

ORTHODOXY AND THE FUTURE OF POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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The recent publication by Samuel P. Huntington, **The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order**¹, touched a nerve, especially among those whose attachment to both Western values and to the Orthodox Church is deep and sincere². Huntington's contention, briefly put, is that there is a historical fault line which divides Western Europe from Eastern Europe, one characterized by differences of religion (Catholicism and Protestantism vs. Orthodoxy), historical experiences (participation in the Reformations, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and so forth vs. non-participation or only a partial and tardy participation), and a failure across time to develop stable democratic systems.

Let me say at the outset that Huntington's "historical fault line" is terribly misleading in so far as it concentrates on only one aspect of life. As Alexandru Dutu has pointed out, "If we accept that political activity is concerned with only one fragment of the human existence then it will be impossible to believe that politics must organize the whole life of the citizens..."³. One cannot replace the crude economic determinism of the Marxists with any kind of political determinism.

On the other hand, it is also true then when we discuss post-Communist development, we tend to focus first of all on the political. This is because one lesson of the totalitarian experiences of the 20th century seems clearly enough that once the political escapes traditional and other restraints, most other liberties rapidly fall by the wayside. Political liberty – freedom - is not the sine qua non, but it is a means that has proven essential for the achievement of our real ends (spiritual, aesthetic, or whatever each person chooses). The result is that the political is important... and rightly at the center of contemporary discussions about the future of post-Communist states and areas.

Like it or not, we cannot escape our political cultures, that is "the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments that give order and meaning to a political process and that provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour in the political system...the product of both the collective history of a political system and the life histories of the members of that system"⁴. It will be

observed that this definition is at pains to make it clear that all of this is political, and does not suggest this is or should be all encompassing. We must be careful not to extend the reach of such an analysis and to remember, as de Tocqueville pointed out, that the mores of a people cover a much wider ground, applying "not only to 'moeurs' in the strict sense, which might be called the habits of the heart, but also to the different notions possessed by men, the various opinions current among them, and the sum of ideas that shape mental habits. So I use the word to cover the whole moral and intellectual state of a people"⁵. But when we look at political institutions, we narrow our scope to "looking for the elements in them [mores] which help support political institutions"⁶.

What are the "attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments that give order and meaning" to modern Romanian political processes and what does this have to do with religion, particularly the Orthodox Church? A principal weakness of the Church in Romanian culture is its lack of a prophetic vocation. It is arguable whether this is inherent or not within the Orthodox tradition⁷. However, the reality is that when national states began to appear in Eastern Europe, the Churches were placed under the control of variously-named governmental departments and were co-opted as fervent supporters of nationalism. What little protest there was was easily squelched⁸.

The Orthodox Church received, as a return for its support, grudging or otherwise, the right to maintain a monopoly on religious practice and favor of the state⁹. For its part, religious symbols and practices were appropriated by the state. In the end, nationalism "went hand in hand with messianism and prepared the ground for the single party" states that became typical of Southeastern Europe in the 1930s and afterwards¹⁰. Throughout this process, opposition of the Orthodox Church to the state became ever more feeble. Romanian society often needed its church to speak out prophetically; it almost never did¹¹. In 1907 when the peasantry finally snapped, in 1937 when the Goga ministry began implementation of numerus clausus legislation, in 1938 when the Royal dictatorship destroyed the last vestiges of Romanian democracy, in 1940 when the National Legionary state murdered Nicolae Iorga as well as assorted Romanian Jews, in 1948 when the Greco-Catholic Church was forcibly "reunited" with the Orthodox Church and the bulk of its clergy killed or swept off into the Romanian gulag, and throughout the Communist regime---in all of these occasions the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church covered itself with ignominy. There were, of course, occasional individual cases of opposition to the tyranny of the modern state, but the general pattern of collaboration, willing and otherwise, persisted¹².

A second negative tradition of modern Orthodoxy is related to what may be called the Mioritic tradition of passivity. Again, it is not entirely important whether this tradition is of ancient vintage or merely a product of the last two centuries. The fact is that such passivity has existed and continues to exist with

Church support. The folkloric hero went passively to certain death, rather than resist. Fate is fate; only the foolish will fight it. That the medieval chronicler Miron Costin's plea, "The times are not under the rule of man, rather the poor human is under the rule of the times", could be quoted centuries later by Mircea Vulcanescu¹³ is only one example among many that could be adduced.

