

THE SERVICE OF THE CHURCH IN THE POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

Sorin Badragan

Lecturer, PhD, University of Bucharest

Abstract: The context of the Romanian society has changed significantly after December 1989, when the communist regime was overthrown. This created a real vacuum in the society, with its main actors unable to read the times and act accordingly. The church has been one of these – this paper explores how the church can serve a society which is still recovering after its communist era. The church could still contribute to the development of a society which is healthier and more prosperous.

Keywords: church, service, society, reconciliation, social work.

The social implications of the policies of the communist regime were seen and felt clearer after the December 1989 when the regime was overthrown: the ‘new man’ the regime strived to produce was actually a *homo autisticus*, as Alexandru Popescu put it. This social and political ‘autism’ was ‘characterized by alternative ways of thinking of and relating to other people, and by a self – protecting mentality and behaviour which were “politically correct” rather than morally acceptable.’¹ The mistrust among the people was symptomatic of the relationship with the church and the clergy too, who have been perceived as rejecting a closure on the challenging communist era issues. Another aspect that contributed to the fragmentation of the society consisted of the conflicts between the Romanian, Hungarian and Gypsy ethnic communities; in March 1990 there were violent clashes between the Romanians and Hungarians; on the other hand there are many reported incidents in some areas between the ethnic Romanians and Hungarians against the Gypsies, as the latter have not been convicted by authorities for alleged offences.²

The challenges for the Romanian society also come from political economic sides – with a poverty ranging between 30-40%, a troubled political scene on which most of the actors are former communists, a significant economic emigration which led to a population decline and very modest social protection policies, the Romanian society would need all the help that it could get.

Confronted with all these issues, the churches in Romania failed to address the needs of the people in the years after 1989 at the levels that were needed and the churches could have acted; the Orthodox theologian Ion Bria commented: ‘Life in society and church alike is distorted and incoherent. Nobody has yet offered an adequate description of the new reality, and as a result the image of the country is becoming anonymous.’³ However, the churches started to open themselves to the society around them and to seek ways to interact with it.

¹ ‘Belief and dissent in Post – Ceausescu Romania: Implications of Petre Tutea’s Mystical Theology in Post – Communist Years’, introductory paper for the Seminar on Theology and the Social Sciences, Nuffield College, Oxford, 25 February, 1997, p. 3.

² Tiberiu Dianu ‘Ethnic minorities in Post – Communist Romania: From Rhetoric to Integration’ on www.wcl.american.edu.

³ Ion Bria *Romania, Orthodox Identity at a cross – roads of Europe*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1995, p. 51.

The service of the church

We will look now at the ways in which the church is to serve; we have firstly considered the context in which the church is working, as this determines the content of the service of the church. In other words, we will think of the specific actions of a servant church in Romania; the principle of the church's servanthood may have led to different conclusions when applied to a different area or country.⁴

Definition of service

In communist years the churches were not given nor did they seek to have a significant social work; in the evangelical case, this withdrawal from the present world did not root only in their individualism in relation to their perception of salvation⁵ as well as in a spirituality understood as humble acceptance of repression and persecution, but also in a lack of hope for the world of this age, as communism incarcerated the dream of the world as a better place of Christians and non – Christians alike.

In the 'Wheaton Declaration' (1966)⁶ of the Congress on the Church's World Wide Mission, the evangelicals acknowledged the renunciation of the social involvement at the beginning of the twentieth century; this disengagement with social justice was a counter reaction to the rise of 'social gospel', one of whose exponents was the Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch. Few years later, they expressed penitence at the evangelicals' International Congress on World Evangelization held at Lausanne in 1974 for 'our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive.'⁷ This statement is followed by a commitment to social action; the latter is thought of as distinct from evangelism: 'Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio – political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.'⁸ However, many evangelicals tend to view social action as the means to the primary goal of the mission of the church, evangelism.⁹ Donald G. Bloesch goes to far when agreeing with Abraham Kuyper, who in his *Christianity and the Class Struggle* suggested that social service rendered not as a means for the gospel, 'may do more harm than good' and can actually be 'disastrous.'¹⁰ This approach implies that human beings themselves become the means by which the church fulfills its task, considered here as being the evangelization of all people. In a sense, the human beings are depersonalized; they become exclusively spiritual entities. On the other hand we have seen in the third section of the first part of this paper that authentic love serves the neighbour in his wholeness without any expectation.

