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# HUMAN RIGHTS WITHIN A LARGELY ORTHODOX POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRY<sup>†</sup>

**Daniel Maris\***

*Institutul Teologic Baptist, Str. Berzei Nr. 29, Sector 1, Bucuresti, Romania*

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## **Abstract**

David Little has noted that one of the main problems we face worldwide is that under the impulses of nationalism, or related political and economical interests, governments ally themselves with one from among a wide diversity of ethnic, religious, racial or cultural groups within a society, and give special favours and advantages to the members of that group over all others. As a result the potential for conflict and bloodshed is palpable. This would explain why members of minorities reach out, regardless of culture or country, for human rights protection against religious and other forms of discrimination. Therefore an attempt is made in this paper to discuss human rights and responsibilities within a largely Orthodox post communist country. The main focus of discussion will be on the Evangelical churches and human rights movement during the communist regime and human rights and religious freedom in a pluralist post communist society.

*Keywords:* religious freedom, communism, evangelicals, orthodox, pluralism

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## **1. Introduction**

Following a period of 50 years of state atheism, different Churches from Eastern Europe have achieved an unusual record: on the one hand is the respectability conferred by dissidence and on the other hand the heavy burden of compromise and co-operation with former atheistic governments. The post communist period just added new accents to the previous situation. To mention only a very obvious one: the religious intolerance which has culminated with the so called Yugoslavian crisis. The exclusivist attitude of some religious groups in those countries where they are a majority and the aggressiveness of fundamentalism reopened the discussion about the place and the role of the Church in society [1]. The main focus of the discussion will be on the Evangelical churches and human rights movement during the communist regime and their ‘responsibility’ in regard to human rights in a pluralistic world.

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\* E-mail: marisdaniel@gmail.com

In order to better understand the complex realities of the post communist society in Romania, the first part of this paper will analyse some of the important aspects of the Christian's experience under the Communism within the larger context of the pattern Church-State relations during the Communism. In the second part of this paper a special attention will be given to the important changes in the Romanian post communist society with particular reference to Evangelicals and human rights.

## **2. Historical and religious background of the Evangelical Churches in Romania**

Romania is a country with a variety of ethnic cultures and Christian traditions [2]. In fact since 1918, when Transylvania, part of Austro-Hungarian Empire had joined with the independent state of Romania, to create modern Romania, a significant number of non Romanian Catholics and Protestants brought their own ethnic cultures and Christian traditions into Romanian society. To mention just the two biggest groups: *The Latin Rite Catholic Church* divided by language and nationality: 75% Hungarian, 21% German, and only a tiny minority Romanian. These various groups had little contact and little in common, a factor skilfully exploited by the communists after 1948 [3]. The second important group, was formed by the *Eastern Rite Catholic Church* (1.5 million). This was stronger, more compact (concentrated in Transylvania), and homogeneous (completely Romanian) [3].

With the arrival of the missions from abroad, new forms of Protestantism gained a foothold and an increasing number of Romanians became attracted to more Evangelical forms of worship and two different developments emerged. The first one included: Baptists, Pentecostals, and Adventists. The second one was an Evangelical revival movement within the Orthodox Church, known as the Lord's Army. Tom Keppler writing about this movement noticed that this is a unique movement, in that it is indigenous to Romania and it is a completely lay movement, although it was founded by an Orthodox priest, Iosif Trifa, in 1922 [4]. The Baptist Church has been active in Romania since the 1850 and has grown rapidly during the present century.

## **3. Human rights and religious freedom during the communist regime in Romania**

During the communist period, the traditional privileges of the Churches arising from the preferential position in culture and society were taken away [5]. Consequently the Church became marginal to society. Although most of the people did not make a pronounced act of officially leaving the Church, they remained on the periphery, and were no longer an active part of the congregations.

The Christian faith remained an ultimate spiritual resource on which resistance to moral capitulation was possible for those who lived in Romania under the most repressive communist regime. The so called re-education experiences, inspired from Stalinist ideology, regarding common law criminals, who having lost social status, are made to realise that their only salvation lies in becoming members of Communist party. These re-education experiences were adopted by the Romanian communist authorities in order to create the new man [1, p. 41]. As someone noticed, re-education was combined through collective labour, but in its Romanian adaptation, re-education was effected through the application of continual physical torture combined with brainwashing [6]. It is well known that the aim of these kinds of experiences was to replace the victim's identity with that of their executioners. But this is not an excuse for those who became 'robots' and tortured others. [6, p. 42]. Janice Brown writing about these dehumanizing experiments under communism speaks about Pitesti, the Romanian prison selected by the Soviet Union for the ultimate in dehumanizing experiments under communism. "Between 1948 and 1952 a thousand teenagers, the elite of their generation were so terribly brainwashed that only two did not break. Three committed suicide; the rest became robots, ready to torture others mercilessly." [3, p. 207]

It was suggested that for most Romanians, the reign of terror left them ready to comply with unsatisfactory religious arrangements. They became docile and submissive in order to avoid trouble. An Eastern rite Catholic priest wrote: "After so many years of physical and moral maltreatment, fear became an integral part of our nature" [3, p. 207]. A Romanian psychiatrist suggested that the very well known concept of 'autism' could be a useful analogy to understand the socio-political condition of Romanians under the communism. He pointed out that, the 1947-1964 period had coincided with the ideological creation of the so called *homo sovieticus*, that was 'the new man' set up by force, using police terror, propaganda, cultural dogmatism, and russification including the introduction of a new Slavicized orthography [A. Popescu, *Belief and Dissent in Post-Ceausescu Romania: Implication of Petre Tutea's Mystical Theology in Post communist years*, Introductory Paper for the seminar on Theology and Social Sciences, Oxford, 1997, 2]. Under the Ceausescu dictatorship the whole country became an ideological prison, under the control of the Secret Police.

