

Defining Romanianship Between Orient and Occident. The Orthodox vs. Greek-Catholic Debate until 1996

Adrian Hatos
University of Oradea
(ahatos@uoradea.ro)

ABSTRACT

Religion and nationalism are strongly intertwined in the political discourses of the communities of former socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe. The aim of this paper is to show briefly the way the Occident/Orient antinomy emerged and developed in the discourses of the leaders, followers and sympathizers of the Orthodox and of the Romanian United with Rome Churches within the borders of approximately invented Romanianship in the first years following the regime change in 1990. The analyzed discourses reveal the dependence of ecclesiastic institutions in Romania upon the ethnocentric discourse and their incapacity of building communities besides those delimited by the nationalist grand narrative. In this regard distinction is made among the two churches not through the common ethnocentric view but through their different commitments to another major issue of modern identity, salient in the Balkan region, the confrontation between Orient and Occident.

Keywords: nationalism, religion, discourse

INTRODUCTION

Religion and nationalism are strongly intertwined in the political discourses of the communities of former socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Overlapping ethnic and religious boundaries made religion peculiarly relevant in the age of nationalist mobilization and provided the religious discourse as a toolbox for the symbolic policies used in sustaining the nationalist claims for the sovereignty over souls, bodies and territories. Such was case in several areas of the region, especially in former Yugoslavia but in the debate over the sovereignty of Transylvania too. Here, as elsewhere, nationalism has been easily related to and transformed by other ideologies, in our case religion.

The literature does not hold unanimous positions concerning the importance of religion for the development of nationalist movements. In a well-known work about nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1991) argues that ethnic nationalism was nurtured by the spread of printing and has weakened the traditional communitarian bonds held together by religious allegiances, like Christendom or the Umma in the case of Muslims. In contrary, other scholars, like Anthony Smith (1971), John Hutchinson (1987) and Miroslav Hroch (1985) support the thesis that religion has a decisive role in the formation of modern nations. Hroch's work highlights the fact that wherever the ecclesiastical institutions supported the nationalist movements and patriotic groups the ethnic identity was stronger. That religion and nationalism are in a synergetic relationship was stressed by Anthony Smith and Hutchinson who spoke of dual legitimization on the one hand and of cultural nationalism on the other. The situations in which multiple religious institutions are competing for legitimacy provides evidence for the complex processes that connect nationalism with religious identity building. The situation of Transylvanian Romanians which are divided between Orthodox and Greek-Catholics in a context of intense ethnic or national confrontation provides the opportunity to assess the interrelations of the two layers of identity.

AIM AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to show briefly the way the Occident/Orient antinomy emerged and developed in the discourses of the leaders, followers and sympathizers of the Orthodox and of the Romanian United with Rome Churches within the borders of approximately invented Romanianship in the first years following the regime change in 1990. Besides the narrative of a temporal process that promotes to some extent the supposition of a linear historical movement we will try to grasp the phenomenon relating it to the general traits and determinations of the two Churches' ideologies during definite periods of time. Moreover, since the discursive developments we are dealing with overlapped with the "age of nations" not only in timing but in its internal logic as well, this paper will be a lot about the constructions of Romanianship.

Fundamentally, we tried to describe the discourses and counter-discourses produced by agents or associates of the two religious groups at two moments: 1. the period stretching between the birth of the Greek-Catholic Church (1700) and the end of the 19th century; 2. the first 7 years that passed after 1989.

Some warnings regarding our analysis should be made before starting. First, the discourses we have used are written, filtered already through bibliographic manipulation and, sometimes, results of previous analytical interpretations. Thus, we do not claim to have access to the *doxa*, to the ideological wisdom known as common-sense, characteristic for a specific historical moment. Consequently, we do not pretend to offer a reconstruction of the dominant ideologies of the religious communities that produced the subject of our study. The relationship between these discourses of power and the *doxa* may be the topic of another investigation.

Second, our interpretive work has various limitations due to many reasons among which I mention:

- the limits of the interpreter
- the chosen topic and the strategy of inquire
- the availability of data or materials
- limits demanded by the virtuality of an unlimited interpretation or the personal idea of interpretive reasonability.

