

Outside the Bishops' Omniscience, There Is No Freedom! The Romanian Orthodox Church in the Age of Autocracy

Ionut Biliuta

In 2007, when Metropolitan Daniel Ciobotea of Moldova and Bukovina became the sixth Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the theological and priestly worlds were brimming with expectation. A respected scholar of systematic theology with degrees obtained in the West, an ecumenical theologian, and a diplomat of the Church, he was the obvious choice for succeeding the old and beleaguered Patriarch Teoctist Arăpașu. Being the spiritual leader of one of the most significant Orthodox churches was no easy task in post-communist Romania. The Patriarchate faced a wide range of dilemmas, such as cohabitation with a democratic state and with an increasingly unsympathetic civil society. In the 1990s and early 2000s, countless voices from civil society criticized the lack of repentance from Orthodox clergy for their collaboration with the Communist regime, their undercover activity with the infamous Securitate—the Romanian secret police—and their subsequent reluctance to acknowledge publicly their ties with the Communist dictatorship. The Patriarchate displayed the same unrepentant silence regarding its moral responsibility for the nefarious role of the Orthodox clergymen in the

Holocaust, their accommodation of fascist ideology during the interwar and postwar years, and their role in the exploitation of Roma slaves in the early nineteenth century.

Social challenges such as a steady secularization of the public sphere, the lack of international visibility of Orthodox theologians, and the migration of clerical and theological vocations to the secular realm caught the better part of the central administration unprepared. The bishops were confronted with a series of highly specific problems of their own, including purely regional and personal ones. In Transylvania, a long and arduous legal conflict with the Greek Catholic Church over the possession of churches and properties confiscated by the Communist regime from the Greek Catholics and handed over to the Orthodox in 1948 consumed time and resources. The growing divorce rate among priests, the promotion in the ecclesiastical administration of yes-men rather than the spirited and intellectually gifted clerics, the absence of a critical theological spirit, and the inability to speak freely in the Church—these are among the critical issues now looming over Orthodox communities. Using his ability and

negotiation skills with the state, Patriarch Daniel steered the Church through several public scandals: charges of pedophilia against Bishop Corneliu of Husi and Priest Cristian Pomohaci, the persistence of medieval exorcism rituals that led to the death of a young nun at Tanacu Monastery, the public contestation of Patriarch Daniel after the Colectiv tragedy. On October 30, 2015, when—because of a devastating fire during a rock concert in the Colectiv Club in Bucharest—64 young people died, the media pointed the finger of responsibility toward the political class’s endemic corruption and the Orthodox Church’s fixation with funneling public funds into building cathedrals and monasteries instead of schools and hospitals. The inability of the Romanian health system to care for the large number of incoming wounded and badly burnt teenagers from Colectiv Club infuriated the public and bred resentment among the young generation toward the political parties and the Orthodox Church. The slogan “hospitals, not cathedrals” was shouted in the streets by hundreds of thousands of voices, decrying the “marriage” between the Romanian political class and the Orthodox clergy for exacerbating the economic backwardness of the country.

Another stumbling block for the contemporary Romanian Orthodox Church is communication, the translation of the Church’s message into the public sphere through the media. The central Patriarchal administration communicates through press statements published on its official website that nobody reads. The Patriarch speaks to his flock through his spokesperson, not with his own voice. Always removed from the public eye, without any live interviews in the national media, with a department of public communication famous for



its blunders, and, lately, preferring his private chapel over his cathedral for celebrating the Divine Liturgy on Sundays and feasts, the Primate of the Romanian Orthodox Church performs his role as a hidden deity or an Oriental monarch demanding obedience without allowing his subjects the privilege of seeing him.

As a result, the scandals in the Romanian Church left the bishops unrepentant. The hierarchs see little or no need to change their behavior towards their flock. One of the most disturbing characteristics of the hierarchy is their sense of entitlement inherited from the late communist years and manifested in extreme autocratic attitudes towards the priests and laity. The cult of personality practiced in the local and central administrations

Patriarch Daniel in 2010. Photo: Cezar Suceveanu.

of the Romanian Orthodox Church has emboldened any bishop to act towards his priests and laity as infallible in all matters (from the construction of churches to sophisticated theological reasoning). Bishops see their role as medieval overlords of their flock rather than as its spiritual fathers.

Toward an Authoritarian Orthodox Church?

