
THE COMMUNIST STATE INTERFERENCE IN THE AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCHES OF THE OPEN BRETHERN FROM ROMANIA[†]

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(Received 10 March 2013, revised 28 July 2013)

Abstract

The Open Brethren Denomination, named in Romania ‘The Christians According to the Gospel’ had a well-established identity during the Interbellum. Regarding the church government, some principles were emphasised in the Open Brethren churches during the interwar period, one of them was the autonomy of the local church. This principle constituted an obstacle for the totalitarian communist regime to control the local churches. For this reason, the State imposed restrictions and changes in the theology and in the practice of the Brethren Denomination. The fight was terrible especially regarding the autonomy of the local church but, even if the atheist regime won at the denominational leadership level, the members of churches did not fully accept the changes. Immediately after the fall of the communist regime the Open Brethren restored the biblical principle of the autonomy of the local church. The Brethren churches could apply the Bible as they understood it because the Post-Communist State ensured the freedom of religion.

Keywords: Bible, Open Brethren Denomination, church leadership, autonomy, freedom

1. Introduction

The Christians According to the Gospel from Romania belong to the Open Brethren Movement, as they were established by missionaries that came from the Open Brethren Assemblies in Switzerland and Great Britain at the end of the 19th century.

In the Interbellum, the identity of the Brethren Denomination was already well-shaped in what concerns the church government doctrine as well, which observed the biblical principles applied in the correspondent churches in Europe. During the Interbellum the State tried to gain control over the

[†] An early Romanian version of this article was published in *Jurnalul Libertatii de Conștiinta*, Editura Universitara, Bucharest, 2013.

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religious phenomenon, but without the Communist brutality. Due to the fact that the Christians reacted promptly to the interferences of the authorities, the doctrine about the Open Brethren Churches leadership did not undergo significant changes during the interwar period.

The Communist dictatorship acted with brutality upon the internal life of the local churches. The autonomy of the local church was a principle of church government in the Open Brethren theology that constituted in an important obstacle against the control exercised by the Communist regime over the denominations in Romania. This was due to the fact that the Communist regime, installed in Romania immediately after The Second World War, considered faith in God as a hindrance to the imposing of the Marxist – Leninist ideology to the people of Romania. Therefore, the atheist regime concentrated all its efforts to encroach upon the religious phenomenon, with the over – emphasized intention to finally inoculate all the citizens with the materialistic worldview.

After the persecution and the brutal intervention of the totalitarian State, and after many years of opposition, the local church leadership underwent some changes, and the Ecclesiology of the Open Brethren churches had been affected by the interferences of the authorities in the internal life of the churches. In the post-Communism society, established after the events in December 1989, the Brethren restored the local church autonomy.

The following study will firstly analyze the autonomy of the local churches during the Interbellum, then the changes that took place in the doctrine of church government during Communism and, in the end, the coming back to the church leading principles specific to the Open Brethren Denomination, which was possible since 1990, in the circumstances of the new religious freedom offered by the democracy installed in Romania.

2. The local church autonomy in the Interbellum

The local Brethren Church leadership in the Interbellum was a congregational one, following many biblical principles. Among these, one of the principles that protected mostly the churches from the interferences of the State was the local church autonomy.

In the Open Brethren doctrine, the autonomy of the local church was a fundamental one, because the Brethren rejected the confessional organization and emphasized the spiritual life of the local church. Dr. Roger Schiff, a researcher of the Brethren Movement, explains this distinct characteristic of the Brethren: “A vigorous anti-denominationalism had been inherited from the earliest years of the movement and took the form of the rejection of all denominational labels, any centralized administration and all formal denominational structures, such as ordained ministry” [1].

In Romania, the Open Brethren Churches kept the principle of the local church autonomy, but they also collaborated, avoiding the independence of one community from the other sister-churches. In the book *Cine sunt crestinii*

după Evanghelie? (*Who are the Christians According to the Gospel?*) there is a succinct, but comprehensive definition of autonomy: “the autonomy is the self-governing of the local church, in the context of co-participation with the other churches” [2].

