

# THE PERSECUTION OF RELIGIOUS CULTS IN ROMANIA BY THE COMMUNIST REGIME: HOW AND WHY WAS IT POSSIBLE?

**Ana-Daniela FARCAȘ, PhD**

*Researcher, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca,  
North University Centre of Baia Mare, Romania  
anadanielafarcas@gmail.com*

**ABSTRACT: The Persecution of Religious Cults in Romania by the Communist Regime: How and why was it possible?**

The Church, one of the most important elements in Romanian society, has not always enjoyed freedom. Studies on religious freedom approached the problem from the perspective of political regimes that challenged the importance of religion. In Romania, even at the declarative level religious freedom was ensured by the Constitution from the beginning, starting with the communist regime, its freedom was linked to state policy. The Church was free only if it was considered that its practices did not harm the state and society. But with this condition, the Church was placed under the control of the state. This started the religious persecution. Through this analysis, we propose to offer a more complete perspective on the phenomenon of the persecution of the Church in the communist regime in Romania. Starting with the influence of Marxist doctrine and the Soviet model, then the historical chronology that follows the evolution of legislation and the seizure of control of the Church by the state, the article will also offer a series of political theories regarding the relationship between power and religion in totalitarian regimes.

**Keywords:** *religious liberty, control, totalitarianism, political power, Constitution*

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The relationship between religion (the Church) and state power is a controversial topic, especially when the main subject is the totalitarian state. As Romania was under the communist regime for 44 years (1945- 1989), that is to say, under a totalitarian leadership, this topic was also discussed by researchers in many areas of interest, in connection with what happened here.

The controversy consists in the fact that religion and state power had a dual relationship, in two opposite directions. On one hand, all the religious cults in Romania were persecuted by the state control organisms, and their prominent representatives, arrested or prosecuted. On the other hand, especially on the case of some representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church (the dominant religion), the Security (the political control body) benefited from the collaboration with high prelates, but also priests who turned faithful citizens over to the authorities, based on their confessions in places of worship. These collaborators with the communist regime were found out quite late, after the revolution of 1989, with the declassification of files from Security Archives.

One might ask how these things were possible. How could a duplicitous policy regarding the Church and its representatives exist and proliferate for such a long period of time? The topic is complex and there were several attempts to explain it.

The persecution of religious cults in Romania has taken place since the establishment of the communist regime, following the Soviet model, implemented earlier in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, but also in Ukraine<sup>1</sup>.

## **The Marxist vision of the world and of religion**

The main reason why the regime was not opened to religious cults consists in the Marxist ideology, reflected in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the authors of the Communist Manifesto, promoters of revolutionary socialism. In their criticism of the capitalist society, they pointed out the conflict between classes, on which the capitalist mode of production is based: the bourgeoisie (the owners of the means of production in agriculture and industry, they receive the profits without contributing too much to the production process) and the working class or proletariat (they constitute the majority, they are employed by the proletariat to produce goods and they do not really have control over their working environment). This ideology was largely accepted by the communist parties all over the world, serving as a model, as a desired mode of action, conducting to a new, better society.

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1 Thierry Wolton, *O istorie mondială a comunismului: Incercare de investigație istorică, Volumul 2: Când moare corul: Victimele*, București, Humanitas, 2019, p. 142.

„But the mistake rests here again on a deeper and truer basis. The capitalist mode of production is conditioned on the fact that the productive labourer sells his own labour-power, as a commodity, to the capitalist, in whose hands it then serves as an element of his productive capital.”<sup>2</sup>

The class inequality in the capitalist system, the exploitation of labour power by the bourgeoisie, generates internal tensions, struggles that could end up in self destruction of the economic and production system. As a solution to the situation, they propose a new form of political, economic and social organisation, in which the proletariat is no longer exploited, a world in which the private property and the class divisions are abolished. But in order for a change like this to occur, a revolution is needed, such powerful as to destroy the society as we know it and reinstate the new order. Of course, not every nation would have the ability to start such a revolution. In this sense, Marx observes the qualities of the French people, their revolutionary past and the Germans passivity, stating that Germany's revolutionary past is a theoretical one, embodied in the Reformation. In fact, the ideologue makes the apology for the said revolution and the abolition of religion using these comparisons between peoples.

In the introductory part of „A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right” Marx brings into discussion the criticism of religion by German philosophers, stating that „the criticism of religion is a prerequisite of all criticism”<sup>3</sup>. Hegel's conception on religion is summarized in this work, in which Marx is adding his own comments and additions.

First, the constitution and democracy are compared to religion. Man is the one who creates religion; the people are the ones creating the constitution, and not vice versa. From here, democracy is for state what Christianity is for the other forms of religion, that is, „the essence of religions, deified man under the form of a particular religion. In the same way democracy is the essence of every political constitution, socialized man, under the form of a particular constitution of the state”<sup>4</sup>. Although for the human beings religion and constitution are both important, often, in the

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2 Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2013, p. 879.