⁴ In 'The Function of the church in society', J. H. Oldham asserts 'The Church has different tasks to fulfil in different conditions of social and political life;' in W. A. Visser 'T Hooft and J. H. Oldham *The Church and its Function in Society* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1937), p. 172.

⁵ H. F. R. Catherwood argues that the individualistic understanding of salvation should rather lead the Christians to be more involved in the society, trying to change it; in *The Christian in Industrial Society* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1964).

⁶ <http://bbs.kcm.co.kr> accessed 21 November 2001.

⁷ 'The Lausanne Covenant' in J. D. Douglas (ed.) *Let the Earth hear his voice. Official reference volume: Papers and Responses*, (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 4 – 5.

⁹ Donald G. Bloesch *The Invaded Church* [Word Books, Waco, 1975], p.27; Bloesch emphasizes that the priority is theological but necessarily chronological; p. 67. This is asserted in The Lausanne Covenant in the section 'The Church and Evangelism' in J. D. Douglas, op. cit., p. 5, as well as in Sherwood Eliot Wirt *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 152.

¹⁰ Op. cit., p. 102; Kuyper's book is mentioned on pages 101 – 2.

The evangelical theologian John Stott rightly regards social action and evangelism as distinct partners: ‘neither is a means to the other, or even a manifestation of the other. For each is an end in itself. Both are expressions of unfeigned love.’¹¹ These two aspects of the service of the church can also be found in the Orthodox conception of ‘*diakonia*’ which is an ‘offering intended for the whole man, for his total spiritual and material needs.’¹²

Each of the three constitutive relationships of the church indicates an aspect of the mission of the church: her relationship with Christ leads us to the ministry of proclamation of the good news of Jesus, that is to be his witness - *kerygma*; the rapport with the kingdom of God denotes the function of the church as creating redeemed communities in this world – *koinonia*; the bond with the Holy Spirit who fills the church with love designates the third function – *diakonia* – the social concern of the church for the benefit of the neighbour who is in need.¹³ Nevertheless, these links are not absolute and exclusive – for example the relationship between the church and the kingdom could also lead to a diakonic aspect, in the sense that the church is to make this world a better place to live in – however, emphasizing this point too much leads to a Ritschilian understanding of the mission of the church – the latter’s *raison d’être* is to build hospitals and schools etc - but that does not fit our line of thought developed so far; the links denote what we consider the main aspect of the mission of the church that follows from each of the three constitutive relationships. Therefore, as a servant of the kingdom, of Jesus Christ and of the neighbour in love, the church serves by witnessing to her Lord – her whole life is Christ - centred, creating communities as signs of the kingdom and by getting involved in social aspects that would help the neighbour whom she loves.

The proclamation of the Gospel

A message of reconciliation

The churches in Romania can serve their Lord, Jesus Christ by witnessing to him, to the work he has accomplished for the benefit of all people; this mandate is not only service rendered to Christ but also a responsibility to the world: ‘the Church has a responsibility to the world that through its service the world may learn of God’s great act of salvation in Jesus Christ.’¹⁴ This message of reconciliation addresses some great needs of the Romanian society. It is about the reconciliation with God but also of the reconciliation within the fragmented post communist Romanian society.

The call to the truth

The church needs to start speaking the truth about her submissiveness in the past, about the evils that happened during the communist times, as well as in the present. There cannot be a message of reconciliation without an invitation to hear the truth, to commit to live

¹¹ Ed. Timothy Dudley – Smith *Authentic Christianity. From the writings of John Stott* (Leicester: Inter – Varsity Press, 1995), p. 341. In another book, Stott argues that social concern of the church is rooted in a deeper understanding of the doctrines of God, of man, of Christ, of salvation and of the church; in *Issues facing Christianity Today*, (Basingstoke: Marshalls Books, 1984), pp. 13 – 25.

¹² *An Orthodox approach to diakonia. Consultation on Church and Service*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), p. 12.

¹³ Harvey Cox, who understands the ministry of the church as the continuation of Jesus’ threefold ministry as summarized in Lk. 4: 18, 19, also speaks of the threefold mission of the church using the words borrowed from Greek that we utilized above, only that for the scholar, the diakonic function is not social action but the acts of healing and reconciliation; in *The Secular City*, pp. 132 – 6.