FIRST TIME SPAN. THE ORTHODOX DISCOURSE

The Orthodox Church did not have, initially, any difficulty in justifying its position towards the Greek-Catholics since it had on its side the past with its myths and traditions and the ambiguity that surrounded the conditions in which the unification took place (Mitu, 1997). Hence, the Orthodox Church would always be in offensive, forcing the Uniates to creativity in setting up legitimizing discourses. Initially, the Orthodox hierarchy argued that the unification did not provide in fact any improvement in the political status of the Romanians, which was partially true, as the Emperors were reluctant in respecting their part of the initial agreements. Later on, the focus shifted from effectiveness to topics related to the definitions of Romanianship, building the Greek-Catholic category as a group situated outside the border of the genuine Romanianship. Thus, we can detect the seeds of the Romanian Orthodoxist doctrine that pretends that Orthodoxy "is an organic reality that has developed together with the nation (Mitu, 1997). Thrown out of Romanianship, Greek-Catholicism is not only an aberration for ethnic identity but the very necessary tool for assimilation employed by an anti-Romanian conspiracy (Mitu, 1997). In this logic, unification would be the first step towards Magyarization or Germanization. On the other hand, Orthodoxes promoted closer relations with Serbian, Russian or Greek co-religionars on the bases of the upper mentioned proto-Orthodoxism although this move was evidently dictated by tactical reasons.

During the period we are dealing with the Orthodox ideologists did not assimilate the categories of Occident and Orient that, consequently, would be absent from the discourses produced. Their arguments did not use the value judgments associated usually with this dichotomy. Instead, they promoted an un-discriminatory Pan-Orthodoxism.

THE GREEK-CATHOLICS

Because of the manner in which it appeared, the Greek-Catholic Church faced very evident legitimacy difficulties from the very beginning. Challenged by the task of creating an acceptable and even attractive Greek-Catholic identity, which could assure the self-committed acceptance of the conversion on behalf of its future subjects, the Uniate Church spent much ideological creativity and its efforts have had long lasting consequences. Responding to the Orthodox's, who claimed to be the containers of Romanianship, Greek-Catholics found the essence of our ethnicity in its Latinity. Since the unification, latinity has always been the major ideological motif in the Greek-Catholic discourse (Mitu, 1997), generating very detailed ethnic and religious legitimizing histories that become eventually parts of the officialized myths of origin.

Whereas the idea of the Latin ascendance of Romanian people was not entirely new, emphasizing the Occidental character was definitely a Greek-Catholic innovation. The metonymy of Greek-Catholicism as Latinity and Occidentalism was not only part of the Uniate's images of Romanianship but the argument for rejecting the Orthodox counter-image also. Besides the historical constructions - emphasizing the violent way in which Orthodoxy was imposed by Bulgarians upon the previously Catholic Romanians - Greek-Catholics built up negative views of Orthodoxy. Slavism and Orientalism were depicted as great perils against the Romanian nation, or against its essence, their rejection being grounded on moral proofs also. The fall of Constantinople was described, for instance, as a divine punishment for the sin of separating itself from the Roman-Catholic mother - Church. Likewise, Greeks - thought as representatives of Orthodoxy previously to Russians or Serbians - are characterized as envious and corrupting, in contrast to Italians that are the closest brothers of Romanians (Mitu, 1997). Thus arguments, and those used by Orthodoxes

as well, suggest some preliminary conclusions about the way the two Churches contributed to the definition of Romanianism.

1. Until the late 19th century the hierarchy of the main marks of this identity - religion and language - was ambiguous in the texts of religious thinkers although a lot of them, coming especially from the Greek-Catholic side, were practically “awakeners” of national consciousness, enlighteners in the most modern sense of nationalism (Gellner, 1994). Therefore, although the ideological trade between the religious and the ethnic had been permanent after the unification, we can hardly say that the religious was taken over by the national (Mitu, 1997). We should better use invasion instead.

2. Both the Orthodox and the Greek-Catholic rhetoric reveal the construction of identities that I would call *serial*. Romanianism is in this logic the special embodiment of some super-national paradigm. For the Greek-Catholics, the model is that of Latinity and Occidentalism whereas the Orthodoxes find the source of Romanian spiritual matrix in the Greek-Oriental Church itself.

3. Both features can be interpreted with reference to the tactics imposed on the two actors by the context in which their debate took place. Competing for the religious identity of a politically and culturally dominated population, the two Churches - which shared for a long time the status of solitary official representatives of the Transylvanian Romanians - being themselves in a fragile position towards the other politically relevant actors (the Emperor, the Diet, the Calvinist Church and other institution) the two churches needed allies outside the Romanian community. For the Greek-Catholics was the imperial administration that was expected to be helpful the same situation applying alternatively, but not exclusively, to the Russian Empire or to the Romanian Principates for the Orthodox Church. Most of these allies accepted the religious but rejected the national.

