

THE EASTER BALL INTERACTION BETWEEN SECULARISM AND RELIGION IN ROMANIA

by Liviu Vanau

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During the Pope's annual Spiritual Exercises in 1996, Archbishop Cristoph Schoenborn of Vienna, who led the week of prayer in the old Matilde Chapel of the Pontifical Palace, pointed out that "Satan and the demons are back." Rock music, drugs and the obsession with sex were presented as *satanic works*. Of course, for the Pope, the Cardinals and the prelates of the Roman curia, and even for the journalists who commented on Archbishop Schoenborn's sermon, there was hardly anything new in this message. However, identifying these issues so specifically, the Austrian prelate suggested some *intolerable* conditions in the world, yet to be attended from a religious perspective.

Obviously, during the last thirty years one can find many examples of less severe Catholic judgments or approaches dealing with similar secular controversial behavior (not to mention some of the Protestant churches that provided far more elastic positions in regard to these controversies). Therefore, one could consider Archbishop Schoenborn's position as a backlash, a return to square one. This would be, I think, a mistake; no matter how far the diplomatic strategies based on the modern concept of tolerance would go in establishing common denominators between religion and non-religion, the crisis is always at hand. In these circumstances, a major role is played by the necessity of defining the *intolerable*.

I would suggest a perspective offered by the Islamic scholar Mohammed Arkoun: "of all that reduces, delays, diverts, compromises, suppresses, denies the *optimal development* of the human person in the reasonable respect of his/her humanistic vocation and of his/her social, cultural, ecological and cosmic environment is *intolerable*." To this Dr. Arkoun adds an essential characteristic: "very often the intolerable is something that the spirit strongly refuses, but which continues to assert itself on the level of the facts, almost as if to demonstrate the radical incapacity of man to overcome his contradictions."

As subject of investigation, for some reason, the notion of *optimal development* seems to be less offensive than that of intolerable because it is related to a constructive ideal. Nevertheless, the interaction of the religious and secular ideas of optimal development is the subject of many tensions.

Before considering any of the specific cases of the Romanian society, let us mention here an Orthodox idea of the future "new style of life," the equivalent and framework of the optimal development, as seen by Olivier Clement, a mixture

of humility and pride, of asceticism and fantasy: the *gaia scienza* in the Holy Spirit. A royal style, but without forgetting that the king always need a buffoon; trying to be Christian in a world as it is now and as it will be, requires a certain "madness". . . . A style which will simultaneously demand the ardor of a knight of life and the impertinent intuition of an artist. A style which will be enunciate by a renewed encounter of the man and the woman: not one based on subordination, not based on complementarity, but of two solitudes and two plenitudes, two ways of living in the world and making possible its existence, within a new Song of Songs.

If we could consider the position of this famous French theologian as representative of the state-of-the-art in Orthodox contemporary thinking, we will find the Romanian Orthodox Church (hereafter ROC) unable to respond to such challenges. Prior to following the patterns of any type of *gaia scienza*, the ROC has yet to solve many issues related with its position in the Romanian society. Some of these issues are pretty mundane, such as the restitution of

the Greek-Catholic churches, confiscated by the Stalinist Romanian regime in 1948 and given to ROC. Far from considering the invasion of the sects and new religious movements as a pastoral challenge, ROC is only vehemently pointing out the danger of this process.

The Romanian panorama of solutions for optimal developments is quite confusing. The transition of the society is an ideal environment for any theory or model waiting to be experimented. From a political and economical perspective, capitalism, socialism and a wide range of *the third alternative* solutions are suggested by political parties and NGOS. It would be rather difficult to name here the actual status of the society; for now, we could consider it a pseudo-democracy in an unpredictable transition. The orientation towards the guidelines of the European Community may be considered quite important as an element of future-related political strategies but only at a theoretical level. In fact, the import of such political ideas as those believed to represent the last and durable achievements of the future continental policy is just another subject of interminable debates over their viability. Various forms of nationalism and authoritarianism are preferred as immediate solutions; we can not determine here whether these are valid solutions for the Romanian transition.

