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# Dynamics of the Holy and the Powerful:

**Stately Regimes and Development**

**of the Greek Catholic Church in Transylvania**

*The Greek Catholic church in Transylvania, the north-western part of Romania, has an interesting history, one that is characterised by an ever changing balance between clerical and secular powers. Looking at the dynamics of church and state as narrowly linked and as both depending on and influencing each other, a vivid picture of state and church interrelationships appears. This article deals with the coming of age of this Church in contemporary Transylvania, focusing on only one aspect of the relationship between Church and Society. This is a rather abstract one, as it focuses on institutions, rather than on people. These two constellations of power are often portrayed as solid and – so it seems – dominant structures, completely dominating the life of believers. Therefore, I would like to note here that it is my view that it is the people who make society, who express and form values, collective images and who have feelings, and it is the people who give expression to their faith.*

## Introduction

Elijah is an important saint in the Byzantine tradition. His name day, 20 July, is celebrated with a holy mass in most Orthodox and Greek Catholic churches in villages and towns in Romania. One of these villages is a small community situated near the main road leading from Cluj to *T[rgu Mures]*. In the small Greek Catholic church, people have gathered. As usual, men and a few small children are seated in front of the small church, while the women have taken their seats on the benches covered with colourful pillows in the back. The priest sings the prayers and hymns, assisted by a student from the seminary in Blaj. After the blessing, people gather outside in the courtyard for a chat. Men and boys who share the name “Elijah” (*Ilie* in Romanian) receive greetings and wishes. Shortly after, everyone returns home for lunch, and to have a nap. These days of rest are a welcome alternation to the days of hard work during the harvest season. The Orthodox congregation, whose church is just down the road, has left already; their service starts half an hour earlier.

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The picturesque Greek Catholic church of the community dates back to the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century. It has been a house of worship to many generations of the village. It is probably one of the first churches that were built in this district, after the Greek Catholic church was officially established in Transylvania, which was, by then, part of the Habsburg Empire. This happened in the autumn of 1700. At that time, the largest Orthodox synod in Transylvania took place, gathering many priests, high officials and laymen. During this synod the Orthodox clergy decided upon the future of the Orthodox denomination in Transylvania. They decided to accept the four articles of the Council of Florence, which in 1439 had brought unity between Rome and Constantinople for a while. The articles included the acceptance of the Pope in Rome as the head of the Christian Church, the usage of unleavened bread during Holy Communion, the doctrine of purgatory, and the Latin doctrine on the Holy Trinity<sup>1</sup>. The former Orthodox priests kept the right to be married before being ordained as priests.



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<sup>1</sup> HITCHINS 1969. 16; and SOMESAN 1999. 33-35. The Latin doctrine on the Holy Trinity proclaims that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. In the Byzantine tradition it is adhered to that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone.

## Political and Religious Constellations in XVIIth Century Transylvania

To understand the process, which led to this union with Rome, as it was officially called, we have to dive a little deeper in the social and political structures of those times. From the end of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century, Transylvania had been part of the Habsburg Empire, with the status of principality. The Habsburg army had been in constant state of war with the troops of the Turkish Grand Vizier, whom they had defeated. As a result, the Habsburg government had obtained, among others, Transylvania, which from then onwards formed the border region with the Turkish Empire, a strategically important area indeed. The acquisition of these new territories, formerly under Turkish rule, confronted the government with certain problems. The authorities tended towards strong centralisation and accumulation of influence and in this process had to take into account the various political, religious and ethnic constellations within the Empire<sup>2</sup>.

The Transylvanian society at the end of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century was strongly segregated, and of a feudal nature. The Prince was the head of the state. The so-called three 'Nations', who had concluded their privileges in a league securing their political, economic and social position, formed the most influential groups. The Nations consisted of Hungarian noblemen (Magyars), Saxons and Szeklers (one of the Magyar tribes). Merchants, rich landowners and peasants from these three Nations formed the middle class. Their privileges distinguished them from the so-called "rabble", which consisted mainly of Romanian, Magyar and Szekler peasants. In this political structure the Romanians, the fourth nationality inhabiting Transylvania, were not represented by nobility. The largest segment consisted of serfs, who worked on the land of large landowners and were obliged to pay tithes of their own produce to them. There had been a class of Romanian noblemen, but they had gradually taken over the language and the habits of the ruling elite of Magyars.

