

WRITING THE PAST: COMMUNISM AND THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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This topic speaks about two major concepts: the State and the Church. On the one hand, the State produces a public discourse on general (national) progress and welfare. On the other hand, the Church preaches a sermon concerning the eternal happiness related to material safety. Both the State and the Church use about the same public as the target of their discourses. Both the political field and the religious one resort to propaganda or publicity in order to persuade. More or less, these institutions need recruits to reproduce their systems. Thus, they have to share the power, finding itself, in the same time, in position to negotiate it with public (citizens or faithful).

1. Interwar period: history, Church and public

Between 1920 and 1939 Romanian church historiography established patterns of interpretation of the past, marks used in the future as generalized norms in analysis and synthesis. Historians of the Orthodox Church argued that the past must be written within a specific frame. They identified it with the patristic times, finding ideas for a theoretical foundation.¹

Ecclesiastical historiography sets up the features of the patristic frame, endorsed by a cultural and intellectual context, encouraged by a traditional and religious public. Historiography believes that the past is sacred: God gave humanity time to pursue its salvation. History becomes a struggle between good and evil, virtue and vice.

Very soon, the Romanian Orthodox Church changes its way. 1948 brings major modifications: Romania becomes a Communist state preaching a new humankind, proletarian. Communists foretell total progress and final happiness. Will the Church manage the new situation? Will the Orthodox Church fight for truth and liberty or for only survival?

¹ Olivier Gillet, *Religie și naționalism. Ideologia Bisericii Ortodoxe Române sub regimul comunist*, București, Editura Compania, 2001, p. 28.

2. After 1989: historians, Church and opinions

Mircea Păcurariu, a voice of the Romanian Orthodox Church, argues that 23 August 1944 represents a historic event bringing Romanians liberty, progress and peace. He believes that Romanians are now free to build a new society ruled by justice, equality and welfare.² He holds these ideas in 1981, probably under the pressure of the Communist censorship. The same historian republishes his book after 1989 and points out that 23 August 1944 establishes a totalitarian regime. Mircea Păcurariu believes that the changes after 1947 involved not only the economical, political or cultural structures, but also the Orthodox Church itself. The Church had to accommodate new modifications in order to survive, doing this with the help of certain prestigious hierarchs like Justinian Marina.³

Radu Ciuceanu thinks that the Romanian Orthodox Church is a basic establishment of Romanian people. This is why the Communist Party tried to annihilate the Christian spirituality and turn the Orthodox Church into a device in the hands of the Communist leaders.⁴ According to Cristina Păiușan, the monks led by patriarch Marina played an important role against the totalitarianism. For the so-called Securitate, they represented a veritable enemy.⁵

Mihai Ungheanu emphasizes that certain historians ignored two forms of anticommunist fight: opposition and resistance. Instead, they underlined the street fight and army resistance. In his view, the category of resistance has a smaller branch: the endurance in institutions. He believes that the activity of the Orthodox Church under Communism fits this category.⁶ The Christian establishment was a big stake for political power trying to assure the stability of the Communist Romania.⁷ Priest Ioan Dură agrees with Mihai Ungheanu. He speaks about another shape of resistance: the silence. In addition, I. Dură thinks there are no studies on clothes during the totalitarian regime. It could show the lack of the Romanians' ideological conformism.⁸ Clothes, like those monks used to wear had to show what silence wanted to hide.

In his book *Religion and nationalism*, Olivier Gillet studies how the Orthodox Church accepted the rule of the Marxist State and how Church justified its role during the atheist dictatorship. Published in Romania in 2001, the book aroused passionate discussions among the historians. For instance,

² Mircea Păcurariu, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1981, vol. 3, p. 461.

³ Idem, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1994, vol. 3, p. 481.

⁴ Cristina Păiușan, Radu Ciuceanu, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română sub regimul comunist*, București, Institutul Național Pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, 2001, vol. I, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p.17, 19.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁸ Ioan Dură, *Pătimirea Bisericii Ortodoxe Române 1945-1989*, București, Editura Ramida, 1994, p. 9.

Mihai Ungheanu argues that *Religion and nationalism* is a book that some historians and faithful can hardly come to terms with.⁹

Olivier Gillet points out that religious phenomena in Central Europe and Balkans reveal mentalities related to sociological and political behavior. Spirituality seems to be left the last ideological mark in terms of national identity. Therefore, a topic like this, in Gillet's opinion, could generate fervent discussions in Romania.

Olivier Gillet actually proves that Romanian Orthodox Church supported the Communist regime at an official level.¹⁰ Churches from Eastern Europe, seen usually as a fearless enemy of the Communists have, been blamed for active collaboration with political power. Most of the Romanian historians and political scientists tried to explain this by invoking the former customs of the Orthodoxy. They pointed out that historical alliance between the state and the Church represented the official politics of Orthodoxy in dealing with the authoritarian Communist regime.¹¹ Gillet seeks other explanations. Firstly, the Byzantine tradition. Secondly, the opportunism, easy to understand under dictatorship. Finally, the collaboration of a conservative Church with a nationalist regime endorsing the popular values in order to reinforce its authority.¹²

Olivier Gillet holds that despite the official politics of the Church, the communist regime tried to suppress liberty of consciousness. Opposition attempts were punished and outlaws imprisoned. Anyway, the Orthodox hierarchy did not sustain those acts of *rebellion*.

