

Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Biserica de stat sau biserica în stat? O istorie a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române. 1918-2023*, București: Humanitas, 2023, 458 p., ISBN: 978-973-50-7919-2.

Nicolae Drăgușin*

Over the past three decades there was a resurgent body of literature on the history of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the 20th Century. This literature has some distinctive features. Three are, in my opinion, of particular importance. First, it consists mainly on studies or book chapters that address specific topics. Secondly, it is authored mainly by laymen of various professional backgrounds such as history, political science, theology and very few by Church historians ordained in the Romanian Orthodox Church. Thirdly, there is a genuine interest of foreign authors, mainly from prominent Central and Western universities, in researching the history of the Christian Denominations in Romania.

One such author is Oliver Jens Schmitt a Swiss-born and Austrian naturalized historian that is already very familiar in south-east European countries for the books he published on important and sensitive topics of contemporary history. In Romanian he published the exhaustive biography of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the undisputed leader of Romanian fascism. For our purpose, it is relevant to highlight from the very beginning that the book we review here is the first on the 20th and beginning of 21st history of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Having already one year since its publication (spring of 2023) we are able to say that *Biserica de stat sau biserica în stat?* is one of the few books that triggered various reactions from academic reviewers, being even attacked under the guise of academic approaches. Very few of these reactions convinced that their authors really understood what Oliver Jens Schmitt intended in this book. Instead of focusing on details, methodological discussions are of utmost importance.

These reactions also give us an indication that writing the history of a Church is not an easy and comfortable endeavour. It is not easy both for the Church-affiliated historians and for the secular historians. The former prefer to focus on a past that goes up to the 19th Century; when it comes to 20th Century, only recently (precisely since 2007), did they start to look selectively on a convenient side of it, that is the communist persecution

* Nicolae Drăgușin, Scientific Researcher III, “Elie Wiesel” National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, str. Alexandru Colfescu nr. 137, 140058 Alexandria, jud. Teleorman, nicolaedr@yahoo.com.

of the Church. The latter have to overcome ideological presuppositions such as anti-clerical and anti-Orthodox Church stances. Anti-clerical and, particularly, anti-Orthodox Church feelings are easily discernible in many studies. Besides personal convictions that sometimes undermine the academic way to write about the history of the Orthodox Church, another difficulty stems from the selective access to primary sources. Oliver Jens Schmitt claims many times in his book that accessing the archives of the Romanian Orthodox Church is difficult and for the 20th Century almost impossible. We do not know however how many of these archives were preserved, how many of them are in good condition and inventoried. Therefore, a researcher of the history of the Romanian Orthodox Church should rather focus on the two main groups of primary sources that are available: national archives and the press issued during a particular period. Last but not least, there is a methodological problem when writing a Church history that is mostly visible in this book on the account of Nicolae Bălan, archbishop of Sibiu and Metropolitan of Transylvania for about 35 years (1920–1955). How do we define the Church? According to the purely scientific approach: as an institution, as any other or, in a more theological approach, as a human institution under divine establishment (at Pentecost) and continuous inspiration? Arguably, a history of the Church written from a sociological and judicial definition, in its visible manifestation, might look differently from a history that takes into consideration the way in which Church sees itself. Nicolae Bălan might be a good case of the differences between these two histories. Oliver Jens Schmitt repeatedly considers him as a legionary and sometimes supporter for the far-right groups, although he admits that there is a strong need to have his full biography. However, departing from the definition that Bălan gives of the Church and that Schmitt conveniently quotes, we might understand that the drive behind Bălan's actions is far more complex than mere supporting unilaterally the Legionary movement. While it is historically accurate to claim that Bălan was a "promotor of legionary fascist movement" (p. 61, 96), it is questionable whether he was "legionary". Having in mind an understanding of the Church that acts worldly and breaths outworldly, Bălan apparently had an open door to all parties and groups, either from personal convictions or pragmatic considerations. According to this reasoning, there should be no contradiction in his clear support for far-right groups and his presence in the circle of people that had a contribution in stopping the deportations of Romanian Jews from the Old Kingdom to the death camp established by Nazis in Belzec. Did he support an anti-Catholic and anti-Western approach? Undoubtedly so,

but there is perhaps no other local archbishopric or metropolitan in the Romanian Orthodox Church to know so well and to discuss the western theological and philosophical literature and to have it in the libraries of the Theological academies from Transylvania.

