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## **Christian Social Ethics in Romania: Assessing the *Status Quaestionis***

### *Abstract*

This brief country report explores Christian Social Ethics (CSE) and Social Ethical Thinking in Romania. The main focus is on the current status of Christian social ethics in academic and ecclesial contexts, as well as on its traditional understanding in the Orthodox world. Moreover, this paper treats challenges concerning central questions and topics for CSE in Romania, as well as potentials and desiderata for further networking of CSE in (Eastern) Europe and beyond. Furthermore, the importance and necessity to establish an articulated social ethical discourse in Romania, especially from the Romanian Orthodox Church as the dominant denomination is being stressed.

### *Zusammenfassung*

Der Länderbericht untersucht die Christliche Sozialethik (CSE) und das sozialetische Denken in Rumänien. Hauptaugenmerk liegt dabei auf der gegenwärtigen Situation der Christlichen Sozialethik in akademischen und kirchlichen Kontexten sowie auf ihrem traditionellen Verständnis in der orthodoxen Welt. Darüber hinaus werden Herausforderungen hinsichtlich zentraler Fragen und Themen für die CSE in Rumänien sowie Potenziale und Desiderate für die weitere Vernetzung der CSE in (Ost-)Europa und darüber hinaus behandelt. Schließlich wird die Bedeutung und Notwendigkeit der Etablierung eines sozialetischen Diskurses in Rumänien betont, insbesondere von Seiten der rumänisch-orthodoxen Kirche als der dominierenden Konfession.

## **1 The Status and the Institutional Framework of Christian Social Ethics in Romania**

To form an idea of the situation of Christian Social Ethics (CSE) in Romania, a brief history and presentation of the local theological landscape is required. The awareness of this context is of crucial importance since Romania's population largely belongs to the Eastern Orthodox Church, which traditionally has a somewhat different theological understanding of CSE. The Orthodox Church controls most theological institutions (fourteen faculties and departments of Orthodox theology in the country), even though other churches are also academically present. The situation is therefore complex. In what follows, I will treat the Roman-Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical academic presence in Romania briefly. The

main focus will be on the status and role of CSE within the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) and its theology.

The status and role of CSE within the existent Orthodox theological faculties is rather undeveloped. CSE defined as a systematic ethical reflection on actions in terms of *right* and *wrong*, *just* and *unjust* – to use these common binaries – in a full sense is taught only at the Faculty for Orthodox Theology in Cluj-Napoca under the name of *Social Theology*.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise, in Eastern Orthodox theology CSE is rather taught in the sense of *social work and charity*, and less as a systematic reflection and evaluation of institutions (Constantelos 1968).

### 1.1 Historical context of CSE in Romania

The initiative of articulating Christian social thinking in Romania belongs to the charismatic personality of Bartolomeu Stănescu (1875–1954), a former disciple of Émile Durkheim and later Bishop in the ROC. Together with several theologians and lay intellectuals, in 1920 he established the Association of Social-Christian Studies *Solidarity* (Cercul de Studii Social-Creștine *Solidaritatea*) with its own journal *Solidaritatea* and a significant academic activity. The Association functioned from 1920 to 1926/1930 and published 20 issues. The principal aim of the Association was to promote the importance of Christian values in society and to translate the Gospel into the Romanian context, which was increasingly influenced by antireligious political movements such as socialism and communism. However, Bartolomeu Stănescu's movement, known as *social Christianity*, had only weak echoes in its day. Despite his sociological background, in 1913 he was appointed to the Chair of Exegesis of the New Testament, at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest (see Raiu 2014). This was not the ideal context for him to continue to promote CSE in an academic milieu. Especially after 1945 (the beginning of the communist regime in Romania) free ethical reflection on society and its political processes was no longer possible. In 1948 the theological faculties and academies were excluded from the universities, being reorganised as