The Reformation had influenced and altered the relationships and the balance between the various religious communities in Transylvania. An important part of the (Catholic) elite became Protestant. The Saxons adhered to the Lutheran denomination, the Magyars and Szeklers were Roman Catholic, Calvinist or Unitarian. These four denominations were the so-called "established" religions. "The faithful of each were guaranteed freedom of worship, and each church was granted equal numerical representation in all branches of the central administration and was allowed to manage its own affairs and to dispense justice to its adherents with a minimum of interference of the state."<sup>3</sup> Political position and religious liberty went hand in hand, so to speak.

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<sup>2</sup> According to ELIAS 1982, the basis of a legitimate state is its monopoly on taxation and its control of means of power and violence. The strive towards centralisation could be interpreted as a means to exert control over the inhabitants of the newly won areas to prevent internal conflicts and instability, and to guarantee a stable influx of financial means. Apart from this process, this tendency towards centralisation was strongly linked with developments outside of the Empire. The French King and the Empire of the Grand Vizier posed considerable and continuous threats to the stability of the border regions and the situation within the Empire (KÓPECZI 1994. 372; and VERDERY 1983. 114.).

<sup>3</sup> HITCHINS 1969. 3-5.

The ethnic Romanians adhered to the Orthodox faith, a denomination, which was tolerated but not recognised. As the faithful of this figuration were mainly serfs, who had no income but the produce of their land, the church had no possessions such as land, churches and buildings, in those days the most important assets and sources of income and influence. An Orthodox priest was not distinguishable from his parishioners but by his headgear. Being a serf, he had to work the land of his lord and yield a tenth of the produce from his own small piece of land. The upper clergy had been given more privileges than the clergy in the villages, but the Nations subjected them to strict control on their administrative and religious practices.

Priesthood was often passed on from father to son. A priest-to-be received his education in a monastery, from the priest in the village or even in a Calvinist school. This training was very limited. Priests learned how to read and write, but in theological matters they were hardly educated. The Protestant clergy, however, was well educated, and students went abroad to study regularly<sup>4</sup>.

Beside the schooling system being superficial, the organisation of the Orthodox church in Transylvania was highly fragmented. Its centre was located in the Romanian principalities; the metropolitan of Walachia, after the prince of Transylvania had given his authorisation, appointed the Greek-Orthodox bishop<sup>5</sup>. During the course of time, ties with the main office in Walachia loosened. In 1567, Romanian had been introduced in the Orthodox liturgy, not to the liking of the Orthodox hierarchy. This contributed, however, to the development of Romanian literary and cultural life.<sup>6</sup>

### **Alliance between the Worldly Powers and the Roman Catholic Church**

Despite the fact that the Roman Catholic church had been one of the accepted religions in Transylvania, it had lost significant influence and number of believers. The ideas of LUTHER were spread by Saxon merchants and by students who frequently travelled to German towns. During and after the Reformation many members of the Catholic clergy had been expelled from the monasteries in the principality, and for a long period of time, they were not welcome there.

The three Nations had a strong influence on the promotion of the Protestant ways of thinking and inhibited the Roman Catholic clergy from exerting influence. During the course of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century, however, Catholic priests started to spread missionary activities into Transylvania from their home bases in the Kingdom of Hungary. Here, mainly Jesuit priests supported and brought further the counter-reformation and Catholic renewal – a development that not in the last place was enhanced by the close relationships between Rome and Vienna.

Now that the lands bordering the Turkish Empire had been more or less secured, the Habsburg government directed its attention towards the policy of stabilisation and tranquillity within the Empire. In this process, the relationships

<sup>4</sup> HITCHINS 1969. 12/3 and KÓPECZI 1994. 344., 403.

<sup>5</sup> KÓPECZI 1994. 373.

