The Romanian Orthodox Church

Earl A. Pope
Lafayette College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol1/iss3/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

by Earl A. Pope

Dr. Earl A. Pope is Professor of Religion and chairs the Department of Religion at Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania. He is a member of the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. His specialty is the Romanian Orthodox Church. Fluent in Romanian, he has frequently travelled in that country. In the late 1970's he spent an entire year in Romania as an IREX/Fulbright scholar studying the ecclesiastical situation in Romania. In this paper he addresses himself to the recent development of the largest church in Romania, the Romanian Orthodox Church, but does not cover the other churches in Romania.

* * * * *

This is the third issue of Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe. The first issue was "The Religious Situation in the German Democratic Republic" by Dr. Max L. Stackhouse of the Andover Newton Theological School. The second issue was "The Church and Contemporary Social Dynamics in Poland" by Dr. James E. Will of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. OPREE is a publication of Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe (CAREE), which is published by the Ecumenical Press at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA 19122. For information on subscription rates and submission of manuscripts as well as other editorial matters, write to the editor, Dr. Paul Mojzes, Rosemont College, Rosemont, PA 19010, U.S.A.
The Romanian Orthodox Church

There is an increasing awareness today of the highly complex and diverse situation regarding the religious groups in the various Communist countries. The Soviet model of Church-State relations has had a critical, but at times limited, impact on the satellite countries; history, culture, nationalism, and far greater sensitivity to Western concerns than previously recognized have played a very significant role in the application of Marxist-Leninist ideology to local religious life.¹

Granted that the religious situation in Eastern Europe leaves much to be desired from a variety of Western perspectives, nonetheless, one should recognize that many of the Churches are able -- within certain restrictions that the Marxist States regard as highly defensible -- to have a very active and meaningful existence. Dr. Paul Hansen, Lutheran World Federation Secretary for Europe, addresses himself forcefully to the Western missionary organizations which convey the impression that the "true Christian life" is to be found primarily underground. He points out that these organizations do a very serious injustice to all the faithful believers in the officially recognized Churches to which the overwhelming majority of Christians in Eastern Europe belong.²

The developments in Romania at the end of World War II brought about extraordinarily serious changes in the relationships between Romanian religious groups and the State. Professor Keith Hitchens summarizes the dilemma of the Romanian Orthodox Church as follows:
The crisis which now confronted the Church was not simply a formal contest between Church and State over precedence or some privilege; religion itself was in jeopardy. Both the Party's long-range aspirations and its immediate objectives were openly hostile to the Orthodox tradition. Guided by a materialist ideology, it taught that religion was retrograde and was rooted in the exploitation of the working classes, and it confidently predicted that "mysticism" would gradually disappear, as the transition from Capitalism to ideal Communism gained momentum. In the meantime, the party admonished its members not to take a passive attitude toward religion, but to recognize it as a serious obstacle to the attainment of Communism and to "unmask" its true character by promoting a "scientific" understanding of natural and social phenomena.³

Unquestionably Marxist atheism with its militant Leninist focus has had the most important influence on the nature of Church-State relations in Romania, but there are also other very important considerations⁴ that have helped bring about the present remarkable co-existence: The constitutional declaration of religious freedom, the Law of Cults of 1948,⁵ the Helsinki agreement,⁶ the durability of ecclesiastical institutions, the persistence of religious convictions and practices,⁷ the concern for political survival, modern means of communication which could call almost immediate attention to difficulties of Churches, the sensitivity to allies and critics abroad, the temptation -- indeed the necessity -- to maximize the usefulness of the Churches to achieve economic, political, and social objectives at home and abroad. It is clear, for example, that the Romanian Church has played a critical role in the development, perpetuation, transmission, intensification, and enrichment of Romanian consciousness and that the history and the traditions of the Romanian people were inextricably interwoven with its faith. Romanian Orthodox scholars point, in sacramental tones, to the
critical involvement of the Church in the most significant historical moments of the unification of the nation. They feel that it is at least implicit that the dominant religious and political imperatives of Romanian history have emerged in a mysterious way to bring about a unique merging of Christianity with a particular people. It should be noted that there has been a heightened awareness and appreciation among the university historians regarding the historic role of the Church in unifying the ancient Romanian provinces. The contemporary Romanian State found itself in need of historical and existential legitimation, and the Romanian Orthodox Church possessed the resources to assist it significantly.