However, the spiritual foundations of the future (to use here Olivier Clement's expression) are in an even more spectacular (yet inefficient) process of failed crystallization. To begin, fifty years of obscene domination of philosophical materialism as promoted by the Communists represented a forced process of secularization. But the advances of this process were not able to cancel completely the Christian heritage of the Romanian society. On the other hand, the spectacular revival of the religious spectrum after December 1989 arrived in the company of many signs announcing an opportunistic pseudo-marriage of the Church and the State.

There are voices, like that of Victor Neumann, suggesting that "the intercultural education is an alternative to the East European nationalism, and one of the few educational means able to prevent the nationalisms." Among the coordinates of this type of education, Neumann speaks about "creating intellectual premises which will transcend the so-called specificities." Yet, the final result of such a strategy may be very well illustrated by the preaching of Archbishop Schoenborn.

Religious Education in Schools

Among the fourteen religions legally recognized in Romania, the Romanian Orthodox Church plays undoubtedly a leading role. With more than 17,000,000 members registered at the last census, the ROC is able to exercise serious pressures over the political parties. Since Romania is a unitary national state (according to the Constitution), the ROC is willing to be considered the national Church. Its access to mass-media is generally offered by the state television channels, and campaigns supporting its interests are therefore easily organized. Introducing religion in the state school curricula was the subject of such a campaign. The Law of Education, adopted July 1995 and applied since September 1995, stipulates that religion is an obligatory discipline in the curricula of the primary education, an optional discipline in the gymnasium [high school] and a facultative discipline in the university. According to this document, "the student, with the agreement of the parents or legal tutors, will chose the religion and the confession." Although Romania has signed the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights, which includes in Article 2 of the first additional protocols the obligation of the State to "respect the right of the parents to assure the education according to their religious and philosophical convictions," there is practically no room left in the Law of Education for any non-religious or philosophical alternative. Yet, as a result of a contestation of the Article 9 of the Law of Education, the Constitutional Court decided that this article is constitutional *only if* "the convictions" of the parents or tutors are respected. Instead of a reformulation of this article, the Ministry of Education decided to set up instructions for the use of the schools, in order to avoid any problems in the future. But, at least for the academic year 1995-1996, in gymnasias, where according to the Law of Education the study of religion is optional, there were no other options. In these circumstances, the students had no problems to decide what they will study. At the university, where religion is a facultative discipline, the number of students interested in this discipline is quite low.

However, religious study in school seems to be a largely popular solution. For minorities, such as Hungarians or Germans, this is also another way (religion being a point of support for minorities) of contributing to the cultural education, to the cultivation of specificity, of the particularity of their identities. For the majority this is a way of strengthening national cohesion, but also a hope for the slow down of moral degradation (this degradation

has many roots in the last 50 years of Communism, although it is perceived as a post-revolutionary import). The Constitutional Court's remarks about the Article 9 of the Law of Education were: "the obligation of religious study as a discipline in the primary education, is justified by the obligation of the democratic and social state to guarantee human dignity, the free development of the personality within the respect for rights and liberties, the public order and the morals of the society; religion, as well as ethic, being the basic elements of the development of human personality."

When a model of optimal development is not privileged enough to get the support of the government, there is still a no man's land within the civil society where one could pursue one's way. The so-called "Balkan" solutions are at hand, namely individuals taking the law into their own hands and deciding on their own how to implement the regulations.

The Romanian Greek-Catholic Church

The story of the Romanian Uniates begins shortly before the foundation of their church, October 24, 1698 (more than one century after the Synod of Brest-Litovsk). Two years later, on September 4, 1700, the Synod of Alba-Iulia decided the union with Rome, marking a quite profound dogmatical separation with Orthodoxy. While maintaining the liturgical (except for the use of *azima*) tradition of the Byzantium, the Uniates adopted the Catholic creed, fundamentally inadmissible for the Orthodox Church (mostly in regard to papal primacy, the use of the *azima*, the existence of Purgatory, and the doctrine of filioque). There are too many controversies about the motivation for this union. Ignoring the religious motivation of the Uniates, the Orthodox always remembered them as traitors, lost in a shameful and opportunistic apostasy.

