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RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE ROMANIAN CONTEXT

By Vasile Alexandru Talos

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As most of the former communist countries in Eastern Europe, Romania, is currently striving to find a new identity. In the difficult process of transition from a mono-cultural to pluralistic society, the Romanian churches are called upon more than ever to dialogue, cooperate, learn one from another, and serve society in Christ's name. In times of economic, political, and social distress, Romanians often find hope and trust in the church. This is why it is imperative that Romanian Christian churches set aside feelings of animosity and work together to bring salvation, renewal and restoration to the Romanian people.

The purpose of this paper is to relay the challenge that religious pluralism poses for the Romanian Orthodox Church as Romania is exposed to Western democracy. Secondly, I wish to survey the basic teachings of Orthodoxy to provide a clearer understanding of this Church.

As Eddie Gibbs points out, "when people live within a mono-cultural society, there is a tendency for them simply to accept uncritically the social norms and religious beliefs of their community."⁽²³⁾ In a pluralistic society, however, people are expected to celebrate ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. But when pluralism is not accepted by the people, these expectations cause tensions. Before discussing religious pluralism in the Romanian context, it is necessary to define pluralism and relativism.

According to Webster's Dictionary, pluralism is defined as a "theory that there are more than one or more than two kinds of ultimate reality...a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization." Relativism is defined as "a theory that knowledge is relative to the limited nature of the mind and conditions of knowing." Applying the definition to religion, Gibbs says "it regards all religions as potentially able to contribute to revealing the truth about God in a comprehensive and pure form."⁽²⁴⁾

The challenge of religious pluralism for the Romanian Orthodox Church

With a population of 23 million, Romania is situated in the Carpatho-Danubian and Black Sea area, and is about the size of Oregon. As Yale Richmond points out, "speaking a Latin language and claiming descent from the Romans, Romanians are unique in Eastern Europe and have a strong sense of their uniqueness."⁽²⁵⁾

Between the two World Wars Romania experienced a period of economic and political liberalism which exposed the country to Western influence. By incorporating Transylvania and Bassarabia during this time, (two multi-ethnic provinces where ethnic Romanians have always been and still are in the majority), the Kingdom of Romania became a religiously pluralistic country. The change from homogenous to multi-ethnic and multi-denominational country generated two significant trends: modernism and nationalistic traditionalism. The Orthodox Church was declared "the dominant religion"⁽²⁶⁾ in cooperation with the nationalistic political movement. It attempted to be a strong national church to protect against Western materialism and modernism, and also to build internal cohesion based upon "native values." However, as Paul Negrut points out, "this approach had very limited success due to both the corruption of the clergy and the ongoing intrigues within the Church."⁽²⁷⁾

Between 1920 and 1944 the Orthodox Church persecuted all other denominations except Catholics. In spite of the persecution, some evangelical denominations grew very fast. For example, the Baptists grew from 20,000 members to almost 100,000. In December 1942 Nazi law prohibited the Baptist churches and all other minor Christian groups. Thus, church buildings were closed and sealed, and many evangelicals were imprisoned. Several Orthodox priests worked long

and hard to bring sectarian prisoners back to the Church. The Romanian Orthodox Church developed a law for deporting all Baptists, Adventists, and Brethren in Transnistria.⁽²⁸⁾

After the Second World War the communists took control of Romania. Communism was not simply another politico-economic system with a nationalized and centralized economy. More than that, the essence of Communism lay in its Marxist-Leninist philosophy. As Klaus Bockmuehl asserts, "Marxism is a world view which provides the individual with answers in every sphere of life and which denies the validity of alternative answers in every sphere as well." Marxism may be described as a sort of "secularized vision of the kingdom of God. It is the kingdom of men."⁽²⁹⁾ During forty years of Communism, all churches in Romania suffered persecution.

After four decades of communist dictatorship, on December 1989 Romania became a free country. Hundreds of thousands of people kneeled down in the public squares of Timisoara, Bucharest and other cities and recited the Lord's Prayer. In those dramatic days the multitudes shouted: "God exists! God is with us!" These were powerful statements after four decades of massive atheistic propaganda.