<sup>6</sup> SOMESAN 1999. 23-31.

between the Viennese authorities and the Roman Catholic church were tightly linked, because both benefited from a stable situation in the Empire. The state offered the Roman Catholic clergy as much space as was admissible in its strategy to promote centralisation and order in the principality<sup>7</sup>.

Communities of believers were the most important entities of organisation. Therefore the religious “domestication” of the inhabitants by Catholic priests and friars was in the interest of the Habsburg government. Besides, the Pope of Rome contributed with a significant amount of financial means to the state treasury. The Catholic church, in turn, could not do without the military backing of the Habsburg army and its approval of the spreading of the Catholic faith<sup>8</sup>. However, none could do without the other, and in this process their ties of interdependence became stronger<sup>9</sup>. The Habsburg Emperor envisioned a political goal in Transylvania. “The Habsburgs fought [...] against Transylvanian Calvinism. Not only as a heretic religious institution, but especially as bastion of Hungarian political resistance.”<sup>10</sup>

In this strategy, the Romanians were a central focus group. The emperor wanted to strengthen the influence of the state on the local communities, among other things, to pose a counterweight to the expanding, autonomous figurations of the three Nations. By uniting her to Rome, it was thought that the Romanian community, which consisted mainly of Orthodox, could be brought under the power and influence of Vienna and Rome and would be less perceptive to influences from Orthodox regimes in the neighbouring states.<sup>11</sup>

The motive, which was thought to be decisive, was the hope that the Orthodox believers would follow their priests, choosing the Catholic faith, with the prospect of improving their status in society.<sup>12</sup> Although the Protestant elite was not considered as a threat to this goal because they were dependent upon the Emperor concerning the admission of privileges and decision making, still they were able to boycott the attempts of the Jesuit priests.

## The Formation of the Greek Catholic Church

In the conversion to Catholicism, the Jesuits, who came to Transylvania accompanied by Habsburg troops, first and foremost directed their efforts towards the clergy, hoping that this would eventually lead to a trickle-down effect in the villages. As one author put it, this was brought about through personal contacts with the priests, who became interested and were eventually in favour of an alignment with Rome.<sup>13</sup> The biggest problems they were facing were the Orthodox dogmas.

<sup>7</sup> HITCHINS 1969. 16.

<sup>8</sup> See also BAX' account on co-operation between the Habsburg regime and Rome in encouraging missionary activities by the Franciscan order in Bosnia Herzegovina (BAX 1995).

<sup>9</sup> INCRAO 1994. 77/8; and BÉRENGER 1997. 1-25. This form of co-operation is not unknown in history. In other parts of the Empire, like in Bohemia, the wind was taken out of political opponents' sails by exerting restrictions on admittance to public positions for non-Catholics and restricting the number of Protestant churches (INCRAO 1994. 30).

<sup>10</sup> SOMESAN 1999. 33.

<sup>11</sup> GHITTA 1995. 165/6.

<sup>12</sup> KÓPECZI 1994. 373; HITCHINS 1969. 15/6; TEODOR 1998. 187.; VERDERY 1983. 108. The Jesuits, however, encountered resistance in their missionary activities, by the Protestant nations. In the Southwest of Transylvania, they were forced to leave (BARBU 1995. 157-164.).

<sup>13</sup> HITCHINS 196. 918/9.

But in the end, as has been mentioned, a solution was found, and the four articles of the Council of Florence were the leading articles that had to be voted for.

During the Synod of 1697, in which the Romanian hierarchy was present, it was concluded that the clergy would agree with unification. Certain demands were made, such as equal treatment of Greek Catholic clergy and access to means of education for Romanian students.<sup>14</sup> In the following years, a new metropolitan was appointed. He was in the middle of disputes and interests of two sides. On the one hand there was the Calvinist clergy, who wanted him to refrain from the union. On the other side were the Orthodox bishops, who warned him of the Calvinist and Catholic pressure.

