

BOOK REVIEW

***Apostolatul antisocial. Teologie și neoliberalism în România postcomunistă (The Anti-social Apostolate. Theology and Neoliberalism in Post-communist Romania)* by Alexandru Racu, Tact Publishing House, 2017, 275 pages¹**

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Alexandru Racu's book "The Anti-social Apostolate. Theology and Neoliberalism in Post-communist Romania" represents one of the few successful attempts in contemporary Romanian social sciences that analyses the post-communist political developments within Eastern Christianity and its relationship to the capitalist transformations and radical neo-liberal reforms that took place during the last decade at the periphery of European Union. The book focuses on the writings of some of the most prominent Orthodox intellectuals and theologians from Romania and carefully scrutinizes the religious and cultural legitimations of capitalism which they produced after the fall of communism. The study also details the ways in which these new religious arguments and narratives depart from previous Orthodox tradition and practice. Drawing on the work of Cornel Ban (2014, 2016), who masterfully analysed the neo-liberal specificities of economic reforms and brutal shock therapies implemented in Romania, and more generally on Tawney (1938) Karl Pollany (2013) and Peck (2010), the book discusses the emergence of cultural and religious forms of neo-liberalism that accompanied, and gave extensive credit to, the implementation of one of the most radical neo-liberal projects in Central and Eastern Europe.

The relationship between Orthodoxy, social modernization and capitalism has been an important feature of the Romanian social history debates. Already in the interwar period Eugen Lovinescu was making the argument in his "History of Modern Romanian Civilization" (1924) that Orthodoxy played a pivotal role in preventing the formation of a national culture and a Western civilisation. Orthodoxy, he claimed, contributed to the 'orientalization' of Romanian society and represented a traditionalist and retrograde force that hindered the cultivation of a genuine Latin

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culture that could enable the institutionalization in Romania of an advanced Western national culture (Lovinescu 1924:8-9). Unlike Protestantism and Catholicism which were important vectors for the creation and consolidation of nationalism, modern civilization and high culture, Orthodoxy generated a Slavic path dependency and so kept the Romanian society in obscurantism (Lovinescu 1924:13-22).

The theme of 'Ex Occidente Lux' was revived in the Romanian social history debates in the early 90's, after the fall of communism. Ioan Petru Culianu, an expatriate at that time, was trying to give a sociological and historical grounding to the argument that Orthodoxy has an anti-modern and anti-capitalist essence. In a study written in the 80's, which aimed at reconstructing the cultural space and the Romanian ethno-political movements that dominated the formation period of Mircea Eliade, his intellectual master, Culianu was pointing out the ill-fated influence the 'poporanist' movements had on the modern Romanian culture (Culianu 1995). These have produced a wide spectrum of historiographical and political projects that transformed Orthodoxy into the central dispositive of imagining the Romanian nation (Culianu 1995:165-168). Proceeding from the classical Weberian thesis regarding the spirit of capitalist, Culianu (1995: 168-174) outlined the specific ways in which the Orthodox ethic was incompatible with social modernization and the modes in which this religious culture was blocking a meaningful integration into the global capitalist structures:

The Romanian had a spontaneous, visceral, repugnance of capitalism. If he would've heeded to scrutinize this profound feeling, he would've understood *that exactly his Orthodox ethic hindered him to understand capitalism and to integrate into the rules of this system*. From a historical point of view the error would not have been a fatal one if, on its part, capitalism, simultaneously as an ethic and as an economy, would not have been the economic *system* of the entire modern world, in whose enslavement all the nations of the world gravitated. So the ethical gap is transformed into an economic gap, and this into a chronological gap, the Orthodox *Commonwealth*, now passed to the Russian presidency, still fights through all means against this gap, threatening to destroy the entire world, because it did not understand that it is condemned to a historical backlash because of its *social ethic* itself. (Culianu 1995: 171, underlines in original)

Culianu's study then shows how the biggest part of the cultural production of the Romanian intelligentsia (with the sole exception of Slavici) was marked by this fundamental aversion towards capitalism. It is important to note that the epistemological device that allows Culianu to explain the anti-capitalist essence of the Romanian culture is rooted, according to him, in the other-worldly orientation of Orthodoxy and its incapacity to produce the ethical subjectification required by the capitalist system. Not even communism would manage, according to Culianu, to dislocate Nicolae Iorga's historiographical legacy who emphasized Romania's

belonging to the Slavic-Byzantine Orient: “the Orthodox brothers can always come to an understanding among themselves because they have a common enemy to abolish: capitalism.” (Culianu 1995: 174)”

