Denominational and Cultural Models and a Possible Ecumenical Strategy from a Romanian Context Part II: The Christian Churches and Social Responsibility

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DENOMINATIONAL AND CULTURAL MODELS AND A POSSIBLE ECUMENICAL STRATEGY FROM A ROMANIAN CONTEXT
PART II: THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY.

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The role of the first part [**REE XVIII, 5**] was to determine the historical background of Romanian society, as well as to define some root causes of the problems the society is facing today. We turn now to those problems which are closely connected to the religious domain and with the social responsibility of the Church.

Religion and Nationalism

Modern Romania is composed of two culturally different regions: Moldavia and Wallachia on the one hand (the so called "Old Kingdom"), and Transylvania on the other. The origin of these two entities is quite different. While Transylvania revealed an ethnic diversity since the establishment of the Hungarian statehood, the territories beyond the Carpathians were ethnically more homogenous. The medieval Transylvanian political system was based on the basic principle of *unio trium natiorum*. Though this principle was above the ethnic groups, it was based on a certain interpretation of the nation. Another distinction is Transylvania's religious diversity, versus the predominantly Orthodox "Old Kingdom." The general effect of these differing traits resulted in different characteristics in the relations between religion and nationalism of the two regions.

Although nationalism and religion were interweaved considerably in the multi-religious Transylvania, the coexistence of several denominations guaranteed a certain balance. Although in different historical periods, some denominations were much closer to the political regime than others. Ethnicity was not identified with a certain denomination, but with a certain group of denominations.

In Moldavia and Wallachia, Orthodox Christianity as well as language, was the defining characteristic of ethnicity. Thus the Orthodox Church's claims that Orthodox Christianity is *the* basic element of the "Romanian soul." The consequence of this claim is obvious: in Romania, which is defined as a national state by the constitution, the Orthodox Church is considered to be *the* "national church." This blending of religion with national identity has an extremely detrimental effect. As Pedro Ramet states, "a religion's claims are absolute, not relative…and no religion has ever tolerated disloyalty (heresy) or betrayal (reconversion, apostasy)."[1] A differing national identity is also not tolerated, and is considered dangerous for the existence of the national state. This is why the Orthodox Church maintained a privileged position under the Communist regime, and why both the Communist government's internal policy toward nationalities, as well as its external policy, was supported by the Romanian Orthodox Church. It is no wonder that the Orthodox Church's main argument against the Greek Catholic Church is a nationalistic one: namely, the Eastern Rite Catholic Church is "the nation's traitor." Once a church or denomination embraces nationalism, there is the danger that a nation and its destiny will take on an almost religious character. As a result, the concept and understanding of "nation" becomes rigid and brittle.[2] This means that national identity is not viewed as merely one frame of reference for human existence, but its very essence, condition, and goal.

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[1] Pedro Ramet, "The Interplay of Religious Policy and Nationalities Policy in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe," In *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics*, ed. Pedro Ramet (Durham, N.C.: Duke Press Policy Studies, 1984), 5.

[2] Ramet, 6.

Another aspect of the problem concerns the formation of national states in Europe. The modern concept of the nation is a relatively new one, and its roots derive from the ideology of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution. The new concept of the national state emerged from the Revolution and has determined, to a great extent, the history of Europe in general, and of Central-Eastern Europe in particular. In his study of Central Europe, Charles Ingrao argues that both the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empires were multinational states, and both of them guaranteed a certain autonomy to their various ethnic groups. Yet the French model undermined this system by the "installation of Western-born German princes and ministers (except in Serbia) and the repatriation of Western-educated Balkan intellectuals who linked the Balkan's destiny to the uncritical imitation of Western models."[3] As a final result of this trend, after World War Two several "national" states were created in Central and Eastern Europe. These states were not "national" because they were ethnically homogenous, but because their nationalities were subordinated to the national majority.

These are, in brief, the roots of the problem. What shall the theological answer be, and what shall be a suitable political solution? For a theological interpretation of the concept of the nation, we should first consider the story of Babel. Genesis 1 offers us the paradigm of ethnicity and nationhood. The story reveals two facts: first, the ethnic division of humankind does not emerge from the order of creation. Second, the division along ethnic boundaries is derived from the fallen condition of humankind. The "confused languages" are consequences of several sins: haughtiness, vanity, and rebellion. Therefore, confused languages--and I believe that these two expressions should not be separated--reveal the imprint of man's rebellion against God, and its result, depravity.

