



An Ecumenical Journey in Romania: Orthodox–Protestant Relationships since 1989

In the years before 1989 there existed a flowering ecumenical movement in Eastern Europe. As this movement, however, mostly was initiated and later on was supported by the communist governments of the time, ecumenism became mistrusted and lost its good reputation. In the last fifteen years the churches have gone their own ways, often independent from the others.

But now there is change. This article relates how the relationship between the Orthodox and Protestants has developed during the last fifteen years, and how in recent times a new movement towards greater ecumenism has emerged in Romania.

I. Ecumenical History in Romania

1. The Ecumenical Movement before 1989

A research project on ecumenical relationships in Romania over the past fifteen years often evokes scepticism. One has the impression that ecumenism in the Balkans does not work. Under the title *Ecumenical Hostility*, Alexander BELOPOPSKY writes that in the new context (after the fall of communism) Orthodox–Protestant tensions became apparent in Romania, where the Protestant minority is very closely linked to the Magyar minority.¹²

¹² BELOPOPSKY Alexander, *Between Chaos and Kairos: Churches, Ecumenism and the WCC in Central and Eastern Europe 1989–2003*. *The Ecumenical Review* 2004/1. 79.

Under the Communist administration (1948–1989) theological encounters were organized between the Orthodox and Protestant traditions for twenty-five years, where the Roman Catholic church was represented by observers.

In the context of the former Eastern Bloc these Romanian conferences were unique events. They were initiated, sponsored and controlled by the government, and therefore were not free from political connotations and implications, but still these meetings should not be disparaged.

The interconfessional dialogues started in 1964, included fifty meetings, tackled one hundred and fifty items and showed high theological standards.¹³ There was a true theological ecumenical dialogue between the Romanian Orthodox church (ROC) and the Protestant churches in Romania.

There have been interchurch and intercultural relations even since the time of the Reformation. The primary aim of the conferences was getting acquainted with one another and growing together on the way to a visible Christian unity.

Secondary goals included preparing the themes of the coming meetings of CEC and WCC; and proclaiming peace by creating good relations among people and nations, which meant that matters of human rights, freedom and justice were tackled.

Visitors from abroad like Willem VISSER'T HOOFT, secretary general of WCC, Lukas VISCHER, director of Faith and Order, and the ecumenical Patriarch ATHENAGORAS confirmed this positive ecumenical spirit of the 1960s in Romania.¹⁴

These meetings can be characterized as sincere, outspoken, organised, mature and of practical importance; in Romania even a “new ecumenical theology” and a ‘new common language’ were created.¹⁵ An additional outcome was that the national contacts with the Protestants also prepared the ROC for dialogue with the Protestant churches abroad.

13 PATULEANU Constantin, *Die Begegnung der rumänischen Orthodoxie mit dem Protestantismus (16. bis 20. Jahrhundert)*, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des bilateralen theologischen Dialogs zwischen der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland und der Rumänischen Orthodoxen Kirche (1979–1998). Hamburg, 2000. 180–276.

14 PATULEANU. 275.

15 PATULEANU. 271.

The Protestant and Orthodox partners begun to understand one another's theological thinking during these conferences, although it would be wrong to idealize this—there were negative effects as well—yet the positive function must be admitted.¹⁶

2. A Changing Ecumenical Climate

Before the political changes of December 1989, the bilateral theological interactions in the country were rather well developed. Focusing more closely shows to a certain extent good relations among the two branches of Christianity in some areas, in particular at the local level.¹⁷ Ion BRIA states that researchers often get lost in the contradictory fabric of the Romanian context.¹⁸

Hence are the relationships good or bad, or both? What actually happened to the Orthodox–Protestant contacts after 1989? December 1989 was marked by fundamental political changes in the country. The regime of Nicolae CEAUȘEȘCU collapsed and an era of freedom finally could begin.

But after December 1989 the national bilateral theological conferences were suspended. This is not only due to lack of resources, but also to changes in the ecumenical atmosphere and the social constellation.

The new times of freedom in this case do not match with better ecumenical relationships; on the contrary, the denominations were faced with hardships of many kinds and ecumenism got a very low priority.