The collaboration of the local churches is freely established, without any other organization to constrict it. It is only the result of the fact that the local churches belong to the same spiritual organism, the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is the universal Church formed by all the Christians all over the Earth, of all times, since the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, until the Saviour’s return.

The autonomy of the local church was sustained in front of the State authorities in the Interbellum. Thus, in the *Memorial* in 1930, through which the Open Brethren made their fundamental doctrines known to the State, it is written: “Each assembly is led through itself. The assemblies are connected by Christian love, the same faith and teaching of the Bible.” [3]

The collaboration of the local churches was done through theological conferences, during which the elders and the preachers studied the Bible, so that the local churches could have the same theology. These conferences were organized both at the national and regional level.

Another factor which maintained unity among the churches was the discrimination and the persecution which some Christians or local churches were subjected to. The acknowledging of such cases, the prayers for the persecuted and the official protests in front of the State authorities strengthened the collaboration of the churches. The denomination’s magazines had an important part in the maintaining of unity. One of the goals of the magazine *The Christian*, was established in the number form December 1929: “As it was decided at the Conference of the brethren sent by the assemblies from almost all the parts of the country – held in Ploiesti, on 6th-8th of December – we will deal in this magazine with the needs and many trials, troubles and persecutions endured by certain groups and Christian assemblies, or by some God’s children” [4].

Unity among churches was also achieved through common projects, like the financial sustaining of God’s servants, which took place at national level, too, not only at local church level.

In the Interbellum, the unity and collaboration among local churches did not twin into an ecclesiastic hierarchic structure, which could have affected the local church autonomy. This principle is promoted through the article written by Lawyer G. Goodman about the Christian freedom as an individual and as an assembly as it follows: “An assembly cannot decide for another assembly the way to be followed. An assembly has no right to excommunicate another one, or to utter any judgment on it in any case.” [5]

The authorities in the Interbellum asked the Open Brethren to have a centralized leadership, but they refused by writing in 1930 a *Memorial* addressed to the Ministry of Denominations, of Public Instruction and to the Internal Ministry, in which they sustain: “Our assemblies do not depend in any

way on any organization or religious denomination in the country or abroad” [3, p. 13].

In 1931, one of the leading teachers of the Open Brethren in Romania, Paul Perret, a Swiss missionary, explained to the Christians: “The Word of God does not mention anywhere any organization, union or federation of the assemblies. Such an organization or union cannot exist without a central authority, a thing with is not in agreement with God’s Word, as it may rob the freedom and responsibility of the local church, thus preventing its full development. Even more, such an organization will have to take over, sooner or later, certain responsibilities which, the Lord himself and Alone, as Head of the Church, can carry out. Therefore, dear brothers, let us cling unto our Lord as our most precious gift.” [6]

The denominational organizing during the Interbellum was minimal, meant only to serve the local churches, not to control them. At national level, some brothers were elected for the ‘Delegation’, with the role to represent the local churches before the State authorities, not to lead them.

3. The restriction of the local church autonomy in the Communist period

The Communist regime, once installed in Romania, issued the normative regulations through which it tried to limit and control the religious life of the denominations.

The *Presidential Commission Report for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania* reveals the strategy of the Communist authorities to subordinate the denominations to the ‘Communist ideal’: “From the very autumn of 1944, in the context of the artificial release of the political crisis, under the pretext of the clearing of the institutions of fascists, certain normative regulations were adopted in order to perform this clearing. There were established certain commissions in order to check the ecclesiastic institutions (the clergymen belonging to different denominations were assimilated by the clerk system, being remunerated by the State budget).” [Raportul Comisiei Prezidențiale pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România, București, 2006, 447, online at: http://www.corneliu-coposu.ro/u/m/raport_final_cadcr.pdf]

The Open Brethren Denomination did not accept the remuneration of the State for the Church servants. Thus, the Open Brethren Churches could not be easily controlled by the Communist regime.