Yet, the next centuries proved that RGCC was an extremely important element in the long process of gaining national independence. It was Mgr. Iuliu Hossu, the Greek-Catholic bishop, who read, on December 1, 1918, the document proclaiming the Union of Transylvania with Romania.

At the end of the Second World War, RGCC was a flourishing Church, with 5 dioceses, 2,498 churches and 1,733 priests, 1,570,000 members, a theological academy and three seminaries, hundreds of professional secondary schools, religious orders, around twenty periodicals printed in five printing and publishing houses, etc. In 1948, two years after the liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church of Ukraine, RGCC was destroyed by the Stalinist government, supported by the Orthodox Church. All the possessions and properties of RGCC were confiscated by the State, as a result of the Decree 358/December 1, 1948, voted by the Great National Assembly. Many of these properties were given to ROC. After that ensued half of a century of cruel and systematic persecution.

Most of the hierarchies of the established religions were 'cooperating' with the Romanian Communist government (ROC become even a member of the Socialist Unity Front) for various reasons. Symptomatic for this phenomenon is the fact that even RGCC, through the voice of an underground committee, declared, in a message addressed to President Nicolae Ceausescu that "this Institution (RGCC) remain at your disposal for the realization of the great ideals that you wish with ardor to accomplish."

However, the 'best' the RGCC ever obtained during the Communist regime was a pressure campaign, after a lobby of the Orthodox Church, in favor of the union of the RGCC with the Catholic Church. RGCC refused, but even today they are expected to make 'a final choice' between Orthodoxy (their liturgies are the same) and Catholicism. Since Transylvanian Catholicism is largely associated with the Hungarian minority, the transformation of the RGCC into a 'completely' Catholic Church would be a 'confirmation' of its 'treacherous' status. Nowadays, in some of RGCC's reborn publications, one can find articles with a strong nationalist sound, not necessarily as a continuation of their traditional 'liberation theology' but most probably as a response to the statements which identifies RGCC members with the Hungarians.

The first post-socialist success of the RGCC came on December 31, 1989, just days after the Romanian Revolution, when the 9th Decree of the new provisional government canceled the 1948 destructive legislation regarding this church. The optimistic atmosphere has vanished today, after more than six years of struggle to annul the effects of the Stalinist legislation.

Two other documents were issued by the Romanian Parliament, in 1990 and in 1992. The official position of the State Secretary for the Cults is that these documents are quite valuable answers to the needs of RGCC. This is

far from being the reality. Two laws were proposed further by Senators Matei Boila and Ioan Avram Muresan. The first one suggested a tempered policy of restitution and the joint, alternate use of some churches. The Romanian Orthodox Patriarch, asked by the Romanian Senate to express his views about this project (the Boila project), was categorically against it. The same position was adopted by ROC against the second proposed law (Muresan), with more vehemence, since this project suggested a *restitutio in integrum*.

The RGCC's opinion was favorable to both these projects and emphasized that a legislative abuse cannot be considered a source of law, that a democratic government that is following an abusive regime has the obligation to restore the situation from a just perspective. No solution is available for the time being, and chances are that this will last until the ROC will agree to change its views or the state will decide to solve this matter.

