
ECUMENISM AND COMMUNISM

PRIESTS VIRGIL GHEORGHIU AND ANDRÉ SCRIMA

IN THE DOSSIERS OF THE SECURITATE

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Abstract

Based on documents found in the former Securitate Archive of Bucharest, but also on the works of Virgil Gheorghiu and André Scrima, both Orthodox priests, writers and personalities with a cultural impact, and on publications dedicated to them, the authors of this study try to emphasise the way in which their work in the ecumenical field was reflected in the documents of the Securitate. The purpose is to investigate whether the agents who were in charge of surveillance were interested in this topic, which particular aspects were of interest or made them intensify their work, and how they interacted with the activity of the aforementioned priests in the ecumenical field. The study will present two relevant examples (case studies) and will contribute to the understanding of the way in which the Romanian communist regime regarded ecumenism and tried to use it to its advantage.

Keywords: securitate, France, Andre Scrima, 25th hour, Ecumenical Patriarch

1. Introduction

The interest of the Romanian Securitate in religion and in the activity of the Orthodox Church has already been approached in various recent or old studies and articles by several scholars, from the theological, historical or sociological field [1-3]. They all tackled the complex relationship between the two institutions, the compromises, which were made, and the topics, which the former surveillance institution considered to be the most interesting in relation to this area. However, there are still some aspects that could be highlighted or approached in order to bring into attention new elements and give a broader picture of the subject.

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We will therefore approach one such element in the present research, whose keywords are also mentioned in the title, namely ecumenism and communism. As already mentioned the Romanian Communist regime understood the role of the Ecumenical Movement as a promotion tool and in most situations it used it to show to the West how open-minded, open to dialogue and democratic it was [4]. Those who had previously been under surveillance were often sent to attend the World Council of Churches meetings in order to convey a pre-defined message. Issues arose when other Romanians, who were in exile, also attended those events. On many of those occasions, there were arguments and discussions, which actually ruined the image the regime was trying to convey.

Among the most important Romanian Orthodox personalities in exile, we must mention Father André Scrima (1925-2000) and Father Virgil Gheorghiu (1916-1991). Both of them were well-known cultural personalities. The former was a theologian who attended the Second Vatican Council and was a reputed professor in the Western space, while the latter was the most translated Romanian writer of his century, his masterpiece *The 25th Hour* [5] being currently translated into 33 languages and being made into a movie starring Anthony Quinn [6].

Both priests had been under the attention of the Securitate. Father Gheorghiu is already the subject of a book that highlights certain documents reflecting his conflict with Monica Lovinescu [7] and of several studies and articles. Articles have also been written about Father Scrima on the topic of his relation with the Securitate [7, 8]. Together with unpublished documents, they will constitute the main sources of the present research, where we aim to see which aspects raised the interest of the Securitate in relation to ecumenism and how the regime worked in order to monitor or influence the work of the two priests.

2. Ecumenism and communism: priests Virgil Gheorghiu and Andre Scrima in the dossiers of the Securitate

2.1. General remarks

As already mentioned in the present research, both Father Gheorghiu and Father Scrima had been under the attention of the Romanian Securitate. While the former has six surveillance dossiers dedicated to him in the former Securitate Archives [ACNSAS, *M. F. I./Neamț*, rola 356; ACNSAS, *Fond Serviciul de Informații Externe (SIE)*, dosar nr. 4408/2; ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, dosar nr. 4408; ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, dosar nr. 349; ACNSAS, *Fond Informativ*, cota I -185086, Dosar Gheorghiu Virgil; ACNSAS, *Fond Informativ*, cota I -234624, Dosar Gheorghiu Virgil], the latter has only three [ACNSAS, *Fond informativ*, file no0005468, vol. I; ACNSAS, *Fond informativ*, file no. 0005468, vol. II; ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, file no. 2601]. Father Virgil was under surveillance from

the very advent of communism in Romania, due to the fact that, as a Romanian diplomat, he refused to return to his country and decided to stay initially in Austria, then in Germany and later in France. Father Scrima started to get attention from the Securitate in the beginning of the sixth decade of the twentieth century, due to his relationship with the *Burning Brush* spiritual movement, which had an important activity in Bucharest in the beginning of Communism [9, 10]. Later, on the occasion of his departure to Benares, where he was allowed to go in 1956 in order to prepare his PhD thesis, the interest of the Securitate grew and remained high, given his refusal to return home.