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[3]Charles Ingrao, *Ten Untaught Lessons about Central Europe: An Historical Perspective* (Habsburg-Web, accessed 14 April 1997.); available from the Internet: http://h-net2.msu.edu/~habsweb/ocasionalpapers/untaughtlessons.htm.

The text dealing with the solution for this condition is the story of Pentecost. In this passage we see how one effect of sin, i.e., ethnic division, is healed by the Spirit of God. The different languages are no more agents of confusion because they are set in a much larger context: the Word of God. Pentecost does not mean the elimination of ethnic differences, but the harmonization of differences by a higher principle, or, theologically speaking, the sanctification of different languages and nations. The picture would not be complete without the eschatological dimension of the problem. The consequences of sin are impossible to eradicate as long as we are in this present world. Complete healing and restoration remain a future hope: "In *that* renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all (Col 3:11)."

The ethnic division of humankind, therefore, is neither God's original will, nor the most important characteristic of our condition. The Church must know that the highest loyalty is to God, and all the other loyalties must be subordinate. It is not a denial of national values, but it is a definite relativization of them.[4]

Nationalism is one of the most acute problems of post-Soviet countries. Is there any political solution for this? The assertion that democracy is the answer is as stereotypical as it is meaningless. Democracy is not a definite substance to be produced in a laboratory. Rather, we can speak about democracy as a general concept and its particular forms. Claes G. Ryn from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. distinguishes between "constitutional or representative" democracy, and the "plebiscitary or majoritarian" one. These two forms of democracy represent "wholly different forms of popular rule." Constitutional or representative democracy is "popular rule under self-imposed restraints and representative, decentralized institutions," and thus is "a society in which the lives of most citizens are centered in small, local and chiefly private associations. It has many centers and levels of power. Regional and local entities can exercise independence."

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[4]Danut Manastireanu, *Nationalism in Central-Eastern Europe: A Trinitarian and Eschatological Perspective* (A Romanian Protestant Christian Homepage; accessed in 7 April 1997); available from http://private.fuller.edu/~ematei/theolog/articles/national.htm#Anatomy; Internet.

Plebiscitary or majoritarian democracy "aspires to rule by the popular will of the moment. It opposes representative, decentralized structures that limit the power of the numerical majority. Plebiscitary democracy expands and centralizes government and erodes local and private autonomy."[5]

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[5]Quoted in Paul Peachey, "Rethinking Nationalism and Democracy in the Light of Post-Communist Experience," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 13 (February 1993): 32.

There are no pure forms of these systems, but in different political structures the constitutional or plebiscitary elements are predominant. The Romanian political system is dominated by the plebiscitary elements. It derives from two main factors: first, the legal system is influenced to a great degree by the French model; and second, the political power governing after the collapse of communism was not interested in the reduction of the over-centralized institutions. Thus, economy, finances, local administration, education, culture, and the churches are under strong state control. The new coalition, elected in November 1996, launched the process of decentralization, but it is still uncertain whether there will be enough political will to accomplish this process. It is true that this is not a simple task, especially after more than forty years of Communist rule which paralyzed any voluntary initiative and atrophied the institutions of civil society. However, not only nationalism but several other harmful phenomena may be neutralized by the formation of regional, local, and private autonomy. Having strong roots in the covenantal perception of presbyterianism (not limited to its denominational meaning) and puritanism, this model is appropriate even theologically.

The Churches and Politics

There are two lines dividing the two components of Romania. First, there is the border between Western and Eastern Christianity, and second, the border between the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empires. Hence, the political comprehension and traditions of these two regions are, to a great extent, different. The theological interpretation of the church-state relationship is quite different between Western and Eastern Christianity. Western Christianity's political view is a radical and comprehensive one. Both the Protestant and the Catholic churches have comprehensive theological teachings about the mission of the Church and the role of the state, combined with a strong sense of autonomy. Thus, these churches may easily conflict with the state, which itself tends to control and to regulate the totality of society. Meanwhile, the Orthodox Church defines itself as a spiritual factor, and

does not have a strong sense of social responsibility. The Western churches want to assume responsibility for shaping the social, political, and economical process, while the Orthodox Church considers that what is outside of the "spiritual" realm is the responsibility of the state.[6] In analyzing Western civilization, Samuel Huntington emphasizes the separation of "God and Caesar, church and state, spiritual authority and temporal authority," as characteristic of the Western thinking. And he concludes: "In Islam, God is caesar; in China and Japan, caesar is God; in Orthodoxy, God is caesar's junior partner."[7]

The effects of the different political traditions are also significant. The notorious corruption of the Ottoman Empire had a powerful influence on the Balkan nations. In the territories ruled by the Sultan, the *baksis* (bribe) was more important than the law, relations more than aptitude, and temporary interest more than future consequences. Indeed, in a state where even the life of the leading elite was extremely uncertain, cunning, intrigue, and complicity were often the only means of survival. Although itself considerably corrupt, the Habsburg empire was by all means different. The Germanic accuracy with regard to rules and law insured a certain degree of stability even in the darkest periods of oppression.

