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## THE ROMANIAN IRON GUARD: FASCIST SACRALIZED POLITICS OR FASCIST POLITICIZED RELIGION?

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The Romanian Iron Guard, or The Legion of the Archangel Michael, has attracted much attention by historians as a unique branch of fascism. Such interest descends from the fact that the movement held seemingly genuine Orthodox Christian principles, and as such plays an important part in our understanding of the relationship between fascism and religion. By way of a background to this relationship in Romania, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw Romanian intellectuals debate between the notions of modernization and traditionalism. From these debates traditionalists increasingly sought a moralist return to traditional Orthodox roots, based upon the peasantry of Romania. Such demands grew from the desire to counteract the modernizing foreign principles of democracy and “Judeo-Bolshevism” that were seen to urbanize and taint an otherwise rural and morally pure nationality.<sup>1</sup> Orthodoxy was found to be the source of the Romanian peasant morality, and thereafter became intrinsically linked by traditionalists to Romanian nationality. The First World War brought the delegitimization of liberal democratic principles, which destabilized the left wing movements throughout Eastern Europe. This political vacuum enabled the

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Haynes, “Work Camps, Commerce, and the Education of the ‘New Man’ in the Romanian Legionary Movement,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 51, Issue.4 (2008): 945. (hereafter, Haynes, *Works Camps*).

development of popular nationalist right wing movements across Europe during the 1920s, which utilised religious symbolism, spiritualism and morality as a part of their political movement, of whom the apotheosis was the Iron Guard.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, however, historiography has been divided between interpretations that deem the religious aims of these movements as fundamental,<sup>3</sup> and those that regard these aims as merely a propagandist exploitation of popular religious sentimentalities for political gain. It is the aim of this essay, therefore, to examine the Romanian Iron Guard's relationship to Orthodoxy, and spiritualism more generally. Based on this, a defense of the Legion's Orthodox spirituality will be developed, based upon the writings of the Guard's charismatic leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and the aims of the movement.

Codreanu developed the Legion of the Archangel Michael as a splinter movement of Alexandru C. Cuza's National-Christian Defense League, which held deeply antisemitic, nationalist, and anti-democratic principles. The splinter was likely caused by the rift in methods proposed by Cuza, a professor, and Codreanu, a student who pushed for achieving the aims of the organization via methods outside of the traditional parliamentary system. From its inception the Legion held the rebirth and purification of the Romanian nation as its primary aim, which was to be achieved through a process of returning the intellectuals and Romanian middle classes to the Orthodox morality of the peasantry. Such rhetoric was commonplace throughout the right wing movements of Europe during the period, however with the creation of "nests", or work camps, the Romanian Iron Guard attempted to breed the "New Man" sculpted upon those very principles it stood for, within a parallel society. For Codreanu, Orthodox morality was central to achieving his parallel society, through which the democratic political order could be challenged, and it is this Orthodox centrality that is

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<sup>2</sup> Emilio Gentile, "Fascism as Political Religion," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1990):229.

<sup>3</sup> S Fischer-Galati, "'Autocracy, Orthodoxy and Nationality' in the Twentieth Century: the Romanian Case," *East European Quarterly*, Vol.18, No.1 (March 1984): 25-35.

argued to separate the Iron Guard from the other European movements.<sup>4</sup> Historians, therefore, have found it far harder to separate the Legion from its Orthodox roots than they have to separate almost every other fascist movement from its religious symbolism. Upon such difficulties, the relationship of the Iron Guard and Orthodoxy has been rewritten frequently in an attempt to accurately discern whether it was another example of a political movement dressed in sacralized form, or a political movement in which the Orthodox religion was an intrinsic pillar.

One of the most damning articles written on the relationship of the Iron Guard and Orthodoxy is that written by Ioanid, who argues that the Legion 'is to be seen as an attempt at subordinating and transforming that [Orthodox] theology into a political instrument in a way that made it the enemy of genuine Christian values and spirituality.'<sup>5</sup> Such arguments use the cult of death that developed in the movement, as it did in many Fascist movements, as example of the fact that spiritualism became twisted into a violent and revolutionary fervor that in doing so lost its connections to true Orthodoxy. The Romanian nation was defined by the Legion as the combined struggle of not only living Romanians, but also Romanians past and future. As such, the nationalism of the movement developed a spiritualism that emphasized resurrection and glory in death.<sup>6</sup> Such principles clearly stretch Orthodox teaching, but were invaluable as a political catalyst that sparked the nationalist fervor required by fascist movements. The Iron Guard's characteristics, as listed by Ioanid, include antisemitism, racism and anti-Communism, each of which are popularized by the radical

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Eatwell, "Reflections on Fascism and Religion," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol.4, No.3 (2003): 145.

