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THE CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN ROMANIA
by Earl A. Pope

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In spite of the dominance of Marxist atheism with its militant Leninist focus there is a complex constellation of factors that have converged to bring about a remarkable measure of coexistence—at times with serious stresses and strains—between the official religious communities in Romania and the State. With the recasting of the national substance into the socialist mold, the Romanian Orthodox Church, inextricably bound up with the national mythology, has assumed an important role vis-a-vis the established ideology. It has been very difficult for the proclamation of atheistic materialism to shatter the deeply ingrained weltanschauung of the people.

The religious communities are under the direct jurisdiction (of the Department of Cults, a very efficient State agency run by highly competent personnel who have impressive resources at their command whereby they can be certain that the written laws (the focus of which is that the "practices and rituals" of the religious communities "be in harmony with the constitution, security or public order, and good morality") and a variety of oral interpretations are carefully followed. There are comparable agencies in the other Communist countries and there are radically divergent perceptions regarding their role.

The Romanian Orthodox Church is well organized and effectively administered with highly trained clergy, distinguished theological scholars, an abundance of candidates for the priesthood, and some of the finest journals within the Orthodox world. (The publications of all of the religious communities are carefully censored by the State officials.) Presumably it 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. Whereas the State may view the Church as a primary, though provisional, vehicle for the preservation of the national spirit and legitimation of the Communist State, it should be noted that the Church through its liturgical worship still views itself as the spiritual and moral soul of the nation. The Orthodox Church in particular is closely monitored by the State which is extremely sensitive to any evidence of internal dissent within this body. No member of the hierarchy of the Church is officially recognized without prior approval by the State officials.

The relationships between the Romanian Catholic Church (primarily Hungarian and German) and the Romanian Orthodox Church have been among the most complex and embittered
in the millennial-old controversy between Catholicism and Orthodoxy; there are signs, however, that the impasse between Bucharest and the Vatican may at last be transcended, but at a great cost to the Catholic Church. The Orthodox Church has tenaciously held to the position that the "voluntary reintegration" of the Uniates (Romanian Byzantine Catholics) into the Orthodox Church in 1948 was a historic moment of the profoundest significance, whereas the Vatican maintains that the "reunion" was brought about by sheer political power and that "the complicity of the Orthodox Church with officialdom was a scandal; no patriotism, no nationalism could excuse such a surrender."

The traditional Protestant bodies (Lutheran, Reformed, Unitarian) are related to the German and Hungarian minorities and have had serious difficulties, but they experience a significant religious life and cooperate in a united Protestant Institute; they are engaged in interconfessional theological conferences with the Orthodox that also have important national ramifications. In recent years these conferences have been expanded to include representatives of all the religious communities.

The Jewish community was radically decimated by the Holocaust and then by massive emigrations, but the remnant reports the most active and free Jewish life in Eastern Europe although there are recent reports of anti-semitic references in officially sanctioned publications.

There are religious communities (particularly Adventist, Brethren, Baptist, and Pentecostal), seriously restricted or underground before 1948 but recognized by the present regime, which have had a phenomenal growth in recent years. They emphasize a Biblical orientation, personal religious experience, ethical living, lay leadership, a supportive community, an eschatological thrust, and powerful awareness of mission. The State increasingly recognizes their importance but it should be noted that there have been serious tension between members of these communities and the State. There have been persistent reports of religious persecution and State interference in the election of Baptist Church officials.

To speak of an unofficial religious activity in Romania is one thing, but to claim an extensive underground Church is not justified by the facts. Creative and imaginative leadership by Western agencies, which thus far has been largely absent, is needed to help provide, through official channels, Bibles and religious literature in the quantities needed.

The Romanian churches are involved in a vast network of external ecumenical activities (WCC, WARC, LWF, WBA, WJC, IARF, CEC, CPC) which have enormously expanded their consciousness regarding the world at large and have given them a new Perspective from which to view their own religious situation. This can have great significance for the future. The State regards these ecumenical relationships of great importance. The representatives of the religious communities officially present a glowing picture of a country with complete religious freedom.
We could be at the beginning of a new stage in the present *modus vivendi* between the Romanian religious communities and the state (providing that the hopes raised by *perestroika* and *glasnost* will have an impact on the Romanian State in the near future), bearing in mind that there will be different emphases between the traditional churches and the Neo-Protestant communities. Profound concerns for increased breathing space will possibly bring about serious discussions and will unquestionably provoke new tensions, particularly if the state fails to respond positively to the sensitivities related to full equality for religious believers in the Romanian society. It is important to note that the official religious communities, despite their orientation to the new social order, have remained the sole social structures that have not been fully integrated into the Romanian political system due to their basic ideological incompatibility.

Regarding the religious situation in Romania, there are very discouraging reports to be sure and the problems have been intensified by a severe economic crisis. There is also evidence, however, of an amazing and increasing amount of dynamic religious life and activity that portends well for the future.