This also happened in the other countries behind the former Iron Curtain. All the Romanian denominations have to deal with the hardships of confessional fundamentalism, secularism, nationalism, proselytism, Church–state relations, education, church properties, ethnicity, poverty, collapsing social welfare system, changing values, and so on.

It has long been time for a revival of the theological dialogue. During his visit to Germany in May 2003, Patriarch TEOCTIST of the ROC characterized the period under communist rule as an 'ecumenism under the cross,' as it was the Nicolae CEAUȘEȘCU administra-

16 OANCEA Dorin, *Zur heutigen ökumenischen Situation in Rumänien*. In KLEIN Hans – KÖBER Berthold – SCHLARB Egbert, *Kirche, Geschichte und Glaube, Freudesgabe für Hermann Pitters zum 65. Geburtstag*. Erlangen, 1998. 326.

17 VOGELAAR Huub, *Ĉecumene in het land van Dracula, Samen op weg in Roemenië*. Wereld en Zending 2004/2. 47–54.

18 BRIA Ion, *Evangelism, Proselytism, and Religious Freedom in Romania: An Orthodox Point of View*. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 1999/1–2. 163.

tion that organised the meetings of religious leaders and directed the aforementioned interconfessional theological conferences.

Patriarch TEOCTIST affirmed that the reinstatement of these conferences is a major goal in order to promote ecumenism in Romania. Apart from a few exceptions, there have been, up to today, no theological bilateral dialogues.

II. Hidden Ecumenical Powers: 'Her-Stories'

This article on ecumenical relationships cannot be written without highlighting the current activities of women. The interchurch conferences astonishingly do not refer to the relationships of women throughout the country, nor to their being very important for mutual ecumenical life and understanding.

This is probably due to the predominant male presence of these consultations, and also to the male character of the leadership in the institutions. But at least two structured initiatives by women must be pointed out.

1. Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women

The *Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women*, which offers space to women of different denominations in Romania, has two branches (National and South), and develops training courses for women as well as all kinds of meetings throughout the country.

The goals are to deepen the Christian understanding, to work together for the visible unity of the Church and for the benefit of humanity, and to support justice, peace and the integrity of creation (JPIC).

The main projects in 2002 and 2003 were the development of a *Centre for Information and Documentation*; the establishment of seminars on trafficking in women, women against violence, and ecumenical prayer; and the publishing of two newsletters a year.

The Forum was organized in 2003 in cooperation with AIDRom, an international workshop in Bucureşti on trafficking in women to and from Central and Eastern Europe, followed by a seminar in Oradea in 2003 on the same issue. Through education and action, ecumenism is regenerated at the grassroots levels.

2. Women's World Day of Prayer

Celebrated each year, the *Women's World Day of Prayer* is one of the largest worldwide ecumenical lay movements. In Romania, especially the Evangelical-Lutheran women have supported the Day of Prayer since the 1970s, and it has become an important sign of ecumenism in the country.

This activity takes place in more than two hundred places in Romania, and the number is increasing every year. The international Day of Prayer in 2002 was prepared by a group in Romania, a countrywide ecumenical committee with women from seven churches, including the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic church.

Positive experiences of Orthodox women in the United States convinced the Orthodox women in Romania to participate. The preparation committee began to work in the 1990s.

The subject of the World Day of Prayer in 2002 was *Reconciliation, a Challenge*. It is a demanding issue in a multiethnic country with many minorities, a political heritage weighing heavily on the Romanians with enormous economic problems, growing poverty and recent wars in the Balkans.

Gerhild COSOROABA, coordinator of the Day of Prayer, said that the women's committee succeeded in writing a common brief history of Romania shared by all the seven denominations, which is not easy in a country with a history full of tensions.

Elfriede DÖRR of Sibiu stated that the greatest challenge was the writing of a sketch of the history together.¹⁹ It was an exercise in reconciliation and an example of a *Healing Memories* project.

Compared to the issues dealt with by the ecumenical church commission for comparative history, the encounter of the ecumenical women's committee is an outstanding event. A member of the commission for comparative history said that even today it still would cause much trouble if, for instance, the more recent history of Transylvania would be put on the agenda.

