



# **The importance of dialogue for the Evangelical Churches in Romania in the context of the expansion of the European Union**

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I am not only from Communist Romania, I am also a Christian brought up in the conservative Pentecostal tradition. Nevertheless I am convinced that the problems of the world today cannot be solved without ecumenical dialogue in the spirit of Jesus Christ.

During my high school years in Oradea I was confronted by two groups: the Orthodox and the atheists. A young Orthodox who discovered that I was an Evangelical told me that I had rejected the true faith. The atheists told me that I was nothing, that there was no future for me and that my experience of God was just a fantasy.

The Communist period in Romania was characterised by monologue rather than dialogue. For Evangelical Christians their monologue consisted of questions about suffering, persecution, prison and corrupt leaders.

Despite persecution in this period the Evangelical churches in Romania experienced revival because they were forced to stay in unity and thus developed an intra-church dialogue: a mutual relationship and cooperation among the members and leaders of different churches of the same Evangelical denomination. The churches had time to listen to one another and pray for one another. But the weakness consisted in the lack of dialogue with outsiders, members of other religious denominations.

At the same time the Orthodox Church leaders wrote many letters

to Protestants and other non-Orthodox urging them to return to the one true faith. The Evangelicals refused to do so, telling the Orthodox that their tradition and liturgy were not the way of salvation. The big mistake that Evangelicals made was to treat the Orthodox as nonbelievers. The Orthodox Church became a mission field for Evangelicals and subsequently they were accused of proselytism by the Orthodox.

Meanwhile in the West the late 1960s and the 1970s and 1980s churches were characterised by ecumenism, and the opening of the Catholic Church to the world (after the Second Vatican Council). The Protestant and Catholic Churches established dialogue with modern society.

In the postcommunist period the Evangelical churches in Romania have developed ecumenical activities, a new attitude towards the different religious denominations of the Christian Church, dialogue with the West, and the beginning of a dialogue with the Orthodox Church.

The change in 1989 was received by different Evangelical churches and their pastors in different ways. There were three kinds of Evangelical: conservatives, progressives and visionaries. The conservatives were sceptics; they responded with hostility to the changes, arguing that they wanted to keep the faith unchanged, as the Apostles had given it to us, in order to secure salvation. The progressives would readily admit that great things had happened, but they were still fearful of changes, of the future and of dialogue. The visionaries, however, believed that the time had come to build the church on the basis of ecumenism and dialogue. Because of the visionaries, new Christian Evangelical schools opened in almost every big Romanian city, but the most significant event was the creation of the Evangelical Alliance to take part in official interconfessional dialogue.

Dialogue with the Orthodox Church was paradoxically prepared in the Communist period when the only Christian literature available was Orthodox. Evangelical theologians, and particularly biblical scholars, were forced to read the books of Orthodox scholars; they entered into discussion with them, and found that Christians had the same faith in God as Trinity. Now many young Evangelical scholars are doing research in Orthodox universities. However, there is still conflict with the Orthodox over proselytism, and the Orthodox still want to be proclaimed the National Church, confusing unity with uniformity.

Perhaps we can learn from the experience of Evangelicals in the West and the history of their dialogue with the Catholics. The Second Vatican Council was a great event in the history of the Western Churches. but the Catholic encyclical *De Ecclesia* still

reaffirmed the primacy of the Pope, and even the encyclical *De Oecumenismo* asserted that only the Catholic Church possessed the totality of revealed truth and all the means of grace. In recent decades, however, Catholics have entered into respectful dialogue with Evangelicals, as a result of the efforts of Pope John Paul II. In the words of George B. Caird, a western Protestant leader, 'Our ultimate union with Rome need not be conceived in terms of submission or even of compromise. All this seems to me to show that a genuine and worthwhile dialogue could be conducted between Catholics and Protestants without either side being compelled to relinquish any of their deepest convictions.'

Pope John Paul II was the most ecumenical Pope of all times He said once that the first 1000 years of Christianity saw church unity, the next 1000 years saw church disunity, and now the third millennium will be the period of restored church unity. I hope this will be true.

In Romania a first step was taken in 2002 in Timisoara, when representatives of the three monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) had a constructive dialogue, aiming not just for a spirit of tolerance, but for active love. The conference was entitled 'Democracy and Religion - the Romanian Experience : the Contribution of Religious Communities to Reconciliation, Respect of Diversity, Democracy, Human Rights, Protection of Minorities, Co-operation and Stability in South Eastern Europe'. Participants included over 60 leaders and representatives of churches and religious communities in Romania, theologians from various Christian churches (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical) and from the Jewish and Muslim traditions, and representative of NGOs, the government and local authorities.