3 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, re-issued in digital printed version, 2009, p. 131.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 30.

past, the two were linked together. Religion served to give credibility and to support certain forms of constitution. There are large fragments related to this aspect in which Hegel's work is explained by Marx. The established connection between primogeniture and religion is analyzed in the same way we approach an old, past world. Religion also served another purpose: to encourage private property; one can even speak of a „religion of private property”, as primogeniture has become such absorbed with its nobility and autonomy and in this type of government private property „relates to itself in a religious manner”<sup>5</sup>. The same tendency, observes Marx, can also be distinguished in his era. From a temporal point of view, the Marxist theory is divided between the past and the author's present, the point from which the revolutionary movement must start, so that the future he projects can be reached. There is no abrupt break between the past and the present, because the meanders of the past are felt even in the present in terms of constitution, democracy, religion or private property.

Being a supporter of philosophy and critical thinking, the German theorist stands for the use of reason on a large scale, but starting with a group of promoters. The future he is aiming for it is only possible under certain specific conditions. First of all, the critical spirit must prevail in society, starting with the criticism of religion, in order to, then, reach the criticism of politics. According to the same model, the criticism of heaven will eventually be transformed into the criticism of earth and the criticism of religion into that of law. Religion is seen as the highest though form of brutality.<sup>6</sup>

The Marxist ideal consists in anchoring man in the reality in which he lives, in actuality, which is not abstract or fantastic. The state, the society and the individual (the man itself) are the real world in which we live. Religion offers an encyclopedic, general image of the world, in a logical form, can be the source of enthusiasm or moral sanction, it is the foundation for justification or consolation. However, the reality it shows it's illusory, an inverted world in which man finds his own reflection, his self-consciousness and self-esteem. Religion belongs to the man „who has either not gained himself or has lost himself again”. That is why Marx calls it „the opium of the people”. Through the veil of religion man gets to realize himself in a

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5 *Ibidem*, pp. 101-103.

6 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, re-issued in digital printed version, 2009, p. 103.

fantastic world, different from the real one; the happiness he gets is misleading, through religion he only finds a semblance of himself, a non-human, supernatural being. Abandoning religion is equivalent in this case with abandoning illusions, so that the human being, through the criticism of theology, can focus on his real needs, on the change that leads to true happiness. The critique of religion helps human being to regain his reason, to overthrow his own neglect, slavery, and degradation. The limits imposed by religion must be broken, for humanity to evolve, because man is not an exploited, enslaved creature, the world is not cruel, but meaningful and we can choose how to shape it for us to be able to lead a better life.<sup>7</sup> The man is the Supreme Being, meaning that he is the only one that matters, the only one capable of turning his life for the better. He lives in society, among other people, and people interact, influence each other, and communicate with each other. We are surrounded by and connected to other people, so that our life is conditioned by these relationships, by man. The real problems, the oppression of the working class can be identified when man is concerned with what is happening in his present time in society. Religion, with its fantastic, idealistic world distracts the human being, causing it to relate to a fictitious sphere, making it indifferent to the struggles of the proletariat.

The role of philosophy is paramount in socialist doctrine. Not only that the philosopher is the one in whose mind the revolution is born for German people, but philosophers and historians are responsible for establishing the truth, showing the depth of human alienation.<sup>8</sup> The relationship between philosophy and religion seems to be one of contradiction: both seem to depict reality in different, opposed ways, to discover the essence of the world. But, states Marx, religion is linked to an illusory reality, while philosophy is fixed on actuality. Not only that, but philosophy comprehends religion in this false reality, so the duality of essence the two seem to represent doesn't exist, as „religion is dissolved in itself”<sup>9</sup>.

Excluding the criticism of religion, the second specific criterion that Marx mentions is the universal emancipation of humans in society. In the last pages of the *Introduction*, he even offers two modes of action, two

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7 *Ibidem*, p. 131.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 132.

9 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, re-issued in digital printed version, 2009, p. 90.

possible scenarios, each with several steps, by which the emancipation of the people can be reached. These are important steps, because they will be applied later in Romania as well, with the accession of the communists to power. The emancipation will make possible the revolution that will change society, so that man will no longer be exploited by his fellow man. Nevertheless, all revolutions arise from people's needs; summed up, they create the material foundation of the revolutions. Karl Marx is aware of the fact that universal human emancipation is not possible in Germany and opts for a partial political revolution. He even anticipates how the revolution will unfold: first, a part of the civil society will succeed in the process of emancipation, gaining universal dominance over the rest of society. These people will start the spark for universal emancipation. The necessary condition for emancipation to become universal is linked to everyone's needs, to the universal rights of society. The rest of society must also wish the changes proposed by the enlightened class. Together, they all must strive for realizing the common goal. However, it is difficult for a group of people, even emancipated, to attract the whole society to a common ground. Only the rebellious energy and self-confidence are not enough. Dominance over society it is easier achieved by means of a scapegoat class. Another class must be created, representing „in itself all the defects of society”<sup>10</sup>. The enemy class, a different segment of society, will represent the adversary opposing the positive changes, and will serve as the embodiment of crime and subjugation. This is the scenario of the French revolution.