He was in a difficult position and eventually called for a synod, which was held on 4 September 1700. In this Synod laymen were also present. There the final agreement, to enter in a union with Rome, was discussed and signed. One of the conditions demanded by the Roman Catholic bishops was that the Orthodox would break links and contacts with the Orthodox Churches in Walachia and Moldavia. The Uniate bishop of Transylvania would be directly subordinated to the Archbishop of Esztergom, Hungary. In this way, he remained independent from the Roman Catholic church in Transylvania<sup>15</sup>.

The social and political status of the Greek Catholics remained unchanged for a long time, despite the fact that on paper Romanians had the same rights as other believers. Also from within the Orthodox church in Transylvania many protests were purported.<sup>16</sup> However, in the course of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century education became more widely available for Romanian students and a centre of intellectual activity slowly started to develop.<sup>17</sup> During the XVII<sup>th</sup> and XVIII<sup>th</sup> centuries the organisation of the Greek Catholic church in Transylvania consolidated more and more (although it lasted until the mid-XIX<sup>th</sup> century) until their basis was firmly established. It eventually entailed that the clergy became more and more independent from the Jesuit order and of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>18</sup> The relationship with the Orthodox churches from the South remained one of constant trial of strength. Many believers of the Uniate church re-entered the Orthodox congregation because the promises of abolition of serfdom and land reforms were not met. Apart from that, the Orthodox church in Transylvania was given a steadier basis with the appointment of an Orthodox bishop in this province during the reign of Maria Theresa.

The three Nations did not strongly oppose this decision because they feared an

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<sup>14</sup> According to some authors, this was the first time in Romanian history that political claims were made. HITCHINS 1969; and SOMESAN 1999, 38.

<sup>15</sup> The rights of the clergy were recorded in the first *Diploma Leopoldinum*. They were later added to the second *Diploma*. On paper, the Romanian clergy and believers were awarded the same rights as believers and clergy of other denominations. In practice, however, the relationships between nobility and serfs remained unchanged (SOMESAN 1999, 39-45).

<sup>16</sup> See MURGESCU 1998, 174-183; VERDERY 1983; and SOMESAN 1999.

<sup>17</sup> As has been argued in anthropological literature, emancipating tendencies in religious constellations tend to reduce the influence of the clergy on the life and ways of thinking of believers; by handing them the tools to emancipate (e.g. Education), independence from these institutions and from the dominant way of thinking is wrought as well. MEIJERS 1989.

<sup>18</sup> The role and influence of the Jesuits gradually diminished during the course of the century. However, this process was noticeable throughout the Habsburg Empire, being strongly linked to a tendency towards rationalisation and secularisation of military, cultural and intellectual life. The order remained in charge of important educational institutions (INGRAO 1994, 165-168).

all too strong position of the Greek Catholic church and, most of all, they were cautious because of the plea the clergy and intellectuals made for the recognition of the Romanians as the ‘fourth Nation’ within the principality. Balancing between political choices whether or not to interfere, the Habsburg regime was more inclined not to support the development of the Orthodox church too strongly, and to put aside the claims made by the Romanian political and religious leaders concerning their status. An important reason for this being that the government did not want to lose the support of the ruling elite in Transylvania.<sup>19</sup>

### **Disintegration of the Habsburg Empire and Nation-Building**

Towards the end of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, various revolts took place within the Habsburg Empire. The nobility as well as the less fortunate groups vented their discontent about the restriction of their privileges, or, on the other hand, the fact that their wishes had not yet materialised.<sup>20</sup> Also, outside the Empire and especially in France, unrest remained among the population. This was reason enough for Emperor Joseph II to loosen his reign, and to sustain the development of more independent communities and factions in exchange for the prevention of upheaval. This development implied, however, that state bodies had less influence on these communities. In this atmosphere, a process came about that has been called “nation building”.

The town of Blaj (Balázsfalva) played a central role as the main stage where ideas on Romanian identity were formed and put on record. Intellectuals, clergy, as well as laymen joined in efforts towards what has been called the “Transylvanian school”. Students were sent to Vienna and Rome to study and develop ideas about their identity as Romanians. Abroad, these students found out about the “origin” of their nation and subsequently, under the influence of broader trends in intellectual thinking, started to write about this relatively new topic.