1 The holder of the Chair is Radu Preda. Regarding his conception of his subject, see Preda (2007).

*University-level theological institutes (Institut Teologic de Grad Universitar)*. Some of them were immediately closed down, as it happened to the Theological Academies of Arad, Oradea and Caransebeș. In 1952, the Theological Academy of Cluj-Napoca was also forced to terminate. The communist authorities allowed only for two Faculties of Orthodox Theology to function – as *University-level theological institutes* – in Sibiu and Bucharest, respectively. After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the two existing faculties were included again within the local universities, while a significant number of (old) theological faculties were restored. Furthermore, new ones were established, Orthodox as well as: Roman-Catholic-faculties of theology (Bucharest, Iasi, and Cluj-Napoca); a department (Alba Iulia); and a Franciscan Institute (Roman) as well as a Greek-Catholic (Uniate) faculty of theology (Cluj-Napoca) with three departments (Cluj-Napoca, Blaj and Oradea). Furthermore, Protestant (Lutheran, Reformed and Unitarian) faculties are to be found in Sibiu and Cluj-Napoca, where a Lutheran as well as a Reformed faculty of theology exists, Professor Tobler from Sibiu being one of the most remarkable contributors to the field of CSE in Romania.<sup>2</sup> Evangelical (Baptist, Pentecostal, Brethren and Seventh Day Adventist) faculties, a department, a university and an institute exist also in Bucharest, Oradea, Arad and Cernica. Each theological faculty has its own particular history, and it is beyond the scope of this essay to analyse the details. Noteworthy is that in the first years after 1989 no Orthodox theological faculties retrieved the social ethical thinking of Bartolomeu Sănescu for their academic theological curricula. Nor have they developed new concepts of social ethics.

The Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate currently controls eleven faculties of Orthodox theology (in Bucharest, Constanța, Sibiu, Târgoviște, Pitești, Iasi, Alba Iulia, Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Craiova, and Arad) and three departments (in Baia Mare, Galați, and Timișoara).<sup>3</sup> With very few exceptions, these theological faculties offer a diploma degree in Pastoral Theology (*Teologie Pastorală*, for priesthood candidates). They also offer bachelor's degrees in Social Assistance (*Asistență Socială*), Philology (*Litere*), Sacred Arts (*Artă Sacră*) and Religious Music (*Muzică Religioasă*).

2 Regarding his views, see Tobler 2007.

3 The official homepage of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate offers a list with these academic theological institutions: URL: <<http://patriarhia.ro/lista-unitatilor-rode-invatamant-teologic-universitar-541.html>> (29. 4. 2021).

Relevant for this paper are the curricula of Social Assistance and Pastoral Theology. Social Assistance (three years) awards the degree of *social worker/assistant*. The graduates can work as *social worker/assistant* in church and state institutions. However, they are not trained in order to develop competences in social-ethical questions. Regarding the diploma degree in Pastoral Theology (four years of study), the ROC's synodal resolution gives explicit priority to the understanding of CSE as studies in *social diakonia*. As the resolution reads: "A curriculum for Pastoral Theology will be drafted for the IVth year of study which should include aspects of social diakonia, where these are missing. These matters will be analysed at the academic staff meeting for this subject" (Dec. no. 4000/1999). Despite this resolution, Social Theology is taught only in Cluj-Napoca. Where some CSE principles are taught, they are part of the discipline of Christian Ethics or Christian Morals, which mainly focuses on the individual dimension of action and on personal spirituality.

Additionally, the Orthodox faculties and departments offer master's degrees. Only one, in Bucharest, called *Theology and the social mission of the Church* seems to include CSE topics. The official information about this degree on the homepage of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest is extremely scanty.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, no Faculty of Orthodox Theology offers a doctoral degree in the field of CSE.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 Particularities of CSE in the Eastern Orthodox tradition

As already noted, CSE is understood in traditional Orthodoxy mainly as *social welfare* and/or *charity*. The reasons behind this understanding are complex. In what follows I present two such reasons, which appear to impact the current situation significantly.

4 URL: <<https://ftoub.unibuc.ro/admitere/studii-universitare-de-master/>> (29. 4. 2021).

5 On the bright side, the Department of Orthodox Theology within the West University of Timișoara plans to establish a Center for Ethical Studies and Social Analysis. Should this initiative be successful, it will inaugurate the solid study of social and political phenomena within the contemporary Romanian Orthodox Church.

First, against the backdrop of the *Byzantine symphony* of Emperor Justinian (which established the responsibilities of imperial authority for human affairs and of the Church for divine things), during the Turkish occupation, the Russian Czars' censure, and the most recent communist persecution of religion, the Orthodox Church has not had the opportunity to distil its own concept of social ethical thought. Ethical thinking has mainly focused on the individual person and his/her behaviour, virtues and vices, the aim of which was and is to achieve holiness within the Church, which however always included personal good social works. This perception entails another issue: Orthodox theology experienced difficulties in identifying ethical categories outside of its theological and ecclesial framework. And so, as a consequence of its own theological profile, the Orthodox Church has consistently and primarily focused on philanthropy and social welfare. This understanding of ethics as a matter of individual Christian behaviour which marks the church is still prevalent. In turn, this understanding explains why CSE is rather underrepresented in theological faculties.