Two years later the national census revealed that 99.3 percent of the population claimed to be Christian.⁽³⁰⁾ The Romanian Orthodox Church represents 87 percent of the population, and is the second largest Eastern Orthodox Church in the world. About 95 percent of ethnic Romanians consider themselves Orthodox Christians.⁽³¹⁾ With a half million members, the Evangelical churches in Romania represent one of the largest bodies of Evangelicals in Europe. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Romania's population does not attend church and demonstrates no commitment to Jesus Christ. Waves of wickedness, vengeance and dishonesty continue to plague the society. The unprecedented growth of crime and abortion indicates deep spiritual and moral decay. While most Romanians identified with the Christian faith, by December 1989 most acted like nominal Christians. Gibbs' description of the nominal Christian is as follows:

...who, for whatever reason, want to be known as Christians, even though they may have lost contact with the church, have serious doubts concerning beliefs basic to Christianity, by living lifestyles which are incompatible with the values of the kingdom of God, or by failing to maintain an ongoing relationship with the Lord due to neglect of the means of grace which He has provided for our spiritual sustenance.⁽³²⁾

Nominalism is expected to pose a serious problem for all churches in Romania in the future. Atheistic propaganda and the lack of religious training has shaped the Romanian people's secular world view over the last forty years. Many lost their religious faith in that hostile secular environment. After the fall of communism there was psychological pressure to deny the atheistic ideology of the Communist Party and to identify with a religion, especially Orthodoxy. Thus many agnostics, even atheists, have claimed to be Christian. During the communist dictatorship people had very few options for spending their free time. The Church offered an alternative to the ideological slavery of the people. Today Romanian society is heading toward democracy and people have more freedom and options as to how to spend their time. Privatization and the free market economy challenge them to work harder to earn money. Young people are fascinated with music, movies, video and Western television. Individualism, hedonism and pragmatism, which according to Gibbs represent "some of the principal features of the contemporary neo-pagan society,"⁽³³⁾ have had noticeable effects on Romanian society as well. Religious movements and cults have flooded the country and especially attract nominal Christians who are most vulnerable and susceptible. Freedom has brought not only tremendous opportunities for churches, but also competition for people's attention and time.

The reality of nominalism within Orthodoxy has been focused on in recent years. Professor Ion Bria, Deputy Director of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism and Secretary for Orthodox Studies and Relationships, acknowledged that "there are many who have been baptized, and yet put off Christ, either deliberately or through indifference."⁽³⁴⁾ The Lausanne Congress held in Pattaya, Thailand in June 1980 produced a report on Christian witness to nominal Christians among the Orthodox. The Thailand Report states that "throughout many centuries of persecution, these [Orthodox] churches bravely proclaimed the Gospel and were very much alive...Today, however, many of their members are Christian only in name."⁽³⁵⁾

The question is: how relevant are the Romanian churches for nominal Christians and for secularists? Bria argues that "the re-Christianization of Christians is an important task of the church's evangelistic witness."⁽³⁶⁾ Even so, the Eastern Orthodox Church has criticized Western churches for their "missionary intrusions in Russia." Cecil Robeck

argues that the Russian Orthodox accusation ignores the impact of seventy years of atheistic propaganda on Russian believers. "They consider all Orthodox regions as 'Christian' due to the fact that in the past 'the Gospel has been preached there, the culture has been Christianized, and the Orthodox Church is entitled to cultural hegemony.'"⁽³⁷⁾