III. Reflections and Hopeful Perspectives

1. Mixed Feelings

The ecumenical meetings of the 1990s show a *mixture of positive and negative characteristics*. On the one hand, the meetings were less frequent, less enthusiastic and less controversial than in the period under communism.

¹⁹ www.wfn.org

Very soon they reflected the deteriorating ecumenical climate with its mutual allegations, hardships of interethnic nature (*hurt feelings* in particular among the Reformed Magyars), and fading mutual solidarity. There were even hostile atmospheres at certain moments. In particular circles, ecumenism became a term of abuse.

But one has to take into account that the denominations were faced with the enormous task of re-establishing their relations with the secular domain, a task they were not prepared for. Their limited space under communism was the restricted area of liturgy. The public realm belonged to the atheist administration.

On the other hand, it led to the foundation of several associations with an ecumenical character, as well as to hopeful local initiatives in several regions of the country. These local contacts are characterized as very good. So the picture shows the qualities of good, bad and better. Some initiatives still seem to be weak, but at the same time they exhibit a new challenging ecumenical spirit.

2. National Council of Churches?

The establishment of a *National Council of Churches* seems to be in the process of implementation. The process towards its formation is slow but constant. One could wonder how a NCC will develop, taking into account that one of the partners dwarfs the others.

At least, however, there will be an authorized platform of the different denominations to meet and discuss. The idea to establish an additional Council of Churches in Transylvania was dropped recently.

3. Interconfessional Bible Society (IBS)

Already in 1992 the *Interconfessional Bible Society (IBS)* was set up, in which twelve denominations were participating. A very important project of the IBS was the bilingual Bible edition published in Magyar and Romanian in 1998.

Also, they issued an illustrated edition of the Bible. This first Romanian Bible with images of three hundred icons was presented in 2002. The Bible Society defines itself as interconfessional instead of ecumenical.

According to the Free churches participating in the IBS, the word “ecumenical” involves the loss of Christian identity. The Roman Catholic church is not a member of the IBS, but Roman Catholics do participate in the translation team.

4. Negative Heritage

A first encounter confirmed the appreciation of the *interconfessional dialogue under communism*, but soon the opinions changed completely. A meeting in Iași in 1998, however, affirmed a more positive understanding again. According to Dorin OANCEA, the interchurch conferences under communism brought some negative consequences for the future as well.

First, the pushing aside of the national and religious tensions—it was impossible to mention these tensions in those days, but they showed up even more powerfully after 1989. The Nicolae CEAUȘESCU regime posed a continuous threat to the very existence of the Magyar minority. These feelings among the Magyars have to be understood.

Second, there is a certain rejection of ecumenical thinking, because the developed ecumenism was initiated by the state and not by the interest of the denominations. As a result, ecumenism had a bad reputation.

And the third negative consequence is that there was the incapacity to design a coherent ecumenical model, which would not be based on mere coincidences, but rather on the existence of basic Christian dynamics.²⁰

An additional, fourth negative aspect was that many pro-ecumenism church leaders kept their positions after the changes, but in fact were contaminated by their earlier positions. All these aspects explain to a certain degree that ecumenical cooperation got a low priority, and was no longer a major concern in the first years after 1989.

5. Joint List of Martyrs

At the meeting in Iași in 1998, the idea came up to issue an ecumenical memorial for martyrs of faith under Communism. In 2003 the Romanian denominations presented a *joint list of martyrs* who died for the Christian faith under Communist rule.

Costel STOICA, spokesperson for the Orthodox Patriarchate, called this a significant ecumenical development. The Roman Catholic Archbishop Ioan ROBU said he believed such a list of martyrs was an important area for interchurch cooperation.

²⁰ OANCEA. 326–330.

6. Theological Faculties

To promote a better ecumenism, the role of the *theological faculties* is vital. In Iași in 1998, the churches intended to introduce a chair for ecumenism and to teach all theological disciplines in an ecumenical spirit.