Second, it is significant to note that the worldwide Orthodox Church, which is a *federative* body comprising several local Churches, does not currently possess an ecclesial structure able to adopt teachings in moral and social matters that can become normative for each of its constitutive local Churches.<sup>6</sup> Due to the lack of ecclesial consensus at the Pan-Orthodox level, which seems to have intensified since the Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete (2016), each local Orthodox Church is free to elaborate, or not, its own social concept. In turn, the concepts that have been put forward so far need not be accepted and applied by other local Orthodox Churches. For instance, the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) published in 2000 *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*<sup>7</sup> and in 2008 the *Resolution on Basic Teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church on Human Dignity*,

6 This is the list with the autocephalous Orthodox Churches that are fully recognised by all others: the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople; the Patriarchate of Alexandria; the Patriarchate of Antioch; the Patriarchate of Jerusalem; the Patriarchate of Moscow; the Patriarchate of Serbia; the Patriarchate of Romania; the Patriarchate of Bulgaria; the Patriarchate of Georgia; the Church of Cyprus; the Church of Greece; the Church of Poland; the Church of Albania; the Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia.

7 URL: <[http://www.orthodoxru.eu/index.php?content=article&category=document&tid=2000-08-16\\_social\\_concept&lang=en](http://www.orthodoxru.eu/index.php?content=article&category=document&tid=2000-08-16_social_concept&lang=en)> (10. 5. 2021).

*Freedom and Rights*<sup>8</sup>. Closer to our time, the Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete approached the topic of social ethics, especially in its *Encyclical*<sup>9</sup>, as well as in the document called *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World*<sup>10</sup>; given the lack of consensus, the impact of these documents remains minimal. In 2020, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople made public its own social vision, entitled *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*<sup>11</sup>, which in fact represents another effort to extend the social ethical vision outlined in Crete (2016).

The interesting side regarding the publication of these documents is that they make it increasingly obvious that, currently, within the Orthodox Church there are two poles of Christian social thinking: a traditionalist one, largely associated with the Moscow Patriarchate, and a more liberal one, largely associated with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. And although the Orthodox Church of Romania signed the final documents of the Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete, its official position regarding CSE in the Orthodox world seems to be rather traditionalist. For example, in 2018, the Romanian Orthodox Church strongly supported and promoted the referendum regarding the definition of marriage in the Romanian Constitution as between a man and a woman. The rejection of the abortion in all circumstances is another example in this sense.

In summary, within the Romanian Orthodox context, CSE is understood in the academic and the ecclesial environments mainly as the theological reflections on social welfare and charity. It has to be added here that the charitable contribution of the Orthodox Church to support vulnerable groups in the society is indeed remarkable. But the CSE as a systematic reflection on societal processes and guidance for political and social action of church representatives is in dire need of development and implementation.

8 URL: <[http://www.orthodoxru.eu/index.php?content=article&category=documents&id=2008-06-26\\_human\\_rights&lang=en](http://www.orthodoxru.eu/index.php?content=article&category=documents&id=2008-06-26_human_rights&lang=en)> (10. 5. 2021).

9 URL: <<https://www.holycouncil.org/-/encyclical-holy-council>> (10. 5. 2021).

10 URL: <<https://www.holycouncil.org/-/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world#:~:text=THE%20MISSION%20OF%20THE%20ORTHODOX%20CHURCH%20IN%20TODAY%E2%80%99S,in%20the%20removal%20of%20racial%20and%20other%20discriminations>> (10. 5. 2021).

