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BOOK REVIEWS

GIUSEPPE TATEO, *SUB SEMNUL CRUCII. CATEDRALA MÂNTUIRII NEAMULUI ŞI CONSTRUCȚIA DE BISERICI ÎN ROMÂNIA POSTSOCIALISTĂ* (ENG.: *UNDER THE SIGN OF THE CROSS: THE NATIONAL CATHEDRAL AND CHURCH CONSTRUCTION IN POST-SOCIALIST ROMANIA*), IAŞI: POLIROM, 2024, 264 P., ISBN: 9789734697359

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For a volume with such an intriguing title, it is fitting to begin by highlighting several clear strengths. I would start with the fact that Giuseppe Tateo's book is, to a considerable extent, the result of actual fieldwork, involving the collection of empirical data – albeit primarily up until 2018 – and the direct interaction with the actors involved with the church construction cause. Based on these elements, the resulting analysis was both necessary and, in many respects, highly accurate. The volume also represents a bold attempt to move away from the long-circulated idea of a "religious revival" recorded in Romania after 1989. This is noteworthy because the concept of "religious revival" is replaced by that of an "organizational revival" a term through which the author captures the efforts of the Romanian Orthodox Church to reassert itself publicly not only through the construction of churches and cathedrals but also through institutional expansion, penetration of the informational environment, and the streamlining of economic activities.

The book offers readers much more than its title might suggest. I would argue that it is not primarily – or not solely – about the construction of cathedrals, churches, and crosses, but rather about a particular dialogue, at times cordial, at other times tense, between the Church, the state, society, and the wider world. The building of churches and the construction of the National Cathedral are merely the visible forms of the political use of religion, reflecting

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Volume 14 (2025): 231-237
https://www.doi.org/10.61801/AUOC-SP.2025.10

the Romanian Orthodox Church's attempt not only to regain public visibility in the post-communist era (the author prefers the terms socialism and post-socialism) but also to reclaim its centrality in public life. From this perspective, one of the author's particularly intriguing observations, referencing Katherine Verdery, is that after 1989, all those who, at an individual or institutional level, considered themselves opponents or victims of the communist regime laid moral claims, operating within what could be termed a compensatory logic. Thus, the Romanian Orthodox Church felt entitled to build churches, cathedrals, or the National Cathedral in Bucharest as a form of moral – and possibly material – reparation for the religious edifices demolished during the 1970s and 1980s and for being expelled from the public sphere for several decades in the name of official atheism.

From a methodological standpoint, the author positions the work within the field of anthropology, partly due to the diverse documentation methods employed, which included participatory observation, ethnographic description, bibliographic and archival research, as well as legal and economic investigation. Two aspects stand out as particularly significant here because they represent obstacles the author faced and sought to overcome. First, there is the well-known opacity of the Romanian Orthodox Church in providing detailed and concrete information – either voluntarily or upon request – regarding, for example, the financing of the National Cathedral. This lack of transparency prompted the author to undertake a meticulous investigation based on press reports, documents, and records produced by the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs, as well as to catalog government decisions, emergency ordinances, and local council resolutions by various public authorities allocating funds. Second, direct contact with clergy, often for interviews, proved to be a challenge. One explanation, offered by the author, relates to media investigations in recent years that have exposed the Church's more controversial financial dealings. Published in a "sensationalist manner" (p. 35), these investigations have fostered a persecution complex among Orthodox clergy, making them reluctant to speak openly.

The bipartite structure of the volume, aside from facilitating a seamless understanding of the conceptual material and the arguments presented, identifies two highly intriguing themes for analysis. The first, as expected, revolves around the construction of the National Cathedral. This theme branches out into several chapters that foreground the secular history of the cathedral and its location; the parties involved in the project, ranging from the Romanian Orthodox Church, public and private financiers, to the construction workers; controversies regarding its name, aesthetics, architecture, and funding; and finally, the social fabric woven around this monumental endeavor, consisting of clergy, believers, pilgrims, and opponents of the project. The second part of the volume shifts attention to the broader industry of church construction in Romania and Bucharest. The author interprets this post-

Volume 14 (2025): 231-237
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communist effort as a form of religious revival. The theme of crosses is tackled in two distinct chapters, the first illustrating how their placement often serves as a political statement or as an affirmation of a particular vision of Romania's recent past. Lastly, crosses are also employed by certain groups to block the construction of a mosque in Bucharest, a chapter that is relevant to discussions about immigration, the impact of social media networks, and conspiracy theories.

