A Documentary Source on the Religious Situation of the Transylvanian

IOAN-AUREL POP **Romanians in 1629**

The union of the Transyl-vanian Romanians with the Church of Rome (1697-1701) inaugurated a new stage in the struggle for national emancipation as well as for the formation and assertion of the modern Romanian nation[1].

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Initially, this religious union was also understood as an act of 'emancipation' of the Romanian Church from the pressure of the Calvinistic Church[2]. But what had led to this attempt to 'Calvinize' the Romanians' Church?

On the eve of the religious Reformation, the inhabitants of Transylvania were Orthodox Romanians and Catholic Hungarians, Saxons and Szeklers. The country was ruled by three estates or nations: the Hungarian nobility, the Transylvanian Saxons and the Szeklers. The Roman Catholic faith was the dominant and official religion in the voivodate and in the Hungarian Kingdom. The Romanians as an entity had no political role in the country, because they were not accepted as estate or nation; their church, considered and labelled 'schismatic', was not officially recognized either[3].

In spite of a small number of Romanian noblemen that had turned to the Catholic religion, the overall picture of the Romanians was that of a subordinate and Orthodox population, as compared to the Hungarians, Saxons and Szeklers, who were inhabitants with full rights and (true) 'Christians'. In fact, the Orthodox/Catholic opposition was replaced in Transylvania by the opposition 'Romanians'/'Christians'. In

the 14th-15th centuries, ample campaigns aimed to attract the Romanians to the Catholic faith were carried out with the help of the Hungarian 'secular arm'. One of the reasons why these campaigns failed to a great extent was precisely the involvement of the Hungarian State in the process of conversion.

After the Reformation, the largest part of the privileged groups of Transylvania (which had become an independent principality under Ottoman suzerainty and had extended its territory), i.e. the Saxons and the Hungarians, became Lutheran, Calvinist and Unitarian. The Romanians on the other hand, who represented the majority of the country's population, remained Orthodox. The Lutherans, the Calvinists, the Unitarians and the few left Catholics would form the 'accepted religions' (= official, recognized), while the Orthodox (the Romanians) would continue to be a 'tolerated' confession as long as the goodwill of the privileged allowed (*usque ad beneplacitum principum et regnicolarum*)[4].

Naturally, at a certain point, the Romanians began to make efforts to overcome their state of subordination through their elites. Their emancipation however implied great risks and also giving up their Orthodoxy. The masses, very attached to their old faith, were almost impossible to convince. There were nevertheless several attempts at changing the Romanians' confession even after the Reformation of the privileged. The most intense pressure came from Calvinism and – in certain places and at times – from Lutheranism (around 1550-1570). The Romanians then had a period of relative calm due to the Catholic Reform (the Counter Reformation) promoted by the princes of the Báthory family, especially Stephen Báthory, who was characterized by tolerance towards the Orthodox. The Transylvanian Romanians had a favorable situation during the short reign of Michael the Brave (intermittently between 1599-1601), when the prince was planning to place Orthodoxy among the 'accepted religions' with the help of the Habsburg emperor[5]. The unrest following Michael the Brave's death brought to Transylvania a series of Calvinistic and Turkophile princes, among whom one of the most important was Gabriel Bethlen (1613-1629)[6].

The Calvinistic Hungarian prince tried to maintain a balance between the 'accepted religions', and to ensure a better functioning of the Orthodox confession. Bethlen confirmed Teofil and Eftimie as bishops of Vad, and Teoctist, Dosoftei and Ghenadie as metropolitan bishops of Transylvania and Partium with the seat in Bălgrad (Alba-Iulia). In 1615, the Romanian clergy was given back its confiscated properties, and in 1624 it was exempted from paying tithe in grains and cattle. It was also then that it was decided that the offspring of Romanian serfs should not be banned from going to school[7]. Among the reasons of this attitude of real tolerance towards the Orthodox, we should mention the prince's quite modern religious outlook, the assistance given to the non-Catholic religions by the suzerain power (the Ottoman Porte), and the supportive position of the neighboring Romanian principalities (Wallachia and Moldavia) towards the Eastern Church in Transylvania[8].

However, towards the end of his reign, besides his designs of glory and his European plans (getting hold of the Polish crown with Swedish and Russian help), Gabriel Bethlen turned more radical in terms of religion too. His new attitude regarding the Orthodox Romanians, so numerous in his principality, is shown by his correspondence with the patriarch of Constantinople[9].

