

“THE RING METAPHOR AND THE SPIRIT OF SOFIA”*
BY H.E. LINO BIANCO AS COURTESY VOLUME
OF ESSAYS ON BALKAN AND MEDITERRANEAN
SPIRITUALITY AND URBAN SPACES

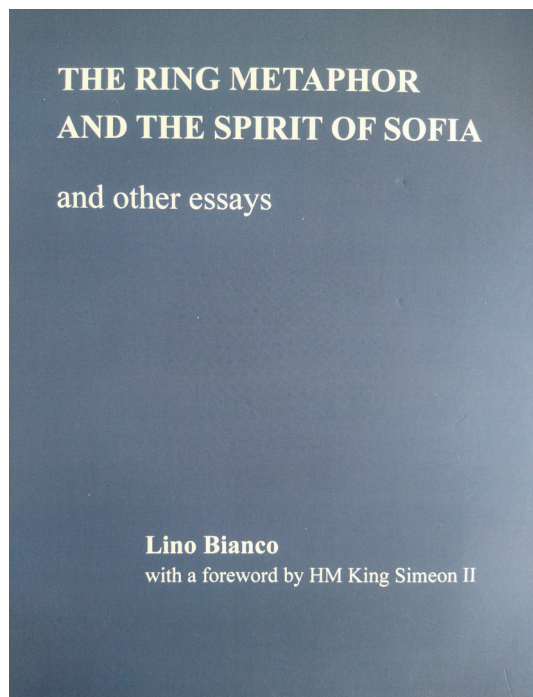
Valentin Petroussenko

I start this paper with a humble feeling of long time unaccomplished duty to my good friend, Lino Bianco. Certainly, he is an extraordinary man and for sure has so many friends in many countries. But there is some special feeling of respect and affection between us and he is sharing his generous friendship towards my whole family – my wife and my both sons.

But let's start from the very beginning.

When I first met Lino Bianco, I was impressed of his easy-going character. The impression was as if we had known each other for a long time. He had an extraordinary capacity in many fields, but first of all, he was a teacher, proudly bearing this profession as fundamental.

On the same basis is his performance as Non-Residential Ambassador. Being diplomatic representative in several countries at a time,



he was constantly travelling. He had not any office and during his visits used a local cafeteria behind his hotel as a meeting point. Usually, he had a long list of scheduled meetings every time. Above all, he possess high expertise about each country of his residence and was easily welcomed by great circle of public and political personalities. With such a rare personality, he asked me to secure an invitation for him to my university, so that he could deliver a public lecture. Discussing on the topic, we came to the end of making three consecutive lectures. We did this and from the very beginning Lino Bianco acclaimed great audience, then provoking lively discussions after these performances. However, we never reached the aim of three connected lectures, Lino soon was replaced with his diplomatic office to another country and visited my university for the second lecture on voluntary basis, just to keep his promises to return again. Then the COVID pandemic dumped on and this changed lives of everyone for long period. So, we never accomplished the third planned lecture, but nevertheless, the future developments may give us the chance.

My last meeting with Lino Bianco (for now, and I hope not the last) was shortly after his new book was published. He asked me to write a review for a prominent foreign editorial house. I gladly accepted this honor. But starting to read the book, I encountered myself stuck and overwhelmed by such a huge responsibility. I was not sure if my review would cope with the high requirements of that editorial. But above all, the essays of the author were very integral and complex. They required deep thought and some mystical approach. My huge responsibility towards this text was further heightened by the foreword written by H.M. King Simeon II, the former Prime Minister of Bulgaria. On the other hand, the introduction was a courtesy of Prof. Vladimir Gradev, a prominent philosopher and theologian, and former a Bulgarian Ambassador to the Holy See and the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. Certainly, the deep theologian character of the

essays required also a special preparation and absorption. In fact, I could not accomplish this task in two months and then, as is often the case, the everyday overwhelming academic agenda did not allowed me to return to the text. I felt deep regret and feeling guilty for this delay locked me in a vicious circle again and again. But now I feel much more secure and motivated to finish this promise applying to the edition of the Institute of Knowledge Management (IKM) from the Northern Republic of Macedonia. I have a previous collaboration history with several publications, I am also sure that the journals of IKM have great international circulation and are read by an astonishingly big intellectual audience. And above all, the editorial team provides a very smooth and friendly atmosphere to facilitate in every sense the process of writing our texts.

Well, after this personal introduction, we get back to the very volume to be presented. The book of H.E. Lino Bianco is compendium of six essays, which originally were published by the journal *Melita Theologica*, an edition of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta. The publication itself was a work of the Maltese editorial group Kite, and apart from the texts, the book is richly illustrated by professional plans of urban planning and photographs representing historical evolution of several sites of cultural heritage. In fact, here we should mention again that Lino Bianco holds a PhD in urban planning, and the first three essays are dedicated to the cultural legacy and current urban situation of three capitals – Sofia, Valletta and London. We should add also, that these texts are not merely written in the language of an architect, but represent a deep immersion into spirituality, unfolding into an intellectual perception how features of the past are visible in the contemporary urban settings.

