
**THE CALL TO LIVE A CHRISTIAN LIFE
USING THE THEOLOGY OF KARL BARTH TO
REFLECT ON UNDERSTANDING THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE IN
ROMANIA**

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Abstract

The theology of Karl Barth has raised many critical questions and has opened fresh ways to think about God, church and society. In this paper I try to reflect about the conditions that led to the dissonance between what Romanians claim to believe and how they practically live. A second concern is to understand how Christians should live ethically in a society by following God in obedience.

Keywords: church, state, theology, politics, sociology of religion

The present reflection comes out of a concern that I have about the role of the Christian and of the church in modern Romania and how this relates to issues like faith, freedom and political responsibility. According to the 2002 census [1] Romania is definitely what one would call a 'Christian country'. Out of a population of 21.6 million citizens about 86% are Orthodox, 5.7% Catholic, 3.33% Reformed, 2.66% Neoprottestant (name used in Romania to describe: Baptists, Pentecostals, Brethren, Seventh Day Adventists and other denominations better known as Evangelicals in the West), 0.3% Muslim. This means that over 98% of Romanians declare themselves as holding a form of Christian faith.

According to a Soros Foundation Romania research realized in 2011, with the name *Religion and Religious behavior* [2], 61% of Romanians, regardless of their religious affiliation, declare that prayer or religious meditation is an important part of their daily life. At the same time, only 6% attend church more than once a week and 25% attend church once a week. The percentages vary

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significantly between different denominations, according to the same study. While 93% of the Neoprotestants pray daily and 90% attend church weekly and 70% of the Greek Catholics and Catholics pray daily and over three quarters attend church once a month, only 59% of the Orthodox pray frequently and a little over 50% attend church once a month with 40% attending church only on important Christian festivals.

One would expect that a country with such a solid Christian foundation would reflect the values of the Christian faith in all spheres of daily life, including economy, politics and society. Unfortunately various studies regarding corruption or human trafficking paint a dissonant image of how every day life is lived in Romania. For example, in the Transparency International's report *Corruption Perceptions Index for 2012* [3] Romania ranks 66 with a score of 44 and from the European Union family it scores higher only than Greece, Bulgaria and Italy. An even more sobering situation is presented in a study of human trafficking realized by the European Commission [4]. This places Romania, fourth in the European Union after Cyprus, Netherlands and Bulgaria with 5.4 presumed victims for 100 000 inhabitants.

According to the Soros Foundation Romania study presented above, while 73% of Romanians have great confidence in the Church, 82% believe that the Church should not be involved in the political affairs of the country and only 13% believe that the Church should be involved in politics. It may be that such a disengagement from involvement in the day by day issues of the life of the 'polis' is a facilitating factor for a society that, whilst thinking of itself as being Christian and pursuing the values of its faith, performs in fact in a manner that leaves much to be desired. The situation raises the question what role does Christian faith really play in the Romanian society and also if the Church is making any attempts to try and correct the diverging direction between what Romanians declare that they believe and what actually takes place in Romanian society.

I use the term Church as a general term to describe all the Churches of the commonly accepted forms of Christian religion. Since this description is sometimes itself a reason for debate in Romania my reference is to what would be known as: Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Neoprotestant (Evangelical) churches. There are significant confessional distinctions between the various denominations leading to some apparently irreconcilable theological differences, many of which are historical. There are also sociological distinctions, along the line of those proposed by Weber and Troeltsch, between the different ways in which these Churches 'see themselves' and understand their *raison d'être* in the Romanian society. However, it is my conviction that for the current study, the dominant role of the majority Church is of such significance that it functions both as a cultural and social paradigm and also as a horizon of expectation for all the Romanians who consider themselves to be Christian (the vast majority according to the studies above) and understand Christianity more in terms of a 'tradition' to be followed or as a 'law of the forefathers' that is inherited. This assumption will evidently be less true for those belonging to a minority and who

are pursuing committed forms of living their Christian faith, regardless of the Church to which they belong.

From this position, the current paper tries to reflect and explore whether a certain type of understanding of the relationship between the Church and State in the Romanian context is in fact a contributing factor to the problem. At the same time the current paper wants to inquire if a certain way of relating to the political life of society can reflect better the call of a Christian as a citizen. The reflection attempts to ground itself theologically in an understanding of Scripture as this is worked out in the life of society and specifically in Romanian society.