The patriarch's letter of 2 September 1629[10] illustrates the Transylvanian prince's ideas, intentions, and plans, as revealed to the head of the Eastern Church:

- the Romanian priests' fate is pitiable and the Christian faith, degenerated (*nocivam, ignominiosamque Valachorum… sacerdotum sortem… morum, religionisque Christianae depravatio*);
- the prince promises the miserable Romanian people and its priests his generous goodwill and protection (*miserae huic genti, sacerdotibusque eius amplam benevolentiam et protectionem*);
- the condition or price of his goodwill is the Romanians' turning from Orthodoxy to Calvinism;
- in order for this conversion to take place, the patriarch's assistance (*asistentia*) would be needed, namely he should encourage at least a little Ghenadie, "the bishop of those regions" (*Gemmadius… levissimum obtineret afflatum*); Ghenadie was to be convinced first to keep silent, then to act (*ad tacendum, perinde ac ad agendum*), if only the patriarch "shut his eyes and ears" to the pressure for this conversion;
- the Turkish emperor was not going to oppose such an undertaking; the king of Sweden, the prince of Brandenburg and numerous other German princes had also accepted his intention to Calvinize the Romanians;
- it is better to attract Romanians to Calvinism than to Catholicism, because the religion of Rome is full of mistakes (*plena errorum est*);
- the Transylvanian Romanians monks and priests in fact have no religion (*kalugeros, popasque Valachorum… nullam plane habere religionem*) and it is better for them to have one, even if mistaken (as the easterners and the patriarch considered Calvinism), than not to have any;
- countries with fewer religious differences are happier (*illa sint feliciora regna, in quibus quam paucissimae religionum vigent discrepantiae*).

Cyril Lucaris, the patriarch of Constantinople, who was also supervising the Romanians' Church, answered all Gabriel Bethlen's ideas, intentions and plans[11]. He was a *sui generis* patriarch, open to interconfessional dialogue and even accused of Calvinistic tendencies, especially after the publication of his work *The Confession of the Orthodox Church* in Geneva in March 1629[12]. In the letter in question, Cyril Lucaris proves to be a determined and enlightened defender of his faith and church. The hierarch was familiar with the situation of the Romanians and of the lands they inhabited[13]. In 1601, Lucaris, at that time a *sinkellos* with the ecumenical patriarchate, was summoned by Meletius Pigas (the patriarch of Alexandria), who felt that his end was close. On his way from Poland (where he was on a mission as patriarchal exarch) to Constantinople, Lucaris stopped in Jassy, where he preached several sermons. In September 1601, the young monk was appointed patriarch of Alexandria, a position he would hold until 1620. Between 1612-1615, the hierarch spent a long time in Târgoviște, at the court of Prince Radu Mihnea, as well as in Bucharest and Jassy. In the fall of 1614, he was present at the dedication of the Radu-Vodă monastery in the Wallachian capital, which had been rebuilt by Radu Mihnea. In that atmosphere, in 1615, the descendants of the

Buzescu brothers dedicated the monastery of Stăneşti, Vâlcea County, to the patriarch-ate of Alexandria. In 1620, when he made yet another trip to the Romanian Countries, Cyril Lucaris was transferred to the Constantinople seat, thus becoming ecumenical pa-triarch. From this moment on, the hierarch's links with the Romanian world became more and more intense: in 1623, he and four other patriarchs confirmed the village of Izvorul Alb, Mehedinţi County, donated by Prince Radu Mihnea to the seneschal Pătraşcu, the son of Petru Cercel, a former prince of Wallachia (1583-1585); in 1628, he confirmed the dedication of the Jassy monastery of the Moldavian prince Miron Barnovschi (1626-1629, 1633) to the Holy Tomb; in 1630, he endorsed the tax exemption of the villag-ers of Poieni, which Voivode Leon Tomşa (1629-1632), the Wallachian prince, had do-nated to the Holy Tomb, etc.

It thus follows that Cyril Lucaris had direct knowledge of the Romanian society, taking into consideration that he spent a lot of time in the company of the Romanian princes, hierarchs, scholars and boyars in Târgovişte, Bucharest and Jassy. On the other hand, as early as his youth, the patriarch had been in close contact with the Protestant world, with the Protestant personalities (David Höschel, Friederich Sylberg, Cornelius Haga, Jan Uytenbogaert, David Le Leu de Wilhelm, Antoine Leger, Thomas Roe and others) and writings[14]. For this reason, his answers to Gabriel Bethlen's letter (letters) and messages were based on a full knowledge of the issue. A refined scholar and a deft diplomat, the ecumenical patriarch formulated the following ideas:

- the prince's 'goodwill and protection' towards 'this pitiable [Romanian] people' are appreciated, but the head of the Eastern Church cannot understand or accept their condition (price) – namely, attracting the Romanians to Calvinism;
- the Romanians' conversion to Calvinism is not feasible also due to other reasons:
a) the opposition of the Romanians themselves, who could not be persuaded to adopt Calvinism of their own will;
b) the clear prejudice to all the other faiths (Catholicism, Lutheranism, Unitarianism) that had equal rights in Transylvania;
c) the confusion and the irritation caused among the souls throughout the country;
d) the blood and consciousness relation existing – secretly, but the stronger for this reason – between the Romanians in the principality of Transylvania and the inha-bitants of Wallachia and Moldavia (… *sanguinis, affectuumque nexus, qui inter Valachos ditionis Transilvanicae, ac incolas terrarum Valachiae, Moldaviaeque, clancularius quam-quam, ast arctissimus tamen viget*);
e) the attitude of the main extra-Carpathian Romanian princes, who would undoubt-edly never agree to this and who would most certainly try to hinder it, if not by arms, then at least by secret instigations (*In id sane principes vicini dictarum terrarum nunquam concedent, obicesque, si non armis, saltem occultis suggestionibus certo certius ponent*);
- Calvinism, the faith of Bethlen and his people is Christian, not heathen, but it is more different from Orthodoxy than Catholicism;
- having the wrong faith (as the Eastern Church considers Calvinism to be) is like having no faith at all;

- the poor Romanian people could only turn to Calvinism out of ignorance or by force;
- if the prince were to force his Calvinization policy on the Romanians, the patriarch would not be able to effectively oppose it due to the great distance and his lack of power;
- on the other hand, it is not right for the church to fight with weapons, but with words, for this would be a great sin;
- the princes' ideal is to have as few religious differences as possible in their countries, but the (Orthodox) Church can never adopt this principle, because 'we are not allowed to sacrifice our faith for the sake of political reasons' (*non licet enim nobis... fidem nostram politicis rationibus immolare*);
- some princes may support the Romanians' Calvinization, but what is agreeable to some may be harmful to others;
- the patriarch emphasizes again that his job is not to fight with earthly weapons against the threat to the Romanians' confession, but that he will pray to God to pour forth His sacred spirit onto the poor Romanian people.

The patriarch's reply perhaps wouldn't have influenced the Transylvanian prince too much with regard to Romanians' conversion. Moreover, the latter died on 15 November 1629. His followers, although not successful in changing the faith of their Romanian subjects, maintained the Calvinistic patronage over the Romanian Church in Transylvania until the Austrians' coming at the end of the 17th century.

The letter we have detailed above, dated 2 September 1629, focuses on a central and concrete topic, namely the Transylvanian Romanians' conversion to Calvinism. However, it also contains a number of more general opinions on the religious and political views circulated in the epoch. Both protagonists of this dialogue express ideas and rules for governance: mainly political in the case of the Transylvanian prince, and mostly religious in the case of the ecumenical patriarch. However, the two also express opinions on each other's fields; namely, Gabriel Bethlen has views on religion, while Cyril Lucaris has views on politics or lay governance. These ideas, opinions and proposals are usually divergent. The opposition between the two leaders starts from the central topic of their correspondence: the prince wants to attract the Orthodox Romanians to Calvinism, while the patriarch is against his intention. This contradiction insinuates itself imperceptibly and gradually, from the very beginning of the letter, when the patriarch says he appreciates Bethlen's 'goodwill' towards the Romanians, who were after all his subjects, but does not accept that this 'goodwill' should be bestowed on them on condition that they turn to Calvinism. The patriarch therefore does not intend to intercede in this respect with 'bishop Ghenadie' as suggested by the Transylvanian prince. Another point of disagreement is their attitude towards the Church of Rome: the Eastern hierarch writes clearly that it is closer to Orthodoxy than Calvinism, which he considers an 'untrue religion'. Lucaris also disapproves of Bethlen's lay political methods; he is against the possible use of force against the Romanians and he himself refuses to appeal to force in order to defend Orthodoxy. As a man of the Church, the patriarch chose to act by using words only.

