Religious Identity in Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song* and Liviu Rebreanu's *The Forest of the Hanged*

Adrian COBUȘTEANU

El siguiente trabajo representa un papel de literatura comparada, investigando la búsqueda de la identidad religiosa en las obras de dos gran clásicos europeos, de la primera mitad del siglo 20, el escoses Lewis Grassic Gibbon y el rumano Liviu Rebreanu, y sus correspondientes obras, Sunset Song y The Forest of the Hanged. La investigación está centrada sobre tres niveles de búsqueda, tomando en cuenta el papel de la iglesia, la figura del sacerdote y el pensamiento sobre la vida futura.

Palabras clave: (religiosa) de identidad, iglesia, sacerdote, otra vida.

Although both novels are set in societies that were tributary to tradition, heavily imbued by the religious dynamic of their times, it is visible, at a closer look, the different ways in which each one of them relates itself to faith. Their corresponding *religious identities* are very different. On the one hand, we have before our eyes the panorama of a still Orthodox Transylvanian society, faithful to its bi-millennial past and tradition, not interested by the winds of change blowing elsewhere (as the Hapsburg's pressure to convert themselves to its Roman-Catholic faith[1]) while on the other, there is presented to us a Protestant Scottish society that has further reformed the Catholic reforms through the Counter Reform.

[1] The statistical figures of the Roman-Catholic subjects in the Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy were dwindling as the figures of the Calvinist subjects in the Hungarian half were on the increase. Thus, in order to avoid an unbalanced religious configuration within the empire, Vienna, in the wake of the Hapsburgs' conquest of Transylvania (1683), tried to boost up its figures by converting the Orthodox Transylvanians. Some of the Transylvanian, such as the Orthodox Metropolitan Atanasie Anghel and its followers (most of them were not even aware of the difference between the Orthodox and the Catholic Church), yielded to the pressure of the 1701 Uniate Act, entering into full communion with the See of Rome. Thus it was established the Romanian (Transylvanian) Greek-Catholic Church. Anghel thought that by doing this the Romanian Transylvanians would acquire more rights within the Kingdom of Hungary, like the German ethnics of Transylvania or the local Magyar nobility were having them. But reality proved to be otherwise as the manoeuvre was just a trick on behalf of the Hapsburg side.

BDD-A19547 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:45 UTC)

Given those differences and the different ways of relating to, and approaching the Divinity, collectively and personally, there is still present that urge of searching for the Absolute, that hunger for Truth, the answer to all answers that makes a person free. The people in Transylvania turn to the Church and to the local priest for guidance and for a word of illumination, following into the footsteps of their ancestors' tradition. In Scotland, given the different social and political circumstances that the Church (*the Kirk*) had to go through (affecting it directly or indirectly, sometimes playing a central role in all these changes), its image was affected and people turn elsewhere in order to quench their craving thirst for spirituality.

In Chris's case the answer lies within the impressive megalithic monument of the *Standing Stones*. The stones are part of an ancient spiritual complex, a pre-Christian sanctuary. Though the stones are in various positions, most of them being tilted or flatten down, out of this circle of scattered stone, three of them, right in the middle, are looking stronger as they are still standing upright. Though the three central stones, through a Christian parallel, resemble the Holy Trinity, which endures forever, and the surrounding ones are, for the earthly visible part of the Church, its ministers, which were perceived, at that time, in the Presbyterian Church, as the fallen ones, as the ones responsible for most of the evil to be encountered within the Scottish society. In addition to this, the stones' long shadows, during the sunset, are pointing due East, like a reminder that the roots of religion are in the East and not all links with it are severed at present, or lost forever.

1. **The Role of the Church**

The Presbyterian Church of Scotland is perceived in the eyes of many Scots as guilty for the social stagnation of the Scottish society. Gibbon uses a very harsh tone in order to describe it:

Next door the kirk was an olden tower, built in the time of the Roman Catholics, the coarse creatures, and it was fell old and wasn't used any more except by the cushat-doves and they flew in and out the narrow slips in the upper storey and nested there all the year round and the place was fair white with their dung. (SS 19).

For Gibbon, the church, *the kirk*, is a dreadful thing, a relic from the Roman Catholics, them *coarse creatures.* Only pigeons fly in and out anymore, as they please. In the Catholic Church the dominant colour is white but now the church is not illuminated by white candles or reflecting the whiteness of the priests' robes, but it is itself buried under an amount of *white dung*, as though the purification colour is to be found anymore only in this cover of detritus.