Very concisely and with reference to the most important contributions in the field, the author manages to traverse more than a century and a half of complex relations between the Romanian Orthodox Church and state authority. Naturally, the starting point is the establishment of the modern state under Alexandru Ioan Cuza, a liberal revolutionary inspired by secular ideas and intentions. Cuza reformed the relationship between the State and the Church to subordinate the latter, not only in terms of property but also regarding the remuneration of clerical staff and administrative organization. Under Kings Carol I and Ferdinand I, orthodoxy held a privileged position within Romania's confessional landscape, and the collaboration between the state and the Orthodox Church proved essential for the successful process of nation-building. After 1945, analyses of the role and attitude of the Romanian Orthodox Church in its relationship with the atheist communist regime have been polarized. On one side, critics condemn what they see as an opportunistic pact with political power, accusing the Church of failing to oppose the regime. On the other side, some argue that entering into an agreement with the regime was a form of tacit resistance that ensured the Church's survival and the continued practice of worship. What is certain is that the Romanian Orthodox Church benefited from the dissolution of the Greek Catholic Church and later, from the mid-1960s, became complicit in Nicolae Ceauşescu's autarkic and nationalist project. After 1990, with the liberalization of the religious domain and the emergence of a clear confessional competition, the Romanian Orthodox Church sought to secure a dominant position within the political sphere.

We are accustomed to considering the topic of the construction of the National Cathedral as strictly contemporary. However, this perspective has the significant disadvantage of ignoring the history behind the cathedral idea, which, in Romania's case, spans nearly 150 years. Over this period, funds were allocated, the most suitable locations were identified and even consecrated, and architectural competitions were organized. The idea originates in the 1880s, shortly after Carol I became Romania's first king. It was intended as a symbol of the country's independence, the autocephaly of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and the Church's aspiration to assert its primary role within society. In the following decades, additional motivations emerged to justify the need for the building. In 1918, after the Great Union, a cathedral was envisioned to celebrate national unity and affirm a religious identity in a country now home to numerous ethnic and religious minorities. By 1925, with the proclamation of the

Romanian Patriarchate, the necessity of such a cathedral became even more apparent. However, despite the seemingly favorable conditions of those times, the project did not materialize, largely due to the political and cultural elites of the period, who held a more secular vision and who recognized that the Romanian state required schools, medical facilities, and administrative institutions. The case of Spiru Haret, Minister of Public Instruction and Religious Affairs, is well known; he redirected funds allocated for the cathedral to the renovation and construction of schools. In subsequent decades, the issue of the cathedral faded from focus due to the economic crisis, World War II, and the communist regime. However, after 1989, the Romanian Orthodox Church ensured the revival of the project and actively pushed for its realization. This time, in addition to debates on the necessity of the cathedral, controversies arose over its location. The site shifted multiple times, from University Square to Alba Iulia Square, through Carol Park, until it finally settled on Arsenal Hill (also known as *Dealul Spirii*), near the Palace of Parliament.

Finally, the chosen site carried a symbolic and emotional weight that could not be overlooked. The geography of that part of Bucharest was deeply marked by one of the greatest traumas of late Ceauşescu-era policies: the transformation of the urban landscape through the demolition of an entire architectural heritage. Renaissance churches and monasteries, neoclassical palaces, and Art Deco buildings were destroyed to make way for standardized apartment blocks, government buildings, wide boulevards, and the Palace of Parliament. Ceauşescu's goal was not merely to build a civic center but, more importantly, to control and manipulate collective memory. By altering the urban space, Ceauşescu sought to force Romanians to forget their past. From this perspective, the Church views the construction of the cathedral on Arsenal Hill as both a commemoration of the churches demolished in the 1980s and a moral and historical reconsecration of the entire area.

One of the most important ethnological observations made by the author is that, before transforming the urban landscape, the new cathedral initiated a social shift in the surrounding area and in Bucharest as a whole. Tateo notes that Patriarch Daniel's intention was to build an active community of believers around the edifice. To achieve this, a small chapel was erected in 2011 on the edge of the cathedral complex. This chapel quickly became an attraction in its own right. To serve there, the Patriarch brought a monk from Sihăstria Monastery, Father Ciprian Grădinaru, who had been a disciple of the renowned Elder Ilie Cleopa for ten years. Over time, Father Ciprian became one of the most popular spiritual figures in Romania.

Giuseppe Tateo provides an inventory of the arguments invoked by the Romanian Orthodox Church in support of the cathedral's construction that is comprehensive and clearly explained, even for less-informed readers. It begins with liturgical motivations, highlighting the Church's claim that the current cathedral on Patriarchal Hill is far too small to accommodate a large number of

Volume 14 (2025): 231-237
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believers and clergy during religious services. Secondly, the author proceeds with the argument stating that the new edifice will host major national events, commemorations, anniversaries, and festive ceremonies on national holidays. Thirdly, the cathedral is envisioned as a symbol of social and spiritual cohesion, serving not only liturgical functions but also charitable purposes. The fourth argument also relates to unity but emphasizes the cultural unity of the Romanian people, reflected in the Romanian Byzantine architectural style. In connection with this, the National Cathedral is intended to satisfy a sense of "national dignity", given that the Romanian Orthodox Church is the only Orthodox Church without a cathedral.

Addressing the legal grounds for the construction of the National Cathedral, the author references Law 261/2005, which, based on the Church's status as a public utility organization, justifies substantial state assistance for the construction works. On the one hand, this involves the allocation of public funds from central and local authorities, funds that are not subject to oversight regarding their expenditure or the organization of tenders. On the other hand, it includes the transfer of an 11-hectare plot in the city center, which the author sees as a striking example of the "desecularization" of property.