The relationship of the different Romanian denominations toward political power is determined by both these factors. The Protestant and the Catholic churches have been in a mostly politically polemical position. It goes without saying that the Protestant churches under the Habsburg rule were obviously in opposition with the anti-Protestant political power, while the opposition position of the Catholic church was determined by its mostly Hungarian character. After World War One, the nationalist character of the Romanian policy yielded a continuous struggle between the state and the minority churches. This is, to a lesser degree, true for the Greek Catholic Church. Under communism, with the exception of the banned Greek

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[6]Miklós Bárdos-Féltoronyi, "Közép-Európa Egyházai a III évezred küszöbén" (The Churches of Central Europe at hand of the third millennium,) *Mérleg* 2 (1992): 32.

[7]Samuel P. Huntington, *The West:Unique, Not Universal* (accessed in 12 February 1997), available from http://jya.com/clash1.htm; Internet.

Catholics, the state controlled every denomination. However, the degree and character of this control were determined by the willingness of different churches to collaborate with the ruling power.

There is no doubt that the most collaborative denomination was the Orthodox Church. This was confirmed after the political changes, when the former head of the Department of Cults acknowledged that the Orthodox Church was under the "direct control and supervision" of the secret police.[8] The contradictory relationship of the Romanian Orthodox Church with the political power persisted after 1989. The government used the Church to legitimize its own power, while the Church used its relations with the government to strengthen its position as the quasi-national church. Officials of the exclusively Orthodox Church are present any time a state institution or a military unit is inaugurated, or when the Academy of the intelligence service holds its annual graduation. The triumphal attitude of the Orthodox Church is often criticized by the media, as well as by the leading intelligentsia. And its lack of repentance for its complicity with the Communist regime is evident. In a recent interview the patriarch was called to account for his cowardly attitude when more than twenty Orthodox churches were destroyed in the capital under the orders of Ceausescu. The answer was one of crass cynicism: "If one wants to serve the church, he needs to be alive. If he withdraws to a monastery, or goes to the grave, if he gives up the struggle, the whole Church will lose by that." The comment of the journalist proved much more understanding of Christian responsibility: "Thus, his holiness disparages all Christian martyrs who did not have diplomatic sense, so to say, and died for the faith, making the Church lose out in this way."[9]

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[8]Bailey, 136.

[9]Victor Barsan, "Arhanghelii blindetei"(The archangels of gentleness), *Dilema* 216 (14-20 March 1997).

What should be the role of the churches in such difficult social and political contexts? The public service of the Church in former East Germany is, I believe, exemplary and a paradigm to follow. In the GDR, "the Christian Churches, primarily the Protestant churches, were the primary force and agents behind the wave of change."[10] Before the peaceful revolution, churches were the hosts of different opposition groups, and led many demonstrations. After the revolution, however, the churches refused direct involvement in political life, maintaining their public opinion-shaping and prophetic roles. The political responsibility of the Church is not to be involved in party-politics, but to "fertilize" politics.

Concerning this role of the Church, an excellent study was made by the Romanian born Virgil Nemoianu, professor at Catholic University of America. His starting point is that instead of the unjustified "clerical triumphalism" of the Romanian Orthodox Church, it would be more adequate to take the initiative in forming a genuine Christian-democratic movement. The important contemporary Western European Christian-democratic parties, Nemoianu argues, were founded after World War Two. The need for these parties was determined by the existence of a considerable mass of traditional--but not authoritarian and extremist--people. By their political orientation they were not inclined to social-democratic progressivism, or to individualistic liberalism. The Christian-democratic parties "absorbed, tamed, and flexibilized" the masses which were otherwise vulnerable to populist extremism. The "conservative humanism" of the Christian-democrats, a viable alternative to more radical, even extremist, ideas (nationalism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism), was of great importance in the "political maturation" of Western Europe.[11]

This is just a simple, but meaningful, example of how the churches can influence politics without exercising pressure on the political power, as it often

[10]Gary L. Lease, "Delusion and Illusion: False Hopes and Failed Dreams: Religion, the Churches and East Germany's 1989 'November Revolution," in *The Formulation of Christianity by Conflict Through the Ages*, ed. Katharine B. Free (Levinston/Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 215.

