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Conclusion

A variety of different currents shaped Romanian Orthodoxy during the 1920s. Working together with the National Liberal Party, Miron Cristea expanded the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) into the Banat, Maramureș, Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia and Dobruja. He imposed a centralized system of church governance by suppressing autonomous tendencies that were emerging in Transylvania and Bessarabia. Cristea placed the Church at the centre of Romanian nation-building, insisting that the ROC was the *only* church that should be associated with the nation-state. He and others used arguments about 'Tradition' when framing their demands, though they were well aware that in practice over the past 500 years Tradition had been about reconciling the competing claims of Church and state by making the best out of unsatisfactory circumstances. Given Orthodoxy's potential as an ideology of social cohesion, its long tradition of supporting state authority and the fact that many of the other churches were associated with ethnic minorities, the government acquiesced to the ROC's demands for dominant status. The vast majority of police and gendarmes were ethnically Romanian and religiously Orthodox. They too were enthusiastic about wielding power over religious minorities given that their forebears had had to submit to Ottoman, Russian or Austro-Hungarian rule for so long.

Cristea did not establish the new patriarchate alone. He was surrounded – and frequently challenged – by a handful of talented leaders, almost all of whom had been trained abroad and were appointed soon after the end of the First World War. Nicolae Bălan, Gurie Grosu, Vartolomeu Stănescu and Visarion Puiu used their positions to reinforce Romanian Orthodox privilege within the regions under their control. These men did their utmost to transform ordinary Romanians into enthusiastic Christians. They introduced an unprecedented number of initiatives that encouraged priests and lay Christians to work together to cultivate their spirituality. The Lord's Army, the Rebirth society, the Take and

Read circle and the Federation of Christian Students Associations in Romania all successfully communicated church messages about temperance, morality and Bible reading to audiences which had hitherto not expressed a great deal of interest in church activities. A new generation of talented teachers helped to shape young priests into successful evangelists and preachers. Irineu Mihălcescu, Constantin Nazarie, Iuliu Scriban, Gala Galaction, Ioan Popescu-Mălăești, Grigore Cristescu and others inspired their students with what they had learned during their studies abroad. Reforming priests such as Iosif Trifa, Teodor Popescu, Dumitru Cornilescu, Grigore Comșa, Manea S. Popescu and Teodor Păcescu grew up intellectually and spiritually under their tutelage. Preaching, Bible reading, temperance, swearing and church attendance now became the standards by which Orthodox spirituality was judged.

Not all of the reform efforts of the 1920s strengthened church unity. The calendar reform of 1924 alienated large sections of the population in Moldavia and Bessarabia, giving birth to Old Calendarism. The preaching of Popescu and Cornilescu at the Stork's Nest turned out to be too Protestant for the taste of many and eventually created a new Repenter denomination. Similarly, Trifa's articles and books taught about individual piety and a personal Saviour with almost no reference to saints, icons, priests or liturgy. Bălan tried to sideline Trifa, but many members of the Lord's Army insisted on following Trifa out of the more institutionalized and nationalist movement Bălan hoped for. When university students associated with the FASCR began sharing God's love through good works their elders had to step in to redirect their energies towards nationalist politics.

The changes inside 1920s Orthodoxy all took place before a backdrop of Repenter Christianity. Despite their small numbers, the spectre of Repenters dominated Orthodox discussions about religion in Romania. In a 1937 book entitled *The Prophetic Spirit*, the deacon Vasile Ionescu wrote that 'the religious problem of our Orthodoxy today has two main aspects: one involves crushing unbelief and eliminating everything that belongs to sectarian teachings; the other is the strengthening of the faithful through their clergy, raising their religious-moral lives to a higher level'.¹ Most Orthodox writers would have agreed, seeing combating sectarianism and teaching the laity as two sides of the same coin. Almost every attempt to create a new Orthodox initiative was justified in terms of anti-sectarianism. Apart from the fact that they ignored national chauvinism and failed to respect the church hierarchy, Repenters excelled at the sort of

¹ Vasile Ionescu, *Duhul profetic* (Pitești: Tipografia 'Artistica' P. Mitu, 1937), 3.

religious practices reforming priests most valued. They cherished their Bibles and read them avidly, they did not drink, smoke or swear, they prayed regularly and were determined to share their faith regardless of the cost. Even anti-sectarian missionaries had little choice but to imitate the strategies and practices of Repenters if they hoped to combat them. Repenters were also associated with the sorts of foreign influences that Orthodox leaders felt powerless to stop. It is telling that anti-sectarian writers blamed Repenters for the rise of atheism, evolutionary theory and immorality. Even if Repenters taught none of those things, their religion came from the same countries as jazz music and the theory of evolution so the two became connected in the minds of anti-sectarian writers.

The relationship between Repenters and changing Orthodox practices was more complex in Romania than scholars have suggested it was elsewhere. Bojan Aleksov and Ksenija Končarević argue that in Serbia the Nazarenes taught God Worshippers and other Orthodox Christians to read their Bibles and to seek to live holier lives. They suggest that the increase in devotional literature, new translations of the Bible, vernacular liturgies and the spread of grassroots holiness movements in Serbian Orthodoxy were a direct result of Nazarene influences.² In Romania, on the other hand, the sorts of changes associated with Repenter religion transformed Orthodoxy at the same time that Repenter communities grew and spread. Bible reading increased as a natural consequence of the rise of literacy levels and the number of religious newspapers and grassroots associations increased because the number of *all* newspapers and associations was growing exponentially during this period. Orthodox leaders used the threat that Repenters would take over the country to promote their new initiatives, but those initiatives were not conscious imitations of Repenter practices. Nor did Repenter beliefs and parachurch movements develop organically out of Orthodoxy, as Sergei Zhuk argues happened in the Ukraine.³ Repenters explicitly acknowledged American, British, German, Swiss and French influences, distributing foreign literature and occasionally receiving money or diplomatic support from abroad.