All dossiers contain biographical presentations which focus on the social origin of the two priests, the situation of their families (in order to use it as an instrument of pressure in case it would be necessary), different opinions about their work and activity, and reviews of their works, translations of their publications abroad, echoes of their activity or references coming from different people living abroad. Often, people with specific tasks were sent to visit them both in France and in different places where they had conferences, held lectures or did pilgrimages, or went on excursions. Gheorghiu's situation was more complicated, as different agents undercover were regularly sent to survey him, some of them being part of the family. There was also a spy who pretended to be his relative, while in fact he had the mission to assassinate him. The writer himself mentioned this in *The Spy* book [11].

Another general remark is related to the preparation of those sent to monitor the priests' work and attitude towards communism. In Gheorghiu's case, there were some situations when writers and literary critics were sent to talk to him, which resulted in reports that contained relevant theological information, although they were not very objective. Nonetheless, most of those sent to write about the two priests were ill prepared. This explains why their notes do not go deep into the investigation of their ideas, or do not contain a proper and pertinent evaluation of their theological background. Instead, they often make artificial connexions with social life, meant to simply demonstrate that they were against the regime, without offering solid arguments. The same holds true for translations [ACNSAS, *Fond informativ*, file no0005468, vol. I, p. 107-108], where the theological meaning of complex aspects, such as the ones tackled by writers like Scrima, are in most cases neglected.

2.2. *Ecumenism and communism*

After touching upon the main aspects that define the general context of the relation between the Securitate and ecumenism, we consider it important to also speak about the way in which the attitude of the two priests and writers as to the ecumenical field is reflected in the dossiers of the Securitate.

Their visible attitude against the Romanian regime, which was reflected in some of the interviews Father Scrima gave and in Gheorghiu's books, made the repressive organs more willing to put them under surveillance. Moreover, the

impact they had on Western society also determined the Securitate to pay more attention to their work. Therefore, the presence of Father Scrima at the Second Vatican Council [12] and his contributions to journals like *Istina* from Paris [13-15] caused the agents to read these journals and the chronicles of the event, to find out more about their content. The same with Father Gheorghiu; the Securitate was even aware that he had been invited to hold a conference in Brussels [11, f. 183] in the beginning of 1951 [7, p. 29] at the invitation of the Catholic Church.

The Securitate was interested in what they wrote, in their contacts abroad and in Romania, among others. For example, they intercepted the letters Father Scrima sent to Father Benedict Ghiuș [ACNSAS, *Fond informativ*, file no0005468, vol. I, f. 353-364] shortly after his departure to Benares, where he described the ecumenical realities he encountered there and the letters sent to Father Dumitru Stăniloae, in which he also asked the Romanian Theologian [ACNSAS, *Fond informativ*, file no0005468, vol. I, f. 105] for a copy of the *Philokalia* collection, which he had translated into Romanian. They also monitored his relationship with patriarch Justinian Marina and knew he received money and materials from him after he left Romania. For instance, a note from the archives of the Securitate mentioned the fact that, on July 20th, 1957, he published an interview in *La Reforme* and that Bartholomew Anania dedicated a review to this interview in the *Ortodoxia* journal of the Romanian Patriarchate [ACNSAS, *Fond informativ*, file no0005468, vol. I, f. 54].

The Securitate also translated and summarised his articles published in French journals, noticing the references he made to politics. Such an example is Father Scrima's dialogue with Olivier Clément, which is summarised by the informant in one of their reports, emphasising the fact that he had presented the real situation of the Romanian Orthodox Church in communist times. That the dialogue was clearly to the disadvantage of the Bucharest regime and of their credibility [ACNSAS, *Fond informativ*, file no0005468, vol. I, f. 58-63].

