

REVIEW

Clark, Roland, *Religious Reform and Sectarianism in Interwar Romania: The Limits of Orthodoxy and Nation-Building*, Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York, 2021. ix + 222 pp. Notes. Bibliography

During the past few years, there has been a growing scholarly interest in the subject of sectarianism and religious renewal both in Romania and in the Balkans.¹ To this literature, Roland Clark adds a valuable contribution by providing a stimulating story about Romania's religious life in the decade following the First World War.

What is probably one of the greatest achievements of the author's approach is that he sets the interwar history of the newly expanded Greater Romania within an alternative framework: instead of the dominant narrative focused on leaders, institutions and elites, he focuses on religious minorities in their struggle with the majority and state authorities. Clark investigates in particular religious renewal movements and their difficult relationship with the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the nation-state, as well as religious revival currents within the ROC itself. The source material upon which he built his narrative is comprised of an impressive array of primary sources such as missionary books and pamphlets, sermons, religious brochures and textbooks, church newspapers and magazines, along many others such as archives, periodicals and secondary sources. This diversity of material and its balanced interpretation supports adequately Clark's aim to provide a novel approach to the history of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the relations it had with the other religious communities.

From the introduction, Clark comes across as a knowledgeable researcher of interwar Romania, situating his main actor – Romanian Orthodoxy - upon a larger historical, political and intellectual background, while also drawing parallels between Romania and other Eastern Orthodox countries such as Russia, Serbia,

¹ It is noteworthy to recall at least some of the latest titles: Michelson, Paul E. 'The History of Romanian Evangelicals 1918–1989: A Bibliographical Excursus'. *Arhiva Moldaviei* 9 (2017): 191–234; *Omul evanghelic: O explorare a comunităților protestante românești*, ed. Dorin Dobrinu and Dănuț Mănăstireanu. Iași: Polirom, 2018; Kapaló, James A. *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity: Religious Dissent in the Russian and Romanian Borderlands*. London: Routledge, 2019; *Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in Eastern Europe*, ed. Djurić Milovanović, Aleksandra, Radić, Radmila. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; and also a number of studies by Ionuț Biliuță: 'Periphery as Center? The Fate of the Transylvanian Orthodox Church in the Romanian Patriarchy'. In *Discourse and Counter-Discourse in Cultural and Intellectual History*, edited by Carmen Andraș and Cornel Sigmirean, 378–93. Sibiu: Astra Museum, 2014; 'Rejuvenating Orthodox Missionarism among the Laymen: The Romanian Orthodox Fellowship in Transylvania'. *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Theologia Orthodoxa* 62, no. 2 (2017): 21–38.

Greece, and Bulgaria. The author thus avoided the classic traps of either isolating his subject from the overall social changes or from non-expert readers. The book is structured in three parts, with three, four and two chapters respectively, and follows an analytical focus along well-chosen dimensions: (1) the state of the Romanian Orthodox Christianity in face of modernity, the formation of the nation-state and the reorganization of the church governance after 1918, (2) ROC's relations with its Others - Roman and Greek Catholics, Protestant „Repenter” (*Pocăiți*) denominations, and (3) renewal movements inside the ROC under the form of two parachurch organizations, the Lord's Army (*Oastea Domnului*) in Transylvania and the Stork's Nest (*Cuibul cu Barză*) in Bucharest.

Chapter One starts by looking at how the Orthodox faith was lived in the villages, taught in schools, and practiced through rituals and collective worship. Clark is looking out for changes in the role of the priests, preaching, Orthodox Biblical Studies in the early XXth century and up until the interwar period. And here the author points to an interesting fact that deserves to be highlighted since it constituted a key allegation used by the leaders of the ROC against Protestantism: „Ironically, most of the leading Orthodox voices in inter-war Romania had all been schooled in Western theological faculties abroad. (...) No matter how often Orthodox leaders complained that Repenters were bringing Western ideas into their Church, *they* were the ones whose theology had been profoundly shaped by Western learning.” (p. 33) Clark herein cites and then deals throughout the book with such leading hierarchs of the interwar period who had studied in Western Catholic or Protestant theological faculties, like Miron Cristea, Nicolae Bălan, Gala Galaction, Vartolomeu Stănescu, Irineu Mihălcescu, Iuliu Scriban, Ioan Popescu-Mălăești, where they were influenced by Western Christianity. One such case is discussed in Chapter Two, that of the Bishop of Râmnicul Noului Severin, Vartolomeu Stănescu, who had studied theology, law and sociology at the Sorbonne. Stănescu advocated for Social Christianity, a renewal movement that called for a more socially engaged church, by organizing and encouraging the parish priests to get closer to the people. By conviction or by strategic choice (Clark seems to favour the latter), Stănescu turned into a supporter of the fascist Legion of the Archangel Michael in the 1930s, but eventually ended by resigning his post after he was put on trial for corruption. Another case discussed in this chapter is dedicated to the student movement in Bucharest associated with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), an international organization promoting sport and humanitarian work in a Christian spirit. Being close to Protestant circles, the YMCA eventually came into conflict with its antisemitic counterpart, the National Union of Christian Students in Romania (*Uniunea Națională a Studenților Creștini din România*), which accused them of being agents of foreign Protestant propaganda. Chapter Three considers the difficult process of establishing a patriarchate in Greater Romania under the leadership of the ROC in the Old Kingdom. Clark shows the tensions and frustrations behind the combination of church-building and state-building,

instrumented by the ROC in alliance with the National Liberal Party, in the former's successful efforts to (1) integrate the other Orthodox churches from the newly acquired provinces into a single administration following its leadership and (2) to prevail over the Greek and Roman Catholic Churches in the 1923 Constitution. Two expressions of dissatisfaction with the official Orthodox Church and the new state are the focus of Chapter Four, which looks briefly into Inochentism and Old Calendarism (*Stilism*), both movements developing in Bessarabia, before and after the First World War, one of a monastic millenarian sort and the other one grounded on the rejection of the Gregorian calendar introduced by the ROC in 1924.