The fact that Lord Jesus Christ is Head of the Church, the local church autonomy and the form of leadership through the elders – a specific characteristic of the Open Brethren – all were a form of protection against the interference of the Communist State in the internal life of the Churches. Therefore, the authorities exercised great pressures on the Open Brethren Denomination in order to change the form of church leadership.

The interference of the Communist State in the religious life can be seen in Decree no. 177 in 1948, article no. 14, which obliges the denominations to submit to the Ministry of Denominations “for examination and acknowledgement” their statutes of organizing and functioning [Monitorul Oficial, 178 (1948), online at <http://www.monitoruljuridic.ro/act/decret-nr-177-din-4-august-1948-pentru-regimul-general-al-cultelor-religioase-emitent-ministerul-cultelor-publicat-n-47.html>]. After certain hot negotiations, the authorities approved the Open Brethren *Statute*, through Decree no. 1203 on the 14th of November 1950.

The Communist authorities could not fight directly with the doctrine that Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, but they restricted the local church autonomy, so this principle could not be kept intact. Even from the first article of the *Statute*, the local churches had to obtain a license from the ‘Union of the Open Brethren Assemblies’: “The Community (the local Assembly) functions within the Denomination and for this the Union will endorse – with the approval of the Ministry of Denominations – a valid license in front of any administrative or judicial authority of any degree” [*Statutul Cultului Crestin după Evanghelie din Republica Populară Română*, Decree 1203/1950, Art. 1].

The principle of local church autonomy is still protected by article no. 8 from the *Statute*: “The communities (local Assemblies) do not depend in any way on any organization or religious denomination in the country or abroad”. In article no. 2 the leadership of the Union is named ‘Delegation’, with a representing role like in the Interbellum: “The Delegation represents the entire Open Brethren Denomination before the State authorities, as well as before the judicial instances of any degree. The Delegation represents and sustains before the State authorities, the interests of the communities (local Assemblies) all over the country whenever this will be needed.”

These stipulations that forwarded the autonomy were thwarted by the imposing in the *Statute* of certain ecclesiastic positions, which could not be implemented by the government in the Interbellum. Therefore, the relationship among local churches was restricted, as only certain persons, called ‘Gospel preachers’ had the permissions to speak in the churches from the other regions: “The Gospel preachers who serve in other communities (local Assemblies) than the home one, an identity ticket is granted by the Union, with the approval of the Ministry of Denominations, which is fully valid in front of any kind of authority” [Decree 1203/1950, Art. 1].

Obviously, many Gospel preachers did exactly what the name of the position suggests – they preached the Gospel. Unfortunately, there were some who became the instrument through which the atheist State interfered in the internal life of the local churches.

The Communist authorities did not agree with most of the stipulations in this *Statute*, but until 1950 the Communist regime did not succeed in controlling the Open Brethren churches; this is why the *Statute* approved through Decree 1203/1950 contains stipulations which protect the biblical

principles of church government. The State continued to exercise pressures on the churches through ‘the authorized agents’ (*împuterniciti* in Romanian) for the denominations who were hired by the Ministry of Denominations, later twined into the State Secretariat for the Denominations. These authorized agents violated even the minimal religious rights offered by the Romanian Constitution, the laws, and the denominations’ statutes. They had as a purpose the implanting of the Communist Party’s policy within the churches.