### ***3.1. The evangelical believers and human rights movement during the communist regime***

One of the most important questions raised up during the communism was: Should Christians allow their religion to be 'locked up' in the private sphere? This was the wish of the most East European governments where a communist party was in power.

Luke Bretherton pointed out that under the communist regime the only institutions that were allowed to exist were organised by the state [L. Bretherton, *The other Europe*, in *Light & Salt*, vol. 8, 1996]. The State supervised the Church through the Department of Cults. As a consequence the Churches were forced to accept restrictions imposed by the state and confined themselves to a pastoral work without interfering in political and social matters. But this view did not seem to be generally held either by Christian leaders or by the simple believers. However the biggest problem in that time was: 'how could the Church work out the connection between religious and secular, without identifying the sacred with secular or spiritual salvation with social reform as in theology of liberation?'

Under the rule of patriarch Justinian, the Orthodox Church has found little difficulty in accommodating itself to the aims of communist society. He ruled the Orthodox Church for 29 years almost from the time when the communist party took control of the country in 1947. His speeches, writings, and sermons were collected and published in a series entitled *Social Apostolate (Apostolat Social)*. The focal point of the Social Apostolate was the service. The Church should cease being preoccupied with itself, its status, its rights, and go to serve the mankind in the name of Christ. It has been suggested that the early statements of Justinian indicated that his launching of the social apostolate, with its implications, stemmed from deep conviction and not simply from a desire to please the communists. Alan Scarfe, who wrote about this aspect, suggested that the leader of the Orthodox Church, and the author of the social apostolate, believed profoundly in the possibilities of the Church if she took the social aspects of socialism seriously and recognised in them principles of Christ teaching [A. Scarfe, *Interview with the patriarch Justinian*, in *Current Developments in Eastern European Countries*, Geneva, 1961, 21-22]. But the real value of that commitment was severely tested by the state confrontation in 1958 which resulted in the arrest of 1500 Orthodox priests, monks and laymen alongside members of other religious groups [7]. As a result, some confrontation with the authorities became inevitable. Therefore most will suggest that there were groups of active dissenters who rejected most, if not at all, of the state control on religion and restrictions on religious activity and who often criticised the morality of the ruling ideology and even the legitimacy of the regime.

The contribution of Evangelical believers to the human rights movement has been a very important one. It worth noticing here, that the Evangelical believers have not only campaigned for religious rights but for the civil rights in general. As Brown points out, these Churches had gained legal status in 1948 but the Department of Cults put them in a difficult position regarding freedom and evangelisation [3, p. 211].

Philip Walters writing on this topic had noticed that in Romania the responsibility for promoting human rights has fallen more and more on Evangelical believers, particularly after the 27<sup>th</sup> Congress of Baptist Churches in Bucharest in 1977 [8]. Among the discussed matters was the fining of

Baptists under one article of the criminal code, as vandals and anarchists. It was noticed that never before, did a Church dared to speak so openly in the communist Romania and the other Churches were emboldened by the example. In a document circulated immediately after the Congress, three areas of discrimination were mentioned: education, employment, the right of association [9].

In April 1978, the Romanian Baptists formed the *Christian Committee for Defences of Religious Freedom and freedom of Conscience* (ALRC - the Romanian name of the committee). Meanwhile, although the Evangelicals were severely disadvantaged, and the range of activities opened to the Churches was very narrow, they attracted a lot of young people. In general, many religious activities which would be regarded as normal in the West were either illegal or actively discouraged: evangelising, educating children in religion, producing and circulating Christian literature or doing social work. At the same time the whole system of education came under pressure: teachers who were practising believers had been forced to 'choose between the job or the Church'.

Writing about different forms of evangelism and responsibility of the Church under repression, the well-known evangelical writer John Stott pointed out three temptations the Church faced: *to conform* (tailoring the Gospel to the prevailing ideology), *to fight* (losing its identity by resorting to worldly weapons), or *to withdraw* (denying its mission, betraying its calling and losing its relevance) [10]. Stott points out some important guidelines for evangelism and social responsibility in such circumstances.