A. Securing Bishops' Uncontested Authority

While these symptoms of ecclesiastical dissolution have thrived over the years, a significant change occurred in the governing guidelines of the Romanian Orthodox Church after the election of Patriarch Daniel Ciobotea. Instead of discouraging episcopal authoritarianism in favor of a closer relationship with the priests and laity, Patriarch Daniel sought to strengthen his bishops' support. His first measure in office constituted an act of defiance toward those who expected him to become a voice of reason and support institutional change. Instead of promoting collegiality and breathing new life into the ossified structures of the church, he tightened his grip on all levels of ecclesiastic governance. In a session of the Holy Synod held in 2008 in Bucharest, a motion carrying most of the votes stated that only the Synod could elect other bishops, archbishops, metropolitans, and the Patriarch, allowing the laity, lower clergy, and monastics no voice or vote. Furthermore, the laity's voice inside the Church's administrative structures shrank to a consultative role, with no impact on any vital decision or election in any level of the church hierarchy. Based on canon law and patristic teachings, this legislative change by Patriarch Daniel signaled, on the one hand, the end of Archbishop Andrei

Șaguna's participatory ecclesiology, which had underlined the presence of the laity in the Church administration, and, on the other, the increasing episcopal autocracy in the Church.

B. Subduing the Lower Clergy and Dismissing the Laity

Behaving as feudal Princes of the Church rather than subjects of monastic vows, the bishops voted en masse in favor of Daniel's plans to expand the bishops' authority to levels unseen in the modern history of Romania. The firm control exercised by the Patriarchate over the Church became manifest with the project of building the highly unpopular National Salvation Cathedral in Bucharest at a staggering price of three hundred million euros. In a country where one in three children goes to sleep hungry and the poverty rate increases every year, the Orthodox Patriarchate chose to build this mammoth cathedral using public funds. Some voices of the Orthodox laity—architects, intellectuals, historians, philosophers—expressed their concern regarding the cathedral's megalomaniacal proportions, which mirrored those of the infamous House of the People built in its vicinity by the former communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, and its lack of stylistic conformity with the traditional religious architecture. The Patriarch unceremoniously dismissed all these concerns. Instead of listening to Christian intellectuals and the public, he maintained a privileged and mutually beneficial relationship with the state, overtaxing the clergy to raise funds for the completion of the cathedral.

From 2008 onwards, all the religious taxes collected by individual parishes in the Bucharest Archdiocese for baptisms, weddings, funerals, and

commemorations of the deceased increased steadily. Half of the money collected went to the cathedral. The spoliation went even further in the geographical peripheries. All the dioceses, archdioceses, and metropolitan sees had to contribute financially to the cathedral's completion by organizing a public subscription program in parishes and asking for financial contributions from local administrations (mayors, county councils, and political parties). Any clergyman wishing to ensure the Patriarch's benevolence and to safeguard himself against his bishop's whims submitted generous contributions out of his pocket or parish.

To avoid dissent, splinter groups, and dissidence among the lower clergy, the Holy Synod confined priests and theologians to parishes and universities, prohibited them from voicing their opinions in the secular media without the blessing of the bishop, and generally adopted a siege mentality with regard to any criticism or suggestion coming from the media or the public sphere. The ecclesiastical media labeled anyone questioning the purpose of the national cathedral as un-Christian, neo-Marxist, or a quasi-enemy of the Church.

Furthermore, openly contesting the decisions of the hierarchy was met with disproportionate consequences. This was the case with some laypeople from the Archdiocese of Buzău. Because of their opposition to the archdiocese's decision to replace their parish priest, the local Archbishop Ciprian excommunicated them. While he eventually lifted the excommunication of the laity—not before they begged for his forgiveness—he defrocked the priest for insubordination and disobedience. The point of contention between the priest and his

archbishop related to a religious bookstore owned by the priest's wife that sold religious and liturgical books at discount prices, competing with the official archdiocesan bookstore hosted by Focșani Orthodox Deanery.

C. Subduing the Theological System

Patriarch Daniel's tenure in the leading see of the Romanian Orthodoxy has been marked by increased institutional control. Gaining admission in a theological school, a promotion on the ladder of the Orthodox Church, access to an administrative position in the university or the church's central or local bureaucracies, or a job in the theological system now requires a blessing from the local bishop. Recently, the Holy Synod decreed that episcopal blessings had to be renewed at the beginning of every academic year for every member of the Orthodox faculty, and would depend on the professor's behavior, public presence in the media, and what rumors might reach the overconfident ears of the bishop and his administration. Academic performance hardly constitutes one of the criteria taken into consideration by the bishops when issuing such blessings. From a formality emanating from the spiritual paternity of the bishop to any member of his flock, the episcopal blessing has turned over the last years into a bureaucratic tool for controlling the opinions and curbing the academic independence of Orthodox theologians.