The second plan, this time closer-aligned to the spiritual characteristics of the German people, advises another course of action: the formation of a radical class, with no traditional roots, totally opposed to the political status quo, a class with a universal character (represented here by suffering). It will promote human qualities; its emancipation will take place at the moment of separation from the other spheres of society, at the same time emancipating them as well. Through emancipation society will be redeemed, but at the same time, society as it was known until that moment will disappear, going through a process of dissolution. If the dissolution of society could be represented by a class, then this class would be the proletariat. With the enlightenment of the proletariat, the order of things changed. The denial of private property by the proletariat has the effect of

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10 *Ibidem*, p. 139.

elevating this idea to the rank of principle in society, even though it was previously perceived by society as a principle of the proletariat, therefore of a lower grade<sup>11</sup>.

Both scenarios envisaged by Marx have certain specific features: although emancipation takes place on a different way, the process results in a shift of paradigm. In the first example, through a partial political revolution, society's needs become of utmost importance; the interests of the favored class are no longer represented. In the second illustration, the emancipation of the proletariat within the society from which it emerges brings with it a radical reorganization: the abolition of private property becomes a desideratum for the whole society.

Communism is going to replace the values and order that society has known until now. In this sense, a fragment of „Manifesto of the Communist Party” is revelatory: Christianity replaced the ancient religion and Christian ideas capitulated to the ideas of the Enlightenment, but all these changes developed under the law that „within the old society, the elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old ideas keep even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence”. Although the philosophical, ethical, religious and juridical ideas were replaced with the changes that occurred in different historical eras, philosophy, morality, religion and political science and law continued their existence. Communism will abolish all these eternal truths. The new order will not be installed on the ruins of the old one. Unlike the changes of the past, communism is constituted as a contradiction to these past experiences. This is necessary because all the human history until now has developed different forms of antagonisms in different eras. Only one thing remains common in all eras: the exploitation of a certain class (of a part of society) by another. Wanting to impose such radical changes, the communist revolution could only be accomplished through despotic means, which will seem illogical and economically insufficient<sup>12</sup>.

Hannah Arendt, the political theorist, tries to explain the reason why Friedrich Engels associated the idea of the Church with that of the

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11 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, re-issued in digital printed version, 2009, pp. 141-142.

12 Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Communist Manifesto*, New York, Prometheus Books, 1988, pp. 229-230.

aristocracy, noting that the political philosopher had in mind the examples from history in which the aristocracy positioned itself against the Jews. With their last strength, the aristocrats tried to ally with the Church, symbol of conservatism, to fight against liberalism. The main purpose of this alliance was the strengthening of the positions and the greater dissemination of the message of the aristocrats<sup>13</sup>. Or the aristocrats, the bourgeoisie are enemies of the working man.

Marxist concepts were formed as a consequence of the spirit the time, of the mentality of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main work in which he presented his theory regarding religion, „Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” appeared in 1843, a period characterized by great changes in society, armed conflicts and social movements which led to the creation of new states. The French Revolution, the starting point of a new era in Europe, took place over a period of ten years (1789-1799). It was, as can be observed, a major inspiration for Marx regarding the socio-political reorganization he desired. The revolutionaries’ dissatisfaction was triggered due to the social inequities in society, on a background of a Europe tried by wars, with a precarious economic situation, in which the peasants and the workers suffered from hunger since they could not find better paid work. The revolution changed the French political regime from monarchy to constitutional republic, bringing to the attention of the world the problem of the rights for ordinary people and the need to represent their interests. Although the changes that devastated the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not occur at the same pace and at the same time in all states, the impact of this social movement cannot be disputed, as Frevert and Haupt also point out: the recognition of human and citizen rights, the participation of all classes in political life, the liberation from the constraints of the lower classes and other restrictions, „the sovereignty of the nation made up of citizens, anchoring the regime to a constitution”<sup>14</sup>.

1832 is the year when the Great Reform Act was introduced in England and Wales, allowing the right to vote for a larger part of the population. The British Empire abolished slavery in 1833. There are also other notable conquests of humanity in this century: industry flourished, leading to an ever-increasing number of workers employed in factories, to the

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13 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, San Diego, New York, London, A Harvest Book. Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979, pp. 389-391.

14 Ute Frevert, H.-G. Haupt, *Omul secolului al XIX-lea*, Iași, Polirom, 2002, pp. 8-9.



detriment of those in the agricultural field - thus the urban population increased a lot, through internal migrations from the countryside, to cities, where factory work was remunerated; scientific discoveries and the ingenuity of engineers have brought attention to fields neglected until then: biology, physics, medicine, chemistry. Darwin's voyage on Beagle started in 1831 and ended in 1836. The observations from his travels helped the researcher to develop the well-known evolutionary theory, which he will make public in 1858 and will publish it in the famous work „On the Origin of Species” in 1859.

