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Foreword to this Special Issue

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THIRTY YEARS AFTER CEAUȘESCU: REPORTS AND REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION IN ROMANIA

Foreword

By Beth Admiraal

Beth Admiraal is professor and political science departmental chairperson at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. She received her B.A. from Calvin College and Ph.D. from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. After serving as book-review editor for *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* for several years, she is now the co-editor of the journal and has previously published articles in OPRÉ and other journals.

Thirty years ago this month, Nicolae Ceaușescu, General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, was executed by firing squad in Bucharest, thus ending one of the most consequential lives of the modern Romanian era. The end of his life signaled not only the end of communism as the single dominating ideology of the political, social, and economic spheres, but also the end of the state's nearly complete domination over religious life.

Ceaușescu came to power in 1965 and stayed in power until the Romanian Revolution of 1989, thus serving as the leading face of the Communist era. His predecessor had already initiated heavy and overwhelming suppression of religious faith and expression. As Dragoș Ștefănică writes in his reflection in this issue, "The Department for Religious Affairs, which was supposed to guarantee the freedom of worship for all the denominations recognized by law . . . was hardly interested in safeguarding it. Instead, it pursued relentlessly a discriminatory and hostile agenda." And Ionut Moraru, another contributor, writes pointedly, ". . . after 1949 *all* of Jehovah's Witnesses in Romania suffered cruel and intense persecution." Claudia Chiorean writes about the Orthodox Church in this issue, which did not escape persecution despite its position as the majority church, "In the Communist prisons in Pitesti, Aiud, Gherla (referential names for the oppression of the Romanian Communist regime) real saints were born." Thousands of Orthodox priests were imprisoned during the Communist era, suffering alongside those from the Pentecostal, Jehovah's Witnesses, Greek Catholics, and other faiths.

While many minority religious groups continued to be suppressed throughout the communist era, the Communist Party soon found that it could co-opt religious leaders and groups for its own political ends. Although the extent of collaboration is not fully known, the Romanian

Orthodox Church [hereafter ROC] was enlisted by the state to support its policies, which in turn led the state to acknowledge the importance of Orthodoxy to the national identity and offer the Church some space for religious activity and additional property rights. Additionally, the state disbanded a competitor to the ROC, the Romanian Greek Catholic Church, a historically important church in Romania that uses the Byzantine rite but is in full union with Rome. In sum, though not all Romanian Orthodox clergy surrendered to the state and a considerable number were imprisoned over time for anti-communist activity, cooperation existed alongside resistance during the Ceaușescu era.

The Communist Party's control over religious life ended suddenly and profoundly in 1989. On December 16, in the city of Timișoara, an ethnic Hungarian pastor, László Tőkés, spoke publicly against the Ceaușescu regime, igniting a revolution that quickly engulfed the country. By December 21, support for Ceaușescu was dwindling, even among the military: he and his wife Elena were captured trying to flee, summarily tried, and executed on December 25, a bolt of violence on Christmas Day. Although the transition to democracy that followed was not without its extraordinary complications, the changes prompted by the events of late 1989 opened up entirely new opportunities for religious life in Romania.

The way forward for religious groups has not been straight or even, though in the final analysis it has allowed religious life to flourish. Ștefănică notes that “the fall of the communist dictatorship meant the opening of new unexpected opportunities and opened the horizon for high expectations that, for the most part, were fulfilled in these thirty years of post-communism.” Moraru writes from his experience and interviews that “Jehovah's Witnesses are joyful that the current situation allows them to fulfill their Christian activities without constraints.” And we learn from Chiorean, “The joy of being able to practise the Orthodox faith freely and unswervingly touched the students, who at that time were the generation of the children of the Communist period, of the children who used to be the ‘pioneers.’” Thirty years after Ceaușescu, religious groups worship in the daylight.

One of the more remarkable signs of religious flourishing is offered in the report by Ovidiu Oltean, who in his overview of the dynamics of religious renewal in the Transylvania region, one of the most ethnically diverse settings in Eastern Europe, narrates the “resilience and intercultural exchange . . . in the religious and confessional environment of the former ethnic German settlements from Transylvania” Fieldwork undertaken by Oltean and others documents a

surprising sign of religious freedom in these historically Saxon communities: “The massive emigration of ethnic Germans coupled with the fall of communism and the democratization of religious and social life has opened up new religious and cultural forms of expression and participation and the transgression of religious boundaries which were kept almost intangible for centuries.”

The door that opens up to religious freedom does not always lead to expected places. Our contributors, reflecting on the past thirty years for religion in Romania, note both the joys and tribulations of freedom. On one hand, freedom does mean opportunities for authentic expression. Ionut quotes a survivor of a six-year prison sentence for his faith who puts things simply: “These were indeed thrilling times.” Oltean looks back at the past thirty years and reports: “the country has managed to build up a spectacular minority rights regime strongly consolidated after the Romanian accession to the European Union.” However, freedom does present struggles, as well. Although only briefly noted in the contributions, the issue of property restitution has continued to be a hardship, particularly for the Hungarian Reformed and Greek Catholic communities, but also the Roman Catholic, Unitarian, and Evangelical Lutheran. The properties that were wrested from them during the communist era are either state-owned property or were turned over to the Romanian Orthodox Church. This has led to tension at the local and national levels, and the refusal to return property has been widely condemned by international human rights and legal communities. Additionally, in some parts of Romania, particularly the rural areas, minority religious groups have documented sporadic threats of violence from government officials and Romanian Orthodox priests and report being rebuffed from taking part in public activities and celebrations. As a spiritual matter, religious freedom can also be confounding, as the freedom to choose often prompts doubts about what once seemed so obviously true. Chiorian thoughtfully notes in her essay that “freedom of religious practice is not equivalent to inner freedom.” Although Romania continues to be one of the European Union’s most religious countries measured by beliefs and practices, the data shows a decline in religious participation on a regular level over the past decades in Romania. Religious freedom is also the freedom to choose not to be religious.

Despite these troubles, one of the threads woven through all four contributions in this issue is the new reality: by and large Romania today is a religiously diverse country with considerable religious freedom. As Oltean concludes: “As Romanian society has grown more pluralistic, not only has political and cultural life developed and become more diverse but also religious forms of

expression and religious organizations have seen new opportunities for development and transformation.” We have every reason to have believe that, in another thirty years from now, religious life will continue to show signs of flourishing.