The patriarch's letter makes several important references to the national issue in general and to the Romanian nation in particular. First, Gabriel Bethlen is considered a prince 'to whom God had given for protection so many great peoples', which shows that the patriarch was familiar with Transylvania's ethnic composition. He also knew that the Calvinist prince was carrying out a policy of confessional leveling according to a principle that seems to have been generally accepted in the epoch, namely that the 'happiness' of the countries was the greater the less numerous the religious differences. This tendency towards uniformity clearly was part of the political tools of the modern national states. Lucaris could not accept it because it worked to the prejudice of Orthodoxy and because the center of the Eastern Church was dominated by a hostile and non-Christian state. The hierarch also knew that the Romanians were not recognized among the Transylvanian 'nations' (i.e. the privileged estates or ethnic groups), together with the Magyars, the Transylvanian Saxons and the Szeklers. That was why the Romanians were called *gens*, not *natio*; the Romanians' inferior status is also revealed by the phrase *misera gens*, constantly used for them[15]. In the view of the two rulers, the Romanians are not officially a nation but a people (population), pitiable and poor. For the status of 'poor people' of the Romanians – a result in fact of their inferior status among the Transylvanian ethnic groups – Bethlen blames the miserable condition of the clergy, the corruption of the Christian faith, the lack of understanding of the gospels, etc. Lucaris considers this explanation more like a consequence than a cause of the Romanians' ignorance. He cannot accept Bethlen's notion that Orthodoxy was the cause of the Romanians' miserable condition. The patriarch knew all too well that the Calvinistic prince was pleading *pro domo*, that he was exaggerating to a certain extent, that, at least after 1550, the Romanians had ecclesiastical books printed in their language – some of them even with a Calvinistic tinge – that circulated up to the parish level. On the other hand, the Calvinistic pressure on the Romanians and even the Calvinization of their hierarchy were not of a recent date. They began in the second half of the 16th century. In other words, the two rulers agreed on the Romanians' 'pitiable' state, but disagreed as to its causes.

Moreover, Cyril Lucaris even makes a distinction between the Transylvanian Romanians' subordinate political and religious situation and their general ethnic community status. The patriarch knew that the Transylvanian Romanians were closely related, in terms of origins and consciousness, to the people in Wallachia and Moldavia, and that the Romanian princes of the two countries could come to the assistance of Bethlen's Romanian subjects, either armed or with secret instigations. Both ideas had a real basis, in the sense that they had been verified in the past, long before 1629. The last important intervention of a Romanian prince in Transylvania had been that of Michael the Brave (1599-1601), who had also been considered a protector of the Romanians[16]. The Transylvanian Romanians were accused in 1599 of having risen against the Hungarian noblemen 'encouraged by their confidence [given by the fact] that they had got themselves a prince of their own people.' They were also accused of acting in agreement with their brothers who came from south of the Carpathians. The Transylvanian elite circles knew that Michael the Brave had prepared the Romanians there with a view to his coming 'through the secret workings of his priests.' All these support Lucaris' opinion: the Tran-

sylvanian Romanians' conversion to Calvinism could not be achieved without breaking their national unity, their bonds with the Romanians in Wallachia and Moldavia, and without annihilating the Romanian princes' opposition. Or, according to Lucaris' openly expressed opinion, these two goals were beyond prince Bethlen's power.

The realistic evaluation of the role played by the Romanians' cohesion and unity is indicative of the ecumenical patriarch's accurate knowledge of the evolution stage of the Romanian nation. Although the Transylvanian Romanians were not accepted as a formal 'nation' in that country, they formed nevertheless an actual, ethnic nation together with the other Romanians of Moldavia and Wallachia. The patriarch, who had spent time among the Romanians, had no doubt that 'the blood and consciousness relation' between all the Romanians was stronger than the Calvinistic prince's policy, and that violation of the Romanians' confession would have certainly generated the intervention of the voivodes of Wallachia and Moldavia. The patriarch considered this military or peaceful intervention of these Romanian princes a means to defend the above-mentioned 'blood and consciousness relation', i.e. the Romanian unity. After 1600, the intervention of the political factors of Wallachia and Moldavia in the defense of the Transylvanian Romanians was considered natural and always possible.

This proves once more that, after the reign of Michael the Brave, the Romanians passed from the stage of instinctive solidarity to that of effective solidarity, thus paving the way for the transition from the medieval to the modern nation[17].

Cyril Lucaris was a defender of the Eastern faith in a world of interferences and rivalries. In his youth, he witnessed the synod of Brest (1596), which confirmed the union of the Polish Orthodox (the Ruthenians) with the Catholic Church, and later, the Calvinistic assaults on the Transylvanian Romanians. In the face of the influence and pressure of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation, the hierarch felt acutely the crisis of the Eastern Churches, many of which were captive or subordinated. It was through dialogue that he took note of the changes in terms of religion and politics that were under way in Europe, and adapted himself to the new situation, while trying to preserve the specificity of a troubled Christian world he was appointed to rule in 1620. His stand reveals flexibility, cunning, openness to dialogue, but also firmness, dignity and courage, despite the decline of the Eastern European civilization after the fall of the Byzantine Empire.