The title of the book suggests clearly enough that Oliver Jens Schmitt wrote a political history of the Romanian Orthodox Church, specifically a history from the point of view of Church and State relations. Hence, he did not attempt to write a comprehensive history that would cover other aspects such as the relation with the other religious denominations, an economic or social history of the Church. The book, as a synthesis history relies mainly on what has been produced by now. There are about 320 references in the bibliography, most of them studies and book chapters. If the book is vulnerable to criticism in some respects it is firstly and foremost because the existing bibliography on the periods covered by the book is scarce and highly disproportioned. For instance, for the history of the Orthodox Church during the Ceaușescu era (1965–1989) the author identified only “four short syntheses” which make this part of history a “*terra incognita* in research” (p. 196–97), whereas the most researched part of history is the one of communist consolidation to power that occurred between 1944–1948 (p. 189). In between, we could include the interwar period.

The political history of the Romanian Orthodox Church that Oliver Jens Schmitt constructs here follows the transformations of the state itself. Hence, as depicted in the title “Church within the State” (*Biserica în stat*), the history of the Church is moulded according to the history of the State. This is an important methodological premise because the unfolding of the political history as seen in the table of contents has four major parts: “2. Provocările Marii Uniri” (“2. The Challenges of the Great Union”); “3. Sub trei dictaturi: Biserica Ortodoxă Română și regimurile dictatoriale de dreapta, 1938–1945” (“3. Under three dictatorships: the Romanian Orthodox Church and the right-wing dictatorship regimes, 1938–1945”); “4. Biserica ortodoxă Română și dictatura comunistă, 1944–1989” (“4. The Romanian Orthodox Church and the communist dictatorship, 1944–1989”) and “5. Biserica Ortodoxă Română după 1989” (“5. The Romanian Orthodox Church after 1989”). When was it a “Church of State” (*Biserica de stat*)? Schmitt’s reply is unambiguous, although not explicitly formulated: during the four dictatorships, three of far-right orientation and one of far-left orientation, that cover a large span of time (1938–1989). It is a crucial argument that perhaps will remain

unchallenged by further research that the dictator Ion Antonescu effectively attempted to annex the Church to the interests of the State (p. 170) and saw it with immense disregard (“[...] there is no other politician to speak so contemptuously and sometimes downright angry”, p. 166). From this point of view, the interwar period (1918–1938) that Schmitt correctly analyses under the subtitle “Challenges of the Great Union” is symmetrical with the postcommunist period (1990 to present). Not only that both periods frame the four dictatorships but they also can be characterized by a precarious democracy and by an effort on the part of the Church to adapt to the changing times. The main body of the book has an introductory chapter: “1. Patru tradiții instituționale ale ortodoxiei românești: Regat, Transilvania, Bucovina și Basarabia” (“1. Four institutional traditions of the Romanian orthodoxy: Old Kingdom, Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia”). This insertion, although beyond the scope of the book, is of crucial importance: it is meant to show that the construction of the Romanian Orthodox Church following the Great Union had to cope with four different ecclesiastical traditions: the Old Kingdom with its own tradition, Transylvania under the Hungarian occupation, Bukovina under the Austrian occupation and Bessarabia under the Russian occupation. It is not accidental that the law and its subsequent status for the organization of the Romanian Orthodox Church needed no less than 6 years to be completed: the discussions started in 1919 and ended in 1925. The way they concluded, as Schmitt so well points out, was a compromise unfavourable to the Church: for the declaration of the Romanian Orthodox Church as patriarchate, the Church had “to accept the control of the State” through various ministries in crucial fields: elections of Synod members, administration, schools of theology, the immensely rich ecclesiastical fund from Bukovina (p. 75). I do not know other author to make such strong and precise argument. Returning now to the first chapter, it is important to say that it has more than a mere introductory status: it fulfils a heuristic role, a key to read and understand the history of the Church after 1925. We understand that the Church had not only to adapt to the speedy changes of the time but it had also to cope with its own difficulties resulting from the arduous task to harmonize various ecclesiastical traditions. Therefore, we may add one more point to the list of items that make it difficult to write a history of the Orthodox Church in the 20th Century: this history is in itself not an easy one.