CONTEMPORARY RHETORIC

Orthodox discourses

The present Orthodox rhetoric carries all the marks of the political and cultural processes that occurred since the 1st world war. By this, I mean primarily the different dictatorships and movements, the war, the secularization and the reality of the nation-state. Directly related to the affairs of the Church are its relationships with the political power, since these connections have generated deep ideological and institutional transformations.

First, the leaders of the Romanian Orthodox Church have assimilated entirely the language of the Orthodoxist doctrine - which is the heritage of the extreme right movements of the 20's and 30's (Ornea, 1995). In this regard, the Romanian people, as a distinct ethnic group is a spiritual organism whose heart is the Romanian Orthodox Church. Essential Romanianism or the fundamental Romanian spirituality is represented by the Orthodox Church¹. The Orthodox homogeneity and purity of this organism would be, therefore, conditions for its health.

Secondly, the theory of *symphonia* became a major ideological tool both for justifying alleged compromises done with the communist regime and for asking a special treatment from the political authority (Stănescu, 1996).

¹ Nae Ionescu: “Being Romanian, not merely “good Romanian”, means to be Orthodox as well, (Ornea, 1995 p. 93).

These interpretive frames are employed to deal with different issues among which the national problem - or the crisis of the national consciousness - and secularization appear to be predominant (Stănescu, 1996).

Evidently, Orthodoxy ends in the rejection of everything that is not Orthodox as non-Romanian or even as anti-Romanian. Greek-Catholicism, along with Neo-Protestantism and atheism, is seen as corrupting the national character and becomes a part of the "national problem." Moreover, Greek-Catholic endeavors towards defining Romanianism independently of the religious factor should be rejected strongly because accepting a religiously heterogeneous definition of Romanianism in the "dominant ideology" would make the doctrine of *symphonia futile or even anachronistic*². The topic of secularization provides the opportunity to put the principle of *symphonia* at work. *Symphonia* asks the Church and the state to support each other, whatever form the temporal power gets, and gives to both orders of power a place in the realm of the other (Stănescu, 1996). Secularization, the separation of Church and state, appears as one of the main sources of the problems the world has been encountering since the dawn of modernity because it pushes the divine out of the worldly provoking immorality and meaninglessness. Identifying the sources of this process in Western Enlightenment the Orthodox Church finds the rejection of most of the Occidental values appropriate. The human rights movement, for instance, is described as "the most terrible religion of the 20th century - the godless religion" (Stănescu, 1996). Likewise, ecological crisis, drugs, AIDS, rock music and homosexuality can be blamed on the West and on its secularity. Faced with the cultural reality however, the Church is forced to make some concessions to Westernization, which is already, by the way, almost complete in form if not in substance. "[We wish] to take what seems to be positive in the Western culture but, in the same time, to resist the pressure of secularization." (Stănescu, 1996)

Greek-Catholic discourses

Analyzing the contemporary Greek-Catholic apologetic, which comes not only from Greek-Catholics themselves but from disappointed Orthodox intellectuals also I found an eclectic picture. Different but not contradictory aspects are stressed. However, with a little interpretive imagination, these different styles can be attached to specific groups of actors.

Basically, there are three positions. Greek-Catholic leaders take usually two attitudes. One of them emphasizes problems of historical legitimacy (anteriority, myths of origin) in the manner that has been familiar since the birth of the Uniate Church. Great attention is paid to the Latin essence of Romanianism (the origin, the starting point reveals and fills in the essence) and to facticities of historical importance that legitimize or delegitimize one side or other³. The other stream of argumentation is conciliatory, avoids any possibly sensible topic and asks for mutual understanding on ecumenical grounds⁴.

In contrast, the intellectuals that support Greek-Catholicism ignore the theological arguments giving essential importance to the contributions of this Church to the culture and the politics of the nation. Their position related to the hostility against the previous governments, supposedly pro-

2 Remember, for example, the constant pressures of the Romanian Orthodox Church for gaining exclusively the title of National Church

3 As an illustration of this position see the opinions expressed by archbishop George Guțu and by bishop Ioan Siseștean in the Vatra survey; Vatra nr. 3 and nr. 4/1996.

4 Archbishop Tertulian Langa, for instance, holds this view; Vatra nr. 3/1996.

Russians and committed to the *symphonia* with the Orthodox Church, and takes a pro-Occidental, pro-European form⁵. Standing beside the Greek-Catholic Church is in this point primarily a matter of politics and ideology this aspect being recognized in fact in many of the texts that I have read.