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Notes

[1] DAVID PRODAN, *Supplex Libellus Valachorum. Din istoria formării națiunii române*, București, 1984, pp. 134-150; FRANCISC PALL, *Inochentie Micu-Klein. Exilul la Roma (1745-1768)*, edited by LADISLAU GYÉMÁNT, vol. I, Cluj-Napoca, 1997, pp. 3-13.

[2] AVRAM ANDEA, AUREL RĂDUȚIU, *Transilvania sub stăpânire habsburgică*, in *Istoria României. Transilvania*, vol. I, Cluj-Napoca, 1997, p. 650.

[3] IOAN-AUREL POP, *Istoria Transilvaniei medievale: de la etnogeneza românilor până la Mihai Viteazul*, Cluj-Napoca, 1997, pp. 207-213.

[4] D. PRODAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-109.

[5] POMPILIU TEODOR, *Politica ecleziastică a lui Mihai Viteazul în Transilvania*, in *Revista istorică*, IV, 1993, no. 5-6, passim.

[6] PETRU BUNTA, *Gabriel Bethlen*, Bucureşti, 1981, passim; LAJOS DEMÉNY, *Bethlen Gábor és kora*, Bucureşti, 1982, passim.

[7] NICULAE M. POPESCU, *Chiril Lucaris şi ortodoxia română ardeleană*, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, LXIV, 1946, no. 7-9, p. 4; AUREL JIVI, *Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants. Studies in Romanian Ecclesiastical Relations*, Cluj-Napoca, 1999, pp. 116-118.

[8] AVRAM ANDEA, SUSANA ANDEA, *Principatul Transilvaniei sub suzeranitate otomană (1541-1691)*, in *Istoria României. Transilvania*, Cluj-Napoca, 1997, pp. 583-590.

[9] See references in NICOLAE IORGA, *Istoria românilor din Ardeal şi Ungaria*, edited by GEORGETA PENELEA, Bucureşti, 1989, pp. 166-67, 171, 174; IOAN LUPAŞ, *Istoria unirii românilor*, Bucureşti, 1938, p. 160; D. PRODAN, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

[10] SZILÁDY ÁRON, SZILÁGYI SÁNDOR, *Török-magyarkori állam-okmánytár*, vol. II, Pest, 1869, pp. 137-140 (Latin text); IOAN LUPAŞ, *Documente istorice transilvane*, vol. I (1599-1699), Cluj, 1940, pp. 177-179. The best Romanian editions of the patriarch's letter of 2 September 1629 (with a Romanian translation) were made by NICULAE M. POPESCU, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-24, and IOAN VASILE LEB, *Ortodoxia transilvană între Reformă şi Contrareformă, sec. XVI-XVII*, in *Teologie şi cultură transilvană în contextul spiritualităţii europene în sec. XVI-XIX*, edited by IOAN VASILE LEB, Cluj-Napoca, 1999, pp. 144-151.

[11] See GERMANOS, Metropolitan of Thyateira, *Kyrillos Loukaris, 1572-1638. A Struggle for Preponderance between Catholic and Protestant Powers*, London, 1951, passim; GEORGE A. HADJIANTONIOU, *Protestant Patriarch. The Life of Cyril Lucaris (1572-1683), Patriarch of Constantinople*, Richmond (Virginia), 1961, passim.

[12] The work was republished in 1633. MIRCEA PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii româneşti din Transilvania, Banat, Crişana şi Maramureş până la 1918*, Cluj-Napoca, 1992, pp. 151-153; IOAN VASILE LEB, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

[13] Lucaris visited the Romanian Countries as early as 1594, and returned on several occasions to Bucharest, Jassy, Târgovişte and the monastery of Bistriţa, where he performed divine services, preached, wrote books, and established contacts with princes, hierarchs and dignitaries such as Ieremia Movilă, Radu Mihnea, Ştefan Tomşa, Gheorghe Movilă, Luca Stroici, and the Buzescu boyars. See NICULAE M. POPESCU, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-15; AUREL JIVI, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-99.

[14] AUREL JIVI, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-119.

[15] In this context, translating *gens* by *nation*, as it has generally been done, seems inappropriate.

[16] See IOAN-AUREL POP, *Naţiunea română medievală. Solidarităţi etnice româneşti in secolele XIII-XIV*, Bucureşti, 1998, pp. 15-36, 129-146.

[17] P. TEODOR, *op. cit.*, passim; IOAN-AUREL POP, *Istoria Transilvaniei medievale...*, p. 250.