Firstly he identified the principle of *consistency* which underlines that "above all the Church must be true to its Lord, a Christ centred community established the credibility of its witness" [10, p. 207]. Secondly he identified the principle of *love* which works even when public worship and witness are forbidden. ***Love helped these Churches under repression to see even in those who persecuted them persons for whom Christ died.*** Love helped them to see that the person is more important than the ideology which he or she holds [10, p. 207]. *Witness* is the third principle highlighted by Stott. The main idea in this case is that even under persecution, God opens spaces for his people to live and share the Gospel especially in personal evangelism [10, p. 208].

The fourth important guideline for the Church under repression taking social responsibility is *solidarity*. When the Church has to act, especially in some kind of protest, members of the body of Christ must stand together [10, p. 209].

Somehow all these principles were well illustrated in the life of the Evangelical churches during the communism. It was during the 1980s when the impetus of religious life passed from protest to pastoral work. But, as Brown noticed, in the mid-eighties, even the pastoral work has brought its problems into conflict with both Church and authorities [3, p. 214]. When the communist government learned that it could not wipe the religion, it decided to make life as unpleasant as possible for believers, particularly those who protest

or evangelise. The Church appointments and transfers depended on the Department of Cults. The clergy had to file routine reports on all their activities. *They were required for example to report any visitors in the Church and any conversions* [11].

Yet I agree with Lochman when he states that religious freedom was not a lost cause under the communism. He takes into account three important considerations: the sociological, the anthropological and theological one. Sociologically, however, even a totalitarian system may not succeed in totally occupying all the spheres of freedom in society [11, p. 15]. In other words the human beings never fit completely into programmed patterns of behaviour. The anthropological consideration encapsulates the idea that citizens are never merely objects; they are also subjects of their individual and political history of freedom. Finally the theological consideration highlights the idea of God's grace; freedom of faith lives *Coram Deo* with regard to God. Here is a dimension of freedom which cannot be guaranteed by any political system, but for that very reason cannot be taken either.

### ***3.2. Human rights and religious freedom in a pluralist post communist society***

The theme of religious freedom arises not only out of its political ideological condition but also out of its deeper human theological dimension. Adamatia Polis, writing about Eastern Orthodoxy and human rights comes to the conclusion that the entire complex of civil and political rights cannot be grounded in Orthodoxy [12]. Moreover the Orthodox theologian Christos Yanaras clearly states: "the protection of human rights became the symbol of modern Western civilization" [13]. On the other hand, the same author argues that the understanding and respect for the principle of the individual rights protection, which was introduced by the Western Modernity, also exists in the Orthodox literature [13, p. 83]. But as Yanaras points out, the radical innovation of modernity lies in the fact that modernity made rights 'human', that is common to all humans, without discrimination [13, p. 83].

David Little discussing about the importance of human rights in society, points out the widely belief that human rights are the outgrowth of the Enlightenment. Accordingly, human rights are interpreted as being militantly secularist, as well as excessively individualistic. I agree with him when he asserts this would explain why many religious communities, including some members of the Orthodox tradition either reject or are deeply sceptical of the language and ideals of human rights [14]. But as the same author correctly noticed that "the whole idea of an individual right as something 'natural', something inborn and claimable by all human beings, whatever their religion, language, culture or place of birth, is much older than the Enlightenment. It found its origins in the Christian Middle Ages, as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century." [14]

The Church in post communist Romania found itself in a new position. It was not any more a Church under repression. Therefore it was important to learn how to adapt itself to the new social context. Lochman is right when he expresses that a theologian has a clear vocation in the radically changed condition. The same author makes a very good point again when he suggests that the theological pilgrimage had to pay attention to the new climate and changed landscape. He makes us aware that there are lessons we had learned from the past within the communist context which can sharpen our eyes for the dangers and promises of the new situation, in helping us not to become uncritically captive to the new society and culture [5, p. viii]. It is truth within the new social context that the memory of yesterday can strengthen the Christian hope today. Furthermore this is important for the Eastern Orthodox approach towards human rights movements because the Orthodox Church have remained silent in the face of repressive actions by the State.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The new post communist context affected, in some ways, the way in which the Church lives and proclaim the faith. There are differences to be seen in Orthodox and Evangelical approach to the new context. On the one hand the Orthodox compromise with the state leaves it in a difficult position. On the other hand, the Evangelical separation of Church and state provide more opportunities.

However, in this move to a pluralistic society, the Evangelicals, as a minority in Romania, could become an element of reconciliation by developing a community of acceptance and love. But they have to be open themselves to an ecumenical dialogue with the Church of the majority if they realise that there is a crying need in Romanian society, for Christians to speak and act in society with a common voice. In a post communist society marked by a return to 'pre modern tribalism', a valid Christian answer should be a community of love. This is a serious reason for the Christian churches to embrace and promote human rights in Romania.

Finally but not the least, looking into the future, the problems of proselytism and the treatment of the new religious movements and religious minorities are some particularly sensitive areas of current human rights concern that affect the Christian churches directly. Therefore identifying some of the remaining areas of tension, and discussing the points at which different rights seem to conflict each other (the right of free religion expression and the right to change one's religion, the right of privacy and the right to protection against coercive intrusion, in matters of religion or belief), could stimulate Christians within a pluralist post communist society to reflect on the importance of the human rights and religious freedom and make an important contribution to the discussions about human rights around the world.

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