As a starting point for my reflection I would like to engage with Karl Barth, the 20th century Swiss theologian, who I believe, is an excellent discussion partner for this theme. In his book *Church and State* [5] he explores the various ways in which the State and the Church interfere with each other by asking the question whether the main way to understand the relationship between the two is one that of conflict or is it possible to also see a positive connection between them [5, p 12]. The situation is that the state can take the form of a demonic power of this age while at the same time the Church should remember Jesus' words quoted by John that his Kingdom is not of this world (John 18.36). At the same time, in the Gospel of John 19.11 Jesus seems to recognize that Pilate's claim that he has power to release or crucify him, is in fact a power that was given to him "from above". In fact, Pilate recognizes that Jesus is innocent before he delivers him to be crucified. Even in its 'demonic' form the State seems to fulfill God's plan. It was not by fulfilling its role but by failing to uphold justice that the state under Pilate gave Jesus to be crucified. However, even when Pilate does not pursue justice, as he should have done, he involuntarily becomes an instrument of the death of Jesus, ordained by God for the justification of the sinful man.

Another significant discussion in the Scriptures is what Paul writes about the state in his Epistle to the Romans 13.1-7. Barth considers that when the New Testament speaks about the state, the emperor or the king it has in mind the notion of angelic powers. According to Barth, the state, while being the one who should defend justice and law as God intended, it has the potential to degenerate and become a demonic power. He considers that this is the case when Paul writes to the Colossians warning them that they need not to struggle against *flesh and blood* but against *principalities and powers* [5, p. 16]. This is not the final word in this relationship between the Church and the state. Writing to the Philippians (2.9-11) the same apostle reminds them that ultimately through Christ's death and resurrection, God brings all these powers under the authority of the Risen one. In fact the apostle Paul makes this clear to the Colossians as well when he writes: "*He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him*" (Colossians 2.15). Barth points out that since we cannot understand God apart from his revelation in Christ, we need to understand the State as also belonging to the Christological realm as he writes: "*The establishment and the function of the state, and, above all, the Christian's attitude towards it, will then lose a certain accidental*

character which was peculiar to the older form of exposition” [5, p. 34]. Barth’s conclusion is therefore that the authority of the state comes from the authority of Christ and the Christian’s conscience recognizing that the authority of the state is in fact the authority of Christ. By doing so Barth follows in fact Luther’s teaching of two kingdoms, much criticized for enabling a double ethical standard (private and public) and also for potentially offering arguments in favor of obeying the state even when it becomes tyrannical.

From this perspective, Barth recognizes that the New Testaments talks about the establishing of a new order that is political. The Kingdom of God, as the reality of the new age presented eschatologically in *Revelation 21*, is not a future church, or another type of ecclesia but a future city, a heavenly state. But a distinction remains between the earthly state and the Kingdom of God, the earthly state is not the heavenly Jerusalem and therefore the state cannot be considered divine. Even if the Church proclaims the justification of the Kingdom of God and by doing so it presents the true state, the Church remains within its boundaries and it cannot replace the earthly state, as we understand from *1 Epistle to the Corinthians 6*. At the same time the Church remains a stranger to the earthly state called to preach the justification bringing hope to the earthly city by speaking about the coming city. On its side the State cannot become the Church but it serves the Church when it guarantees its freedom to preach. In turn the Church serves the State when it prays for the State guaranteeing in this way its existence.

We should compare this perspective with that presented by one of the renown Romanian Orthodox theologians, Dumitru Staniloaie. In an article from 1940 [6], he writes that Orthodoxy is the eye through which the Romanian looks towards Heaven and it is the only healthy eye. Explaining why Romanians are and should be Orthodox, Staniloaie writes that the Romanian people affirm the importance of their faith by calling it Romanian law or the law of forefathers [7]. For Romanian Orthodox Christians, faith is therefore not to be understood mainly as faith (*fides*) or trust (*fiducia*) but as a set of customs and practices that sets the Romanians apart from their neighbours. This understanding is emphasized by the way in which Romanians relate to Scriptures. Staniloaie considers that a nation is not Christian through the written text of the Scriptures but through obedience to the truth that existed before the text and independent of it [8]. He maintains that because of its autocephalous nature, Orthodoxy is the only one faith that points out to an adequate understanding of nation, while Catholicism with its centralized organization and Protestantism with its anarchic tendencies tend to manifest antinational tendencies [9]. By establishing a relationship between Church and nation the door is open to a type of nationalism that remains exclusivist of other confessions in spite of the fact that phyletism was condemned by the Orthodox Church in the nineteenth century. The same is true regarding the relationship between Church and State. This continues to be seen from the paradigm that was set by the legal code of Emperor Justinian in the sixth century in spite of the fact that today the larger Orthodox Churches do

not exist in countries with monarchies. The code defines the relationship as a 'symphony' and it establishes a diarchy between the Emperor and Patriarch.