The Open Brethren opposed the interference of the authorized agents in the internal life of the churches, being based on both the Bible’s authority and on the approved *Statute*. Such a situation was signalled by the Delegation through Letter no. 57 on the 19th of July 1952, addressed to the Ministry of Denominations, through which the freedom to organize monthly conferences in each region of the country was required, as it had been done for tens of years in the Open Brethren Churches: “We have acknowledged lately that the authorized agent of the Ministry of Denominations and the Police (*Militia*) have forbidden these meetings, especially the ones in Ploiesti, Iasi and the Negresti Region in Iasi, having as a reason the fact that they have not been mentioned in the statute [...]. Will you take into consideration the fact that these assemblies do not break any law and please ask your authorized agents and the local authorities to allow complete freedom of religious practice in the aforementioned assemblies.” [Delegatia, Arhiva SSC, Dosar 96, Vol. 4, 1952, 10]

The Minister of Denominations at that time, V. Pogăceanu, answered to the Union through Letter no. 599 on the 23rd of October 1952, justifying the fact that the monthly assemblies have “economic unfavorable results in the country’s thriving process and is in total contradiction with the effort working people make for the increase of productivity” [V. Pogăceanu, Arhiva SSC, Dosar 96, Vol. 4, 1952, 8]. With such fallacious, incredible reasons, the Communist regime brutally interfered in the internal life of churches, The Open Brethren had opposed such abuses for years but, gradually, these meetings took place less.

The struggle between the denomination leadership and the State inspectors for religions can be seen from the representatives’ request Gheorghe Oprea and Marin Ionescu in 1951, through which they were asking the Ministry of Denominations: “According to our Biblical principle, we want all the members of our denomination to be allowed, without any restriction, to travel from one location to another, in order to visit an assembly or more, so that they may rejoice in their fellowship. Beside these ones, who will have a special licence, the other members of the denomination will be allowed to visit other assemblies every time they feel free and have the pleasure to.” [Delegatia, Arhiva SSC, Dosar 96, Vol. 9, 1952, 24]

In return, the chief inspector H. Fârserotu requested the Minister of Denominations to allow only one preacher for each region, and at the national level only 20 preachers. Even more, the chief inspector’s request was not to allow among these preachers two Christian leaders, as they were people who

could not be easily intimidated by the Communist authorities abuses: “We mention that Giuvelea Gheorghe from Ploiesti must not be one of them and neither Moisescu Florea from Bucharest, as they are inappropriate elements” [H. Fârserotu, Arhiva SSC, Dosar 96, Vol. 9, 1952, 19]. The sharp conflict between the denomination leadership and the State authorities had continued for a long period of time.

This is why the Open Brethren were considered “the most disobedient denomination”, as is shown in the Report belonging to the authorized agent from Iasi, referring to one of Gheorghe Oprea’s visit in the Iasi Region, in 1953: “I personally got in contact with him, but he was very cautious during our conversation, which was not be seen at a denomination leader and mostly at the leader of the most insubordinate denomination” [Împuternicit, Arhiva SSC, Dosar 96, Vol. 2a, 1953, 1].

The conflict had worsened, so that the Ministry representatives labelled the Open Brethren leadership as it follows: “they willingly have an attitude of isolation and enmity toward our regime” [Directia de Studii, Arhiva SSC, Dosar 96, Vol. 2b, 1953]. The authorities stated: “Unlike the other Neo-Protestant denominations, the Open Brethren declare that they have no central leadership and claim that all their communities are independently led, their only standard being the Bible, and ‘the delegation’ as a superior leading authority has the role of maintaining the relationship between the communities and the State authorities” [Directia de Studii, Arhiva SSC, Dosar 103, Vol. 13, 1953, 6].

This is the reason why they proposed: “The replacing of the current leadership and, in case in might have no results, we will proceed, in accordance with article 13 from the Law concerning the denominations, to denying of the denomination right to function” [Directia de Studii, Arhiva SSC, Dosar 103, Vol. 13, 1953, 6]. As this measure was not adopted in the following months, the Study Direction from the Ministry of Denominations established on the 3rd of March 1953 a plan through which the Open Brethren churches would undergo gradual restrictions, until their subjection. The steps would be the following: (1) “The delegation of this denomination must be summoned in order to examine together its wrong position”; if they do not submit (2) “they will talk with the National Board of Elders (a consultative organ of the delegation”); if the attitude does not change (3) “there will be elections for the general conference, in order to establish another board of elders and another delegation, consisting in appropriate elements; if this does not occur (4) “there will be a temporary suspending of the so-called central forum, and the communities will have the possibility to function like independent units, under the supervision and control of the authorized agents.” [Directia de Studii, Arhiva SSC, Dosar 96, Vol. 2b, 1953, 4-5]

The Communist authorities enforced their established plan. As the Delegation at that time did not cooperate, they called the National Board of Elders which named other Christians in the Delegation. But the hope of the authorities to find ‘more appropriate elements’ did not fulfil.

