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THE SINICIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA

GERGELY SALÁT¹

Abstract. This study examines the Sinicization (zhongguohua) policy of Xi Jinping’s government and its impact on Christianity in China. It distinguishes between organic, bottom-up cultural adaptation and the top-down, politically driven Sinicization enforced since 2015, which demands that religious communities pledge loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party, adopt socialist core values, and sever foreign ties. The paper traces the development of this policy through Xi’s key speeches, major regulatory documents (2018–2025), and the five-year plans of official Protestant and Catholic organizations. It concludes that the policy represents state-imposed political domestication rather than genuine inculturation, steadily narrowing the space for authentic Christian practice in China.

Keywords: Sinicization (zhongguohua); Christianity in China; Chinese Communist Party (CCP); religious policy; Xi Jinping; religious freedom; state-church relations; political domestication

In May 2015, at the Central United Front Work Conference of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), General Secretary Xi Jinping announced a new direction for religious management in China, stating that “in actively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society, we must adhere to the direction of Sinicization [...]”.²

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- 2 “Xi Jinping zai Zhongyang tongzhan gongzuo huiyi shang qianguangdiao: gonggu fazhan zui guangfan de aiguo tongyi zhanxian, wei shixian Zhongguo meng tigong guangfan liliang zhichi 习近平在中央统战工作会议上强调：巩固发展最广泛的爱国统一战线，为实现中国梦提供广泛力量支持” [Xi Jinping Emphasizes at the Central United Front Work Conference: Consolidate and Develop the Broadest Patriotic United Front to Provide Broad Support for Realizing the Chinese Dream], *Gongchandangyuan Wang* 共产党员网,

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With this statement, a new era began not only in Chinese religious policy but also in the history of Christianity in China – an era characterized by the concept of Sinicization. Xi later elaborated on the details of the Sinicization program for religion in several speeches. At the same time, the government issued new administrative regulations on religion that explicitly mandated Sinicization as a fundamental requirement.

This study examines what Xi Jinping’s Sinicization policy means for China’s religious communities, primarily Protestants and Catholics, from legal, administrative, and political perspectives. Before turning to contemporary developments, however, it first examines the concept of Sinicization in some detail, including its bottom-up and top-down variants, and then briefly reviews the development of religious policy in the People’s Republic of China from 1949 to the beginning of the Xi era. Without this context, recent developments are difficult to interpret.

Zhongguohua: Defining the Concept

The term rendered in English as “Sinicization” is *zhongguohua* (中国化) in the Chinese original, literally meaning “making Chinese” or “becoming Chinese.” It is important to note that this does not mean becoming Han Chinese (*hanhua* 汉化). In Chinese political discourse, a distinction is made between Han Chinese identity and the broader *Zhonghua* (中华) identity, which transcends individual ethnic groups and of which the Han Chinese are an integral part, alongside China’s recognized ethnic minorities. The state of this *Zhonghua* nation is *Zhongguo* – that is, China. In this sense, the Sinicization of religion does not mean Hanification, but rather alignment with this broader pan-Chinese identity.

In the modern era, the concept of *zhongguohua* first appeared in connection with Marxism-Leninism. The Chinese Communist Party, founded in 1921, soon confronted the problem that the basic tenets of Marxism and Leninism did not readily correspond to Chinese conditions: China in the 1920s represented a very different social and economic environment from that of nineteenth-century England or early twentieth-century Russia. The CCP suffered numerous failures in its early years partly because it paid insufficient attention to this problem. It was ultimately Mao Zedong who argued that Marxism-Leninism had to be adapted to

20 May 2015, <https://news.12371.cn/2015/05/20/ARTI1432111597695781.shtml>[accessed: 25 May 2026].

Chinese reality: while its basic tenets were to be upheld, concrete policies had to be adjusted to the social, economic, and political conditions of contemporary China. Mao first used the term *zhongguohua* at a party conference in 1938, although in practice he had been following this political line even earlier.³

Since then, the Sinicization of Marxism – that is, adapting Marxism to ever-changing Chinese circumstances and thereby developing it further – has been expected of each successive paramount leader of the Party. Each leader has been required to develop his own theoretical contribution, thereby becoming the latest link in the ongoing Sinicization of Marxism. The most recent example is Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想), which is not an independent ideology but the latest stage in the development and Sinicization of Marxism.

With respect to religion, the concept of *zhongguohua* was first applied to Buddhism by religious scholars in the 1980s. They observed that this religion of Indian origin had undergone extensive Sinicization during the first millennium CE, and that this transformation had been a fundamental precondition for Buddhism's widespread adoption in China. The study of this process became an important strand of Chinese Buddhist studies. From this period onward, it also became common for Buddhist scholars and practitioners to present this pattern as an example for Chinese Christians to follow, emphasizing that the spread and lasting rootedness of any religion in China require its *zhongguohua* – its Sinicization. Beyond Buddhism, the concept of Sinicization became increasingly common in academic discourse on Chinese religions from the 2000s onward, and it presumably entered political usage from there.⁴

It is important to note that *zhongguohua* encompasses two distinct but related processes.⁵ Sinicization can arise from below: in this sense, it refers to the more

3 Joyce C.H. LIU, “Paradoxical Routes of the Sinification of Marxism: Materialist Dialectic and Immanent Critique”, in Joyce C.H. LIU, Viren MURTHY (eds.), *East Asian Marxisms and Their Trajectories*, New York: Routledge, 2017, 157–175.

4 Fenggang YANG, “Sinicization or Chinafication? Cultural Assimilation vs. Political Domestication of Christianity in China and Beyond”, in Richard MADSEN (ed.), *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below* (Religion in Chinese Societies, vol. 18.), Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2021, 18–33.

5 Richard MADSEN, “Introduction”, in Richard MADSEN (ed.), *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below* (Religion in Chinese Societies, vol. 18.), Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2021, 1–15.

or less spontaneous adaptation of religions to Chinese circumstances. In the case of any religion that is not bound to a single nation but seeks to cross national and cultural boundaries, a recurring problem arises: the religion has a core that is, in principle, unchangeable, but also numerous external features associated with a particular culture. When such a religion moves from one cultural setting to another, its core teachings tend to remain intact, while its external cultural features adapt to the new environment.

In contrast to this bottom-up *zhongguohua*, there is also a form of top-down Sinicization that is far more political in character. It is directed simultaneously at the institutional structures of religions, the intensification of state control, intervention in personnel decisions, and even the modification of religious teachings. The Sinicization proclaimed by Xi Jinping clearly falls into this latter category. Here, we are not dealing with localization, acculturation, or accommodation, but with the adaptation of religion in China to the Chinese political system, and with the more emphatic enforcement of the state's traditional supremacy over religious life. This, too, is not without historical precedent: in the imperial period, rulers likewise claimed the authority to supervise religious institutions, define orthodoxy, suppress heterodoxy, and determine which teachings could legitimately serve the political order.⁶

This political dimension is also indicated by the fact that the slogan of *zhongguohua* is emphasized even in connection with indigenous Chinese religions such as Taoism. In these cases, cultural adaptation is obviously not the issue; what is meant is political alignment. This expectation gives the concept of Sinicization a distinctly political content: religious communities are required not merely to adopt Chinese cultural forms, but also to identify with the CCP's ideology, socialist core values, and the "Chinese dream." The goal is not simply for a given religion to become Chinese, but for it to become loyal – to the party and the state. In this sense, *zhongguohua* is not primarily a cultural project but a political one: the incorporation of religious communities into the party-led united front system, the institutionalization of their loyalty, and the supervision of their ideological content.

Chinese authorities deliberately blur the boundary between the two kinds of Sinicization. In official rhetoric, *zhongguohua* is presented as the natural and

6 C. K. YANG, *Religion in Chinese Society. A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*, Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961, 180–217.

necessary adaptation of religions to Chinese society, supported by millennia-old precedents: the development of Buddhism in China, the integration of Islam, and even the legacy of Matteo Ricci are all invoked in this context. In reality, however, the policy now promoted under this label is a top-down, administratively enforced process whose outcome is not necessarily an authentically Chinese religion, but rather a state-controlled and politically obedient religious organization.

To distinguish between the two forms of Sinicization, some scholars use two separate terms: “Sinicization” for the bottom-up process and “Chinafication” for the top-down, state-directed one.⁷ This distinction is fundamentally justified. The present study, however, follows the usage found in most of the scholarly literature and employs the term Sinicization in both senses.

Sinicization also has theological dimensions and affects community life, rituals, and other religious practices. The present article, however, focuses on top-down *zhongguohua* and examines its political and administrative dimensions. In what follows, Sinicization is therefore used not primarily as a cultural, historical, or theological concept, but as a political one. Its other dimensions would require separate treatment.

It is important to note that the Sinicization of religion is not an independent process, but fits organically into the broader changes that have taken place in China since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. Among the most important of these are the restoration of party control over society and the economy, and the strengthening of the power of the party center – in other words, recentralization. Whereas from the 1980s onward the party had partially withdrawn from many areas of social life, under Xi Jinping this process was reversed, and the demand re-emerged for the party to control all areas of society as closely as possible. This has been accompanied by the more forceful propagation of Marxism and its contemporary variant, Xi Jinping Thought, and by their reintegration into education and propaganda. China today is far more ideologically saturated than it was in the decades before Xi Jinping.⁸

All of this has been accompanied by intensifying nationalism. This is not a contradiction, since in China Marxism has always been far more of a nationalist

7 YANG, “Sinicization”, 16–17.

8 Gergely SALÁT, “The Power Politics of Xi Jinping – The First Ten Years of Xi Jinping, Part 2”, *KKI Policy Brief* KE-2023/15, Budapest: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023, https://hiia.hu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/KKIElemzesek.KE-2023.15_EN.pdf [accessed: 25 May 2026].

than an internationalist phenomenon. The program of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” entails both the revival of carefully selected elements of Chinese culture and the demand to minimize foreign influence. The party leadership has made clear that foreign influences deemed harmful are to be removed from ideology, culture, and thought. This is therefore not merely a project of national revival, but also an effort to reduce what the party regards as the danger posed to China by foreign ideas.

All of this directly affects religion, and Christianity above all, which the Chinese state views with inherent suspicion: not only because of its foreign origin, but also because, in Chinese historical memory, it is closely associated with the imperialist powers.

Religious Policy in the People’s Republic of China

Several factors shaped the attitude of the communist government that came to power in 1949 toward religion. One was the long-standing Chinese imperial tradition of subordinating religion to the state, inherited from a much older conception of political authority. Furthermore, the CCP sought to impose Marxist ideology on the whole country, regarding religious organizations as problematic both because they obstructed ideological hegemony and threatened the party’s monopoly of power over society. Christianity’s foreign origin made it particularly suspect: since Catholicism and Protestantism had spread alongside violent Western penetration, the real goal in practice was to suppress Christianity, or at least bring it under control.⁹

The new government recognized only five religions – Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism – incorporating their “progressive” forces into the CCP-led united front through national “patriotic” organizations established in the 1950s. At the same time, the state engineered the impossibility of religious life: monasteries were stripped of their land, foreign missionaries expelled, and political campaigns made regular worship impossible. During the Cultural Revolution (1966), all religious activity was prohibited, temples closed, and clergy persecuted. After Mao’s death in 1976, the Deng Xiaoping leadership

9 Gergely SALÁT, *Kína és a kereszténység*, Budapest: Szent István Intézet, 2023, <https://szentistvanintezet.hu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/kinai-keresztenyseg-tanulmany.pdf> [accessed: 25 May 2026], 9–11.

concluded that repression had proved ineffective and opted instead to guarantee a degree of religious freedom.¹⁰

Under these freer conditions – and contrary to the leadership’s expectations – religion began to grow rapidly.¹¹ Protestantism, in particular, experienced spectacular growth. The number of Protestant believers stood at approximately 700,000 in 1949 and probably grew little during the Mao era and into the late 1970s. By contrast, the government’s 1997 White Paper cited 10 million Protestants, the 2018 White Paper cited 38 million, and some unofficial – probably exaggerated – Western estimates have put the number of Chinese Protestants at around 100 million. Among Catholics, growth was less spectacular. According to one survey, there were 3,270,000 Catholics in China in 1946, shortly before the communist takeover; the 1997 White Paper put their number at 4 million, and the 2018 document at 6 million.¹² The Pew Research Center’s 2023 report puts the number of people who say they believe in Jesus or God at 81 million, though the number of actual denominational members is far lower according to the same report: 18 million Protestants and 2 million Catholics.¹³

Freedom of religious belief is guaranteed by the current 1982 Constitution, and numerous other laws also contain provisions to this effect. This, of course, does not amount to religious freedom in the Western sense. First, legal protection extends only to the five officially recognized religions, meaning that unregistered

10 Raymond PONG – Carlo CALDAROLA, “China: Religion in a Revolutionary Society”, in Carlo CALDAROLA (ed.), *Religions and Societies: Asia and the Middle East*, Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982, 551–578.

11 Fenggang YANG, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

12 CHINA HANDBOOK EDITORIAL COMMITTEE (ed.), *Life and Lifestyles* (China Handbook Series), Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1985, 208, 214; INFORMATION OFFICE OF THE STATE COUNCIL OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *Freedom of Religious Belief in China*, China.org.cn, October 1997, <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/Freedom/index.htm> [accessed: 25 May 2026]; STATE COUNCIL INFORMATION OFFICE OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *China’s Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief*, Beijing: Guowuyuan Xinwen Banshigongshi, April 2018, http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/2018n/202207/t20220704_130575.html [accessed: 25 May 2026].

13 PEW RESEARCH CENTER, *Measuring Religion in China*, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 30 August 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/08/30/measuring-religion-in-china/> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

Christian communities and groups classified as cults continue to face persecution. Second, anti-religious excesses by local cadres continue to occur and have in fact multiplied in recent years. Third, as we shall see, “freedom” itself means something quite different in the Chinese context.

In 1996, the drafting of a comprehensive law on religious affairs was announced, but such a law has still not been completed. Instead, only a State Council regulation was issued in 2005 under the title *Regulations on Religious Affairs*.¹⁴ This regulation, too, guaranteed “freedom of religious belief,” though it said nothing about communal religious practice. Its most important rule was that every religious organization, venue, and religious professional had to be registered in advance with the local authorities; failure to do so rendered religious practice illegal. The text was a classic catch-all regulation: while it guaranteed “normal” religious practice, without defining the term, it classified religious activity as illegal if it was under foreign control, fell into the category of religious extremism, or was capable of disturbing public order or endangering social stability – although none of these concepts was clearly defined either. This regulation was later superseded by the 2018 *Regulations on Religious Affairs*, discussed below.

The Ideological Framework of the Xi Jinping Turn

In the 1990s and 2000s, despite strict regulation, religious communities enjoyed a degree of relative freedom in practice – by Chinese standards – and this contributed to the rapid spread of Christianity discussed above. This relative liberalism was gradually replaced by a tightening that began after Xi Jinping’s rise to power in 2012. Party-state control increased across all areas of life, and religion was affected as well, with the major measures framed around the concept of *zhongguohua*.

The slogan of the Sinicization of religion first appeared in a speech by Xi Jinping in 2015, and the General Secretary subsequently elaborated on its meaning in further speeches. In the Chinese system – especially under Xi Jinping – guidance from the paramount leader is extremely important. The party press and internal publications publish such speeches, or summaries of them, and local party and

14 GUOWUYUAN 国务院, *Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli* 宗教事务条例 [Regulations on Religious Affairs], 30 November 2004 (effective 1 March 2005), <https://xzfg.moj.gov.cn/front/law/detail?LawID=1025> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

state leaders conduct relevant affairs within their areas of competence on this basis, knowing that their performance will be evaluated accordingly. For this reason, Xi's speeches are often more important than legislation, with the latter mainly providing the formal framework. What follows is an overview of how the program for the Sinicization of religion developed in the decade after 2015.

Xi Jinping first mentioned the need to sinicize religion at the Central United Front Work Conference, held on May 18–20, 2015. Religion was not the main topic of the conference, but was discussed alongside other social organizations and forces. Xi's speech included the following passage:¹⁵

In actively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society, we must adhere to the direction of Sinicization, raise the level of law-based governance in religious work, view the social role of religion dialectically, attach importance to bringing into play the role of religious circles, and guide religion to contribute to economic development, social harmony, cultural prosperity, ethnic unity, and national reunification.

At the time of the speech, this was not yet clear, but subsequent official retrospectives have identified the event as the starting point of the new religious policy.¹⁶ Alongside Sinicization, the passage already contains the demand for the active guidance of religion and a utilitarian approach whereby religion is to be used to promote broader political goals, such as economic development, ethnic unity – that is, the suppression of separatism – and national reunification, meaning above all reunification with Taiwan.

15 “Xi Jinping zai Zhongyang.” The full texts of the Xi Jinping speeches cited here were generally not made public. However, Xinhua News Agency and the Party press reported on them in detail, quoting entire passages. The cadres responsible for implementing these directives work on the basis of such summaries, which in certain respects gives them greater practical importance than the original speeches themselves. In what follows, we quote from these summaries. In the analysis, we rely on the original Chinese texts of the speeches and the relevant legal provisions; where English translations are available, we provide references to them alongside the original Chinese sources.

16 Xunmou ZHANG 张训谋, “Ruhe renshi he xitong tuijin woguo zongjiao Zhongguohua” 如何认识和系统推进我国宗教中国化 [How to Understand and Systematically Advance the Sinicization of Religion in China], *Hongqi Wengao* 红旗文稿 24 (2025), <https://www.qstheory.cn/20251230/8fb9de71b57c491eb77535efb02e61c0/c.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

Sinicization played a more central role in Xi Jinping's next relevant speech, delivered at the National Religious Work Conference in April 2016. Here, the entire speech was devoted to religious policy, and Xi elaborated in far greater detail on the role he envisioned for religion and for religious policy – or, in his terminology, the policy of freedom of religious belief.¹⁷

The starting point and ultimate goal of implementing the policy of freedom of religious belief is to unite the believing and non-believing masses to the greatest extent possible. Actively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society means guiding the believing masses to love the motherland and the people; to safeguard national unity and the great unity of the Chinese nation; to subordinate themselves to the supreme interests of the state and the overall interests of the Chinese nation; to support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system; to persist in the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics; to actively practice the socialist core values, carry forward Chinese culture, and strive to integrate religious doctrines with Chinese culture; to comply with state laws and regulations and consciously accept state management in accordance with the law; to participate in reform and opening up and in socialist modernization, and to contribute to the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation – the Chinese dream.

This passage illustrates particularly clearly how different the Chinese understanding of “freedom of religious belief” is from the liberal Western concept of religious freedom. Xi defines the implementation of religious freedom through a series of requirements that, from a Western perspective, directly contradict the very meaning of religious freedom: believers are to subordinate themselves to the supreme interests of the state, support the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system, practice the socialist core values, accept state management, and contribute to the political project of national rejuvenation. Religious freedom thus appears not as protection from state interference, but as a framework within which religion is permitted only insofar as it serves the political, ideological, and national goals of the party-state.

17 XINHUA SHE 新华社, “Xi Jinping chuxi quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua” 习近平出席全国宗教工作会议并发表重要讲话 [Xi Jinping Attends the National Religious Work Conference and Delivers an Important Speech], *Renmin Wang* 人民网, 23 April 2016, <https://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0423/c1001-28299513.html> [accessed: 27 May 2026].

The speech also discusses Sinicization in detail:

One important task in actively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society is to support our country's religions in adhering to the direction of Sinicization. We must use the socialist core values to guide and educate religious figures and the believing masses, carry forward the fine traditions of the Chinese nation, guide the broad masses of believers with ideas of unity, progress, peace, and tolerance, and support each religion, while maintaining its fundamental beliefs, core doctrines, and ritual systems, in deeply excavating from its doctrines and religious canons content conducive to social harmony, the progress of the times, and sound civilization, and in interpreting its religious canons and doctrines in a manner that accords with the requirements of contemporary China's development and progress and with fine traditional Chinese culture.

The message is unambiguous: in these passages, Xi does not simply expect religious people to be "good citizens." The requirement goes further: he expects their religious identity to be subordinated to the party-state political order, to national unity, to socialist ideology, and to the requirements of Sinicization. In other words, the fundamental expectation is that religion should not separate believers from the party-state and the nation. They are expected to support CCP rule; to harmonize religious teachings with socialist core values; to "sinicize" religion and reinterpret its teachings where necessary; and to contribute to national goals, modernization, and the realization of the "Chinese dream."

In this context, Sinicization means, on the one hand, cultural adaptation: religious teachings must be connected with Chinese culture, with "fine traditional Chinese culture," and with Chinese national traditions. Religion must take on Chinese forms, Chinese language, and Chinese cultural framing. On the other hand, it also means political adaptation: "Sinicization" is not merely cultural localization, but the integration of religion into the national-political order defined by the CCP. Religion is "Chinese" when it does not represent foreign influence, universal religious authority, or transnational loyalty, but instead serves the goals of the Chinese party-state. The speech employs a rhetorical strategy that conflates the two forms of Sinicization, presenting them as an organic whole, although in reality they should be analytically distinguished.

The Sinicization requirement entered the highest-level party document in 2017, when Xi Jinping stated in his report to the 19th CCP Congress, in the section

on united front work: “We must fully implement the Party’s basic guidelines for religious work, adhere to the direction of the Sinicization of religion in China, and actively guide religion to adapt to socialist society.”¹⁸ With this, Sinicization became part of the Party’s ideological canon.

Five years after the 2016 conference, another National Religious Work Conference was held in 2021, at which Xi Jinping delivered a further speech on religious policy. The requirement to sinicize religion again appeared prominently, and Xi expanded the expectations with new elements:¹⁹

We must further promote the Sinicization of religion in China; guide and support China’s religions in taking the socialist core values as their guiding principle; and strengthen the identification of religious figures and the believing masses with the great motherland, the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the Chinese Communist Party, and socialism with Chinese characteristics. In religious circles, patriotic, collectivist, and socialist education must be conducted; education in Party history, the history of New China, the history of reform and opening up, and the history of socialist development must be strengthened in a targeted manner; and religious figures and the believing masses must be guided to cultivate and practice the socialist core values and to carry forward Chinese culture. We must adhere to the overall national security concept, uphold the principle of independence, autonomy, and self-management, and coordinate related

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- 18 Jinping XI 习近平, “Juesheng quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui, duoqu xin shidai Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi weida shengli: zai Zhongguo Gongchandang di shijiu ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao” 决胜全面建成小康社会, 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利: 在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告 [Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era: Report to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China], *Xinhua Wang* 新华网, 18 October 2017, <https://news.sina.cn/2017-10-18/detail-ifymyxw3516456.d.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026].
- 19 XINHUA SHE 新华社, “Xi Jinping zai quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi shang qiangdiao: jianchi woguo zongjiao Zhongguohua fangxiang, jiji yindao zongjiao yu shehui zhuyi shehui xiang shiyong” 习近平在全国宗教工作会议上强调: 坚持我国宗教中国化方向, 积极引导宗教与社会主义社会相适应 [Xi Jinping Emphasizes at the National Religious Work Conference: Uphold the Direction of Sinicization of Religion in China and Actively Guide Religion to Adapt to Socialist Society], *Guojia Zongjiao Shiwu Ju* 国家宗教事务局, 4 December 2021, <https://www.sara.gov.cn/static/content/xxgcqgzjzghyjs/zyjs/2022-09-03/1306305927527268352.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

work. We must strengthen the management of internet religious affairs. We must effectively resolve outstanding problems affecting the healthy transmission of religion in China.

Here Xi formulates the Sinicization of religion not merely as a general principle, but as a concrete political-ideological program. He reiterates that religion cannot function as an independent social or moral authority, but must be embedded in the national, cultural, ideological, and security framework defined by the party-state. Religious communities and believers are to be guided by the socialist core values – meaning that a state-designated value system is placed above religious teachings, with which religious practices must also be aligned. Xi attaches particular importance to strengthening the identification of religious figures and the believing masses with the five fundamental political-cultural reference points: the “great motherland,” the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the Chinese Communist Party, and socialism with Chinese characteristics. This makes clear that religious identity is acceptable only when it does not take precedence over, or weaken, these loyalties. In practice, religious communities must function as venues for political education.

The reference to the “overall national security concept” shows that, in Xi’s view, religion is not merely a social or cultural question, but also a potential security issue. The emphasis on the principle of independence, autonomy, and self-management primarily entails distancing religious communities from foreign religious centers, organizations, and influences.

In September 2025, the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee held a collective study session devoted to the Sinicization of religion, at which Xi Jinping also delivered a speech, essentially carrying forward what had already been formulated in earlier statements.²⁰

20 XINHUA SHE 新华社, “Xi Jinping zai Zhonggong Zhongyang Zhengzhiju di ershier ci jiti xuexi shi qiandiao: xitong tuijin woguo zongjiao Zhongguohua, jiji yindao zongjiao yu shehui zhuyi shehui xiang shiyong” 习近平在中共中央政治局第二十二次集体学习时强调: 系统推进我国宗教中国化, 积极引导宗教与社会主义社会相适应 [Xi Jinping Emphasizes at the 22nd Collective Study Session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee: Systematically Advance the Sinicization of Religion in China and Actively Guide Religion to Adapt to Socialist Society], *Zhongguo Zhengfu Wang* 中国政府网, 29 September 2025, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202509/content_7042829.htm [accessed: 25 May 2026].

History and practice prove that only by continuously promoting the Sinicization of religion in China can we promote religious harmony, ethnic solidarity, social harmony, and the country's long-term stability.

Our country is a socialist country led by the Chinese Communist Party, and therefore actively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society is an inevitable requirement. We must adhere to the socialist core values as the guiding thread; guide religious figures and the believing masses to firmly establish correct views of the state, history, nation, culture, and religion; continuously deepen the “five identifications”; and consciously participate in the building of Chinese-style modernization.

Our country's religions can be transmitted in a healthy manner only if they always take root in Chinese soil and are permeated with Chinese culture. We must draw on the five thousand years of Chinese civilization, promote the integration of religion in China with fine traditional Chinese culture, and guide religious figures and the believing masses to strengthen their identification with Chinese culture.

Inspiring the initiative and self-transformation of religious circles is crucial to promoting the Sinicization of religion in China. We must support and guide religious circles in reflecting Chinese characteristics and adapting to the requirements of the times in their doctrines and religious rules, management systems, ritual customs, and codes of conduct, and in raising their level of self-education, self-management, and self-restraint.

Compared with his earlier speeches, this text represents a further step: Xi no longer merely states that religion must “adapt” to socialist society, but also makes clear that this adaptation must take the form of a systematic, institutionalized, and substantive transformation. Here, Sinicization is already a program for transforming religious teachings, institutions, rites, codes of conduct, and self-understanding.

An important element is that Xi directly connects the Sinicization of religion with political stability. The sentence states that only through the continuous Sinicization of religion can the long-term stability of the state be achieved, meaning that *zhongguohua* is presented as a precondition for stability. Religion is therefore treated as a potential source of instability, which can be transformed into a positive social force only if it fits within the framework defined by the CCP.

Xi clearly explains why he considers this adaptation inevitable: China is “a socialist country led by the Chinese Communist Party,” and the basis of religious

policy is therefore not religious freedom as such, but the political nature of the state. Since the country is socialist and under Party leadership, religion must also align with this political order. The requirement to establish “correct views of the state, history, nation, culture, and religion” signals that not only religious practice but also the thinking of believers is to be reshaped. Religious people are expected to think about the state, history, the nation, culture, and religion itself in the manner the Party considers correct. The “five identifications” already mentioned show the hierarchy into which religious identity is placed: faith may remain, but above it stand national, cultural, and party-political identifications.

A novel element is Xi’s insistence that religious communities must carry out this self-transformation themselves. This means that Sinicization must become internalized: religious organizations, leaders, and communities are expected to rework their own teachings, rules, management systems, rites, and codes of conduct. The state thus seeks not only to regulate religion, but also to have religious institutions transform themselves in accordance with party-state expectations and internalize those expectations. The requirement that the internal structures of religions should also reflect “Chinese characteristics” represents a far deeper interventionist ambition than before: the state does not merely regulate the external behaviour of religious communities, but also demands the transformation of religion’s content, self-understanding, and mode of operation. An interesting contradiction emerges here: top-down Sinicization seeks to generate a process that is expected to present itself as bottom-up, internally driven Sinicization.

The idea of sinicizing religion thus first appeared at the highest level in 2015, and, as we have seen, the concept has since continuously expanded and developed. This ongoing process clearly demonstrates that Sinicization is not a temporary policy, but a fundamental strategy. The policy rests on three mutually reinforcing logics: securing the political loyalty of religious communities, filtering out foreign influence, and supervising the ideological content of religion. These three objectives shape the concrete legal and administrative measures discussed in the following subsections.

Institutions and Regulations

From the 1950s onward, the State Religious Affairs Bureau played a key role in implementing the PRC’s religious policy; in 1998, it was renamed the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA). It supervised the activities of

religious organizations, appointments, and the registration and administration of religious institutions. However, the political direction of matters relating to religion had, from the beginning, been handled by the Party's United Front Work Department, since – as noted above – no sharp distinction was made between religious communities and other social organizations. Those considered useful were incorporated into the party-led united front.