In 2001 the Romanian Orthodox theologian Viorel IONITA, study secretary of CEC, presented an article entitled *Churches and Ecumenism in the Present Romania*.²¹ He stated the following:

“We cannot evaluate how ecumenism is taught in these theological academies, and even less we are able to determine what is said about the image of the others. But we do know that the subject of ecumenism has a low priority. If lectured, it is done from an apologetic perspective. The intention is mainly not to learn from the others, but to affirm one’s own identity.”²²

A hopeful sign is that some years ago an *Institute for Biblical Research* was set up in Cluj, in which scholars of the Orthodox, Calvinist-Reformed, Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Theological Faculties participate.

7. Ethnic Tensions

Remarkably enough, a meeting in Novi Sad in 1990 was the only one putting clearly the *ethnic tensions* to the forefront. It intended to cope with this *hot item* peacefully. This topic also played a role at other consultations, although it was always relegated to the background.

Almost thirteen years later, during his visit to Germany in 2003, Patriarch TEOCTIST presented the point of view of the ROC regarding *The Exigencies of the Present Ecumenism*. His speech offers a consistent opinion on ecumenism by an Orthodox Church. Michael BRINZEA from AIDRom translated the speech into English for the *Newsletter* of his association.²³

Among other things the Patriarch expressed his hope that the ecumenical Commission of Church Comparative History, established in 1980, one day would produce a common *Church History Book of the Romanian Churches*.

21 IONITA Viorel, *Kirchen und Ökumene im heutigen Rumänien*. Glaube in der 2. Welt 2001/7–8. 12–17.

22 IONITA. 12–17.

23 *Newsletter of AIDRom* 2002/1–3. www.aidrom.ro

This book could in particular be helpful in the region of Transylvania in order to create social reconciliation among the ethnic Magyars, the ethnic Romanians and other ethnicities. This includes also the intraethnic Romanian conflict between the Greek Catholic church and the ROC, at the moment the toughest interchurch disparity of the country, particularly in Transylvania.

The history of this region is well known for its two contradictory histories, the Romanian vs. the Magyar perspective. It is clear that the boundaries between academic and ethnic historiography cannot easily be drawn.

It might be helpful if the riches and positive aspects of the multi-ethnic Romanian history and society could be more emphasized.²⁴ The region is also known for a tradition of tolerance and pluralism.

In Romania the lines between the Christian confessions in general are interwoven with the contours of ethnicity. Regarding ethnicity and faith, blood is thicker than water. But the connection between ethnicity and religion also must not be exaggerated.

When Romanians and Magyars are asked to mention criteria of their nationality, they both primarily refer to factors as *feeling a Romanian or a Magyar* and *sharing a common culture and language*. References to a *Romanian or Magyar church* have respectively the eighth and sixth position.²⁵

Therefore, it seems, the ecumenical hardships are more related to ethnicity than to confession. But at the same time the confessions are earnestly challenged to reconsider their closeness to ethnicity (respecting Galatians 3,28), in particular regarding the actuality of reconciliation.

8. Theological Dialogue

The desire to restart the *interconfessional theological dialogue* is often mentioned. No one doubts the importance of good relationships, but what might be the goals? Is it an attempt to catch the positive spirit prior to the changes? What space will be given to the initiatives developed by the ecumenical women's movement, in particular their experiences with healing and reconciliation of memories?

24 ROMOCEA Christian, *A Strategy for Social Reconciliation in the Ethnic Conflict in Transylvania*. Religion in Eastern Europe 2003/5. 19.

25 VAN DE VYVER Greet, *Samen in het land van Dracula, socio-culturele praxis en interetnisch samenleven in Transylvanië*. Leuven, 2002. 244–245.

Furthermore, the Romanian society is constantly in transition, wrestling with several hard topics; and on the other hand the Orthodox and Protestant churches have achieved a lot of ecumenical experiences through meetings abroad over the last fifteen years.

Their theologians are or could be aware of one another's theological thinking, and it is clear that the positions still differ to a great extent. For the time being, deeper unity among the denominations is not possible.