<sup>5</sup> Radu Ioanid, "The Sacralised Politics of the Romanian Iron Guard," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* Vol.5, Issue.3 (2004): 419. (Hereafter, Ioanid, "Sacralised Politics").

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Haynes, "The Romanian Legionary Movement, Popular Orthodoxy and the Cult of Death," in, Mioara Anton, Florin Anghel, Cosmin Popa (eds.), *Hegemoniile trecutului: Evoluții românești: Profesorului Ioan Chiper la 70 de ani*, (Bucharest: Editura Curtea Veche, 2006), 117. (Hereafter, Haynes, *Popular Orthodoxy*).

nationalism that the Guard was able to build.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, it was the Legion's use of Orthodox symbolism and rhetoric that enabled the realization of its nationalist policies.<sup>8</sup> Such a description of events inevitably leads to the conclusion that the Legion bent the legitimate support of the populace for Orthodox spiritualism in order to pursue its political aims. Beyond this, the fact that the movement never gained the official approval of the Orthodox Church is also used to argue that the two institutions were not ideologically homogeneous.<sup>9</sup> Without the official approval of the institution the Guard claimed to defend from foreign influences, the legitimate nature of its claims to Orthodoxy are put into question. As a result of these factors, it is argued that the political aims of the movement far outweighed its religious principles, thus explaining how these principles became distorted by political interests.

In contrast, the centrality of the Legion's religious principles allowed it to attract a large proportion of Orthodox priests to its ranks, showing just how complimentary the two institutions could be. If the movement was able to attract priests on the local level, but fail to receive the support of the church officially, there appears to be a separation between the religion itself and its institution. Those priests that were active members, and even represented the movement politically, clearly felt no contradiction between their religion and the Legion. It appears, therefore, that the motive behind the church's lack of recognition of the movement were of the political nature rather than a condemnation of their claims to Orthodox values. The fact that the 'Legion blended religious and secular elements' made it 'ultimately a heretic movement.'<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the relationship between the Orthodox

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<sup>7</sup> Ioanid, *Sacralised Politics*, 419.

<sup>8</sup> Irina Ognyanova, "Between the Radical State and the Christian Rampart: Ustasha Ideology, Catholic Values, and National Purification," in, Rory Yeomans (ed.), *The Utopia of Terror: Life and Death in Wartime Croatia*, (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2015), 165.

<sup>9</sup> Ioanid, *Sacralised Politics*, 436.

<sup>10</sup> Constantin Iordachi, "Charisma, Religion, and Ideology: Romania's Interwar Legion of the Archangel Michael," in, John Campe and Mark Mazower (eds.), *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of*

institution and the Legion was not entirely negative. With the creation of a “Greater Romania” as a result of the settlement of World War I, the influx of other religions pressured the Orthodox Church during the latter half of the 1920s to attain a degree of collaboration with the Legion.<sup>11</sup> During the 1930s, however, this relationship was altered again, as the charismatic leadership of the Legion began to conflict with the required charismatic relationship of the church and its followers.<sup>12</sup> The relationship between the Orthodox Church and the Legion is therefore better described as one in flux, with the political interests of the church a significant factor in its determination. It is for this reason that whilst the Orthodox Church did not always collaborate with, and in the end openly condemned, the Legion, this does not necessarily put into question the legitimacy or centrality of the Legion’s Orthodox principles.

Codreanu’s founding of the Legion was done so through the auspices of a spiritual movement, rather than a political one.<sup>13</sup> From its inception, therefore, the Legion held no specific political program, but instead aimed to pursue the development of spiritualism as could be found in the peasantry. As we have already discussed, the focus placed onto the Orthodox values of the peasantry found significant precedent amongst nineteenth century intellectuals. Of course, it would be too far to indicate that the Legion was initiated as an apolitical movement, due to the fact that those values it promoted were done so with the aim to ‘create and educate the so-called “New Man”... through whom the Romanian nation as a whole would eventually be renewed.’<sup>14</sup> It can therefore be seen that despite no political program being established by the movement, it certainly held both political ambitions and

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*Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe*, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 36. (Hereafter, Iordachi, *Charisma*).

