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# BAPTISTS IN ROMANIA DURING THE GOVERNMENT OF PATRIARCH CRISTEA THE ATTITUDE OF GREAT BRITAIN

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## Abstract

On 14<sup>th</sup> June 1938, while the Orthodox patriarch Miron Cristea was premier of Romania, the Ministry of Arts and Culture issued a decision that religious associations were no longer permitted to function unless they met ministry conditions including a minimal number of faithful. The decision, effective from 15<sup>th</sup> December, sparked criticism from international religious organizations. News about the persecution of Romanian Baptists had a strong impact in Great Britain, but the Foreign Office was not formally involved in solving this problem, content to mediate international contacts between representatives of religious organizations on the one hand and Romanian officials on the other.

*Keywords:* ministerial decision, Romanian Orthodox Church, Baptist churches, Foreign Office

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## 1. Introduction

On 10<sup>th</sup> February 1938, when Miron Cristea, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church was nearly 70 years old, he accepted the office of prime minister from King Carol II. This established the royal dictatorship in Romania which lasted until September 1940. The government established in early February 1938 was heterogeneously composed of centre-rightists who answered the king's call both from a desire to restore order in the country and from personal and opportunistic reasons [1]. The clumsy attempt to bring together the spiritual and the temporal power by making the patriarch the prime minister position arose from a desire to give greater cohesion to governance, during a rather troubled time in Romanian political life. Then as now, Romania was known as a predominantly Orthodox country.

Throughout the patriarch's premiership from 10<sup>th</sup> February 1938 until his death on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1939, his government faced problems originating in 1918, when the Old Kingdom annexed provinces with a long history of separate development. Much though we may wish to neglect this aspect, Transylvania, Bessarabia and Bukovina had been part of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian

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Empires, and their histories left lasting effects on the demographic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of interwar Romania. The government led by the patriarch also inherited this situation [2].

Thus the first census after the establishment of Greater Romania, conducted in 1930, found that a significant number of the population did not belong to the Romanian Orthodox Church but to minority religions – 27.2%, of which most were in Transylvania. If the majority of the population in Old Kingdom Romania were Orthodox before the start of the First World War, after 1918 when Romania incorporated important provinces, the ratio between the Orthodox and the confessional and religious minorities was 3:1 [3].

## **2. The situation of the Baptists in the period before the Cristea government**

Article 7 of the 1923 Constitution stated that “the difference of religious beliefs and faiths, originating in ethnicity and language, are no obstacle to the acquisition and exercise of civil and political rights in Romania”, which meant that all Romanian citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation, had political rights. However, Article 22 of the same constitution stated that the Orthodox Christian Church and the Greek Catholic Church were considered Romanian Churches, that the former was dominant in the Romanian state, while the second took precedence over other religions [4]. The Romanian population was thereby divided into three categories of religious affiliation. The first category included the Orthodox, as they belonged to a Church that the constitution considered both Romanian and dominant in Romania. The second category included the Greek Catholics, recognized as Romanian but not dominant. The third category included all other religions recognized by the Romanian state, which the authors of the 1923 fundamental law did not even trouble to list. They were considered neither Romanian nor dominant, which put them at a clear disadvantage against the Romanian Orthodox Church or the Greek Catholic Church.

Baptists in Romania, in 1938 numbered between 65,000 and 70,000, had hoped throughout the interwar period to attain the status of ‘recognized religion’. At that time, the Act of 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1928 on denominations recognized only the Orthodox Church, whose organization was established by a special law. The following seven denominations were added to the Orthodox Church: the Romanian Greek Catholic cult (Uniate), the Catholic rite (Latin, Ruthenian Greek and Armenian), the Reformed (Calvinist) Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Unitarianism, the Armenian Gregorian Church, Judaism (with its various rites) and Islam [5]. Under the same law, the Baptist community in Romania obtained only the status of ‘religious association’, totally dependent on decisions which the Ministry of Arts and Culture could make at any time. As A.D.M. Ross mentioned in a Foreign Office minute, the Bucharest government failed to fulfil its promise made in 1935 to extend the recognition of the Baptist community in Transylvania throughout the country [Public Record Office, Foreign Office, London, coll. 371 Romania, file no. 22454/1938, p. 300, *Minute by A.D.M. Ross on the Baptist minority in Romania*, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1938].