[11]Virgil Nemoianu, "Ce rost are o miscare crestin-democrata," (What is the reason of a Christian-democratic movement), *Revista 22* 3 (16-23 January 1997).

happened, not only in Romania, but in several other countries too, or getting directly involved in party politics. This attitude is, I believe, in accordance with the social and political responsibility of the Christian Church.

The Churches and Social Reconciliation

Once the oppressive pressure of totalitarian communism was gone, significant social tensions rose to the surface. Most of these tensions were present during the communist regime, but were swept under the carpet and no public discussion of them was allowed. Other tensions, however, appeared or became worse after the collapse of the system.

The first step to be taken by the church toward a healthier social climate should be an acknowledgment of its own mistakes and failings. If we really believe that the attitude of the Church should be the paradigm of the Christian life, then the new path must begin with repentance. Unfortunately, as we have previously seen, the full admission did not happen. There were acts of repentance, but they usually lacked sincere remorse. This is typical in the sense that one single historical analysis of the Church's communist period came to light, as it happened, in the Reformed Church. Of course, it is argued that we do not understand the proper historical perspective, therefore the analysis should be done by future generations. Undoubtedly, we do not have a perfect perspective. But the acknowledgment must be done nonetheless. This is a matter of ethics and faith, rather than an academic objective.

In the dynamics of revival, repentance is followed by forgiveness. The hate and resentment accumulated over long decades of oppression and humiliation is immense. This force, once out of control, can be really damaging, as it was recently in Albania. Hate must be channeled in one way or other. Unfortunately, it was often blamed on different scapegoats: minorities, political parties, social classes, etc. In so doing, hate was not diminished, but suppressed, and in actuality, increased. In spite of this, the catharsis of forgiveness was demonstrated by several examples.

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In former East Germany, members of the secret police were protected from the revenge of the crowd by none other than the pastors. For example, Honecker was housed by a church-sponsored social institution. The immense power of forgiveness is often ignored or refused by the churches themselves. Forgiveness, of course, does not mean hushing up, but the Church must set an example of respect for the long-term violation of the rule of law and justice. However, no matter how much it would hurt, there are injuries impossible to repair. It is particularly valid concerning the injustices done to the church during the communist era. The churches claim a *restitutio in integrum* when they discuss the future of their nationalized properties. However, the issue is not simple at all. What happens, for instance, in a village with only one school when the church claims the return of its property, or when a church building was transformed in a sanatorium or retirement home? Post-communist societies must learn how to live together with their wounds, and the only way to avoid future injustice by the taking out of revenge, is forgiveness.

Repentance and forgiveness must be followed by new life. This is not a pious phrase, but a requirement of our human condition. In the sphere of social reconciliation the church must proclaim, first of all, a respect for human dignity and the importance of solidarity. Human dignity, rooted in our creation in the image of God, is the primary basis of Christian social ethics. No one has the right to sacrifice another individual for the so-called sake of society, and vice versa. Individual interest is inseparable from community existence. Human dignity is the inalienable right of every human being, independent of religious conviction, social status, political orientation, ethnicity, or moral deficiency. There is nothing to differentiate between "worthy" and "unworthy." If we recognize this, we may move toward social solidarity. The context in which everyone must develop his or her own vocation is human society, with its various structures, institutions, and norms.

It is extremely important that during the communist era, the churches were the only tolerated elements of civil society. Even in the darkest years of Stalinism, when every private initiative was brutally suppressed, the churches, somehow, were functioning. When political elections became a parody of democracy, the board of

elders, or the general assembly, was able to make responsible decisions. These facts invest the church with a special status, and responsibility. A recent survey revealed that in Romanian society, the confidence in the church (82%) precedes the confidence in any other institution. In spite of its failures, the church is still appreciated as the most reliable institution. Besides, owing to its structure (central, regional, local, plus the educational, social, and other institutions), the church has the potential of reaching a very large part of society effectively. If it takes seriously its vocation and responsibility as the reconciler of society, it could become a powerful agent in strengthening social consensus.

The Churches and Education

As we saw, the role of the Romanian churches (especially the Protestant and the Catholic ones) in the field of education was extremely important. Though confronted with serious financial difficulties, these churches did not give up this mission. There are two issues relating to education that we need to address: church-maintained schools, and religious education in public schools.