The question, which may be part of the answer of this reflection, is whether this type of relationship between Church and state has not led in general to a more obedient position of the Orthodox Church towards the state in which it exists? At the same time, since the tradition of customs and the law of the forefathers are part of the Christian faith could it mean that there is less respect for the law of the state, which is seen merely as the result of an imperfect human effort? Probably the answer is more complex but the thesis may be supported further by the fact that during the years of communist dictatorship significant protests took place in countries that were Catholic or Protestant (Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland) and not in Orthodox countries. Barth's understanding that the Church and the state while ordained by the same authority of God fulfill different roles is a helpful reminder and correction that the Church needs to keep its prophetic voice.

I would like to start again with Karl Barth as we reflect on the question about how a Christian should relate to society and politics. It is well known that he was very critical of the German church lack of reaction towards National Socialism during the reign of Hitler. It was Karl Barth who was the main author of the famous Declaration of Barmen, where the Confessing Church expressed its position towards what was happening in Germany. Barth was also critical of western consumerism but did not adopt a similar attitude against soviet communism. Because of this, many of his friends became critical of his apparent softer approach regarding communism. In an open letter to Barth, Emil Brunner is puzzled because Barth does not seem to see that soviet communism was a form of totalitarianism similar to Nazism [10]. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that Barth has ceased to have any influence on his thinking and on that of Western Christians who believe in accepting common responsibilities without illusion or despair [11]. Niebuhr's criticism comes because he thinks that Barth's eschatological perspective places him "above the battle field". He also seems to think that Barth is not interested in radical political involvement as a Christian.

Joseph Bettis, considers that part of the problem that Barth has in being adequately understood in America is due to the fact that his theology implies a radical socialist ethic which is in stark contrast with the liberal capitalist ethic that dominates America [12]. Bettis thinks that Niebuhr suffers, like all liberals, from what Herbert Marcuse called "unidimensional thinking" [13]. Therefore he seems to think that the threat must come from the left or from the right whilst it may be possible that the threat could come from the middle. Bettis is of the opinion that far from being indifferent to politics, Barth considers that the Gospel is directly relevant to the political act. In fact he thinks that Barth has a deeper understanding of the political reality. In a letter to a German pastor, Barth uses 1 Peter 5.9 to remind us that we are encouraged to resist the enemy, the devil. The real issue is to identify the adversary and Barth points out that both the West and communism show signs of being the adversary. However, in the West the substitution of Christ is a more dangerous reality while communism

does not substitute Christ since it declares itself against Christianity. Only by identifying the adversary, the Christian can respond with a radical revolutionary challenge of the social and political structures.

In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth develops four criteria for action starting with the question: what should we do? [14] First he thinks that any ethical action remains open because it has to be recognized that it is human and therefore contingent. Secondly, the ethical activity validates itself. It is not a question of applying a criterion of good, true or beautiful to an action or an event. It is not a matter of applying the universal to the particular but of finding the universal. Thirdly ethical activity is a community action because it starts with the question: what should we do? Therefore it remains an open issue for the entire community. Lastly, ethical activity is concrete and not abstract because it asks what to do in a specific situation. Therefore, Barth considers that there cannot be a neutral ethical position and escaping in discussing moral abstractions, is in fact an abandonment of the ethical problem. In dealing with ethics, liberalism substituted the external authority of the theological dogmatism with a humanistic pragmatism. But Barth believes that God's authority is functionally different by the proposal of the old theological orthodoxy which accepted the heteronomy of the divine law but gave it an extrinsic authority which was sometimes just a human law. Although the liberal proposal felt the need of an intrinsic authority, by doing this it gave the law autonomy and this was, in Barth's view, equally different from God's authority. Barth rejects both an external heteronomy and the human autonomy and proposes, instead, an internal heteronomy of things. The only response to this is obedience, as the choice between good and bad is not an ethical problem and in fact it hides the ethical question by claiming that man can know what is good or bad. The only authority is that of God and the only response is obedience.

I believe that engaging the theology of Karl Barth from the Romanian context is helpful for our reflection. We discover on one hand that the particular type of society and political expectations facilitate the dissonance between what Romanians claim to believe and what they do. The origins of a culture that makes possible such a behavior in society can be arguably identified as being rooted in a certain model of association between church and state specific to the Byzantine arrangement. At the same time, Barth's understanding of the Christian's need to act politically in obedience to God calls all Christians to act as followers of Christ. Rejecting human laws and traditions or some autonomous humanism as a basis for ethical action, Barth calls all Christians to hear the call of God, to act in obedience for the building of the Kingdom of God.

In conclusion, the church in Romania should change its emphasis from claiming to know and be able to speak about what is ethical and move to live by following God in obedience of his call, acknowledging thus that it ultimately recognizes only his authority in all matters. The church has a call to serve the state and also society by proclaiming the justification of God and by providing a prophetic challenge to the kingdom of this world through the heralding of the Kingdom of God. Being involved in the political life is therefore not only a

possibility for the Christian but also an obligation to be a witness for the Gospel and for God's transforming power in this world.

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