In contemporary Romania, the bishop decides which topics theologians can and cannot pursue, which conferences and workshops they may attend, to which academic societies in Romania and abroad Romanian Orthodox they may belong, and how the history of the Romanian Orthodox Church should be written. The keys to historical truth and to new theological

National Salvation Cathedral under construction in Bucharest.
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avenues have been placed in the hands of the bishops, who, with a few exceptions (Patriarch Daniel, Bishop Ignatie of Husi), due to their intellectual inability, are in no position to supervise theological or historical research. Furthermore, the bishops now advise theologians regarding the journals and publishing houses in which they are allowed to publish.

The new episcopal authority over the theological system has determined a rapid and dramatic change in Orthodox theologians' mindset and academic behavior, with a few but notable exceptions (Archdeacon Ioan I. Ică, Jr., Deacon Sorin Mihalache, Father Gheorghe Remete). In order to survive the episcopal pressure exerted daily and by all means possible, Orthodox theologians believe in the system of servitude, seeking the goodwill of their bishops above their ecclesiastic and academic vocation. Alternatively, they belong to the system due to their intellectual détente and vocation, without believing that they have to serve at the bishops' pleasure and therefore refusing to vouch

for mindless obedience toward the all-knowing bishops.

With many of the members of the theological faculties the bishops use blackmail, veiled threats, "spiritual advice," and authoritarian majesty. If a bishop dislikes a university professor of any rank, he can withdraw his blessing from the professor's personnel file and leave him unemployed. This is a form of silent blackmail, used to ensure academic obedience and conformity. Every professor of theology knows that bishops have no problem withdrawing these pieces of paper from their files.

Plagued by the bishops' whims, hardly selected for any outstanding intellectual competence, always afraid of becoming unsavory in the eyes of the local hierarchy, Romanian Orthodox theologians choose silence instead of free speech when confronted with episcopal abuses. Admission to the academic theological system obliges the candidate to father as many children as possible—thus pushing the bishop to hire him as a charity case—to have

an obedient wife with a career subservient to that of her husband, to have as his confessor a “famous” spiritual father well regarded by the bishop, to perform menial jobs within the department or the ecclesiastical administration until the right position opens, and to smear the potential competition. If a rival candidate for such a position has studied abroad in a secular or heterodox university, has failed to perform his regular years of service (read: servitude), or has not paid lip service to the personality cult around the bishop orchestrated by the academics and clergymen, he is labeled a “Sorosist,” a freemason, an “ecumenist,” an apostate, or a secret convert to Judaism. No wonder most teaching positions in the theological system patronized by the Romanian universities have only one applicant, who knows in advance from his bishop or the professor he replaces—who was also his doctoral supervisor—both the topic of examination and its outcome.

Orthodox theologians who are displeased with the bishops’ increasing authoritarianism or want to pursue their vocation freely have only two options available: resign and leave for Western Europe, hoping for a good parish and eventually a new academic job, or quit Orthodox academia altogether. Even in this bleak context, spaces of dissent and breaths of fresh air have been provided by the ecumenical movement and intellectual outlets such as New Europe College Institute for Advanced Study in Bucharest and the Center for Ecumenical Research in Sibiu. While New Europe College is a private research institution with vast range of academic interests and a multitude of scholars, the Center for Ecumenical Research was until last year a joint venture of the Orthodox and Lutheran Departments of Theology from Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu. The Center,

with its multi-confessional team of researchers (Orthodox, Lutherans, Roman-Catholics), embarked on challenging research projects such as the liturgical reflection of antisemitism in Orthodox hymnography and the social and religious integration of the Roma, with the aim of bringing a wave of fresh air into the obtuse theological system. The Center also published one of the most respected scholarly theological journals in Romania (*The Review of Ecumenical Studies Sibiu*), which received the highest score (A) for a theological journal from the evaluating body of the Romanian state.

The last straw signaling a more radicalized and authoritarian Church was drawn in August 2021, when the Holy Synod in Bucharest chastised the Center for Ecumenical Research in Sibiu for a research project (funded by Norwegian and Romanian national grants) intended to study the integration of the Roma community in Romania over the last few centuries in the Orthodox Church. This is a sensitive issue in the history of pre-modern Romanian Orthodoxy, since Orthodox monasteries and dioceses depended from medieval times until the mid-nineteenth century on Roma slave labor. The research project, conducted by Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox theologians, focused chiefly on the beneficial role played by the Orthodox Church in the past and on current Orthodox efforts at the social integration of the Roma. The decision of the bishops had repercussions over the Institute’s very existence: the Orthodox priests hired at the project and the Institute were summoned by the Orthodox authorities in Sibiu and told to choose between their jobs at the Center and the priesthood. Furthermore, the local Orthodox Department of Theology’s representatives withdrew from the

Center and, through back channels, asked Lucian Blaga University to dissolve it. Due to the increased pressure and the threats by Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities in Sibiu, a key member of the Center suffered a cardiac arrest and nearly died.