Part Two concentrates on the ROC's approach to its Others, starting with Greek and Roman Catholics, moving on to six of the most important Repenter denominations and eventually ending with the anti-Repenter activities which saw Church and state at work in combating what they perceived to be as a common threat. Chapter Five examines the ROC's mutually embittered relationship with Greek and Roman Catholicism, especially in the context of the debates and negotiations over the signing of the concordat between the Romanian state and the Vatican, which came about in 1927. Clark argues that while for Catholics the concordat was about securing a necessary legal framework for their rights in the face of Romanian nationalism and accusations of being an instrument of foreign propaganda (p. 95-96), for the Orthodox it was not only about their dominant status in the nation-state, but about the definition of Romanian-ness in religious terms as well (p. -99). Chapter Six looks into six Protestant Repenter denominations – Baptists, Brethren (*Creștini după Evanghelie*), Nazarenes, Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Bible Students (or Jehova's Witnesses) – documenting each group's historical background, doctrinal differences, and their activity in 1920s Romania. The chapter is particularly interesting because it presents the discrepancy between the concern and distrust of the authorities and the ROC's anxiety regarding the spread of the Repenters, on the one hand, and their very small number, on the other: there were only 0.3 per cent Baptists, 0.08 per cent Seventh-Day Adventists, and 0.04 per cent „other religions and sects” of the 18 million people living in Romania according to the 1930 census (p. 6-7). As Clark writes, „The spectre of Repenters appeared constantly in Orthodox writings from the 1920s, giving the impression that they were to be found knocking on doors in every village and town” (p. 101). Chapter Seven explores in a particularly original way, drawing on a series of missionary writings, archival sources, diaries, and periodicals, another type of Orthodox response to Repenter Christianity, an institutional one: the appointment of anti-sectarian missionary priests and the encouragement of lay missionary work in general. As Clark notes, although this approach came as a strategy of dealing with the Other, it challenged Romanian Orthodoxy to look inward too, to see how it might become more active and attractive at grassroots level.

One of the most striking parts of these anti-sectarian efforts documented by Clark throughout his work is the manner in which policemen and gendarmes abused their power when dealing with Repenters, sometimes in alliance with the ROC and backed by the inconsistent legislation guaranteeing the former's rights: „Repenters were frequently beaten, arrested, tortured and even killed by the authorities, often at the instigation of missionaries or parish priests. Anti-Repenter activities involved close cooperation between the Church and the state, which saw Repenters as a common threat. Both Church and state embraced the Orthodoxist doctrine that to be Romanian was to be Orthodox, and persecuted Repenters accordingly” (p. 138).

Part Three deals with two renewal movements started from within the ROC, The Lord's Army and the Stork's Nest. Chapter Eight follows the story of the priest Iosif Trifa, the founder of the newspaper *Lumina satelor*, around which revolved the Lord's Army, established as a temperance movement in the Transylvanian city of Sibiu, in 1923. Trifa was initially called into action by Nicolae Bălan, the Metropolitan of Transylvania, who had studied in Protestant and Catholic institutions abroad, and wanted to strengthen the ROC in the new province and to ignite the faith among believers. The author evidences how Trifa not only rose to the challenge, but soon wanted more than just promote theological literacy among peasants or convince them to give up drinking and swearing. He started to develop a theology of his own, Clark argues, drawing on the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith, without ever admitting such a source of inspiration (p. 157-167). Trifa was eventually defrocked and removed from the leadership of the movement in the wake of a financial disagreement with Bălan, but the Lord's Army had continued to exist to this day and still is an entity affiliated with the ROC. Chapter Nine analyses another renewal movement also taking place inside the ROC, namely at St. Ștefan's Church in Bucharest, known as the Stork's Nest. This was the place where crowds started gathering to hear the preachings of Teodor Popescu, the parish priest, about personal conversion and justification by faith, influenced by his cantor, Dumitru Cornilescu, who was an eager translator of Protestant books and of a new version of the Bible. Just as in Trifa's case, Popescu was eventually defrocked on charges of heresy, but his followers still organized Tudorist gatherings up until the 1950s (p. 191).

A five-page conclusion provides the necessary integration of all the arguments put forward throughout the book, which achieves its promise of reconstructing 1920s Romania as a polyphony of religious ideas, practices and denominations, which most of the time attacked one another, but were nevertheless, consciously or not, influenced by the Other. As the subtitle of the book - *The Limits of Orthodoxy and Nation-Building* - clearly suggests, Clark confronts Romanian Orthodoxy with its limits both from the outside, mainly in the form of Repenter Christianity, as well as inside the church itself, where its leadership had to face regional tensions from the new provinces, calls for greater

social engagement and a new generation of talented reforming priests. The book enriches our understanding of the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the state in the first interwar decade, when both acted as centralizing actors, but faced different types of opposition along the process from the communities or the different minorities of the new provinces. A curious parallel comes to one's mind after reading Clark's compelling account: the threat of Repenter groups appeared so alarming and so obsessive in the eyes of the Orthodox leaders, just as that of Jews appeared in the eyes of the antisemitic nationalists. This happened although both minorities were small in number, constantly had a hard time having their legal rights respected by the authorities and were most of the time victims of crime and abuse of power. But they were both markers of difference.

Georgiana Țăranu*

* "Ovidius" University of Constanța, Romania. georgianataranu87@gmail.com