The actual laws relating to education did not allow the churches to sponsor schools except those preparing ministers, or other church professionals. However, before the law was passed in 1995, a compromise had been reached and several church-sponsored high schools were permitted to function on a limited basis. On the occasion of the preparation of the law, a commission formed by representatives of every denomination was consulted. With the exception of the Romanian Orthodox Church, every church demanded the right to maintain a full educational system.

The opposition given by the Orthodox Church was determined on two grounds. On one hand, the Orthodox Church was afraid that schools maintained by other denominations would endanger its own position. The mission of the Catholic Church, as well as that of the other denominations, was often attacked by the Orthodox Church in extremely violent and intolerant ways. The reestablishment and the active mission of the Greek Catholic Church were considered to be particularly dangerous for Orthodox interests. On the other hand, since most church schools were

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sponsored by the churches of the national minorities (especially Hungarians), the reestablishment of the schools was considered contrary to Romanian national interests.

There is variation from country to country as to whether the role of the church in public education is legitimate at all. Historically, church sponsored educational institutions played a crucial role in the history of the Eastern European nations. Even after secular education was instituted, church sponsored schools, especially the high schools, offered the highest quality education. These schools, although maintained by different churches, were open to every denomination (including the Jews), and the composition of the student body was multi-denominational. No form of religious or national discrimination was tolerated, and the religious education of the students was provided by their own denomination. Because of this the confessional schools were not denominational ghettoes, but high-quality schools with a strong sense of ecumenism. Their high professional and moral standards guaranteed the appreciation and support from society at large. Legally there is no reason why education should be exclusively secular. As long as private and church educational institutions respect the curriculum standards and the general program of education, the existence of church sponsored schools is justified. However, if secular education is based on secular humanism, there should be an alternative for those who wish to educate their children in the spirit of the Christian--or any other--religion.

Religious education in the public schools is the second issue. The law pertaining to education stipulates that religious education is compulsory in primary schooling, optional in high school, and "facultative" in the university. This means that schools are obliged to provide religious education in the primary grades and parents may choose whether to register their children in these courses. In reality, the way the law is implemented is as follows: in primary grades religious education is guaranteed in every school, in the high schools just rarely, and in the university, not at all.

There is a theoretical issue here. Although in many Western countries any form of religious education was banned in the public schools, in the former

communist countries it was reintroduced in the curriculum on an optional basis. Public opinion varies on this issue from country to country. In Romania this format of religious education is generally supported by the populace. The law of education states that "religious study as a discipline in the primary grades is justified by the…state to guarantee the human dignity, the…development of the personality with respect to rights and liberties, the public order and the morals of society; religion, as well as ethics, [are] the basic elements of the development of the human personality."[12] This statement introduces the historical aspect of the issue. During the communist era, the church was removed from its normal place in society and forced to limit its activity. In so doing the natural development of society, at least in the sphere of church-society relations, was interrupted. This happened in one of the less secularized societies of Europe. By reintroducing the option of religious education in the public schools, public demand was satisfied, and the possibility was created for the church to once again take its place in society.

Christian Charity

Christian charity is one of the most important public roles of the Church. Before nationalization, especially the Protestant and the Catholic churches had a good number of charitable institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, and nursing homes. Even during the Soviet era the churches carried out basic charity work on the local level. After the political changes were implemented, institutional activity became possible and many churches began developing the infrastructure. The established institutions included orphanages, nursing homes, hospitals, soup kitchens, counseling services, and others.

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[12]Liviu Vanau, "The Easter Ball: Interaction Between Secularism and Religion in Romania," *Religion in Eastern Europe* XIV (December 1996): 4.

The problems in this field are mostly financial. The nationalized estates are still the property of the state. Therefore, possibilities are limited. Financial resources are tight. Consequently, charity work depends mainly on voluntarism and Western aid. Many have hoped that the state would give financial assistance to charity works, but this has not been the case. The church provides an important service for the state by assisting the socially disabled. Moreover, the church's social programs are less expensive and much more efficient than similar programs run by the state. In spite of this, churches often run into bureaucratic difficulties and obstacles. Notwithstanding, this activity must be continued for at least two reasons. First, it is inseparable from the mission of the Christian Church. Without concrete actions, the proclamation of the gospel is in the best case not more than well-intentioned moralization. Second, the way the church fulfills this mission is a model of how society should understand human dignity and social solidarity.

