

BOOK REVIEW

OLIVER JENS SCHMITT, *BISERICA DE STAT SAU BISERICA ÎN STAT? O ISTORIE A BISERICII ORTODOXE ROMÂNE 1918-2023*

[ENG.: STATE CHURCH OR CHURCH IN THE STATE? A
HISTORY OF THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: 1918-2023]
(BUCHAREST: HUMANITAS, 2023, 444 P.), ISBN 978-973-50-7919-2

Gabriel Stelian MANEA*

Received: June 3th, 2023

Accepted for publication: July 31st, 2023

In recent years, Oliver Jens Schmitt has offered the Romanian audience various volumes, including *Corneliu Zelea Codreanu: Ascensiunea și căderea Căpitanului* [Eng.: *Corneliu Zelea Codreanu: The Rise and Fall of the Captain*] or *România în 100 de ani: bilanțul unui veac de istorie* [Eng.: *Romania in 100 Years: Assessment of a Century of History*], which have sparked a wide range of reactions among readers. Some reactions came from professionals and more knowledgeable individuals, while others came from mere enthusiasts of historical readings. There has been a sense of shock and even indignation among representatives of a certain historiographical tradition, just as there have been historians from the new generation who have understood the necessity of a truly critical and uninhibited approach ready to convey uncomfortable truths. On the other hand, the commercial success of these volumes has demonstrated that even those who read history out of pure passion have been intrigued, surprised, recommended the titles to others, or, conversely, vehemently contested them.

The new volume by historian Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Biserica de stat, sau Biserica în stat? O istorie a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române: 1918-2023* [Eng.: *State Church or Church in the State? A History of the Romanian Orthodox Church: 1918-2023*], is likely to generate equally diverse and polarized reactions.

* Gabriel Stelian Manea, Ph.D. is a Lecturer with the Faculty of History and Political Sciences, “Ovidius” University of Constanta, e-mail: gabrielstelianmanea@yahoo.com.

Beyond these reactions, the new volume constitutes a scientific endeavor, embraced and respected as such. Right from the preface, the author accurately and courageously identifies several reasons why a history of the modern Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) represents a difficult and delicate undertaking. These reasons include the Church’s own attempt to control and sometimes even censor the historiographic discourse regarding its recent past, the lack of a comprehensive historical synthesis that surpasses the fractures caused by different political regimes and finds elements of continuity in the existence and activities of this institution, and evident divisions among groups of historians who have very different views on both the history of the Romanian Orthodox Church itself and the manner in which it should be written.

Oliver Jens Schmitt starts from a reality that is difficult to contest, namely that in Romania, there is a lack of historiographic or intellectual tradition to scientifically debate the history of the Orthodox church. Furthermore, according to Schmitt, the ROC itself “has never shown any interest [to conduct a] scientific and objective research of its own past throughout its history”. Furthermore, the lack of interest is not the main reason why critical scientific research regarding the Church in recent times is at an impasse, but rather the fact that the institution “has restricted and hindered free research” (Schmitt 2023, 10) This fact is compounded by another equally serious one, evident in the post-communist years of democracy, during which the Romanian Orthodox Church had multiple tools at its disposal “to control the memory of its past, that is, to largely rewrite the image of the Romanian Orthodox Church in modern Romanian history and marginalize critical voices” (Schmitt 2023, 18). Among these tools and strategies was the deliberate confusion and intermixing of criticism towards the institution with criticism towards Christianity as a whole: “This accusation of hostility towards Christianity clearly limits the possibility of open discussions about the Romanian Orthodox Church as an institution in Romania because those who criticize the Church [...] risk being stigmatized as anti-Christians” (Schmitt 2023, 21). To put things in perspective, to this day, church archives remain inaccessible to independent researchers or those who do not have at least a close relationship with the ROC. This “restrictive administration of archives” is more evident where documents from the era of Nicolae Ceaușescu are concerned, and Oliver Jens Schmitt provides an explanation that the Church hierarchy does not want to acknowledge: “too many continuities, especially of a personal nature, within the institution would have been exposed” (Schmitt 2023, 26).

Most historians who approach such a topic tend to do so in a fragmented manner, focusing on specific periods, such as the interwar period, which is well-covered in historiographic works, the early decades of communism, or the post-1989 era. However, the years of Nicolae Ceaușescu's leadership are often explored only superficially. Indeed, such fragmentation makes it difficult to examine elements of continuity that surpass the boundaries of specific regimes or governments. It also prevents the articulation of a fundamental question: “What does the Romanian Orthodox Church mean for the modern history of Romania, not just during a single period, but as a whole?” (Schmitt 2023, 22)

Regarding the categories of historians interested in the history of the ROC, the author operates with a tripartite division. The first ones are the radical defenders of the Church, those who come from within ultranationalist and neo-legionary circles, those who “consider any criticism of the institution a sacrilege and an attack on the Christian faith”. The exaggerations of the first group are rejected by a second group, composed of intellectuals with some attachment to the Orthodox faith and tradition, even towards the Church, but who are not very eager to initiate or engage in genuine debate. Finally, there is a third group, albeit heterogeneous, where we find researchers who “study the Romanian Orthodox Church as an important historical and socio-cultural phenomenon in Romania, without being driven by an ideological motivation, but purely out of scientific interest” (Schmitt 2023, 29) Indeed, the number of this third group is significantly outnumbered by radical or moderate apologists, and their space for expression is limited.