Indeed, Romanian proverbial wisdom commends to our attention the wisdom of the flexible reed, who survives the blasts of the winds while the mighty oak tree is cast down and destroyed. Such imagery was used in the 1970s by Romanian intellectuals to "explain" to me the differences between the foolhardy Poles and Czechs on the one hand, and the Romanians on the other. The oak-like integrity of the former brought only death and disaster in 1939, 1956, and 1968, while the Romanians had bowed to the wind and escaped the fate of a Katyn Forest and the rumbling of Soviet tanks that ended the Prague Summer. Unfortunately, while the reed may bend before the stormy onslaught, it also has to spend a lot of time with its face in the mud. What if lying supinely for so long has the effect of permanently defining the national backbone? It is no accident that the political and spiritual fates of post-Communist Poles and the Czechs have been quite different thus far from that of the Romanians.

Here, again, one must give heed to Dutu's qualifying observations: the leading groups of the Romanian elite in the 19th and early 20th centuries "took little interest in religious life" while the "lack of religious and political education under communist regimes explains the passivity of people from Eastern Europe in religious as well as political matters"¹⁴. Perhaps this is not a 500 year old tradition; however it is a 200 year old one; and that makes change difficult.

A third area of concern has to do with the history of freedom in Romania and the relationship of that history to the Orthodox tradition. Donald W. Treadgold has written that the principal elements of the development of freedom are: "(1) political pluralism: the sharing of authority by princes, in law and fact, with central and local governmental institutions, developing into constitutional government and ultimately democracy; (2) social pluralism: the existence of social classes whose property and rights were partly secured by contractual and other legal bases independent of princes; (3) strong property: possession of which is secured by contract or clear title; (4) the rule of law; (5) application of the religious value of the absolute value of the individual, unevenly and intermittently but nevertheless persistently, to secular institutions"¹⁵.

Most of these points have in the last 200 years been more honored in the breach than in practice in the Orthodox tradition... when not actively opposed. The hierarchical mode of leadership has not been particularly friendly to localism and constitutions. Whether political pluralism is compatible with Orthodoxy remains to be seen. Strong property rights is another problematic area, though one that has had a considerable amount of attention in the last decade. Rule of law, unfortunately, is very weak in South Eastern Europe in

general and Romania in particular. There is no long standing contractual tradition in the region that can compare with the maze of contracts and compacts that grew and flourished in the Medieval West¹⁶. Lastly, the value of the individual has been a frail reed under Orthodoxy, especially after nationalism subordinated almost everything else to itself in the 19th century¹⁷. According to N. Iorga, "pour l'Orient l'essentiel c'est l'ordre, même à la condition d'une annulation complète des manifestations de l'intelligence libre. En Occident, il y a le chemin ouvert pour ces manifestations libres de l'intelligence..."¹⁸. Instead of giving the individual absolute value, there is the reverse tendency to subordinate him or her to the state. Witness the 1946 plea of Mircea Vulcanescu to his Communist prosecutors: "Public servant, son and grandson of public servants, I never had another patron than the State, which I have served with all my power as much as and when I could"¹⁹.

Alexandru Dutu notes that "The absence of civic education continues to provoke tension between national spirit and personal responsibility, as well as between the communitarian spirit and the competition proper to market economy"²⁰. Indeed, true economic liberalism has always been a minority view in a Romania whose dominant liberal tradition was enveloped in the fortunes of a National Liberal Party whose very name gives precedence of the "national" to the "liberal," and whose 1920s protectionist slogan was "Prin Noi Insiine"²¹. Unhappily, a *societas civilis* was not built up in Romanian culture: "We may even say that 'what characterized East Central European development was a lack precisely those autonomous and plural spheres in society which in the different models of West European development were seen to be at the heart of its particular developmental path"²². Berdyaev wrote that "religious populism paralyzes personal responsibility and spiritual self-discipline"²³ among the Russian Orthodox; much the same has been true for Romanian Orthodoxy and its culture. The idealization of the peasantry as a collective consciousness paralyzed personal responsibility and initiative in Romanian culture even before the Communist experience²⁴. Finally, the Orthodox tradition has little to say about the achievement of freedom. What Berdyaev wrote concerning Dostoevsky appears to be true more generally: while Dostoevsky has a strong "enthusiasm for freedom of spirit... but he did not tell us how it is to be acquired, how we may attain spiritual and moral autonomy, how as individuals and as a people we can emancipate ourselves from base influences..."²⁵. These are not promising omens, especially when we recall, with de Tocqueville, that "Every religion has some political opinion linked to it by affinity. The spirit of man, left to follow its bent, will regulate political society and the City of God in uniform fashion; it will, if I dare put it so, seek to *harmonize* earth with heaven"²⁶. Patapievici writes that "The true and singular problem of Orthodoxy in today's world... is that modernity is not a natural product of its own historical traditions"²⁷.