If this history is so difficult to write and if the inertia of the Church is so visible due, among others, to its collective leadership and strong decentralization on the vertical of power that implies competing voices, why should one be surprised that after 1989 it was so difficult to accept and to speak about its own past? If the first three chapters are well-documented and highly analytical, pointing to the main issues of the political history of the Church, I consider that the last one that deals with the Church after 1989 is most vulnerable to criticism. First and foremost because not all changes are discernible in Schmitt's historical account although they are quite visible in the public space. If the section "The political stabilization of the Church: the defense of its own rights" (p. 351–54) captures the essence, the sections "The Romanian Orthodox Church and the geopolitical division of the orthodox world" (pp. 376–80) and "Neo-orthodoxism, neo-legionarism and populism" (pp. 381–91) are not so convincing as other sections in the book. For instance, at the Synod in Crete in 2016, the Romanian Patriarchate (which of course should not be confused with the Romanian Orthodox Church as a whole) played a much more interesting and nuanced role in the relations with the Russian Orthodox Church in comparison to the entire period. Moreover, it had a strong voice against the war that Russia started against Ukraine in 2022 and the position with regard the claims for autocephaly. Combining these moments with the role the Romanian Orthodox Church played in returning the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople after the expulsion by the new Turkish state (1923–1924) and the rapprochement with the Anglican Communion (during late 20s and 30s) we might not agree with Schmitt's claim that the Romanian Orthodox Church had no voice on the international arena (p. 57 and other). On the contrary! Equally important is the role that the Patriarchate played in the past years in limiting the neo-fascist tendencies that lobbied for washing the memory of former legionary clergymen and pushed the canonization of them as "saints of the prisons". There are individual cases of neo-fascism within the Church but the tendency to limit their influence or at least to silence down their voice is also clearly identifiable. A particular interesting case is that of Mircea Vulcănescu, condemned for crimes of war that died during the communist time due to conditions of imprisonment. While reading Schmitt's book, I felt the need to point out the turning point in his ecclesiastical reception. While prior to 2019 there was a largely positive reception of his memory especially owing to the way he died (allegedly saving the life of a younger colleague of detention), after 2020 this

tendency reversed and almost no reference was made to him, at least in the TV station and newspaper of the Patriarchate. What could this imply? In 2019 the Court of Appeals from Bucharest ruled that Vulcănescu was not a political prisoner in the sense that he was not imprisoned for anti-Communist activities but for his administrative duties as dignitary within the Antonescu government, responsible for the Holocaust in Romania. The disposition of the Court and the provisions of the law that forbid and criminalize the public apology of war criminals was sent by the Patriarchate to each and every parish under its jurisdiction through a circular with the recommendation to avoid positive reception when referring to Vulcănescu. I found this circular disposition, available on the internet, an important document that, together with the press release after the start of the war in Ukraine, should not be disregarded when speaking about “Neo-orthodoxism, neo-legionarism and populism”. More should be also said about the intense debates during the late 90s about the old issue of the Church’s involvement in active politics that were concluded by Holy Synod dispositions (2004, 2008) to ban such activities. These commands were prompted by Bartolomeu Anania, archbishop of Cluj, and managed to put an end to a debate spanning over 80 years on whether a clergymen should be involved in politics. Seen against this background that is not mentioned, cases such as the support for Victor Ponta at the general elections in 2014 by a member of the Holy Synod (p. 330, 387) looks rather as an exception than a rule, at least in the public space. Other claims in the last section of the book need to be updated. Such is the case with the decision ruled by the European Court of Human Rights in the claims of some priests to organize a union: if the European Court “ruled in their favour” (p. 395), this is true only for the first Chamber, which was not final. The decision was appealed and the Great Chamber reversed the decision and rejected the application (case “Păstorul cel bun” v. Romania, 2013). Therefore, the conclusion should be the opposite: the position of the Romanian Orthodox Church was a fair one.

This book is remarkable in other respects too. I would draw attention to only one more: in my experience as a reader on the matter at hand, I rarely encountered books to indicate the blank points in the historical research. Schmitt’s book is a remarkable exception in this regard. I counted at least twelve indications for white dots in research (pages 89, 93, 126, 166, 179, 196, 267, 294, 301, 316, 383, 387). Needless to say, this is an imperative that stems from the methodological considerations and to the state of current research that is mirrored by the references in

the bibliography. However, Schmitt assumes explicitly this intention to highlight the missing points in the puzzle (p. 325). Therefore, the researchers should be thankful to Oliver Jens Schmitt that he indicated, with extensive argumentation, the paths that one should follow in further works. It is known by perhaps every researcher that one of the most difficult tasks is to find a direction of valid historical and, in general, scientific investigation. Schmitt made this task easy. There are hence at least twelve directions of research that sometimes would take a lifetime to investigate. I find particularly important Schmitt's suggestions that a comprehensive history of the Romanian Orthodox Church should include the Russian influence in the minds of lay theologians during the interwar period, the role of the Church in Șoah and a social history of the lower clergy (priests, and deacons) to include their efforts to adapt to the changing political times, to fulfil their mission as Christ's servants within the Church and their role as family members, to overcome the economically precarious condition of the priest (Schmitt points out this detail too).

All in all, there are other issues to include in the political history of the Romanian Orthodox Church after 1918. At the level of details, the topic is still under construction. The most important question is however the following one: will this research be challenged by existing or new ones, even by relevant details which for some reasons might have been previously obscured? Will one be able to find a more appropriate methodology to investigate the political history of the Romanian Orthodox Church than the one exposed here? These are the most important questions at the very end and my impression is that the replies look rather negative than positive. I hope that a second edition will follow and will take into consideration the reactions triggered by this one and recent researches. I would not express this hope if the book itself, as it is constructed and argued, did not encourage me to do so.