The Western reader should understand the decision of the Holy Synod in Bucharest as the final subjugation of the theological system to the authority of the bishops. To paraphrase one Latin Father of the Church, Saint Cyprian of Carthage, who declared that “there is no salvation outside the Church,” for Romanian Orthodox theologians there is no freedom outside the bishops’ will. Even to attend events and conferences abroad or to apply for a research grant, a clergyman or theologian now needs the blessing of the Patriarch himself. A theologian must first submit an official request to the local bishop for permission to participate in a conference. The bishop approves the form (or not), writes a (un)favorable report, and forwards these materials to the central administration, where the Patriarch or the Synod decides if the request should be approved. Afterward, the bishop receives the decision, co-signs it, and sends it back to the candidate. The whole process can take months.

The decision of the Holy Synod curtails all academic freedom. No theological dialogue or ecumenical undertakings will be possible in the future without the agreement of the bishops and especially the Patriarchate. As such, the decision contradicts several constitutional provisions and even basic civil rights. The mentality of a hierarchy unable to accept constructive criticism from the public sphere effectively sees the Church as constantly under siege of occult forces with the sole purpose of destroying it. Such a

counterproductive attitude ensures the isolation of Orthodox faculty in the university and the academic world. It also causes the theological education system at all levels to collapse slowly but surely into mediocrity.

What Should Be Done

With the laity and theologians pushed into a corner, the priesthood overburdened with financial duties, and monasticism reduced to a vegetative state, it seemed the hierarchy had succeeded in controlling all the component layers of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Yet the pandemic crisis, which generated inner tensions in society, also signaled the first cracks in the authority of the bishops from within the Holy Synod itself. With the silence of Patriarch Daniel regarding his vaccination status and the constant anti-vaxxer rants of Archbishop Teodosie of Constanta that contradicted and defied the Patriarch’s and the Holy Synod’s decisions, cracks began to emerge in seemingly bulletproof Orthodox communities. Encouraged by Archbishop Teodosie and by several priests, an extensive array of fundamentalists, anti-vaxxers, neo-fascist sympathizers, opponents of ecumenical détente, and monastics who excoriated their bishops as heretics for signing the decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Synod in Crete fomented a state of virtual schism in the Church. They refused to commemorate their bishops in the diptychs, disobeyed the recommendations of their bishops to be vaccinated against Covid, and chastised the leadership of the Orthodox Church for its leadership and its lack of opposition to the state’s handling of the epidemics. Patriarch Daniel and the bishops could not deter the wave of discontent in Orthodox communities through the power of their

words or their infrequent public appearances. Instead, the bishops kept their silence and stalled for time.

Overburdened with taxes and forced fundraisers that squeeze the last penny out of parishes to salvage the tainted public image of a church exposed by the media as one of the largest private institutions to benefit from state funding, Orthodox priests have focused on their own interests and the preservation of their communities. Pastoral duty has taken precedence to sheer obedience towards the bishops and engaging with the internal problems of the Orthodox Church. Retaining their lifestyle and their steady income, parish priests have continued to contribute to the urban projects of the central and local administrations, because they know that money always trumps competence. Instead of envisaging the Orthodox clergy based on a meritocratic structure that dwells on academic performance and pastoral activism, a Romanian Orthodox priest is always prepared to pay good money for his promotion.

With the apprehensive priesthood and the bishops at each other's throats, this is the moment when theologians should have been at the

forefront of the debate, pacifying rebellious communities and spreading the gospel of truth. Rendered idle by the bishops' authoritarian control, theologians have preferred the comfort of their classes and churches to participation in a debate for which they have not assumed responsibility. Gossiping instead of acting, theologians have signaled the patriarchal policy's impotence of curbing the academic clergy's freedom. Confronted with the utter failure of their initiative, the Holy Synod should reconsider the status of Orthodox theologians and their academic freedom in the future. Deprived of the power to approach touchy and delicate topics, engage in ecumenical dialogue, or attend conferences abroad, Orthodox theologians in Romania are doomed.

Furthermore, progress in theology and pastoral mission of the Church would encourage priests to care more about their pastoral duties. Bishops should tend to their spiritual responsibilities in a spirit of love and collegiality with the priests and laity of the Church, and theologians should pursue their academic interests with impunity. Without freedom of expression and creativity, theology remains a questionable venture at best. ✱



Dr. *Ionut Biliuta* is an Orthodox theologian and historian of the Romanian Orthodox Church. He currently works as a researcher with the Romanian Academy's Gheorghe Sincai Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities in Târgu Mureș and as a research fellow at the Polish Institute of Advanced Studies in Warsaw. His latest publication is "Constructing Fascist Hagiographies: The Genealogy of the Prison Saints Movement in Contemporary Romania," in the journal *Contemporary European History*.