11 URL: <<https://www.goarch.org/-/life-of-the-world-thurs>> (10. 5. 2021).

## 2 Challenges concerning central issues and topics for CSE in Romania

In the last few years, an increasing number of positions on social-political challenges have become manifest. Since the failure of the 2018 referendum on the definition of marriage, the social role and the influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church have been strongly questioned and contested. Within such a controversial context, the absence of an articulated social thinking obviously is a weakness. The Romanian Orthodox Church continues to argue in favor of its role in society by evoking its historical contributions to the formation of the Romanian nation, culture, and language, as well as its rich philanthropic activity. A third pillar of the Church, as defender and promoter of the *traditional values*, comes to the fore, perhaps as a reaction to the failure of the Referendum, or perhaps denoting the growing influence of the prevalent American and European right-wing, conservative actors. In the absence of an explicit definition, under the category of *traditional values* are generally understood the *family* (recognized as marriage only between a man and a woman), the *Church* (the Orthodox Church is the *mother* of the Romanian people) and the *nation* (in this case, Romanian ethnicity). To this list we must also add the rigid stance on sexual issues such as the strict prohibition of abortion and of homosexuality. It is around these topics that a significant part of the ethical thinking of the Romanian Orthodox Church gravitates. This ultimately shows that CSE never really linked up to the issues which were and are understood by the Social Teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, e. g., labor, poverty, peace, etc. ROC's social thinking can rather be located within the agenda of what recently from a sociological point of view has been called "post-secular conflicts" (see Stoeckel/Uylander 2020).

Nevertheless, there are small signs in another direction. Since his appointment as leader of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Daniel has established a tradition according to which the Holy Synod proclaims a special annual theme of reflection for academic theology as well as for the pastoral and missional structures of the Church. Given the academic impact of these topics as they are discussed by the Theological Faculties at national and even international conferences, in what follows I will briefly explore the social and the ethical dimension of the last five thematic years (2017–2021) as an illustration of the focus of the ROC.

2017 was proclaimed *The commemorative year of Patriarch Justinian Marina and of the shepherd of the Church during communism*. The topic was encouraging, as it was an occasion to address and adopt a public stance with regard to the cruel experience of communism, which the society still struggles with (see Gabriel 2021, 113–125). Indeed, post-communist Romanian society still suffers from the impact of the communist regime in a number of ways. Representatives of the former ruling party still hold key positions in society, economy, and politics. Another unresolved matter refers to the evaluation of personalities who defended the ROC, even at the cost of their lives, while before the communist era – between the two World Wars – they supported more or less anti-Semitic, fascist political movements. All these questions relating to a haunting past need to be addressed to find long term social reconciliation.

In 2018, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church proclaimed the year of *unity of faith and nation*, emphasizing the historical role of the Orthodox Church in the making of modern Romania.

The theme in 2019 was the *Romanian village (priests, teachers, hard-working mayors)*, focusing on local structures and on the major impact of migration and the countryside depopulation trend, a phenomenon that has begun already with the communists' plan to abolish Romanian villages. Romania currently faces a strong process of emigration which leads to the depopulation of whole regions in the countryside. Thus, since 2007 more than 4–5 million from a total of approximately 20 million Romanians (no exact data are known) left the country and settled in Western Europe, often qualified personnel which would urgently be needed to build up the country, a trend that continues.

The Patriarch 2020 focused on the “pastoral care of parents and children” and on the “Orthodox Romanian philanthropists”. The lack of a close relationship between parents and children is a huge problem also caused by migration. Many children (the estimates oscillate between 80.000 and 90.000) have grown up (and still do) without parents or without even one parental unit. This is a fundamental question, directly relating to the rights of children.

Finally, the call 2021 focuses on the one hand on the “pastoral care of Romanians outside of Romania” and on the other hand on “those who have fallen asleep in the Lord”. The question of the Romanian diaspora again becomes central, but in this context the emphasis is on the establishment of parishes of the Romanian Church in foreign countries. Such parishes are crucial for the pastoral support of people, helping them also



to adapt to the countries to which they have migrated. The social ethical dimension of this topic is obvious; what remains to be seen is how it will be addressed.

Additionally, but from a different angle, since 2020, like most of the world, the Romanian society has been plagued by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though during this trying situation the Romanian Orthodox Church made considerable efforts to support materially the vulnerable groups and to promote vaccinations, it has no clear social-ethical views with regard to prioritising vaccination for certain vulnerable categories. The Church continues to remain silent both nationally, where it could advocate on behalf of the vulnerable groups, and internationally, where it has failed to promote programmes such as COVAX, for instance. This is particularly relevant as the Romanian government has set as its first criterion in the national strategy of vaccination the “ethical principles and social justice” (Hotărâre nr. 1031, 27 November 2020). In reality, the process of vaccination has lacked transparency and has been extremely controversial, many non-vulnerable people getting the jab before the vulnerable groups.