These discoveries, enhanced by the tradition of the Enlightenment, made them think in a very critical manner about the Transylvanian society. Therefore, their writings clearly intended to emancipate the Romanian people.<sup>21</sup> Until the end of the First World War,<sup>22</sup> the political thought among Romanian Greek Catholic intellectuals and politicians in Transylvania was directed towards their recognition as a the fourth Nation. In this claim, they were supported by the Orthodox, together representing one community. However, it would not be before 1863 that Romanians would be allowed to vote, and even longer before feudal relations were abolished.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> TEODOR 1998. 190.

<sup>20</sup> In Transylvania serfs revolted out of unease with their economic and social situation. This revolt was broached by three men, under whose names it has become known in history; HORIA, CLOSCA and CRISAN (HITCHINS 1969. 39).

<sup>21</sup> See HITCHINS 1969; SOMESAN 1999; and TEODOR 1995. Apart from being a political justification, their writings had the intent to be a justification for the union with Rome as well.

<sup>22</sup> In 1918 Transylvania was joined with Great Romania, consisting of Walachia and Moldavia, forming what today is called Romania.

<sup>23</sup> VERDERY accounts of feudal bonds that lasted until 1896, well within the recollection of the people she interviewed (VERDERY 1983:174).

### **“We have always been Catholic”: the Greek Catholic Community beyond 1989**

“We have always been Catholic, Miss,” was the phrase I heard so many times while living and doing field research in a Romanian community. In the village where I stayed, one third of the population belonged to the Greek Catholic congregation, the rest belonging to the Orthodox one. But, as most people admitted, they had been Catholic before, for a long time in history, and still considered themselves Catholic. “Before” meant “before 1948”, when the communist government abolished the Greek Catholic church in Romania, like in most of the other communist countries.

Any church that had such close links with the Western part of Europe and the capitalist hemisphere was especially unwelcome to the communist doctrine of self-sufficiency and abstinence of (suspected) Western influences.<sup>24</sup> Its property was confiscated by the state, as most of private and institutional property, or handed over to the Orthodox Church, and so were the believers.<sup>25</sup> Under communism, the Greek Catholic community of believers was small and invisible, but nevertheless active. Most of the clergy, however, had been imprisoned or sentenced to labour camps. As some informants declared, marriages, baptisms and funerals were celebrated in private and led by Greek Catholic priests. Nevertheless, religious life in general was hampered, not to say discouraged, by the communist authorities. However, the persistence of some people in the Greek Catholic faith, rites and customs (but also in religious life in general) support the statement that state interference functioned only up to a certain level. It could not control the extreme, flexible and inventive acts of people.

After December 1989, with churches booming, the Greek Catholic clergy re-entered public life again. This congregation and other denominations as well, enjoyed a revival of church life. The most signifying struggle that all of the established congregations experienced was the fight for the restitution of their belongings. Most of the efforts of priests and higher clergy were consumed with dragging through the slowness of bureaucratic rules and assumptions. However, from the beginning the state drew back its hands from the problem. Cases are fought in court and the state makes every effort to stay on the sidelines, restricting itself to law-making and jurisdiction. It seems that the main fighting is left to the churches among themselves and to courts.

Like in the village where people spoke to me about their church life, it had taken some effort, but the Greek Catholics regained their small wooden church. A priest settled in the village. From the first day on he began to raise funds to build a new

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<sup>24</sup> An explanation for the fact that the Roman Catholic church in Romania was tolerated is given by DELETANT. Its position was ambivalent, because monasteries were closed, but parishes and priests were allowed to function. The fact that the Roman Catholic community consisted practically solely of believers of Magyar origin prevented the Romanian communist government to forbid this church; since any action against the Roman Catholics in Romania might have been interpreted as directed specifically against the Magyar minority (DELETANT 1999. 92-94.).