This anti-capitalist trope of Orthodoxy is not a feature only of Romanian social history debates, but also of contemporary international relations and European political sciences scholarship. The integration of two Orthodox countries (Romania and Bulgaria) into European Union generated an increased attention to the role national religious cultures play in successfully incorporating transnational democratic mechanisms and the EU communitarian aquis (Spohn, 2009, Byrnes and Katzenstein 2006). Several political scientists have emphasized the capacity of Protestant (due to religious civism) and Catholic (due to religious corporatism) countries to generate public institutions and a political culture which enabled them a swift integration into EU structures. On the other side, the EU integration of Orthodox countries has been considered an ‘incomplete and failed process’ (Spohn, 2009). What explains this alleged incompatibility is the predominant authoritarian religious culture (Byrnes and Katzenstein, 2006), neo-Byzantine political practices, fundamentalist rejection of democracy, human rights and religious pluralism, autocephaly which contributed to the emergence of closed forms of nationalist systems (Philpott and Shah 2006) and disdain for liberal democratic values and cosmopolitanism (Perica, 2006). All this amounts to a radical anti-Europeanism that spreads from the Orthodox clergy to society and political institutions alike, through religious socialization (Ramet, 2006:150). Within this sociological epistemology, the Orthodox religion becomes the main reason that accounts for alleged popular anti-Western feelings and the incapacity to generate viable institutions and political culture required for a meaningful European integration (Byrnes and Katzenstein, 2006). Orthodoxy is portrayed as being in its very essence a non-Western and non-European retrograde religion.

The Romanian theologians and intellectuals that Racu’s book analyses is captured by these wider debates regarding the position of Orthodoxy in relation to Western modernity. They want to articulate an Orthodox Christianity that addresses these forms of criticism and emphasize that its political theologies are not incompatible with Western culture and social modernity. Although Alexandru Racu dwells little on this wider context that structures these specific theological positions within the religious field, he briefly hints to these logics (Racu 2017:271) and to the mechanisms that make these religious intellectuals so popular. Nevertheless, a wider analysis of this tradition of cultural criticism of Orthodoxy (see for example Barbu 2000, 2001 for religious attitudes toward work, or Stan and Turcescu 2007 for Orthodoxy and European Union) to which the post-communist Orthodox intellectuals react, could enable a better understanding of the rationalities, motivations and imaginaries that the Orthodox intellectuals crafted shortly after the fall of the Communist modernity project. By this I mean for example the contextual debates regarding the secularization of urban strata and the need of a

form of Christianity that addresses the intellectual preoccupations of the emerging urban middle class that becomes more culturally dominant or debates regarding secularism and anti-clericalism that spreads in both popular and literate culture and which requires new forms of apologetics of existing religious ontologies. The reconstruction of this wider context and the position of his sharp and well-documented criticism within this larger cultural debate, would've made Racu's own socialist agenda more intelligible, which is neither that of a secular Marxist who thinks of religion as the opium of the masses, nor that of an Orthodox religious nationalist who wants to prevent the contamination of Orthodoxy by Western modernist ideas and practices. But it is clear from the writings of the Orthodox theologians and intellectuals he analyses that the Romanian theologians who endorse neo-liberalism are connected to wider cultural debates that address Romanian ethno-nationalism, social modernization, urban culture, attitudes toward work, secularization, geo-political rationalities and aim at re-imagining a Christian narrative that addresses these debates. One specific feature of their answer to these issues is the religious embracement and justification of neo-liberalism, who so becomes intelligible not only in terms of its opportunistic relationship to existing political structures (of which they clearly take advantages, as Racu shows) but also in terms of the relational positionality to other Orthodox political-theologies (for example ethno-nationalist ones) or to secular criticism.

Alexandru Racu's excellent study focuses mainly on this specific neo-liberal dimension of the Romanian post-communist theology and on the moral ontologies it produced in order to endorse the post-communist capitalist transformations. The liberalization of markets, wide-spread privatization, deregulation of labour and the creation of new industrial reforms that produced one of the most unbalanced capital-labour arrangements and a corporate governance that could attract Foreign Direct Investment were important features of the Romanian neo-liberal reforms (Ban 2014, 2016; Bohle and Greskovits 2012; Stoiciu 2012; Trif 2016). What sets Romania and the Baltic countries apart from the neighbouring CEE countries is the radical reforms and austerity measurements implemented here, whereas in other CEE countries more embedded forms of economic transformations were experimented with which were sensitive to the preservation of welfare policies and allocated significant state subsidies to national strategic economic sectors (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). The growing social inequalities, vast de-industrialization and unemployment, labour migration, peripheralization of poverty and ghetto formation represent direct consequences of these neo-liberal policies. None of these policies could've been enacted and maintained without cultural legitimations and popular social justificatory narratives (Racu 2017: 13-30). Alexandru Racu focuses on a specific form of cultural neo-liberalism, namely the theological arguments articulated by leading Romanian Orthodox intellectuals and theologians in favour of these transformations: Horia-Roman Patapievici, Teodor Baconschi, Mihail Neamțu, Ion I. Ica Jr. and Radu Preda.