***Theosis*, the cornerstone teaching of Orthodoxy**

To have genuine encounter with the Eastern Orthodox Church one should be aware of the main Orthodox doctrine. This doctrine is the teaching of *theosis* and it refers to the deification of humanity through union and free communion with God. According to Robert Stephanopoulos, *theosis* implies both the final destiny for which man was created by God, and the fulfillment of a long and intense ascent by the believer who strives to achieve perfect union with God in this present life.⁽³⁸⁾ As Bishop Kallistos Ware asserts, "for Orthodoxy our salvation and redemption mean our deification."⁽³⁹⁾ Thus, within the Orthodox Church this teaching lies at the heart of the Christian message. Mircea Eliade observes that the idea of deification (*theosis*) is not only the central doctrine in Orthodoxy, but it is a monumental originality.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Daniel Clendenin maintains that *theosis* implies at least three major factors: 1) the mystical union with God whereby believers are transfigured; 2) movement from death, mortality, and corruption toward life, immortality, and incorruption; and 3) the ascent from the image of God to the likeness of God given to those who cooperate with divine grace.⁽⁴¹⁾ The centrality of *theosis* may be properly understood in its relation to other major Christian teachings as they are viewed in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The Eastern Orthodox Church accords tremendous importance to the teaching of the Trinity. The love relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is both the source and the model for what the Church, family, individual, and even society must be. From the beginning God's plan was to share His love and glory with human beings. The ultimate purpose of God's mission is the revelation of His glory. As James Stamoolis asserts, "God's purpose in calling humankind is for humans to be partakers of the divine glory."⁽⁴²⁾ Accordingly, man was created in the image of God and for union with God. Dumitru Staniloae argues that man possesses a more privileged status than angels for at least three reasons: 1) by creation, the image of God is more preeminent in man than in angels and man has the capacity to be transfigured in God's likeness; 2) man was created to reign over God's creation, while angels are servants of those who will inherit salvation (Hebrew 1:14); and 3) the Son of God was made in human likeness through the incarnation so that man will be made in God's likeness through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, man was destined to become God while the angels do not have this privilege.⁽⁴³⁾

However, *theosis* must not be understood in pantheistic terms. "Deified man is man renewed, re-created and transfigured into the son of God by grace." As Stephanopoulos asserts, "...God remains inviolate, sovereign and inaccessible in His unknowable and unapproachable essence."⁽⁴⁴⁾ In Vladimir Lossky's words:

The Union to which we are called is neither hypostatic - as in the case of the human nature of Christ - not substantial, as in that of the three divine Persons: it is union with God in His energies, or union by grace making us participate in the divine nature, without our essence becoming thereby the essence of God...We remain creatures by becoming God by grace, as Christ remained God in becoming man by the Incarnation.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Theosis was made possible, Stephanopoulos explains, through the person of Jesus Christ "who redeemed humanity by his incarnation, his voluntary death and resurrection and who has reconciled our corporate human nature with the living God."⁽⁴⁶⁾ According to Staniloae, "each of the acts of Christ represents a spiritualizing of the humanity which he assumed, and this implies a growth of this humanity in freedom and authenticity." The incarnation is both "a kenosis of the divinity and a divinization of humanity."⁽⁴⁷⁾ After his ascension, Jesus Christ becomes the focal point of the new humanity. The purpose of God's mission, as Yannoulatos writes, "is the 'recapitulation' (anakephalaiosis) of the universe in Christ and our participation in divine glory, the eternal, final glory of God."⁽⁴⁸⁾ A proper understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ is essential for attaining *theosis*.

God works our deification only through the Church, which is the Body of Christ. The Church alone is able to actualize the redeeming power, through the inter-human sensibility achieved by the Holy Spirit. Moreover, because at Pentecost the Holy Spirit constituted the Church with its *hierarchical - sacramental* structure, this fact underlines the fact that Christ's deifying grace cannot be communicated in the absence of these structures. Staniloae argues that there is no other possibility of divine-human dialogue or for deification outside of the hierarchical-sacramental structure of the Church.⁽⁴⁹⁾

The sacraments play an important role in attaining deification. Four sacraments must be observed by all believers if

they are to attain deification as described by Anthony Coniaris. The first sacrament is baptism. Through this the believer receives the second birth as a child of God, is cleansed of sin, and becomes a member of the Church. Also through baptism the person dies to sin and rises to a new life in Christ. The sacrament of Chrismation represents the anointing with the Holy Spirit. The sacrament of penance or confession involves forgiveness of all sins committed after baptism. One of the most important sacraments is that of the Holy Communion. The believer receives through this sacrament the very life of God through the Body and Blood of His Son. The bread and the wine administered represent Jesus Christ's Body and Blood. If the believer does not receive Communion, it is impossible for him or her to be saved, cleansed of sins, and admitted in the kingdom of heaven.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Salvation and *theosis*, according to Eastern Orthodoxy, are synonymous and presuppose a continuing process. In order to appropriate salvation or the attainment of *theosis*, one must believe, pray, obey the divine commandments and receive divine grace through sacraments. Good deeds are essential for deification, yet these must derive from faith, which according to the apostle Paul is the faith that works through love (Galatians 5:6). In order to be saved one should persist in the process of deification because God will consider only the spiritual condition that the believer has when he or she leaves this earthly life. Nobody knows the level of purity or virtue necessary to enter heaven. The Church can help by praying for those believers who died in faith to be transferred from hell into heaven, but only before the final judgment.⁽⁵¹⁾