The first essay, *The Ring Metaphor and the Spirit of Sofia*, was in fact a leading part of Lino Bianco's doctoral research. Laying ground on the Enlightenment philosophy of the German theologian Lessing, the author compares the notion

of the spiritual ring of tolerance, as represented in his epic drama *Nathan the Wise*. Indeed, going through the synopsis in the poem of Lessing, the author remarks the classic “ring metaphor” as symbolic tolerance between the three main religions – Christianity, Islam, and, of course, Judaism. Certainly, our author would not be a truly faithful Maltese, without mentioning a nice element in the Lessing’s narrative – the main protagonist Nathan, returning back from Palestine, finds his house burned down, but his daughter being saved by a young German Templar, who was captive in the hands of Muslims, but was spared because of the well-known tolerance of the wise Saladin. Thus, the metaphor of the “tolerance ring” is substantially enriched by the Lino Bianco’s going into depth of the early history of Serdica (the Roman name of current capital Sofia). For instance, upon the conquest of this city, well known by the numerous thermal waters, by then pagan Proto-Bulgarian ruler Khan Krum in the early 9th century, all this territory had traditionally been Christian. And they continued to live with their religious beliefs, despite the fact that the Bulgarian Khanate was officially baptized into Christianity nearly 60 years later.

During the following centuries, Islam came to the lands of Bulgaria with the Ottoman conquest. Although Sofia was a relatively small regional urban center at the time, it now possesses one of the finest gems of Ottoman architecture. The Banya Bashi Mosque, now the only active mosque in Sofia, was built in the mid-16th century by the era’s most prominent architect, engineer, and urban creator, Mimar Sinan. Following on, Lino Bianco makes a brilliant urban design analysis of the architectural balance and spiritual harmony in the center of Sofia. This is, indeed, a unique place where in a one square mile all world religions appear in full tolerance. Reflecting the historical division of Christianity, both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions are present with their churches. In the vicinity, we even find both Armenian and Romanian churches. So,

this square mile is really a religious oasis of tolerance. Lino Bianco has very professional and integrated approach, combining classical urban design perspective with spiritual analysis. He seeks the cultural roots through epochs, despite changing religions. His study is full with detailed maps and sketches, panoramic air views and parallel presentation of historic and contemporary photographs of different buildings.

Same patterns are applied in the two following essays – *Valetta: A City in History*, and *Limestone in Post-War British Architecture: Is It a Plea for Return to Pugin?*. The former is a diligent study of the arising problems how current modernization affects the bases of Maltese capital historical legacy. This is not only theoretical essay, but it gives some possible ways how civil community and local residents may induce regional authorities to be more careful in keeping the cultural heritage of La Valetta. The colourful taste of this urban design assessing is due to the personal position of the author towards his home place.

The latter essay is also interesting in recalling the classical British theory of architecture of Augustus Pugin (one of the pioneers of the Gothic Revival) with emphasizing the limestone as basic construction material, against arising British architectural Modernism in the decades following the end of Second World War. At the time, the use of light metal constructions appeared more fashionable, being considerably cheaper in addition to its fast construction dynamics. However, in Lino Bianco’s view, this was very dubious way to turn the urban features and his personal call is to preserve the cultural heritage through combination of limestone and metal constructions in the appearing new architectural landscape.

We have also an exquisite essay entitled *Hegel’s Notion of Gothic Architecture* which underlies once again the specific academic approach of Lino Bianco, who goes beyond the simplified urban design to incorporate in his study deep cultural, philosophical and theological methods,

which in sum gives us a perfect piece of theoretical study with serious pragmatic weight and advises how to develop the modern urban styles while also preserving our cultural heritage and intellectual traditions.

The last two essays feature a co-author. Saviour Catania and Lino Bianco write about the early cinematographic work of the French director Alain Resnais from 1961 – *L'Anée Dernière à Marienbad and the Cartography of an Orphic life-in-death: The Modern Katábasis of Resnais*. Here the author demonstrates his ability to write texts in the field of cultural studies. He turns around the Ancient Greek mythological protagonists Orpheus and Eurydice to make an example how human relations receive different readings by the ancient contemporaries like Ovid and Vergil. To this analysis he introduces a contemporary Modernist perception of the classic love triangle drawing a parallel with René Magritte's artwork *The Empire of Light*.

Curiously, the very last essay – *Music in Teaching Religion and in Primary Schools*, demonstrates the other angle of this book in the field of children education. Certainly, with the help of co-authors, here we can see a theoretical approach to understand the value and social role

of music in providing children more possibilities to interact in small communities. In fact, this essay contributes to the concept of how singing helps the children to create their own emotional personality and a taste of art. The process of singing also has an important Kinaesthetic element to facilitate children's psychological and physical health status. But it also can be enriched with spiritual element, thus prolonging Maltese deep traditions with the religious element of their cultural roots.

Concluding, we may assure that the book of H.E. Lino Bianco is really piece of art with so many angles. It gives us profound insight to the spiritual and historic meaning of our traditional urban environment, shedding light on how to merge the technocratic urban design description with fine and emotional intellectual observation of our centuries-long historic roots, and provides a better vision how to preserve our rich cultural heritage. This book also shows us the fascinating history and modern development of two countries, Malta and Bulgaria, which are quite remote, but can come closer together by utilizing the platform of cultural diplomacy and personal contacts among their people.

Assoc. Prof. PhD Valentin Petroussenko

Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski", Bulgaria
petrus@uni-plovdiv.bg

* *The Ring Metaphor and the Spirit of Sofia and other essays* by H.E. Lino Bianco, Kite Group Publishers, Malta, First edited 2022.
ISBN 978-9918-23-053-2 (Hardback)
978-9918-23-054-9 (Paperback)