachment to the familiar patterns, practices and ways of being in the world that are more readily associated with folk religion.

In his discussion of contemporary Western radical ecclesiologies, Henk de Roest opts for the category of *marginal* as a “non-judgmental” term to describe those ecclesiologies “which have arisen out of, or are located on, the margins of mainstream (or ‘traditional’) churches” (de Roest, 2008). The narratives told by members of such groups “to articulate and justify their identity” are often excluded from discussions about the histories, identities and trajectories of their mainstream counterparts. One of the aims of this chapter is to stand as a corrective to these tendencies by demonstrating that groups that occupy the unsettling periphery and that transgress Orthodox boundaries can tell us much about the centre ground from which they are excluded. The marginality of such groups is an indication of their liminal status and their transformative power as masters of gateways or crossing points.

The idea that Christ or other divine or saintly persons have returned to earth and walk amongst us in a new guise was not an Inochentist or Archangelist innovation. Amongst radical and mystical Russian sects, starting with the Christ Faith in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the bodily reincarnation of successive Christs and of the Holy Spirit, in both male and female in form, was at the heart of their radical beliefs (Zhuk, 2004: 15). The belief in human incarnations of divine persons is condemned in Russian Orthodoxy as the heresy of *chelovekoobozhanie*, “worshiping man” (Engelstein, 1999: 51) and Inochentism came to be associated with this current of Russia mysticism (Leu Botoșăneanu, 1929: 51). I argue here, however, that the particular case of twentieth century Moldova, when the “liminal” phases of transition from one state to another and from one religious institution, calendar and language to another, in this marginal borderland became permanent, the conditions were right for the ultimate form of border crossing, between the divine and human realms, to manifest multiple times.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The territory of the present day Republic of Moldova has also historically been referred to as Bessarabia. For a fuller account of terminologies associated with the territory see King, 2000: 18-22.

<sup>2</sup> The Revised Julian Calendar was adopted by the Orthodox Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Poland, and Bulgaria at a congress in Constantinople in May 1923. Russia along with Ukraine, Georgia and Jerusalem rejected its introduction.

<sup>3</sup> The lunar part of the Calendar, used for the calculation of Easter, was rejected by all Eastern Orthodox Churches which is why Easter is celebrated on the same day amongst all Orthodox.

<sup>4</sup> For a full account of these territorial changes and the politics of rivalry between Romania and the Soviet Union see van Meurs (1994) and King (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Following the Crimean War, three districts in the south of Bessarabia were awarded to the Romanian Principalities from Russian territory. Between 1856 and 1878 the Romanian Church and state authorities tried to reverse the Russification process by introducing Romanian schools and Romanian language liturgy in the Churches (see King, 2000: 22-23; Kapaló, 2011: 51-52).

<sup>6</sup> See in particular Mozes Gaster's works on and collections of Romanian popular literature and manuscripts (Gaster, 1883; n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> See Gaster (n.d., 158-176) on the apocryphal legends the Apocalypse of the Mother of God, *Epistolia Maicii Domnului*, and *Apocalypsul Apostolului Pavel*, the Apocalypse of the Apostle Paul.

<sup>8</sup> See Gaster, n.d.: 46-51, Pócs, 2002, and Kapaló, 2011: 221-224.

<sup>9</sup> On the cult of the Archangel Michael in Byzantine Orthodox tradition see Olar, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Moldavia was the centre of a spiritual revival in Orthodoxy in the eighteenth century. The Ukrainian born monk Paisii Velichkovskii, who championed the use of patristic ascetic texts and the tradition of the Prayer of the Heart, was invited to lead a revival of monastic life in Moldavia by Prince Grigore III Ghica (1764-67 and 1774-77). The monasteries of northern Moldavia (Bucovina) and central Moldavia remain important centres of monastic ascetic practice.

<sup>11</sup> J. Eugene Clay's article on Inochentism (Clay, 1998) draws mainly on Russian language sources and although it gives a generally reliable outline of events in the life of Inochentie, it fails to discuss questions of Inochentie's teachings and divine identity in any depth.

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller account of the role of women and possession in the early Inochentist movement see Kapaló, 2017b (forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> During World War 2 the region between the river Dniester and the river Bug was administered by Romania as the Transnistria Governorate. This multiethnic region included the whole territory of the former Soviet Moldavian ASSR, which existed from 1924 to 1940 including Balta, the site the Inochentie's original monastery, and Lipetcoe, the location of the 'Raiu' community.

<sup>14</sup> I expand on the theme of the relationship between the divine identity of Inochentie and visual representation in Kapaló 2014; Kapaló 2017a (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> Inochentie's hagiography contains numerous episodes that mimic or parallel biblical narratives such as the feeding of the five thousand and the passion and resurrection of Christ.

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