<sup>11</sup> Iordachi, *Charisma*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Iordachi, *Charisma*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Haynes, *Popular Orthodoxy*, 113.

<sup>14</sup> Haynes, *Popular Orthodoxy*, 114.

principles. The extent to which these political principles clashed with, or molded their religious ones, is the area at which historiography is most divided. Despite this division however, it is clear from the birth of the movement that the religious and political principles were tightly interwoven. The Legion's political principles, primarily the recreation of a Romania free from foreign influences, were laced with Orthodox sentiment. As the backbone of "Romanian-ness", Orthodox values and spiritualism were identified as inseparable features of the new Romania. Simultaneously, the education of Orthodoxy was required as a means to recreate the nation, as well as to purify the middle and upper classes, and to repel influences that were foreign to the nation. Such an understanding of this relationship implies that the Orthodox religion did not exist in the Legion as merely a means to an end, but that it was also an end in itself. As such, the religiosity of the Legion is legitimized by how tightly interwoven the Orthodox values and spiritualism were with the political aims of the movement.

The epitomization of this interwoven relationship between the Legion's political and Orthodox principles can be found within Codreanu's work camps, which put into action the ruralization of the middle classes. These camps brought students, lecturers and urban groups into an environment wherein they could be educated in Orthodox morality and achieve purity through physical labor and work in the local rural community. The engagement achieved between these camps and the communities in which they were located was clear from the rapidity in which the camp system expanded throughout Romania, growing from a single camp in 1928 to seventy-one work camps by 1936<sup>15</sup>, without counting thousands of smaller Legion work sites. The political aim of these camps were to develop a parallel society outside the realms of the traditional government, through which traditional institutions could eventually be challenged. Whilst it may be argued that these camps were the expression of

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<sup>15</sup> Haynes, *Works Camps*, 947.

the Legion's political ambitions, it would be erroneous to suggest they did not also express the Legion's spiritualism. These camps were not merely locations around which revolutionary emotion could be developed and the political principles of the movement could be realized, they also performed 'vital moral, regenerative and educational functions.'<sup>16</sup> It would be within these camps that a generation of pure Orthodox Romanians were to be created, and emerge to reclaim Romania from those influences that had infested traditional society and its institutions. Such motivations went, in the case of the Legion, far beyond a mere propagandistic religious layer, as Orthodoxy became synonymous with nationality and its political aims became inseparable from its religious sentiments.

As a result of the development of such a close relationship between the Legion and Orthodoxy, historians have debated, in regard to the wider implications of the role played by religion in fascist movements, the role of Orthodoxy in the creation of strong discriminatory and violently antisemitic principles. The Iron Guard developed, through its assimilation by Antonescu and King Carol II into a governmental body, its antisemitism into a support of the German concentration camps and the development of xenophobic ideas of racial superiority alike that found in National Socialism.<sup>17</sup> The movement became, as was common in fascist movements, one bound in violence and surrounded in the spiritual rhetoric of death and resurrection. It is here, that many prescribe the area in which the Iron Guard ideology transcended its Orthodox principles, and developed its own spiritualism that would facilitate notions of violent nationalism, political assassinations and self-sacrifice. As an example of this development, Legionaries were added to the list of Orthodox saints, whilst ideologists reimagined the Romanian nation as having its own spirit to encompass all those who would

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<sup>16</sup> Haynes, *Works Camps*, 967.

<sup>17</sup> Ioanid, *Sacralised Politics*, 428.



live and die in its name.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore possible to envisage how the Legion's links to Orthodoxy could be lost in the 1930s under the strength of its nationalist focus, its deep antisemitism and its cult of death. It is here too that the strongest argument can be made in favor of the idea that the Iron Guard adapted Orthodoxy for its political aims. With a taste of power in Romania, the Guard developed an increasingly radical ideology, which distanced itself further from Orthodoxy and closer to the generic spiritual rhetoric that both legitimized and motivated violent nationalism. It becomes self-evident that the strength of the political principles of antisemitism, anti-Communism, and nationalism became the driving force for the movement.