Moreover, a decision of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, published in *Monitorul oficial* (the Official Gazette), Part I, no. 93 of 21<sup>st</sup> April 1937, prohibited the existence of several religious associations in Romania, while others were allowed to operate provided that they had a minimal number of faithful [6]. Although Baptists in Romania fell into the second category, they had little reasons to feel cheerful, as application of the provision would have closed most churches. The ministerial decision had not yet been applied, as the Romanian authorities had decided that the matter should be considered by a special commission, to the great satisfaction of religious minorities in Romania, including the Baptists.

### **3. Decision no. 26,208 of 14<sup>th</sup> June 1938**

#### ***3.1. The provisions of the decision***

The satisfaction generated by the non-enforcement of the decision of April 1937 did not last long, since during the first months of 1938 the head of the Foreign Office in London was informed about a long series of abuses and persecutions to which Baptists in Romania were subject, which deeply grieved him [*Minute by A.D.M. Ross on the Baptist minority in Romania*]. In addition Sir Reginald Hoare, the Plenipotentiary Minister of Great Britain in Bucharest, reported that British diplomats were well aware that as long as Miron Cristea was premier of Romania, prospects for religious minorities were not bright and that London already knew about the Patriarch's religious intransigence [Public Record Office. Foreign Office, London, coll. 371 Romania, file no. 22454/1938, p. 8, *Telegram from Sir Reginald Hoare to Maurice Ingram, 7<sup>th</sup> April 1938*].

Foreign Office concern was justified by the fact that Great Britain, along with the United States of America, France, Italy and Japan, was a guarantor of the Minorities Treaty signed in Paris on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1919 by representatives of the guarantor powers and by General Constantin Coandă as plenipotentiary for King Ferdinand I. Wishing for "reliable guarantees of liberty and justice" both for Old Kingdom residents and for those in the recently annexed territories, the treaty, with its 17 articles, sought to shelter the ethnic and religious minorities in Romania from possible abuses from the central and local authorities. Since 1937 it was easy to observe that there had been violations of Article 2, providing that "All inhabitants of Romania shall be entitled to the free exercise, whether public or private, of any creed, religion or belief, whose practices are not inconsistent with public order and public morals" [7]. The obvious violations aroused much indignation among British officials.

If the Orthodox majority generally approved of the historical religions recognized at that time in Romania, since the Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists largely corresponded to ethnic minorities, the same could not be said of newer, ethnically heterogeneous groups. Consequently, since the beginning of April 1938, the *Universul* newspaper campaigned for the suspension of activities of all religious associations, specifically targeting the Baptists and Adventists as

‘sects’ that contributed nothing to the national welfare, international in their attitude and aims [Universul, 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 1938]. A desire to intensify national feeling and the tendency to restrict foreign influences as much as possible led the government to publish decision no. 26,208 in the *Monitorul oficial* of 14<sup>th</sup> June 1938, regulating the existence and activity of religious associations [6, vol. 26, p. 905-911].

Like the decision of 1937 issued by the Ministry of Arts and Culture but not yet applied, that of 1938 named more religious associations that were ‘absolutely prohibited’. Further, penal code provisions were set down for ritual practices that were believed to contravene the state’s laws, institutions, morals and public order. The following associations were completely prohibited: the Millenarian Associations (International Association of Bible Students, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Society of Bibles and Tracts), Pentecostalists, Quakers, the Apostolic Church of God, Penitents, Nazarenes, Reformist Adventists, Reapers, the ‘Hliști’, the Innocents and the Stilists.