As a sign of the renewal of religious policy, in 2018, as part of Xi Jinping's comprehensive reform of state and Party institutions, the State Administration for Religious Affairs was merged into the Party's United Front Work Department. The formerly governmental body thus officially became a Party organ, with the CCP bringing religion directly under its supervision. This made clear that religious policy is fundamentally a Party matter: religion is not merely a social phenomenon to be administered, but a component of the Party's political direction and mobilization strategy. At the same time, for external purposes the body retained its original name, so one may still encounter the name "State Administration for Religious Affairs," although it should be understood that it now functions as a Party organ.²¹

In 2018, new *Regulations on Religious Affairs* came into force, replacing those that had taken effect in 2005.²² This document does not deal primarily with substantive doctrinal matters, but regulates the administration of religious activity in considerably greater detail than before. The word *Sinicization* does not appear in it; nonetheless, the document places greater emphasis on the need to suppress extremism and cults posing threats to national security, prohibits religious activity in schools, reinforces the registration requirement, and imposes stricter controls on foreign donations, travel, and connections.

The regulation's main goal is to ensure that religious activity can take place only within the framework of the official organizations of officially recognized religions and at state-registered and supervised venues. Communities outside the officially recognized framework are not dealt with by the regulation, except

21 Martin LAVIČKA – Julie Yu-Wen CHEN, "New Measures for Governing Religions in Xi's China", *China Report* 59.3 (2023) 264–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00094455231187046>.

22 GUOWUYUAN 国务院, *Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli* 宗教事务条例 [Regulations on Religious Affairs], 26 August 2017 (effective 1 February 2018), https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm [accessed: 25 May 2026]; China Law Translate, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/religious-affairs-regulations-2017/>.

through a general prohibition, since they fall not under religious policy but under the jurisdiction of public security. Overall, the new regulation reflects the general tightening of the past decade, which has also extended to religious policy.

In 2020, another regulation was issued, the *Measures for the Administration of Religious Groups*, which already addressed substantive questions.²³ Article 5 of the regulation states:

Religious groups must follow the leadership of the Communist Party of China; abide by the Constitution, laws, regulations, rules, and policies; adhere to the principles of independence, autonomy, and self-governance; persist in the direction of the Sinicization of religion; practice the socialist core values; and maintain national integrity, ethnic unity, religious harmony, and social stability.

Article 17 provides as follows:

Religious groups shall publicize the directives and policies of the Communist Party of China, as well as the state's laws, regulations, and rules, among religious professionals and religious citizens; educate and guide religious professionals and religious citizens to support the leadership of the Communist Party of China and the socialist system; persist in following the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics; obey laws, regulations, rules, and policies; correctly handle the relationship between national laws and religious rules; and raise awareness of the state, the law, and citizenship.

Article 32 states:

Religious groups shall establish study systems and organize their staff to study the major decisions and arrangements of the Communist Party of China, state policies and regulations, fine traditional Chinese culture, religious knowledge, and so forth.

23 GUOJIA ZONGJIAO SHIWU JU 国家宗教事务局, *Zongjiao tuanti guanli banfa* 宗教团体管理办法 [Measures for the Administration of Religious Groups], 20 November 2019 (effective 1 February 2020), <https://www.sara.gov.cn/static/content/xxgk/2019-12-30/1306305919071551488.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026]; China Law Translate, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/measures-for-the-administration-of-religious-groups/>; see also LAVIČKA – CHEN, “New Measures”, 265–266.

The document regulates in detail the operation, structure, leadership, administration, leadership responsibilities, and supervision of religious organizations. What is apparent, however, is that the 2020 regulation already goes beyond mere administrative regulation and addresses substantive issues: it prescribes that religious organizations must follow the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, support the socialist system, adhere to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, persist in the direction of the Sinicization of religion, and practice the socialist core values.

The regulation essentially transforms religious organizations into institutions of political education and mediation. Their task becomes to disseminate the Party's guidelines, state laws, and policies among religious personnel and believers, and to strengthen their consciousness of the state, the law, and citizenship. Religious prescriptions are explicitly subordinated to state law. The regulation also institutionalizes political study: religious organizations must establish a "study system" in which their staff study the Party's major decisions, state policies, "fine traditional Chinese culture," and religious knowledge alike. This clearly demonstrates that Sinicization here no longer means cultural adaptation, but political-ideological re-education and organizational discipline. The key innovation is thus that the substantive expectations articulated by Xi Jinping in the speeches cited above have now been given regulatory form.

In 2021, the State Administration for Religious Affairs issued a regulation titled *Measures for the Administration of Religious Professionals*. After religious organizations, the affairs of "religious personnel" – priests, pastors, monks, imams, and others – were thus also brought under detailed regulation.²⁴ In addition to administrative rules concerning training, qualifications, supervision, and related matters, this document also contains substantive prescriptions. Article 3 states:

Religious personnel must love the motherland, support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system, comply with the Constitution, laws, regulations, and rules, practice the socialist core values, adhere to the principle of the independent and autonomous operation of religion in China, follow the direction of the Sinicization of religion, and safeguard national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony, and social stability.

24 GUOJIA ZONGJIAO SHIWU JU 国家宗教事务局, *Zongjiao jiaozhi renyuan guanli banfa* 宗教教职人员管理办法 [Measures for the Administration of Religious Professionals], 18 January 2021 (effective 1 May 2021), https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content_5600086.htm [accessed: 25 May 2026]; see also LAVIČKA – CHEN, "New Measures", 267–268.

In essence, the obligations formulated by the 2020 regulation with regard to religious organizations are here extended to “religious personnel.”

In 2022, yet another area was brought under regulation: internet-based religious activity, which is particularly widespread in China. The *Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services*, issued jointly by the State Administration for Religious Affairs and several other government bodies, prescribe that online religious content – including live broadcasts, social media posts, and recordings of sermons – may be disseminated only by registered organizations, on their own platforms, and on the basis of prior official approval.²⁵ Foreign organizations and individuals may not provide online religious content in China. During the Covid pandemic, online worship services and sermons proliferated rapidly; this regulation was, in part, a state response to that phenomenon, seeking to bring the space of digital religious practice under a form of control similar to that exercised over physical religious practice. Article 3 states the same basic principles already seen in relation to offline religious activity:

Internet religious information services must comply with the Constitution, laws, regulations, and rules; practice the socialist core values; adhere to the principle of the independent and autonomous operation of religion in China; follow the direction of the Sinicization of religion; actively promote the adaptation of religion to socialist society; and maintain religious harmony, social harmony, and ethnic solidarity.

In 2025, the State Administration for Religious Affairs issued the *Detailed Rules for the Implementation of the Regulations on the Administration of Religious Activities of Foreigners within the Territory of the People’s Republic of China*, regulating the religious life of foreigners residing in China.²⁶ The main rule is that,

25 GUOJIA ZONGJIAO SHIWU JU 国家宗教事务局, *Hulianwang zongjiao xinxi fuwu guanli banfa* 互联网宗教信息服务管理办法 [Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services], (effective 1 March 2022), https://www.moj.gov.cn/pub/sfbgw/flfggz/flfggzbmgz/202305/t20230509_478398.html [accessed: 25 May 2026]; China Law Translate, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/internet-religious-information/>; see also LAVIČKA – CHEN, “New Measures”, 269–270.

26 GUOJIA ZONGJIAO SHIWU JU 国家宗教事务局, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo jingnei waiguoren zongjiao huodong guanli guiding shishi xize* 中华人民共和国境内外国人宗教活动管理规定实施细则 [Detailed Rules for Implementation of the Regulations on the Administration of Religious Activities of Foreigners within the Territory of the People’s

if foreigners wish to practice their religion collectively in China, they may do so only at officially registered religious venues, on the basis of prior official permission, under the leadership of Chinese religious personnel, and without the presence of Chinese citizens. Foreigners may establish religious, cultural, or friendly relations with Chinese religious actors only through official religious organizations. Foreign individuals may preach at Chinese religious ceremonies only if they have been officially invited by official religious organizations for this specific purpose, or if they have received explicit official permission to do so. Religious books, audio materials, and similar items may be brought into the country beyond quantities for personal use only under strict conditions.

The rule is clearly a response to the fact that China – especially for Protestants – has become an important missionary destination, with numerous foreign missionaries, primarily Korean and Taiwanese, arriving in the country and operating outside fully controlled conditions, for example in house churches. The authorities’ goal is to restrict this activity and channel it toward official – and therefore controlled – religious organizations.

Also in 2025, the State Administration for Religious Affairs issued the *Norms for the Online Conduct of Religious Personnel*, which gave concrete form to the 2022 internet regulation and again formulated substantive prescriptions.²⁷ Article 2 provides:

In their online activities, religious personnel are obligated to love the motherland, support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system, comply with state laws and regulations on the administration of religious affairs, observe social morality, public order, and good customs, model compliance with the “Self-Discipline Pact for Civilized Internet Use,”

Republic of China], April 2025 (effective 1 May 2025), <https://www.sara.gov.cn/static/content/ywdt/qtyw/2025-04-01/1356550603266883584.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026]; China Law Translate, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/implementation-foreigners-in-china-religion/>.

27 GUOJIA ZONGJIAO SHIWU JU 国家宗教事务局 [State Administration for Religious Affairs], “Guojia Zongjiao Shiwu Ju guanyu yinfa ‘Zongjiao jiaozhi ren yuan wangluo xingwei guifan’ de Tongzhi” 国家宗教事务局关于印发《宗教教职人员网络行为规范》的通知 [Notice of the State Administration for Religious Affairs on Issuing the Code of Conduct for Online Behavior of Religious Professionals], 7 September 2025, <https://www.sara.gov.cn/static/content/xxgk/gfxwj/2025-09-16/1417173278783471616.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

conform to religious codes and commandments, and accept government supervision and social oversight.

Article 3 provides:

In their use of the internet, religious personnel are obligated to practice the socialist core values, adhere to the principle of the independent and autonomous operation of religion in China, follow the direction of the Sinicization of religion, actively promote the adaptation of religion to socialist society, and maintain religious harmony, social harmony, and ethnic solidarity.

Article 8 provides:

Religious personnel may not collaborate with foreign forces through the internet, nor may they support or participate in activities of foreign religious infiltration.

The document again prescribes that internet-based religious activity may take place only on the controlled platforms of official religious organizations. This means, for example, that the use of social media for proselytization is prohibited.

The framework for the Sinicization policy articulated in Xi Jinping's speeches was, from 2018 onward, given concrete content through an increasingly dense web of regulations. This regulatory ensemble is not accidental: it constitutes a coherent, mutually reinforcing system whose common goal is to bring religious communities under state control at every level – institutional, personal, and digital alike.

The Five-Year Plans for the Sinicization of Christianity

The program for sinicizing religion in China applies to the recognized religions. The qualification “recognized” is important: communities outside the five officially recognized religions do not fall within the scope of the Sinicization policy. The government does not seek to sinicize these communities, but rather to force them into controlled religious organizations – this applies primarily to unregistered Christian communities – or else to eliminate them. More generally, what is called religious policy in China applies not to religion in general, but exclusively to the five recognized religions.

The five recognized religions thus constitute the target of Sinicization, but Christianity deserves special attention among them. Along with Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism are the religious traditions most relevant from the perspective of the Sinicization program because of their foreign origins. Buddhism has been present in China for nearly two millennia and is considered a “Chinese” religion in many respects, while Taoism originated in China.

The official Protestant and Catholic organizations responded quickly to the announcement of the program. On the Protestant side, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council issued the *Five-Year Planning Outline for Advancing the Sinicization of Christianity (2018–2022)* at the end of 2017.²⁸ Even in its format, the document conformed to the political planning logic of communist-led systems. Catholics produced a similar document: the *Five-Year Work Plan for Advancing Adherence to the Direction of Sinification of Catholicism in our Nation (2018–2022)*.²⁹

The two five-year plans fully conform to the expectations articulated in the Xi Jinping speeches and regulations discussed above, repeatedly referencing the socialist core values and emphasizing the leading role of the Chinese Communist Party.

The overall tone of the Protestant plan is well captured by the following passage:

The Chinese Church and Chinese Christians are the principal agents in advancing the Sinicization of Christianity. In promoting the Sinicization

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- 28 *Tuijin woguo Jidujiao jianchi Zhongguohua fangxiang wunian gongzuo guihua gangyao (2018–2022 nian)* 推进我国基督教坚持中国化方向五年工作规划纲要(2018–2022年) [Five-Year Planning Outline for Advancing the Sinification of Christianity (2018–2022)], <https://www.hubeichurch.com/news/23.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026]; China Law Translate, [https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/outline-of-the-five-year-plan-for-promoting-the-sinification-of-christianity\(2018-2022\)/](https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/outline-of-the-five-year-plan-for-promoting-the-sinification-of-christianity(2018-2022)/).
- 29 ZHONGGUO TIANZHUJIAO AIGUO HUI 中国天主教爱国会 – ZHONGGUO TIANZHUJIAO ZHUJIAOTUAN 中国天主教主教团, *Tuijin woguo tianzhujiao jianchi Zhongguohua fangxiang wunian gongzuo guihua (2018–2022)* 推进我国天主教坚持中国化方向五年工作规划(2018–2022) [Five-Year Work Plan for Advancing Adherence to the Direction of Sinification of Catholicism in our Nation (2018–2022)], <http://www.jstzj.com.cn/huibian/mshow.asp?id=1097> [accessed: 27 May 2026]; China Law Translate, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/five-year-work-plan-for-advancing-adherence-of-catholicism-in-our-nation-to-the-direction-of-sinification-%EF%BC%882018-2022%EF%BC%89/>.

of Christianity, the following principles must be observed: uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China, follow the guidance of the socialist core values, and identify with our nation's system, path, theory, and culture of development; be grounded in the teachings of the Bible and preserve fundamental beliefs and core doctrines; persist in independence and autonomy while maintaining unity of direction; take into account both the universality and the locality of the Church; draw insights from the practice of faith, spiritual experience, and theological heritage of the global Church; integrate with fine Chinese traditions and advanced socialist culture; and boldly assume social responsibility and integrate with Chinese society.

The spirit of the Catholic plan – in which the name of Xi Jinping appears five times, that of Jesus only once – is no different:

Adherence to the direction of the Sinicization of Catholicism in China requires conscious political identification. Love of the motherland and obedience to the state are the responsibility and obligation of every Christian. The core of political identification is acceptance of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, support for the socialist system, and preservation of the authority of the Constitution and laws, the unity of the people, and the integrity of the motherland.

Catholics should practice the socialist core values and absorb the nourishment of fine traditional Chinese culture; advocate Chinese styles and integrate with Chinese culture in theological reflection, expressions of ritual and social practice, church construction, painting, music, and art.

It is apparent that, in the name of Sinicization, the official organs of the two Christian denominations seek to create a kind of hybrid system of thought in which original teachings, traditional Chinese culture, and contemporary political expectations all appear simultaneously. The documents also seek to portray Sinicization as the church's own internal development rather than as state compulsion: the Protestant plan embeds it in the legacy of the Three-Self movement, and the Catholic plan in the principle of inculturation associated with the Second Vatican Council. In substance, however, both clearly pursue state political goals.

After the first set of plans, both Protestant and Catholic organizations developed and published new five-year plans for the 2023–2027 period, in a similar spirit.³⁰ One innovation in the Catholic plan is that it expressly states the principle that “national law takes precedence over religious rules,” although this already follows unambiguously from the preceding policy framework.

Chinese Christianity in Practice

The real question is how all this manifests itself in the daily lives of Chinese Christians – yet here the researcher faces a fundamental problem. Christians are scattered across a vast country and have not been the subject of any comprehensive, scientifically rigorous national survey; the questions are politically sensitive, and candor of interlocutors remains uncertain. Information available in the West comes primarily from human rights organizations with potential biases, or from sensationalist press coverage. Our knowledge thus consists more of scattered and anecdotal evidence than of systematic analysis. On this basis, the situation appears extremely contradictory.

On the one hand, churches and houses of prayer operate throughout the country; according to official data alone, tens of millions of Christians live in China; Chinese religious diplomacy is active; members of various Christian communities maintain lively international connections; and Beijing has even made important gestures toward the Vatican, most notably by concluding a 2018 agreement with the Holy See on the appointment of bishops, which has since been renewed several times and represents an important step forward.³¹ On the other hand, reports continue

30 JIDUJIAO QUANGUO LIANGHUI 基督教全国两会, *Shenru tuijin woguo Jidujiao Zhongguohua wunian gongzuo guihua gangyao (2023–2027 nian)* 深入推进我国基督教中国化五年工作规划纲要(2023–2027年) [Outline of the Five-Year Work Plan for Deepening the Sinicization of Christianity in China (2023–2027)], <https://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/17230> [accessed: 25 May 2026]; ZHONGGUO TIANZHUIJIAO 中国天主教, *Shenru tuijin woguo tianzhujiao Zhongguohua wunian gongzuo guihua gangyao (2023–2027 nian)* 深入推进我国天主教中国化五年工作规划纲要(2023–2027年) [Outline of the Five-Year Work Plan for Deepening the Sinicization of Catholicism in China (2023–2027)], <https://www.chinacatholic.cn/ccic/report/2404/0481-1.htm> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

31 Mauricio PERCARA, “Crossroads of Faith and Politics: Understanding Vatican-China Relations in the 21st Century”, *Cognizance Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 3.12 (2023) 191–198, <https://doi.org/10.47760/cognizance.2023.v03i12.016> [accessed: 28 May 2026].

to emerge of crosses being demolished, churches being closed, Christians being persecuted, and religious practice being restricted.³²

The various accounts suggest that, in practice, the freedom of religious life – particularly the operation of Christian communities – varies from place to place and from time to time. The broadly interpretable regulations allow local officials to handle religious affairs according to their own preferences and the circumstances of the moment. Thus, in certain areas, not only underground Catholics or unregistered Protestant communities are persecuted – with clergy taken into custody and congregations forcibly dissolved – but the activities of official churches are also strictly restricted. Elsewhere, local officials maintain good relations with religious communities, and in some places even unofficial Catholic or Protestant congregations operate openly without sanction.³³

What is certain is that the trend over the past decade has been fundamentally negative. The most important development is that the registration requirement is being enforced increasingly seriously. The principle itself is not new, but after the 2018 tightening, enforcement of the registration requirement intensified, and the conditions also changed.

Because of the registration system, Christians can be divided into two groups. The first consists of registered Protestant and Catholic communities belonging to patriotic organizations, which operate legally, although they must fulfil the requirements of Sinicization. The second consists of communities that, for various reasons, have not registered. Over the latter constantly hangs the sword of Damocles: their places of worship may be closed at any time, their clergy taken into custody, and their congregations forcibly dissolved.

Control over religious personnel has also intensified, and political education has become a mandatory component in the training of priests and pastors. Seminaries and theological colleges have been required to introduce courses on patriotic education, Chinese history, and the socialist core values. In addition, religious personnel have been required to study the current Party line and official ideological

32 Fuk-tsang YING, “The Politics of Cross Demolition: A Religio-Political Analysis of the ‘Three Rectifications and One Demolition’ Campaign in Zhejiang Province”, *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 5.1 (2018) 43–75, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22143955-00501004> [accessed: 27 May 2026].

33 Marie-Eve RENY, *Authoritarian Containment: Public Security Bureaus and Protestant House Churches in Urban China*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

documents. Sermons must be harmonized with the current political line of the Chinese Communist Party.³⁴

Religious life is also affected by the extensive infrastructure of citizen surveillance that has been built in China. This is characteristic of virtually all areas of life, but in some provinces facial-recognition cameras have been installed in churches and houses of prayer, and QR-code entry systems are used to identify visitors. This enables the authorities to track who visits a given community and when.³⁵

These processes do not unfold in a nationally uniform manner; concrete implementation depends greatly on the attitude of local authorities, the priorities of provincial and local Party leadership, and the size and visibility of the community in question. The overall trend is nonetheless clear: political and administrative control over religious life is intensifying, and the space available to Christianity is gradually narrowing in the Xi Jinping era.³⁶

The reactions of communities vary; individual communities respond to the Sinicization policy with different strategies.³⁷ As we have seen, official religious organizations publicly identify fully with the policy's expectations. As far as can be determined from outside, however, serious internal debates take place within some registered churches about how far it is possible to comply with state expectations without surrendering the essential elements of the faith.

Some communities choose fragmentation: instead of maintaining larger, highly visible congregations, they divide into smaller, less conspicuous groups, hold their gatherings at unregistered venues, and minimize their digital presence. The authorities are primarily interested in larger, more organized communities, since Chinese historical experience suggests that such groups can pose a real political

34 Peitong JING – Karrie J. KOESEL, “Church and State in Contemporary China: Securing Christianity”, *Politics and Religion* 17.1 (2024) 107–137, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048323000329> [accessed: 27 May 2026].

35 Chris MESEROLE, “Technological Surveillance of Religion in China”, *Brookings Institution*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/technological-surveillance-of-religion-in-china/> [accessed: 27 May 2026].

36 Sarah COOK, *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*, Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2017/battle-chinas-spirit> [accessed: 27 May 2026].

37 Carsten T. VALA, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party?*, London: Routledge, 2018.

risk. Below a certain size, some congregations are therefore still able to remain under the radar.

Open political resistance is not typical. It is important to recognize that, since religion already occupies a marginal position in this enormously populous country, Christianity – unlike in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe – has never become a broad social basis for resistance. Moreover, in China, a strongly nationalized form of communism serves as the ruling ideology: support for the Party and patriotism are closely intertwined. Opposition to the system can therefore also invite accusations of being unpatriotic, particularly in the case of Christians, who are already regarded as followers of a religion of foreign origin.

For this reason, identification with the leadership's goals is more characteristic at the official level, while quiet adaptation is the norm at lower levels. Most communities do not seek open confrontation, but rather try to preserve the greatest possible room for manoeuvre within constantly narrowing political and administrative frameworks.

Conclusion

Overall, the Chinese government's Sinicization program is a clearly top-down *zhongguohua* initiative, despite official rhetoric that deliberately blurs this approach with more organic processes. The program does not aim at genuine religious inculturation; rather, it enforces a political domestication of the Christian faith under Party control. Historically, state–church relations have posed complex dilemmas across eras, including under twentieth-century communist regimes. In contemporary China, similar challenges arise within the specific political and social conditions of the 21st century. While some goals of the official Sinicization effort may superficially coincide with the natural indigenization of Christianity, significant tensions remain. For example, subordinating core religious principles to Party–state policies can conflict with fundamental Christian teachings (such as those concerning family and social ethics). This raises a critical question: can Chinese Christianity adapt under these conditions without breaking from its core convictions, and is an authentic Chinese Christianity even possible if it is imposed through top-down administrative means?

The trend of the past decade has been an unmistakable narrowing of space for Christianity and an intensification of state control. At the same time, policy implementation is uneven across regions, reflecting the Chinese system's local

autonomy: enforcement of directives can vary widely by locality. It is unclear how long the current Sinicization push will last. Historically, China's system has alternated between periods of strict centralization and phases of relative decentralization ("tightening and loosening"). We appear to be in one of the more restrictive phases now, though this too may not last indefinitely.

Studying Chinese Christianity therefore demands exceptional sensitivity from outside observers. Reliable information is limited, and the stakes are high: the physical safety and basic freedoms of Chinese believers may be at risk. Observers should refrain from hasty or politically driven judgments and should follow developments with maximum caution and understanding. Over-politicizing these issues can cause real harm. Ultimately, the Sinicization campaign embodies a fundamental paradox: authorities are attempting to force by top-down administrative means an organic, internally driven transformation of faith that, by its nature, should occur spontaneously. Whether this tension – between the centuries-old processes of organic localization of Christianity and the current state-imposed domestication – can be resolved (and if so, how) remains uncertain. In the end, the future of Christianity in China will depend largely on how central policy evolves and on how Christian communities respond and adapt to these changing circumstances.

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ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN THE LATIN-RITE CATHOLIC POPULATION, 1992–2021

DÉNES KISS¹

Abstract: This article examines the socio-demographic transformation of the Roman Catholic population in Romania between 1992 and 2021. Drawing on data from Romanian population censuses, it analyses changes in population size, ethnic composition, territorial distribution, and educational attainment. The study argues that these transformations were driven primarily by demographic and migration processes rather than by religious factors such as conversion or secularization. During the post-communist period, the number of Roman Catholics declined significantly, reflecting both Romania's overall population decrease and the specific demographic and migration patterns of the Hungarian and German minorities, which historically constituted a large share of the Catholic population. At the same time, the proportion of Romanian Catholics increased, while the shares of Hungarians and especially Germans declined. The territorial distribution of Catholics became increasingly concentrated in Szeklerland and Moldavia, whereas the relative importance of Banat and Central and Southern Transylvania decreased. The educational profile of Catholics also reflects the social characteristics of the Hungarian minority, showing lower representation among university graduates and higher representation in intermediate educational categories. The findings demonstrate that demographic, ethnic, and migration-related factors provide the most convincing explanation for recent changes in Romania's Roman Catholic population.

Keywords: Roman Catholicism; religious demography; religion and ethnicity; migration and religion; religious change.

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Introduction

In this study, I seek to provide a statistical description of the Roman Catholic population in Romania, as well as to examine the changes that have occurred in its main demographic characteristics over the past three decades. The analysis focuses on the transformation of the Latin-rite Catholic population from four perspectives: (1) changes in total population size, (2) the dynamics of the population's ethnic composition, (3) territorial distribution, and (4) changes in educational attainment.

The analysis relies primarily on data from the Romanian censuses conducted between 1992 and 2021, which make it possible to examine the demographic processes that unfolded during the three decades following the collapse of the socialist regime.

I argue that the transformation of Romania's Roman Catholic population between 1992 and 2021 was shaped primarily not by religious processes — such as religious conversion or secularization — but by broader demographic and migration trends, as well as by the specific minority demographic and migration patterns resulting from the ethnic composition of the Catholic population.

Factors Shaping the Size of Religious Denominations: Theoretical Considerations

The evolution of the size of individual religious denominations may be influenced by a number of factors. One such factor is (1) competition among religions for adherents, whereby individuals choose from the available religious “supply” based on personal conviction and, as a result, convert; that is, religious conversion takes place. The decision to opt for non-religion may also be included here, namely religious disaffiliation resulting from secularization. Rather than using the term religious conversion, Hackett and his co-authors refer to these two phenomena collectively as religious “switching”.²

2 Conrad HACKETT – Marcin STONAWSKI – Yunping TONG – Stephanie KRAMER – Anne SHI – Dalia FAHMY (2025). *How the global religious landscape changed from 2010 to 2020*. Pew Research Center. Source: https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2025/06/PR_2025.06.09_global-religious-change_report.pdf [Accessed: 22. 06. 2026] <https://doi.org/10.58094/fj71-ny11>

(2) Although in most democratically functioning countries the free competition of religious ideas is, in principle, guaranteed, and voluntary religious conversions arising from such competition should theoretically face no obstacles, in practice this competition is constrained to varying degrees by the religious policies of individual states and by the actual extent to which religious freedom is exercised. In this respect, Grim and Finke argue that at least three factors should be taken into account. The first is government regulation, that is, the laws and administrative measures governing the operation of churches and the practice of religion, including the criteria for registering new churches, the legal prohibition of certain religions, and restrictions on proselytizing and preaching, among others. The second is government favoritism, understood as the support or privileges granted by the state to one or more selected religions or religious groups. Third, free competition may also be limited by social regulation, that is, restrictions imposed by other religious groups, associations, or the broader culture.³

(3) In addition to the above, demographic processes constitute another set of factors shaping both the size of a denomination and a country's denominational structure. The number of births and deaths, as well as the age structure of the population, may lead to population growth or decline independently of religious factors.⁴ At the same time, the demographic behavior of the adherents of a denomination – above all, fertility – may be influenced by its theological teachings.⁵

(4) Migration processes may also affect denominational structure, since emigration and immigration influence the number of adherents of existing denominations and may also lead to the emergence of new religions. Migration may increase or decrease religious pluralism in both countries of origin and destination; it may also alter the internal composition, ethnic structure, and social weight of particular religious communities⁶

3 Brian J. GRIM – Roger FINKE, International religion indexes: Government regulation, government favoritism, and social regulation of religion. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 2 (2006), 2–40.

4 HACKETT C.– STONAWSKI M. – TONG Y. – KRAMER S. – SHI A. – FAHMY D., *How the global religious landscape changed*.

5 Michael HOUT – Andrew GREELEY, – Melissa J. WILDE, The demographic imperative in religious change in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 2/2001, 468–500.

6 M. T. FREDERIKS, (2015). Religion, migration and identity: A conceptual and theoretical exploration. *Mission Studies*, 32.2 (2007), 181–202.