Be that as it may, Dutu believes that the Church learned between 1948 and 1989 that "its main enemy was not the alien, the foreigner, but the materialistic spirit which invaded politics, education, social life in general. Thus, the Orthodox Church developed its relations with other Christian churches and associations and will eventually notice does not contradict patriotism. But the political power will continue to use the influence of the Church and to take advantage of its impact on the people. It is what anyone could see during the past four years when former communists went candle in hand to the mass and resumed their former activities afterwards"²⁸. It is far from certain that this is so. The jury is still out and will be for some time.

The same thing is true in connection with Dutu's other hope, that of a new relationship between the clergy and lay people. On the one hand, "Christian morals might guide people out of confusion and fear". On the other, the hierarchy "might more actively involve intellectuals in matters of the Church"²⁹. However, until the Church takes a more consistent stance in favor of reform and can capitalize on the resulting moral leadership, the clergy will be just as confused and fearful as the laity. One sees little sign of this happening under the auspices of the existing hierarchy, which appears to be more concerned with maintaining its status and accumulating more worldly goods than it does with moral guidance or involvement of lay people in the affairs of the Church³⁰. Spiritual self-discipline cannot be said to predominate in a society in which the moral failures of leaders---including religious leaders, political leaders, and intellectual leaders---are excused and even justified³¹. And, of course, such conduct and rationalization set a very bad example and precedent for the ordinary person, who, after all, has no real reason to be any better than his or her leaders. Small wonder then that Romanian society experiences today a spiritual desiccation in many cases and spiritual rigor mortis in others. The message of Christianity is redemption, regeneration, and renewal. Until the dominant church in Romania concentrates on these tasks, the culture and society will languish or even become more "sick unto death"³².

Lastly, there is Dutu's plea that "people might be reminded that man has a dual citizenship, since he is a member of a state and, at the same time, a member of an Ecclesia that makes him experience the sacred dimension of life and guides him toward eternity... The dual citizenship confers on each member of a social body full responsibility for his deeds and at the same time a sense of solidarity with all those who believe in Truth". At the same time, this "dual citizenship fights chauvinism and parochialism as well as the uniformity brought about by the modern world"³³. Such a sense would indeed be salutary, but only if it is inclusive not exclusive, and if the circle of Truth is seen as extending beyond just Orthodoxy. Though Dutu believes that Orthodoxy and pluralism are not

incompatible; it is not yet clear how many Orthodox clergy would share such views.

The premier student of secularization, sociologist David Martin, has written: "This means that within societies with a Christian tradition... the old inclusive frame allied to ecclesiastical monopoly is no longer viable. The Roman Catholic Church, even in Italy, accepts the fact that it cannot hope to dominate a society through a party... and therefore sees itself as a potent commentator within a pluralistic framework... That role, the role of potential commentator within a pluralistic society, still exists, and it is probably the one that will eventually be taken up by the expanding evangelical movements of the contemporary world..."³⁴. The challenge to the Orthodox churches is whether or not they will be able to make the same realization.

A key restorative is, indeed, a deeper sense of history. Paradoxically, though Romanian culture is permeated by historical consciousness and historical mindedness³⁵, post-Communist development has increasingly and sadly demonstrated that this historicism of Romanian culture is shockingly shallow, being a manifestation of the abuse of history rather than its healthy use. Kierkegaard once remarked that "Life must be lived forwards, but can only be understood backwards"³⁶. That, I think, is a deeper sense of history, one in which the past "is not a master but a teacher"³⁷.