<sup>25</sup> They had to cede between 1800 and 2000 buildings; the 1,5 million believers automatically became Orthodox (RAMET 1998. 16.). For some Orthodox priests, however, this was a justification of the vexed unification with Rome of 1700 (DELETANT 1999. 101-103.).



church for his parishioners. The foundations were laid in 1947. This did not come about without tension between the “Orthodox” and the “Catholics”. But now relations settled. One could say that things became normal again, like in the old days.

## Concluding Remarks

In the preceding paragraphs, an effort has been made to outline the coming of age of the Greek Catholic church in Transylvania in the broader framework of relations between church and state. This relationship is one of the main characterising dynamics of power in a society because both compete for the same “rank and file” – that is, they fulfil important functions in the realm of organisation and orientation for people’s lives.<sup>26</sup> Religious regimes are one of the players in the field of power and influence. In all periods described, the space in which both functioned was conditioned by outer influences, such as geopolitical constellations.

At the same time, within these realms (the Habsburg Empire, as well as the Romanian communist state and the contemporary Romanian state) forces were (and are) at work that challenged the influence and authority of the stately regime. This balance changed over time and gave direction to the dynamic relationship between the two. This process, however, is not to be seen as separate from the “people”. It is they who act and think, who believe and give way to their values, who make society, and thus make state and church. As THOMAS has put it, “if people consider a situation as real, it is real in its consequences.”

### Suggested Reading

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- VERDERY Katherine, *Transylvanian Villagers. Three centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change*. Berkeley, 1983.

## Suzanna VERGOUWE: Dinámica de lo Santo y lo Poderoso:

<sup>26</sup> For theory on state and religious regimes see BAX 1988.

## **los regímenes Estatales y el desarrollo de la Iglesia Católica Griega en Transilvania**

Los factores que llevaron a la creación de la Iglesia Católica Griega en Transilvania a finales del siglo XVII, fueron varios, y han de ser analizados desde diferentes perspectivas. El autor arguye desde el punto de vista de un antropólogo político, enfocado en las relaciones entre los regímenes estatales y clericales. La llegada de la Iglesia Católica Griega fue fomentada por las autoridades de Habsburgo y por la Iglesia Católica Romana. Esto con el objetivo de aumentar su campo de influencia en la sociedad transilvana, dominada entonces por una élite fundamentalmente protestante. Luego que el imperio de Habsburgo se desintegró, le siguieron una serie de cambios para lograr el equilibrio de poder; tanto hacia el interior como al exterior del Imperio. Entonces la Iglesia Católica Griega se mostró como una importante defensora y fuerza en la construcción de la nacionalidad rumana. Ya en los tiempos del comunismo la Iglesia Católica Griega pasó a la clandestinidad. Pero luego de 1989, la vida de la Iglesia se desarrolló nuevamente, y la Católica Griega ha retomado su lugar en la sociedad – no sin luchas – junto a otras denominaciones de su sociedad.

**Suzanna VERGOUWE:**

## **La dynamique du sacré et du pouvoir: régimes étatiques et développement de l'Église Catholique Grecque en Transylvanie**

Les tendances qui ont abouti à la création de l'Église Catholique Grecque en Transylvanie à la fin du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle sont de nature diverse et doivent être abordées sous différents angles. L'auteur de cet article fonde son argumentation sur une perspective anthropologique, axée sur les relations entre le régime clérical et étatique. Ce furent en effet les autorités des Habsbourg et l'Église Catholique Romaine qui furent à l'origine de la maturité de cette Église; en étendant leur champ d'influence à la Transylvanie, ils prétendaient renforcer leur ascendant sur la société transylvaine, dominée par une élite principalement protestante. Après la désintégration de l'Empire des Habsbourg suite aux changements des rapports de forces à l'intérieur et l'extérieur de l'empire, l'Église Catholique Grecque s'érigea en important défenseur et véritable précurseur de l'édification de la nation roumaine. Sous le communisme, les activités de l'Église Catholique Grecque continuèrent en secret. Après 1989, la vie de l'Église reprit, et les catholiques grecques ont désormais trouvé une place, non sans confrontations, néanmoins, avec d'autres confessions de la société roumaine.