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O istorie a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Editura Humanitas,  
București, 2023**

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Biserica de stat sau biserică în stat? O istorie a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2023. 457pp.**

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Romanian book publishers have recently released many books, that capture national attention, becoming the central topic of professional debates, institutional disputes, and press coverage. Among these is a Romanian language monograph, *Biserica de stat sau biserică în stat? O istorie a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române* [State Church or Church in the State? History of the Romanian Orthodox Church, 1918-1923, by Oliver Jens Schmitt, a Swiss historian of Austrian origin living and researching in Vienna. The book caused intellectual excitement and sharp debate in Romania in 2023. He is a member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and Director of *Das Institut für die Erforschung der Habsburgermonarchie und des Balkanraumes der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* [Hapsburg Empire and Balkan Research Institute].

The book became a bestseller within weeks, but also caused a huge public outcry, receiving harsh critiques from the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Romanian Academy. The release of the book and the attacks it faced can only be understood together, so it is worth considering the arguments and positions of both sides, as they shed light on significant phenomena that extend beyond this case study from Romania.

This author's books are associated with nationwide controversies, as demonstrated by the scandal caused in Albania by his book on Skanderbeg. The controversy led to the suicide of its translator. In this volume, Schmitt claims that Skanderbeg's mother, Voisava Kastrioti, might have been of Serbian origin. The ethnic affiliation of these figures turned national myths often leads to such significant offenses and collective ruptures in the region that some countries even change their names, as seen in the recent history of North Macedonia due, to the "Macedonian" or "Greek" identity of Alexander the Great. Schmitt, as a Byzantinologist and Balkan expert, is aware of this. He recognizes the "misery of the Central and Eastern European states," as István Bibó argued and the peculiarities of the semi-periphery and inter-imperiality

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of the region, where the inviolability of national myths and heroes serves as the foundation for collective security and Andersonian imagined communities. In his books, Schmitt deconstructs these elements that contribute to national unity and imagined collective identity (persons, events, institutions). He primarily does so as a historian, relying on sources and academic literature, but sometimes, subjectivity is given too much space in his texts: many statements lack footnotes, and without sources; the reader cannot verify their credibility. Like Lucian Boia and many other Romanian representatives of deconstructive historiography, Schmitt demythologizes by creating new myths. Schmitt's historical technique is akin to the myth-creating and myth-demystifying magic of a wizard. He writes fluently, as a talented author who occasionally drops strong, controversial statements, but he does not exaggerate or base his work solely on that. Therefore, it is often challenging for the reader to determine where the historian's knowledge based on sources ends and where the subjective interpretation of an intellectual closely associated with Western institutions begins. In other words, it is a genuine challenge to determine in Schmitt's work where history ends, and meta history begins.

In his latest volume, he examines the largest church in Romania, the Romanian Orthodox Church (hereafter referred to as BOR – *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*). The starting thesis and question revolve around the extent to which BOR can be considered a state church or a church within the state in its post-1918 history. The author aims to explore how the power dynamics between the state and the Orthodox Church have evolved over the past century. In this volume, he briefly delves into the prehistory of BOR (pages 31-57), analyzing in detail the conditions prior to 1918, the radically different traditions of the fragmented Romanian Orthodoxy in Transylvania, the Romanian principalities, and the Russian and Austrian territories. The issues of inter-imperialities are rarely discussed here. Subsequently (pages 57-80), Schmitt thoroughly examines the role played by BOR in the 1918 unification: he introduces the main actors and demonstrates how Orthodox Church leaders suddenly change their opinions between 1916 and 1918 (Miron Cristea, for example, was still loyal to the Hungarian cause in the war in 1916). He highlights that the newly expanded Romanian Kingdom faced enormous challenges after 1920 when it had to confront not only the religious diversity of ethnic minorities but also the religious dissonance within the united country. In 1920, the Romanian population was divided among Greek-Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity from the Austrian world, and Orthodox Christianity from the Russian world, requiring the establishment of a unified voice and church policy. The author primarily emphasizes the process of forced national unity, often artificial and fraught with conflicts, through the conflict between BOR and the Greek-Catholic Church from Transylvania, as a living, politically active and culturally