In Transylvania, the situation is different. The church is the heart of the rural community, of the village. It acts as a light-house, guiding the souls, "Soon, the glimmer of the church's tower could be seen through the darkness..."(FH 162).

BDD-A19547 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:45 UTC)

His eyes were gazing without bewilderment, though the yard has disappeared, and the field too, and all the land as well and only the cross on the top of the church was shining very gentle... (FH 191).

The Holy Liturgy is the only thing that keeps the *Transylvanian community* together, where people can freely speak off their worries and problems through the sacrament of confession, where they meet not only with other suffering folks and neighbours but also with the memory of their fore-fathers (that had to suffer too), *the collective memories* of *the national community.*

If everyday life flows under the specific mundane pressures of that given place and time, and everybody has to gear up to the pace and requirements of the imperial law, then on Sundays things are slightly different; the community gives to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, during the week, and to God what belongs to God, on Sundays. People are attending religious services but according to their denomination. The Transylvanians gather round the place where the Holy Liturgy is carried out into their mother tongue, Romanian, by the local Transylvanian priest, Boteanu, who sings humbly, in a higher voice and with his eyes shut.

Regarding the community and its participation into the liturgical act there is also a stark contrast between the two communities. If in Transylvania we see a fervent activity and implication (especially during the great feasts of the church or during the Holy Week) in Scotland, on certain occasions, the three, four attending ministers meant the majority of the people present within the church at that given service.

2. **The Figure of the Priest**

Father Constantin Boteanu is a modest figure that gives the Caesar his part (agreeing that the Transylvanians use the conqueror's language) without absconding from his responsibilities underlining that their ideal is God. He is a fearful person that charges all his words with humbleness; a person that feels shame and listens to the others with his eyes touching the ground. The only time when he allows himself to boasts proudly is when he praises his wife. His household seems to be shrouded in happiness:

Then the service started. Father Boteanu was singing humbly, in a higher voice, with his eyes shut or raised towards Heavens. The light[2] was playing onto his slim face, casting the look of a saint from an old icon (FH 237).

He is very aware of his flaws as a mortal being. When Apostol comes to tell him about his desertion plans –thinking that he has an ally in the priest– Boteanu reminds him about their chat in the train the day before. He was returning from a camp where he was detained without being guilty or any other culpable reason and

[2] It is not just the sunlight entering through one of the churches stained glasses' but it is also a parallel to the *uncreated light* of God that the Holy Spirit brings it down upon the earth and enshrouds the saints with it, it is the very same light seen by the apostles Peter, James and John on the Mount Tabor during Jesus' Transfiguration.

BDD-A19547 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:45 UTC)

he did not want any further implication, given the current foreign occupation of the country and the unfolding war.

"But you are Romanian, father, my brother!" said Bologa flabbergasted.

"I'm only a man today, Apostol", answered father Constantin more relaxed. (FH 153).

Nevertheless, later he is body and soul next to Apostol's quest for the eternal light of truth (especially after he is caught and condemned to death). He drags him literally to the grave, as Apostol cannot walk anymore and has to lean on him[3] but he also sends him on his way to Heaven. He is not just a childhood mate and a good friend, but he is his teacher as well as his spiritual leader (as Apostol is his disciple).

His most dominant stance is during the service of Resurrection. With the Holy Book in one hand and a lit candle in the other, he summons the people to come and receive the light. A sea of candles would stretch towards him: "... the priest's voice, strong and triumphant, cheerful as a silver trumpet: Christ is risen from the dead..." (FH 237).

Although the whole service is carried out in Romanian, we learn from Ilona that only the sermon is delivered by the priest in Hungarian, thus everybody could understand it. Beside the Hungarians leaving in the area there are children from mixed marriages or families whom, due to various motives, have adopted Hungarian as their first language, in the detriment of their own mother tongue, Romanian.

In Scotland, the situation appears to be the other way round. The men of the cloth are the betrayers of the local community due to their allegiances with the aristocracy and the powerful elites supported by the English money. For the Scottish eyes their guilt lies into the Clearances, in the Industrial Revolution, in the emigration, in their lack of compassion and generosity, in the superiority given by books and habits, etc.

They are not even decent men or men worth of sincere respect; they are *them minister creatures* or even worse than creatures as Long Rob classed them lower than horses. In addition, he thinks that their depravity is without limits:

... up to a great flat hill-top where lay a bit loch that nested snipe by the hundred; and some said there was no bottom to it, the loch, and Long Rob of the Mill said that made it like the depths of a parson's depravity. (SS 23).