Finally, (5) ethnopolitical factors and minority policies may also play an important role in shaping a country's denominational structure, since the boundaries of ethnic groups often coincide with denominational boundaries.⁷

In my analysis, I therefore argue that the transformation of the size and major socio-demographic characteristics of Romania's Roman Catholic population between 1992 and 2021 was shaped primarily not by religious processes, but by the country's broader demographic and migration processes, as well as by the specific demographic, social, and migration patterns of the Hungarian and, to a lesser extent, German ethnic minorities that make up a substantial part of the Catholic population. In this study, I first briefly review the historical development of the Catholic population in Romania. I then restrict the analysis to the post-communist period and examine changes in the number of adherents, transformations in the population's ethnic composition, shifts in its territorial distribution, and patterns of educational attainment.

Roman Catholics in Romania from the Roman Empire to State Socialism

Although the aim of my analysis is to examine the processes that unfolded during the three decades following the collapse of the socialist regime, understanding these developments also requires a brief overview of the demographic history of Catholicism in the territory of present-day Romania prior to this period. The history of the various groups that make up the Catholic population living in present-day Romania evolved, for much of its past, within different political formations, under distinct historical influences, and in markedly different ways.

In the territory under consideration, the emergence of Christianity can be traced back to the period of the Roman Empire. At that time, Christianity was also present in an organized form in the province of Scythia Minor, located in present-day Dobruja, with predominantly Latin affiliations. Following the formation of the Eastern Roman Empire, the Roman Catholic presence in this region declined and was replaced by Byzantine Christianity.⁸ A more limited Catholic presence re-emerged in the region only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

7 Rebecca Y. KIM, Religion and ethnicity: Theoretical connections. *Religions*, 2, 3/2011, 312–329. Claire MITCHELL, The religious content of ethnic identities. *Sociology*, 40.6 (2006), 1135–1152.

8 Emil DUMEA, On the ecclesial history of the Catholic Church of Romania: An overview. *Romanian Journal of Artistic Creativity*, 6.1 (2018), 23–24.

with the growing importance of port cities. The larger Catholic communities of Dobruja are still located in these cities today.

Another chapter in the history of the Roman Catholic Church relevant to the present topic begins in Transylvania, with the consolidation of the Kingdom of Hungary. By the eleventh century, three dioceses had been established in Transylvania, and Latin-rite Catholicism became the dominant form of Christianity, associated primarily with the Hungarian population and, later, to a lesser extent, with the Saxon and subsequently the Swabian populations.⁹ In the centuries following the Reformation, the Catholic presence in the region underwent a period of relative decline, followed by renewed strengthening under Habsburg rule. The first modern census data date from the end of this latter period. The first data series covering the territory of Transylvania in a uniform manner dates from 1869, when 709,501 Roman Catholics lived in the region, accounting for 16.9% of the population (Table 1). As part of the general population growth, this number had risen to 910,730 by the turn of the century, while the share of the Catholic population also increased, reaching 18.8%. Numerical growth continued after the turn of the century, reaching 985,155, although the proportion of Catholics remained stable.

Table 1. Roman Catholics in Transylvania, 1869–1910

| | Total population of Transylvania | Roman Catholics | Roman Catholics (%) |
|------|---|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1869 | 4,210,536 | 709,501 | 16.9 |
| 1880 | 4,013,822 | 708,182 | 17.6 |
| 1890 | 4,408,182 | 801,920 | 18.2 |
| 1900 | 4,848,451 | 910,730 | 18.8 |
| 1910 | 5,228,180 | 985,155 | 18.8 |

Source: Varga¹⁰

The available numerical estimates and data concerning the size of the Catholic population in Moldavia were reviewed by Vilmos Tánzos. According to the sources examined by Tánzos, in the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries

9 E. DUMEA, *On the ecclesial history of the Catholic Church of Romania*, 27–28.

10 VARGA, E. Árpád, *Az erdélyi megyék népességének felekezeti tagolódása 1850–2002 között*. In E. Á. Varga, *Fejezetek a jelenkori Erdély népesedéstörténetéből*, Budapest: Püski, 1998.

the number of Catholics in Moldavia barely exceeded 5,000. Subsequently, that is, following the intensification of Székely out-migration, their number began to increase rapidly: by 1807 it had reached 21,307, by 1844 it had doubled to 43,244, and by the end of the nineteenth century it had approached 90,000. As will be shown below, the number of Catholics in Moldavia continued to grow throughout the twentieth century, and this growth was reversed only toward the end of the century.

Table 2. Number of Roman Catholics in Moldavia, Early Sixteenth Century–2002

| Year | Number of Roman Catholics |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Early sixteenth century | 25,000 – 30,000 |
| 1591 | ca. 15,000 |
| 1646 | 5,577 |
| 1744 | 5,500 |
| 1807 | 21,307 |
| 1844 | 43,244 |
| 1859 | 52,881 |
| 1899 | 88,803 |
| 1930 | 109,953 |
| 1992 | 240,038 |
| 2002 | 232,045 |

Data adapted from Táncoz (2011, p. 19); the original table also lists the historical sources on which the estimates are based.

In the regions of Oltenia and Muntenia, the Catholic presence has historically always been marginal, and this remains the case today. More limited Roman Catholic in-migration occurred primarily in a few counties of Muntenia, in Bucharest as it became the capital, and, presumably, in the areas of the oil fields, which also attracted foreign labour. In Oltenia, a small number of Catholics arrived mainly as a result of the forced labour-migration system of the socialist regime, particularly through the system of compulsory job placement, and settled mostly in larger towns and cities.

As a result of these regional antecedents, in the enlarged Romania that emerged after the First World War, the 1930 census recorded 1,234,151 persons who declared themselves Roman Catholic, living primarily in Transylvania and Moldavia. Since

the territory of interwar Romania did not fully correspond to that of present-day Romania, this figure is somewhat higher than the number of Catholics who lived at that time within the country's current borders. Among the territories that belonged to Romania at the time but are no longer part of the country, Catholics of German, Polish, and Hungarian ethnicity lived mainly in Bukovina, while far fewer lived in Bessarabia. Estimating their number at approximately 100,000, there may have been around 1,134,151 Roman Catholics living within the territory of present-day Romania at that time.

In the censuses conducted after the post-Second World War transformations, religious affiliation was not recorded, reflecting the anti-religious ideology of the socialist regime. For this period, therefore, information is available only from data collected by the Ministry of the Interior.¹¹ According to various sources originating from the archives of the secret police, the number of Roman Catholics was 1,163,437 in 1965; in 1977, "there are approximately 1.3 million Roman Catholics in the country";¹² in 1982, the figure was 1,396,000 (Figure 1).¹³

Roman Catholics in Post-Communist Romania

In the post-communist period, four censuses were conducted in which the religious affiliation of the enumerated population was once again recorded. The 1992 census recorded 1,161,942 Roman Catholics; by 2002, this number had declined to 1,026,429, then to 870,774 in 2011, and further to 741,504 in 2021.

Beginning with the 2011 census, previously non-existent problems of data interpretation also emerged, as the methodology of data collection changed compared to earlier censuses.¹⁴ As a result of these methodological changes, the

11 Constantin CUCIUC – Manuela GHEORGHE, *Tranziția în domeniul religiozității. Sociologie Românească*, 5–6 (1995).

12 NAGY, Zoltán Mihály – NOVÁK, Csaba Zoltán, *The Roman Catholic Church during and after the communist regime*, STAN, L. – STAN, T. (eds.), *Church reckoning with communism in post-1989 Romania*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021. 94.

13 Ovidiu BOZGAN, *Cronica unui eșec previzibil: România și Sfântul Scaun în epoca pontificatului lui Paul al VI-lea (1963–1978)*. București: Editura Curtea Veche, 2004. Cited in NAGY, Z. M. – NOVÁK, Cs. Z. (2021). *The Roman Catholic Church during and after the communist regime*.

14 During the 2000s, as a result of migration reaching a scale of several million persons, a substantial transnational or bi-residential population also emerged. Although this

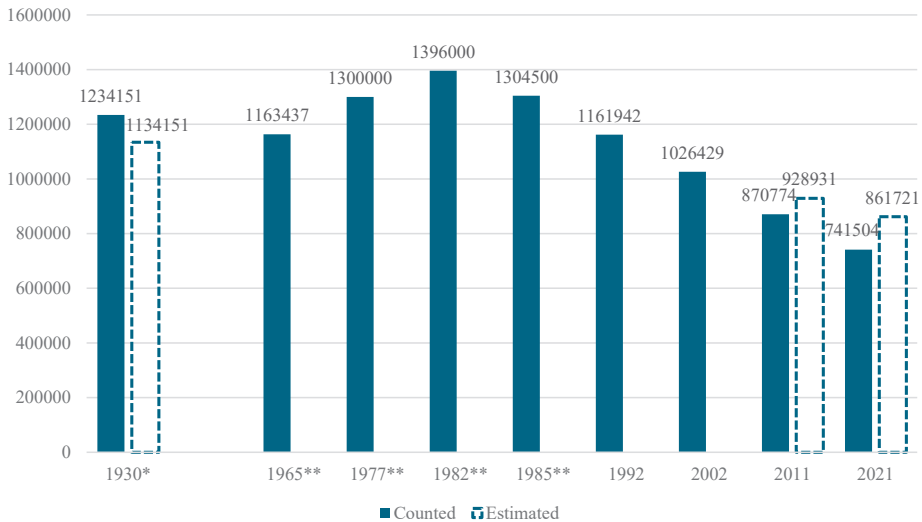
religious affiliation of approximately one million persons in 2011 and 2.65 million persons in 2021 is unknown. The emergence of the category of persons with unknown religious affiliation complicates the analysis of long-term trends, since in reality the number of Catholics in these years was substantially higher than the figures obtained from the census data.

A corrective estimate is made possible, however, by the fact that the findings of representative surveys on religiosity consistently indicate that denominational affiliation remains widespread in Romania, with those who are actually unaffiliated accounting for less than one percent of the total population.¹⁵ In other words, 99% of those recorded as having unknown religious affiliation in fact belong to some church or denomination. If we may also assume that persons with unknown religious affiliation are distributed proportionally across the country's different denominations, the number of Catholics living in Romania was 928,931 in 2011

population held Romanian citizenship, it spent a considerable part of its time abroad and was therefore difficult to reach through traditional face-to-face census-taking. For this reason, beginning with the 2011 census, persons who were not found at home by census takers were also included in the census population if they appeared in the records of various public institutions as having had contact with those institutions during the year preceding the census. In this sense, they were not considered to have emigrated permanently or to have severed all ties with the country. The 2021 census introduced a further methodological innovation by allowing the census questionnaire to be completed online, an option used by a substantial part of the population. Unfortunately, both innovations affected the data on religious affiliation. Administrative records do not contain such information, as they are limited to data included in the personal identification number, namely sex, date of birth, and place of residence. In the case of online completion, there were two reasons why these data remained unknown: first, because providing them was not mandatory and many respondents therefore left them unanswered; and second, more frequently, because for various technical reasons the question on religious affiliation, together with the question on ethnicity, often did not appear on the respondent's screen and thus remained unanswered without the respondent being aware of it.

- 15 KISS, Dénes – ROSTA, Gergely – BOGDAN VOICU, Between Romania and Hungary: Religiosity among Hungarians in Transylvania, LUIJKX R. – REESKENS T. – SIEBEN, I. (eds.), *Reflections on European values: Honouring Loek Halman's contribution to the European Values Study* Tübing: Open Press TiU, 2022, 179–195. MALINA VOICU – ANDREEA CONSTANTIN (2012). Religious revival in Romania: Between cohort replacement and contextual changes, BOROWIK, I. – TOMKA M. – POLLACK, D. (eds.), *Transformations of religiosity: Religion and religiosity in Eastern Europe 1989–2010*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 155–174.

and 861,721 in 2021. In Figure 1, these latter estimated figures are represented by a dashed line.



*The 1930 figure includes Catholics living in Northern Bukovina, which belonged to Romania at the time; the dashed bar represents an estimate excluding this population.

**Ministry of the Interior data, based on Nagy and Novák (2021) and Bozgan (2004).

Figure 1. Roman Catholic Population in Romania, 1930–2021

Factors Influencing Changes in the Number of Catholics

The data presented above show that the Catholic population increased steadily during the first half of the twentieth century, reached its peak in the 1980s, and then began to decline; this downward trend continues to the present day. It is useful to compare this dynamic with the evolution of the country's total population during the same period. In Romania, after the Second World War, mortality declined sharply while fertility remained high. This was the result of the modernization of the healthcare system, which primarily reduced infant mortality and combined with still-high fertility, led to rapid population growth. This growth process, referred to in demography as the first demographic transition associated with industrialization, had already begun to slow by the 1960s. In response to declining birth rates, the communist authorities introduced their notorious abortion policy,

which forcibly increased fertility again for a time and generated further population growth. As a result of this second wave of population growth, Romania's population probably reached its maximum around 1990. Thereafter, the population began to decline as natural increase diminished. From the 2000s onward, this natural decrease was accompanied by increasingly widespread emigration; these two mutually reinforcing processes, with persons of reproductive age overrepresented among emigrants, resulted in a steep population decline.¹⁶

If we examine the data presented in Figure 1, we can see that the size of the Catholic population followed a somewhat different trajectory from the overall population dynamics described above. According to the data, the number of Catholics reached its peak in 1982 and had already begun to decline before 1990. This was most likely due to the fact that, among the Hungarian minority, which constituted the majority of Catholics, and the German minority, which also accounted for a significant share, both demographic and migration processes developed somewhat differently from those of the majority population. In the case of the Hungarian population in Romania, which lived largely in Transylvania, the first demographic transition began earlier and also ended earlier; in other words, natural increase began to decline sooner. Because modern contraceptive methods were more widely used, the abortion ban also had a weaker effect. For these reasons, the Hungarian population in Romania may have reached its peak earlier than the country's total population, in 1982.¹⁷ As the data presented in the figure show, this demographic pattern characteristic of Hungarians is also reflected in the size of the Catholic population: similarly to the Hungarian population, the number of Catholics began to decline earlier than the national population, already in the second half of the 1980s.

The Hungarian minority, which constituted the majority of Catholics, differed from the majority population not only in terms of natural increase but also with regard to migration patterns. In the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, natural decrease was accompanied by a mass refugee movement toward Hungary. Between

16 Veronica DUMITRAȘCU – Alexandru Ștefan TRICĂ– Nicoleta Caragea, Population of Romania: Shapes and demographic trends. *Romanian Journal of Sociological Studies*, 2 (2018), 119–135.

17 Kiss, Tamás, *Adminisztratív tekintet: Az erdélyi magyar demográfiai diskurzus összehasonlító elemzéséhez. Az erdélyi magyar népesség statisztikai konstrukciójáról*. Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2010, 66.

1987 and 1991, approximately 100,000 Hungarians left Romania,¹⁸ and the rate of Hungarian emigration continued to exceed that of the Romanian population until Romania's accession to the European Union.

We do not have data on the specific features of demographic processes within the German minority; however, their emigration began earlier than that of the Hungarians and was more extensive. Emigration, which was also facilitated by a German–Romanian intergovernmental agreement, had reached drastic proportions by the late 1980s, with between 10,000 and 15,000 persons of German ethnicity leaving the country each year. Then, within a few years after the collapse of the socialist regime, the overwhelming majority of this population had left. While the 1977 census still recorded 359,000 persons of German ethnicity, this number had declined to 119,000 by 1992.¹⁹ Although only the Banat Swabians, that is, approximately half of this German population, were Catholic, this process nevertheless had a significant impact on changes in the size of the overall Catholic population. In the case of both the Hungarian and German minorities, these migration processes were most intense in the 1980s and 1990s and slowed down thereafter.

Figure 2 presents changes in the country's total population alongside changes in the number of Catholics. The bars represent the Catholic population, while the lines represent the total population. The solid bars and lines show the enumerated data, which therefore exclude cases with missing data in 2011 and 2021, whereas the dashed lines represent the corrected estimates. The figure clearly shows that, between 1992 and 2021, both Romania's total population and the Catholic population declined, but the decline was somewhat more pronounced among Catholics.

The fact that the development of the Catholic population was also affected by the demographic and migration processes of the Hungarian and German minority groups, which differed from those of the majority population, also led to a decline in the share of Catholics within the country's total population. As shown in the following table, while Roman Catholics accounted for 5.1% of the population in 1992, this share had declined to 4.7% by 2002 and continued to decrease, albeit at

18 Kiss, T., *Adminisztratív tekintet*, 180.

19 Remus Gabriel ANGHEL – Laura GHEORGHIU, *Refugiați, vânduți, regretați: Migrația germanilor din România, 1944–1993*, ANGHEL Remus Gabriel – TRĂȘCĂ Ottmar (eds.), *Un veac frământat: Germanii din România după 1918*, Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2019, 308–334.

a slower pace, in the following decades. According to the most recent census data, over three decades the share of Roman Catholics declined from 5.1% to 4.5%, that is, by 0.6 percentage points.

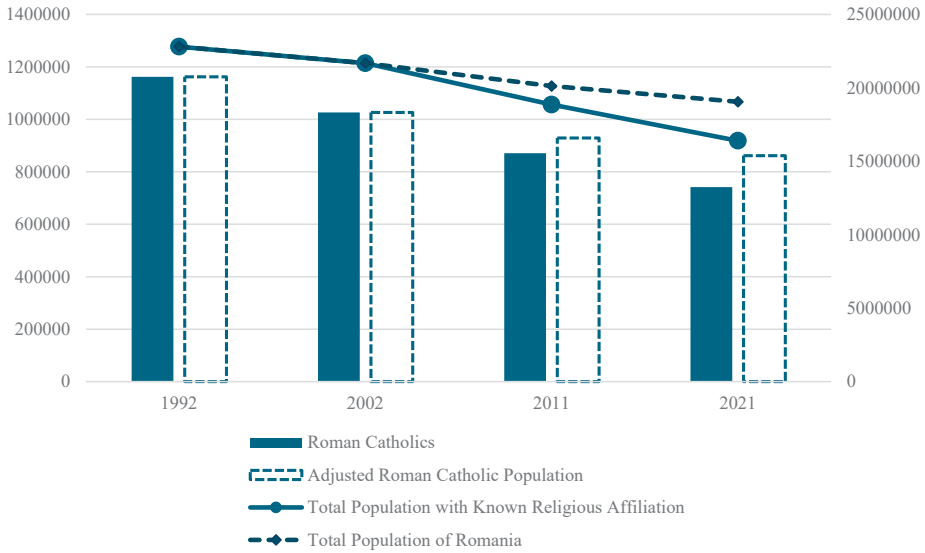


Figure 2. Romania's Total Population and Roman Catholic Population, 1992–2021

Table 3. Changes in Romania's Denominational Structure, 1992–2021 (%)

| | 1992 | 2002 | 2011 | 2021 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Eastern Orthodox | 86.8 | 86.8 | 86.5 | 85.5 |
| Roman Catholic | 5.1 | 4.7 | 4.6 | 4.5 |
| Reformed | 3.5 | 3.2 | 3.2 | 3.0 |
| Greek Catholic | 1.0 | 0.9 | 0.8 | 0.7 |
| Pentecostal | 1.0 | 1.5 | 1.9 | 2.5 |
| Other religions | 2.4 | 2.7 | 2.8 | 2.8 |
| Atheist | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.5 |
| No religion | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.4 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Changes in the Ethnic Composition of the Roman Catholic Population

As noted above, for historical reasons the Roman Catholic Church in Romania is a multiethnic church in which Hungarians have traditionally constituted the majority. This remains the case today; however, the demographic and migration characteristics of minority groups, which differed from those of the majority population, have significantly transformed the proportions of the various ethnic groups within the Catholic population over the past three decades. As shown in Table 4, in 1992 Hungarians constituted the largest group, accounting for 57.6% of Catholics. The second largest group was Romanians, who made up 31.1% of Catholics, followed by persons of German ethnicity, with 6.1%.

As a result of the demographic and migration characteristics summarized above, the share of Hungarians declined to 54.6%, while that of Germans fell to 1.7%. At the same time, the share of Romanian Catholics increased to 38.2%. Slovak, Bulgarian, Czech, Croatian, and Polish Catholics continue to be present in the several-thousand range; with the exception of Croats, both their numbers and their shares declined during the period under analysis. From other sources, we know that the Catholic Croatian population in fact also declined. The contrary result appearing in the census data is due to the fact that, in 1992, a significant share of Croats identified as Krashovans, a regional variant of Croatian identity. In subsequent censuses, they were classified under the Croatian category.²⁰ By contrast, Italians entered the group of Catholic ethnic communities numbering in the thousands, most of whom are Italian immigrants who moved to Romania after the collapse of the socialist regime.

Romanian Catholics constitute the only larger ethnic group whose share increased significantly within the Catholic population. The reasons for this are most likely complex. On the basis of the available literature, there is no reason to assume that this increase was the result of significant religious conversion; it is more likely that, in their case as well, non-religious processes lay behind the

20 See: VARGA, E. Árpád, *Erdély etnikai és felekezeti statisztikája III. kötet: Arad, Krassó-Szörény és Temes megyék*. Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 1998. and: Kiss, Dénes – Kiss, Tamás (2024). *Carașovenii: Minoritatea croată din România în primele două decenii postsocialiste. Studiu de caz despre carașoveni*, Kiss, Dénes – PETI, Lehel (eds.), *Etnicitate cotidiană: Studii despre comunități minoritare din România*, Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2024, 17–66.

change. A systematic examination of these processes lies beyond the scope of the present study, but several possible explanations may be mentioned.

Table 4. Ethnic Composition of the Catholic Population, 1992 and 2021

| | 1992 | 2021 | Share, 1992 (%) | Share, 2021 (%) | Change, 2021-1992 |
|---|-----------|---------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Hungarians | 669,420 | 405,212 | 57.6 | 54.6 | -3.0 |
| Romanians | 361,324 | 283,320 | 31.1 | 38.2 | 7.1 |
| Germans | 70,983 | 12,495 | 6.1 | 1.7 | -4.4 |
| Roma | 19,275 | 16,103 | 1.7 | 2.2 | 0.5 |
| Slovaks | 12,974 | 6,853 | 1.1 | 0.9 | -0.2 |
| Bulgarians | 7,351 | 3,583 | 0.6 | 0.5 | -0.1 |
| Czechs | 4,812 | 1,290 | 0.4 | 0.2 | -0.2 |
| Croats | 3,954 | 4,663 | 0.3 | 0.6 | 0.3 |
| Poles | 3,729 | 1,898 | 0.3 | 0.3 | -0.1 |
| Serbs | 920 | 111 | 0.1 | 0.0 | -0.1 |
| Ukrainians | 620 | 198 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Jews | 97 | 24 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Lipovan Russians | 94 | 14 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Armenians | 94 | 63 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Greeks | 57 | 24 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Other ethnicities | 6,173 | 5,649 | 0.5 | 0.8 | 0.2 |
| No data | 65 | 4 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| ROMANIA | 1,161,942 | 741,504 | 100 | 100 | 0.0 |
| From the category "other ethnicities": Italian | | 2,773 | | | |

First, it may be assumed that among the Catholic population of Moldavia, especially among the predominantly rural population of Csángó origin, the first demographic transition occurred later than in the country as a whole, and that fertility remained above the national average even in the 1990s. Second, the increase in the share of Romanian Catholics may also have been facilitated by the fact that the Catholic areas of Moldavia had greater population-retention capacity during

the period of intensified migration than many Catholic regions in Transylvania and Banat. As a result, the Romanian Catholic population around Bacău declined to a lesser extent than the Catholic population nationwide, as will be discussed later in the study.

Finally, ethnic assimilation may also have been an important factor. A strong shift in identity took place among the Catholic population of Csángó origin, a process that had begun earlier but continued during the post-communist period. According to surveys conducted by Vilmos Tánczos, the number of Hungarian-speaking Csángós declined significantly during the post-communist period.²¹ Ethnic assimilation may also operate through ethnically mixed families: where one spouse is Romanian, members of the next generation often come to identify as ethnically Romanian. This mechanism is not limited to Moldavia, since mixed marriages occur at a relatively high rate across the country.

The case of Roma Catholics deserves particular attention. According to the data, the share of Roma within the Catholic population increased from 1.7% to 2.2%. This increase is consistent with the fact that, over the three decades under analysis, the national share of the Roma population also rose, from 1.8% in 1992 to 3.0% in 2021. It is noteworthy, however, that the increase within the Catholic population lagged behind the national increase, which can probably be explained by the weakening ecclesial integration of Catholic Roma. At the same time, this phenomenon may also be related to the exceptionally strong growth of Pentecostal churches among Roma during the period under analysis,²² a growth that may have occurred partly at the expense of Catholic Roma. The case of the Roma is perhaps the only ethnic group for which religious factors, namely religious conversions to evangelical, above all Pentecostal, churches, appear to have been more decisive than demographic factors.

Compared with Romania's total population, the Catholic population is more rural. While 52.2% of the country's population lives in urban areas, less than half of Catholics, 45.5%, are urban residents. This difference is consistent with the fact

21 TÁNCZOS, Vilmos, *Madárnyelven: A moldvai csángók nyelvéről*, Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület, 2011.

22 FOSZTÓ, László, A megtérés kommunikációja: Gondolatok a vallási változásról pünkösdimusra tért romák kapcsán. *Erdélyi Társadalom*, 5.1 (2007), 23–49. PETI, Lehel, „Krisztus ajándéka van bennünk”: Pünkösdizmus moldvai román, roma és csángó közösségekben. *Vallásantropológiai tanulmányok Közép-Kelet-Európából*. Budapest–Kolozsvár: Balassi Kiadó, 2020.

that Hungarians in Romania, who constitute the majority of Catholics, are overall more rural than the national average; accordingly, 53.6% of Hungarian Catholics live in rural areas. At the same time, rural residents also constitute a majority among Catholics of Romanian ethnicity, at 55.4%. This is due to the fact that a substantial share of Catholics who identify as Romanian consists of a population of Csángó origin, most of whom live in villages.

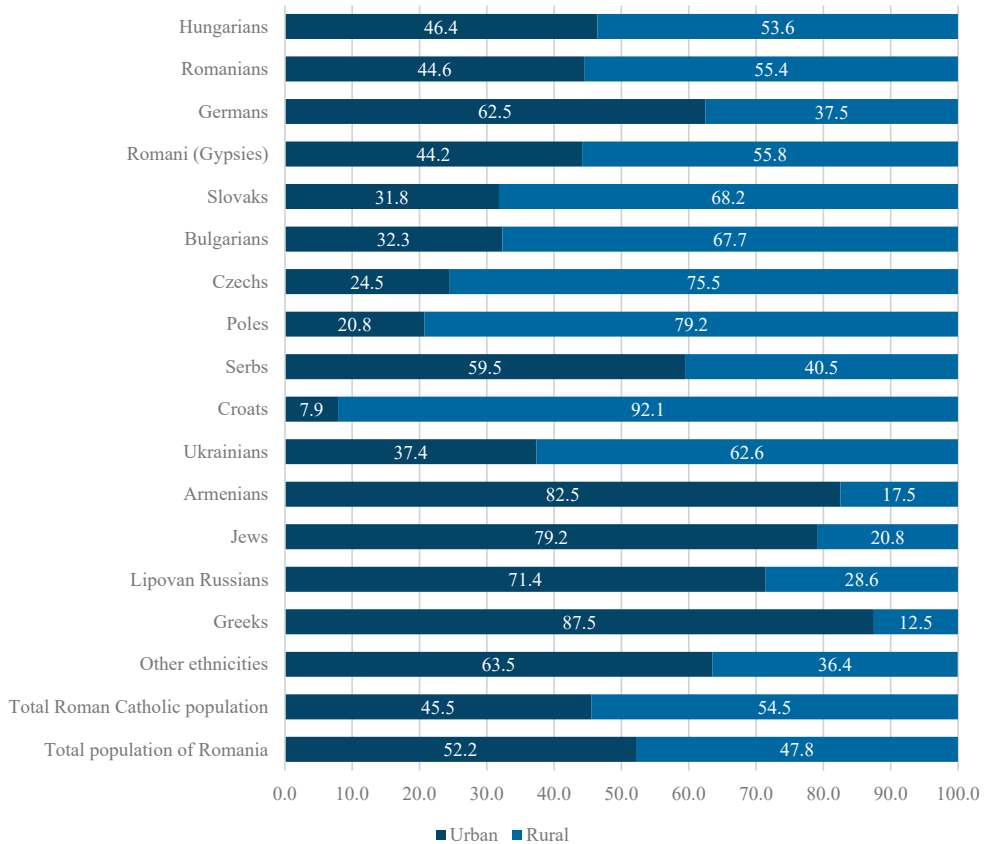


Figure 3. Distribution of Roman Catholics by Ethnicity and Settlement Type, 2021

Most Catholic ethnic minorities numbering only a few thousand persons are characteristically rural populations. Slovak, Croatian, Bulgarian, Czech, and Polish Catholics typically live in clusters of villages in which they constitute local majorities, a circumstance that contributes significantly to their religious and

ethnic reproduction. The Croatian minority is particularly notable in this respect: 92% of its members live in rural areas, largely in a compact micro-region consisting of seven villages around Caraşova.