For many readers of the volume, perhaps the most intriguing part is the one addressing the funds allocated and spent on the cathedral project. Giuseppe Tateo dedicates a subchapter to this issue, and beyond the exact figures – which were valid as of 2018 – other conclusions stand out. For instance, when comparing the estimated costs of approximately 130 million euros (excluding VAT, painting, and finishing) with public fund allocations, the author concludes that the building is almost entirely funded by the state since the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs allocated the largest sums of money. However, the other religious denominations in Romania did not protest, given that they, too, received funding proportional to their number of believers, on the model of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Unsurprisingly, significant amounts were allocated during election years, such as 2014 and 2016, with the Bucharest City Hall being the second-largest financier.

Regarding private funding, such as sponsorships or donations from believers, the author estimates that these do not exceed 20% of the total costs and serve more of an auxiliary role, such as covering VAT or social contributions. While a fundraising campaign was launched, the Patriarchate did not impose a fixed amount of donations on parishes across the country.

Giuseppe Tateo also examines the most notable opponents of the National Cathedral project: a number of humanist associations that, in the early 2000s, contested public funding for religious denominations and the presence of the Church in education and administration, sometimes even protesting in the streets. Based on interviews with some members of these associations, the author concludes that their actions target the government and political sphere

Volume 14 (2025): 231-237
https://www.doi.org/10.61801/AUOC-SP.2025.10

rather than the Romanian Orthodox Church itself, though he notes the existence of a clear anticlerical tone in their discourse.

As with many aspects of this grand construction, even its name is not a recent or post-communist innovation. The title *Catedrala Mântuirii Neamului* (Eng. trans.: Cathedral of the Salvation of the Nation) dates to the interwar period, from the time when the first construction proposals emerged. However, now that the project has come to life and is nearing completion, the name has been contested by many, including conservative intellectuals or those close to the Church. For example, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Teodor Baconschi warned that the name is dangerously close to being an *ethnophyletism,* a heresy condemned by the Constantinople Synod in 1872, which involves an exaltation of ethnic and national elements at the expense of the duty of love for God. Similarly, Adrian Papahagi, professor at the Babeş-Bolyai University, sees this name as a continuation of the nationalist-communist rhetoric of the 1980s. Consequently, the Romanian Orthodox Church attempted to rebrand the cathedral, eventually adopting the name *Catedrala Națională* (Eng. trans.: National Cathedral).

Another well-known controversy in the public space revolves around the architectural style and the dimensions of the building. Once again, art critics such as Sorin Dumitrescu and Petre Guran have criticized the cathedra'ls style, advocating for a reproduction of the iconic Hagia Sophia. For some of these critics, the design of the cathedral is nothing more than an oversized version of a neighborhood church. However, Patriarch Daniel opted for a design that combines Byzantine style with specifically Romanian or Brâncovenesc features. As for the dimensions, these too have been heavily criticized, partly because their sheer scale is said to hinder the intimate spiritual experience characteristic of Romanian Orthodoxy.

The construction of the National Cathedral has also highlighted a particularly interesting and increasingly visible phenomenon: a pronounced anticlerical attitude among significant segments of society, which has led to a decline in the popularity of the Church as an institution. The triggering event was a tragic incident that turned into a national trauma: the Colectiv nightclub fire on October 30th, 2015. The Romanian Orthodox Church's failure to show empathy and solidarity with the victims and their families sparked resentment toward its hierarchy, including the Patriarch. Public hostility peaked when Romania's overwhelmed healthcare system struggled to care for hundreds of injured victims, while public opinion recalled its chronic underfunding, juxtaposed with government allocations for the construction of the National Cathedral. This led to the rallying cry of many protesters in November 2015: "We want hospitals, not cathedrals!"

The author made an uninspired choice when, attempting to illustrate another dimension of anticlerical sentiment – specifically, the Orthodox hierarchy's lack of reaction during the communist regime – he included a quote

Volume 14 (2025): 231-237
https://www.doi.org/10.61801/AUOC-SP.2025.10

from Ioan Ianolide, a well-known member of the Iron Guard, the interwar far-right movement, and a central figure in the neo-Legionary campaign *Sfinții închisorilor* (Eng. trans.: The Saints of the Prisons). There were certainly other examples that could have better demonstrated the complicity of the Romanian Orthodox Church's hierarchs with the communist regime.

Additionally, under the topic of anticlerical attitudes, particularly those aimed at bishops, Giuseppe Tateo also includes testimonies from priests about the excessive preoccupation of some hierarchs with raising funds by any means necessary, which is perceived as a betrayal of their Christian mission. Moreover, ordinary priests criticize the unchecked freedom and immense powers that bishops wield within their dioceses, leading to a system of "episcopal autocracy".

In light of the aspects analyzed, I would argue that Giuseppe Tateo's book stands out for its many qualities, achievements, and even groundbreaking contributions. His analysis of church and cathedral construction in post-communist Romania is undoubtedly a novelty and a bold undertaking, all the more so in an editorial landscape where authors often tread cautiously when addressing the intimate and unspoken connections between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the state.