The failure of the modern world has been to fragment man into a dichotomous physical and metaphysical being and then to banish the metaphysical³⁸. Berdyaev writes: "Man had been left with only his bodily envelope and the lesser faculties of his soul; he could no longer see the dimension of depth"³⁹. Religious people have long recognized and denounced this. The relevant insight which Berdyaev brings to this problem is to recognize that in Orthodox countries, it was the Church itself which "began this deprivation when she relegated spiritual life to another and transcendent world and created a religion for the soul that was home-sick for the spiritual life it had lost. This process could only lead to positivism, gnosticism, and materialism, that is, to the utter despiritualization of man and his universe. The transcendent world itself was pushed back into the unknowable and all the ways leading to it were closed, till at last its very existence was denied"⁴⁰. What of it? Let us give de Tocqueville the last word: "Is not this worth thinking about". If men must, in fact, come to choose between all being free or all slaves, all having equal rights of all being deprived of them, if the rulers of societies are reduced to this alternative, either gradually to raise the crowd up to their own level or to let all citizens fall below the level of humanity, would not that be enough to overcome many doubts, to reassure man consciences, and to prepare each man readily to make great sacrifices? Should we not, then, consider the gradual development of democratic institutions and mores not as the best but as the only means remaining to us in order to remain free?... I do think that if we do not succeed in

gradually introducing democratic institutions among us, and if we despair of imparting to all citizens those ideas and sentiments which first prepare them for freedom and then allow them to enjoy it, there will be no independence left for anybody..."⁴¹.

1 [New York: Touchstone Books, 1998].

2 I am thinking in particular here of my late and valued friend, Alexandru Duțu, whose views on this subject were published shortly before his death in 1999 as **Political Models and National Identities in "Orthodox Europe"** [București: Babel, 1998], and as "Y-a-t-il une Europe Orthodoxe?" **Sud-Estul și Contextul European**, Vol. 7 (1997), pp. 9-86. I deeply regret that we will no longer be able to discuss these and similar issues.

3 Duțu, **Political Models**, 1998, p. 208.

4 Lucian Pye, **Aspects of Political Development** [Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1966], pp. 104-105.

5 Alexis de Tocqueville, **Democracy in America** edited by J. P. Mayer [Garden City NY: Anchor Books, 1969], p. 287.

6 De Tocqueville, **Democracy**, 1969, p. 287.

7 Duțu, **Political Models**, 1998, pp. 163 ff., argues that it was not.

8 For the Romanian case, see Paul E. Michelson, **Romanian Politics 1859-1871** [Iasi: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1998], pp. 89 ff.

9 Cf. H-R. Patapievici, "Biserica Ortodoxă Română și modernitatea", **Dilema**, Nr. 331-332, June 1999.

10 Duțu, **Political Models**, 1998, pp. 166, 172.

11 Indeed, once the state and the church became mutually identified with the nation, any attack on or criticism of either became an attack on the nation.

12 See Duțu, **Political Models**, 1998, pp. 166 ff. for some examples.

13 Mircea Vulcănescu, **Ultimul cuvânt** edited by Marin Diaconu [București: Humanitas, 1992], p. 31.

14 Duțu, **Political Models**, 1998, p. 173.

15 Donald W. Treadgold, **Freedom: A History** [New York: New York University Press, 1990], p. 5.

16 Pace Patapievici, "Biserica Ortodoxă", **Dilema**, 1999, "Etica ortodoxă n-a putut genera un comportament laic contractual, etic și cetățenesc, deoarece niciodată ortodoxia nu a fost prezentă în spațiul public cu intenția de a promova astfel de valori".

17 Patapievici has noted that this identification of religion with nationalism was condemned by the Ecumenical Patriarch, but to no avail. Cf. Patapievici, "Biserica Ortodoxă", **Dilema**, 1999.

18 N. Iorga, "Relations entre l'Orient et l'Occident," in his **Études byzantines**, Vol. I [București: Institut d'Études Byzantines, 1939], p. 163.

19 Vulcănescu, **Ultimul cuvânt**, 1992, p. 36. Cf. also Dutu's observations on "collectivism" and "communitarianism", **Political Models**, 1998, pp. 197 ff. Patapievici takes a much stronger stance: "În epoca premodernă, religia ortodoxă s-a instituționalizat

nu ca o credință personală, care angajează responsabilitatea individuală a fiecărui membru, ci ca o 'lege strămoșească', care angajează adeziunea colectivă și destinul comunității în ansamblul ei". Patapievici, "Biserica Ortodoxă", **Dilema**, 1999.