Alongside these characteristically rural Catholic ethnic groups, there are also several Catholic ethnic groups that are predominantly urban. Thus, 62.5% of Germans who remained in Romania after mass emigration, 59.5% of Serbs, and 82.5% of Armenian Catholics live in urban areas. Those included in the category of “other ethnicities” are also predominantly urban; this category consists largely of recently immigrated ethnic groups. More than half of the entire “other ethnicities” category is made up of Italian immigrants, who typically live in county seats.

Changes in the Territorial Distribution of the Roman Catholic Population

As already indicated in the introductory historical section, the Catholic population in Romania is present to varying degrees across the country’s regions. Of all Catholics, 71.1% live in Transylvania and 23.9% in Moldavia; by contrast, 3.3% live in Bucharest, while Muntenia, Oltenia, and Dobruja together account for only 1.6%. Catholics therefore continue to be concentrated primarily in Transylvania and Moldavia. Within this broader spatial framework, however, notable changes in their territorial distribution occurred over the three decades under analysis. A comparison of the 2021 data with those from 1992 shows that, although the number of Catholics declined in every region, the current population became more concentrated in two narrower regions: Szeklerland and Moldavia.

The increase in the weight of Catholics in Szeklerland within the total Catholic population is likewise related to demographic and migration processes within the Hungarian minority. As noted above, the above-average decline of the Hungarian minority was not territorially uniform; rather, it was inversely related to the regional share of Hungarians: the higher their proportion in a given region, the smaller the extent of decline. Thus, Szeklerland, the only compact Hungarian-majority region in Transylvania, proved to be one of the regions with the strongest population-retention capacity.

In Partium, which is characterized by much more balanced ethnic relations than Szeklerland, the decline was more substantial. In the Central Transylvanian region, broadly defined as the wider sphere of influence of Cluj-Napoca, the Hungarian population, living alongside a significant Romanian majority, experienced substantial decline and loss of share almost everywhere. In the scattered minority areas of

Southern Transylvania, the Hungarian population is practically disappearing. These regionally differentiated processes have also shifted the spatial centre of gravity of the Hungarian population: Hungarians in Transylvania are increasingly concentrated in Szeklerland and Partium. In other words, a process of territorial concentration of the Hungarian population is taking place, and between these two regions Szeklerland is gaining increasing weight.²³

These processes also partly underlie the changes in the regional distribution of the Catholic population. Today, a larger share of Catholics live in Szeklerland than three decades earlier, an increase of 5.4 percentage points, while their share in Partium has remained virtually unchanged, with a change of -0.1 percentage points. By contrast, the share of Catholics living in Central and Southern Transylvania has declined significantly: whereas 12.5% of Catholics lived there in 1992, only 9.6% do so today. In Banat, where Swabian Catholics were still present to some extent in the years immediately following the collapse of the socialist regime, the Catholic presence has declined the most, from 15.8% to 10.9%.

Table 5. Regional Distribution of the Catholic Population, 1992 and 2021

| Region | Counties included | Share, 1992 (%) | Share, 2021 (%) | Change, 2021-1992 |
|-----------------------------------|--|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Szeklerland | Harghita, Covasna, Mureş | 32.6 | 38 | 5.4 |
| Partium | Bihor, Satu Mare, Sălaj | 12.7 | 12.6 | -0.1 |
| Central and Southern Transylvania | Cluj, Bistriţa-Năsăud, Maramureş, Alba, Hunedoara, Sibiu, Braşov | 12.5 | 9.6 | -2.9 |
| Banat | Arad, Timiş, Caraş-Severin | 15.8 | 10.9 | -4.9 |
| Moldavia | All Moldavian counties | 21.7 | 23.9 | 2.2 |
| Bucharest | Municipality of Bucharest | 2.8 | 3.3 | 0.5 |
| Muntenia | All Muntenian counties | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0.0 |
| Oltenia | All Oltenian counties | 0.5 | 0.3 | -0.2 |
| Dobruja | Constanţa, Tulcea | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.0 |

Apart from Szeklerland, Moldavia is the other region of the country in which the Catholic population increased in relative terms. Examining the changes in Moldavia at the county level (Table 6.) shows that this increase was concentrated

23 Kiss, Tamás, A 2011-es romániai népszámlálás tanulságai és következményei. *Pro Minori-tate*, 3 (2012), 9-26.

in three counties: Bacău, Neamț, and Iași. Among these, Bacău County stands out, as it includes a large part of the settlement area of the Csángó population. Whereas in 1992, 10.8% of the country's Catholics lived in this county, by 2021 this share had increased to 12.1%.

Table 6, which presents the distribution of the Catholic population by county, also shows the numerical decline of the Catholic population in each county, as well as the share that the missing Catholic population represents relative to the county's Catholic population in 1992. In other words, it indicates the percentage by which the Catholic population of each county declined. Looking at these columns, the situation of Timiș County is particularly notable: it has more than 50,000 fewer Catholics than three decades earlier, meaning that the Catholic population there declined by 56.2%. In terms of numerical decline, Timiș County is followed by the two counties with the largest Catholic populations, Harghita and Bacău. In these counties, however, the rate of Catholic decline was below the national value: while the Catholic population declined by 36.2% nationwide, the decrease was only 22.2% in Harghita County and 28.7% in Bacău County.

A further examination of the county-level data shows that, in terms of the percentage decline of Catholics, two counties in Oltenia, Gorj and Mehedinți, rank first. In these counties, the already small Catholic population declined to one-third of its earlier size over three decades. They are followed by counties in Southern Transylvania and Banat: Caraș-Severin (-60.5%), Hunedoara (-58.7%), the already mentioned Timiș, followed by Sibiu (-55.1%) and Alba County (-54.1%).

Table 6. Number and Share of the Roman Catholic Population by County, 1992 and 2021

| County | 1992 | 2021 | Change, 2021-1992 | County-level decline (%) | Share of Catholics nationwide, 1992 (%) | Share of Catholics nationwide, 2021 (%) | Change in national share |
|-----------|--------|--------|-------------------|--------------------------|---|---|--------------------------|
| Harghita | 228884 | 178126 | -50758 | -22.2 | 19.7 | 24.0 | 4.3 |
| Bacău | 125805 | 89742 | -36063 | -28.7 | 10.8 | 12.1 | 1.3 |
| Timiș | 93033 | 40703 | -52330 | -56.2 | 8.0 | 5.5 | -2.5 |
| Covasna | 85648 | 64008 | -21640 | -25.3 | 7.4 | 8.6 | 1.3 |
| Satu Mare | 74862 | 49946 | -24916 | -33.3 | 6.4 | 6.7 | 0.3 |
| Bihor | 64616 | 39893 | -24723 | -38.3 | 5.6 | 5.4 | -0.2 |
| Mureș | 63933 | 39470 | -24463 | -38.3 | 5.5 | 5.3 | -0.2 |

ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

| County | 1992 | 2021 | Change, 2021-1992 | County-level decline (%) | Share of Catholics nationwide, 1992 (%) | Share of Catholics nationwide, 2021 (%) | Change in national share |
|---------------------|-------|-------|-------------------|--------------------------|---|---|--------------------------|
| Neamț | 62374 | 44033 | -18341 | -29.4 | 5.4 | 5.9 | 0.6 |
| Arad | 58863 | 27565 | -31298 | -53.2 | 5.1 | 3.7 | -1.3 |
| Iași | 39627 | 29098 | -10529 | -26.6 | 3.4 | 3.9 | 0.5 |
| Maramureș | 36828 | 17653 | -19175 | -52.1 | 3.2 | 2.4 | -0.8 |
| Cluj | 32729 | 18467 | -14262 | -43.6 | 2.8 | 2.5 | -0.3 |
| Ilfov and Bucharest | 32454 | 24526 | -7928 | -24.4 | 2.8 | 3.3 | 0.5 |
| Caraș-Severin | 31896 | 12614 | -19282 | -60.5 | 2.7 | 1.7 | -1.0 |
| Brașov | 29732 | 15105 | -14627 | -49.2 | 2.6 | 2.0 | -0.5 |
| Hunedoara | 26981 | 11147 | -15834 | -58.7 | 2.3 | 1.5 | -0.8 |
| Suceava | 9542 | 5304 | -4238 | -44.4 | 0.8 | 0.7 | -0.1 |
| Sibiu | 8436 | 3791 | -4645 | -55.1 | 0.7 | 0.5 | -0.2 |
| Sălaj | 7786 | 3904 | -3882 | -49.9 | 0.7 | 0.5 | -0.1 |
| Vaslui | 6924 | 3362 | -3562 | -51.4 | 0.6 | 0.5 | -0.1 |
| Constanța | 6546 | 4000 | -2546 | -38.9 | 0.6 | 0.5 | 0.0 |
| Alba | 6208 | 2849 | -3359 | -54.1 | 0.5 | 0.4 | -0.2 |
| Vrancea | 5075 | 3818 | -1257 | -24.8 | 0.4 | 0.5 | 0.1 |
| Bistrița-Năsăud | 4500 | 2374 | -2126 | -47.2 | 0.4 | 0.3 | -0.1 |
| Prahova | 3024 | 1722 | -1302 | -43.1 | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.0 |
| Galați | 2463 | 1149 | -1314 | -53.3 | 0.2 | 0.2 | -0.1 |
| Mehedinți | 2414 | 900 | -1514 | -62.7 | 0.2 | 0.1 | -0.1 |
| Dolj | 1503 | 831 | -672 | -44.7 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.0 |
| Brăila | 1242 | 643 | -599 | -48.2 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.0 |
| Argeș | 1162 | 718 | -444 | -38.2 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.0 |
| Gorj | 1157 | 400 | -757 | -65.4 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.0 |
| Dâmbovița | 1122 | 709 | -413 | -36.8 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.0 |
| Tulcea | 883 | 438 | -445 | -50.4 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.0 |
| Botoșani | 865 | 547 | -318 | -36.8 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.0 |
| Vâlcea | 709 | 373 | -336 | -47.4 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.0 |

| County | 1992 | 2021 | Change, 2021- 1992 | County- level decline (%) | Share of Catholics nationwide, 1992 (%) | Share of Catholics nationwide, 2021 (%) | Change in national share |
|-----------|---------|--------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--|-----------------------------------|
| Buzău | 500 | 397 | -103 | -20.6 | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.0 |
| Giurgiu | 483 | 362 | -121 | -25.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Călărași | 353 | 226 | -127 | -36.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Olt | 326 | 216 | -110 | -33.7 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Ialomița | 323 | 253 | -70 | -21.7 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Teleorman | 131 | 122 | -9 | -6.9 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Romania | 1161942 | 741504 | -420438 | -36.2 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The Educational Attainment of the Roman Catholic Population

In the final section of the study, I compare the distribution of the Roman Catholic population by educational attainment with that of the country's total population. In this respect, too, significant differences from the national pattern can be observed. In the highest educational category, that of university graduates, the Catholic population lags behind the national share by 4.4 percentage points. The proportions of those with post-secondary and upper-secondary education are similar to the national figures, whereas the shares of those who completed vocational education or only lower-secondary education are higher among Catholics than in the population as a whole. At the lowest levels, the shares of those with only primary education or only preschool education again do not differ from the national proportions.

This educational structure, which differs from the national pattern, also reflects the socio-demographic position characteristic of the Hungarian minority. As is well established in the literature, the position of the Hungarian population within Romania's social structure has demonstrably deteriorated over the past three decades.

The disadvantaged position of Hungarians within Romania's social structure emerged during the communist period as a result of a deliberate anti-minority ethnopolitics, but it deteriorated further in the post-communist era.²⁴ Three main

24 KISS, Tamás, Etnikai rétegződési rendszer Erdélyben és Romániában: A magyarok társadalmi pozíciói. *Regio*, 22.2 (2014), 187–245.

dimensions of this process of social marginalization in the post-communist period can be identified.

First, the already disadvantaged position of the Hungarian population within the settlement structure, which had developed during the final decades of the communist regime, worsened further. Whereas half a century ago urban residents still constituted the majority among Hungarians, this has since been reversed, and the share of rural residents among Hungarians now exceeds that among Romanians. The consequences of this were reflected above in the pronounced rural character of the Catholic population.

Second, as a result of socialist educational policy, which was likewise shaped by ethnopolitical considerations, by the end of the communist period Romanians had come to outnumber Hungarians in the higher educational categories. In the post-communist period, higher education expanded substantially, leading to a significant increase in the share of persons with tertiary education at the national level. This increase, however, was smaller among Hungarians, and the educational gap between the two ethnic groups therefore widened further.²⁵

Finally, for the same reasons, the position of the Hungarian population within the country's occupational structure also became more disadvantaged. By the end of the socialist period, Hungarians were underrepresented, relative to Romanians, in higher-prestige occupational categories, and this did not change after the collapse of the socialist regime.²⁶ Since the Hungarian population had previously occupied a more favourable position than the majority ethnicity within the country's social structure, the process of marginalization led to a deteriorating position in the upper strata and to a greater concentration in the middle strata, a form of "crowding" into middle positions. In both the educational and occupational structures, this resulted in the overrepresentation of Hungarians in medium-prestige categories.²⁷ The effects of this process are visible in the educational structure of the Catholic population: while the share of those with higher education is below the national average, the share of those with intermediate levels of education is higher.

25 KISS, T., *Etnikai rétegződési rendszer Erdélyben és Romániában*.

26 VERES, Valér, Népszámlálás 2011: A népességszám, foglalkozásszerkezet és iskolázottság nemzetiség szerinti megoszlása Romániában. *Erdélyi Társadalom*, 11.2 (2013), 23–54.

27 KISS, T., *Etnikai rétegződési rendszer Erdélyben és Romániában*. VERES, V., Népszámlálás 2011.

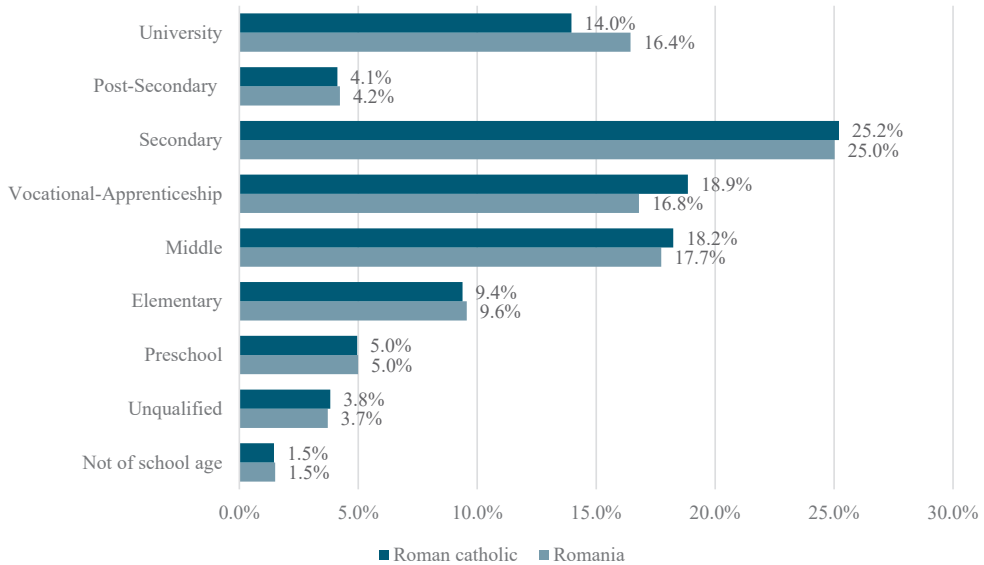


Figure 4. Romania's Roman Catholic population and total population by educational attainment. Percentages.

Conclusions

In this study, I examined changes in the size, territorial distribution, ethnic composition, and educational structure of the Roman Catholic population in Romania between 1992 and 2021. The results of the analysis show that changes in the Roman Catholic population were shaped primarily not by religious factors, but by demographic, migration-related, and ethnic processes.

The number of Catholics declined significantly during the period under analysis. This decline occurred as part of the broader decrease in Romania's total population, yet it was somewhat faster among Catholics. This more rapid decline is related to the denomination's specific ethnic composition. The demographic decline and emigration of the Hungarian population, which constitutes the majority of Catholics, as well as of the formerly significant German population, played a decisive role in the decrease of the Catholic population.

Alongside numerical decline, the internal structure of the Catholic population also changed. The share of Catholics of Romanian ethnicity increased, while the share of Hungarians and especially Germans declined. From a territorial perspective,

the concentration of the population in Szeklerland and Moldavia increased, whereas the relative weight of Banat and of the Central and Southern Transylvanian regions decreased. The specific characteristics of the Hungarian minority are strongly reflected in the social composition of the Catholic population. As in the case of the Hungarian population, Catholics are more likely than the national average to live in rural settlements; in terms of educational attainment, they are underrepresented among the highest educational categories and overrepresented among those with intermediate levels of education.

The most important conclusion of my analysis is that changes in denominational populations should not be interpreted exclusively through the categories of the sociology of religion. Although religious conversion and secularization may play a role in the case of certain groups, in the case of Roman Catholicism in Romania the explanatory power of demographic, migration-related, and ethnic processes has proved to be considerably greater.

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THE FORMATION OF A ROMA PENTECOSTAL COMMUNITY DURING SOCIALISM, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE LEADER WHO FOUNDED IT

LEHEL PETI¹

Abstract: This study examines the emergence of a Roma Pentecostal community in eastern Romania during the final decade of the socialist dictatorship through the narratives and conversion story of the community's founder. It explores the measures taken by the communist authorities against the religious community and demonstrates how, despite the authorities' repressive actions, the congregation managed to survive and grow, eventually becoming one of the largest Pentecostal communities in the region. The article shows how the community leader's successful integration of the newly formed religious community into the network of non-Roma Pentecostal communities operating legally or illegally during socialism allowed his group to obtain ideas and material support to mitigate the impact of the regime's measures taken against them, while its members were also able to experience new forms of ethnic acceptance.

Keywords: socialism, Pentecostalism, Roma, religious conversion

This study examines the institutionalization, during socialism, of a Roma Pentecostal community through the life story of the Roma Pentecostal leader who brought it into being. The analysis shows that the establishment of contacts among different Pentecostal communities – a factor that played an important role in the formation of Pentecostal communities after the regime change – was also significant in the case of communities that emerged under the socialist dictatorship. Despite the prohibitions imposed by socialist authorities, the founder successfully integrated the emerging Roma Pentecostal community into the network of non-Roma Pentecostal congregations in the region. With this support, although the

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authorities banned the creation of the new Pentecostal community and tried to prevent its operation by brutal means, the community became increasingly successful at local level. Maintaining relations with Romanian Pentecostal communities (even if these relations were mostly informal and conducted in secret) enabled the Roma community to encounter a model of ethnic acceptance. During socialism, Romanian Pentecostal communities provided the leader of the Roma community with practical ideas for circumventing the prohibitions of the socialist authorities and also offered material assistance for establishing an illegal place of worship. Through these contacts, the community leader also reached the highest leaders of the Pentecostal denomination; as a result, he received an informal but verbally expressed authorization from the top leadership to continue leading the community.

Pentecostalism during Socialism and Roma Pentecostalism

According to historians of religion, the beginnings of Pentecostalism's transformation into a global movement are linked to the Azusa Street congregation in Los Angeles (1907), a congregation with African-American cultural and religious connections.² Today, „The form of Christianity in which believers receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and have ecstatic experiences such as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophesying is one of the great success stories of the current era of cultural globalization”.³

The spread of Pentecostalism among Roma in Europe can be dated to the 1950s and 1960s. Its most important locus was France, while other significant sites included England, Spain, Bulgaria, and Romania.⁴

2 Walter J. HOLLENWEGER, n. d. *Pentecostalism. Article, Research Centers, Bibliographies and Selected Literature*. 5. Source: 06. <https://www.hoegger.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/Pentecostalism.pdf>. Accessed 22. 06. 2026. There is, however, debate in the literature about whether the origins of the movement can in fact be attributed to the Azusa Street congregation (Allan Heaton ANDERSON, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism. Global Charismatic Christianity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 9).

3 Joel ROBBINS, The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33 (2004), 117.

4 Melody J. WACHSMUTH, *Roma Pentecostals Narrating Identity, Trauma, and Renewal in Croatia and Serbia*. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2023, 10. See also: Magdalena SLAVKOVA,

In Romania, Pentecostalism appeared in the 1920s in the western part of the country.⁵ Although the socialist authorities in Romania officially recognized Pentecostalism, in practice they regarded it as “one of the most dangerous religious deviations” and applied various forms of religious repression against it, “yet the number of Pentecostals continued to grow steadily”.⁶ In the case of the Pentecostal church, the repressive measures included, among other things, restrictions on the number of congregational gatherings, the suppression of their organizational frameworks, reorganizations, the obstruction of pastors from operating within legal boundaries, etc.⁷ The authorities prohibited those forms of religious practice that were among the most attractive features of Pentecostal religiosity – “glossolalia, noisy manifestations,” and other spectacular expressions of religious experience characteristic of Pentecostalism – and required the leaders of the religious organization to demand the cessation of these practices in circular letters.⁸

The growth in the number of Pentecostals intensified especially in the second half of socialism, after 1965; the number of Roma conversions also increased in this period.⁹

Based on secret-police documents, Manuela Marin has examined the role of religion in Roma neo-Protestant communities in Romania during the 1970s and 1980s, presenting both the initiatives of the Roma Pentecostal movement in the second half of socialism and the regime’s reactions.¹⁰ She shows that, from the

Conversion, Leadership and Identity of the Evangelical Roma in Bulgaria. Schöningh: Brill, 2025, 5–8.

- 5 FOSZTÓ László, Roma and the ‚New religions’ in Europe, Factsheets on Romani Culture, Project Education of roma Children in Europe, 2. Source: https://real.mtak.hu/215129/1/Fosztó2019C_2.4_religiosity.pdf. [Accessed 23. 06. 2026]. FOSZTÓ László – KISS Dénes, Pentecostalism in Romania: The Impact of Pentecostal Communities on the Life-style of the Members, *La Rivista Folklorica*, “La sfida del Pentecostalismo” (“The Challenge of Pentecostalism”), 65 (2010), 54. KISS Dénes, „Nekünk csak ez van.” *Vallás és egyházak a rendszerváltás utáni Erdélyben.* Kolozsvár: Nemzeti Kisebbségkutató Intézet–Exit Kiadó, 2020, 153.
- 6 KISS, „Nekünk csak ez van.”, 155.
- 7 FOSZTÓ – KISS, Pentecostalism in Romania, 54.
- 8 Gheorghe MODORAN, Confesiunile neoprotestante din România în perioada regimului comunist: 1945–1965. *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, 3 (2007), 659.
- 9 FOSZTÓ, Roma and the ‚New religions’ in Europe, 2.
- 10 Manuela MARIN, Faith on the Margins: Religion and Civic Emancipation among Roma People during Communist Rule in Romania. *Review of Ecumenical Studies*, 14.3 (2022),

1970s onwards, Roma individuals repeatedly asked the authorities to approve so-called „Gypsy churches”, but permission was denied.¹¹ Most neo-Protestant communities continued their activity illegally, producing their own leaders or pastors,¹² even in the face of severe punishment.¹³ Drawing on documents from the Securitate archives, Marin discusses various forms of resistance by Roma Pentecostal community founders and their followers that the Securitate considered anti-systemic: transforming the homes of Roma pastors into meeting places, holding forbidden religious gatherings, and conducting prohibited baptisms.¹⁴ Her research indicates that, from the 1970s, interest in neo-Protestant communities, especially Pentecostal ones, increased among Roma in Romania, while at the same time, this remained numerically limited: at the end of the 1980s, Orthodoxy was still the dominant religion among Roma in Romania.¹⁵

The situation of Roma neo-Protestant communities was similar in socialist states within the Soviet sphere of influence. Magdalena Slavkova reports that in Bulgaria, because of the obstacles created by the communist regime, the evangelical movement was not very strong until 1989. Roma „spiritual leaders“ and „travelling missionaries” appointed by churches were rather exceptions, and the movement essentially survived in house-based „domestic churches”.¹⁶ In her discussion of Protestant Roma communities in socialist Bulgaria, Slavkova notes that ritual occasions were often held in pastors’ homes and that gatherings were disguised as secular events, such as holiday celebrations.¹⁷

László Fosztó observes that until the regime changes of 1989, Pentecostal communities, like other neo-Protestant communities, were not allowed to maintain relations with foreign communities.¹⁸ At the same time, „this movement was

405–430. Manuela MARIN, Romii în perioada comunistă sau despre religie ca mijloc de emancipare civică, Manuela Marin – Marian Zăloagă – Daniela Popescu – Cristina Mocanu – Bogdan Andriescu (eds.): *Religie, actori religioși și practici religioase în rândul romilor din România*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Mega, 2024, 321–377.

11 MARIN, Faith on the Margins, 420.

12 MARIN, Faith on the Margins, 418–419.

13 MARIN, Faith on the Margins, 421.

14 MARIN, Romii în perioada comunistă, 329.

15 MARIN, Faith on the Margins, 415.

16 SLAVKOVA, *Conversion, Leadership and Identity*, 70.

17 SLAVKOVA, *Conversion, Leadership and Identity*, 54.

18 FOSZTÓ, Roma and the ‚New religions’ in Europe, 3.

characterized by the interplay between forces of religious revival and suppression attempts by the authorities”.¹⁹

On the Antecedents of Research, the Fieldwork, and the Village

Between 2013 and 2018 I conducted fieldwork in Pentecostal communities in a Moldavian micro-region in the orbit of Bacău. The communities differed in denominational origin and in ethnic composition: they were Romanian, Csángó, and Roma communities. Besides their common regional location, they shared the fact that a Pentecostal community founded in the 1970s had played a significant role in their emergence and functioned for them as a kind of spiritual centre. The worldview of the people who founded these communities, and their formation as leaders, were strongly influenced by Martin, the charismatic leader who had founded a community under socialism. After the 2000s, this central community provided institutional support to newly formed Pentecostal groups, for example by helping them build their own churches, and it offered a model of operation.²⁰ The satellite communities that emerged under the support and spiritual influence of the central community were linked to one another in a loose network.

During my fieldwork in the communities mentioned above, the Pentecostal Roma community of Lingureni²¹ also came up several times. My interlocutors described this community as distinctive and its situation as atypical. According to narratives about them, the Roma living in this village were well situated, travelled to England for work, had built new houses, and several of them were engaged in farming. At present, Lingureni is the largest Pentecostal community in the region both numerically and proportionally whose members are regarded as Roma by the inhabitants of surrounding settlements and who, apart from official contexts of identity declaration such as the census, also consider themselves Roma (Lingurari).

19 FOSZTÓ, Roma and the ‚New religions’ in Europe, 3.

20 The history, operation, and relationships of these communities are discussed in detail in my book: PETI Lehel, *A Szentlélek ajándékai és karizmatikus rítusok egy moldvai kistérség pünkösdi közösségeiben*. In: *„Krisztus ajándéka van bennünk”. Pünkösdzizmus moldvai román, roma és csángó közösségeiben*. Budapest–Kolozsvár: Balassi Kiadó–Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2020, 17–48.

21 When referring to the location, I use a pseudonym, as is the case for all individuals mentioned in the study.

I visited Lingureni in 2021, when I first met Fratele²² Bortea, the founder of the Pentecostal community and its leader at that time. He received me kindly, probably also because we had a common friend in the leader of a community that had converted from Roman Catholicism²³ to Pentecostalism and who sadly died in 2018. Thereafter I visited Brother Bortea every year. I mainly conducted semi-structured interviews, although at times these resembled more informal conversations; even then, sound recordings were made.²⁴

During fieldwork I always took part in the main Sunday congregational meetings. When the interviews took place in the days after these gatherings, I asked about elements of the meetings that seemed unusual to me or whose meaning was unclear. I listened in advance to the interviews recorded each year and prepared new questions. Several topics also recurred in our conversations, especially when, after previous interviews, I was not certain that I understood him correctly or when I wanted to learn more about something.

He appreciated my persistent interest in the founding of the religious community and in the story of his personal conversion – the fact that at least once each summer I visited him at home and attended religious meetings. This contributed to the development of trust toward me. During our most recent meeting, in the summer of 2025, he joked: When I first met you, I wondered what this kid wanted here. Look how much time has passed since then: even your beard has turned grey.“

I present the emergence of the community and its operation during socialism through the story of the Roma Pentecostal leader who created it. As part of this, I outline the major stages in the life course of the founder that are connected to his becoming a religious community leader, and I analyze the motivations behind his commitment to founding a religious community. I examine the circumstances under which a young Roma man converted and the role this played in his decision to lead a religious community that acquired a new value system and identity despite the severe reprisals of the regime. In this connection, I present his efforts to establish and operate the community and his conflicts with different levels of communist authorities.