more visible heritage of the Hungarian and Habsburg times. Strangely, the book scarcely addresses the BOR's role in the Romanization of Szeklerland, the urban reconfiguration of Transylvanian cities, the distribution of church properties, or the complex and strained relationship with Catholic and Protestant churches. BOR played a nation-unifying role in the establishment of Greater Romania in 1920, but this relationship was not always free of conflicts. Schmitt extensively draws upon a vast body of scholarly work, incorporating the contributions of numerous young and talented researchers, such as Lucian N. Leuştean, Ovidiu Olar, Andreea Kaltenbrunner, Konrad Petrovszky, Marian Pătru, Tamás Sárándi, or Ionuț Biliuță, often in surprising ways (quoting from unpublished doctoral theses, of course, with the authors' permission). Although he speaks Romanian perfectly, it is not clear from the introduction whether he himself wrote this volume in Romanian, or if it was translated.

Almost every page features a story where we encounter blemishes in the history of BOR: the inseparable relationship between the Iron Guard and the church is analyzed through the notable theologian Dumitru Stăniloae, Metropolitan Antim Nica, and the later Patriarch Teoctist Arăpașu (pages 80-133). The author also sheds light on sexual harassment by Nicodim Munteanu, the anti-Semitism of Octavian Goga, and writes critically about Miron Cristea, the first patriarch who later became the prime minister (pages 133-188). These names become the subject of unsparing critical analysis, which previously had only been the subject of panegyrics in Romanian scholarly literature, with few historical monographs or contextual analyses. Schmitt repeatedly mentions in the preface that he couldn't always rely on adequate sources since many details and chapters of BOR's history had not been thoroughly analyzed yet, especially when it comes to the Ceaușescu era (1965-1989). Monographs on patriarchs and leaders of BOR are typically works by ecclesiastical publishers and authors, often presenting the life of a patriarch or metropolitan with a lack of sources or selective methodology. Therefore, Schmitt faced a difficult situation writing his book: on the one hand, he had to gather thousands of documents covering a century of history, and on the other hand, he had to possess a vast body of relevant scholarship, preferably both the emic and ethic literature. However, such an endeavor is not feasible for a single author in one volume, as it exceeds their capabilities, space, and time. Schmitt "bridges" this methodological problem by collecting the main works written by the above-mentioned young authors and historians, along with some contemporary sources (such as letters and memoirs of politicians and patriarchs) and synthesized them in a comprehensive, historical work. Writing a hundred years of history in just 400 pages is no small feat, but it requires extreme selectivity. In Schmitt's book, the history

of the Orthodox Church appears as a kind of indictment, depicting it as an exploiter, opportunist, and parasite in its relationship with state power.

Considering these aspects, it is perhaps not surprising that the official reaction from BOR and the president of the Romanian Academy (Ioan Aurel Pop) was vehement, and the reviews were equally strong. The critics emphasized that Schmitt is anti-Church, his style resembles the era of Marxism and Stalinist historiography, and with his deconstructivism, he intentionally opposes Orthodoxy, which played a crucial role in the establishment of Romanian national unity, culture, education, and the social system.

As mentioned, the conflicting parties (nationalist historiography vs Western deconstructivism) reveal not only the peculiar problems of Romanian historiography but also the depth of collective wounds that the field of Romanian historiography is currently unwilling to confront, or only a few have dared to address in recent years. Since Schmitt's book has already been purchased by thousands, BOR and the Academy rightfully see this volume as a rapidly spreading source of danger that stands in opposition to their own worldviews. Schmitt boldly but superficially delves into a deep collective heritage of trauma, unspoken experiences of the 20th century, and the radically changing world of our contemporary society. His book and its Romanian public reception confirm the turbulence and unhealed dimensions of collective woundedness of Central-Eastern European societies, still haunted by the weight of historical traumas and the past.

Oliver Jens Schmitt's book is far from being a "perfect" work of historiography. It would be difficult to teach it at university as an exemplary model of thoroughness and scholarly referencing. However, as a scientific and popularizing work, it touches upon depths and topics that Romanian historiography and collective mentality will eventually have to address, confronting the traumas and collective wounds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, provoking the Romanian and international scholarship for further, in-depth research for several case studies which were not discussed in detail by the author.