20 Duțu, **Political Models**, 1998, p. 188.

21 See Michelson, **Politics**, 1998, pp. 39 ff.

22 Duțu, **Political Models**, 1998, pp. 188-189, quoting Adam Seligman. Compare Nathan Rosenberg and L. E. Birdzell, Jr., **How the West Grew Rich** [New York: Basic Books, 1986]: "The earlier relaxation of overarching religious and political authority in Western societies bore fruit in the form of a plural society of comparatively autonomous spheres of industry, trade, finance, science, politics, education, art, music, literature, religion, and the press", (p. 183).

23 Nicolae Berdyaev, **Dostoevsky** [New York: Meridian Living Age Books, 1957], originally published in 1934, p. 222.

24 Cf. Duțu, **Political Models**, 1998, p. 205.

25 Berdyaev, **Dostoevsky**, 1957, p. 221.

26 De Tocqueville, **Democracy**, 1969, p. 287.

27 Patapievici, "Biserica Ortodoxă", **Dilema**, 1999.

28 Duțu, **Political Models**, 1998, p. 172.

29 Duțu, **Political Models**, 1998, pp. 172-173.

30 Views shared by Patapievici, "Biserica Ortodoxă", **Dilema**, 1999: "Distorsiunile de reacție ale Bisericii Ortodoxe Române... pot fi complet înțelese dacă ținem seama de următorii patru factori: (a) predispoziția anumitor înalți prelați la entnofilie și statolatricie; (b) prejudecata superiorității religioase a ortodoxiei față de toate celelalte tradiții apostolice sau confesiuni creștine; (c) lupta instituției BOR pentru putere materială în societatea românească de azi; (d) lupta BOR pentru conservarea puterii simbolice tradiționale a ortodoxiei în domeniul culturii și al spațiului public românesc".

31 See Lord Acton's 1895 Inaugural Lecture on "The Study of History", in: Lord Acton, **Essays in the Study and Writing of History** edited by Rufus J. Fears [Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985], pp. 546 ff. on such excuses. His concluding warning is both disturbing and prescient: "if we lower our standard in history, we cannot uphold it in Church or State".

32 Cf. Soren Kierkegaard, **Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death** [Garden City NY: Anchor Books, 1954]. Patapievici, "Biserica Ortodoxă", **Dilema**, 1999, believes that this won't happen until the Orthodox Church holds its own version of Vatican II, which could be "un prilej de regândire a menirii sale istorice". However, the Romanian Orthodox Church, far from considering such measures, has sought merely to "reocupe toate pozițiile din care statul comunist o evacuează".

33 Duțu, **Political Models**, 1998, p. 173.

34 David Martin, "The People's Church: The Global Evangelical Upsurge and Its Political Consequences," **Books and Culture**, Vol. 6 (2000), Nr. 1, p. 15, adapted from Peter L. Berger, ed., **The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics** [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Ethics and Public Policy Center, 2000]. Incidentally, this is one factor in the rapid spread of evangelicalism is developing societies: "The evangelicals' most potent contribution will be the creation of voluntary associations and the multiplication of social and political actors in the public arena. Other things being equal (which of course they rarely are), the cultural characteristics of

evangelicals---participation, pragmatism, competition, personal discipline---ought in the long run to foster democracy". (Martin, p. 15).

35 See my "Themes in Modern and Contemporary Romanian Historiography," in: S. J. Kirschbaum, ed., **East European History** [Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1988], pp. 27-40; and "Reshaping Romanian Historiography: Some Actonian Perspectives", **Romanian Civilization**, Vol. 3 (1994), Nr. 1, pp. 3-23.

36 Cited in W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, **The Viking Book of Aphorisms: A Personal Selection** [New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993], p. 239.

37 Acton manuscripts 5648, reprinted in: Lord Acton, **Essays in Religion, Politics, and Morality** edited by Rufus J. Fears [Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985], p. 620. Compare Acton's observation that we should "be governed not by the Past, but by knowledge of the Past" which are quite "different things". (Mss. 4993, p. 620)

38 This started with Kant's ill-fated attempt to solve Hume's challenge to the Enlightenment.

39 Berdyaev, **Dostoevsky**, 1957, p. 36.

40 Berdyaev, **Dostoevsky**, 1957, p. 36.

41 De Tocqueville, **Democracy**, 1969, pp. 314-315.