The future certainly involves cooperation among churches. According to Viorel IONITA, "The first steps in mutual ecumenical encounter have been taken. Now we must make further steps, but we do not dare."²⁶

Metropolitan DANIEL of Iași expressed already in the 1990s that the alternative for the present ecumenism is not anti-ecumenism, but a better ecumenism. In Romania one can sense more openness towards a *practical ecumenical assistance*, instead of a *closer inter-confessional relationship*.

Paul BOTICA, a Romanian Baptist minister, refers to common enterprises, like working together in prisons, hospitals, orphanages, helping the poor, homeless and street children, as proper opportunities to know one another better and initiate a relevant dialogue.²⁷ Regarding the proposals of Iași in 1998, these plans risk being undermined if they are not soon implemented.

IV. Evaluating Voices

1. Not Bad or Very Good?

All the leaders of the denominations involved in the Protestant–Orthodox contacts recently stated that the interchurch relations are *good*. Patriarch TEOCTIST expressed on the exigencies of the present ecumenism that the relations of the ROC with other denominations in Romania are generally *good*.

Bishop Christoph KLEIN, head of the (German) Evangelical-Lutheran church in Sibiu, expressed the same opinion. On a meeting in Oradea of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in 2002, bishop PAP Géza of the (Magyar) Calvinist-Reformed church pointed out that the relationships with the other denominations in his country are *good*.

²⁶ IONITA. 3.

²⁷ BOTICA Paul, *Kissing the Crucifix, Practical Steps toward Effective Ecumenical Dialogue and Cooperation in Romania*. Religion in Eastern Europe 1999/2. 40.

His complaints concerned the Romanian authorities, who have not returned the church properties confiscated under communism, and the European representatives of WARC, who in his eyes are not open towards the struggles of his Reformed church.²⁸

In Trondheim in 2003, Michael TITA of the ROC even used the qualification *very good*. But the positive statements of church leaders do not, of course, reflect the whole spectrum. Dorin OANCEA regarded the relations as *not bad*, but being better with the churches of Evangelical-Lutheran backdrop than with those of the Calvinist-Reformed Tradition.

He stated also that ecumenism at the local level often is *very good*. But this is, for instance, not the case in Cluj in Transylvania where ecumenical relationships between Orthodox and Protestants are not well developed.

2. Scepticism and Inclusivity

In particular the Protestant voices showed *scepticism* in this respect. During the World Day of Prayer (WDP) services, the Romanian women could use their own language in the Calvinist-Reformed church, but the Magyar women were not allowed to speak Magyar in the Orthodox Church.

In an ecumenical radio station in Cluj the programs could only be broadcast in Romanian and not in Magyar. Ethnic Magyars derive their identity primarily from their language, with which they have an emotionally intense relation.²⁹

Religiously the Magyars are divided into Roman Catholics, Calvinist-Reformed, Evangelical-Lutheran, Neo-Protestants, and Unitarian, but their being religiously different from the Orthodox majority creates certain homogeneity among them.

A few years ago a Calvinist-Reformed Church in Cluj, a young congregation, took a new step. The church offers a simultaneous translation system to make it possible for Romanian members to come to the Calvinist-Reformed services.

The translation system also allows the church to host interethnic events. The official approach of the Magyar Calvinist-Reformed church leadership is to give no instruction for services in Romanian, due to political and historical reasons: a fear of assimilation and of being dominated by the Romanian majority.³⁰

28 PAP Géza. *Letter*. In Landelijke Werkgroep Gemeentecontacten, *Karpatenbekken*.

29 VAN DE VLIJVER. 37.

30 *Ethnic Reconciliation in Romania*. www.cwrc.org/programs/justice/stories

3. Papal Visit

Undoubtedly things could be done much better, but some fifteen years after the political changes, the current interconfessional climate in general is running better. The visit of Pope John Paul II to Romania in 1999 was an important step ahead along this ecumenical road.

The ecumenical involvement of the Roman Catholic church in Romania became more and more apparent in recent years. About 5.6 percent of the population (Greek Catholics included) follows the Roman Catholic creed, the majority of which belongs to the ethnic Magyars in Transylvania.