There are several positive implications of this doctrine in regard to mission. First, for the Orthodox Church the glory of God is the aim of mission, and her practice focuses on worship. According to Stamoolis, the Orthodox Church is a worshipping church above all else.⁽⁵²⁾ Second, in a time of depreciation of the human being, the Orthodox Church promotes a high anthropological view. Third, due to the fact that human nature was deified through the incarnation of Christ and *theosis* can be attained only through union with Christ, the Orthodox Church accords special consideration to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ's person and work. Fourth, since Orthodox believers are in continuous need of God's mercy and grace in order to attain deification, they develop a sense of reverence and humility before God. Fifth, because *theosis* is attained only within the church, Orthodox Christians pay a high respect to the church and their bishops, priests and deacons. Sixth, as Clendenin asserts "the Orthodox emphasis on the importance of the human response toward the grace of God, which at the same time clearly rejects salvation by works, is a healthy synergistic antidote to any antinomian tendency that might result from (distorted) juridical understandings of salvation."⁽⁵³⁾ One might see several negative implications of this doctrine. First, the Orthodox Church confuses the experience of sanctification with that of salvation. Clendenin argues, "while any believer who experiences salvation can and should undergo sanctification, this is not to equate the two experiences or doctrines."⁽⁵⁴⁾ The justification by faith and the process of sanctification are both biblical teachings and are worthy of theological assertion. Because the Orthodox Church confuses salvation with sanctification, the believer has no assurance of salvation. Second, due to the fact that according to Eastern Orthodox teachings, a person receives new birth through baptism by water and deification is attained mystically through the liturgy and sacraments, people are not encouraged to know the word of God and to have a personal experience of conversion. As Stamoolis writes, "it is interesting to note Macarius Gloukharev's judgment 'that the Russian masses were only superficially Christian.'"⁽⁵⁵⁾ Ioan Alexandru explains: "Berdiaev was saying that in Russia Christ was liturgically lived only by an elite while common people were left outside..."⁽⁵⁶⁾ Many Orthodox Christians may be compared with the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius who worshipped God, were devout and god-fearing, but were not saved before they received Christ by faith after hearing the word of God (Acts 8:35, 11:13-15). Third, within the church one can see different levels of deification. Thus, some believers may attain a high level while others are situated at a lower level. The "superior" deified ones are expected to support and help inferior members in their struggle toward *theosis*. Besides any positive implications of this teaching, one may see negative aspects as well. From a practical point of view Orthodox believers may be divided into two major groups: a passive community and a representative community. Most Orthodox Christians make up the passive community. These delegate their spiritual affairs to priests, monks, nuns and other dedicated believers. Thus, they do not manifest a genuine interest in spiritual growth. Fourth, although deification means putting off sinful habits and vices and putting on Christian virtues, one may see cases of believers who still manifest sinful habits. According to Eastern Orthodox teachings, they may compensate for these with other virtues or good deeds. Thus, the role of the personal encounter with God and spiritual growth is diminished. Fifth, since the grace of God comes through the hierarchical-sacramental structure, people are committed to this structure instead of the community of believers. At the same time they develop a nationalistic and ethnocentric attitude. Sixth, due to the teaching that a person may be moved from hell to heaven after his or her death because of the prayers of the Church, his family, or those who benefited from good deeds, a popular religion has been developed in this regard. Orthodox Christians are heavily involved in rituals and customs related to dead

people. Many are tempted to postpone their own salvation until after death.