His accounts of the history of the Pentecostal community during socialism are at the same time narratives of his religious conversion. They show the role played

22 'Borther'

23 The Roman Catholics living in the region are referred to as *Moldavian Csángós*.

24 During a longer stay in the region, I sometimes visited them twice, so two interviews were conducted in a single year.

by the experience of transcendence as a living reality in his life in motivating him to establish a new religious community in his native village, and they show how, as a consequence, he and the members of his community had to face both the intimidating arsenal of socialist authorities and the aggression of the religious majority at the time. His recollections and stories therefore contain elements of Pentecostal conversion and worldview. The interpretation of what happened to him and to his community is intertwined with Pentecostal modes of understanding the world and with Pentecostal terminology.²⁵ Since the emergence and functioning of the community, as well as his leadership activity, become visible to us through stories about his religious conversion and about the significance of transcendence in his life, I also address the anthropology of Pentecostal rituals and religious ideas.

The History of the Emergence of the Pentecostal Community during Socialism

The Village and the Life Course of Brother Bortea

Regarding the founding of the village, Brother Bortea recounted that the boyars, in order to secure the labour force needed for their estates, gathered people from different communities, among whom there may have been both Roma and Romanians. When he was young the village community was small; he remembers twenty-two house numbers.²⁶

During socialism, a significant share of the landless Roma population obtained jobs. In the nearby commune centre, and in another settlement belonging to the same commune, collective farms were established; in the commune centre there was also a machine depot. Most people were employees of the collective farm, working as animal keepers or on various construction projects coordinated by the collective. Regular bus services connected the Roma village to the nearest towns, and many

25 As Simon Coleman has also pointed out, the language used by members of Pentecostal communities differs from the social-scientific language used about them; following Thomas Csordas, Coleman argues that the researcher must strive for a „double hermeneutic“, that is, for an academic understanding of charismatic interpretations of the world (Csordas 1994: xi, cited in SIMON COLEMAN, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity. Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity*. New York–Melbourne–Madrid: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 5).

26 26 June 2023.

men worked in newly created industrial agglomerations or on construction sites. Under socialism many people maintained small household farms, keeping poultry, pigs, one or two sheep, or cows on pastureland not cultivated by the collective farm, on land difficult or nearly impossible for machines to cultivate, or on patches regarded as nobody's land — sometimes just a few ares, on steep hayfields, ditch-sides, and similar marginal spaces. Despite improvements in the situation of the Roma in Lingureni, Brother Bortea reported that the community was marked by great poverty.

Brother Bortea completed eight grades of schooling, four in his native village and four in the neighbouring commune centre. He also participated in various forms of training at his workplaces. He came from a very poor family; his parents worked in the collective. There were eight siblings, and he was the fifth child. The children's maintenance depended mainly on their mother, while his father lived an unsettled life. Although he was a good pupil, in these circumstances the possibility that his mother might educate him further never really arose.

He married around the age of twenty. According to his account, he married so early because his parents had divorced and he was being raised by one of his mother's uncles. The elderly and sick man, a former prisoner of war, suggested that he marry as soon as possible so that a woman's hand would care for them: „He said, he advised me to get married, to take a wife, so that there would be someone to cook and wash for us.“²⁷

Looking back on himself during socialism, he said that he had not been particularly religious; he had been like an average Orthodox young man. His worldview at the time was influenced by books he had read about Darwin's theories. On several occasions he worked in the village for a military man of higher rank who, according to him, planted the idea of atheism in him.²⁸ On another occasion he also mentioned the local policeman, who likewise contributed to his becoming an atheist.

He worked on construction sites in larger settlements nearby and in town. Presumably, by the mid-to-late 1980s, he was already responsible for the registration of ballast delivered to construction sites, the scheduling of operators of machinery, as well as other administrative tasks. According to him, he had an exceptionally

27 2 August 2025.

28 28 June 2023. On another occasion, he also mentioned the local police officer, who likewise played a role in leading him toward atheism. 2 August 2025.

good salary at the time. His last workplace was on an urban construction site, from which he was dismissed at the time of the regime change.

He had eight biological children. In addition, he and his wife raised six more children. Five siblings came to them after their mother died and their father abandoned the family; the youngest was two and the oldest nine. The woman had been Pentecostal. She was a cousin of Brother Bortea's wife and their neighbour, and Brother Bortea felt morally obliged to care for the children. Later, in addition to thirteen children, he also took in another girl of about seven or eight after an event that deeply shook the Pentecostal community. He explained that the case began when a woman acquired a new partner and tried to rid herself of her husband by accusing him – a member of the Pentecostal community – of sexually abusing a child from her earlier marriage. Although it later emerged that this was untrue and the man was acquitted, the child did not want to return to the disordered family situation. According to Brother Bortea, the village police chief asked him to take the child in for a short time until some legal solution could be found. The matter faded away, the child became accustomed to living with them, and in the end she stayed; they later married her off.²⁹

He described the conditions in the household as follows: mattresses lay everywhere on the floor, and the children slept on them. If he had to go out at night, he stepped carefully among them so as not to tread on anyone. If they slaughtered a pig, it was eaten within two weeks; if they slaughtered a calf, that too disappeared immediately, because fourteen children had to be fed.

Aiding others on moral grounds was not limited to children. After the regime change, an elderly woman who had converted to Pentecostalism bought a house in the village. The purchase was made without documents and proved to be fraudulent; the woman ended up on the street and went to him for help. Bortea offered her a room in his house. She moved in with them and lived there for more than fifteen years, until her death; they buried her.³⁰

After the regime change, he opened a carpentry workshop and also engaged in agriculture, keeping horses and buying tractor and other equipment. His regular helper was a young man from the commune with a troubled background. The man had nowhere to go; he wanted not only work but also a place to live. It later emerged that he had previously been in prison. He worked for a long time on Bortea's fields

29 13 August 2024.

30 13 August 2024.

and cared for his horses. Brother Bortea was unaware of his background and when he was accused of employing a criminal and confronted the boy, he told him that he had previously worked for a shepherd who had killed a man. The shepherd persuaded him to take responsibility for the murder, telling him that, as a minor, he would be immune from punishment, and in exchange he would receive eighty sheep. This is how he eventually ended up in prison. The boy was Roman Catholic, but after some time he began attending Pentecostal services and converted. He married someone from the village and later moved back to his home village.

Encountering Pentecostalism

In the 1980s, the Orthodox Church began building a new Orthodox church in the commune, which also included Lingureni. To cover the costs, the local Orthodox priest encouraged villagers to „buy” the icons painted inside the church. According to Brother Bortea, the names of the local families who „bought” them are still visible on the icons. Brother Bortea and his wife wanted to be the „owners” of an icon depicting a saint and his wife popular in Orthodoxy, because they shared the names of the figures represented, but there was strong competition for that icon and they missed their chance. The priest persuaded them to become the patrons of another saint important in Christian history.³¹ Brother Bortea was not yet twenty years old at the time. He and his wife already had two children, and he did not have a job. To earn an income and be able to purchase the icon, he decided to take seasonal work on a farm in Tulcea County. Today, he considers it a form of manipulation that Orthodox believers were persuaded to “buy” icons, that is, to become their patrons. According to his account, representatives of the Orthodox Church personally approached people, emphasizing the miraculous power of the saint depicted on the icon and its ability to assist the life of its purchaser.

I contributed, as a young married man, to the construction of an Orthodox church here in the village. To have an Orthodox church built. The people’s situation was difficult. Those were times like that. Difficult times. But even then, with cooperation, it was possible to do something. And they did, they built an Orthodox church, which still exists today. And people were

31 I deliberately avoid referring to them as his patrons, since he himself did not describe these relationships using that concept and was probably unfamiliar with the logic of patronage as such.

manipulated. Religiously. Because people were heavily manipulated. Even today they are manipulated, and back then they were also manipulated, in a religious sense. And they wanted to paint images inside the church, in order to extract a bit more money from people, I don't know for what. For the church fund, for the priest's fund. I don't know, for the parish house fund. So as not to defame anyone. They painted it with small images of various saints. With icons, on the walls, like this. And everyone from the village had to buy such a little icon. They advertised those icons, with various explanations of what each little icon symbolized. Whom they represented. And they held a kind of... not only advertising. A kind of preliminary discussion. So that... and in this way they manipulated people. These things are done by... by people who understand manipulation. They explained who that saint was, what... what benefit would come to the person who bought it, who prayed to it, who honored it. And one of those saints would have suited me as well. I was a member of the Orthodox Church. A saint from among them would have been fine for me too. And my wife and I decided to buy one. [...] That saint would have suited me very well. And I went to buy it, but there was competition. As I said, people were manipulated. You understand what manipulation is. It is easy to manipulate the masses. Groups of people who have not read a single book in their life, who have no professional training, or no knowledge in the field — because there are also people who have no professional training but are not so easily manipulated, they are born in such a way that they cannot be manipulated. And I could not buy the Saint I wanted. I did not know [he says the name of the saint]'s story. I knew him as a saint, as he was presented. And I do not want to offend in their faith those who honor him, who consider him a saint. That is their business. Their problem. [...] And because there was competition, because it was an advertised saint, [...], I could not buy it, because I was poor. Because it cost some money to buy it. [So, the church bought these icons and people...] The church painted them there. (Painted them and people had to...) People had to buy each of those little saints. When you go into an Orthodox church (unintelligible word) it is full, all around, everywhere. And they bought all of them. And everyone's name is written there, of those who bought them. [Ah, I see, I see. And is it still like that?] It is still like that. Nothing has changed. I was there, I am not telling stories, I was there, a nice image, like this. The painters of that time were not worse than today's, they had such images... yes. They said that it looks at you, that it turns its head towards you. And people were too well taught. And then that monk who was responsible for the sale, for all of it, for this propaganda, for each of these little saints there, said that there is still one great-value saint left, which no one has bought yet, and it is very

valuable. I had no biblical knowledge, nor religious education. Only that I was Orthodox, like this, a member of the Orthodox Church. I knew how to make the sign of the cross, like this, and to observe the official holidays marked with red crosses in the calendar. Those were official holidays when you did not have to work. [...] [And what does it mean that some saints have greater value, that they help a person, if one has contributed to having them painted? And it means that there is some kind of connection...] It helps the person. They said that those saints who have died pray for us. Those people up there pray for us, intercede for us. [Yes, and the one who financed the painting — does that saint help him more?] Yes, more. This was the trick. Yes. Look, man, look, he gives everything, believe! It does not matter what professional qualification you have. He, if he believes like that, makes certain sacrifices. He would rather not give it to a poor person who needs a piece of bread but gives it to a certain saint. Normally, according to God, religiously, he should give to the poor, so that the other can also eat a piece of bread. Yes. Do not be manipulated. And they said that there is still one (saint) that no one has bought, and he is called Peter. The Apostle Peter. I had also heard jokes about Peter, stories, not real things that are not in the Bible.³²

On the farm in Tulcea County he met a man who had been to Italy and who, although he had not yet been baptized, spoke to him about religion in the spirit of Pentecostalism. The man spoke enthusiastically about matters of faith. Brother Bortea listened with interest, but because of his work he could not always pay attention, which prevented their conversations from deepening. It was impossible, for example, for his „teacher” to take out a Bible at certain points and discuss questions of faith based on Scripture. The man therefore made an unexpected proposal. He offered to pay him the wages for four hours each day; during that time, he would not have to work, and the time gained in this way could be spent in conversation about faith. Brother Bortea accepted the arrangement. After three weeks, the teachings of this strange new friend brought about a change in his understanding of the world that Pentecostals call „conversion”.

They wrote there that the (icon) had been bought, and I had to go and earn money to pay for it. So, I left home for somewhere in Tulcea. There I met a man who was a believer. He was not Orthodox; he was a believer, like the Pentecostals here now. But he was not a „legal” Pentecostal. He was a dissident Pentecostal, as they say, meaning that he did not belong to any community.

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At first, I was wild toward him, because I did not come from a world with good culture. When I drank, I became angry, as young people do, especially because he came with something strange, with another religion, not the one I accepted. I wanted to beat him.³³

Many poor people without permanent jobs worked in the extensive vineyards of the state farm (gostat). At that time Brother Bortea also had no job. The strange man was rumoured to be extraordinarily clever, yet the others behaved roughly toward him. Once Brother Bortea got to know him and began to appreciate him, he defended him against the roughness of the others. The man, who came from around Galați, told him that he had fled to Italy in the hope of a better life and had encountered Pentecostal faith there. After his conversion he returned home to take his family out as well. During his stay in Italy, maintaining contact with his family had been difficult. In the meantime, his wife had become a nun, and their three children were being raised by their maternal grandmother. The man said that money did not interest him; he had stayed in the area where his wife also lived in the hope that he might still persuade her.

And he kept talking about faith, and I had no time to listen. Because I was employed there for work, to work. And I told him: "I am employed for work, I have to buy an icon." Besides that, I also needed money, for my family, at home. "I have a family." "Alright," he said, "look, here's what we'll do. Let's make an agreement together," he said. "From six in the morning, when we go to work. Let's go a bit earlier." Because we had an agreement at work. Everyone worked as much as they wanted, as much as they could. That's how it was then. It was a very good farm where... people went there to work. And then we made an agreement that from six in the morning until two, three o'clock, whatever I work goes to me. We only put one of the worked rows under his name, to secure his food, they also provided food. And we assigned one row under his name (in the vineyard there were rows, that's how they worked), to cover his meals. And the rest (of the rows) went to me. He said: "Good, from two o'clock until six in the evening, four, five, seven, you listen to what I say. So we have time to talk." It was not mandatory, but so that we would have time. And during those three weeks, one month, he converted me. [And how did this happen for you? Was what he said interesting to you? Or did you come to understand deeper things about the world? Or how did it happen?] [...] At the beginning I thought I could manipulate

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him. That it was easier to listen to him than to work. We were hoeing, it was hard work. It was easier to listen to than to work. And since he was a good worker, I earned twice as much as others there. Because we worked a lot in the morning. And in the afternoon, it was hot, you couldn't work. Anyway, you had to stay in the shade. Like this. And at the beginning, I want to be honest with you. Because if I tell stories, it is useless. At the beginning I saw it as a source of income. I thought I could earn some money with this man, go home and buy my icon.³⁴

At the end of the work in Tulcea County, Brother Bortea went home and then contacted the Pentecostal congregation functioning officially in nearby Bacău.

His wife reacted to what had happened to him with strong antipathy. Their disagreement went so far that she wanted to divorce him. He bore her opposition patiently and often spoke with her about his new ideas. After a while he took her with him to the religious meetings of the Bacău congregation. The women of the congregation received her kindly. The atmosphere of the meetings and their welcoming character played a significant role in gradually dissolving her initial hostility and in her commitment to her husband's efforts to build a community.

[And after you understood all these things³⁵, what did you do? Or how did the things you learned change your life?] You can imagine that I went through a major trauma. Because everything I understood there (on the farm), however little it may have been, for a month my family did not know, my wife did not know what I was doing there. My brothers did not know, my parents did not know. [...] So my parents did not know either, because there was no one in our village who was of any other religion than Orthodox. And you can imagine that I came back from there, full of fear of God and gratitude, having gained some knowledge, and here I first had to face my family. First, I told my wife that I had met someone there and that he had converted me, and that it stayed with me that I would become a believer and that this is roughly what faith means. And at first my wife did not like it; she (then) started to take an interest because of me. [...] And it did not take long for my wife to convert. And she said it was not a bad idea. "Good, right?" And she saw a little from the change in my behavior that I was not rebellious, that I tried

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35 Those things that he heard from the person who introduced him to the Pentecostal faith.

to give up drinking, because drinking was a very ugly thing (for me). I also quit smoking. All of these were disasters as well.³⁶

Enthusiastic about the new religious truths he had encountered, he first spoke about them to neighbours and relatives. At the beginning it was mainly relatives who attended these meetings, but after a time more and more people from the village appeared. People listened with interest as religious matters were discussed with them directly, in a way they could understand and feel. The meetings became increasingly regular, although at first only a small group gathered.

Brother Bortea, who lived in a small house, built a small room onto it so that they could hold their meetings there. In this modest room attached to the little house, the first conversions took place; these were the founding steps of today's Pentecostal congregation in Lingureni. He also contacted several people who, under socialism, were secretly connected to the Pentecostal movement (among them some who were organizing religious meetings in their own native villages without permission)³⁷ and with others who were important figures in the Bacău congregation, which (probably) functioned with state permission. These people sometimes visited the illegal Pentecostal group in the Roma settlement and participated in its meetings. Their persuasive power also contributed to the further growth of the small community.

He told us a few things (namely the person through whom he came to know the faith), and then the rest was done by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit worked in our hearts and created the possibility for us to meet believing brothers and sisters.³⁸

The growth of the community did not escape the attention of the authorities. On one occasion, when they were holding a religious gathering in the house of a „brother”³⁹, that is, a member of the community, the village party secretary notified the communal police. The police arrived accompanied by several local members of the people's council and wanted to arrest Brother Bortea as the leader

36 2 August 2025.

37 See, for example, the role of the person referred to as the leader of the “central community” in organising one of the region's first rural communities.

38 26 July 2021.

39 Pentecostals refer to members of their communities as “brother” (for men) and “sister”.

of the congregation. A scuffle began, however: the members of the congregation – about fifty persons at that time, in 1980–82 – did not want to let their leader go. In the end he and several companions were summoned to the police station, where, when they appeared, they were beaten cruelly. The most elementary rights of the believers were not respected; without any formal identification, everyone was beaten. Some, especially visitors from outside the village, managed to flee. Those caught were taken in through one door, beaten with slaps and a whip, and led out through another. The president of the council was also present during the torture. A party member was also among the Pentecostal believers; at the president's instruction, he was beaten first.

And I remember that we were praying in one of the brothers' houses, and from the village, from the party organization, the party secretary notified the police. He called them, and they came together with the people's council [...] and with members of the local organization, and they came to the house where we were. And they wanted to arrest me. The police, together with the communists, dragged me out of the house; the brothers pulled me back, and they could not handle the brothers. So in the end they took me, as the one who had initiated it, as the one who organized the believers. But it was very difficult. Then again we received a harsh punishment. And all of us were summoned to the police, but that is not all I wanted to say. Still being new in the faith, I did not understand why we were being persecuted. Since earlier I had lived a bad life, I stole, I drank, I swore, I fought —here in the village we were bad people. And no one said anything. But after we became believers, the pressure from the authorities began. [...] They called us to the police station; they found us at home. They gathered all of us and finally took us to the station, and there at the police station they started beating us. They placed an executioner there to beat the believers. One went in, was beaten, and taken out through another door. Another went in, was beaten, and taken out the other side. And in the end Brother [he states his name] went in, who is still alive today. [...] He was terribly beaten. I can still see it now, when he came out of the station bent over, saying: brothers, there is no need for identity cards here, there is no need for anything. [...] And then we had to leave; we ran so that the brothers who were strangers, not locals, could escape. But we, who were locals, had to stay there. The one with whom we began building the community⁴⁰ — a younger brother, about a year older

40 He uses the term *lucrarea*, which in this context refers to the work of the Holy Spirit, that is, the formation of the community.

than me — he was also a believer, but before that he had been a party member, and even then, he was still a party member with the communists. And when the council president arrived, the one who was there when we were arrested, he said to the police: “Start with him!” Meaning with him, who was a party member. I saw it, because the door was not fully closed; even the police did not have the patience to close the door at the station, and when he slapped this brother who was a party member, I do not know how many chairs he knocked over as he fell at the police station. There was such hatred in him (in the policeman). I do not know what else they did to him, how many more beatings he received inside, I do not know.

But then my turn came as well. And I was still new in the faith; I said that I did not understand why we believers had to suffer (for our faith). Why does society reject us. Why does everyone hate us, us believers — from institutions, through laws, through legal authorities. And I did not understand this problem. And it took some time until I understood why they would hate us, because we are not of this world. And then I was also called to the police station. They called me in! They took me, holding me by the hand. The party secretary took the whip down from the hook; the policeman instructed him to take the whip down and beat me with it. When I saw him taking down the whip, I said: man, stop, you have no right to beat me, because I have done nothing wrong for you to beat me.⁴¹

After this he was not beaten, but he was fined 3,000 lei, which he said was an enormous sum: at that time, one could buy a house in the village for 5,000 lei. He could not pay the fine; his monthly salary was 800-900 lei. He appealed the penalty in court. On the day of the hearing, to his surprise, the room in which his case was discussed was full, because members of the Bacău Pentecostal congregation had come. He knelt to present his case, but the judge ordered him to stand up. He recounted how they had been attacked while praying and how they had been beaten at the police station. The judge asked whether he wanted a lawyer; he replied that he did not need one because he had told the truth. His appeal was not accepted and the obligation to pay the enormous fine remained. Tears came to his eyes, and he thought he would never be able to produce such a sum. After the hearing, the leader of the Bacău congregation approached him. This man had once been a lieutenant-colonel in the air force, demoted by Ceaușescu, and had converted to Pentecostalism after his wife was miraculously healed of cancer. He behaved

41 July 26, 2021

kindly towards him and told him that litigation with these people was completely useless, because they were the same people as those who had fined and beaten them. It was, he said, „as if one complained to Satan that his brother had beaten you”.

He said: „You, Bortea, do not come anymore to contest (to appeal), because these people here at the court, here in the law, are the same as those who fined you. You came here and said: ‘Hey, Satan, hey, look, your brother fined me! Your brother beat me!’⁴²

After they left the courthouse, something unusual happened. The believers who had attended the hearing went up to him and, “emptying their pockets,” gave him money. Through these donations, more than half of the fine was collected in this way.⁴³ At the same time, the leader explained to him how to handle the money. He said that when the debt collector, the “perceptor,” comes to collect the accumulated amount, Brother Bortea should give him 100–200 lei per month, as much as he could save from his salary. In this way, he could avoid prison, since he was not able to pay the full amount at once. The perceptor came to collect the money every month, while at times he also became the target of mockery.

The collector came and asked a neighbour of mine. Since the collector came to me every month so that I could pay for this problem, this fine, he asked the old woman: „Mother, do you not know what this boy is paying a fine for? He is a decent boy.” The woman, who was not a believer, always said: „Ah, that is the ticket to heaven.” That is what my neighbour said.⁴⁴

Then they sent the police after us; the priest set the people against us. They came at us, broke our windows there, smashed our doors. They threw stones inside, at night, in the evening when we gathered there. There was no one we could complain to, no one we could tell. [Did you usually gather at night?] In the evening, that is how we gathered. Not during the day, because during the day we were afraid they would come after us. But they watched it even at night. When it was not people coming at us to break the windows, officials

42 July 26, 2021

43 1,700 lei.

44 July 26, 2021

from the people's council came. "That's it, we caught you!" They wrote something down on a sheet of paper and summoned us to the police station.⁴⁵

According to his account, as the community grew, they needed a larger place to gather. He requested permission from the people's council to build a forty-square-meter „storage room”, and this was approved. That room was then used as the site for religious meetings. When the local authorities realized what was happening, they summoned him and tried to withdraw the permit. But someone on the council who sympathized with them advised him not to hand over the document, because it would be destroyed and the new structure would immediately be demolished. The room was built with the help of members of the Bacău community, who assisted with building materials and their own labour.

[And it was from his own money, wasn't it? Or how was it? The building.] We did not have the money to build quickly. It was difficult, very difficult to build a house. Even if it cost 4,000–5,000 lei, 6,000 lei was already the best house (in the village). Not everyone could afford it. It took time to build a house, because people were barely living from one day to the next. But those people who... we went to them in the city, right? They helped each other. One bought us a door, two windows. One of them helped with the construction. Another one... without the knowing [of authorities]. [Yes, yes.] They also taught us how to build, how to do things, what to do. Like that. So I had a lot to struggle with in this village, because people were bad. Very bad. They thought they were doing God's work by punishing me. Yes? And they really punished me severely. Yes? [On the advice of the priest?] The priest and the leadership of the commune. The commune leadership was also with the Orthodox believers. [After you converted you started preaching the...] Well, after I explained it to my wife, we also became a bit stronger in what we believed. The people around us, when they saw that we were not going to church, we started telling the brothers, ours, our relatives. You should know that people could also have been manipulated from this side, to draw them over. Because people did not know. But we did not want manipulation. We wanted people to understand first that Christ said: preach the word to every creature.⁴⁶

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Meanwhile the police wanted to have the little room attached to his house, where they held meetings, demolished. Because the building had been erected with a construction permit, this ultimately did not happen.

People were very bad to us. Extremely bad! But in the end, the community survived. [So in the end, were you able to gather and pray, or not?] Good. They persecuted us for a very long time, like rats, like hares in the field. [And where did you gather? In houses? At people's homes?] Yes, we gathered there, where we had put up the building. The police came, and I told them: sir, faith is a spiritual necessity. [You built a building where you gathered?] A small one, a "kilér"⁴⁷, where a handful of people could fit. And the police wanted us to demolish it, but it had a construction permit. And it was not really possible to demolish it if there was a permit. And I told the police officer: sir, look, this is the situation. For us, faith is a necessity of the soul. If we demolish this building, we will still pray. Whatever they intend to do to us, they can arrest us, they can kill us, my God, we will remain believers. Because this is within our soul. And the police, no matter how many times they warned us, no matter how many times they fined us, they summoned us, fined us, beat some of us, and some outsiders who came to us were driven away and beaten.⁴⁸

Alongside the constant harassment by the police, the Pentecostal congregation also had to face the resentment of the Orthodox majority. The most serious manifestation of the conflict occurred when the community's pastor⁴⁹ arrived and non-Pentecostal villagers attacked them. The pastor, his driver, and Brother Bortea were sitting in a Dacia when people incited by the local party secretary surrounded the car, threw stones at it, broke its windows, and tried to force open the door. The attack was successful: Brother Bortea, who tried to protect those inside, was struck several times in the face and temporarily lost consciousness. The driver was hit with a large stone, and his blood splashed up to the roof of the car. Brother Bortea attributes to divine miracle the fact that although the car malfunctioned during the attack and did not start despite the driver's attempts, it somehow did start and they escaped.

47 Extension of the main building, with an auxiliary building attached to it.

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49 It is not entirely clear when and in what form the Lingureni community came to have a pastor, who occasionally attended the community.

The pastor was beaten in our village. That is why I am saying I don't think you have enough time to listen to everything. The pastor who pastored our congregation came, and the people here in the village beat him. It was a rough fight, a wild brawl. They (i.e., the pastor and the driver) came by car, a Dacia. People were standing both in front of and behind the car. And one man from the village punched the windshield about thirty times. Do you hear me? Thirty holes. He punched the car so hard that the door opened. And I put my hand there to dull his blows, because I was afraid, he would eventually break it. The local party secretary had been watching from the beginning. When I was holding it with my hand, he punched me here in the face, in the teeth, up here. I fell back onto the seat, the back seat, stunned, I don't know how long I lost consciousness — he hit me so hard, without me defending myself. I did not know he was going to hit me; I did not see it. [...] And I don't know how long I was unconscious. I told this to another brother as well, I don't know, but when I came to from the coma, I saw that my skin was completely torn open. I looked left and right and said, who could have done this to me? But I could not figure it out. I put my hand there again where the door was broken in, and I watched. The second time he punched through the window, I saw it, but it was too late — I could not defend myself. He hit me in the mouth from below, tearing my upper lip. And when he struck again, he tore my lip at the teeth. He did not knock out my teeth, only split them open. And I lost consciousness again. Maybe for a shorter time than the first time. And when I came round (unintelligible words), they were throwing stones, breaking the car windows. [Were those people from the village?] People from the village. The believers of today. Those who later became believers. [But at that time...] They were not. Yes. A woman picked up a 20–25 cm stone. And when she hit the driver on the head — I saw it with my own eyes — the blood sprayed to the ceiling. I told the driver: start it, I shouted, start it and let's go, because the car was already surrounded by people. And he replied that the car would not start. The key was in the ignition, but the starter did not engage. But then he turned the ignition again and it started. Because the Lord wanted us to be saved. And that is how we escaped.⁵⁰

It is not entirely clear with what regularity and in what capacity, but people who had legitimate status for the community and for Brother Bortea certainly visited the Pentecostal community from Lingureni before the regime change. What

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seems certain is that such people existed and that their presence and their role in the gatherings were decisive in shaping the community's worldview, developing its ritual system, strengthening its identity, and thus in its institutionalization.

One consequence of the attack on the community's pastor was that he no longer went to Lingureni to perform ritual tasks. In the same way, other visitors who had been extremely important for the community's emerging identity also stopped coming. During socialism, Brother Bortea went to the national Pentecostal delegate in Bucharest, hoping that a legal solution could be found for their community's functioning. Under the threat of the Securitate, the meeting resulted only in his being sent on to the county leadership, where he presented their problems and hoped that a pastor would be sent to them. The idea proved completely naive. At that time, he said, pastoral status was granted with great difficulty; one pastor might be responsible for the congregations of three counties.⁵¹ The county leaders gave him verbal authorization to act as pastor in the community despite his youth – he was barely twenty.