It can be said that this century was characterized by the orientation towards reason, towards logic, both in the scientific and philosophical fields. It was a period in which the ideas of the rationalist current of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were cemented among citizens and theorists. More precisely, the philosophical theories of Descartes, Immanuel Kant or Hegel, which advanced the idea of man as a thinking, critical being, express the Enlightenment ideal of man's possibility to get out of an inferior state by practicing rational and critical thinking<sup>15</sup>.

As it usually happens with new ideas and orientations that permeate society, the old, opposing, conservative ones receive an impulse to emerge again. And in this case, the phenomenon led to a rebirth of religion through miracles that managed to attract crowds of believers in Europe. If men tended to move away from these forms of devotion being attracted to the political scene, women continued to remain religious and look for new ways to show their love for God. There was a feminization of the clergy and a change in religious values towards feminine qualities<sup>16</sup>.

## The Historical Perspective

The historical analysis of the communist regime in Romania highlighted the fact that religious persecutions were more numerous in the early years of this form of political organization. The religious persecutions were conducted since 1944, under the pretense of purging the state institutions of fascists, legionaries, Hitlerites or other elements in the service of foreign interests. The beginning of the totalitarian era was marked by the entry

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15 Marco Drago, Andrea Boroli, *Enciclopedie de filosofie și științe umane*, București, All Educational, 2004, p. 903.

16 Ute Frevert, H.-G. Haupt, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11, 106-108.

into force, in October 1944, of laws no 486 and 594, which allowed the dismissal of civil servants and their replacement, based on the charges mentioned above. Also, there were campaigns to unmask these people who could not be controlled by the communist party, under the same accusations. The duplicity of the regime could be observed since the beginning: the dismissed priests were replaced by clerics with a compromising past (even though some of them had been legionnaires), willing to obey the leadership and to be „reeducated” in the spirit of the doctrine.

With the tightening of legislation in 1945, the punishments that could be applied to people who could be removed from service included internment in special camps. The clemency for clerics found guilty was conditioned by the unequivocal collaboration with the authorities in the service of the Communist Party<sup>17</sup>. Until 1947, the relations between the Ministry of Cults and the high Orthodox prelates were tense, against the background of these purges and the passing of some representatives of the clergy to the side of the party, becoming informers or advisers. The collaborators facilitated the process of changing the members of the Synod, the refractory members being replaced by others, who had a pro-communist attitude.

In 1947, the Orthodox patriarch Irineu Mihălcescu (Metropolitan of Moldova), with a doctorate in philosophy defended in Leipzig, was replaced by Justinian Marina, former countryside priest. Apart from these replacements (supported by recent legislation) of people who opposed the regime, there were also a number of suspicious deaths of priests from the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church. Since the internal organization of the Romanian Orthodox Church did not allow the communist regime to intervene in the election of hierarchs and in the church's power structures, in 1948 the Law of Cults promulgated in 1928 was repealed and a series of new regulations were introduced, among which the obligation of cults to offer religious services at national ceremonies „prescribed by laws or journals of the Council of Ministers, as well as at occasional ones, communicated by the Ministry of Cults”. In addition, upon entering office, the priests and bishops had to take an oath by which they committed themselves to be faithful to the people and to defend the country from internal and external

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17 Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrinu, Cristian Vasile, *Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România: Raport final*, București, Humanitas, 2007, p. 259.

enemies.

Even now, differences could be observed regarding the attitude to these changes between the Orthodox Church and the Greek-Catholic Church (United with Rome). The Greek-Catholic prelates opposed the mandatory oath, while Justinian Marina, the newly replaced patriarch, did not object.

A new decree in August 1948 in the Law of Cults, brought a new important change: if in the law of 1928 religious cults benefited from freedom and state protection, in Decree 177, although on a formal level, freedom of conscience and religion were guaranteed on the territory of the Romania People's Republic (form of state organization at the moment), an article of this law stipulated the conditioning of the freedom of cults by their practices, which had to be in accordance with the Constitution and not be against good morals and public order. Through this decree, the administration of religious issues was taken over by the state. The control of cults and churches came under the charge of the Ministry of Cults, which thus acquired the right to suspend or annul decisions and measures related to church administration, philanthropic, cultural, educational activities, if it was considered that they would contravene public order, the statutes organization of worship, administration laws and state security<sup>18</sup>.

The relationship between the ministry and the cults was mediated by the proxies for the cults in the territory, who were also called „special delegates”. They existed in every county and were responsible for informing the party about everything that was happening in the churches. The proxies for cults enjoyed great authority over this field, being responsible for all the punishments to those considered guilty or undesirable in cult structures. They were the source of many conflicts between the party and the cults, fueled by their forceful interventions. The proxies' activity was based on the regulations received from the Security or the Ministry of Cults.