If in certain articles, the political aspect was visible and it could be understood from their content, in others it comes only as a misinterpretation, or a forced summary of the texts. What is also interesting is the fact that while the articles which are not very deep from the theological point of view have detailed presentations, the ones having a specific theological approach are in many situations just attached to the dossier. The same happens with letters. For example, shortly after his arrival to Benares, Scrima sent a letter to Father Benedict Ghiuș, who was working at that time at the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate and, just like him, had been imprisoned by the communists. After reading the long letter, the note of the informant mentioned the article published by Olivier Clément [ACNSAS, *Fond informativ*, file no0005468, vol. I, f. 352], although the letter did not contain any reference to this. In addition, the evaluation the Romanian Orthodox monk made as to the Protestant and Catholic space, which was relevant for his later discourse in the ecumenical field, was omitted. The future Archimandrite of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the

adviser of the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras [ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, file no. 2601, f. 88], considered one of the most relevant voices of ecumenism in the 20th century, mentioned the following in relation to his staying in Sweden, before going to France, Greece and later to India, to Benares: “Then I arrived to Switzerland. Now I can recapitulate, somewhat, the Swiss moment and try to find a place for it that I believe is providential: the contact with authenticity. As before - before and after - by God’s will we met the peaks from the first moment, which is not unimportant (and which once again had been arranged through small and unsuspected details, meetings, previous contacts). I had a view of the Protestant universe in its entirety and in its depth: I acknowledged first hand its problems, aspirations, tendencies, needs, difficulties, nostalgias, prospects (I stop) (which of course involved meetings, discussions, conferences, debates, I was quite busy, thank God!, without tiring, I gave academic lectures, I ‘fought’ weighted and Orthodox, when I had to). I could present my observations like this: on the one hand an interesting attempt (without further clarification) of contemporary Protestantism to [have] constituted a body of tradition in matters of doctrine, on a necessarily philosophical (though not classical-philosophical) basis, because the liturgical or experimental-mystical basis is missing. It is in any case a genuine moment, a first stage. ‘Philosophy’ uses that personalistic and introspective (an overcoming of Cartesianism towards [the] interior, which is not without enriching the problematic field of Philosophy and general culture - and perhaps also the issue of the anthropology of religious experience). Usually and unfortunately - the representatives of this tendency are somewhat less willing to observe and take up the themes of the authentic Christian tradition, which they encounter in the Orthodox and the Roman Church: this I believe is also because the act itself - or the work - of creation under certain conditions absorbs you and makes you shut down. (K. Barth is less celebrated today, and up close he can be likable, but woefully inadequate.) The other trend, this organic and deepened one of an overcoming of the old Protestant base in the sense of accepting the Liturgy, the sacramental life and exceptionally, the integral monastic life. This is the case of the community from Taizé (near Cluny), where the Rule of Saint Benedict (custom, vows), the Orthodox liturgy, liturgical singing was adopted, adapting of course.”

Father Scrima’s attitude at ecumenical meetings was also an important topic for the Securitate. While in aspects which were relevant for geopolitics, such as his attitude in the Palestinian matter [ACNSAS, *Fond informativ*, file no. 0005468, vol. II, f. 34-36], they even tried to discredit him, in matters of Theology or political theology, they were only interested in the subject and even agreed with him, although his opinion was against the one held by the person officially delegated to attend the meeting. Such an example is the discussion that took place in Rhodos, when Father Scrima had an argument with Metropolitan Justin Moisescu, the future Patriarch: “Scrima explained to the informant that he had tried twice to make amends for the bad impression he had made at the congresses in Enugu, Nigeria and Rodhos, Greece. Metropolitan Moisescu

concluded that the population of Transylvania was mostly Hungarian.” [ACNSAS, *Fond informativ*, file no. 0005468, vol. II, f. 3]