It is difficult to overlook a similar situation in which the state and the Church found themselves in 1918. After the Great Union, both the state and the Church had to face the challenges posed by the issue of diversity. The state had to grapple with ethnic diversity, while the Church had to contend with religious diversity, in addition to the organizational peculiarities of the united provinces. Therefore, the state and the Church saw themselves as allies in a process of integration and homogenization because “the joy of creating a national state for all Romanians coincided with the fear of everything that was not Romanian and Orthodox” (Schmitt 2023, 32)

A statistical observation with serious qualitative consequences is the nearly complete lack, as noted by Oliver Jens Schmitt, of serious studies dedicated to the lower clergy, the clergy in rural areas, in various periods, not just during the interwar years. We know very little about the socio-economic situation of these priests, their level of educational preparation, their political involvement, and

how all of these factors have influenced their relationship with the Church hierarchy, the state, and the believers.

In a subchapter titled „Un eretic tolerat de biserică: Alexandru Constantin Cuza și doctrina sa” [Eng.: *A heretic tolerated by the Church: Alexandru Constantin Cuza and his doctrine*] (Schmitt 2023, 99), the author highlights just one of the many situations in its history where the Romanian Orthodox Church has failed or has been unwilling to explain, assume, and repudiate them. *Cușism*, as it pertains to this doctrine, encompassed a radical form of anti-Semitism, the rejection of the Old Testament, presenting Christ as anti-Semitic, and portraying the Apostle Paul as a falsifier of Christianity. All these heterodox inventions were not decisively rejected by the Church, and their author enjoyed the constant goodwill of the hierarchy.

Cuza had demonstrated the ability and methodological inspiration to approach the interwar history of the Romanian Orthodox Church by focusing on its most characteristic aspects. He organized the material into individual domains, which together shaped one of the most intense, but problematic periods in the institution’s history. Among these areas, there are some that are still sensitive, such as the unification of different Orthodox traditions of the united provinces in 1918, the positioning of the institution and clergy towards the new Romanian democracy, the contribution of the Romanian Orthodox Church to shaping a Romanian national identity in the face of evident regional particularities, the relationship between the clergy and political parties, the management of the phenomenon of miracles, and the positioning of the Romanian Orthodox Church in relation to Orthodox, nationalist, ethnocentric, and anti-Semitic currents that took shape politically through *Cușism* and Legionarism. This dense interwar thematic episode was succinctly summarized by Oliver Jens Schmitt in a sentence that draws conclusions about the period: “This shift towards a mystically supported national orthodoxy, which left no room for dissidents, those of other faiths and ethnicities, was promoted for years by the state, the Romanian Orthodox Church, and nearly all authoritative Romanian politicians”. (Schmitt 2023, 132)

It is tempting and worthwhile to follow the author’s thesis that the Romanian Orthodox Church had little to gain from its relationship with the dictatorships of 1938-1944. Further research on this topic would be valuable in shedding light on this aspect. Indeed, it is clear that the ROC did not gain what it had hoped for, despite apparent ideological affinities. During the royal dictatorship, as argued by the author, while Miron Cristea was prime minister, the Church had

to subordinate itself to the monarch, becoming a mere instrument of the state and a means of legitimizing the regime. Under the National Legionary State, it was not the Orthodox wing of the Legionary Movement that dominated, but rather the social-revolutionary wing, which left very little room for maneuver for the clergy and certainly did not create the desired *clerical fascism* envisioned by them. Finally, under Ion Antonescu, the Romanian Orthodox Church regressed back to a state similar to the period before 1918, functioning as a mere subordinated state authority.

However, despite its subordination to the state, the Romanian Orthodox Church appears as an instigator and independent participant, having its own motivations for the mass murder of Jews. This was the result of an atmosphere cultivated by the Church throughout the interwar years, an atmosphere of authoritarian ultranationalism and xenophobia that ultimately culminated in genocide.