PART III: AN ECUMENICAL STRATEGY

In the first two parts of this paper I tried to define the social problems which the Romanian churches must contend with, as well as the roots of those problems. In this last chapter I wish to propose a strategy for resolving those problems. It is first necessary to identify the actions to be taken by the Church. Second, since Romanian society is multi-cultural and multi-religious, I will suggest a strategy for ecumenical action for the various churches, which would allow cooperation in the field of social mission.

The problems that Romania is confronted with are enormous. Although the official Marxist-Leninist doctrine always remained an alien ideology, the prohibition of any other ideology and the forced secularization of society caused serious moral damage. Communism denied the value of religion. But the only alternative it could offer was an obviously stupid, and therefore unacceptable, poor ideological substitute. It is striking that the resulting moral and intellectual confusion--almost nihilism-- influenced a generation whose childhood and youth fell in the 1950's and the early 60's, the era of the intense Stalinist indoctrination.

Survival in the communist system was dependent to a great extent upon hypocrisy and distrust. Fear became one of the fundamental forces to determine how people acted. Westerners visiting Eastern European countries today often confess their confusion when faced with people looking grave and tense, rarely smiling. This is not a mystery; it is the reaction of people who for years had to live in hostile, unreliable environments.

The double standard imposed by circumstances, as well as the planned economy (where compensation was not based on productivity) caused the working morale of people to deteriorate. Many people still do not realize that prosperity, even in a well-functioning market economy, is impossible to achieve without hard work. Overcoming this mentality is one of the greatest obstacles to political and economic transition.

The consequences of both the deficient system and the mentality generated by it, are perhaps most obvious if we consider the state of health:

> Most East European populations are declining or only just maintaining themselves; infant mortality is increasing (twice as high as the rest of Europe); and life expectancy has actually fallen since 1978. The deterioration in Eastern Europe is unparalleled in the rest of the developing world.
> Demographic expert Jean-Claude Chesnais cites various factors in the decline. Education, housing, and health have all suffered because of the disproportionate amount of national income spent on armaments. Rigid central planning hinders productivity and leads to shortages. Food shortages, inadequate heating caused by fuel shortages, drug shortages, and deteriorating medical services and hygiene lower life expectancy. Noxious chemical pollution and industrial accidents (of which Chernobyl is only a dramatic example) take their toll, as does widespread chronic alcoholism. The habitual use of abortion as a means of birth control leads to lower fertility and higher infant mortality.[13]

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[13]Broun and Sikorska, 289-290.

The facts are shocking, all the more because we realize that we do not deal with merely demographic and economic data, or with abstract theories, but with human lives. It was surprising to many during the second elections after the political changes in many Eastern European countries, that left-wing parties won the power. This would be surprising if we did not take into account the human factor. Neither political programs nor economic strategies can be successful unless they are supported by society. Yet the people are scared, despairing, and desperate. They are looking for stability and certainty. Somewhere here lies the role of the Church. The mission of the Christian Church is enormous, and so is the responsibility. For several reasons, this is an "acceptable time" time for the Church to address society. The Gospel can offer the stability and certainty that society is seeking.

Toward a New Strategy

In order to make the preaching of the Gospel more effective, Eastern European churches need a redefinition of their purpose. The three major aspects of church activity I want to consider are the theological, the pastoral, and the structural.

Like the Western world, the Eastern European churches were not prepared for the collapse of communism. It is therefore not surprising that the post-communist Church was often the "bugle giving indistinctive sound" (1 Cor 14:8.) The ***theological dealing*** with the changes, and with the present situation of the church and of the society is indispensable. Just as the Western world is tempted to interpret the collapse of communism as the victory of capitalism, so the church is tempted to interpret the collapse as the victory of Christianity. Yet, these interpretations are not true. Communism was not defeated, but collapsed under its own burden. Indeed, a system rooted in Western Christianity proved to be viable, while the other, atheism *par excellence*, failed. But this is another story. The cause of communism's failure was neither the heroic fight of the West, nor the steadfastness of the Eastern European churches, though we wish it were. It was simply the economic impotence of the communist system.   The starting point of theological interpretation must be

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repentance, not self-sufficient triumphalism. It must be acknowledged that the Church survived not because, but in spite of, its attitude.

Another danger is the total rejection of the past. Károly Tóth, long time bishop of the Reformed Church in Hungary, calls our attention to the danger of unadvised interpretation of the past:

> The past summarily disowned and rejected without any analysis and can unequivocally be regarded as opportunism. It is high time that we should give a theological answer to our past. But this should be done as a real task of theology and not simply as an opportunistic antithesis of all theological reflections that were considered 'official theology' in the forty years of socialism. It would be a great mistake to replace the quasi-theological thinking of yesterday with another 'quasi theology' of today. We should avoid any new manipulation with theological values.[14]

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[14]Károly Tóth, "Five Years After the Changes: An Assessment of the Situation in Central-Eastern Europe," *Religion in Eastern Europe* XIV (December 1994), 34-35.