According to Tismăneanu, in a study by the Directorate of Studies of the Ministry of Cults, during this period three ways of solving the problems regarding religious cults were proposed, in accordance with the lines followed by the Russian policy: the first proposal consisted in cohabitation with the monastic phenomenon, without interventions from the

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18 Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrinu, Cristian Vasile, *Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste din România: Raport final*, București, Humanitas, 2007, p. 260.

state. It was expected that the problems will sort themselves out naturally, with the passage of time. Religious mysticism will disappear as the state develops, the influence of religions thus being minimized until the point of disappearance. Although it was the most pacifist solution, it was not taken into account by the political class because of its idealistic character. The second and most radical proposed model consisted in the prohibition of religious practices and the abolition of places of worship. The model could not be adopted on a large scale due to fears of opposition from the population. The third solution, successfully applied, consisted in infiltrating inside the cult a number of trustworthy people. With their help, control over the administration and organization of religious cults could be imposed. The application of the solution was achieved with the support of the legislation, which had the effect of limiting the power and freedom of the cults, with the aim of gradually diminishing their influence. Through the interference of the state in the organization of religious cults the desired effects consisted in reducing the number of believers and the removal of Romanian people from the religious influence<sup>19</sup>.

A series of studies on religious persecution in Romania established the fact that they took place mainly in the period between 1945 and 1964. Most of the clerics arrested in 1945 passed through the Caracal camp, priests from all religious denominations being brought here. In the same year, the clerics were released, but the monitoring of their activities continued, as they were likely to be arrested again. In 1948, the Department of State Security (or Securitatea), the state control body was founded, which led to an increase in arrests. Research on Orthodox persecutions has revealed that approximately 1725 Orthodox priests were arrested during the communist period in Romania. Among the arrested were also close friends of the new patriarch, Justinian. In his case, the duality of relations between the Orthodox Church and the state is well highlighted: even if he did not oppose the regime's involvement in the cult's activity, he requested the dioceses at the national level to draw up lists of all the detained clerics. The lists were sent to the Ministry of Cults, with the request to verify the justice of the arrest measures, an action that was cataloged by the regime as inconsistent with the government, but in the country, it was interpreted as

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19 Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrinu, Cristian Vasile, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

a victory of the Orthodox Church over the state<sup>20</sup>. Because the authorities were interested in suppressing the religious phenomenon, part of their actions were directed against the monasteries.

A decree from 1959 followed the dissolution of several monasteries and the removal of many monks from the monastic life. In March 1960, there were only 132 Orthodox monasteries, 92 monasteries having already been banned in the period before or after the decree<sup>21</sup>.

The repressions against the Catholic Church United with Rome (or the Greek Catholic Church) were much harsher. Prior to the persecution of Greek Catholics in Romania, the same thing happened in Ukraine. Starting in 1945, Stalin forbade the practice of Greco Catholic worship here. Being under the sovereignty of Rome, these clerics were considered traitors. The leaders of this Church were removed from their positions, the churches were passed under the property of the Orthodox Church and the believers were forced to convert to orthodoxism. At the same time, clerics who resisted Stalin's measures were deported<sup>22</sup>.

The oppression of the Greek Catholics in Romania begun after the establishment of the communism. In 1947, Patriarch Alexei of Russia, on an official visit to Romania, made known Russia's position towards the Church United with Rome. He ordered that the Greek Catholic Church to be dissolved from Romania in two years. In previous years, the Greek Catholic clergy was put under pressure. They were fired, arrested, and the catholic high school graduates were prohibited from enrolling in universities.

On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1948, the union of the Greek Catholic Church with the Orthodox Church was proclaimed. Until the end of the month, all six catholic bishops were already arrested and incarcerated in Sighet prison. After the cult was outlawed, secretly, six other bishops were appointed to take the place of the arrested ones, by the Apostolic Nuncio. Of the twelve bishops, four died in Sighet prison (known for the high mortality rate of prisoners) and other two died in the prison belonging to the Ministry of Internal Affairs or in the hospital in Bucharest, due to the harsh conditions they were subjected to. The memoirs of some of the arrested catholic bish-

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20 Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrinu, Cristian Vasile, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

21 *Ibidem*, p. 277.

22 Thierry Wolton, *O istorie mondială a comunismului: Incercare de investigație istorică, Volumul 2: Când moare corul: Victimele*, București, Humanitas, 2019, pp. 142-149.

ops attest to the involvement of Orthodox Church in their detention on Orthodox monasteries. Moreover, the relations between the two religious cults during the period were strained, due to the support offered to the regime by the Orthodox Church. It is estimated that a number of approximately 600 Greek Catholic clerics ended up in communist prisons, some of them being arrested more than once<sup>23</sup>.

With the approval of decree 358 from December 1948, as a result of the union of the two Churches, the Church United with Rome was outlawed. The decree stipulates that all forms of organization of the Greek Catholic Church (Metropolis, Episcopates, congregations, monasteries, deaneries, associations, etc.) will cease to exist, so even the practice of the religion was banned. In article 2 of the same decree, it is mentioned that all movable or immovable assets belonging to the cult will immediately pass into the possession of the Romanian State, part of these to be distributed to the Orthodox Church and its component parts.<sup>24</sup>

In Romania, the believers were also encouraged to convert to Orthodoxy. Because the Greek Catholic clergy recognized the authority of the Vatican, the communist regime declared them dangerous and accused them of treason, by representing the interests of a foreign state.