The book is divided into two sections: the first one discusses the patristic sources regarding the social doctrines of the Early Christian Churches, their positions towards wealth and social distribution, the early social institutions created by Christianity and its teaching regarding private property, social justice and welfare practiced in the Byzantine Empire. The aim of the first two chapters is to give a solid grounding to how Early Christianity developed a substantial social doctrine and rejected the private appropriation of wealth. This argument is further developed in the following two chapters which explore the Catholic social doctrine and the not-so-developed Orthodox one. The author is well-versed in historical theology, ecclesiology and dogmatic exegesis and points out very clearly the fundamental communitarian aspects of Christianity and the charity and compassion imperative that characterize both Eastern and Western Christianity. Orthodoxy did not manage to produce and implement formal social doctrines and to articulate positions similar to the Catholic encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) or Pope Francis' bold condemnation of inequality and economic injustices in *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), but, in spite of this, it experimented with different ideas of Christian socialism (2017:90-93). This first section represents an important part of Racu's argument because it enables him to show what a radical departure the political theologies of Romanian post-communist theologians are from the social doctrines of both Catholic and Orthodox Church.

The second section of the book represents one of the most rigorous and well documented sociological, political and theological criticism of Romanian post-communist theology and constitutes a masterful analysis of sociology of (religious) elites and their role in developing and embedding cultural neo-liberalism. Each individual chapter carefully analysis the arguments, narratives, professional development and intellectual debates of some of the most important contemporary figures of Romanian Orthodox theology and the specific ways in which they endorsed capitalism and the brutal neo-liberal reforms. Racu exposes a wide spectrum of libertarian and capitalist religious anthropologies that played an important role in popularizing theological neo-liberalism: Patapievici's arguments in favour of the sanctity of private property, the redemptive nature of markets and their capacity to transform 'private vices into public virtues', the religious valorisation of individual entrepreneurialism; Baconschi's attempt to build a Christian Democracy based on an subsidiarity principle in detriment to the social solidarity principle, his religious defence of a minimal state and the 'moral' requirement of welfare retrenchment; and Neamțu's theological development from Christian socialism to the endorsement of spiritual entrepreneurialism, religious moralization of success and motivational programs that equip the religious believer with the necessary tools to create profitable enterprises. The two case studies regarding professional theologians, Radu Preda and Ion I. Ica Jr., emphasize not so much a radical support for neo-liberalism, as is the case with the previous three Orthodox intellectuals, but outline the confusions and incoherence regarding the social doctrines

of the Church. The second part of the book represents an in-depth assessment of the post-communist political theology and constitutes a breakthrough analysis of the relationship between Orthodoxy and the endorsement of capitalism in the context of dramatic economic transformations and reforms taking place in contemporary Romania. The criticism makes a rigorous inventory of the conceptual apparatus, theological discourses and legitimizing religious narratives of capitalism emerging in Romania and brings a significant contribution to the understanding of increasing popular forms of cultural neo-liberalism. The book also discusses the potential reasons why the Orthodox Church did not distance itself from these neo-liberal intellectuals (Racu 2017:272-275) and the way their symbolic capital was used by the Church for cleaning its public images in the wake of recurrent criticism for its collaboration with the communist regime (see for example Gillet 2011, Luestean 2008).

The book concludes with a discussion of how can these findings be extrapolated to a) Romanian Catholicism and b) every-day religious practices. The author rightfully outlines the conditions of validity of his findings and confines his argument to religious elites. His analysis focuses rather on discourses and not so much on urban and rural clergy, religious institutions, every-day spiritual practices and socializations of religious subjects. It remains to be determined to what extent this theological neo-liberalism is a characteristic of the wider Orthodox populations and if within this religious community a religious endorsement of capitalism is much likelier to emerge than in Protestant and Evangelical religious communities. Anthropological research (Gog 2016) suggests that popular religious legitimations of capitalist accumulation, individual competition, private initiative and libertarianism are still little developed within the discourses of the Romanian Christian churches and denominations, in comparison for example to the wide spread programs of personal and spiritual development that cultivate a radical neo-liberal subjectivity for which the entrepreneurialisation of inner human resources constitutes the most valuable asset for personal-growth, prosperity and individual success.

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