Even if we take into account that Tóth, whose activity as a church leader during communism was much disputed, is partly defending his own attitude in the past, this statement should be kept in mind.

Finally, there is the fact that the system change found the Church theologically backward. The imposed isolation from Western theological development, as well as the difficulties raised by the power controlling academic training, made its influence felt when the Church had to address issues not possible to address in the past, like politics, economy, abortion, and homosexuality. It is true that much energy was spent on the reorganization of church life and institutions, and the process is far from over. But the reconstruction of theology is one of the most urgent goals.

We need a ***modernization of the pastoral work***, based on a solid theological reflection. In spite of the severe restrictions placed on it during the communist era, in a sense, the mission of the Church was simple. The "enemy," the "evil," was clearly identifiable, and thus the methods of resistance more simple. The preservation of the faith and of the church's legal order was the most important task. In addition, the churches have not had "competition." They were the only element of civil society, and the only (albeit limited) political opposition. However, the situation has radically changed and we have to realize that "Churches no longer are the island where people can find freedom. We are only one among many equal groups" as the German clergyman Werner Kraetschell observed.[15] Rather than the well-defined red danger, we must now face secularism, moral degradation of society, and a strong religious and secular competition. This can be dealt with by finding new ways to share the eternal message of the Gospel in our particular social reality. Our conceptions about pastoral work currently go no further than 1950's and 1960's practical theology. After the system change, when clinical and prison pastoral work became possible, we realized that we lacked specialists, and did not have understanding of many other

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[15]Bailey, 121.

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fields. By postgraduate scholarships offered in Western countries, we started to close up the ranks, but the shortcomings are still considerable.

The third field of the renewal would be the *organization of modern church structures*. Although reorganization of church administration is demanded by certain groups (though not by the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches), I consider the reorganization coming from the bottom level more important. That is because administrative reform, however proper it might be, will leave mostly unchanged the largest part of the church. However, the main goal of reform must be to support the main part of the church, which are the people of the church.

One of the harmful consequences of communist rule is manifested in the lack of initiative and apathy of the people. This is easy to understand, since strict state control actually prevented any private or independent initiative. The fact that the state provided employment, housing, education, and medical care, etc. suggested that the socialist state takes care of its citizens, and that voluntary organizations are useless. Of course, this was not a manifestation of "social humanism" but of an all-controlling dictatorship. This basic feature of the communist structure deconstructed not just the organizations of the civil society, but also the mental and psychological patterns they are based on. Thus, many people simply do not acknowledge that, for instance, the role of political parties is not to provide housing, or solve the problem of stray dogs. The paternalistic state, in a way, made living more simple and carefree.

In the church the above-mentioned phenomena is accentuated by the conservative nature of traditionalist institutions. Change, in my opinion, must come from the level of parish communities. One of the greatest blessings of my time in the United States was to see how local problems are solved by voluntary associations, committees, and action groups in society in general, and in the church in particular. The principle of subsidiarity must become normative for the life of our churches, just as it is for the socio-political sphere.

Promising steps in this direction were taken, here and there. The reorganized women's guilds, for instance, treat charity duty in a very efficient way. Properly led youth groups help in various mission programs.   There are also church-based

agricultural and educational projects. However, this is just the start. The Church should emphasize that Christian responsibility implies concrete action in order to carry out various tasks in the environment we are living in. Nothing can substitute for the vigor of self-respecting, self-confident, and active base communities.

The Premises of Ecumenical Cooperation

The history of the Romanian ecumenical movement is characterized by various features, but none of them has much to do with the spirit of *oikoumene*. The ecumenical movement was under state direction. This was not because the atheistic state was concerned about the unity of the Christian body; the reasons were less pious. First, this was part of the homogenizing process to make the central control over the society easier. Second, through the ecumenical movement, the nationalistic communist power used the "national" and loyal Romanian Orthodox Church to attack the churches of ethnic minorities. The third reason was a propagandistic one. Ecumenism was supposed to demonstrate internally, "the indissoluble unity of the whole people under the leadership of the party," and outside, the commitment of the regime to the peace movement. It was not a genuine Romanian idea, since the Christian Peace Conference, under the patronage of the Moscow Patriarchate, filled a similar function in the context of "socialist internationalism."[16] Thus, the ecumenical conferences directed by the Department of Cults and dominated by the Romanian Orthodox Church were political meetings rather than Christian gatherings.