### 3 Potentials and desiderata for the development of CSE in Romania and (Eastern) Europe

#### 3.1 Potential

It is well known that CSE is one of the most promising fields of (ecumenical) encounter between Christian Churches in Europe and perhaps between Christians and other religions, too. Christian Churches find much more easily a social-ethical consensus, in contrast to the many intractable theological questions that keep them apart. On the bilateral side, Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew signed on 1 September 2017 a *Joint Message on the World Day of Prayer for Creation*. In May 2018, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I gave a speech in the Vatican at the annual conference of the Centesimus Annus foundation with the topic *A common Christian agenda for the common good*, in which he proposes – as the titles says – a white paper for the Christian Churches in order to promote the common good (environmentalism is of course a part of this agenda). Related, the social vision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate articulated in *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* affirms:

“It is also the reason and reasoning behind the establishment of September 1 – as early as 1989, by Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios, of blessed memory, and subsequently adopted by all Orthodox Churches, by the World Council of Churches and many Protestant Confessions, by the Anglican Communion, as well as by Pope Francis for the Roman Catholic Church – as the annual day of prayer for and protection of God’s creation.” (§68)

Ecology is perhaps the best example that at least the traditional Christian Churches are speaking to the world with the same voice. But despite the ethnic difficulties, confessional misunderstandings and language barriers existing in Romania, CSE has the potential to stress the ecumenical dialogue at the academical level and to support reconciliation. The theological faculties and departments across Romania could contribute to this effort significantly. To this cooperation with non-Orthodox theological faculties, departments and institutes could contribute.

### 3.2 Desiderata

It is of crucial political importance that CSE gains a better position in the academic milieu of Eastern Orthodox countries and that it is conceived in a way that may also contribute to European unity, together with the initiatives of others Christian Churches. For this to happen, CSE should become first of all part of the academic curriculum of Orthodox theological faculties. What would condition this development is the will of the local Orthodox Churches to develop a social vision. This desideratum is perhaps the most significant challenge for the Orthodox Churches, as the current *nationalist ecclesiology* weakens their capacity to reach a Pan-Orthodox consensus in fundamental questions that affect contemporary society. Until the Orthodox Local Churches succeed to achieve a compromise in order to adopt in concert a common social vision, the development and consolidation of CSE for the Orthodox Church relies on the support of Western European CSE networks, which give Orthodox theologians the possibility not only to obtain academic degrees and qualifications in social ethics, but also an exposure to basic ideas of Catholic Social Teaching and Ethics, which they then may develop further and integrate in their own Orthodox theological traditions. An example for this is the CEEPUS Program (Central European Exchange Program for University Studies). Within

the network *Ethics and Politics in the European Context*<sup>12</sup>, founded in 2012 by Professor Ingeborg Gabriel, many students, doctoral researchers, and academics from Central and Eastern Europe (including Romania) received scholarships for research programs in social ethics. Another important network is *Association for Social Ethics in Central Europe* (Vereinigung für Sozialethik in Mitteleuropa)<sup>13</sup> that is a well-known milieu for the encountering of social ethicists from Central and Eastern Europe (Romania is represented, too). Last but not least, such associations as *Pastorales Forum* (lead by Paul M. Zulehner)<sup>14</sup> or *Renovabis* (the Conference of German Bishops)<sup>15</sup> support many PhD-Students with scholarships, including in Social Ethics. Such academic cooperations have to be further supported and developed.

#### 4 Conclusion

CSE and Social Ethical Thinking in Romania are only in the very beginning of their development, as the Church focuses mainly on philanthropy (both in partnership with the Romanian government and independently from it). The Council of Crete (2016) had the potential to serve as a stimulus for the Romanian Orthodox Church's ethical thinking, as many of its final resolutions addressed social matters within the Church's wider sphere of operation. However, while the Romanian Orthodox Church did sign the Council's final documents, so far this event has not led to any progress in this area. This absence of social thinking at the ecclesial level also affects the academic opportunities for teaching and researching in the field of CSE, and is often the cause of awkwardness when the Church faces social and political challenges. CSE in Romanian academical context remains further dependent from the external support of important academical centers (Vienna is a meaningful example in this way), in order to qualify theologians with social ethical competence.

12 URL: <<https://ethicsandpolitics.eu/>> (5. 5. 2021).

13 URL: <<https://se-ktf.univie.ac.at/forschung-kooperationen/sozialethik-in-mittleuropa/>> (5. 5. 2021).

14 URL: <<http://www.pastorales-forum.net/>> (5. 5. 2021).

15 URL: <<https://www.renovabis.de/>> (5. 5. 2021).

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