The international theological dialogue between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic church was inaugurated at the beginning of the 1980s. According to the Balamand Document of 1993, the Roman Catholic church and the Orthodox church recognize each other as sister churches.

This basis made it possible for the ROC to strengthen the relations with the Roman Catholic church, which culminated in the visit of the Pope to Romania, the first visit (and historical event) of a Pope to a predominantly Orthodox country.

Meanwhile it was obvious that Patriarch THEOCTIST of the ROC and Pope John Paul II became good friends, sharing common ethical principles. Radio Vatican called "Romania, ecumenically speaking, the most open country."³¹

In turn, the ROC tries to unlock the hampered international theological dialogue between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic church. The good contacts between the two church leaders brought the Roman Catholic church in Romania more to the forefront.

This church will become a member of the future National Council of Churches. In 2004, exactly five years after the visit of the Pope, Cardinal Walter KASPER, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), paid a visit to Romania.

He was awarded by the Greek Catholic Theological Faculty of Cluj in Transylvania, an area the Pope did not visit during his stay in Romania. In Cluj he also met representatives of the Protestant and Jewish communities.

But before he went to Cluj, the church leaders of the ROC received

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him in Bucharest.³² The contacts between the ROC and the Vatican clearly have their impact on the Romanian ecumenical dialogue, and put pressure as well on the toilsome intraethnic dialogue between the ROC and the Greek Catholic church.

4. Small Beginnings and Sincere Motivations

In summary, the picture of the confessional interactions in Romania over the course of fifteen years shows drifting images: good and bad are competing with each other. The sceptical observer regards the recent positive statements of the church leaders on ecumenism as overblown or diplomatic window dressing for abroad.

Anti-ecumenical circles and attitudes as well as stagnation exist. But focusing more closely shows good relations among Christians of different traditions, and also encouraging initiatives going far beyond the phase of living apart together.

One can observe *small beginnings*, *sincere motivations*, and *well-intended actions* coming from all the denominations, which point to the fact that ecumenical dialogue is growing and becoming a visible characteristic of an increasing number of denominations.

Suggested Reading

- BELOPOPSKY Alexander, *Between Chaos and Kairos: Churches, Ecumenism and the WCC in Central and Eastern Europe 1989–2003*. **The Ecumenical Review** 2004/1.
- BOTICIA Paul, *Kissing the Crucifix, Practical Steps toward Effective Ecumenical Dialogue and Cooperation in Romania*. *Religion in Eastern Europe* 1999/2.
- BRIA Ion, *Evangelism, Proselytism, and Religious Freedom in Romania: An Orthodox Point of View*. **Journal of Ecumenical Studies** 1999/1–2.
- IONITA Viorel, *Kirchen und Ökumene im heutigen Rumänien*. *Glaube in der 2. Welt* 2001/7–8.
- OANCEA Dorin, *Zur heutigen ökumenischen Situation in Rumänien*. In KLEIN Hans – KÖBER Berthold – SCHLARB Egbert, *Kirche, Geschichte und Glaube, Freudesgabe für Hermann Pitters zum 65. Geburtstag*. Erlangen, 1998.
- PAP Géza. *Letter*. In Landelijke Werkgroep Gemeentecontacten, *Karpatenbekken*.
- PATULEANU Constantin, *Die Begegnung der rumänischen Orthodoxie mit dem Protestantismus (16. bis 20. Jahrhundert), unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des bilateralen theologischen Dialogs zwischen der Evangelischer Kirche in Deutschland und der Rumänischen Orthodoxen Kirche (1979–1998)*. **Hamburg, 2000**.
- ROMOCEA Christian, *A Strategy for Social Reconciliation in the Ethnic Conflict in Transylvania*. **Religion in Eastern Europe** 2003/5.
- VAN DE VYVER Greet, *Samen in het land van Dracula, socio-culturele praxis en interetnisch samenleven in Transylanië*. Leuven, 2002.
- VOGELAAR Huub, *Ökumene in het land van Dracula, Samen op weg in Roemenië*. *Wereld en Zending* 2004/2.

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32 *Religious Life* 2004/554.