¹⁴ Hendrikus Berkhof ‘The Church’s Responsibility for the World’ in Alan Richardson and Wolfgang Schweitzer *Biblical Authority for Today. A World Council of Churches Symposium on ‘The Biblical Authority for the Churches’ Social and Political Message Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), p. 249.

the truth as Jesus Christ was truth incarnate: ‘Reconciliation is not a scheme to silence those whose stories of the past need to be told completely. It is not about burying the truth in the disguise of forgiveness.’¹⁵ Access to the archives of the former ‘Securitate’ have opened the possibility for the Romanian churches to come to light in what regards their past. Some initiatives along these lines have been triggered by ecclesial or political interests, so there is still a need to address the issue in truth and with an openness that will lead to humility and repentance. One of the very few church leaders who admitted his collaboration with the communist regime - with the Securitate, was Orthodox Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu of Banat who spoke up the truth in 1997 and asked for forgiveness. He hoped that by proclaiming and living the truth, the church will raise the conscience of every Romanian to do penitence for the past and experience the liberation of mind and spirit.¹⁶ Another great example of public repentance is of a scholar who after admitting his collaboration with the former regime, suggests that for a national reconciliation ‘the truth has to be known, no matter how painful that could be.’¹⁷

A judgment of the evils of the society

The church’s invitation to hear the word of truth, to speak and live the truth brings an inescapable judgment on the ills of the Romanian society such as the corruption and the very large number of abortions.

A prophetic word

This way the churches will speak the prophetic word that the Holy Spirit wants to address to the society in general; it is not only the society who needs to hear that but also the church – she needs to let herself challenged and renewed by the power of the Word of God, living in obedience to the voice of the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

A message of hope

The churches could proclaim their message of hope for the future; it is the hope that characterizes the Christian life and which can be appropriated by a society that listens to and obeys the message of the cross. The stories of Easter and the second coming could be practices of encouragement, hope and determination to build a new community.

The contrast society

The aspects of the church’s proclamation mentioned above have to be a reality of her life. The church is indeed humiliated by the discrepancy between the New Testament standard and her actual situation.¹⁹ The imperative for penance and then renewal is to be listened and acted upon accordingly if the church wants to fulfill her mandate of servant of the kingdom of God. We have seen in the first part of the paper that the church is not identical with the kingdom but only its sign. This vocation of the church is to be seen in anticipating the fellowship of the kingdom, in cultivating the values of the kingdom: ‘righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.’ (Rom. 14: 17)

¹⁵ Gunnar Staalsett ‘The Role of the Church in Eastern Europe – Carrier of Hope!’ in ‘Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin, Vol. 70, No. 3, 1990, p. 10 cited in Frederick O. Brokowsky ‘Truth Telling in Eastern Europe: The liberation and the burden’ in *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 1991, p. 15.

¹⁶ ‘Interviu cu Nicolae Corneanu – Eliberare prin cainta’, ‘Evenimentul zilei’, 10 april 2004, No. 3699, p. 3.

¹⁷ Eugen Jurca ‘Scrisoare deschisa societatii civile – Am colaborat cu Securitatea’ ‘Evenimentul zilei’, 26 March, 2002, p. 3.

¹⁸ W. A. Visser ‘T Hooft *The renewal of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1956), p. 91. H. J. Schultz also sees the imperative for the renewal of the church, only that for him this is to take place exclusively for the benefit of the world; in *Conversion to the world* (London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 112, 18.

¹⁹ Albert H. Van den Heuvel *The Humiliation of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 50, 182.

The churches of Romania can be models of reconciled communities as they bring together reconciled persons who have to continue at a corporate level the ministry of reconciliation that God began in their lives. The church is the community governed by love, justice, equality, fellowship and hope; in this sense the church is a 'contrast society'.²⁰ This is not to say that the church is 'against society' but only that it is an alternative to the society based on egocentrism and injustice: 'The political novelty which God brings into the world is a community of those who serve instead of ruling, who suffer instead of inflicting suffering, whose fellowship crosses social lines instead of reinforcing them.'²¹ As an alternative to the society, the church is not to create or maintain boundaries between her and the society but to be an open community that strives to have an impact on the wider society.²²