“Look, go home. You are the greatest pastor there.” How me? I was just a young kid. Twenty years old. “Yes, yes, yes. You are the greatest pastor there. Because people there will still beat you, they will still let you (continue what you are doing). But if we send someone else there, they will kill him.” And since then, I have pastored the Church of God in our village. Without credentials, without anything, based only on what Brother [he says his name] said. [...] (Pastoral work, religious activity) at that time was carried out in secret, without the Securitate or the world knowing. So he received me in his office there. And he says: “From this day on... look, let us pray, you are the pastor of the congregation there.” “And what will I do?” “You will bury the dead, you will perform marriages, you will preach the Gospel, you will give communion. Everything a pastor does; you will do as well. You are the pastor of the church there.” At that time, you could not officially appoint a pastor. There was a great struggle over pastoral work. It was strict. One pastor had three counties. One pastor had three counties in the region. No one knew that they had made me a pastor there, only the pastor (i.e. the head of the county organization).⁵²

51 For the low number of pastors during the socialist period, see M. MARIN, *Faith on the Margins*, 420.

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After the regime change, he functioned as a so-called missionary pastor (pastor misionar), which, besides leading the local community, involved maintaining relations with various Pentecostal communities at home and abroad and much travelling. Around the middle of the 2020s he transferred the pastoral title and its many tasks to his son-in-law. He himself remained more of an honorary pastor, but he still plays an important communal and ritual role in the community.

When I asked how, among other things, he had learned to conduct a funeral, he explained that he had attended funerals two or three times in congregations belonging to his network and saw there what had to be done. His learning of the pastoral and community-leadership role took place through maintaining contacts with other community leaders in the region.

He told several times the story of one occasion when he was summoned to the militia and the militiaman complained that, because of him, he had been interrogated by the party secretary, who had reproached him for not acting effectively enough against the Pentecostals in the village. When Brother Bortea replied that he no longer stole — though earlier, like everyone, he had stolen from the collective's property in the fields — the militiaman shouted: „Did I tell you not to steal? Go and steal, only leave this believing business!” In other words, he would have preferred that I go stealing rather than convert.⁵³

The resentment of the Orthodox in the village toward the Pentecostal group also broke into open conflict when someone in the Pentecostal community died and the Orthodox did not want to allow the person to be buried in the village cemetery. Because of their resistance, the Pentecostals were forced to bury their dead in the courtyards of family houses.

There are „proroci“ in the Pentecostal congregations of the region and also in Lingureni. These are people with complex religious functions whom believers most often visit for healing and to inquire into the will of the Holy Spirit. The „information“ that the prophets receive from the Holy Spirit is usually called in Romanian *descoperire*, that is, “a disclosure”, “revelation”, “or manifestation of the Holy Spirit”.⁵⁴ Through *descoperire* the Holy Spirit may assist in solving a problem or may convey different important messages to the community or even to an individual.

⁵³ June 28, 2023

⁵⁴ In certain contexts, the term *lucrare* is used in this sense to express the miraculous nature of the event.

The best-known *proroc* in the region was Martin, the founder of the central community established in an Orthodox village during socialism. Martin's spiritual significance was also present in Brother Bortea's life. According to one of Brother Bortea's stories, at a time when he was already interested in matters of faith, he reached Martin. They had not met before. His companion explained the purpose of their visit: to „see what the Lord says about him.” They knelt and prayed, and Martin received a *descoperire*. The Holy Spirit showed Martin that at the age of nineteen Brother Bortea had been in a car accident in which three people died. Bortea survived with lasting injuries to his leg that are still visible. Martin said that several people around him had died; he saw how they had died. He told Brother Bortea that the Lord had preserved him so that he might convert. According to Brother Bortea, this had a great effect on him and touched him deeply.

And then we knelt and started to pray. And he said: “Let us see what the Lord says tonight about this boy. You, boy, I do not know you. I am seeing you for the first time.” That is how that man said it. “Look at what I saw about you. I saw you in an accident. People died around you. I saw how they died.” Yes? “And the Lord preserved your life so that you would convert.” Oh, this really touched me, Peter, it had a great impact on me. [...] Because he was a man who had revelations (*descoperiri*). And it really moved me. It made me understand... why does this man know this, where does he know it from? There was no way he could know it, if he had not had a revelation (*descoperire*) (unintelligible words). And this was a revelation. A reality.⁵⁵

He was already in contact with Martin when he helped resolve a specific problem of the community. This assistance also took place within the framework of a *descoperire* (revelation), which falls under the authority of *proroc*. In Pentecostal communities, the final stage of ritual incorporation is baptism. This can take place in a river or stream⁵⁶ – even today – or in a church or congregation hall equipped with a baptismal pool. In the absence of these, baptism can also be performed in some kind of “water-retaining facility,” most commonly a bathtub. During socialism, although – as the interview excerpt below indicates – there were occasions when baptisms were carried out in secret at night in a stream,

⁵⁵ June 26, 2023

⁵⁶ In the case of Roma diaspora communities abroad, I have also heard of examples where it took place in the ocean.

those who participated took a very high risk, as the socialist authorities strictly prohibited such practices.⁵⁷

After a few years had passed, I converted to faith and continued on. It was during communism, and we were not allowed to baptize those who had converted to the faith. And in our small congregation, where we gathered [...] there were four people who needed to be baptized. So, I rolled up a piece of linoleum and made a kind of small tub out of it, so that we could pour in about two buckets of water and baptize someone. Meanwhile, a friend of mine from another denomination came – the Evangelical Christians. We are close (as denominations), but not exactly the same in teaching. And he came to me, and I said: come to the congregation. But hey, what are you doing here? Look, we want to baptize someone. We have four people who need to be baptized. But we cannot go to the stream, because if the communists find out, they will put us in prison. [So you could not baptize in the stream at that time?] At night, in secret, yes – but if anyone was caught doing such things, they would get into serious trouble. And then I said: look, I will take you by car, we will squeeze into the car; there is no one here with a bathtub. In the village, I said, people were very poor and no one had a bathtub. No one did. And I said that in [he mentions the name of the village], someone has a bathtub. I knew it, I had been to that person⁵⁸, I mentioned him earlier. But it was Sunday and I did not know if he was at home; maybe he had gone to church, but maybe someone had stayed home who would allow us to use the bathtub. Because maybe they were at the service, since they went to church in the city. But it could happen that we would find someone at home. And so we got into the car with him and the four other people [he mentions a settlement in the Bacău area].⁵⁹

Brother Bortea recounted that when they arrived at Martin's place, they found him leaning on the gate. He asked why he had not gone to the religious gathering held in the city, to which Martin replied that the Holy Spirit had revealed to him (descoperire) that Frather Bortea would come that day with four people to baptize

57 As Marin Manuela notes, requiring official authorization for baptism into neo-Protestant faith was one of the regime's techniques for restricting Roma neo-Protestant religious communities, alongside the limited issuance of operating permits for such communities (Marin, *Romii în perioada comunistă*, 328).

58 Martin, the founder of the central community.

59 June 26, 2023

them, and that he therefore had to stay at home. He showed that the bathtub had already been filled with water, and the white garments used for baptism had also been prepared in advance. The driver, who was an Evangelical Christian and, according to Brother Bortea, someone who does not understand miracles, asked excitedly whether this was not something arranged in advance, but he replied that there was no such thing. The Holy Spirit had communicated their arrival to Brother Martin through a *descoperire*. He specifically noted that in the evening it had still been expected that only three people would be baptized, but in the morning a fourth person joined them, and Brother Martin already knew that there would be four. He also told him that they had initially intended to hold a secret local baptism, and it was the driver himself who suggested that they go to Brother Martin. As a result of these events, the driver was deeply moved. Afterwards, Brother Bortea asked Brother Martin to baptize them together, but he refused, explaining that they should do it exactly as it had been revealed by the Holy Spirit.

Tanya Luhrmann introduces the concept of metakinesis⁶⁰ to describe specific forms of charismatic religious experience. As she states: “I use the term *metakinesis*⁶¹ to refer to mind-body states that are both identified within the group as the way of recognizing God’s personal presence in your life and are subjectively and idiosyncratically experience”.⁶² Based on fieldwork in a Californian religious community, the author demonstrates the operation and role of metakinesis in the community’s religious practice. Members of the studied community learned to identify “metakinetic states,” through which they experienced their relationship and communication with God as living and real: “In identifying metakinetic states, congregants identify—and, thus, psychologically organize—bodily phenomena that seem new and distinctive to them, which they come to interpret in ways that are congruent with the group’s understanding of evidence of God’s real reality in their lives”.⁶³ Tanya Luhrmann describes how these experiences were often lived as dissociative: by narrowing their attention, believers entered states of consciousness

60 A dance studies–derived concept originally describes “the way emotional experience is carried within the body so that the dancer conveys the emotion to the observer and, yet, does it by making the expressive gesture uniquely his or her own” (Martin (1983), 23–25, cited in Tanya M. LUHRMANN, *Metakinesis, How God Becomes Intimate in Contemporary U.S. Christianity. American Anthropologist*, New Series, 106 (2004), 519).

61 The italics are also from Tanya Luhrmann.

62 LUHRMANN, *Metakinesis*, 522.

63 LUHRMANN, *Metakinesis*, 522.

in which they felt as if they were “floating or not in control of their bodies”.⁶⁴ These states could also be accompanied by various auditory or visual “sensory hallucinations”.⁶⁵

The literature describes religious conversion as a multi-stage process.⁶⁶ In most Pentecostal communities, it is expected that the individual receives the gift of speaking in tongues (a phenomenon referred to in the literature as baptism with the Holy Spirit). In the communities I studied, the acquisition of glossolalia occurred after the completion of the conversion process, when the converted person became a „stable” member of the religious community. This is also reflected in Brother Bortea’s account, according to which his first such experience took place during a small congregation gathering in Bacău. The description of the event suggests that its atmosphere and unfolding evoke the social and ritual conditions of what Harvey Whitehouse describes as imagistic religiosity—a highly aroused emotional state, strong solidarity among participants, and a creatively experienced form of religiosity⁶⁷ characterized by intense group cohesion.⁶⁸ In the communities studied in the region, it was often reported that the reception of glossolalia (speaking in tongues) took place in small, intimate congregational settings, like those described by Whitehouse. According to Whitehouse, “And one of the hallmark features of the imagistic mode is that its rituals trigger transformative experiences through the enactment of traumatic ordeals, searing themselves into the memories of participants and triggering a process of exegetical reflection that last for years,

64 LUHRMANN, *Metakinesis*, 522.

65 LUHRMANN, *Metakinesis*, 522.

66 J. LOFLAND – R. STARK, Becoming a World-saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective. *American Sociological Review* 30.60 (1965), 862–875. Lewis R. RAMBO, *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1993; Lewis R. RAMBO – Charles E. FARHADIAN, Converting: Stages of Religious Change, in Christopher LAMB – M. Darrol BRYANT (eds.), *Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, London–New York: Cassell, 1999, 23–34.

67 At one point, the author refers to this as “*interpretive creativity*”, which contributes to the formation of group cohesion, what he calls an “*imagistic bond*” (Harvey WHITEHOUSE, *The Ritual Animal: Imitation and Cohesion in the Evolution of Social Complexity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021, 9).

68 Harvey WHITEHOUSE, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2004, 70–74.

sometimes for a whole lifetime”.⁶⁹ Imagistic rituals, which are components of initiation rites involving torture or strong physical and psychological ordeal – as Whitehouse emphasizes⁷⁰ – are of course absent from the rituals accompanying the reception of glossolalia. At the same time, Whitehouse argues that imagistic religious experience is not limited to these rituals, but can appear in any ritually significant transformative context, including shamans’ visions, spiritual journeys, and so on.⁷¹ “At the heart of this imagistic process was usually an emotionally intense experience which endured in memory and demanded interpretation.”⁷²

The transformative power of the experience of glossolalia is indicated by the fact that individuals recounting their conversion narratives consistently recalled this experience in detail and presented it with great emotional intensity. The role of this experience in personal religiosity remains significant even though, through its narration as part of the conversion story and its repeated ritualized telling, it also becomes to some extent structured in the same way as the conversion narrative itself.

According to Brother Bortea, after meeting Pentecostalism on a farm in Tulcea County, and before fully committing to it, he observed a kind of one-year probationary period of abstinence to see whether he could truly give up certain “sinful habits” condemned by his new faith. Among these he mentioned smoking, alcohol consumption, and occasional “entertainment” with other women. After this year had passed, he experienced the event that resembles the transformative experiences characteristic of Whitehouse’s notion of imagistic religiosity.

See what happened to me. After I turned twenty, after I converted, I first tried (perhaps) to discipline myself. To see whether I could manage not to smoke, because I used to smoke. To see whether I could manage not to drink anymore, because I used to drink; I liked alcohol. And to see whether I could leave behind my episodes with women, my “womanizing.” Because this is a difficult episode for people who have once experienced its taste. It is like changing cars — like someone getting tired of their car. [Did you have many

69 WHITEHOUSE, *The Ritual Animal*, 90.

70 For example, here: WHITEHOUSE, *Modes of Religiosity*, 111.

71 Harvey WHITEHOUSE, *Inheritance. The Evolutionary Origins of the Modern World*, Cambridge–Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2024, 86–87.

72 WHITEHOUSE, *Inheritance*. 87.

girlfriends?] Yes, I liked going to several women. I liked having some fun. Even if my wife did not know, she did not need to know what I was doing. And I said that I would not engage with faith until I left these things behind, because they are from the Devil, from the Evil One. Because the Evil One tempts people. Yes? And after a year of abstinence, I saw that it was possible. After that I underwent water baptism.⁷³

He recounted his experience as follows: on one occasion he travelled to a nearby large city for medical examinations. Accessing the results took longer than he had planned, so he asked to stay at the home of one of the Pentecostal members he had met through the city congregation. In the simple house, located in a suburban area, several people were taking part in an informal gathering. The believers from the urban congregation, like him, were simple people without extensive theological knowledge or interpretive skills regarding matters of faith, but they had been members of the Pentecostal community for a longer time. They asked him whether he had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, to which he replied that he had not. At this point, the small group present knelt and began to pray aloud, asking God to grant him this gift of the Holy Spirit. Some people prayed on their knees in a “desperate” manner, breaking into tears. While this was happening, Brother Bortea was also praying when he sensed the appearance of a supernatural force in his body. At the same time, he felt a heat in his mouth and throat, which he identified as the “warmth of the spirit.” He closed his eyes and felt as if flames were coming out of his mouth, while hearing a sound like water being poured from a full bucket into an empty one. This experience lasted a few seconds; he then opened his eyes and saw how the others were praying. After this brief episode, he began speaking in a foreign language, which lasted approximately ten to fifteen minutes, during which he wondered how he could speak without consciously controlling it. He then went out into the courtyard of the house. As he explained, he wanted to make sure that what was happening was real and not a dream. When he went outside and saw that his sense of space and time belonged to reality, he was filled with indescribable joy and felt like running and jumping over fences. At that moment he believed that this experience was entirely unique and had happened only to him. After he told the members of the congregation, they informed him that anyone in their community could experience it if they believed and prayed for it.

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(...) they knelt and prayed to God. “Lord,” they said, “baptize him with Your Holy Spirit, baptize Brother Bortea with Your Holy Spirit.” They prayed, they were literally crying. I watched their tears and I felt sorry for them. [This was at a church gathering....] Not at a church gathering, but in a house, at someone’s home. [...] And they said: Grant it, Lord, to Brother Bortea. That is how they prayed, desperately. They believed, they were simple people, but they believed, they knew the *lucrare*⁷⁴ better, they were older people (in the faith). Peter. While they were praying, and I was also praying, a supernatural force came over me⁷⁵, which I cannot explain. And I felt it in my mouth and (perhaps) also in lower parts. A heat. The warmth of the Spirit. And I heard with my own ears. I heard now, with my eyes closed, and I was praying. I heard with my ears. As if a... As if flames were coming out of my mouth? Or as if water were being poured from a full bucket into an empty one? I heard such a gurgling sound. And flames came out of my mouth and then I felt... the Holy Spirit.⁷⁶ [Did you feel it like this?] The Spirit. The heat, so to speak. That is how it felt. Like this. It lasted a few seconds. Like this. They continued praying for me. Because I opened my eyes and looked at them. At those who were praying. And after this few-second episode ended, my mouth started speaking in another language, which I did not yet understand. For more than ten minutes. Almost a quarter of an hour. [And you understand what he was saying?] Nothing. I did not. It was something else. And at a certain moment I said, but can my mouth speak without me? That is what I thought. A continuous flow of speech, but no one understood it. And it is written in the Bible. It is written. Like this, document, I can show it. And it says..., they jumped up, they applauded. They said, the Lord has baptized him with His Holy Spirit. I did not understand what was happening. Yes? Like this. During this time, for me. A special force manifested itself there. For about 10 minutes, a quarter of an hour, because I did not check the time, it seemed like a dream, what was happening. It could not be real. Then I went out (into the yard). “Where are you going?” “Wait a moment, I’m just going outside for a bit.” I did not tell them what I was going to do. I went out in order to see whether this was reality. Was it happening in reality? I had originally gone

74 *Lucrare*: a miracle brought about through the Holy Spirit (see PETI Lehel, Két moldvai karizmatikus vallási közösség alapítójának megtéréstörténete. In: „*Krisztus ajándéka van bennünk*”. *Pünkösddizmus moldvai román, roma és csángó közösségekben*. Budapest–Kolozsvár: Balassi Kiadó–Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2020, 103).

75 In Romanian: “(...) o coborât peste mine o puterină supranaturală, pe care nu pot să o explic.”

76 Here he refers to it as *duhoarea*.

to the city for medical examinations. My wife knew that I was in the city. I went to do medical analyses, but it was postponed from one day to the next. Come tomorrow, like this, come tomorrow. After the results. I had to sleep somewhere there, at someone's house. There I met those people. And when I went out and saw that this was reality, that it was true, I felt like jumping over those gardens, running in joy. I did not know what to do! It was true, true, what had happened! I thought I was the only one to whom this was happening. The only one on earth. But I spoke with those people, and they said that every believer receives it, those who came to the faith, who converted and believe in this miracle (lucrare) and pray to God. "We also received it, we also received it!" And full churches, people like this... from every place which (unintelligible word).⁷⁷

In the case of the experience lived by Brother Bortea, we can identify the principles of the functioning of metakinetic experiences described by Luhrmann. Brother Bortea described the experience of receiving glossolalia as an entirely new experience for him, but behind the experience lies the religious community's interpretation of such experiences. Moreover, the emergence of such a special experience is expected by the community; sooner or later it must happen to its joining members.⁷⁸ The experience itself took place during a communal gathering, where the present members were in a particular state of sensomotoric perception (they were praying, breaking into tears). The experience thus lived by Brother Bortea came into being under the influence of communal expectations and interpretations adjusted to it, as if "reflecting" them. The principle of metakinesis based on "reflection" thus turns it into a Durkheimian concept of the social functioning of religion.

According to one of his accounts, during the socialist period, when several people had already converted to Pentecostalism, a fellow believer invited him to the seriously ill father of him so that they might pray for him. The father, whose death had already been due a week earlier, was not a Pentecostal. In the house they encountered several people who themselves were not Pentecostals. Brother Bortea began a prayer asking God to „touch” the man and to extend the patient's life. At that moment, according to his account, those present experienced the appearance of an alien force. The non-believing persons at the bedside began to cry

⁷⁷ 26 June 2023.

⁷⁸ In the communities I examined, the time required to receive glossolalia varied from the moment the individual joined the group.

out and weep, they cried out to God and began to speak in tongues. Brother Bortea particularly emphasized that for those who do not understand the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, it can even be frightening. The patient rose from the bed and asked for food. The non-Pentecostal participants of the event subsequently converted themselves. Their baptism took place at night, in secrecy. These believers then also played a role in the spread of the new faith within their community.

Those who experienced the power of the Holy Spirit, the holiness of the Holy Spirit, were baptized. But baptism did not take place in such a way that everyone could see it, in front of the eyes of the whole world. We had to go at night. At one o'clock at night. The baptisms took place in a stream, in places like that. Like this. But they not only (perhaps) converted, but they also told others what had happened to them. They also spread it to others. And thus, the message of the Gospel spread.⁷⁹

According to his account, during the one-year period of trial he studied the Bible in depth.⁸⁰ On the farm in Tulcea, the person who had spoken to him about faith taught him how to "search" the Bible himself in order to find answers to his questions.⁸¹

Summary

The formation of the Pentecostal community in Lingureni began with the stay of a twenty-year-old man on a remote farm, where, following the teachings of a person who had encounter the Pentecostal movement abroad, he converted and began community building. This element is also present in the case of other Pentecostal communities formed in the region, which I studied during earlier fieldwork.⁸² Although the religious community in Lingureni has a somewhat

79 26 July 2021.

80 13 August 2024.

81 13 August 2024.

82 A similar pattern emerged during the socialist period in the Orthodox Romanian-background "central community," which, due to its charismatic leader and long-term activity, became a model congregation in the region (PETI Lehel, *A Szentlélek ajándékai és karizmatikus rítusok egy moldvai kistérség pünkösdi közösségeiben*). In the 2000s, the first Pentecostal Roma community was formed in a village inhabited by both Roma and Romanians (PETI Lehel, *A pünkösdzimusra való áttérés okai és funkciói egy moldvai roma közösségben*. In: *„Krisztus ajándéka van bennünk”. Pünkösdzimusz moldvai román, roma és csángó közösségeiben*. Budapest–Kolozsvár: Balassi Kiadó–Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2020, 49–73, see also PETI

different history from the network of Pentecostal congregations operating in the area (one of its particularities being that, like the rural central congregation, it was formed during the socialist period), its institutionalization followed a similar pattern to that of post-socialist communities that emerged after regime change and differ from one another along significant cultural features. In the case of the Lingureni community, a defining factor was that the young community builder came into contact with key figures of both illegal and legal Pentecostal communities in the region (community leaders, charismatic individuals, “proroci,” etc.), who not only provided him with information on how to navigate conflicts with the authorities, but also contributed to strengthening the motivation he acquired at the time of his conversion. At the same time, they also offered important models and “role components” for his functioning as a religious leader. His conversion and the consolidation of his leadership identity were particularly strongly influenced by the community in Bacău, which also functioned as a catalyst congregation for the founder of the Orthodox background “central community,” which organized an illegal Pentecostal congregation during the socialist period. Brother Bortea’s becoming a community founder was also significantly shaped by his contacts with the leaders of Pentecostal communities operating in the region.⁸³

The state obstruction of the Pentecostal movement during the socialist period meant that its leaders exercised informal forms of leadership authority.⁸⁴ This

Lehel, Migration and Pentecostalism in a mendicant Roma community in Eastern Moldavia. *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica*. 63.1 (2018), June, 83–106), where, although the founding figure remained an important member of the church throughout, he was unable to maintain his leadership role. A community following the same pattern also emerged among the Csángó Pentecostals (PETI, *A Szentlélek ajándékai*). Analyzing the conversion narratives and life trajectories of community leaders, it became clear that the founders’ subjective conversion experiences and cultural backgrounds played a fundamental role in shaping the “religious profile” of each community as well (PETI, *Két moldvai karizmatikus vallási közösség alapítójának megtéréstörténete*). While in some communities’ certain rituals well known in the Pentecostal movement (healing, speaking in tongues, etc.) were highly significant, in others they were given less emphasis or even prohibited (PETI, *A Szentlélek ajándékai*).

83 For the rural, post-socialist communities of the region, such a figure was Martin, the founder of the “central community,” who established a community that lasted for more than forty years.

84 I encountered a similar form of informal authorization (in the case of the Csángó-background Pentecostal community) in the 2010s as well.

practice was also one of the conditions for the successful spread of the Pentecostal movement: it provided significant room for maneuvering for individuals with ambitions of community building and leadership.

His relationships with other Pentecostal actors in the region were important not only in terms of his attempts to strengthen his community on an institutional level, but also because they continuously motivated him to realize his determination and sense of mission.

Alongside the processes of the formation of the Lingureni community, we can also identify the elements that structured the religious worldview of its founder, Brother Bortea: the characteristics of globalized Pentecostalism⁸⁵ (the experience of glossolalia), as well as its locally significant variants (the revelations of the Holy Spirit mediated through the highly legitimate prophet of the central community, the so-called *descoperiri*⁸⁶). Joel Robbins points out that Pentecostal Christianity is characterized by the fact that it largely reproduces the ritual, ideological, and organizational features of Pentecostalism in a similar manner, while at the same time successfully adapting elements of local culture.⁸⁷

According to Marin Manuela, during the socialist period in Romania, Roma churches contributed to the preservation of civil consciousness and ethnic and cultural identity at a time when the state did not recognize Roma as an official minority but instead pursued their full assimilation.⁸⁸ The fact that the Lingureni community, by being mostly clandestinely connected to the Bacău-based and other illegally operating Romanian Pentecostal communities in the region, on the one hand strengthened its civil consciousness (as M. Manuela notes), while on the other hand it also encountered a new model of acceptance within Romanian Pentecostal communities. Some authors argue that Roma communities may, through Pentecostalism, belong to a “transethnic denomination,” which offers a possibility for the dissolution of social stigma.⁸⁹

85 For the relationship between the local and the global in Pentecostalism, see COLEMAN, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*.

86 The *proroc* is able, even without prior knowledge of the person, to recount (attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit) the key traumatic events of his life.

87 ROBBINS, *The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*, 118.

88 MARIN, *Faith on the Margins*, 422, 429.

89 Johannes RIES, The Cultural Dynamics of Romani/Gypsy Ethnicity and Pentecostal Christianity. In: David THURFJELL–Adrian MARSH (eds.), *Romani Pentecostalism. Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Academic Research, 2014,

In the case of Lingureni, conflicts with the socialist authorities resulted in a strengthening of relations with members of the urban Pentecostal congregation. Members of the Bacău community supported Brother Bortea and his small community in various ways. As Slavkova has shown in relation to Roma evangelical churches in socialist Bulgaria, the anti-religious policies of the dictatorship contributed to the expression of unity and solidarity among communities.⁹⁰

Members of the Bacău community helped establish what Slavkova also describes as a “domestic church,” assisted in paying court-imposed fines, and provided leadership advice in navigating legal constraints (for example, advising him not to pursue further legal action).

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127–140. David THURFJELL, *Faith and Revivalism in a Nordic Romani Community. Pentecostalism Amongst the Kaale Roma of Sweden and Finland*, London–New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013. For further discussion of these ideas, see also: PETI L., *A pünkösdzimusra való áttérés okai és funkciói egy moldvai roma közösségben*, 68–69.

90 SLAVKOVA, *Conversion, Leadership and Identity*, 70.

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CANONICAL COLLECTIONS AND THE SYSTEMATIZATION OF MEDIEVAL CANON LAW IN THE LATIN WEST. FROM LATE ANTIQUITY TO THE DECRETALS OF GREGORY IX

RUSU CĂTĂLIN¹

Abstract: This article examines the formation and systematization of medieval canon law in the Latin West between Late Antiquity and the thirteenth century. It analyses the transmission of Roman legal traditions, the role of pre-Gratian canonical collections, and the emergence of episcopal and monastic centres as spaces of legal compilation. Particular attention is given to Gratian's *Decretum*, the work of decretists and decretalists, and the gradual consolidation of papal decretal collections. The study argues that medieval canon law developed through compilation, interpretation, and juridical harmonisation, culminating in the *Liber Extra* of Gregory IX.

Keywords: medieval canon law; canonical collections; *Decretum Gratiani*; decretalists; *Liber Extra*; Latin West.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyse the process through which medieval canon law was formed and systematized between Late Antiquity and the thirteenth century, through canonical collections, papal decretals, and the juridical commentaries produced by medieval canonists. The study also examines the way in which the Roman legal tradition was reinterpreted and integrated into the juridical culture of the Latin West, culminating in the emergence of *Decretum Gratiani* and the major decretalist collections.

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Roman Legal Heritage and the Post-Imperial West

The tradition of compiling documents that regulated the exercise of government by the Holy See has its origins in the early Middle Ages.² During the period of the Eastern Roman Empire's apogee – marked by the sixth-century campaigns for the reconquest of Italy and North Africa, under the sign of *renovatio imperii* – the attention of the emperors in Constantinople also turned to the reform of the legislation that organised the political and administrative life of Eastern Romanity.³ This concern of the Constantinopolitan rulers had a significant effect: the great jurists of the age succeeded in bringing together, in a unified written form, a vast legislative corpus that updated and harmonised existing laws, adapting them to the realities of the time. In other words, under imperial authority, the Eastern Roman Empire would provide a coherent and official body of law, intended to be known and applied by all the citizens of the empire.⁴

Codex Theodosianus, promulgated in the fifth century under Emperor Theodosius II, was used not only in the Eastern Roman Empire but also in the West, before Rome came under the pressure of the migratory invasions.⁵ After the dissolution of the Western Empire, fragmented by the presence of the barbarian peoples, the

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- 2 This tradition has been analysed in detail by Christof ROLKER, *Canon Law in the Age of Reforms (c. 1000 to c. 1150)*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023, 1–18; see also Michael H. HOEFELICH, Jasonne M. GRABHER, “The Establishment of Normative Legal Texts: The Beginnings of the *Ius commune*,” Wilfried HARTMANN – Kenneth PENNINGTON (eds.), *The History of Medieval Canon Law in the Classical Period, 1140–1234: From Gratian to the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008, 1–20.
 - 3 On the legislation of the Eastern Roman Empire, as well as on the compilation, transmission, and medieval transformation of Justinianic law into the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, see Charles M. RADDING, Antonio CIARALLI, *The Corpus Iuris Civilis in the Middle Ages: Manuscripts and Transmission from the Sixth Century to the Juristic Revival* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 147), Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2007.
 - 4 The Christian Church itself was included in the legislative framework of the Roman Empire from the fifth century onwards. On the adaptation of the Church to Roman law, see Ennio CORTESE, *Il diritto nella storia medievale*, Roma: Il Cigno Galileo Galilei Edizioni di Arte e Scienza, 1995; Francesco CALASSO, *Medioevo del diritto*, Milano: Giuffrè, 1954.
 - 5 Jeffrey RICHARDS, *The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages (476–752)*, Milton Park: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2014, 323.