The basic principles of the religious policy of the present Romanian State were set forth in the decree, "On the General Governance of Religious Cults," on August 4, 1949, and are regarded as valid today. This law spells out what are considered to be the constitutional rights of freedom of conscience and religious freedom in Romania, and at the same time it has established a very thorough and comprehensive system of State control over all denominations. The Churches are under the direct jurisdiction of the Department of Cults, a very efficient agency run by highly competent personnel who have impressive resources at their command whereby they can be certain that the written laws and oral interpretations are carefully followed.

Much of the complexity in the contemporary religious situation in Romania existed long before the present Romanian State. There have been profound tensions between former Romanian govern-
ments and religious groups, as well as among the religious groups themselves. There are a number of reports that the various official religious groups are functioning today in a vital and dynamic manner within the context of the regulations set forth in 1948. Indeed, there appears to be a very important resurgence of religious faith in Romania. Paradoxical as it may seem the rise of Marxism has led to the inner strengthening of religious communities. In certain respects, some of them appear to be in a healthier state now than they were in an earlier era -- despite the limitations and restrictions imposed. When the full story of these remarkable religious developments is known, the influence on the Western Churches -- which are in many instances much more the captives of their societies than are the Churches in the East -- is likely to be very significant.11

There are fourteen officially recognized religious groups in Romania,12 the most prominent, of course, being the Orthodox Church with more than 10,000 priests and approximately 12,000 places of worship, most of which are in good repair. The Orthodox Churches remain very well attended at their regular Sunday services, and many churches hold additional daily services. There is a surprisingly large number of young people in attendance; recent reports indicate that an increasingly large number of young people and members of the working class are beginning to attend the early morning services. New Churches have been built and many have been restored, but there remains a great need for new churches, particularly in the burgeoning metropolitan areas. Within the past decade the missionary priest has arisen -- a
priest without a parish who visits families in new communities and holds liturgical services within the apartments. This development holds great promise for the Church's ministry in the urban areas. It should be pointed out that, particularly in the village world, the Church is very important in many subtle ways within the lives of the people, and many Romanians living in the industrialized centers are still villagers at heart. The priests are held in high esteem, and some of the fiercest struggles within the society for the allegiance of men's hearts and minds are between the priests and the local party secretaries.

The Church is well organized and effectively administered with a well-trained clergy, distinguished theological scholars, outstanding candidates for the priesthood, and some of the finest theological journals within the Orthodox world. The monastic system still plays a vital role within the life of the Church. Six theological seminaries enroll more than 1,500 students, and two University Theological Institutes (Bucharest and Sibiu) have more than 1,200 students. It would appear that the training of the priests is at least equivalent, if not superior, to that for some of the other professions. Approximately forty of the theological students and priests study abroad each year in some of the leading theological centers in the West. A number of the professors are invited to lecture abroad annually and to serve on an increasing number of ecumenical commissions. There is a steady stream of ecumenical leaders, scholars, and students entering Romania from other countries, thus bringing about stimulating exchanges of ideas; the Department of Cults is
frequently involved. State officials express great pride in the achievements of their Orthodox scholars and in the leading role that their Church has begun to play in the international community. ¹⁵

It is important to note that the morale of both the Romanian priests and the theological students is high and that there are at least three to four candidates for each opening at the Institutes and more than six candidates for every opening in the seminaries. (There have been reports of upwards of twenty in some instances.) The State provides very important subsidies to the Orthodox Church (as well as to other traditional religious communities) and contributes at least one-third of every priest's salary, as well as the full salaries of all the theological professors on the same scale as the professors in the State University system. The professors are very active in their scholarship in historical, ecclesiastical, and theological areas, and their publication record is impressive. The Church recently announced plans to publish new Romanian translations of one hundred volumes of the Church Fathers -- ten a year for the next ten years.