They are either stuttering creatures or curly bulls, scared rabbits diving at night under the blankets frightened by lighting or dogs lapping up their porridge. Only an *Auld Kirk Minister* could *"skin a tink for his sark and preach for a pension in purgatory..."* (SS 51) They were not perceived anymore as God's servants on Earth but like any other Tom, Dick or Harry: "So the curly bull prayed and boomed beside her, it was what he was paid for, she neither listened nor cared." (SS 91).

[3] Resembling the moments when Jesus, carrying His cross along the Via Dolorosa, towards His crucifixion point, had to lean, at times, on Simon of Cyrene.

BDD-A19547 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:45 UTC)

They were simple mortal beings, stripped of their divine power, men that would swear, get involved into brawls, indulge into the mundane pleasure of sin, and have love liaisons with women like any other layman:

Down came the sack and there among the hay was the minister and the maid from the Mains that had scraiched so loud, she'd her arms round him and the big curly bull was kissing the quean like a dog lapping up its porridge. (SS 125).

In a changing world that enriched itself and brought back slavery, "ministers went with it and whored with the rest" (SS 67).

Their sermons varies, from boring sermons to Hell raising ones, from plain, straight sermons to thrilling ones, from pro-home sermons to anti (pro-Germans) ones. But the general feeling among the congregation is not that the homily is the peak moment of the liturgical service, but another (sometimes boring) moment that they have to put up with on a Sunday: "She wished she were back in Blawearie, and hoped the minister would not be over long-winded when he said his say." (SS 94).

3. **The Thought of Afterlife**

Death, for a practicing Christian, does not represent the end of life (of this mundane life) but it is the beginning of the next one, the gate for *the afterlife*, *the celestial patria*. Thus, the Resurrection night becomes the apex of the Christian liturgical year.

In *The Forest of the Hanged* the Resurrection night and its service is described into minute details. Ilona wakes up Apostol on the night with the following words: "Wake up, you lazy... Come on, don't just lose The Resurrection!" (235) This is not just a wakeup call for Apostol on behalf of Ilona, it is a warning, a wakeup call on behalf of Rebreanu for all of us.

Svoboda dies with the hope of the afterlife, so does Apostol, and so do scores of other soldiers caught in between consciousness dilemmas, like all them Czech defecting soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian army, that were filling up the branches in that forest of the hanged, behind the Italian front.

If Christ is Christ[4], it is for the fact that having conquered death He has bestowed through His glorious Resurrection a new meaning upon life and the whole creation. In a similar manner, Apostol's sacrifice materialises into the resurrection of his people and their new identity. The dream of the Transylvanian Romanians of living within a Romanian state becomes eventually true as Transylvania becomes part of the Kingdom of Romania after the conclusion of the First World War.

In *Sunset Song* the idea of a second life, of an afterlife though and not of a reincarnation, appears scantly and very vaguely, more in a rhetorical manner: "And Chris thought of her dream looking up at the coarse lands of the hills and thinking of the lands of death, was that where Christ would meet with father?" (94).

[4] *I am Who I am*. Ex. (3,14).

BDD-A19547 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:45 UTC)

Regarding Scotland there is not an individual act of resurrection that encompasses the *identity* of the whole nation. There is no martyrdom and no ultimate sacrifice. In this sense, as to parallel Apostol's destiny, Chris comes closer to his stance, but more from a survival point of view rather than anything else. She is the key for the evolution of the whole country. Her path follows closely the transformation of her community and of its environment. She comes to symbolise, in a word, Scotland's destiny.

Bibliography

Butiurcă, Doina. *Simbolismul religios în opera lui Liviu Rebreanu.*Editura Universitas XXI, Iași, 2005

Craig, Cairns (editor); Craig, Cairns (general editor). *The History of Scottish Literature, vol. 4, Twentieth Century*, AUP, Aberdeen, 1987

Grassic Gibbon, Lewis. *A Scots Quair*, London, Penguin Books, 1986

Mitu, Sorin. *National Identity of Romanians in Transylvania.* Budapest, Central European University Press, 2001

Murray, Isobel &Bob Tait. *Ten Modern Scottish Novels*, Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1984

Rebreanu, Liviu. *Pădurea Spînzuraților* Editura Mondoro, 2012

Wittig, Kurt. *The Scottish Tradition in Literature,* second edition, Westport, Connecticut, 1972

BDD-A19547 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:45 UTC)