Despite what Orthodox writers claimed, Repenters were not the major conduit through which Romanians learned about Western Christianity. For the

² Bojan Aleksov, 'The Nazarenes Among the Serbs: Proselytism and/or Dissent?' and Ksenija J. Končarević, 'The Influence of the God Worshipper Movement on the Language Policy and Religious Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church', in *Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in Eastern Europe*, ed. Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović and Radmila Radić (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 105–89.

³ Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation*, 3.

most part, Orthodox leaders discovered Western Christianity for themselves, without Repenter influence. When priests such as Iosif Trifa or Dumitru Cornilescu wanted edifying literature to give their followers there was simply too little written by Romanian Orthodox Christians. They thus had little choice but to turn to Catholic and Protestant devotional writings which contained doctrines such as justification by faith and *sola scriptura* alongside messages about temperance and morality. Similarly, so many of the bishops, archbishops and metropolitans in inter-war Romania had been educated abroad because the standards available in Romanian theological faculties before the First World War were too low. Social Christianity, modern Biblical hermeneutics, lay activism and revivalism had all developed within Western Christianity, as had the idea of temperance leagues, self-help associations and religious newspapers. Regardless of the impact of missionaries and organizations such as the YMCA, during the 1920s Christians of all persuasions had unprecedented levels of access to and contact with the West thanks to new travel and communication networks connecting the globe.

Over the centuries Eastern Orthodoxy has had a long tradition of developing through interaction with Western Christianity, sometimes incorporating Western ideas and practices and sometimes creatively rejecting them.⁴ Yet chauvinistic nationalism was so entrenched during the early twentieth century that the idea that Romanian Orthodoxy might benefit from foreign ideas was incomprehensible to many people. Manea Popescu concluded that ‘if we have to establish our evangelism on a foreign basis, it would be better for us to stay where we are and be happy with preserving what we have inherited.’⁵ As Nicholas Doumanis has demonstrated through his study of religious change in Anatolia, there was nothing in the popular practice of early twentieth-century Orthodoxy that precluded an active and intimate cohabitation with neighbours from other religious traditions. It was, rather, the institutional cultures of church-building and nationalism coming on the back of centuries of humiliating exploitation by imperial powers that instrumentalized Orthodoxy as a xenophobic, intolerant religion.⁶ Frustration at state attempts to control the ROC and a growing appreciation of the power that grassroots religiosity could give Church leaders in

⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1963); Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology* (Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanst, 1979).

⁵ Manea Popescu, ‘Un ultim răspuns și câteva lămuriri Preotului Teodor Popescu’, *Noua revistă bisericească*, 1 April 1922, 13.

⁶ Nicholas Doumanis, *Before the Nation: Muslim-Christian Coexistence and Its Destruction in Late Ottoman Anatolia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

a democratic nation-state further encouraged metropolitans, bishops and parish priests to embrace antisemitic and fascist politics as a means of producing social change when legal means failed.

Aristotle Papanikolaou and George Demacopoulos have recently asked whether the resurgence of Orthodox(ist) 'traditionalism', which posits that there is one, authentic and traditional form of Orthodoxy and other, less orthodox strands, is a form of Orthodox fundamentalism that is seeking to find a way of maintaining an Orthodox identity in a secular world.⁷ In inter-war Romania, talking about Tradition was both about establishing the limits of Orthodoxy and about reaffirming the dominance of one Church and one way of life in the face of the rapid changes that came with modernity and state-building. Although they occasionally gave lip service to the idea of Tradition as a creative force, most Romanian writers of the 1920s saw it primarily in terms of its conservative nature. Irineu Mihălcescu defined Tradition as 'those teachings given by the holy apostles ... [that were] written down by the Church Fathers and thus preserved unchanged until today in their writings and in the books of the church.'⁸ As Pantelis Kalaitzidis notes, this is only one way of thinking about Tradition. 'If tradition is something that emanates only from the past', he writes, 'if its only reference points are those bequeathed and handed down to us, then any change, modification or reform is *perforce* a betrayal of the original, authentic truth. Conversely, if tradition comes to us from the future – the future of God's Kingdom, of the eschatological Christ himself – then anything is possible, everything is open, and nothing is set in stone.'⁹ However much Romanian Church leaders might have hoped for a creative renewal of their faith, whether it be through Social Christianity or paligenetic ultra-nationalism, they were terrified that they would be losing something in the process. The spectre of Repenter Christianity constantly reminded them that Orthodoxy did have its limits and that these limits must be respected lest, in the words of Teodor Păcescu, 'we pass beyond Orthodox dogma in our desire to evangelize and unexpectedly find ourselves in the camp of the sectarians.'¹⁰

⁷ Aristotle Papanikolaou and George E. Demacopoulos, 'Introduction: Being as Tradition', in *Fundamentalism or Tradition: Christianity after Secularism*, ed. Aristotle Papanikolaou and George E. Demacopoulos (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 7–9.

⁸ Mihălcescu, *Catehismul creștin ortodox*, 7.

⁹ Pantelis Kalaitzidis, 'Challenges of Renewal and Reformation Facing the Church', *The Ecumenical Review* 61, no. 2 (2009): 149–50.

¹⁰ Teodor P. Păcescu, 'Biserica in pragul anului 1922', *Noua revistă bisericească*, 1 January 1922, 321.