The Orthodox Church has its own publishing houses that are producing an amazing number of periodicals, theological volumes, Bibles, and liturgical works.¹⁶ These are distributed carefully within the Church community but never quite seem to meet the demand. There are a few Church centers in public areas where religious articles may be purchased. Candles, liturgical calendars, and small icons are sold in all the Churches.

Presumably the Romanian Orthodox Church has no special
privileges within the Romanian State; in practice, however, its position amounts virtually to an establishment vis-à-vis the other religious communities. It is important to bear in mind that the Romanian Church has the Byzantine legacy of a "symphony" between secular and spiritual powers and that its commitment to nationalism has been irrefutable; this gives it a unique leadership role in the religious community. Whereas the State may view the Church as a primary vehicle for the preservation of the national spirit, it should be noted that the Church still views itself as the spiritual and moral soul of the nation -- because of its possession of the divine truth. This unique fusion of the Romanian people with the Orthodox tradition implicit within the Sagunian national mythology has been revived in an even more penetrating way in contemporary orthodoxy by Professor Dumitru Staniloae. In many ways Orthodoxy and Romanian national consciousness converge, but there is always a struggle within the Church to transcend this cultural convergence by a profound religious awareness. It is also important to note that the Churches, despite their orientation to the new society, have remained the sole social structures that have not been fully integrated into the Romanian political system due to their basic theological incompatibility.

The late Patriarch Justinian provided very important leadership for the Church and proved to be remarkably successful in avoiding a major confrontation with the State. His understanding of the relationship between Orthodoxy and the new social order is expressed in the thirteen volumes of his
Social Apostolate. Patriarch Justinian continually urged his Church to work without any hesitation for the new social order of "peace, love, brotherhood, and honesty." He believed that there was a fundamental convergence between the social concerns of the Church and those of the State and emphasized the importance of full cooperation in the fundamental changes that were taking place. Socialism appeared to him to be more satisfactory from the Orthodox point of view than some of the governments the Church had experienced in the past. He increasingly emphasized the importance of the Romanian Church as the Servant Church. He also continually stressed the spiritual mission of the Church, re-organized the monastic system, raised the standards of theological education, and strongly supported both internal and external ecumenical relationships. Patriarch Justinian proved to be an extraordinarily able and far sighted ecumenical leader and early in the 1970's began working on plans for an International Ecumenical Center in Romania. It was his hope that this center would provide exciting opportunities for interorthodox, inter-confessional and interreligious dialogues. The Patriarch also hoped to establish a research library which would attract scholars throughout the world to work on areas dealing with the social and theological issues confronting the ecumenical movement.

It should also be noted that in recent years the Romanian State has made efforts to include the Churches as social institutions in organizations alleged to be close to the center of power within the Romanian State. In May, 1974, the Romanian Orthodox Church along with all the other religious bodies joined the Socialist Unity Front, which serves as a national advisory
body in domestic and international affairs. It has a central committee on which workers, peasants, ethnic minorities, Party officials, and the religious communities are represented. At least one representative from each of the Churches is a member of the central committee. There is no question but that the leaders in all the Churches are very pleased with this development.

In his address to the Churches on this occasion, President Ceausescu stated, "Certainly, as we are Communists, we promote the materialist-dialectic and historical concept of life and world, and act in all circumstances on the basis of this scientific view," but he stressed that the State respected "the views of others including the religious beliefs and the right of practicing them" and referred to their constitutional rights.17

Reference should be made to the extensive ecumenical network that the Romanian Churches have developed with international religious bodies: World Council of Churches, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Lutheran World Federation, World Baptist Alliance, World Pentecostal and Adventist Fellowships, World Jewish Congress, International Association for Religious Freedom, Conference of European Churches, Christian Peace Conference, Pan-Orthodox Conferences, and Call to Islam.18 The importance of these relationships for the renewal of the Churches within the Romanian context can scarcely be overstated. The international contacts have expanded enormously the consciousness of the Romanian Churches regarding the world at large and have given
them a new perspective from which to view their own religious situation. This is highly significant for the future.