Base ecclesial communities

There has not been any movement towards some sort of an articulated liberation theology neither before nor after the 1989 revolution; on the other hand the very existence of the church in a totalitarian regime points to a theology of liberation, as the church kept alive the hope under persecution and also gave a sense of freedom. However, many Christians were actively involved in the December 1989 revolution in bringing the liberation of the oppressed Romanian people. What the churches could do now regarding this aspect of service as being a loving community, creating grass roots communities especially in larger cities; here the poor and the despised would experience the harmony and the unity of the Christian life: 'the rites and the liturgies of the new community are her most urgent witness, since in them the church's true identity appears.'²³

Servant leadership

The evangelical Romanian churches need also to change their practice regarding their style of leadership. Many ministers in churches seem to be tributary to the authoritative model of the communist times. This is in opposition to the theology of the evangelical churches which emphasizes the priesthood of all believers and the equality of all the members of the church. A servant church requires servant leaders; the Spirit imparts the gifts to all believers so they are equipped for ministry and service (Eph. 4 : 11 – 2).²⁴

Social work

The gospel has a transforming power in the lives of all those who accept it; it brings changes in a person's conduct and in the relationship with the neighbour; the great revivals of the past reveal that the gospel can also change a society, its structures.²⁵ While this is nevertheless possible, the society and its structures - being more than the sum of their members - need to be confronted directly by the church. She has to take specific steps and get involved actively in social matters for the improvement of her neighbour's situation.

²⁰ John Fuellenbach *Church: Community for the Kingdom* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 196; as Fuellenbach asserts, this concept can be traced back to Gerhard and Norbert Lohfink.

²¹ John Howard Yoder 'A People in the world: Theological Interpretation' in ed. James Leo Garrett *The concept of the Believer's Church* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1969), p. 274.

²² William Temple suggests that the church should offer her principles to the society so that the latter will take the service as the Golden Rule – this is however, difficult to achieve; in *Christianity & Social Order* (London: Shephard – Walwyn, and London: SPCK, 1976), p. 73 – 7.

²³ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson *The two Cities of God. The Church's Responsibility for the Earthly City* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. ix.

²⁴ Howard Snyder *Liberating the Church. The Ecology of Church and Kingdom* (Basingstoke: Marshalls, 1983), p. 133.

²⁵ Hector Espinoza 'The Biblical Mission of the Church in Worship, Witness, and Service' in ed. J. D. Douglas *Let the Earth hear His Voice*, p. 1100. Also see the discussion in James Leo Garrett *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), pp. 499 – 501.

From the church's institutions to the state's

Should the church create her own structures to serve the society or should she work within the state institutions? J. A. T. Robinson answers this question bluntly asking the church to renounce her structures for a more direct contact with the world: 'the Church is the servant, and the first characteristic of a servant is that he lives in someone else's house, not his own...the churches [have] to serve within the structures in which they live.'²⁶ However, the post communist Romanian society has needed the churches to start projects that would help or replace the state institutions because of the insufficiencies of the latter. So the churches should continue to run their orphanages, the elderly people's homes, to show an active care of the homeless, education of the illiterate and helping poor. Moreover, the churches should take the side of the oppressed when the authorities deny the latter the basic rights; the Christians should get involved in asking for justice for all citizens alike. Also, the churches ought to be more intentional about creating their own institutions to permeating the structures of the state, making changes from within and influencing policies through democratic channels.²⁷

Conclusion

The notion of a servant church is rooted in the very nature of the church; she is to serve the kingdom of God by being its sign – a redeemed community, anticipating the life of the kingdom in this present world; the church is a servant of Jesus Christ, from whom she has to learn to serve and not to seek to be served – the church witnesses to the work Christ accomplished for the humankind; the church has to serve her neighbour as she is filled with the love brought by the Holy Spirit – the church ought to be actively involved in alleviating the suffering of the oppressed, in providing for the hungry and in the creation of a climate of justice for each person. The Romanian churches need to face this challenge posed by this imperative to be a servant church as seen in her very nature; should they be relevant and seek to fulfill their mandate, the churches in Romania will strive to apply this principle of a servant church to the context within which they function, always trying to bring the freshness and the joy that only the genuine service in love can produce.

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²⁶ *The New Reformation?*, p. 92, 27.

²⁷ Horst Symanowski speaks of this issue in his *The Christian Witness in an Industrial Society* (London: Collins, 1996).

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