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[16]Broun and Sikorska, 300.

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After the political changes, the only important ecumenical meeting was held in 1990. On this occasion the churches agreed to continue ecumenical dialog. However, due to increased nationalistic political trends, the prospects for sincere dialog vanished. The situation was worsened by Romanian Orthodox Church attacks on the Catholic and neo-Protestant churches especially. The close ties of the Orthodox Church with the crypto-communist governing party as well as with the nationalist and anti-Semite political forces considerably reduced the willingness of the other denominations to engage in a dialog with the country's main church. Thus, the ecumenical contacts of the Romanian denominations were determined mostly by their ethnicity. The leaders of the historical Hungarian churches have a monthly conference where they act uniformly in supporting minority, as well as religious human rights. The otherwise rather cool relations of these churches with the Baptist church have been ameliorated to a degree. But there is still much to do.

There is no doubt that the actual ecumenical situation is intolerable. Something must be done in order to facilitate true ecumenical dialog. In my view the task has three main areas that must be focused on: theological, institutional, and local.

One of the good parts of the deceased state-directed ecumenical movement was the so-called Interconfessional Conferences. These conferences were held annually and their task was to promote ***interconfessional theological dialog***. After a short period of academic dialog, the Orthodox leaders participating in the conferences became the spokesmen of nationalist policy. I distinctly remember the conference held in our seminary during my studies. I will never forget how the Protestants in general, and Hungarians in particular, were humiliated by the peculiarly aggressive speech of the participating Orthodox metropolitan. None of the Protestant leaders and professors sitting under the pictures of the outstanding historical personalities of the Transylvanian Reformed Church, dared to utter a word, because it was clear that the metropolitan was carrying out "party duties."

The necessary interconfessional theological dialog should take place among those who acknowledge the equality of the denominations involved. The theological issues to be debated and dialogued by the various confessions are numerous. Perhaps

the most important would be the theological interpretation of nation and nationalism. An articulate and theologically well-founded response to this important problem would undoubtedly have a positive effect on future ecumenical efforts. It is also necessary to analyze the political, social, and economic responsibilities of the churches, not to mention the concrete issues like abortion, homosexuality, alcoholism, family, divorce, capital punishment, and ecology.

I do not have any illusion that theological dialog will be easy, or even exempt from hostility and intolerance. I also acknowledge that on several issues totally different points of view would make even minimal consensus impossible. However, what is perhaps more important than a consensus is the opportunity to get acquainted with each other's opinions, ideas, and struggles. The numerous common beliefs could strengthen the recognition that, in spite of significant differences, we are members of the same Body.

It is startling that denominations coexisting, some of them for centuries, have so little *institutional contact*. We have no one who is a specialist in one or other denomination. A fundamental duty is to train such people. Every main denomination must have several rapporteurs who know the dogma of the denomination in question and be familiar with its structure, organizations, and current issues, who read its periodicals and participate in conferences. Undoubtedly, more direct and personal contacts could be developed in this way. Student exchanges would be another fruitful step toward interdenominational communication. It could broaden not just the theological view, but it could also be an opportunity for interpersonal relations and further cooperation. Visiting lecturers could move ecumenical relations in the same direction.

A bold, but extremely beneficial initiative could be the establishment of an interdenominational charity institution. A nursing home or hospital, maintained by several denominations, could be the catalyst for practical ecumenical cooperation. I am not suggesting that these kinds of institutions should replace the denominational ones, but the existence of one could offer the possibility of practical experience in the various fields of the ecumenical endeavor.

The easier objective to realize is the ***local cooperation*** of the churches. Although nationalism is present in many spheres of the life, in daily life people of different religions and nationalities live and work together. They participate in weddings and funerals, as well as many other social events. When the contacts are human and personal, not official and distant, the differences seem to be less important. Cooperation between local churches in ecumenical worship and church programs is not nonexistent, but it is extremely rare. It is also true that once it is started, prejudices will start to lose their strong normative character, and the social climate will be considerably warmer.

Whatever good solutions one proposes, they are worth nothing without the willingness to put them into practice. When the issue is reconciliation, the most common question is: who will take the first step? We unwillingly acknowledge our blindness and faintheartedness. Who will take the first step? Nobody has to do that. It was already done by Somebody else.

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