Episcopate of Rome – one of the few Roman institutions to survive in this part of the continent – adopted Theodosian legislation and integrated it into its own system of government.⁶ The code contained norms that protected the properties of places of worship, regulated donations made to the Church – whether sacred objects or property titles – and established clear rules concerning the status of the clergy, including the right of priests to be judged only by ecclesiastical authorities.⁷ All these provisions were firmly defended by Rome whenever the new barbarian rulers, settled in the former western Roman provinces, laid claim to Church lands, regarding places of worship as mere buildings erected on their domains.⁸ Through *Codex Theodosianus*, therefore, the Church of Rome sought to defend its rights, properties, and clergy, confident that, in time, the barbarian peoples would adapt to the Roman legal model.

On the other hand, the reconquest of the Italian Peninsula in the sixth century by the Eastern Roman Empire exerted additional political and legislative pressure on the Church of Rome. In the reconquered territories, the new Byzantine rulers introduced an updated legal code – the Code of Emperor Justinian (*Codex Justinianus*) – which restricted some of the privileges enjoyed by clerics under the Theodosian Code, bringing them, from a juridical point of view, closer to the status of laymen.⁹ In essence, the clergy lost certain rights in favour of the laity – a situation that was understandable in the East, where the emperor was consolidating his authority over the Bishop of Constantinople, but difficult to apply in the West, where the Bishop of Rome concentrated in his own person both administrative authority over the goods and institutions of the Church and spiritual authority over the regulation of religious practices in the dioceses situated south and north of the Alps.¹⁰ The Roman Church,

6 Peter PARTNER, *The Lands of Saint Peter: The Papal State in the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance*, Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972, 2–3; Bronwen NEIL, Pauline ALLEN, *The Letters of Gelasius I (492–496): Pastor and Micro-Manager of the Church of Rome*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2014, 8.

7 Kristina Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 45.

8 Jean GAUDEMET, *L'Église dans l'Empire romain (IVe–Ve siècles)*, Paris: Sirey, 1989, 305; CALASSO, *Medioevo del diritto*, 235.

9 Jeffrey RICHARDS, *The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages, 476–752*, Milton Park: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2014, 323.

10 These aspects are analysed by Gabriel LES BRAS, “Le droit romain au service de la domination pontificale”, *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 26.4 (1949).

therefore, could hardly renounce a body of law that granted benefits to the clergy in favour of another that restricted them.

Canonical Collections before Gratian

By the eleventh century, the Holy See had managed to confront the two challenges mentioned above and had sought to follow the example of Constantinople in the uniformisation and updating of legislation in accordance with new juridical realities. Yet such a legislative tradition could not fully take shape, although history records several attempts at juridical adaptation between the sixth and ninth centuries, when norms concerning the status and properties of the clergy were incorporated into the new codifications of the barbarian kingdoms. A relevant example is the *Lex Romana Wisigothorum*, compiled by King Alaric II in 506. This collection brought together not only the imperial constitutions contained in the *Codex Theodosianus* – including provisions concerning the clergy and ecclesiastical goods – but also laws of barbarian origin, transmitted through customary tradition and incorporated into the new compilation.¹¹ After the middle of the sixth century, however, interest in Justinianic legal texts – the *Codex*, the *Digesta*, and the *Institutiones* – gradually began to decline in the West. In the absence of an imperial administration capable of sustaining the study and copying of these works, they ceased to circulate in manuscripts, while the Roman tradition was diluted in the face of the customs of the new Germanic peoples. After the conquest of Italy, the Lombards introduced their own norms, which they codified in writing in the *Edict of Rothari* (643) and, later, in the laws of King Liutprand – texts written in Latin, yet expressing a Germanic juridical tradition. Similar phenomena can be observed among the Visigoths and the Franks, who also committed their own legal traditions to writing, while nevertheless preserving, in Romanised regions, certain elements of Roman law.¹² In this context, between the seventh and tenth centuries, the western juridical landscape became hybrid: Roman norms, barbarian customs, and local traditions coexisted without a unified framework.

The formation of the Carolingian Empire at the beginning of the ninth century, although it brought the long-sought unity of the West, made the Church of Rome

11 CALASSO, *Medioevo del diritto*, 87–88.

12 Walter POHL, Ian WOOD, Helmut REIMITZ (eds.), *The Transformation of Frontiers: From Late Antiquity to the Carolingians*, Leiden–Boston–Köln: Brill, 2001, 190.

dependent not only on the new “barbarian” emperor, but also on the legislation issued by him. Although the new provisions continued to protect the rights of the clergy, ecclesiastical properties and appointments to ecclesiastical offices came to depend directly on the authority of the Frankish ruler, a situation whose consequences would be felt up to the Gregorian Reform in the eleventh century.¹³

Before the emergence of the great juridical compilations of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the episcopal sees and monasteries of the West functioned as genuine “workshops” for the preservation and compilation of canonical norms. Manuscripts were copied there, texts considered useful for the life of the Church were selected, and different juridical sources were brought together into a single collection.¹⁴ In medieval usage, the term *canon* designated, in a broad sense, a “rule” or a norm of Christian conduct. Isidore of Seville explained in the *Etymologies* that the canon was a rule that led the human being along the right path and corrected deviations from it.¹⁵ Over time, the term also acquired a more precise juridical meaning: that of a text possessing normative authority within the Church.

The fundamental problem of the early Middle Ages, however, was that of authority. If numerous canons existed, deriving from different sources and composed in different periods, which of them possessed binding force? In the absence of a unified juridical system, the validity of a collection depended on the authority of the texts it contained and on its recognition by bishops or by Rome. Until the twelfth century, canonical collections brought together highly diverse materials: biblical texts, conciliar canons, papal decretals, writings of the Fathers of the Church, penitential books, fragments of Roman law, royal legislation, as well as acts issued by local bishops for their own jurisdictions.¹⁶ This mixture of sources reflected the still-fluid character of medieval canon law before the systematisation brought about by Gratian. As a rule, the authors of these pre-Gratian collections did not comment on the texts they reproduced. Their interventions were generally limited to prefaces or to the criteria by which the material was selected. Yet this very selection revealed the ecclesiological orientation of the compiler: some collections emphasised the

13 The legislative authority of the Carolingian monarch is discussed by Walter ULLMANN, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages: A Study in the Ideological Relation of Clerical to Lay Power*, London: Methuen & Co., 1962, 110–114.

14 ROLKER, *Canon Law in the Age of Reforms*, 1–2.

15 ROLKER, *CANON LAW IN THE AGE OF REFORMS*, 2.

16 ROLKER, *CANON LAW IN THE AGE OF REFORMS*, 4.

authority of the local bishop, others defended the primacy of Rome, while others assigned particular importance to the canons of the ecumenical councils.¹⁷

Thus, long before the emergence of medieval universities, the Latin West had already developed a culture of juridical compilation. Gratian did not create this tradition *ex nihilo*; his merit lay in ordering, interpreting, and harmonising juridical material accumulated over centuries in the episcopal and monastic libraries of medieval Europe.

Decretum Gratiani and the Birth of Classical Canon Law

The Western tradition of canonical compilation, gradually developed in episcopal sees and medieval schools, reached a new level of systematisation with the appearance of Gratian's *Decretum* in the twelfth century.¹⁸ His merit lies in the fact that he laid the foundations for a coherent system of compilation and interpretation of the juridical sources available at the time: papal decretals, the works of the Fathers of the Church, the canons of ecumenical synods, sermons, monastic rules, hagiographies, and norms derived from Roman law, especially from the two codices mentioned above, sometimes transmitted fragmentarily or with documentary errors.¹⁹ Thus, *Decretum Gratiani* became the foundational work of the Western juridical tradition concerning the manner in which the canons of the Catholic Church could be interpreted, commented upon, and supplemented. Gratian not only established this method, but also inspired later generations of jurists who, in the great schools and then in the medieval universities of Europe, would adopt his style and rigour in their own works. These jurists subsequently

17 ROLKER, *Canon Law in the Age of Reforms*, 2-12.

18 On Gratian and his role in the juridical development of the Holy See, see Paul FOURNIER, *Histoire des collections canoniques en Occident depuis les Fausses Décrétales jusqu'au Décret de Gratien. Tome II: De la Réforme grégorienne au Décret de Gratien*, Paris: Recueil Sirey, 1932; Yves CONGAR, *Droit ancien et structures ecclésiales*, London: Variorum Reprints, 1982; Péter ERDŐ, *Storia della scienza del diritto canonico. Una introduzione*, Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1999.

19 Michael H. HOEFLICH, Jasonne M. GRABHER, "The Establishment of Normative Legal Texts: The Beginnings of the *Ius commune*", in Wilfried HARTMANN, Kenneth PENNINGTON (eds.), *The History of Medieval Canon Law in the Classical Period, 1140–1234. From Gratian to the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008, 1–20 (9).

came to be grouped into several “specialisations”: the decretists, who analysed and commented on Gratian’s *Decretum*; the decretalists, who compiled and interpreted papal decretals; and the glossators, who interpreted Roman law, influencing through their method the development of canon law as well.²⁰ In practical terms, these scholastic juridical milieus were intended to produce new interpretations of the canons of the Church, adapted to the needs of the time, starting from older or more recent decretals issued by the Holy See, while also commenting on the Roman legal texts rediscovered in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

A relevant example is provided by the aforementioned Gregorian Reform and the conflict between Church and Empire that followed it. This development was fuelled, among other factors, by the reinterpretation of the famous epistle *Duo sunt*, sent by Pope Gelasius I (492–496) to the Byzantine emperor Anastasius I. In the fifth-century text itself, Gelasius affirmed the existence of “two powers” – the sacred and the temporal – called to cooperate for the common good, while each retained its own sphere of authority.²¹ By contrast, in the eleventh century Pope Gregory VII would cite the Gelasian letter, but the interpretation he gave to the text would be different: the spiritual responsibility of clerics and their moral mission became arguments for asserting the primacy of the Church over the lay authority of the emperor.²²

Starting from this point, the later reading of the canonists of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries consolidated the idea of the superiority of spiritual authority over secular authority. On the basis of this interpretation, the decretists and decretalists – and, through the influence of juridical method, the glossators as well – constructed arguments in favour of the primacy of the Holy See. The Pseudo-Isidorian False Decretals, together with the theory of the “Two Swords”, maintained that Rome, rather than the emperor, possessed primacy in the appointment and

20 HOEFELICH – GRABHER, “The Establishment of Normative Legal Texts: The Beginnings of the *Ius commune*”, 10.

21 Cătălin RUSU, “New Interpretations Regarding *Duo sunt* of Pope Gelasius in Romanian Historiography”, *Ephemeris Dacoromana. Serie noua XXI* (2019) 59–80.

22 On the interpretation of the Gelasian text during the Gregorian Reform, see Henri-Xavier ARQUILLIÈRE, *Sur la formation de la théocratie pontificale*, Paris: E. Champion, 1925, 11–13; James A. WATT, “The Theory of Papal Monarchy in the Thirteenth Century: The Contribution of the Canonists”, *Traditio* 20 (1964) 179–317 (191–194); Kenneth PENNINGTON, *The Prince and the Law, 1200–1600: Sovereignty and Rights in the Western Legal Tradition*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–Oxford: University of California Press, 1993, 32–33.

deposition of clerics, as well as in the collection of tithes from churches under royal ownership. Thus, the monopoly of authority was no longer held by lay rulers, but by the Pope.²³

The Decretalists and the Systematization of Pontifical Law

It may therefore be argued, to a significant extent, that the Roman Pontiff provided the “official” interpretation of the canons, while the jurists had the task of resolving contradictions or clarifying the application of those norms in concrete contexts.²⁴ In effect, from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, decretalist works evolved in an increasingly analytical and structured register: authors did not limit themselves merely to presenting papal decretals, but began from a *lemma* –

23 Susan WOOD, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, offers a broad analysis of the discrepancy between the normative discourse of the Gregorian reformers and the concrete reality of the relations between lay power and ecclesiastical institutions. Although the Gregorian Reform condemned, in theory, the control exercised by kings and nobles over churches and monasteries, in practice numerous ecclesiastical institutions continued to accept the protection of lay patrons because of the privileges and security they provided. The reform was therefore more firmly expressed at the level of pontifical discourse and major ecclesiastical centres, while its concrete application varied considerably at the local level. WATT, “The Theory of Papal Monarchy”, 191–194, complements this picture by showing that medieval jurists developed, at a theoretical level, arguments concerning the primacy of the Holy See in matters of ecclesiastical investiture, canonical jurisdiction, and pontifical taxation.

24 In medieval canon law historiography, the juridical status of canonical collections prior to the thirteenth century remains a matter of debate. Although the great collections of papal decretals—which transmitted the juridical interpretation of the Holy See on various canonical matters—had not yet received a universal official sanction from Rome, they circulated widely in the law schools and ecclesiastical courts of Latin *Christianitas*. Their authority derived primarily from practical reception, the prestige of their compilers, and their constant use in juridical and didactic activity. Only with the promulgation of Gregory IX’s collection (*Liber Extra*, 1234) did the Papacy impose an official canonical corpus universally recognised in the Latin Church; Kenneth PENNINGTON, “Decretal Collections 1190–1234”, in Wilfried HARTMANN, Kenneth PENNINGTON (eds.), *The History of Medieval Canon Law in the Classical Period, 1140–1234. From Gratian to the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008, 293–317 (300–301).

a word, a juridical expression, or a canonico-juridical notion – and, on its basis, subjected the text to a detailed analysis. They explained the term, placed it in parallel with other sources – Roman law, patristic texts, Aristotelian or Platonic philosophy – identified possible contradictions or normative gaps, and proposed juridical solutions oriented towards practical application.²⁵ Thus, in the Italian Peninsula, papal decretals were, in theory, followed with strictness;²⁶ beyond the Alps, however, clerics combined the interpretations of the Holy See and of the jurists with local customs. In the Kingdom of Hungary, for instance, at the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth, it was customary that, before the diocesan members proposed a suitable person for the office of bishop or archbishop, the king's consent had to be obtained; only thereafter did the scrutiny proceed according to the canonical norms then in force.²⁷

If the works of medieval jurists were becoming increasingly sophisticated and minutely commented upon, it was only natural that the material on which they worked should attain the same level of rigour. From the twelfth century onwards, the decretalists gathered extensive collections of papal letters, intended to serve as the basis for later elaborations. Between 1189 and 1191, Bernard, bishop of Pavia, was the first to compile such a collection, known under the title

25 Rudolf WEIGAND, “The Development of the *Glossa ordinaria* to Gratian’s *Decretum*”, in Wilfried HARTMANN, Kenneth PENNINGTON (eds.), *The History of Medieval Canon Law in the Classical Period, 1140–1234. From Gratian to the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008, 55–97 (65–66). For a broader view of the intellectual mechanism of medieval juridical commentary, the structure of the gloss apparatus, and the way in which a word or expression could become the nucleus of an extended juridical interpretation, see Jean GAUDEMET, *La formation du droit canonique médiéval*, London: Variorum Reprints, 1980.

26 Antonio ANTONETTI, “Le istituzioni ecclesiastiche dell’Italia meridionale nel Duecento tra centralizzazione e resistenze”, *Schola Salernitana. Annali* 28 (2023) 219–255.

27 For a general overview of the relations between royal power and the Hungarian clergy, see Péter ERDŐ, “Ecclesiastical Procedure in Eastern Central Europe”, in Wilfried HARTMANN, Kenneth PENNINGTON (eds.), *The History of Courts and Procedure in Medieval Canon Law*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016, 426–460; for a more detailed analysis of the relationship between the archbishoprics of Esztergom and Kalocsa and the Hungarian monarchy, see Gergely KISS, “Mutatis mutandis? Les mutations de la pensée juridictionnelle des prélats hongrois à la fin du XIIe et au début du XIIIe siècle”, *Specimina Nova Pars Prima Sectio Mediaevalis* 7 (2013).

Breviarium extravagantium.²⁸ In later tradition, this collection would be cited by jurists under the name *Compilatio Prima*, and was followed, not long afterwards, by the *Compilatio Secunda* of Johannes Galensis (c. 1201–1210). The basis of these first collections consisted of late synodal canons, the decretals of pontiffs prior to Gratian, as well as the letters of Popes Gregory I (590–604), Gregory VII (1073–1085), Alexander III (1159–1181), and Clement III (1187–1191).²⁹ The pontificate of Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) was remarkable for the abundance of its pontifical correspondence. From this abundance of letters, the canonist Petrus Beneventanus compiled a new collection in 1210, known as *Compilatio Tertia*, which brought together exclusively the decretals issued by Innocent. The pontiff, impressed by the rigour of the work, approved the compilation and sent it for examination to the jurists of the school of Bologna – the principal centre for the study of canon law at the time.³⁰ The success of *Compilatio Tertia* was considerable: within a short time, it spread from Italy throughout Christian Europe, while French, English, and German jurists began to add their own commentaries and supplements to the Innocentian letters, thereby enriching the initial juridical material and strengthening the legislative prestige of the Roman Church.³¹ *Compilatio Quarta*, compiled by the German canonist Johannes Teutonicus, and *Compilatio Quinta*, produced by the glossator Tancred, were the last autonomous collections of decretals. In 1234, Pope Gregory IX entrusted the Dominican jurist Raymond of Penyafort with the task of officially compiling a new collection of pontifical texts, intended to replace all previous compilations. This work, known as the *Liber Extra*, represented the culmination of the tradition of canonical codification: it was approved by the Holy See, disseminated to the principal universities of Europe, and recognised as the official canon law of the Latin Church.³² Through this work, the thirteenth century consecrated the long-sought legislative unity of western Christendom, achieved

28 KENNETH PENNINGTON, “The Decretalists 1190–1234”, in WILFRIED HARTMANN, KENNETH PENNINGTON (eds.), *The History of Medieval Canon Law in the Classical Period, 1140–1234. From Gratian to the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008, 211–245 (218).

29 PENNINGTON, “The Decretalists 1190–1234”, 219.

30 PENNINGTON, “The Decretalists 1190–1234”, 221.

31 The best-known case was analysed by KENNETH PENNINGTON, “The French Recension of *Compilatio Tertia*”, *Bulletin of Medieval Canon Law* 5 (1975) 53–71.

32 PÉTER ERDŐ, *Storia della scienza del diritto canonico. Una introduzione*, Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1999, 42–45.

through the efforts of the pontiffs and the meticulous commentaries of the jurists in the great medieval schools.

Therefore, the role of medieval jurists was to contribute to the uniformization and systematisation of the entire juridical patrimony of the Church: the collections of decretals, the commentaries on Gratian's *Decretum*, and the interpretations of rediscovered Roman law. They created not only a coherent corpus of texts, but also a working instrument – a methodology of analysis and interpretation – that opened the way to a true science of canon law. Through this work of synthesis, the Holy See asserted itself in the Middle Ages as the legitimate heir of the Western Roman Empire, continuing and perfecting, in a Latin register, the juridical model born in Byzantium.

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VATICAN ARCHIVAL DATA ON THE SITUATION OF HUNGARIAN CATHOLICS IN TRANSYLVANIA AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR¹

SZABOLCS ANDRÁS²

Abstract: This study, based on research conducted in the Vatican Apostolic Archives, seeks to shed light on several data and details that remain less familiar to contemporary Hungarian historiography and that, in my view, constitute important elements of the broader mosaic from which a comprehensive picture of the Hungarian population in Transylvania between the two world wars may be reconstructed. The period examined here extends from 1918 to 1932, from the incorporation of Transylvania into Romania to the signing of the 1932 Agreement, which in several respects settled the situation of Hungarian Catholics who had been placed at a disadvantage by the 1927 Concordat. In addition to this main theme, the situation of Roman Catholic Hungarians in Transylvania can also be followed through a number of subsidiary threads, which likewise reveal aspects that help us understand the position of the Holy See on this question. The archival sources show that, alongside universal ecclesial and diplomatic interests, Rome also kept the question of minority rights in view and, over time, attached increasing importance to it.

Keywords: Transylvania; Hungarian minority; Roman Catholic Church; Romania; Holy See; minority rights; education; property

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Introduction

Drawing on research conducted in the Vatican Apostolic Archives, this study examines several archival details that have received relatively little attention in contemporary Hungarian historiography. These details, I argue, are important pieces in the broader historical mosaic of the Hungarian community in Transylvania during the interwar period. The study covers the years between 1918 and 1932: from the incorporation of Transylvania into Romania after the First World War to the conclusion of the 1932 Agreement, which in several respects remedied the situation of Hungarian Catholics disadvantaged by the Concordat of 1927.

The central thread of the period examined here is the long series of concordat negotiations between Romania and the Holy See. These negotiations began well before the First World War and continued until 1927, although the Concordat itself was not ratified until 1929. Over the course of these years, the positions of the negotiating parties shifted repeatedly, particularly regarding the status of Hungarian Catholics in Transylvania. The initial atmosphere of optimism and confidence gradually gave way to mistrust. Paradoxically, this change helped create the conditions for the 1932 Agreement, which proved more favourable to the minority.

Alongside this main line of inquiry, the situation of Roman Catholic Hungarians in Transylvania can also be followed through a number of related issues. Several of these will be discussed below, since they shed further light on the Holy See's position. The archival material suggests that, in addition to universal ecclesial and diplomatic considerations, Rome also took the question of minority rights into account and came to attach increasing importance to it over time.

A Brief Overview of the Diplomacy and Archives of the Holy See

Navigating the institutional structure of the Catholic Church is not always straightforward, nor is it easy to use the relevant terminology with complete precision. Because of its distinctive historical development, this structure is highly complex. It is often referred to simply as "the Vatican," but such a shorthand can obscure important distinctions. The Papal States, the political and administrative entity of the Catholic Church, ceased to exist in 1870. Vatican City State, which may be regarded as its successor in a limited sense, was established by the Lateran Treaty of 1929. Its jurisdiction extends only over the small territory that includes

Saint Peter's Basilica, the papal palaces, several other institutions, and the archives. By contrast, the official institution representing the universal Church is the Holy See. It is non-territorial in character and is not identical with the city-state.³

The Holy See is headed by the pope, who is also the monarch of Vatican City State, while the practical direction of its diplomatic activity belongs to the Secretariat of State. The Secretary of State coordinates the work of the dicasteries, formerly known as congregations, and plays a central role in the external relations of the Church.⁴ Both the Holy See and the Secretariat of State have their own archives.

The most visible representatives of papal diplomacy are the nuncios, who function as ambassadors of the Holy See. They are appointed by the pope on the recommendation of the Secretary of State and represent the interests of the Catholic Church in a particular country or region. They report directly to the Secretary of State, and their reports are preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Archives. Nuncios also act as intermediaries between Rome and the local Church. In many cases, however, diocesan bishops communicated directly with the Secretary of State, the pope, or the cardinals heading the dicasteries, without passing through the nunciature.

According to canon law, local bishops, and especially archbishops, belong to the ecclesiastical diplomatic body in the broader sense: they represent the Church, not the nation or state of which they are citizens.⁵ As will become clear, this principle was not always consistently observed in practice. The letters and reports of bishops and archbishops are likewise preserved in the Apostolic Archives.

The Vatican Apostolic Archives took shape in the seventeenth century, gradually separating from the papal library. From 1646 onward, the institution was commonly known as the Secret Archives. In 2019, however, Pope Francis restored the older designation "Apostolic Archives," partly to dispel popular associations of secrecy and mystery surrounding the institution. Although the Napoleonic period severely damaged the collection, when a large part of the documentation was transferred to Paris, the archive remains one of the largest

3 See: <https://www.vaticanstate.va/it/stato-governo/note-general/origini-natura.html> [Accessed 3 August 2024].

4 BÚZA László, A Szentszék nemzetközi jogi helyzete a lateráni egyezmény szerint, *Magyar Jogászegyleti Értekezések*, vol. XX, no. 103 (1929), Budapest: Franklin Társulat.

5 Michael F. FELDKAMP, *La diplomazia pontifica da Silvestro I a Giovanni Paolo II. Un profilo*, Milan: Jaca Book, 1995, 84.

in the world. It preserves not only records of the Catholic Church, but also an exceptionally rich documentary heritage concerning the history of humanity over the past two millennia.⁶

The documents are open to scholarly consultation, and part of the collection is also available in digital form. In what follows, this study focuses on documents preserved among the records of the nunciature in Romania.

The Diplomatic Aims of the Holy See in Relation to Romania between the Two World Wars

The outcome of the First World War posed a serious challenge for the Holy See, whose principal diplomatic partners had traditionally been the Habsburgs. The collapse of the Dualist Monarchy forced the ecclesiastical diplomacy associated with Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Gasparri⁷ to adjust to the new international order established after Versailles. This adjustment brought with it what may be described as a French orientation in Vatican diplomacy. Seen in this context, it is understandable that the series of concordats so characteristic of the pontificate of Pius XI continued with states regarded as allies of France. Among these were Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, the three countries that together formed the Little Entente and contributed to the diplomatic isolation of Hungary.

During this period, Romania's chief political objective was to consolidate the borders drawn at Versailles. Although the overwhelming majority of the population belonged to the Orthodox Church, and although government policy developed largely along National Liberal lines, the leading politicians of the period considered it important to establish good relations with the Catholic Church. This was especially true of Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu.⁸ For Bucharest, such relations offered the possibility of securing recognition from a universal religious community and institution whose influence extended well beyond the borders of any single state. It was with this aim in mind that the Romanian authorities

6 See: <https://www.archivioapostolicovaticano.va/content/aav/en/l-archivio/note-storiche.html> [Accessed 3 August 2024].

7 Pietro Gasparri (1852-1934), cardinal and Secretary of State of the Holy See between 1914 and 1930. His activity centred on the conclusion of concordats, the most significant of which was the treaty signed with Italy in 1929.

8 Ion I. C. Brătianu (1864-1927) was Prime Minister of Romania, president of the National Liberal Party, and a defining political figure of the period.

revived the concordat negotiations that had first begun under the country's first ruler, the Catholic King Carol I.⁹ When the leading politicians became aware of the resistance of the Orthodox Church and of part of the population, however, the issue was gradually removed from the government's list of priorities. This development caused considerable disappointment in Rome.

Romania was important to the Holy See for several reasons. It could serve as a bridgehead toward the Orthodox states of Eastern Europe, a prospect that gave it particular strategic value in Vatican diplomacy. At the same time, after Versailles Romania had acquired a substantial Catholic minority whose ecclesiastical and legal position required clarification. The Holy See's approach was also shaped by another expectation: namely, that the Greek Catholic Church might become a means through which a significant part, perhaps even the majority, of the Romanian nation could be drawn closer to Catholicism. During the period examined here, the Holy See was represented in Romania by two nuncios: Francesco Marmaggi, who served between 1920 and 1923, and Angelo Maria Dolci, who held the office from 1923 to 1933. The two archbishops of Bucharest, Raymund Netzhammer (1905–1924) and Alexandru Cisar (1924–1954), likewise played important roles. Regarding the Roman Catholics of Transylvania, Count Gusztáv Károly Mailáth remained bishop of Transylvania, or Alba Iulia, throughout the entire period under discussion (1897–1938). He generally maintained contact with the Holy See through the nuncio, although there were also several occasions on which direct communication took place between Mailáth and Rome.

Transylvania from the Perspective of the Holy See

It would perhaps be an exaggeration to claim that the Holy See had a distinct Transylvania policy of its own. In administrative and political terms, the region was regarded before the First World War as part of Austria-Hungary and, after the war, as part of Romania; in this respect, Rome could hardly have acted otherwise. From an ecclesiastical point of view, however, the Holy See had to take account of both the Greek Catholics and the Roman Catholics living in the region. The former were considerably more numerous. According to the census of 1910, Roman Catholics accounted for 14 per cent of the population of historical Transylvania, or 375,325

9 Ofelia MILO, *România și Sfântul Scaun în a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea*, PhD dissertation, Cluj-Napoca: Babeș-Bolyai University, 2008, 233.

persons, whereas Greek Catholics represented 28 per cent, or 749,404 persons.¹⁰ This numerical imbalance appeared to support a view widely held in Rome: that the Romanian Greek Catholic Church, united with Rome, might facilitate the rapid and substantial growth of Catholicism within the new kingdom.¹¹ Nevertheless, not least because of its historical past and institutional weight, the Roman Catholic bishopric was also treated by Rome as a partner of comparable importance. This attitude was visible in Nuncio Marmaggi's tour of 1921 and in the way that visit was received.