Inextricably related to and deepened by the external ecumenical participation of the Romanian Churches is the highly significant internal ecumenism expressed through the Interconfessional Theological Conferences which date back officially to 1964 (a critical date in the thaw between Church and State). These conferences have been conducted under the leadership of the Romanian Orthodox with strong government encouragement and presence and have involved with varying levels of participation the Reformed, Lutheran, Unitarian, and Roman Catholic Churches. The conferences are well attended by the professors, ecclesiastical leaders, administrators of the Institutes and seminaries as well as by students of these religious communities. They are held each year at the Orthodox Institutes in Bucharest and Sibiu and at the Protestant Institute in Cluj. The agenda for these meetings was initially set by concerns emerging out of discussions of the international ecumenical bodies with the focus increasingly on local issues, i.e., the role of the Churches within a Socialist society. The conferences have brought about a greater measure of mutual trust and respect among participants, a knowledge and appreciation of one another's traditions, and a discovery of common convictions; they have created important personal bonds of friendship and have helped to bring about exchanges of professors at the Institutes as well as occasional joint worship services and exchanges of pulpits. Detailed reports of the conferences are made in the journals of all of the participating Churches.
The State has come to view the conferences as important forums for the national minority groups because in spite of the national rivalries and tensions that separate them from the Romanian Orthodox, they are bound together by religious mythic structures that presumably transcend their ethnic divisiveness. It is indeed of interest to see a Communist State encouraging religious dialogue in an effort to help resolve problems that have defied the solutions, ideological and practical, offered by the new social order.\textsuperscript{19}

Representatives of the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, Jewish, and Armenian communities are also elected to the Great National Assembly. Baptist representatives recently attended as observers. These developments could indicate that a measure of trust has emerged and is continuing to develop between Church and State whereby they are learning to live and work together in ways previously regarded as inconceivable considering the ideological chasm that divides them.

The contemporary relationships and expectations of the Romanian Orthodox Church and State regarding one another are clearly expressed in the election of the new Patriarch and the inauguration ceremonies in 1977. Metropolitan Justin Moisescu was regarded as the model ecclesiastical leader whose work had been "characterized by religious, moral, humanitarian, social and patriotic ideas."\textsuperscript{20} These he delivered at religious services, at diocesan meetings with the clergy, in the Great National Assembly, at the Congress of the Socialist Unity Front, and in the National Committee for the Defense of Peace in Romania. Patriarch Justin was a member of the Central Committee of the
World Council of Churches and led the delegations of the Romanian Church to the General Assemblies at New Delhi (1961), Uppsala (1968), and Nairobi (1975). He was a member of the Presidium of the Conference of European Churches and led the Romanian Church delegations to the General Assemblies at Nyborg IV (1964), Nyborg V (1966), Nyborg VI (1971), and Engelberg (1974). He thus brought to a clear focus in himself the major expectations of the Romanian Church by the Romanian State. He very admirably represented the merging of Church and State concerns that has made Church cooperation so highly prized by the Romanian government. Following the presentation of the Presidential Decree, the new Patriarch was received by President Ceausescu. The Patriarch expressed his gratitude to the President for the freedom that the Church enjoyed and expressed "the determination of the Romanian Orthodox Church" to fully support the goals of the Romanian State. President Ceausescu congratulated the new Patriarch and called upon all the religious communities to make a total commitment to the objectives of the socialist order which would bring both personal and national fulfillment.

The Romanian State realizes that the religious bodies continue to have tremendous power over the lives of many of its citizens. It has been difficult for the proclamation of atheistic materialism to alter immediately the deeply ingrained Weltanschauung of the people; religious believers are sustained by their belief in the ultimate indestructibility of their community of faith. Despite the fact that efforts at the "atheistic socialization" of the younger generation has probably
been an important factor in accelerating the secularization process, it is doubtful that it has been very successful in making committed atheists. The liberation of persons from the religious perspective does not necessarily mean that they will transfer to Marxist ideology.