Whereas for a “neutral” social scientist the thing that pushes the two churches in opposed positions is only the lust for hegemony - an approach which may seem out of any doubt - many others see in the conflict at hand radical opposition between cultural, universalistic categories like:

- particularism/ universalism
- traditionalism/ universalism
- isolation/ Europeanism
- conformism/liberty
- outworldly ascetism/innerworldly ascetism
- homogeneity/diversity
- intolerance/tolerance

We reconstructed partially, using more or less artificial antinomies, the idiom of the European liberal-democrats and its own built counter-ideology attached to Eastern mentality. All the keywords of liberal democracy used previously are encompassed in practice by a single grand category: Occident. The Uniates are holding firmly the banner of Occidentalism. It means on the surface a set of values a promise but in the subtext it asks for a certain definition of Romanian identity, for a certain worldview and commitment to a specific political project.

DISCUSSIONS. THE EVOLUTION OF CONCEPT OF ROMANIANSHIP

Instead of conclusions, we can provide interpretations of the way the concept of Romanianism evolved in the view of the two churches as well as of the places Occidentalism and Orientality have in the mechanisms that made possible the ideological products we discussed so far.

One have to understand the strategic orientation of the mutual endeavors of the two clerical institutions. Regarding the religious practices of the Romanian community and the relationships with the state, the Romanian Orthodox Church aims to gain back its hegemony whereas the Greek-Catholics restrain themselves to the project of legitimacy⁶. According to Verdery, who takes a definition of Marxist origin, „hegemony suggest a regularization, at the level of the entire society, of the discursive practices and productions, which provoke a minimal contestation on behalf of those who are subjected.“ (Verdery, 1994). On the other hand, the same author identifies legitimacy as the „commitment of just a part of the population whereas the rest does not organize effective counter-images.“ (Verdery, 1994) While the balance of power between the two players suggests merely the tactics adopted, without providing sufficient reasons, the discourses that go with them display a remarkable coherence of ideas. Thus, *symphonia* and Orthodoxism are clear premises of hegemonism and anti-Occidentalism inasmuch as, we have already seen, the Greek-Catholic rhetoric reproduces the liberal-democratic ideology.

The intelligibility of this mechanism of ideology production is restricted if we stick to the discursive

5 Many positions declared in in the Vatra survey are of this sort. I can just list the name of several Romanian intellectuals holding these opinions, most of them Othodox: Sorin Antohi, Neagu Djuvara, Livius Ciocârlie, Doina Jela, Adrian Marino. The survey includes more than 150 essays dealing with the contribution held by the Greek-Catholic Church in the development of the Romanian culture and a vast majority of the contributors are Orthodox intellectuals who support the Greek-Catholic Church.

6 A similar view is that of Sorin Antohi in Vatra, nr 3/1996

stage. As a matter of fact, we have to take into account the actors with their interests as well as the dynamics of the social contest that hosts the polemic we are discussing.

Very important aspects are, in this respect, the *de facto* secularity and the hegemony of the nationalist grand narrative. Hence, the Church is pushed on a secondary level by most of the social institutions, especially by the state. Consequently to this subsidiarity, the Church is affiliated to the diverse movements that dispute the access to the resources of the "imagined" Romanian community. The special relationships that bind the Romanian United Church with the National Peasant Christian Democratic Party - presently in power, its pro-Occidentalism, the Transylvanist accents in the Greek-Catholic discourse and the critiques opposed to the Romanian Orthodox Church by the intellectuals should be understood on these grounds. In the same time, the strategic targets, together with the performed ideological affiliation, render more promising perspectives to the United Church as long as the hegemonic claims of the Orthodoxes, as well as their appeal to the principles of *symphonia* and Orthodoxy collide with the trends towards secularization and de-Christianization of the contemporary Romanian society. The Romanian Orthodox Church enters often in contradiction with the public opinion as it happened in 1989 or in the case of the NATO enlargement. In contrast, the Uniates seem to be on the right track of Romania's development.

Much speculative anthropological interpretation can be offered to the efforts headed for the serialization of the religious and national identities. Here, may be very helpful the observation made by Mircea Eliade on the consecration of the territory inhabited by any community and the reality, realized by many others, of the emergence of the „global village.“ Eliade emphasized in a different context that human groupings tend to invest the area they are living in with the quality of center of the world (Eliade, 1992). His statement is valid either for lodgings and preying houses or larger areas, like those administrated by states and has its proof in a certain mythology (with the appropriate symbolism and rituals) that justifies the symbolic uniqueness of the territory that is object to these representations. Ancient societies, like the Greek community or the Roman Empire, were defined each of them as centers of the inhabited world and of the civilization. Simultaneously with modernity, understood here as the mondialization of political, economic and cultural relationships, the centrality came to be demanded by cultures of continental extension.