At this point, a question arises. Is the idea of liberty a part of the orthodox tradition of theology? Paul E. Michelson thinks not. He believes that liberty has some prerequisites that Orthodoxy lacks: political and social pluralism, rule of the law, private property and total value of the individual.¹³ Quoting N. Berdiaev, P. Michelson argues that religious populism annihilates personal responsibility in Romanian culture even before the Communists take over. Quoting Nicolae Iorga, he emphasizes that order is more important in the Orient than individual freedom. For example, clerk Mircea Vulcănescu (an important intellectual of the Christian elite) confessed in 1946 that as the grandson and son of an office worker he served the State with all his heart.¹⁴

Dennis Deletant explains the lack of individual liberty differently. For example, the patriarch Justinian Marina collaborated with the Communist leaders but he believed, like most people, that the unity of the Romanian Orthodox Church was in fact the unity of the Romanian people. Also, Justinian Marina understood some aspects of Orthodox theology (described in his work

⁹ Cristina Păiușan, Radu Ciuceanu, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

¹⁰ Olivier Gillet, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹³ Paul E. Michelson, *Orthodoxy and the Future of Post-Communist Romania*, in "Xenopoliana", VII, 1999, nr. 3-4, p. 61.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

Apostolatul social) as part of the socialist ideology.¹⁵ Involving the Church in the socialist revolution the patriarch saved it from the Communist rage, saving in fact an important source of spiritual nourishment. Some Orthodox faithful believe that Justinian Marina acted very well. They think that in this approach consist the value of his deeds.¹⁶

Dennis Deletant argues that unlike the Soviets, the Romanian Communist Party choose to manipulate the Church rather than destroy it. Both the Orthodox and Uniate Church had played an important role in shaping the national modern identity. Therefore, the new regime preferred to tolerate them.¹⁷ State appropriated the goods of the Orthodox Church, forcing her to obey Marxist politics. Thus, any attempt in supporting the civil society was stolen from religious leaders.¹⁸ The Communist Party saw the religious establishment as an institution capable to promote both its politics: internal and external. Catherine Durandin holds that more or less, the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church consented to this.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it seems that lower clergy – especially its most independent elements – continued to attract faithful.²⁰

J. F. Soulet believes that the Communist system met with difficulties after 1970. He was undermined not only by the elites but also by the people at least in two major fields: faith and national feeling.²¹ Liberty was now to find its new shape in religious practices: christening, confession, burial etc.²² Many Romanians did not see the practices as special religious acts. In fact, the faith represented a normal part of their day-to-day life.

Trevor Beeson narrates his travel in Romania and states that Romanian parish churches were always crowded for the Sunday liturgy. People entered the churches to venerate an icon, to light a candle or to have a few moments of reflection.²³ Also, Beeson tells us most believers went to confession and received Holy Communion at the major festivals and on certain saints' days.²⁴ Beeson emphasises that devotion took place not just in public but also in private: "For the Romanian Orthodox Christian the family house is a place of deep devotion. Parish priests are kept busy officiating at the many domestic blessing ceremonies. They sprinkle houses with blessed water at certain seasons of the year. Household implements are blessed."²⁵ It is there not difficult to understand, thinks Trevor Beeson, way the Communist governments decided to settle for a form of co-existence with the Romanian Orthodox Church.

¹⁵ Dennis Deletant, *Teroarea comunistă în România*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2001, p. 88.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

¹⁹ Catherine Durandine, *Istoria românilor*, Iași, Editura Institutul European, 1998, p. 279.

²⁰ Jean-Francois Soulet, *Istoria comparată a statelor comuniste*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1998, p. 245.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 243.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 244.

²³ Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour*, London, Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1982, p. 352.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 362.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 360.

3. Writing history: approaches and alternatives

Although it is difficult to state some conclusions, one can say that the history of the Orthodox Church has numerous levels of investigation: cultural, social, political, ideological and economic. However, the most important of them seems to be the level of mentalities: it uncovers the stereotypes of the orthodox theologians and faithful, showing their convictions. Historians could analyze the habits of thinking before 1948 and after 1989. Olivier Gillet argues that stereotypes are the same no matters the time.²⁶ Voices of Romanian historians and theologians hold that O. Gillet is wrong.

One can conclude that the discussion on Orthodox Church remains open to next investigations. Maybe we will never know how Church came to terms with Communist power. Nevertheless, it is more important to find out if the Orthodoxy matches democracy.

²⁶ Olivier Gillet, *op. cit.*, p. 28.