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Book Review: Orthodox and Greek Catholics in Transylvania (1867-1916): Convergences and Divergences

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BOOK REVIEWS

Marcarie Drăgoi, *Orthodox and Greek Catholics in Transylvania (1867-1916): Convergences and Divergences*, Translated by Carmen-Veronica Borbely, Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015, 289 pp, hardback. ISBN: 979-088141-507-0.

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The Transylvanian region is an extraordinarily complicated place, not least of all in its religious demographics and life. One of the more potent and enduring religious developments in the region was the emergence of the Greek Catholic Church in Transylvania from within the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1700, leading to two rival churches that claim to wear the Romanian mantle. Marcarie Drăgoi, in *Orthodox and Greek Catholics in Transylvania (1867-1916): Convergences and Divergences*, offers a comprehensive investigation and thoughtful analysis of the Transylvanian Romanian churches, focusing on the period of the Austro-Hungarian dualist monarchy. For Transylvania, this era represented a time of intense Magyarization of the region of Transylvania, putting Romanian identity in a vulnerable position and forcing Romanian institutions to adopt defensive and offensive measures to safeguard Romanian culture. Drăgoi details the relationship between these two principal Romanian churches during this period, giving insight into their evolution as allies in the struggle against Magyarization but also adversaries in the quest for public and private resources and support.

This monograph is remarkable in three ways. First, in examining the relationship between the Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities in Transylvania rather than just treating the churches monolithically, it opens up new insights into the complexities of the relationship between the two entities. The relationship was at times fraught and at times amicable; in some localities it was generally collegial while in other places it was typically strained or even violent; on occasion, issues between the two churches altered significantly one or the other church's prospects, sometimes even its sustainability. Second, this examination focuses heavily on parochial life and local structures in the churches, from "the daily minutiae of pastoral care" (16) to the local parishioners' religious activity, allowing for the rare experience of hearing the voices of the rural faithful in this region. In doing so, it brings to the page for the first time a substantial body of archival documentation, some unearthed in local collections, some from national archives, and still more from church archives. Finally, *Orthodox and Greek Catholics in Transylvania* is a fair-minded, data-driven analysis that, though written by a Romanian Orthodox bishop, seeks to treat both churches with objectivity and respect. Though some readers might be tempted to look

for pro-Orthodox bias, what's remarkable is that Drăgoi acknowledges equally the good and the bad behavior of members of both churches during this difficult time.¹

Drăgoi divides his book into four sections, with the first section setting the stage for the subsequent three. In this opening scene, he overviews ecclesiastical life for the Romanian population in Transylvania beginning with the 1848 Revolution, which allowed, crucially, for “the organization of Romanian bi-confessionalism on the constitutional, canonical, and disciplinary levels” (25) despite the neo-absolutist regime in place. Notwithstanding all of the obstacles that arose in the decades following 1848, Drăgoi notes that “the two Churches continued to represent institutions of primary importance for the Romanian community up until World War I” (25). At the same time, the period of focus for this book, 1867-1918, presented enormous struggles for the Romanian churches, which after 1867 faced Magyarization policies that were intended to limit the churches' autonomy and place significant restrictions on their role in Transylvanian society.

In part two, the focus is exclusively on the role of ecclesiastical schools under Austro-Hungarian dualism. The Hungarian government, effectively in control of the Transylvanian region from 1867 onwards, viewed the educational system as a “useful instrument for building and strengthening the Hungarian political nation through the assimilation of the non-Magyar nationalities” (51). Various laws were passed, such as requiring a minimum teacher's salary and a level of mastery of the Hungarian language, seemingly to pressure church schools, especially in rural areas with few resources to meet the requirements, to relinquish control of the school, and retool as a state school. Drăgoi—and this is where the book really shines—unearths, summarizes, and analyzes a vast array of archival material, mostly in the form of letters and school documents, to tell story after story of the two churches' individual and joint efforts to sustain their schools as conduits of the Romanian identity. The stories are fascinating: in some rural localities, the two churches peaceably pooled resources to maintain one church school where sufficient funds did not exist to maintain separate schools. In such cases, the confession of the school typically went to the majority church in that area. In a few areas, compromises did not come easily and discord erupted between the two churches. Overall, though, Drăgoi concludes that in those communities where insufficient resources allowed for two church schools to remain open, leading to the real possibility of disagreements, the “desire to defend the Romanian national cause proved stronger than any confessional disputes and adversities” (106) and agreements were worked out.

Various aspects of inter-church relations in the dualist period are addressed in part three, with a focus on confessional changes of individuals, families, and even (occasionally) entire communities. The

¹ It's worth mentioning there are a few points where the author makes contested remarks about the Hungarian position in Transylvania, such as in the second sentence of the introduction where he calls the Romanian population ‘indigenous’ to the region (7). Most historians do not think there's enough evidence to commit to the view that the Romanian population is native to the region. These points are tangential to the book's primary argument, however.

Hungarian laws discouraged these changes by placing a high burden on those who wished to convert, denying children over the age of seven from switching with parents, and precluding the transition of ecclesiastical possessions in cases where entire churches wished to switch to the other denomination. The number of conversions in either direction was limited; however, when they were initiated, they often produced significant animosity within communities. Drăgoi overviews many such cases with extensive documentation, drawing conclusions that are worth sharing: first, these conversions did not typically concern “spiritual pursuits” but rather “conflicts inside the communities, namely, resentments [and] petty human interests” (155); sometimes conversions were initiated by priests, other times by parishioners who often faced dire material shortages (213). Second, although these conversions placed a great strain on particular communities at various times, “strategies of rapprochement and cooperation, for the common good of the nation, were found” (212), with both churches keenly aware of the need to cooperate to maintain the Romanian identity.

The final section of the monograph focuses on the institution of the clergy, with close attention to the material struggles of priests and church communities as they were emerging from a long period of serfdom and the role of clergy as culture-bearers for the Romanian identity. Drăgoi credits the efforts of Romanian clergy to secure funding for their parishes and church schools as an important part of the movement away from serfdom, from “overcoming backwardness” to “putting them on the pathway of progress” (235). Additionally, the church schools in Transylvania, Drăgoi finds, cultivated Romanian intellectual life and championed the Romanian national project during a period of duress under the dualist regime. Drăgoi does not mince words on this point, concluding, “The contribution of the Romanian clergy to the advancement of the Romanians from this part of the country to modernity and progress made for a bright page in Romanian national history” (263).

This manuscript makes a convincing case for the importance of both the Romanian Orthodox and the Greek Catholic Churches in the modernization of Transylvanian society and for the integral cooperative work of these churches in preserving the Romanian identity during a period of intense Magyarization. In making this case, the book is sometimes repetitive in its storytelling, with the same cases emerging in more than one chapter without acknowledgement that they had appeared earlier. This is likely the result of Drăgoi stitching together smaller sections into a larger book. Nevertheless, the book doesn’t lack coherency in any way and ultimately establishes the important ways in which the two churches often cooperated, together preserving Romanian culture. The lesson learned during the dualist period on the value of cooperation would serve these same churches well today.