The case of Father Gheorghiu was rather similar. The Securitate focused mostly on his literary career, due to the prominence he gained after publishing *The 25th Hour* novel. This is the reason why an important part of his surveillance dossiers contains references to this aspect. However, his relationship with important people from the French ecumenical space was also a subject of interest. Consequently, in 1965, the Securitate wrote to pastor Henri Verneuil [ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, dosar nr. 4408, f. 16], with whom the Romanian priest who at that time was the parish priest of the Romanian community of Paris had a very good relationship, asking him to try to convince Gheorghiu to visit Romania. The authorities hoped that his visit could help them to increase their credibility in the West and at the same time to discredit the writer, who was known for his anti-communist vision, in front of those who approved of his activities. As one could expect, they succeed nothing as the priest understood that it was a trap prepared for him by the representatives of the country he considered to be a ‘penitentiary republic’ because of the communist regime [11, p. 70].

The failure of the operation determined the Regime to try to get in contact with Charles Westphal, a Lutheran pastor who at that time was the head of the Ecumenical Movement in France, in an attempt to use him as a pressure factor. He was recommended by one of the informant, who, in one of his notes, wrote the following about his relationship with Gheorghiu: “Westphal has a good opinion of Gheorghiu. He stated that he is a serious man, he enjoys prestige and appreciation, he is a good priest, but first of all he is a writer.” [ACNSAS, *Fond informativ*, file no. 0005468, vol. II, p. 25]

Unsurprisingly, this attempt also failed, because Westphal refused any form of cooperation with the communists.

Therefore, the authorities also tried to carry out other actions meant to discredit him in front of his faithful and to transform him into a man of the regime. Despite the fact that, at a certain point, the writer did seem to get closer to the Romanian authorities and was even willing to have a dialogue with them, Gheorghiu did not change his attitude in relation to Communism and did not cease to criticise it both in his books and at public meetings such as those organised by the World Council of Churches in Geneva. This was mentioned in notes such as the following: “Relations with Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu worsened again as a result of the negative attitude of the Patriarchate and the Department of Cults, which, citing the fact that within the World Council of Churches in Geneva, C[onstantin] V[irgil] Gheorghiu did not have a position consistent with his quality as a priest of the Romanian Orthodox Church, I don’t keep in touch with him, I don’t answer his letters, etc. Gheorghiu explained to the liaison officer that if he had taken the attitude required by the Patriarchate in Geneva, his passage under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church would not have had any effect.” [ACNSAS, *Fond SIE*, dosar nr. 4408/2, p. 191]

The writer felt that the authorities' willingness to have a dialogue was in fact an attempt to bring him closer to the Regime and to transform him into a collaborator, which is why he refused any other visit to the Romanian Embassy in France starting from 1966.

3. Conclusions

As it can be seen in the information we have provide in the present research, the Romanian communist regime was interested both in ecumenism, which they perceived as a potential tool in their propagandistic work and as an instrument in presenting themselves as transparent and democratic, and in the attitude of the representatives of the exile, such as Father Gheorghiu and Father Scrima. When the two came into contact, the interest of the regime arose. That is why they translated and read the two priests' interviews, studies and books and attended the conferences they gave in various centres and universities, or payed subscriptions to the journals were they were invited to write, and translated their content for their superiors, or tried to summarise texts and emphasise their political polarisation when there was one or the fact that it was missing, thus artificially highlighting this aspect. Unfortunately, as one can tell, they were incapable of understanding and investigating the deep roots of the two priests' work in the ecumenical field and they were missing important aspects which defined their later attitude. In few words, we could say that the ecumenical attitude of Father Gheorghiu and Father Scrima constituted an important topic for the communist regime only when it was related to political matters. Consequently, they tried to monitor their relationships with important personalities from the ecumenical space of that time, such as Pastor Charles Westphal, in order to use them as factors of pressure or to discredit the life and work of those who were disagreeing with the attitude of the regime and criticised it in their interviews and works. At the same time, the regime tried to block their access to platforms of dialogue such as the World Council of Churches, which they did not succeed, as the two priests were relevant cultural personalities and the members of the World Council of Churches did not support the regime.

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