The religious situation in Romania is a very complex one, but, given a reasonably stable international situation and creative leadership in Church and State, the 1980's and 1990's could bring about a new stage in the *modus vivendi* between the Romanian Church and State. This could involve the beginnings of a serious and sustained ideological/theological dialogue that has thus far been largely absent. There will be continuing pressure by the Church to be able to carry out more effectively its catechetical program and increasing sensitivity to attempts at atheistic indoctrination within the nation's school system. There will also be increasing dissatisfaction by the Church with the assumption that it is to be limited primarily to cultic activities; this will be coupled with the insistence that the Church, too, should have a greater independent role in the contemporary cultural, intellectual, social and even political life of the nation. There will be greater concern regarding the opportunity for university professors, authors, and artists to deal with the Church, religious practices, and themes in an open and positive way. There will be persistent requests for the Church to have full access to the public communications system throughout the land to express its convictions. Without a positive response to some of these developments there is the
possibility of widespread restiveness of embarrassing proportions. These profound concerns for increased breathing space, unless dealt with very responsibly, could bring about new tensions between the Churches and the State.

In spite of reports of difficulties for religious believers there remain important signs that could lead to a new age in Church-State relations in Romania. The recently approved plans to build an International Ecumenical Center in the suburbs of Bucharest will provide opportunities for inter-orthodox, inter-confessional and interreligious dialogues. Hopefully, such a Center could also help stimulate important discussions between Romanian theologians and Marxist philosophers regarding ways in which they can all make their maximum contributions to the development of their society.
Footnotes

1. Outstanding works on the overall religious situation in Eastern Europe are: Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1974); Bohdan Bociurkiw and John Strong (eds.), *Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1975); and Erich Weingartner (ed.), *Church within Socialism* (Rome: IDOC, 1976). The last work is particularly valuable because of its inclusion of the constitutional provisions governing religious freedom in Eastern Europe.

Beeson attempts to give a balanced view recognizing the progress being made but also giving attention to the serious problems that exist; the book edited by Bociurkiw and Strong contains some excellent essays.

2. For penetrating analyses of the "underground church" mythology see Paul Hanson, "Report of the Secretary for Europe," CCC Agenda 1975-80 (Lutheran World Federation) Albert H. von den Heuval, "A Reaction on Richard Wurmbrand's *If That Were Christ, Would You Give Him Your Blanket?*" 1970, TS, 14 pp.; and Gerhard Simon, *Church, State and Opposition in the U.S.S.R.* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), pp. 176-187. In pp. 185-186 Simon criticizes the "emotionally determined anti-Communism" of Richard Wurmbrand whereby "the East-West confrontation imperceptibly becomes a moral world-drama in which a ceaseless struggle is waged between good and evil, light and darkness for the final victory." He points out that "This world view does not at all correspond with reality, or with the problems of the Churches in the Communist-controlled countries... These Churches do not begin with the thought that Christianity is a priori bound up with a certain world order, but rather that at all times and in all political circumstances it has the task of reaching men."

3. Hitchens in Bociurkiw and Strong, op. cit., p. 315. An outstanding analysis of Romanian Orthodox-State relations following World War II. An important analysis of the religions before 1938 is provided in Olimp Caciula, "Cultele în România," *Enciclopedia României, I* (1938), 417-42. Summaries of the religious situation in Romania are found in Beeson, pp. 300-20, and Ilie Georgescu, "A Latin Island in a Slavic Sea," Weingartner, pp. 108-14. Beeson has a particularly good overview of the Romanian Orthodox Church, but the sections on the Neo-Protestants need to be revised.

An authoritative statement of an official nature on contemporary Church-State relations in Romania was written by Bishop Antonie. Lukas Vischer (ed.), *Church and State/Opening a New Ecumenical Discussion* (Geneva: WCC, 1978), pp. 90-106. The best survey written by the Romanian Church in English of its life and work is *The Romanian Orthodox Church Yesterday and Today* (Bucharest: Bible Mission Institute, 1979).