As it appears from the anthology edited by Gellu Hossu, only three bishops survived the Sighet prison. They were released from prison at the beginning of 1955, but they will be imprisoned for a month in a secret villa, and then sent to a hospital in Bucharest. Because they did not yield to the pressure, refusing to convert to Orthodoxy and still requesting freedom for the Church United with Rome, they were transferred to the Curtea de Arges monastery in May of the same year, and in 1956 they were transferred to the Ciorogârla monastery.

In spite of the ban, in the country, services were secretly held in the Greek-Catholic rite. Some priests held services in the homes of the faithful or held funeral services. Therefore, the practice of this religion did not stop during the communist period, but the services were clandestine. The Information Service in Romania, also known as Security, was aware of these things, but could not do much; in fact, there was a fear that a revolt could be initiated in support of the Greek Catholic Church. The measures tak-

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23 Vladimir Tismăneanu, Dorin Dobrinu, Cristian Vasile, *op. cit.*, pp. 278-279.

24 Ministry of Cults, Decree 358/02 December 1948, online: <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/22875>, accessed in 25<sup>th</sup> of July 2022.

en consisted of arrests of those involved or suspected of these practices. An example in this sense is the Greek Catholic liturgy that took place in Cluj-Napoca, on August 12, 1956, which was attended by several thousand believers. Immediately after this, the authorities made arrests in all the centers (locations) known to be predominantly Greek-Catholic<sup>25</sup>.

Only after the revolution of 1989, with the fall of the communism, was the situation partially rectified, by Decree no. 9 in December, by which a number of laws and decrees were repealed. Among these, Decree no. 358/1948, „for the establishment of the legal situation of the former Greek-Catholic cult”<sup>26</sup> was annulled.

### **Political Theories on the state-Church Relationships in the Communist Regimes**

A series of political analysts, historians and philosophers tried in their research on totalitarian or communist regimes to explain the problematic relationships between the State or authorities and the Church. Thus, a few theories were developed regarding the struggle for power between the two parts.

Thierry Wolton offers a justification based on the differences between the two main religions discussed so far. He follows the way in which the political discourse on Church changed in the communist regime. The 1923 Constitution declared the Orthodox and the Greek-Catholic Churches as Romanian Churches. The Orthodox being the majority was therefore considered dominant in the Romanian State<sup>27</sup>, but it was stipulated that the Greek-Catholic Church had precedence over the rest of the cults (except the Orthodox one). Nevertheless, the most important aspect consisted in the passage of the Orthodox Church under the control of the Romanian State, its organization and operation following a special law. The Constitution also specified the fact that the relations between the

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25 Iuliu Hossu et alii, *Credință sub teroare: memorialistica Greco-catolică de detenție și domiciliu obligatoriu: o antologie*, București, Humanitas, 2021, p. 27.

26 The Council of the National Salvation Front, *DECREE-LAW no. 9 of December 31, 1989, regarding the abrogation of some normative acts*, online: [http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis\\_pck.htp\\_act?ida=9](http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.htp_act?ida=9), accessed in 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2022.

27 Romanian Parliament, *Romanian Constitution of 1923*, Online: [http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis\\_pck.htp\\_act\\_text?id=1517](http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.htp_act_text?id=1517), accessed in 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2022.

other religious cults and the State will be established by law. Thus, the Romanian State made sure that it had control over the religious cults, something that was also realized later, by the replacement of the patriarch or the bishops with people willing to collaborate with the existing regime. In the process of oppressing the Church, the communists used the old dissension between Orthodoxy and Greek Catholicism. As can be seen in the historical perspective, the first step was the dissolution of the Greek-Catholic Church, after which the pressures of the regime also increased on the Orthodox Church. While over 1700 Orthodox priests will be imprisoned, Patriarch Justinian and the hierarchs at the head of the Orthodox Church will continue to support the communist regime. The political speech will use the Orthodox Church to prove or support its legitimacy, based on its ancestral roots<sup>28</sup>.

If in the case of the Church United with Rome the question of obtaining control by the authorities could not be conceived, because it recognized only the authority of the Vatican, in the case of the Orthodox Church, the communist takeover was possible through a series of legislative mechanisms and through abuse of power, which had to be somehow legitimized. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why the state needed the Church, the two institutions becoming closely linked. Therefore, the political discourse since the establishment of communism in Romania linked Orthodoxy, the national Church, to the idea of the people: the Orthodox Church belongs to the Romanian people since ancient times, but „the people is the state”<sup>29</sup>. The two institutions are linked and have as finality the interests of the people, so they must collaborate. With the arrival of Nicolae Ceaușescu to the presidency, the term „people” was replaced by that of „nation”, in the sense of ethnicity. Moreover, the ethnic cleansings from the communist period took place mainly under this president. The state and the Church have the role of preserving and continuing the Romanian identity.

The collaboration between the Orthodox Church and the political power did not start in the Balkan countries with the communist regimes. Wolton shows the tradition has been preserved since the Byzantine period, when the Ottoman Empire dominated several religious communi-

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28 Thierry Wolton, *O istorie mondială a comunismului: Incercare de investigație istorică, Volumul 2: Când moare corul: Victimele*, București, Humanitas, 2019, pp. 147-148.