Church-State Relationship

Celebrating Easter and, in general, formally being a Christian during the Communist regime was, indeed, possible to a certain extent. However, if during the whole year the youth had little chances, if any, to spend a night dancing at a disco-club or a ball, during Easter, many *Culture Houses* belonging to various Communist organizations offered this opportunity. This strategy, which was supposed to keep the next generation of builders of Communism away from the Church, contained an element of an obvious anti-Christian attack, along the line of Archbishop Schoenbron's preaching. As a dialectic reflex, many people thought that post-revolutionary Romania would be a free state and many hoped to see a revival of the faith. The flood of demagoguery--both secular and religious--but also the failures of social and economic policy of the former Communists now spectacularly turned 'democrats' brought instead a painfully tense society and a never-ending witch-hunt. The actual government's policy is marked by its alliance with a hyper-nationalistic party as the Romanian National Unity Party (Valentin Stan demonstrates that the PUNR is a hyper-nationalistic party as defined in John Mearsheimer's terms. Valentin Stan's main thesis is that as long as the Party of Social Democracy in Romania (Romanian acronym PDSR) will associate the PUNR to the government, Romania has no chance of being co-opted into the Euro-Atlantic structures. And since the integration into these structures constitutes the absolute priority of Romanian foreign policy, the PDSR's strategy of political alliances will affect Romania on a long term. Extending Valentin Stan's thesis, Gabriel Andreescu and Renate Weber, in "Nationalism and its impact upon the rule of law in Romania," point out that "Romania cannot promote the principles of the rule of law and fulfil the prerequisites for Euro-Atlantic integration merely through the PDSR's giving up the association with the PUNR in the governance" but it is compulsory that "the nationalist current inside the PDSR be also eliminated." Of course, one could easily find religious-nationalist statements completely opposed to Euro-Atlantic integration. But Romanian nationalism, as many other East European nationalisms, is a complicated mixture of ethnic pride, religious faith, devotion to the (home)land, and sharing of a tragical sense of history. The pre-War model of church-state (school) relationship (marked by a notorious right-wing extremism which went so far as to make Romania an ally of Nazi Germany) was closely related to a sort of mystical wedding. The Soviet invasion brought an abrupt change: "the divorce between the Celestial Father and our mother, our Homeland, happened when the religious teaching and the Icon of our Lord Jesus Christ were taken out from the schools and replaced with Stalin's picture." The Communist regime kept a special type of relationship with the Church (although dangerous for the spiritual foundations of the faith) based on terror, with corruption and replacement of the hierarchy. The usual argument of ROC is that its leaders managed to preserve the faith in times of atheistic propaganda, creating a *parallel Christian Romania*, to the Communist one. In the case of the Chief-Rabbi Moses Rosen, his cooperation with the regime provided the Jewish community with an unique chance to perform the *Alia*.

The Revolution (or the coup d'etat organized by Securitate, the secret service of Communist Romania) has some mystical connotations, as well. The whole world witnessed the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu on Christmas Day. Through morbid associations, this weird 'exorcism' became a sign that God turned His face towards Romania. The Parliament then installed a crucifix in its Assembly Hall ... Now, when the policy integration in the European Community requires that the law against homosexuals should be abolished, the politicians ask for advice from the Church. Then, President Ion Iliescu stated publicly (October 31, 1995, on the state television channel TVR) that the visit of Pope John Paul II to Romania (which was possible at that time) would be approved only if the Romanian Orthodox Church will agree.

Paul Mojzes observed in a study dedicated to religious human rights in post-Communist Balkan countries that

the post-socialist societies show a situation in which there are currently mixtures of Type A (monopoly of a religion society) and Type B (social preference for religions; religious toleration with religious views being at advantage and atheism at disadvantage) and the results are tensions that come with the coexistence of incompatible models within the same society.

In his analysis, Paul Mojzes also uses the concepts of a Type C society--based on near-monopoly of state atheism & decisive disadvantage for religion--and Type D society--based on pluralism and freedom for all views and practices, except those most patently destructive.

Using these coordinates in our case here, one could observe that Romania is actually internationally engaged in a process of development toward a type D society but is currently a mixture of the A, B, and C types, none of them being carried to its final social consequences. The type A is present in the lobby of the Romanian Orthodox Church and some important political parties, the B type is more likely to describe the actual pattern in some legislative initiatives and in the current life of the society, while the C type is the contribution of the former Communists who are currently holding key positions in the hierarchy of power. The efforts of the political parties to support a type D (pluralistic, multi&intercultural, etc.) society, doubled by the efforts of human rights activists, are perceived by the Church as having a Type C inclination.