Despite these changes, there exists evidence to suggest that Orthodoxy within Romania had already become associated to xenophobia, antisemitism and an increasing degree of chauvinism.<sup>19</sup> Through the work of Nichifor Crainic, who sought the fusion of intellectual life and Orthodoxy, Romanian nationality was put in contrast with values of the West through the argument that it belonged in the East, which was represented by Orthodoxy. From this intellectual milieu, Orthodoxy became a contrasting figurehead to materialism, internationalism, liberalism and democratic equality.<sup>20</sup> With this contrast to Western values, then it is unsurprising that Orthodoxy developed for some into a chauvinistic and xenophobic ideology. Whilst the religious principles of the regime may not have driven the violent realization of its political principles, they remained set in the symbolism of Orthodox spiritualism. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that these violent manifestations of spirituality can be located within either Orthodox teaching or contemporary religious discourse. 'The Revelation of John', for example, facilitates the ideological premise for the

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<sup>18</sup> Ioanid, *Sacralised Politics*, 437-38.

<sup>19</sup> Keith Hitchins, "Orthodoxism: Polemics over Ethnicity and Religion in Interwar Romania." in, Ivo Banac and Katherine Verdery (eds.), *National Character and National Ideology in Interwar Eastern Europe*, (New Haven (CT): Yale Centre for International and Area Studies, 1995), 141. (Hereafter, Hitchins, *Orthodoxism*.)

<sup>20</sup> Hitchins, *Orthodoxism*, 143-44.

cult of death, with its descriptions of the resurrection of the “glorified savior,” which found its way into Legionary ideology through Codreanu as savior. Furthermore, Christianity contains a great deal of interaction between the living and the dead, from the symbolism of the eucharist to the story of Christ, and whilst the Legion exaggerated these notions in its nationalist form, they remained fundamentally Christian. For these reasons the alterations made by the Legion did not break with either traditional teachings of the Orthodox Church, nor did they break with the interpretations of Orthodoxy found in Romania from the late twentieth century. As a result of this, the principles through which ethnic and political violence could be justified, did not contradict the Orthodox principles as they existed in Romania. It may also be said that it was from this very fundamental Christian symbolism, that the cult of blood and death was developed.

Not only did the Legion not contradict Orthodoxy, but its cultural manifestations were also deeply rooted in Orthodox culture. Just as Orthodoxy had for generations been manifested through the iconography of particular figures, Legionary culture would include the production of icons of Codreanu, to be carried by Legionaries alongside Orthodox figures in their pockets.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, imagery of the cross was manifest in the placement of crosses atop hills and mountains in association with the work camps and the rhetoric of physical labor. Beyond this, before every meeting of the Iron Guard and as a part of every ceremony, an Orthodox liturgy would be given by Orthodox priests, which provides further evidence of the cultural value of Orthodoxy to the Legion. Many of the goals dictated by Codreanu involved notions of salvation, reconciliation with God, education and rejuvenation of Christian morality. The doctrine of the Legion remained fused with Orthodox imagery and language, from its inception throughout the Second World War. In regard to the culture of the Legion, the modification of Orthodoxy for political ends did not take place. Whilst the

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<sup>21</sup> Haynes, *Popular Orthodoxy*, 122.

Legion would create new martyrs for celebration, and new goals for Orthodox understanding, they were consistently fabricated through Orthodox modes. This can be seen from the fact that the Legionaries culture did not alienate priests and prevent the coexistence of an Orthodox and legionnaire lifestyle. Despite the fact that priests and the church would not officially condone the violent methodology of the movement, even the religious justifications for these methods did not contradict Orthodox teaching. With the Legion's utilization of Orthodox imagery and principles within its culture, mixed with its Orthodox values and moral goals, it is difficult to separate Legionary culture from contemporary Romanian Orthodox culture. It can therefore be argued that with reference to the culture of the Legion, the religious content molded the political principles, as only principles that were consistent with the deep Orthodox culture could be facilitated by the Legion.