29 *Ibidem*, p. 148.



ties, which later used the Church to express their national character. The links between administration and religion had the role of substantiating the formation of nation-states in later history. The Orthodox Church and the Greek-Catholic Church had an important role before and during the Union of the Romanian Principalities in 1918. Both were the basis of the resistance movement against foreign powers in the Romanian Principalities and led to the strengthening of religious and national sentiment. By awakening the national consciousness of the Romanian people, in an era in which more and more territories fought for independence, the two Churches left their mark on a special historical event: the creation of the Great Romania. Inspired by the Enlightenment movement, prominent members of these Churches supported the struggle for national rights. Both Churches had numerous representatives present at this event, which supported the cause and signed for the union of the principalities. The Greek-Catholic bishop Iuliu Hossu was the one who read in Alba-Iulia the Resolution of the Great Union in 1918, being chosen to be part of the delegation that was going to present the decisions in Bucharest, before king Ferdinand<sup>30</sup>.

The way the Orthodox Church perceives the world is another characteristic that made collaboration with the political regime possible. Here there is no clear division between sacred and profane, no individual salvation, but a collective one, even if not in the earthly domain. Also, there is no real separation between the powers, regarding the spiritual and the profane. In the relationship of the Orthodox Church with the political power, the Church can serve the power, without this being understood as dangerous for spirituality, as long as the two domains are not perceived in the same plane<sup>31</sup>. Man's life unfolds on two planes: the earthly one, in which he is a citizen living in society, and the spiritual one, in which he obeys the Church rules and the order established by the Church. In the earthly plane man can live according to the rules imposed by the state, as long as they do not contradict the spiritual order. In the Catholic Church salvation is individual and the final judgment depends on the way the respective person lived his life.

Milovan Djilas makes a comparative analysis between communism

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30 Iuliu Hossu et alii, *Credință sub teroare: memorialistica Greco-catolică de detenție și domiciliu obligatoriu: o antologie*, București, Humanitas, 2021, p. 20.

31 Thierry Wolton, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

and the Church. Although both the Christian Church and the communist totalitarian regimes appealed to dogma and fanaticism, the two differ in the purpose of the actions<sup>32</sup>. Often they justify their actions through the idea of sacrifice for the good of all. For the communist regime, dogma consists in Marxist doctrine. Communists want state authority and socio-economic power, and for this they use force, persecution, and intellectual control, these being used to increase state authority. The Christian Church, on the other hand, has focused throughout history on the spiritual salvation of people, even if this could be achieved by killing them (destruction of the physical bodies for heretics).

Power belongs to religion and to the state, both exercise influence over the masses of people, which can be translated by the power they have over society. Both the Church and the state offer a set of rules that have the role of ordering and ensuring the functioning of the group, of society. In Culianu's perspective, religious rites have a multiple value, depending on the roles they assume: they are social, uniting the group that practices them, they are ecological, transmitting the necessary information for the group's balance in its own environment and they have a psychological role because the individual cultural values can be assimilated into rites. In addition, „religious rites can constitute an area of fulfillment of power” in socially acceptable forms<sup>33</sup>. If we accept all these values, taking into account the similarities between the state and religion in relation to the power they exercise, it is interesting to observe to what extent the state fulfills the roles mentioned above. Of course, the rules and prohibitions imposed by the state differ in many aspects from those imposed by religion. However, it cannot be denied that both appeal to a set of established rules to exert their influence on the masses. Therefore, it is not surprising that some authors, referring to totalitarian political regimes, consider that these regimes (the communist one, also) try to replace the idea of God with that of the party, by annihilating religion. Their goal is for the party (or the state) to end up being the one worshiped, feared and listened to.

In this sense, Voegelin makes an observation related to the process

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32 Djilas Milovan, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1957, p. 150.

33 Gianpaolo Romanato, Mario G. Lombardo, Ioan Petru Culianu, *Religie și putere*, Iași, Polirom, 2005, p. 190.

of secularization and how it can change religion. The secularization process consists in the transfer of all that belongs to the Church to the state property. In other words, what the communists achieved in Romania with the help of the new legislation. With secularization, the main change suffered by religion is the descent of the holy into the mundane. From this decay, Voegelin concludes that there can be only one result: worldly problems end up being the main concern, spiritual ones taking a back seat or being replaced by science, something the author compares to an apocalypse. Therefore, the way in which the current movements tend to be constructed as not only political movements, but also religious ones (what he calls political religions), is a dangerous tendency that must not be allowed to take place. If normally the concepts regarding the state and religion are separated, through the process of building political religions, the limits between these concepts diminish, and the religious sphere comes to include different elements that belong to the state, but which can be interpreted as having a religious nature. In the same way, it must be seen to what extent the concept of the state can include elements of the organization of society without including religious aspects, knowing that since antiquity, only those who were considered the messengers of the gods on earth could govern. God reveals itself only to the ruler and only the ruler can interpret the will and word of God.