Furthermore, the State interference to change the Delegation in 1954 was regarded by the Christians as a serious violation of the religious freedom. General inspector Mireanu Constantin, interpellated by the Open Brethren in Ploiesti, complained about the fact that believers “see in Oprea a martyr who expresses the denomination’s wishes and they agree with his position” [C. Mireanu, *Arhiva SSC*, Dosar 96, Vol. 3, 1954, 31].

The newly-elected Christians as leaders of the denomination did not prove to be more cooperative, the authorities asked the National Board of Elders to name other ones. This successive process of resignations and elections lasted more years, due to the fact that the ones elected as leaders of the denomination observed more strictly the principle of local churches autonomy than their predecessors.

Such an example is Gheorghe Giuvelea, who observed the Biblical principles and opposed the abusive interferences of the atheist State. He was elected in the Delegation to replace Alexandru Panaitescu, but the authorities realised later that his influence was far greater in the sense of restoring the Open Brethren principles. An authorized agent reported: „Giuvelea does not agree with the State specifications, that is, the delegation must take the lead (he sticks to the principle that each assembly and each believer must have no other leader on earth but Jesus Christ in Heaven) and this is why there have been certain uprisings within the assemblies and the denomination [...]. He misbehaves and has a negative attitude toward our regime; Giuvelea has had a bad influence on Alexandru Panaitescu.” [Îndrumător, *Arhiva SSC*, Dosar 96, Vol. 4, 1958, 34]

Giuvelea stated at the meeting of the National Board of Elders that: “Preaching is specific to our denomination and we will not give it up, even if we may be called illegal” [Îndrumător, *Arhiva SSC*, Dosar 96, Vol. 4, 1958, 33]. This thing infuriated the authorized agent, who requested that Giuvelea should be taken out of the Delegation, and of the National Board of Elders. These occurred at the general Conference of the open Brethren Denomination, on the 8th of November 1958 [Biroul Conferintei, *Arhiva SSC*, Dosar 96, Vol. 4, 1958, 44–49].

By successive replacement, at the mid-sixties, the authorities succeeded in having enough representatives in the Delegation and the National Board of Elders, who submitted to the atheist regime more than to the Bible.

In 1969, the Delegation even wrote a project through which the denomination leadership had the right to intervene in the life of the local churches, country to the Open Brethren’s principles. The project stated: “All the communities of the denomination will receive guidance, regulations, dispositions of any kind, only from the Communities’ Union, [...] the only central leading organ [...]. Any guidance, regulations or supervision from other communities or persons beside the statutory Delegation of the Union must not be taken into consideration.” [Delegatia, *Arhiva BCEAP*, Dosar Proiect Regulament si Conventii Culte, 7]

Thus ‘the unique leading organ’ became the controlling instrument of the totalitarian regime over the local churches, the denomination having an episcopal kind of government, very convenient to the Communist Party. Hopefully, this project was not fully implemented in the Open Brethren Denomination, and the *Statute* in 1950 remained valid.

4. The restoration of the local church autonomy in the Post-Communist period

The democratic regime installed after the events in December 1989 did not hasten to devise a new denomination law and, for 16 years, the denominations have functioned based on Decree no.177 in 1948. The important thing was the fact that the authorities respected the religious freedom, so that the denominations could govern themselves according to their creeds. The new Law of denominations, no. 489/2006, published in the *Official Monitor* Part 1, no. 11, on the 8th of January 2007, promulgated the religious freedom in conformity with the European Union norms.