The Baptist denomination was not in fact prohibited by the decision of June 1938. However, Baptists, along with other permitted religious associations, had to comply with the new provisions of the Ministry of Arts and Culture without which, as noted in Chapter II of the decision, no religious group could operate. Thus to obtain recognition, the law required an association submit a statement by at least 100 members, male Romanian citizens, adults, heads of family, with civil and political rights, setting out their religious doctrine, ritual practices and organizational status. Authorizing a local religious association required that a group of at least 20 believers meet the same conditions and submit a request to the ministry, providing more accurate information about their association. Under Chapter III, Article 11, any recognized local religious association depended henceforth directly on the ministry, while Article 14 prohibited religious proselytizing altogether for both Churches and recognized religious associations. The Romanian government tendency to control, but also their desire to reduce the people’s links with the outside world to the minimum possible, is reflected in Article 15 denying any religious associations reliance on any similar organization abroad, the only links permitted arising from uniformity of doctrine and religious ritual. Moreover, foreign citizens who were members of similar organizations in other countries were not allowed to participate in the discussions and decisions of associations of Romania and were only allowed to attend the religious associations’ congresses as guests, by prior approval of the Ministry of Arts and Culture. The transitional provisions specified that religious associations recognized by the ministry through previous decisions, including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists and Evangelists, could continue their activity, provided they conform to the stipulations of the decision no later than six months from its publication in *Monitorul oficial*. Otherwise, these associations’ houses of worship would be closed and their members criminalised.

On 14<sup>th</sup> December 1938, with only one day to the expiry of the six months, the Ministry of Arts and Culture issued application instructions for religious associations. The ministry also established that for recognition of an

association, the minimum number of householders was to be 50, not 100 as stated in the decision in June, provided they lived in the same place or in neighbouring places.

### **3.2. Public opinion in Great Britain and among religious organizations**

By the early twentieth century, relations between the Anglican Church and the Romanian Orthodox Church were sporadic, first formal relations being established only during the First World War. The Romanian Orthodox-Anglican Conference held in Bucharest between 1<sup>st</sup> January 1<sup>st</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> June 1935 had an important role in bringing the two Churches closer, with important doctrinal agreements between Anglican and Romanian Orthodox representatives [8]. Patriarch Miron Cristea's visit to England in the summer of 1936 strengthened relations between the two Churches; he was received by the King, the Archbishop of Canterbury, by the Bishop of London and by other personalities of literary, scientific and political life in Great Britain [9].

As D.N. Ciotori mentioned in a report to the State Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest, the Romanian Orthodox Church's ties to the Anglican Church had not only ecclesiastical importance but were seen as an excellent way to strengthen cultural relations between Romania and Great Britain. In addition the Anglican Church had a major role in Anglo-Saxon public life as it guided British subjects not only in Christian morals but also in everyday political and practical life. Moreover, in the same report, Ciotori saw the Anglican Church as one of the strongest supporters Romania could have in the Anglo-Saxon world, while Catholics were thought to be waging "a bitter and carefully crafted war" against the Romanian government in Transylvania [The Romanian National Archives, Department of the Central Historical Archives, Bucharest, coll. National Propaganda Ministry, Propaganda, file no. 1809, p. 28-29, *Report by D.N. Ciotori to Alexandru Lapadatu, president of the Romanian Academy*, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1937]. The perfection of Romanian national unity, a process begun in 1918, was far from complete, and politicians in Bucharest did not neglect the support the Anglican Church could offer.

In the second half of 1938, the Romanian government decision on religious associations threatened to cancel all the steps taken in rapprochement between the two Churches. Especially because the head of the government in Bucharest was none other than the Romanian Orthodox patriarch who had been received in London, and during whose reign the conference of June 1935 took place. Indeed, as a result of public criticism, it was not unlikely that the intolerance shown by the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1938 would prompt the Archbishop of Canterbury to abandon the idea of closer cooperation.

There were many attempts to ease the fate of Romanian Baptists. Several religious organizations in Britain, including the Anglican Church, joined the campaign, as did the major daily newspapers and, not least, members of the Foreign Office and of the British Legation in Bucharest. Letters and memoranda

were sent to the King of Romania, to the Patriarch, to the Foreign Minister and to members of the Romanian Legation in London.

J.H. Rushbrooke, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), representing the Baptist communion throughout the world and numbering a million and a quarter members and adherents in Britain, had developed a strong support for the Baptist cause in Romania, both by appeals to senior Foreign Office officials and by visits to Romania. Rushbrooke considered that in no state in the world, except the Soviet Union, were interference in and restrictions on religious life so numerous, and he intervened on behalf of the BWA from the spring of 1938 to draw attention to the problems. During his visit to Romania in early 1937, Rushbrooke met Patriarch Miron Cristea, who was largely able to put an end to the difficulties, being both patriarch and prime minister.