The encounter between Baptist and Orthodox churches

The first Baptist church in Romania originated within the German community from Bucharest in 1856. The first Romanian Baptist churches started in Transylvania during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The ideals of Baptist mission in Romania will illustrate the encounter between Baptist and Orthodox churches. One may depict four consecutive ideals of the Baptist churches' mission during a period of 130 years.

First, there was the ideal of a Biblical community of believers. The first Baptist converts derived from a group of Reformed Christians who began a Bible study and were longing for a deeper spiritual life. After converting, they spread the good news that by believing in Jesus Christ people may have eternal life and experience a transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit. They were Calvinistic in their theology and preached that those who were "elected" would be saved. In their encounter with the Hungarian Reformed Church and Romanian Orthodox Church, the lay preachers boldly shared with the priests, deacons and officials of the villages. They evangelized in rural areas. Due to evangelistic zeal, there were 600 Baptist churches with almost 19,000 members by 1919. About 13,000 of them were Romanian, and 6,000 were Hungarian, German and other minorities.⁽⁵⁷⁾ The pioneers of the Baptist faith faced sporadic acts of persecution.

After the First World War the Romanian Orthodox Church unleashed several waves of persecution. The Baptist mission took a more aggressive attitude based on John 4:23, *"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks."* 1 Thessalonians 1:9 was also instrumental: "They tell how you turned to God from idols." The idea of turning people from icons and dead ritual toward true worship of God persisted for decades. Lay preachers attacked the corruption and greed of priests and monks. Some transferred membership from the Orthodox and Greco-Catholic Church to avoid paying high taxes for those churches.

After 1930 the Baptist pastors who graduated from the Baptist Theological Seminary in Bucharest focused on Jesus Christ and invited people to genuinely repent and convert to Christ. A new Baptist ideal prevailed throughout the country, which was inspired by 1 Corinthians 1:23, *"We preach Christ crucified."* These words appeared on the front walls, and behind pulpits in every church building. The ideal of proclaiming Christ crucified became a more positive approach for those from traditional Christian churches. Especially during the Communist era this ideal was on the heart of the suffering church. During those days the proclamation of Christ crucified inspired pastors and lay preachers to be bold. However, since the fall of Communism this ideal has seemed too simplistic. Since 1990 increasing numbers of Orthodox priests and lay Orthodox Christians proclaim Jesus Christ, His incarnation, death and resurrection.

The sad reality is that neither Evangelicals nor Orthodox believers know each other. The Orthodox Church labels Evangelical churches as sects, (i.e., "cults"), and Evangelicals consider Orthodoxy to be a lifeless religion without Good News. A new ideal of Christian mission must prevail for people to be evangelized and proselytism to be avoided. This ideal might be The King and His Kingdom. Each church should acknowledge that the Kingdom of God is larger than any denomination.

Romanian society experienced aggressive secularization processes and tactics during the Communist era. Today, Romanians are fascinated by Western materialism and secularism. But human beings have needs which rationalism cannot meet. The human spirit cannot live permanently with a form of rationality which does not address eternal questions such as: Where did I come from? Who am I? What is wrong with me? Why am I here? Where am I going?⁽⁵⁸⁾ The churches and Christians should be humble and loving, but maintain strong convictions and commitments. They should also celebrate plurality without accepting pluralism as a philosophy of life, as Lesslie Newbigin argues:

We can and we must welcome a plural society because it provides us with a wider range of experience and a wider diversity of human responses to experience, and therefore richer opportunities for testing the sufficiency of our faith than are available in a monochrome society. But we must reject the ideology of pluralism. We must reject the invitation to live in a society where everything is subjective and relative...I doubt whether such society can long sustain its integrity in the face of the claims of those who have a firm commitment to some vision of truth.⁽⁵⁹⁾

The Romanian Orthodox Church has a great spiritual and cultural heritage, and tremendous opportunities to touch people's lives. She also has the proper human and material resources for ministry. And Evangelical churches can motivate the servants of the Orthodoxy to preach the Gospel and build Biblical functioning communities as they serve as examples. Romanians are conscious about their spiritual needs and are open toward the Gospel. During this time of openness, Romanian churches should not compete one with another while looking out for their own well-being, but they should serve the lost people in the spirit of Christ.