The General Conference of the Open Brethren churches occurred in Ploiesti, on the 2nd of January 1990, just a few days after the Revolution. Among the measures that were taken, there was also the decision to elaborate a new organizing and functioning statute. The coming back to the local church autonomy was the central issue of the discussion; this is the reason why it was mentioned more times in the view of the State decisions. Thus, point 3 decides: “Among other stipulations the statute will also mention that the local assemblies are self-governing, but they belong to a Brethren Country Union” [*Proces Verbal Conferința Generală din 2 ianuarie 1990*, Arhiva UCE, Nr.1 din 03.01.1990]

At point 6, the Conference recommends the local churches to solve “their problems autonomously”. The restoration of the biblical autonomy of the local church is established at point 6 also, by changing the denominational structure: “the old structures such as: delegation, National Board of Elders, the person appointed responsible of the local churches, the Gospel preachers that own a license etc. are eliminated. There is no pretension of reaching a powerful position in the Assemblies any longer, but solely a matter of serving based on biblical principles.” [*Proces Verbal Conferința Generală din 2 ianuarie 1990*] In this way, the elders must minister in the church by spiritual serving, not by coercion.

The denomination’s statute has periodically revised after 1990, until its present format, but the local church autonomy has already been stated as a fundamental principle. In the *Statute for the organizing and functioning of the Open Brethren Churches in Romania* it has been mentioned that: “The local church is autonomous, within the terms of its Statement of Faith and of the present statute. It is equal in status with the other local churches and may join them in the view of commonly-shared projects.” [7]

Even if a certain denominational organisation has been maintained, it has no longer been an ecclesiastic hierarchic one, through which the totalitarian State interfered in the internal life of the local churches, but it has become an organisation which has served the local churches to accomplish common projects, which have surpassed the individual capacity of every church. The denomination's President, Silviu Cioatã, wrote in an article published in 1994 about the role of the denominational organization: "The Union still remain only to: establish the relationships among the assemblies; [...] warn against the dangers of false doctrines which loom over the assemblies, so that Christians might avoid them [...]; organize a biblical form of schooling, one meant to observe our brothers' beliefs; create a better way of representing the assemblies before State authorities and other denominations or external Brethren Missions. Today, the Union no longer orders, it serves the brothers in Christ instead." [8]

The same approach can be found in the present *Statute*, article no. 67: "The Open Brethren Union is the national representative organ of the Open Brethren Denomination interests and a means of serving and assisting the Open Brethren churches and the other parts of the denomination. The Union is not an ecclesiastic hierarchy."

The volunteer association of the local churches favours both the community autonomy and the unity among churches. It is important to notice that the New Testament church government principle have been applied only at the level of the local church, which is both an organisation and a spiritual body. The democratic means, such as periodic elections, appointing representatives, only according with the number of members, the vote, were applied only for the national and regional structures of the denomination. This is due to the fact that the Union and the Zone Community are only organisations means to serve the local churches, not spiritual entities also.

This approach has protected the local churches from both the intrusion of democracy in their organising system and from any hierarchy structure above them.

5. Conclusions

The Open Brethren churches from Romania have applied the leadership principles specific to the evangelical family they came from, the Brethren Movement. Among these principles, the local church autonomy has been well-established doctrines in the Open Brethren theology. During the Interbellum, this principle protected the local churches from the interferences of the State which, through general regulations and normative acts tried to periodically alter the Open Brethren church governing.

During the Communist period, the totalitarian State brutally interfered in the local church life, managing to restrict the local church autonomy. This happened after many years of ruthless struggles. The form of Open Brethren church leadership was changed from congregationalism into episcopal type.

Happily, this change occurred only at the national and local organizing and leading level. The mentality of the members of the churches could not be altered, this is why, immediately after the events in December 1989, the local church autonomy was restored.

The unity among the churches has been maintained, and the biblical principles were restored in the church governing doctrine and practice of the Open Brethren from Romania.

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