Because the audience lasted only 40 minutes, while the patriarch adopted the well-known device of hardly allowing Rushbrooke to open his mouth and giving evasive answers to the few questions the British interlocutor managed to ask, Rushbrooke later wrote a letter that was sent to Cristea through the British Legation. In this document, dated 5<sup>th</sup> April 1938, the author drew attention to the situation from the establishment of Greater Romania until 1938: the arbitrary closure of Baptist churches, Baptist children's persecution in public schools, the refusal to register the transfer of congregants to the Baptist Church, and cases of force [Public Record Office, Foreign Office, London, coll. 371 Romania, file no. 22454/1938, p. 14-17, *Letter from J.H. Rushbrooke to the Patriarch of Romania*, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1938]. All these actions were completely unjustified, he pointed, because Baptists of all countries, including Romania, were loyal citizens who fulfilled all state duties, including military service. In addition, their so-called dependence on international organizations, which bothered the Romanian authorities to the extent that they were considered 'defective citizens', was not reflected in reality, given that Baptist denominations in all countries were strictly autonomous. The Baptist World Alliance was a purely fraternal organization based on a common faith, with no political purpose.

On 10<sup>th</sup> October 1938, when the provisions of the decision had not yet been implemented, the Executive Committee of the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches adopted a resolution that was sent to Patriarch Miron Cristea, the plenipotentiary minister of Romania in London, and Lord Halifax, the head of the Foreign Office. It is worth noting that this national council represented all the evangelical free churches, meaning nearly half of the worshipping population in England, among which there were members of both Houses of Parliament. Concern over decision no. 26,208 led the committee to ask the Romanian Patriarch to cancel this decree, to give the Baptist Church all the freedom it needed, and to grant it the status of "recognized religion" [Public Record Office, Foreign Office, London, coll. 371 Romania, file no. 22454/1938, p. 130-132, *Resolution passed by the Executive Committee of the National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches, regarding religious freedom in Romania*].

In early November a letter was sent to King Carol II on behalf of the Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches of England, through the Romanian Legation in London. Besides sending good wishes to the sovereign in Bucharest, the authors expressed their deep concern for the situation in Romania in terms of religious freedom, and requested an audience during the official visit that Carol was planning to London between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of November 1938. The authors, officially representing the Methodist Church, the Congregational Union of England and Wales, the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, the Presbyterian Church of England and the Moravian Church, specified from the beginning that they were not motivated by political purposes. They also stated that as foreigners they might not issue any legal claim against the Romanian ruler, their only interest in the situation created in Romania by the publication of decision no. 26,208 being purely religious [Public Record Office, Foreign Office, London, coll. 371 Romania, file no. 22455/1938, p. 170-173, *Religious minorities in Romania*].

News of the Baptist situation in Romania had a strong impact on public opinion in Great Britain. All charges against them (that they were Communists, that they were opposed to military service, that they promoted disorder in the country, that they were disloyal to the Throne) were broken down and proved to be completely unfounded. The Baptists held no doctrine or dogma and supported no practice antagonistic to state interests, or conflicting with public morals and national safety. The *Manchester Guardian*, along with other large newspapers, informed readers about what was happening in Romania. Decision no. 26,208 was seen as driven by the Orthodox Church and a purely ecclesiastical act, given that the Prime Minister was also the Patriarch and the Minister of Arts and Culture, who signed the decree, was the Orthodox Bishop Nicolae Colan, who said he would resign before permitting a single Baptist church to be reopened without fulfilling the decree of June 1938. According to the *Guardian*, Carol II gave his consent to this ministerial decision to get the support of the Romanian Orthodox Church, given that not long ago he had established a royal dictatorship [*Baptists of Rumania. Appeal to Carol*, *Manchester Guardian*, 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1938].

The Romanian Orthodox Church's action contravened agreements at the Oxford Conference of World Faiths in July 1937, where a delegation from the Romanian Orthodox Church had also taken part, officially constituted by Patriarch Miron Cristea himself. The report written after the conference, established, among other things, the following essential conditions, necessary to the Church's fulfilment of its primary duty: "freedom of public and private worship, preaching and teaching," as well as "freedom of Christian service and missionary activity, both home and foreign." The same report stated, "all Churches should renounce the use of the coercive power of the State in matters of religion" [Public Record Office, Foreign Office, London, coll. 371 Romania, file no. 22455/1938, p. 209-212, *Letter addressed by Sidney M. Berry (Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches of England) to the King of Romania*, 17<sup>th</sup> November 1938]. In addition the decision by the Cristea government

stipulating a minimum number of householders for recognizing a religious association embodied the entirely false principle that the freedom and rights of Christian churches depended on their numerical strength.