P. Delroy (ed.), "The Church in Romania," *Pro Mundi Vita Dossiers* (November-December, 1978) provides a discriminating but sympathetic treatment of the Romanian Orthodox Church and contains important insights on the Catholic Church (Latin Rite) and the Uniate issue.

5. Legea Si Statutele Cultelor Religioase Din Republica Populara Romana (Bucuresti: Ministerului Cultelor, 1951), p. 3. This law is frequently referred to very seriously by the religious community and Department of Cults.

6. The Helsinki statement was printed in its entirety in Romanian publications and is used by religious leaders as an important point of reference.

7. Marxist researchers on the survival of religion reportedly discuss this although there have not been many publications in this area. Religion in Communist Lands, VI (Summer, 1978), cites the following reference: "In Vrancea: with atheists on religion," Contemporanul, November 11, 1977. The reporter discovers an embarrassing number of believers as members of the Party and the Youth Communist League (p. 133).


9. Bishop Antonie states that "The statutory principles of this law and their implementation by the State in the provisions of certain laws, decrees, decisions, and practical steps, provide for true and perfect religious freedom and rights for all religious beliefs and bodies in Romania." Vischer, op. cit., p. 95.

10. For an early official interpretation of the attitude of the Romanian State towards the religious bodies see Stanciu Stoian, "Attitudinea regimului de democratie populara fata de culte religioase" in Cultele Religioase in Republica Populara Romana (Bucuresti: Ministerului Cultelor, 1949), pp. 69-103. Important changes in the leadership of the Department of Cults in the fall of 1977 led some Western observers to feel that a more heavy-handed policy would be followed particularly regarding the Neo-Protestant communities. Serious difficulties have arisen recently, but these are not necessarily to be attributed to the new leadership. Given the growing strength of the Neo-Protestant groups, conflict would have been inevitable even with the more ecumenical approach of former President Cheoghe Nonciu.

11. This writer has studied the religious situation in Romania over the past decade visiting the country on five different occasions; the longest period of time was for a year (August, 1977 to August, 1978) under the International Research and Exchanges Board Senior Research Scholars' Program and the DHENOE Fulbright-Hayn Faculty Research Abroad Program. He has traveled extensively throughout the country attending services of all the religious groups (many times completely unannounced) and interviewing leaders at various levels of these communities. He has been deeply impressed by the profound religious life that exists and by the remarkable theologies that are being developed. Vischer states that "Even when the doors are open," the Church "can still live as a prisoner. And it can demonstrate its freedom in unexpected ways even when outward rules seem to militate against it." Vischer, op. cit., p. 15.

12. The Romanian Catholic Church, although recognized by the State, does not have a statute but "functions legally on the basis of a license." Antonie in Vischer, op. cit., p. 102.
13. Eileen Mary, "Orthodox Monasticism in Romania Today," RCL, VIII (Spring, 1980), 22-27. This sympathetic statement on Romanian monasticism with a focus on the role of women maintains that "It is the seduction of western secularism which poses the chief threat to this Christian-orientated culture, far more than a political system which, from a sociological point of view, recognizes the value of tradition."


15. Gheorghe Nenciu, former President of the Department of Cults, discussed with great pride the accomplishments of the Romanian scholars.

16. The publishing house of the Romanian Church printed 100,000 copies of the New Testament with Psalms in 1979; it has also published 200,000 copies of the Romanian Orthodox Bible since 1971 as well as thousands of copies of Mica Biblia and the Book of Psalms. "Background Paper: Bible Work in Eastern Europe" (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, June, 1980), 6. The American Bible Society Record CXXV (April, 1980), 10, adds that a total of 300,000 New Testaments have been published since 1971.


19. Bishop Antoanie clearly states: "This local ecumenism has made an important contribution towards the Christian churches of Romania coming to know one another better, as well as towards uniting the Romanians with the national minorities." Vischer, op. cit., p. 105.


22. Ibid., 611