



The Future of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the European Union

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The recent death of Pope John Paul II was marked in Romania with Orthodox liturgies and prayer vigils, while 8 April was declared a day of national mourning. If this would be normal in a Catholic country like Poland or Croatia, it might seem unimaginable for an Orthodox country. This unprecedented ecumenical openness finds its roots in the unprecedented official visit of Pope John Paul II to Romania in February 1999, which remains the first visit ever made by a Catholic Pope to an Orthodox country in the history of the Christian Church. It also signifies the putting into practice of the Pope's vision of a global Christianity which surpasses centuries-long animosities and is committed to ecumenical cooperation and constructive dialogue. The openness of the Romanian Orthodox Church leaders to the Pope's visit to Romania as well as the dialogue that was maintained between the two churches since the official visit of Romanian Patriarch Teoctist to Vatican in 2002 are indicators of the level of normality and maturity that the Romanian Orthodox Church has achieved. Such an attitude and commitment to ecumenical dialogue and religious pluralism are fitting for a church in the European Union.

The communist dictatorship in Romania was one of the most repressive in the whole of the Eastern bloc. For over 40 years the communists prevented Romanian society from coming to terms with the political debate which had animated the inter-war social and political milieu, the so-called 'national debate' of the 1920s to the 1940s. The debate was between the liberal supporters of

Europeanisation and of Romanian democratisation, and the right-wing supporters of a nationalist political agenda with a strong autochthonous, collectivist and authoritarian tendencies.

There were two important factors contributing to this debate. One was the formation of Greater Romania (1918) through the union with Transylvania, and the second was the challenge that secularism and modernity posed to the transformation of the authoritarian Romanian society.

Some thought that a nationalist and corporatist Orthodoxy would offer the theologico-political solution to the interwar social dilemma between liberal capitalist individualism and communist collectivism. A recurrent feature of this Orthodox 'ethnocracy' was a polemical and highly critical attitude towards Europe, the West, towards modernity, democracy and liberalism. All the intellectual and cultural values that were connected with the European civilisation, such as rationalism, individualism and universality, were discredited as forms of atheism. On the other hand, aspects of Marxist-Leninist collective mysticism such as homogeneity, fusion and totalitarian integration became elements bearing the substance of the Orthodox faith.

After the popular revolution in December 1989 popular revolt the Romanian Orthodox Church found itself in the midst of events; it had an important, if symbolic, role in the transition of the society towards a liberal democracy. Important attempts at reform and ideological cleansing among the Orthodox prelates were applauded and seemed to indicate that the Church would exert a positive influence in the process of moral regeneration.

Sadly, however, the interwar legacy of identification of Orthodoxy with Romanian nationalism continued to represent a major challenge. The Church did not hurry to achieve a clear separation from the state. It continued to oscillate between endorsement of political decisions of the government, which included formal support for the country's commitment to joining NATO and to European integration, and negative tendencies, which included demonising Western liberalism as a source of sinful materialism and individualism at the expense of community. Some argued that Orthodoxy was a threat to Romania's modernisation and democratisation, going as far as to argue that the complete removal of the Romanian Orthodox Church from public life would need to be part of the legislative integration of Romania in the European Union.

The tension which emerged from these conflicting ideologies was widely perceived as irreconcilable and led to a fracture in the constructive dialogue between Church and state in

postcommunist Romania.

In recent years, with the prospect of entry to the EU, discussions about the role of the Orthodox Church in the EU have reemerged and fears about the impact of this enlargement iterated.

In Romania, notwithstanding sporadic instances when Orthodox clergy reacted negatively to the country joining the EU, the official discourse of the Church hierarchy has always been supportive of this integration. However, some legitimate fears have recently been raised in the Romanian press about the preparedness of the ROC for integration into a secular and economy-driven Europe, and about its future prospects as a spiritual and social presence in society. These range from doubts concerning the openness of the Church to ecumenical dialogue, to more pragmatic fears that the Church will become obsolete and irrelevant to the complex challenges younger generations will be facing in increasingly secular societies.

Some have argued that because the EU tends to erode national boundaries, a National Church which is not used to multinational and interethnic dialogue locally will not be able to adapt to the variety of denominations and ethnicities that will form the EU. Others predict that Romanian Orthodoxy will become a marginal sect in 30 years' time, because of its reluctance to break centuries-old traditions and become an active force of moral regeneration in society. The attitude of the Church to proselytism could present another barrier. The US State Department's Human Rights Report for Romania in 2004 identifies this Orthodox reticence towards religious pluralism and hints at its incompatibility with a democratic society.

The Romanian Orthodox Church has entered the debate about the wording of the European Constitution. In March 2003 the Church's Synod followed the Catholic Church in officially requesting the addition of the clause 'predominantly Christian' to the text referring to the 'religious heritage' of European civilisation. The Church used the following arguments in support of this plea:

1. The majority of the European population is Orthodox/Catholic/Protestant Christian.
2. The idea of a united Europe which was first uttered by Christian-Democrats like Adenauer, Monet and De Gasperi was aimed at an economic community which would form a cultural and political community founded primarily on Christianity and only secondarily on the Greco-Latin heritage.
3. Christian morality and the social work of the Church have inspired a respect for human dignity and have influenced civil society with ideals of liberty, equality, and concern for

the marginalised. Though secularised by the Enlightenment, these values which shape today's humanist idealism have their roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

4. European culture, art, music and literature have been inspired for centuries by the Bible and by Christian spirituality, both in Catholic and Protestant Western Europe and in Orthodox Eastern Europe.
5. Lastly, Romanian culture is thoroughly indebted to Christianity. Romania as the only Latin Orthodox country can be a model for Europe. Eastern Orthodox in faith, Latin in language and consisting of a variety of denominations representative of Europe, which have coexisted despite religious and cultural differences and which have enriched the national spiritual thesaurus, Romania is a miniature of Europe where various Christian Churches must be allowed to preserve their distinctive spiritual identity.

Thus for the Romanian Orthodox Church mentioning the Christian roots of European civilisation and culture is not intended against those of other religions or the nonreligious, but simply confirms the historical influence of Christianity on the formation of the European spirit. Europe is founded on three symbolic hills: the Acropolis, the Capitol and Golgotha; and the European Constitution must represent this reality in order to strengthen the political unity of the continent.

The Romanian Orthodox Church can play an important role in Europe. Pope John Paul II maintained that Europe breaths with two lungs, the Western one represented by the Catholic and Protestant Churches and the Eastern one represented by the Orthodox Church. Refuting the speculative thinking of historians such as Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee and Samuel Huntington, who contended that Europe ends where Eastern Orthodoxy begins, and warned about an irreconcilable clash between Slavic-Orthodoxy and the Catholic-Protestant West, the Orthodox Church must share with the whole of Europe its spiritual and cultural richness.

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