Any slippage must be avoided, because the changes it would produce in the essence of the human being would be radical, man not being able to transcend existence through uplifting spiritual experiences. The reality offered by the state is not sufficient for the human being. He is limited to realizing its desires in the field of the real, which is far from ideal. Man's daily struggle for a better life is finally translated into his fall into an abyss of nihilism. Because of that, Marx and Engel's philosophy of history is seen as a bringer of the apocalypse. The two thinkers start their criticism of religion from the conclusion that religion, with its symbolic system, is not based on scientific methods and is formulated in a way that promotes the interests of a certain class. A community is the realm of politics, but also, of religion, it takes into account both, the organization of power, legislation, as well as religious organization, experiences and symbols, notes Voegelin. Oftentimes, political language is interspersed with expressions or symbols taken from religion or intended to produce exaltation. In reality, politics and religion have points where they intersect each other. But neither knowledge

(science, politics), nor Christian determinism can provide a clear answer regarding God or being. Therefore, both politics and religion must coexist in society, because if the transcendental realm disappears. In the case of scientific socialism, the mystery disappears; society is governed by atheism, secularization, and indifference to the specifically religious way of seeing the world. Everything is scientifically explained. Science becomes the only form of credible knowledge. The problems of the everyday world thus become so present for the human being, reaching to seize him that God seems to hide or disappear behind the world. „And when God is invisible behind the world, the contents of the world will become new gods; when the symbols of transcendent religiosity are banned, new symbols develop from the inner-worldly language of science to take their place.”<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The revolutionary soar specific to the 18th and 19th centuries was perpetuated in the collective mind, the repercussions manifesting in the desire to change the old feudal order with structures inspired by the theory of a utopian society (socialism). The French revolution had an indisputable influence on the great political thinkers who inspired the soviet policy, guided by the saying „the end justifies the means”, which was highlighted by the usage of violence and the lack of scruples they showed.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century, characterized by a change in the world view, from a philosophical, political, social and scientific point of view, contributed to the birth of scientific socialism, which had Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as its parents. As its name suggests, the new doctrine was based on the belief that society can evolve only if the old thinking, based on an expired ideology and on a way of organizing society that favors the owners of the means of production, will be replaced with a thinking based on the methods of science. What Marx proposes is a revolution, a change of paradigm. For this to be achievable, the old ways must be replaced, so that the radical change he proposes is possible. In the new society he imagines, the proletarian, the working man, represented by the state, ends up taking over the reins. Private property is abolished, the means of production become the property of the state, and the worker is paid as he deserves. The transition

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34 Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 5, Modernity without Restraint*, Columbia and London, The University of Missouri Press, 2000, p. 60.

to a centralized state system is made. Religion does not have an important role here: in the society dominated by scientific rationalism there is no place for mysticism and things unproven by scientific methods. Moreover, religion is perceived as a veil over people's eyes, which evades them from the true reality, making possible the existence of social classes and promoting the rights of the bourgeoisie. Therefore, it was desired to transform the society in an atheist one.

The ideas of this doctrine were taken over by the socialists, who formed several groups or parties, some more radical than others. Through the ideology they promoted, which followed the guidelines stated in the works of the two thinkers, they managed to influence the masses and make them act in the desired direction. Those who created the models that were implemented in the Soviet Union, with the fall of tsarist rule, were Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Joseph Stalin. The two pursued a totalitarian policy, making use of all possible methods to remove their opposition and to implement the changes through which they promoted the Marxist ideal. The tactics they used included the use of violence and the control of all branches of society, the economy and the Mass Media. The Soviet example was adopted by the members of the Romanian Communist Party, both in terms of propaganda, and through the manipulation and control techniques they exercised. The Russian influence on the way society was organized and led in Romania is due to Moscow's dominance over the communist countries. The theories that try to explain the way totalitarian regimes relate to society and the way power is exercised, managed to identify a series of common elements, which were also used in the case of the communist states. Depending on how pronounced the radical character of the communist states was, the stronger was the control over society.

Most studies on the relationship between political power and the Church in the communist period are based on only one perspective. The research carried out takes into account either Marx's dialectical materialism (the doctrine he developed together with Engels), or the sequence of events from a historical point of view, or, finally, one theory or another regarding totalitarian regimes. For a more in-depth understanding of the proposed issue, we consider that a mosaic-type look is necessary, in which several perspectives offer a more complete picture of how the communist political regime interacted with the Church, how the Church was used and for what purpose and what was the basis of religious persecution. If the

perspective of the Marxist doctrine shows the foundations of the ideology which by actions of party members led to the social-political changes in the communist regime, the historical perspective is the one that provides the model according to which the respective ideology was implemented in the Romanian society, following the Soviet example. Last but not least, the theories analyzed in the last part of the article, through the similarities and differences they identify between religion and politics, try to offer explanations about how religious persecution was possible, at the same time that the Church was used and as a means of legitimizing the communist party and the abusive use of power. We cannot omit the importance that the Church once played in political life and the influence of Catholic clergy in state affairs (see for example the Dreyfus Affair).

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