Chapter four, “*Biserica Ortodoxă română și dictatura comunistă, 1948-1989 [The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Communist Dictatorship, 1948-1989]*” is indeed more complex from the perspective of a historian, and Oliver Jens Schmitt begins by acknowledging this difficulty. First and foremost, it is mentioned that in the last 30 years, the Romanian Orthodox Church has managed to bring its own past under its control: “The fact that we do not know much is not a coincidence but the result of a systematic and successful strategy by the Romanian Orthodox Church to maintain silence about an era that is very close to the present and highly problematic for the Church due to its profound subordination and the alleged compromise of many hierarchs and priests”. (Schmitt 2023, 196-197). Secondly, the Church managed to offer and impose a convenient narrative regarding half a century of history.

Therefore, a first consequence, which may surprise many readers, is that we know very little about the history of the Romanian Orthodox Church’s relationship with the communist regime over the span of four decades. The years of the communist regime’s rise to power and the early years of Patriarch Justinian Marina’s tenure are relatively well-researched. However, beyond that, from a research perspective, particularly the period from 1965 to 1989 is largely unexplored terrain. A second consequence is that the Romanian Orthodox Church has attempted and succeeded in removing several highly sensitive topics from historiographic and public debates, topics that could potentially disadvantage the Church. These topics include the collaboration of hierarchs and priests with the communist regime, informants infiltrated into the

Romanian Orthodox Church by the Securitate (the secret police), the Church's silence regarding numerous crimes committed by the regime, its role in the destruction of the Greek-Catholic Church, active support for collectivization, and the lack of reaction in the case of church demolitions. Moreover, and here Oliver Jens Schmitt raises a valid alarm, there are several historians who are closely affiliated with the Church and who, in recent decades, have constructed a narrative that makes the institution more comfortable. This narrative emphasizes the ideas of resistance and suffering under communism. It encompasses the victimization of the lower clergy, the resistance of monastic and mystical circles such as “Rugul Aprins”, the issue of the imprisoned saints presented as martyrs in Pitești or Aiud, the subtle yet tenacious opposition of Patriarch Justinian, the survival of the Romanian Orthodox Church compared to the situations in the USSR or Albania, expressed through the continuous celebration of the Holy Liturgy, the performance of baptisms, weddings, and funerals, the activity of renowned spiritual leaders, and the undertaking of pilgrimages. In exchange for all of these, the Romanian Orthodox Church had to pay the price of total submission to the regime. This is the self-image that the Church promotes today.

It is always challenging to write a history of the present times, regardless of its theme, especially when it comes to the ROC. Faced with this challenge, aware that a comprehensive approach is impossible, the historian can only highlight the main lines and constructive features, as well as Oliver Jens Schmitt has identified them. One of the author's most assertive statements, fully confirmed in the past three decades, is that “The Romanian Orthodox Church has never been as powerful and independent from the state as in the period after 1989” (Schmitt 2023, 326) However, these three decades, and more, have proven to be extremely delicate and challenging for an institution that emerged with a disastrous image after years of communist rule. The re-emergence of the Greek-Catholic Church, rightfully reclaiming its properties, sparked an aggressive and confrontational reaction from the Romanian Orthodox Church, which also faced unrest from the growing success of the neo-Protestant churches in attracting disillusioned Orthodox believers. In its own backyard, the Church had to seek solutions to what Western societies had already experienced, namely a retreat of faith into the private sphere, coupled with an increasingly apparent discrepancy between the formal declaration of belonging to the Romanian Orthodox Church and a “low attachment to church dogma”. In terms of the economy, the Church has succeeded in becoming a significant

commercial player, with extensive land properties and businesses in the hospitality and religious tourism sectors. This has helped it to reduce its dependence on the state, but it has also exposed the Church to well-founded accusations of exhibiting luxury and opulence. Last but not least, in a context where Romanian society has largely expressed its support for a European and Euro-Atlantic path, manifested through its membership in the European Union and NATO, the Church has become predominantly driven by “fear of Western principles of human rights and religious freedoms”. Furthermore, “maintaining a national-autarchic model of identity” has remained the preferred response of many representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church towards the perceived issue of openness to the West. However, as the history of this institution has never been homogeneous or linear, the election of a new patriarch in 2007, in the person of Metropolitan Daniel of Moldavia, marked the victory of a certain reformist faction within the Romanian Orthodox Church. This faction was more open to dialogue with the Protestant and Catholic world and held a more liberal stance compared to another faction consisting of traditionalists.

Oliver Jens Schmitt’s book is and will prove to be a landmark in terms of what represents a critical history of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Firstly, it provides a synthesis of a century of history, which is unusual among Romanian authors who tend to narrowly delimit their periods of analysis, thus failing to highlight the lines of continuity in the evolution of this institution. Secondly, and more importantly, the author clearly distances himself from the apologetic and benevolent style in which this subject has been written about in recent decades, a fact that, over time, will prove beneficial even for the Church.