

Iemima Ploscariu, *Alternative Evangelicals. Challenging Nationalism in Interwar Romania's Multi-ethnic Borderlands*, Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2024, 191 p., ISBN: 978-3-506-79668-4

Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy*

Alternative Evangelicals is a captivating book which opens up important innovative perspectives on the Evangelical communities in interwar Romania. In this compelling study, which “takes place mainly in the 1930s” [p. XX], Iemima Ploscariu delivers a superb and compelling account of how these groups managed to navigate the rising tide of nationalism in interwar Romania, while also challenging it through their ethnically, linguistically and socially diverse congregations. The study is extremely relevant especially as it comes to fill significant historical gaps, contributing to a better understanding of religious politics in Greater Romania. Just as the author states in the introduction, while the study of evangelical communities has not been ignored by scholars, “almost nothing has been written about the multiethnic character of these groups not of eastern European multiethnic communities in general” [p. XX].¹

Another innovative aspect of the book is that it sheds light on the little-studied lives of evangelical groups such as Jewish Christians in Chişinău and Roma Baptists, revealing their complex and often countercultural responses to state-driven efforts to forge ethnic and confessional homogeneity. As for the term “evangelical”, Ploscariu argues that she chose to use it for a very simple reason: all these groups –be they Baptists, Brethren, Pentecostals, or Seventh-day Adventists– identified as such in their publications from the period. Ploscariu’s central argument is that these communities, far from being passive recipients of oppression, actively contested the hegemonic narratives of Romanian nationalism by cultivating alternative forms of belonging and collective memory. The book, which appeals to an interdisciplinary methodology and is based on careful archival research, is structured in five thematic chapters which are framed by a thorough introduction that sets the scene for Romania’s interwar religious life, a concise conclusion, and a well synthesized epilogue.

* Dr. Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy, Independent Researcher, Strada Tiberiu Ricci, nr.2–4, sc.E, ap. 52, Sibiu, Romania, iuliacindrea@gmail.com.

¹ Among the most relevant works on the topic are: Dorin Dobrinu and Dănuţ Mănăstireanu, eds., *Omul evanghelic: O explorare a comunităţilor protestante româneşti* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2018); Roland Clark, *Sectarianism and Renewal in 1920s Romania* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); Mihai Ciucă, *Istoria Baptilor: Pionierii* (Oradea: Casa Cărţii, 2023).

specialized services for compensation, empowerment, and rehabilitation, aimed at optimizing each child's potential, regardless of developmental specifics, type of disability, or background. Specific therapies continue to be provided by inclusive education centers for children with severe disabilities or in other public or private centers. Another shortcoming of mainstream education is the lack of social work offices in mainstream schools; these are only found in inclusive education centers, at the administrative territorial units, within general directorates of social assistance, and at the county centers for resources and educational assistance (p. 138–40). An argument in favor of having a social worker in mainstream schools is that issues faced by students and their families cannot be thoroughly understood from outside the educational institution. Without a social worker on-site, prompt support cannot be provided, families cannot be adequately accompanied, and the psycho-pedagogical climate of each classroom remains unknown. The success or failure of inclusion is influenced by the composition and functionality of the multidisciplinary team within the educational institution, where the social worker plays a crucial role (p. 138–50). The social worker has important responsibilities, including conducting social investigations, providing support to families at risk of exclusion, facilitating access to services, fostering the school-family-community relationship, and offering counseling to aid students school adaptation. The author views the school social worker as a case manager and believes that this role could facilitate inter-institutional collaboration by ensuring that students with disabilities receive the necessary support both within and outside the educational institution (p. 146). Regarding institutional collaboration models between inclusive education centers and mainstream schools, the following are highlighted (p. 153–54): the existence of special classes within mainstream schools, the involvement of support teachers in mainstream schools, and the model of cooperation where teachers from both types of educational institutions learn from each other. Inclusive education centers can be valuable resources for educational institutions that enroll students with special educational needs, given their extensive experience with this category of students and the fact that legislation has provided for the inclusion of specialists within these centers who form the multidisciplinary team (p. 149; p. 155; p. 177). This chapter also presents differentiated and individualized strategies recommended for the teaching and learning process, as well as co-teaching models, advocating for inter-institutional collaboration in their implementation (p. 157; p. 161–63).

The fourth chapter begins by presenting the inclusive education centers in Sibiu County, including a brief history, types of beneficiaries, infrastructure, services provided, and specialized services offered by non-governmental organizations (p. 183–306). It then provides data on the research conducted in Sibiu County 2014–2020. Using research methods specific to the field of sociology, the author, after analyzing both qualitative and quantitative results, draws conclusions that she does not view as alarm signals for the Romanian education system. The following data were analyzed (p. 229–306): the evolution of the infrastructure of inclusive education centers, the development of the inclusive pre-university education infrastructure, the respect for rights and support of educational services for students with disabilities, and the perceptions of direct and indirect beneficiaries regarding inclusive education.

Following the analysis of the obtained data, the following conclusions were formulated (p. 306–16):

- teachers say they agree with inclusion but acknowledge that mainstream schools are not always the most suitable choice for students with special educational needs;
- directors and teachers from inclusive education centers believe they are the only ones practicing inclusive education because they have specialized services, and support teachers in mainstream schools come from these institutions;
- to become truly inclusive schools, mainstream schools must provide recovery and rehabilitation services, specific therapies, support services, and counseling for students, parents, and teachers to eliminate barriers to inclusion; the development of services to monitor students' academic progress (advancement/regression) is necessary, with a key role played by social workers, mediators, psychologists/counselors;
- the development of optional courses designed to prepare students for the inclusion process, is required; improving access to educational institutions is necessary, ensuring participation in all activities and access to all classrooms within the school.

The author highlights the importance of specialized training for social workers in a system affected by multiple changes, where they must uphold social justice as its guarantor in a democratic society (p. 313). The added value that this specialist can bring to the educational institution is emphasized, with their role being to connect and support collaboration between the school, family, and community, and to manage shared

databases with other institutions. This work analyzes the specific issues of inclusive education in Romania, capturing both the essence of legislative dynamics and the implementation of normative provisions. It highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the organization of the two types of educational institutions – mainstream schools and inclusive education centers – identifies barriers to inclusion, and advocates for the presence of social workers and the entire multidisciplinary team in mainstream schools, as well as for collaboration to benefit students. The research initiative successfully continues the theoretical foundation, and the conclusions formulated can contribute to improving the quality of inclusive education in Romania.

In order to have a clearer perspective on the support services necessary to ensure inclusion in education, we consider it essential to evaluate the current social and economic context in Romania, where significant groups face the risk of exclusion due to poverty, ethnic background, and territorial disparities in the development of services. A fair allocation of financial, material, and human resources – such as doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and educators – based on needs and with thorough monitoring, is required. The common goal and the convergence of the actions of all those involved is the key to inclusive schools and an inclusive society.