An article entitled *Roaming in Rumania* by T.G. Dunning, published in *The Baptist Times* of 20<sup>th</sup> October 1938, gave new information on the situation of religious minorities in Romania. It emphasized that although the government decision was expected to enter into force only in December, it had already been implemented at the time of the publication. Romanian authorities had carried out numerous arrests and fifty Baptist ministers were in prison. Like the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Baptist Times* considered the Romanian Orthodox Church as behind all these state actions, which contravened what was established at Oxford in 1937. Besides the fact that the Romanian authorities and Orthodox clergy unfairly accused Baptists of disloyalty to the state, another important charge was of proselytizing, and the Baptist Church was considered invasive in Romania. It must however be noted that forbidding evangelism meant undermining the rights of a Christian church, Christian conscience and genuine religious freedom as established at Oxford. In interwar Romania, however, the concept of proselytism had been largely misused to become a means to suppress liberty of preaching, while the Romanian Orthodox Church feared losing its parishioners to Baptism. The *Baptist Times* argued that Baptists in Romania did not want to steal sheep from another fold, but to preach the Gospel and call the sinner to repentance and salvation, which could only make God happy [T.G. Dunning, *Roaming in Rumania*, *The Baptist Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1938].

### **3.3. *The attitude of British officials***

The Foreign Office sought to support the religious organizations' claims denouncing abuses against Baptists in Romania, given that hundreds of thousands Baptists lived in Britain, in 1938, including the Minister of Labour, Ernest Brown. However, British officials were reluctant to engage formally for fear of being accused of intervening in another state's internal affairs and considered that the problem could be solved through the League of Nations. Sir Reginald Hoare, the British Plenipotentiary Minister, a close friend of J.H. Rushbrooke, intervened since 1935 with King Carol II and with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, sending numerous reports to London on the persecution endured by Baptists in Romania. The Foreign Office senior officials, aware of how difficult it would be to intervene in another state to protect a religious minority, but also of the complicated international situation generated by Germany's rise in Europe, preferred to adopt an attitude of 'hardness of hearts'. However, they were aware of the abuses committed in contravention of the Protection of Minorities Treaty signed in 1919.

Although the Baptist World Alliance repeatedly asked for Carol II's state visit to Great Britain to be delayed, or for their representatives to be invited to one or more ceremonies during the visit, the Foreign Office did not respond to these requests. This was due firstly to the fact that in late 1938 and early 1939

Britain was keen to maintain its influence in south-eastern Europe while the economic and political presence of the Third Reich was becoming more and more evident in this part of Europe. Secondly, officials in London were aware that the BWA was nothing but a religious organization, like many others in England, and inviting its representatives to a state visit would do nothing but produce discrimination in favour of British Baptists [Public Record Office, Foreign Office, London, coll. 371 Romania, file no. 22455/1938, p. 163-166; file no. 22454, p. 311, *Baptist minority in Romania*].

#### 4. Conclusions

According to the decision in June, of the approximately 1,600 Romanian Baptist churches, most did not meet the requirements to continue functioning. In many parts of Romania, however, even before the decision of June 1938 entered into force, authorities had sealed Baptist churches, confiscated sums found and made an inventory of the patrimony. In some places, as a sign of protest, or to avoid conflict with the authorities, Romanian Baptists themselves had closed their churches before 15<sup>th</sup> December 1938, the day the decree was intended to be applied. Many Baptists were beaten, fined and imprisoned for between six and twelve months, while their political rights were suspended. Often, those arrested were marched on foot from village to village under police escort, which only increased their humiliation. The statements by religious organizations in Britain had no concrete results and the situation remained unchanged until the end of the Cristea government on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1939, the day the Patriarch died. The international situation becoming more complicated, the outbreak of the Second World War, the loss by the Romanian state of some important territories to the Soviet Union, Hungary and Bulgaria have done nothing but worsen even more the fate of religious minorities in Romania in the years that followed.

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