The most representative type of interaction between these models is manifested by and through the Easter Ball syndrome, characterized by a parallel, ostentatious, essentially or partially opposed response given by the religious groups to the secular initiatives and strategies and vice versa (inter-ethnic relationships are also a subject of this syndrome). The EB type of reaction-provocation has a 'Balkan odor,' being an element which although it makes any dialogue between the parts impossible, usually prevents an open and constructive conflict between them. Even a destructive encounter is prevented (or is carried only half way) due to the cohesion forces of the civil society vestiges. When these cohesive forces are overtaken by the events, the conflict degenerates. The point of this strategy is to *keep alive the flame of a fundamental passion*, usually ignored or misunderstood by the *others*. A bond of hate, incompatibility, will become a sacred bond, since it certifies a state of facts whose real meaning and importance would otherwise be ignored.

Conclusions

The models of optimal development offered by the various groups of interest within the Romanian society are in conflict over fundamental issues. Since the Orthodox thinking is not founded on the idea on of a borderline between sacred and profane and the post-socialist Romanian state permitted the future restoration of the pre-War symbiosis between Church and State, it is not likely that ROC will voluntarily renounce the possibility (currently exploited) of playing a major role in Romania's social and political life. There are still instances, such as the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the World Council of Churches, the European Community, etc., that will probably bring about certain compromises, according to mutual interest.

As a counterpart, interest groups related to the state-of-the-art liberalism are currently engaged in promoting pluralism along the lines of European and global policy. Human Rights activism has a representative and active role in this area.

Many other political bodies, interested more or less in the fundamentalist-pluralist dialectic, but with a clear desire to participate in the public (economic) life of the Romanian Society, are constantly the elements of a *Pax Balcanica*, with its manifestations of extremism, intolerance, corruption, but also tolerance, hope and responsible action. It is not likely that this war of the models will end before the less efficient model will actually have too serious (destructive) an impact over the Romanian society.

Hopefully my prediction will prove to be wrong.

APPENDIX I

THE STATE

What are the duties of the Christians regarding the state?

By state we understand the "political and legal organization of a society, within a limited territory." The role of the state is to protect--through the mediation of settlements and laws based on justice--the honest life, the rights and the natural freedoms of its citizens, without any distinction between them. Also, the state should provide them with the proper means for the enlightening, the rise and the flourishing of the qualities bestowed to them by God, to ensure their security when facing their enemies from outside the boundaries of the state.

Therefore, the duty of the state is to take care of the flourishing and protection of the common good--state, to offer to all citizens the possibility to use, in times of peace, the good fruits of their striving.

From all these are derived the duties--called duties of citizenship--of Christians regarding the state. These are:

1) Patriotism--which is the love and the devotion for the homeland and its people

2) The obedience and listening to the leaders and the laws of the state, following the guidelines of the Holy Scripture: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist, have been instituted by God. Therefore, he who resists the authorities, resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement" (Rom. 13, 7). Even the Savior submitted Himself to the unjust trial of Pilate, giving an example for the obedience we should manifest to the state authorities.

3) The conscious work for the improvement of the common good, through the fulfillment of the duties related to the role of the citizen within a state, its wise participation in public affairs, tax payments, etc. The holy Apostle Paul says: "Pay all of them their dues: taxes to whom taxes are due; revenue to whom revenues is due, respect to whom respect is due; honor to whom honor is due" (Rom. 13, 7). The Savior Himself had fulfilled his duty to pay the taxes (Matthew 17, 25-27).

4) Prayers for the health of the authorities (I Tim. 2, 1-2), for the flourishing of the country and its protection from the enemies.

5) Defense of the country, with the price of life, if necessary, in times of war.