Some of the questions they debated were:

- Will we find within our internal interdenominational cooperation an instrument for increasing social cohesion and maturing constitutional patriotism?
- Will ecumenical dialogue continue to function as an ethic of a multicultural Europe, and will it be as faithful as possible to its Christian roots?
- Will the Romanian state be a real partner of the churches and will they be able to achieve a balance between autonomy and loyalty?

Silvo Devetak, the coordinator of the 'Maribor Initiative' project and chairman of its International Programme Committee, spoke of the basic objectives of the initiative: 'Contributing to reconciliation, tolerance, and cooperation between peoples; spreading the culture of dialogue and of respect of diversity: considering

possible ways for promoting permanent dialogue and cooperation in the region and especially the dialogue between institutions and organisations of churches and religious communities.'

In the view of Walter Schwimmer, secretary general of the Council of Europe, who was present at the conference,

The 'Maribor Initiative' launched a few years ago proved to be a most successful means for the restoration of dialogue across the borders of ethnicity and religion and to promote confidence amongst the populations of the South Eastern European region... Today we know that in the coming years, linking diversity may be one of the political priorities for all our societies. Diversity and respect for the equal dignity of all should be protected by law. To improve the awareness of the other and mutual understanding needs constant dialogue.

One of the Evangelicals present at the conference was Rev. Petru Bulica, pastor of the Betel Baptist Church in Timisoara. He welcomed the desire to overcome the ill-fated identification of unity with uniformity in the name of 'unity in diversity'.

Rev. Prof. Dragos Bahrim, director of the Orthodox theological seminary in Iasi, said that the Orthodox Church had a firm desire to participate in building a democratic society and wished to engage non-Orthodox faiths in a constructive dialogue. He emphasised the fact that the term 'tolerance' is not found in the Gospels and that 'love' should replace it.

When we enter into dialogue with the Other we share the Other's problems; but at the same time we run the risk of losing touch in some way with the community to which we belong. We need to keep a balance between the Other, ourselves and society. We Evangelicals have to be aware that while we could lose our voice and identity if we remained silent today, we also risk losing ourselves if we make too many compromises with postmodern society. In his book *Talking to the Other* (London, I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2003, pp.90-91) Jonathan Magonet notes that

the participant from the minority situation will often be aware of a degree of threat to his or her status before the dialogue even begins. This may have to do with being a relatively new arrival in the host society, such 'newness' often stretching over a number of generations; or it may be because of the fear of loss of identity through assimilation or acculturation to the majority society, a deeply disturbing experience even when no overt threat is being posed. The minority partner in dialogue does not start off on the same footing, and is often acutely aware of the fragility of his or her position vis-à-vis the other.

This becomes magnified because of the responsibility he or she bears as a representative figure to those back home.

Nevertheless in recent years my own Pentecostal Church has become open to dialogue with other confessions. In 2002 the president of the Pentecostal Union, Pavel Riviș Tîpei, said that 'The Romanian Pentecostal Church is receptive to the initiatives of other religious denominations that try to engage in a dialogue without altering their principles. We also try to have a positive impact on the Christians' joint effort to come closer to God.'

Engaging in dialogue with other confessions we Evangelicals must be creative in our own Biblical interpretation, enabling us to move from our confessional position to a more open and dialogical use of the Bible. In the words of the New Testament scholar James Dunn (McDonald, Martin and Sanders (eds), *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, 2002) pp.571, 578),

In the New Testament the Christ event always meets us clothed in particular forms and language culturally and historically conditioned; that is why historical-critical exegesis is necessary, that is why it must be a dialogue rather than a fundamentalist subserviency. But without the New Testament we have no possible way of tying our faith into the Christ event, no possible way of carrying forward the dialogue of faith for ourselves.

He speaks of the need for a thoroughgoing dialogue between past and present, 'neither permitting a mere clinging to forms or formulations that are not meaningful to the contemporary situation nor allowing the contemporary situation to dictate the message and perspectives of its faith'.

In conclusion, I would like to name some of the important young Romanian Evangelical scholars who are writing about church and politics, postmodernism and Evangelical identity in Europe today - Danut Manastireanu, Silviu Rogobete - or who are finishing research on politics, society and religion in Eastern Europe: Corneliu Constantineanu, Christian Romocea. They are engaging in dialogue with young Orthodox scholars like Lucian Leustean. Another well-known voice is that of H.-R. Patapievi. He calls for 'a continuing dialogue between all social and religious groups' as 'the crucial problem of democracy'.

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