The Western world promoted its political and economical domination, besides other instruments, through the appeal to a civilizing speech initiated by the Enlightenment thought. In the same time, there is no doubt that Orient is one of the alterities in reference with which the Occident defines itself, and this category was internalized by the Easterners as a validation of their status of subjects of the Western culture. There are many evidences that prove that the reality of a distinct, homogenous Orient is a creation of the so-called West heading to world domination. It created not the just the Oriental identity, which was a new concept, but also the problem of the relations between the Westerners and the Easterners in terms of relative self-definition. As a consequence of a specific world-order this definitions have besides others a hierarchical significance which may lead eventually to identity crisis. If those living in significantly far Eastern areas solved this issue through the assignment of positive value to the marks of their outside imposed description, developing in time a nationalism whose best descriptor is its exaltation of non-Occidental features, the case was much dilemmatic in border regions.

Because our dichotomy implies also some separation, some exclusion. It happens not only on the cultural level but has also geographical facets. And it occurred that Romania, more specifically Transylvania, was on the line drawn by the Western imagination between the two fundamental categories of civilization. Considering the West as the center of the world is, if we think of Eliade's commentaries, a sufficient premise for one's lust to be accepted into what is called Occident. But the West has always been jealous, suspicious, not very eager to open itself towards the East. The fact that the actual territory of Romania was never entirely considered neither belonging to Europe, nor even to the relatively recent construct of *Mitteleuropa*, is part of this history of exclusions.

Greek-Catholics and Othodoxes fight not only on the basis of their claims for preying houses or for governmental help. Besides that, their polemic is consequence of the border feature of this region, as it is in Ukraine as well, and an epiphenomenon of an acute identity perplexity generated by the rejection from the West and the non-attractivity of the East.

As a final remark, let us say that the Orient/Occident dichotomy evolved as a major frame used by both churches to justify the inclusions and the exclusions operated at the level of the definition of their religious and ethnic associations. Is also clear that, intentionally or not, this antinomy tends to become defining for certain aspects of Romanian identity.

CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing the discourses of the recent Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic clergy from Romania one can find valuable information concerning the relationship between the religious and the nationalism narratives. Whether for the period of nation formation the religious discourse had been probably of great importance in emerging of national loyalties the current situation gives evidence of the preeminence of the nationalistic rhetoric. Hence the appeal of both churches engaged in battle over legitimacy or hegemony over the souls of Romanians, especially living in Transylvania, to the argument of the ethnic legitimacy of the churches, based on either historic or anthropologic arguments. Moreover, I would argue that the analyzed discourses reveal the dependence of ecclesiastic institutions in Romania upon the ethnocentric discourse and their incapacity of building communities besides those delimited by the nationalist grand narrative. In this regard distinction is made among the two churches not through the common ethnocentric view but through their different commitments to another major issue of modern identity, salient in the Balkan region, the confrontation between Orient and Occident.

REFERENCES

1. Anderson, B. R. O. G. (1991). *Imagined communities : reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. and extended ed.). London ; New York: Verso.
2. Eliade, M. (1992). *Sacrul și profanul*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
3. Gellner, E. (1994). Mitul națiunilor și mitul claselor. *Polis*(2), 17-59.
4. Hroch, M. (1985). *Social preconditions of national revival in Europe : a comparative analysis of the social composition of patriotic groups among the smaller European nations*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press.
5. Hutchinson, J. (1987). *The dynamics of cultural nationalism: the Gaelic revival and the creation of the Irish nation state*: Allen & Unwin Australia.
6. Mitu, S. (1997). *Geneza identității naționale la românii ardeleni*: Humanitas.
7. Ornea, Z. (1995). *Anii 30: extrema dreaptă românească* Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române.
8. Smith, A. D. (1971). *Theories of nationalism*. New York: Harper & Row.
9. Stănescu, M. (1996). Discursul actual al bisericii ortodoxe române. *Revista de Cercetări Sociale*(2), 81-90.
10. Verdery, K. (1994). *Compromis și rezistență. Cultura română sub Ceaușescu* [National

ideology under socialism : identity and cultural politics in Ceaușescu's Romania] (S. Antohi, Trans.). București: Humanitas.

11. Revista Vatra, *Care credeti că este contributia Bisericii Române Unite cu Roma la spiritualitatea, cultura, politica si istoria României?* Nr.3/1996.