In order to exemplify how religious and political principles interacted within the Legion, we must include Codreanu's 'For My Legionaries (The Iron Guard)'<sup>22</sup>. This text was written in order to piece together the story of the Legion's creation, as well as Codreanu's political story in general. Through the text we are able to discern each of the factors we have discussed, with Codreanu distancing himself from Western values, as well as the building of a movement that sought to achieve, through political means, a spiritual goal. The book, in reference to the creation of the movement, refers to the Legion as 'more a school and an army than a political party' which will produce 'a great educator and leader who can defeat the powers of evil.'<sup>23</sup> As can be seen, the language used by Codreanu is indicative of a person who held religion as a vital part of his movement, which transcends the idea that Orthodoxy was the means to attain power. Whilst, of course, the text must be treated with caution, this caution is best directed at those areas in which a chronological account is fabricated in order

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<sup>22</sup> Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *For My Legionaries: (The Iron Guard)*, (York (SC): Liberty Bell Publications, 2003). (Hereafter, Codreanu, *Legionaries*).

<sup>23</sup> Codreanu, *Legionaries*, 221.

to serve the propagandistic purposes of the Legion. One finds many reasons to query Codreanu's political motivations, both in producing the book, and in the themes of violence and antisemitism that are consistent throughout. In no way, however, does the book show any conscious signs that the Legionary movement wished to manipulate its religious principles to achieve political power. Furthermore, one does not find reason to query the centrality of Christianity to the Legion, either in its aims or in its methods of achieving them.

Beyond this, from the same text it is possible to see the cognitive link between Christian notions of self-sacrifice and the Archangel Michael, developed into a violent nationalism and cult of death. The depth with which Codreanu believed in defending Orthodox Romanian-ness led him to create the Legion which would combat the system because it was 'better to end our life dying to the last man up in the mountains for our faith.'<sup>24</sup> Not only is Codreanu showing the passion with which the Legion would defend Christianity, but he also shows the notions of sacrifice that frequents Christian teaching. As this quote suggests, the Legionary movement did not merely manipulate Orthodox teachings, but used its language and teachings in order to develop a violent movement aiming to defend Romanian Orthodoxy from the perceived threat of Judeo-Bolshevism. Codreanu develops the requirement of a violent nature from the iconography of Archangel Michael in the Church of the Coronation in Alba-Iulia, which reads: 'Towards the unclean hearts who come into the most pure House of the Lord, I mercilessly point my sword.'<sup>25</sup> As can be seen, the aims of the Legion were developed in Codreanu through the ideas of the Orthodox church. Whilst it would be erroneous to suggest Orthodoxy is in itself a violent ideology, it would be equally erroneous to argue that Romanian Orthodox ideas did not act as the basis of the Legion's violence.

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<sup>24</sup> Codreanu, *Legionaries*, 285.

<sup>25</sup> Codreanu, *Legionaries*, 227.

The relationship between religion and the Legionary movement is one that finds increased relevance in contemporary historiographical debates in regard to the development of an increasingly violent form of Islam in European movements.<sup>26</sup> It is important, as a result of these debates, to understand the role played by religion in these movements. Whilst religion itself cannot be deemed a violent ideology, it should also not be held above discussion into the origins of violent messages and ideas. The Legion holds, as a result of these discussions, an important position in historicism as an example of a movement that maintained a strong religious culture and principles that were both political and religious. The Legion exemplifies the possibility of an interconnection between deep religious belief and extreme political views. As we have discussed, it is wrong to suggest that Orthodoxy does not contain messages within it that can be used as the basis for violent movements, due to the fact that notions of self-sacrifice and the interplay of living and dead are not only present but fundamental to it. Orthodoxy, therefore, does not require subordination or transformation in order to produce the aims, principles, and methods that it did in the Legion. Historians such as Ioanid have been too fast to argue, due to the horrors produced by the Legion in regard to the Holocaust and its cult of death, that these must have occurred due to some manipulation or distortion of Orthodox ideology for political ends. The Legion is an extreme case in point, however, as we have shown, the religious content of the Legion was legitimately Orthodox and consistently appealing to Orthodox priests due to its assimilation of the religious with the political. The Legion, therefore, does not represent a manipulation of Orthodox values in the political sphere, but an extreme case of Orthodox values merged with a racist and nationalist political fervor. As such, it is vital to understand that religion may be used in combination

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<sup>26</sup> M.D. Lionjua, "Religious Zealotry and Political Violence in Christianity and Islam," *International Review of Modern Sociology*, Vol.35, No..2 (Autumn 2009): 307.

with extreme political views in violent and popular movements without contradicting religious content.

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