The nuncio first travelled to Blaj. Many interpreted this gesture as an acknowledgment of the new Romanian political reality and of the missionary role assigned within it to the Greek Catholic Church. Through the meeting of Latin and Eastern Christian traditions, this Church was expected to contribute decisively to shaping the identity of the newly enlarged Romanian state.¹² It is therefore not surprising that Hungarian diplomatic sources followed Marmaggi's journey through Transylvania with suspicion and criticized it from Budapest. Yet the nuncio also visited Alba Iulia, where he made a favourable impression. In his address, he stressed that the Holy See was aware of the situation and difficulties of the Roman Catholics of Transylvania and wished to act in such a way as to improve their position.¹³ As an experienced diplomat, Marmaggi was careful not to say or promise more than he could. At the same time, he did say what the Hungarian faithful wished to hear: that the universal Church had not forgotten them and was attentive to their situation. Subsequent developments, however, including the transfer of the Minorite church in Cluj to the Greek Catholics, shook this confidence among the local Catholic community.¹⁴

10 JAKABFFY Elemér, *Erdély statisztikája*, Magyar Kisebbség. Nemzetpolitikai Szemle, Lugos, 1923, 2.

11 Raymund NETZHAMMER, *Episcop în România*, vol. II, Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2005, 903.

12 *Unirea Poporului*, III/25, 19 June 1921. Source: Vatican Apostolic Archives (hereafter AAV), Archivi Delle Rappresentanze della Santa Sede presso Organizzazioni Internazionali, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, bundle 12, P169.

13 A pápai nuncius Gyulafehérváron, *Erdélyi tudósító*, IV/13-14, 1 July 1921; source: AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 12, P169.

14 On this, see ANDRÁS Szabolcs, A kolozsvári minorita templom átadása a görögkatolikus egyháznak, *Erdélyi Krónika*, source: <https://erdelyikronika.net/2020/02/06/a-kolozsvari-minorita-templom-atadasa-a-gorogkatolikus-egyhasznak/> [Accessed 4 August 2024].

The work of ecclesiastical diplomacy was further complicated by the fact that relations between the two Catholic Churches in Transylvania were far from harmonious. One source of tension was the disputed affiliation of Hungarian-speaking Greek Catholics. Alba Iulia sought to secure separate parishes for them, thereby preventing their full absorption into Romanian Greek Catholic ecclesiastical structures.¹⁵ Another source of conflict was the ambition of Blaj to obtain a dominant role in the management of Catholic affairs in Romania and to acquire a legal position comparable to the state-church status enjoyed by the Orthodox Church. In pursuit of these aims, the self-organization of Hungarian Roman Catholics came to be seen as an obstacle. This is evident from a letter addressed by Vasile Suciu¹⁶ to Secretary of State Gasparri in May 1922. In that letter, Suciu objected to Mailáth's request that József Hirschler,¹⁷ the archdeacon and parish priest of Cluj, be granted the title of auxiliary bishop. In Suciu's view, such a step on the part of the Church would be perceived in Bucharest as a provocation and would jeopardize the good relations that had been established between the parties.¹⁸

The Echo of the Land Reform in the Vatican

If any issue tested relations between the Holy See and Romania in the years following the First World War, it was not primarily disagreement within the Church, but the land reform of 1921 and its consequences. The law regulating the agrarian reform in the territories attached to Romania by the Treaty of Trianon profoundly disrupted the property system of the Catholic Church. For centuries, this system had provided the material basis for the autonomous functioning of the Church's institutional network. The impact was especially serious in the field of education, since earlier bishops of Transylvania had assigned substantial forests and landed estates to the support of schools and other educational institutions, and the revenues from these properties were used to cover their expenses. In some cases, the income generated by a Church-owned mill, or by another enterprise of varying size, served the same purpose.¹⁹

15 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 6/12, 28 May 1921.

16 Vasile Suciu (1873-1935), Greek Catholic Archbishop of Făgăraș-Alba Iulia.

17 József Hirschler (1874-1936), Roman Catholic archdeacon-parish priest of Cluj and founder of the Marianum Girls' Gymnasium.

18 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 6/18, 18 May 1922.

19 ANDRÁS Szabolcs, *Iskola múlt időben. A gyergyószentmiklósi Fogarassy Leánynevelő Intézet története*, Gheorgheni: F&F International, 2016, 27–28.

The consequences of the reform were made more severe by the structure of Catholic landed property. In the case of the Reformed Church, estates serving comparable purposes tended to be smaller and were usually held by individual parishes. Catholic estates, by contrast, had been consolidated into larger property units. As a result, under the proportional principle applied in the agrarian reform, the Catholic Church suffered substantially greater losses. In Bihor, for example, the Reformed Church lost approximately 40 per cent of its relevant property because of the reform, whereas the Catholic bishopric recorded losses of more than 90 percent.²⁰

The Holy See did not contest Romania's right to carry out land reform and, in principle, regarded the matter as one belonging to the domestic jurisdiction of the Romanian state. At the same time, it followed the implementation of the reform closely. The reports arriving from the region were alarming. It soon became apparent that the reforms threatened not only ecclesiastical property, but also the survival of Church institutions themselves. The Holy See received a copy of a letter addressed as early as 1920 to King Ferdinand of Romania by Sámuel Jósika, the lay president of the Transylvanian Roman Catholic Status. In this letter, Jósika warned of the drastic impact that the proposed legislation would have on the Catholic educational network.²¹

Jósika's fears proved well founded, as the detailed report prepared by Ágoston Pacha, vicar of Timișoara, clearly shows. In a table arranged by diocese and religious order in the annexed territories, Pacha recorded the amount of landed property held by each institution before the reform and the amount that remained after the expropriations. The greatest losses were suffered by the religious orders of the Diocese of Oradea.²² The Hungarians of Transylvania naturally sought assistance not only from the Holy See, but also from the Hungarian government. They asked that the reform be reconsidered and that its consequences be mitigated as far as possible.

Budapest, however, had no direct influence either over the decisions of the Romanian government or over relations between Romania and the Holy See. It nevertheless attempted to exert pressure through its ambassadors accredited to the Holy See, urging Rome to adopt a firmer position in defense of the affected ecclesiastical institutions. This pressure from Budapest placed the Holy See in an

20 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 12, 2913/May 1923.

21 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 12, 6/18, 50/26 November 1920.

22 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 12, 2913/May 1923.

uncomfortable position. At that time, the conclusion of a concordat with Romania had priority in Vatican diplomacy, and Bucharest made it clear that it would not tolerate the involvement of any third party in that matter.

The Holy See therefore sought to reassure both the Hungarian Catholics of Transylvania and the Hungarian government by invoking the prospect of the future concordat. In Rome's view, such an interstate agreement would eventually resolve the difficulties created by the agrarian reform. Gasparri had hoped that the concordat might already be signed in 1921, but much time was still to pass before this expectation was fulfilled. In the meantime, the protests of the bishops within Romania became increasingly forceful. Greek Catholic hierarchs also raised their voices on several occasions. They did so partly because they too had lost some property in Transylvania, and partly because, in comparison with the Orthodox Church, they received very little through the redistribution that followed the reform.²³ The strongest intervention came from Timișoara. It led to another low point in the complex relationship linking the Holy See, Romania, Hungary, and the Hungarian Catholics of Transylvania.

The Holy See Background of the Glattfelder Affair

Gyula Glattfelder,²⁴ bishop of Csanád/Timișoara, protested the consequences of the agrarian reform in a circular letter addressed to his faithful. The letter soon provoked indignation and, at the same time, furnished the authorities with a pretext for taking action against him.²⁵ Prime Minister Brătianu described the bishop's circular as an act directed against the king and appealed to the Holy See, demanding the removal of the prelate.²⁶ At the same time, a press campaign was launched against Glattfelder. He was accused of having become a standard-bearer of Hungarian irredentism despite his Swabian origin, while the argument was advanced that the diocese needed a bishop capable of representing Romanian,

23 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 12, 1650/2 October 1922.

24 Gyula Glattfelder (1874-1943), bishop of Csanád/Timișoara and, from 1923, bishop of Szeged.

25 I analyzed the details and background of the Glattfelder's expulsion, here I present new informations regarding this case. See: ANDRÁS Szabolcs, New Details Regarding the Expulsion of Bishop Gyula Glattfelder from Romania, *Studia Theologica Catholica Latina*, LXI, 1 (2016), Cluj-Napoca: Babeș-Bolyai University Press, 87–98.

26 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 8/24, 9153/30 October 1922.

Swabian, and Serbian believers alike. From the outset, the prime minister made it clear that the conflict that had arisen between the Romanian state and the Holy See could be resolved only if Glattfelder left the country.²⁷ Budapest was soon informed of the affair and likewise turned to the Holy See, urging it not to give in to the Romanian demand. It also conveyed to Glattfelder that he should not, under any circumstances, leave Timișoara.

The affair placed the Holy See in a difficult position. Rome still attached great hopes to the conclusion of the concordat and failed to assess accurately the determination of the Romanian government. Through the nuncio, Gasparri asked Glattfelder to defend himself and to apologize to the king. Glattfelder complied with the instructions received from the Holy See. In a letter to King Ferdinand I, who was also personally acquainted with him, he explained that his circular had not been motivated by anti-state intentions, but by concern for the interests of the faithful. He also sent an explanatory letter to the Secretariat of State.²⁸ The Holy See accepted his explanation and believed that the matter had thereby been brought to a close. The government in Bucharest, however, took a different view. It persisted in its original intention of forcing Glattfelder out of the country. To that end, it froze all the assets of the Timișoara bishopric and suspended all payments until the bishop departed and a person acceptable to the government was appointed in his place.²⁹

Faced with the prospect of the financial collapse of the bishopric, Secretary of State Gasparri ultimately yielded to Bucharest's demand. He justified this decision by referring to the fact that, as a consequence of the Treaty of Trianon, the diocese had been divided into three parts. Glattfelder was therefore entrusted with organizing the new seat of the Hungarian Diocese of Csanád in Szeged. From the point of view of canon law, however, Glattfelder remained bishop of Timișoara, while his former vicar, Ágoston Pacha, represented him in the Romanian territories as apostolic administrator. Glattfelder accepted the decision of the Holy See and, in a letter addressed to Pope Pius XI, agreed to transfer his seat to Szeged. This step caused considerable disappointment in Budapest. Thereafter, the Holy See rejected further intervention by the Hungarian government, arguing that the

27 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 8/24, 10632/1 December 1922.

28 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 8/24, 12024/2 January 1923.

29 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 8/24, 27 January 1923.

bishop himself had shown his willingness to leave Timișoara.³⁰ The greatest fear was that the case might create a precedent that would allow Bucharest to force other Hungarian bishops into exile as well. Such a possibility was also raised, at least theoretically, in connection with Mailáth. The Holy See, however, promised that this would be its last concession of this kind to Bucharest, and it ultimately kept that promise.

The Glattfelder affair deeply unsettled Hungarian Catholic society in Transylvania. It strengthened the conviction that the community could rely only on itself and that it had to take responsibility for preserving its own institutions, especially its schools. One might say that among Transylvanian Hungarian Catholics the belief became increasingly firm that, for the Holy See, the concordat mattered more than anything else. Mailáth himself also articulated this view. In Rome, too, the growing mistrust of the Hungarian Catholics was noticed. Nevertheless, the response remained essentially the same: they were once again reassured by reference to the beneficial effects expected from the concordat that had yet to be signed.

The Question of Hungarian Denominational Education in Rome

As already noted, the question of education was of central importance for Hungarians in Transylvania, because after 1918 it became one of the essential conditions for preserving national and confessional identity. Following the First World War, Romania gradually dismantled state-supported minority education. In this situation, denominational schools became the principal institutions through which instruction in the mother tongue could be maintained. The Reformed Church succeeded in increasing the number of its schools. The Catholic Church, by contrast, was placed in a far more difficult position as a consequence of the agrarian reform. It had to make considerable efforts simply to maintain its existing schools, and several institutions were eventually forced to close.³¹

In Transylvania, Partium, and Banat, Catholic schools may be divided into four main categories. The majority were episcopal property and were operated directly by the bishopric. A second group also belonged to the bishopric, but, in accordance with the intention of the founding bishop, their administration had

30 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 8/24, 2556/13 February 1923.

31 SZABÓ Kálmán Attila (ed.), *Az erdélyi tanító- és óvóképzés évszázadai*, Târgu Mureș: Mentor, 2009, 75.

been entrusted to a religious order. In Partium and Banat, however, there were also several schools that were both owned and operated by religious orders. In historical Transylvania, the most prestigious secondary and civic schools functioned under the supervision and maintenance of the Transylvanian Roman Catholic Status in the larger towns.³²

In the first half of the 1920s, there were several attempts to nationalize ecclesiastical schools, with mixed results. Around the same time, the authorities seized both the Theresianum orphanage and school in Sibiu³³ and the seminary in Satu Mare. Gasparri attempted to exert pressure on the Romanian government in order to secure the restitution of both institutions, but he ultimately succeeded only in the case of the Satu Mare institution.³⁴ Another characteristic feature of the period was the introduction of subjects taught in Romanian, together with repeated inspections. During these inspections, several schools were deprived of their public rights—that is, of their right to issue officially recognized diplomas—on the grounds that either the teachers did not know Romanian adequately or that a large proportion of the students had failed the Romanian-language examinations.

In the second half of the decade, the authorities increasingly turned their attention to schools operated by religious orders, and this brought relations between Romania and the Holy See to another low point. The 1925 law on private education, which also applied to denominational schools, stipulated that instruction in schools run by religious orders had to be conducted in Romanian.³⁵ In the Diocese of Alba Iulia, that is, in Transylvania, this should not have created a serious difficulty in principle, since Bishop Mihály Fogarasy had already placed all schools under episcopal jurisdiction. At the same time, however, he had also entrusted the administration of several schools to the Sisters of Mercy of Satu Mare, a circumstance that now nearly turned against the diocese. Overzealous local authorities attempted to apply the restrictive provisions of the law even to those schools that were merely administered by religious orders. Consequently, both

32 For more detail, see ANDRÁS Szabolcs, *Az erdélyi római katolikus szerzetesi oktatás helyzetváltozása az I. világháború után*, *Sapientiana*, 2.16 (2023), 63–74.

33 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 6/18, 578/11 May 1921.

34 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 6/16, 163/3 February 1921.

35 Monitorul Oficial, Law no. 93 of 30 July 1921 on agrarian reform in Transylvania, Banat, Crișana, and Maramureș, source: https://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.htp_act_text?id=65850 [Accessed 4 August 2024].

Rome and Mailáth once again had to make clear that, in historical Transylvania, all Catholic schools were the property of the bishopric.³⁶ The situation was more complicated in Partium and Banat, where several schools were indeed owned and operated by religious orders.

The question of the language of instruction in schools run by religious orders overshadowed the final phase of the concordat negotiations. The bishops continuously informed the Holy See of the state measures affecting their schools, while the Bucharest government insisted on the implementation of the law. At the centre of the dispute stood the argument that religious orders were subject to foreign control, since their major superiors did not reside within the territory of the Romanian state. From the government's point of view, the national interest required education to remain under state supervision and direction. In the end, the Romanian position was incorporated into the text of the concordat. This meant that education in the mother tongue remained possible only in episcopal schools. The sources of the Holy See suggest that this question was still under discussion on the very day the Concordat was signed.³⁷

As a solution, the Holy See adopted the proposal of the Transylvanian Hungarians in a manner that was almost without precedent at the time. By a central decree, it transferred all ecclesiastical schools into episcopal ownership. This measure ended a centuries-old network of schools run by religious orders. At the same time, however, it made possible the preservation of Catholic education in Hungarian. Rome had also come to recognize that, without such a measure, there was a real danger that large numbers of Hungarian faithful would turn away from the Church.³⁸

The Place of the Catholic Church in the Romanian State

After the First World War, one of Romania's principal aims was the administrative and legal unification of the territories it had incorporated. To this end, a series of laws were enacted that extended the legal system of the Old Kingdom to the newly acquired provinces. The education law discussed above belonged to this

36 ANDRÁS, *Iskola múlt időben*. 50.

37 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 38/182, 4559/26 May 1927.

38 Mailáth himself drew the attention of the Secretariat of State to the fact that many parents had already enrolled their children in Reformed schools to ensure education in the mother tongue.

process, as did the law on religious denominations adopted in the same period. The latter provoked at least as much indignation in the Holy See as the education law, since the Bucharest government had previously promised that no law on religious denominations would be adopted before the conclusion of the concordat.³⁹ The indignation was further intensified by the fact that, under the draft law, the Catholic Church would have received only a secondary form of recognition. The Orthodox Church was to be granted the rights of a state Church, the Greek Catholic Church was to receive recognition as a Church of national importance, while the Roman Catholic, Reformed, and other Churches would have been placed in the category of other denominations.

As soon as the Holy See received the draft, it lodged a protest with the Bucharest government. Its first objection was that Romania was failing to honour its earlier promise not to adopt a law on religious denominations before the concordat. At the same time, Rome also protested the discriminatory character of the proposed legislation. The government responded by arguing that the legal and administrative unification of the country made the adoption of the law urgent and that it was therefore unwilling to wait for the concordat, whose signing the same government had repeatedly postponed. In response, Rome also adopted a firmer position. It declared that if the law on religious denominations were adopted in its proposed form, there could be no question of concluding a concordat.⁴⁰ Bucharest, however, did not wish to jeopardize the concordat either, since it needed recognition from a political actor and institution of universal significance within the framework of the new borders. It was therefore ultimately forced to make concessions.

After lengthy negotiations, a compromise was reached. The law retained the privileged distinction accorded to the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches, but it also included an article removing the Roman Catholic Church from the category of other or foreign Churches. In addition, a clause was inserted stating that the status of the Roman Catholic Church would be regulated by a separate interstate agreement, namely the concordat.⁴¹ Under these conditions, the Catholic Church was ultimately willing to continue the concordat negotiations. Nevertheless, trust between the parties had been damaged to such an extent that the enthusiasm characteristic of the early 1920s had largely disappeared.

39 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 18/56, 4056/29 March 1925.

40 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 18/56, 4188/26 November 1925.

41 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 18/56, 1/16 December 1925.

The debate over the status of the Roman Catholic Church can also be observed at the local level, especially if we examine the documents concerning Mailáth. During this period, two legal disputes of symbolic importance reflected the changed circumstances both within the Catholic Church in Romania and in the relationship between the Romanian state and the Hungarians of Transylvania. One concerned the precise designation of the bishop's title, while the other concerned the senatorial seat held by right. In the first matter, after the union of Transylvania with Romania, Mailáth continued to insist on using the title "bishop of Transylvania," since this designation could be traced back to the foundation of the diocese by King Saint Stephen in 1009. The Romanian government, however, was unwilling to accept this. It consistently avoided allowing Hungarian ecclesiastical or public figures to bear titles that referred to the territory as such. The Romanian side invoked canon law and ecclesiastical custom, according to which bishops were named after the see city of their diocese. On this basis, it argued that Mailáth was entitled only to the title "bishop of Alba Iulia." Since Bucharest's position was well founded from a canonical point of view, the Holy See accepted it, and this designation was accordingly included in the text of the concordat and in other documents. Nevertheless, Mailáth continued to sign his internal ecclesiastical correspondence as bishop of Transylvania.⁴²

The second dispute involved more than a question of nomenclature. As in the period of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the bishops of the historic Churches in royal Romania also held seats as senators in the upper house of the Bucharest parliament. The electoral law of 1926, however, modified this arrangement. Under the new provisions, all Orthodox and Greek Catholic bishops remained senators by right, whereas the other "minority Churches" could each appoint only one senator, with the exception of the Muslims, who were permitted to designate two leaders. At first, Mailáth was not especially worried by this restriction. As the oldest Roman Catholic bishop in the country, he assumed that, according to customary practice, the senatorial seat would belong to him.

Archbishop Alexandru Cisar of Bucharest, however, appealed to the Holy See for permission to receive the parliamentary seat himself, bypassing the nuncio in the process. He did so on the grounds that he was the highest-ranking Roman Catholic prelate in the country. In this initiative, he was personally encouraged and supported by the prime minister, who informed Rome through the Romanian

42 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 20/61, 3013/31, 4 December 1931.

embassy that the government's preferred candidate was Cisar. In its response, the Holy See did not attach great importance to the matter and, for its part, attempted to close the issue by stating that it was an internal affair of Romania. Thereafter Mailáth, together with his principal supporter Elemér Gyárfás, made several further attempts to retain the senatorial seat. Once they saw, however, that the Holy See had adopted a neutral position, they eventually accepted the *fait accompli* created by the Bucharest government and the archbishop.⁴³ In the elections, Gyárfás succeeded in winning a senatorial seat and went on to represent the interests of the Hungarians and Catholics of Transylvania with considerable expertise until his death in 1945.

The Concordat as an Objective: Concluding Remarks.

A full analysis of the Holy See documents concerning the concordat would require a separate study, or even an entire volume. For this reason, no attempt is made here to present that topic in its entirety. It may nevertheless be stated that most of the events that took place between the end of the First World War and the signing of the concordat in 1927 were assessed by the Holy See primarily in relation to a single question: whether they facilitated or hindered the conclusion of that agreement. In Rome, there was a strong conviction that such a document could create conditions in Romania favourable enough for the Catholic Church to make possible its later flourishing in the region. In pursuit of this objective, the Holy See was prepared, especially in the first years after the war, to accept a number of compromises. These included questions concerning the transfer of churches, education in the mother tongue, and the reorganization of dioceses along the new state borders. The increasingly dissatisfied Hungarian Catholics of Transylvania were repeatedly reassured that the concordat itself would eventually resolve their difficulties.

The documents of the Holy See also make it possible to trace the gradual process by which the Church's diplomats and representatives came to realize that the complaints and warnings of the Transylvanian Hungarians were not without foundation. Rome had placed excessive hopes in the concordat, while Romania's objectives did not in fact coincide with those of the Holy See. Through the reports of nuncios and bishops, Rome gained an increasingly accurate picture of Romanian public opinion and of the positions adopted by successive governments. At the same time, it carefully documented the expressions of hostility in the Romanian

43 AAV, Arch. Nunz. Romania, 1243A, 18/57, 4674/1 August 1927.

press directed both against the concordat and against Mailáth. Over time, these developments made the Holy See more receptive to the petitions and arguments submitted by the Hungarians of Transylvania.

The Church's reassessment of the concordat's significance, however, occurred only after the agreement had been signed. Romania delayed ratification for two years, thereby causing considerable disappointment in Rome. In the meantime, an important change also took place within the Holy See itself. In 1930 Cardinal Gasparri retired and was succeeded by Cardinal Pacelli. Pacelli no longer sought, above all, relations regulated primarily through concordats. Rather, he aimed at a more rational system of relations with European states, based on the equality of the parties. For the Hungarian community, this shift ultimately led to the Agreement of 1932, which corrected those articles of the concordat that had also placed the Hungarian Catholics of Transylvania at a disadvantage.

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Book review

FRANCO PIOTTI, CIÒ CHE SI FA SOTTO IL SOLE.
QOHELET: APPUNTI SPARSI (STUDI BIBLICI),
BOLOGNA: EDB, 2024. 302 PP. ISBN 978-8810978337.

REVIEWED BY MIKLÓS ISTVÁN SZABÓ ¹

Franco Piotti's volume belongs to the long philological tradition of Qoheleth studies. *Ciò che si fa sotto il sole. Qohelet: appunti sparsi* offers a series of readings of Ecclesiastes focused on several basic questions: the value of human toil, the meaning and limits of wisdom, the future of the human being, and the relation between created order, lived experience, and the disorder perceived in history. The phrase “under the sun” in the title keeps the discussion anchored in this earthly and experiential horizon.

Until his retirement, Franco Piotti conducted research at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. His work on Qoheleth goes back to his thesis, *Il problema della lingua originale nell'Ecclesiaste*. He later published numerous studies on Qoheleth and biblical wisdom literature in *Bibbia e Oriente*. His 2012 volume *Qohelet. La ricerca del senso della vita*, published by Morcelliana, marks an earlier stage of this long engagement. Piotti has also written on philology and the history of the Hebrew language. That background matters here, since the present book repeatedly reads theological questions through close attention to language, and textual detail.

The Introduction states the programme of the volume. Piotti begins from a question that carries a degree of self-irony: why add another book on Qoheleth after a biblical book that already speaks about the increase of knowledge and the endless making of many books (cf. Qoh 1:18; 12:12)? His answer is modest in scope. This is not another continuous commentary. It is a set of thematic studies,

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loosely connected and guided by a common interpretative direction. The expression *appunti sparsi* (“scattered notes”) therefore describes both Piotti’s own form and the non-linear, associative structure he finds in Qoheleth.

A central claim follows from this. Qoheleth is more than a collection of detached sayings, yet it resists the shape of a closed, linear treatise. Piotti reads the book as a text made of repetitions, recurring motifs, paratactic links, and thematic returns. That premise governs the volume. Qoheleth becomes a critical reader of biblical wisdom, legal, social, and political traditions. Interpretation, in turn, has to follow the text through its repetitions, fractures, and internal tensions.

The opening study, “Osservare la Legge o seguire cuore e occhi?”, turns to Torah and desire. Qoheleth urges the young man to follow the ways of his heart and the sight of his eyes. Is this simply wisdom’s invitation to enjoy life, or does it shift the emphasis of the inherited tradition? Piotti reads Qoh 11:9 against Num 15:39, where the same movement after “heart” and “eyes” names forbidden conduct. In Numbers, the phrase belongs to the language of infidelity and idolatry. In Qoheleth, it becomes a summons to receive the joy God gives during the short time in which it is available. One of the book’s main lines of interpretation is already visible here: Qoheleth remains inside the language of tradition while making that language answer new questions. Joy is the divine gift offered within a human life marked by *hebel*. The example also clarifies Piotti’s method. Individual sentences have to be read closely, but familiar formulas must also be followed as they move into new contexts. Qoheleth’s force lies in that re-use. Traditional language is not discarded. It is made unstable.

“È certa la diversità tra uomini e animali?” moves from Torah to anthropology. The anthropocentric language of Gen 1–2 seems to secure the human being’s privileged place in creation: the image of God, the mandate to rule, and a distinctive status among living beings. Qoh 3:18–21 unsettles that certainty. Death, origin from dust, and the shared life-breath make any simple appeal to human exceptional status more difficult. What appears first “under the sun” is common finitude. Human beings and animals live, breathe, die, and return to dust. Human distinctiveness is therefore read as responsibility rather than superiority. Piotti does not cancel the theological claims of Genesis. He asks what happens when those claims are heard from the standpoint of mortality.

The next study, “Può essere attuale Qo 3,18–21?”, stays with the same passage and asks about its contemporary force. Human beings and animals come from the same dust, are sustained by the same breath, and return to the same death. That claim

tests modern self-understanding. Piotti does not turn Qoheleth into an author of animal ethics. Nor does he erase human responsibility. He lets the biblical question remain in place: what do we actually know about the ultimate difference between human beings and animals “under the sun”? The passage resists quick doctrinal closure through later teaching on the soul, resurrection, or final judgment. For that reason, it can disturb an anthropocentric confidence that treats animals as mere instruments. Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and more recent ecclesial documents enter the discussion at this point. The issue becomes theological and ethical. A misunderstood anthropocentrism has often valued animals chiefly in relation to human needs and dignity. Qoheleth gives Piotti a way to reopen that habit of thought.

Royal power enters in “Davvero «per mezzo mio regnano i re» [Pr 8:15]?” Biblical tradition can associate wise rule with divine wisdom, justice, protection of the needy, and the good of society. Qoheleth measures that association against political experience. The old and foolish king in Qoh 4:13–16, the short-lived popularity of the poor but wise young man, and the forgotten deed of the poor wise man in Qoh 9:13–16 all point to a fracture between wisdom and power. Wisdom may save a city and still have little social effect when it is linked to poverty and insignificance. Power, for its part, loses sapiential legitimacy when the ruler refuses counsel, justice, and service to the community. Piotti handles this material with attention to its irony. Possessing power does not guarantee wisdom. Wisdom does not guarantee influence, remembrance, or lasting esteem.

“Davvero i re detestano fare il male [Pr 16:12]?” continues the political line, now with royal morality in view. Proverbs presents the king as one who protects the poor, hates wickedness, receives counsel, and establishes his throne through righteousness. Qoheleth sees a different royal world “under the sun.” Wisdom does not reliably guide government. Power is fragile and unpredictable. Bureaucracy can become an instrument of oppression, economic exploitation, and fear. The critique is experiential. Against the ideal king of Proverbs stands a political reality shaped by interest, the self-preservation of power, and the vulnerability of the weak. Piotti places this critique against the background of Hellenistic rule, especially the Ptolemaic systems of taxation and administration in Palestine. Prov 16:12 is read from the ground level of political life.

“L’ordine sociale riflette quello cosmico?” follows the social consequences of these political readings. Traditional wisdom can imagine a world in which the divine order of creation is mirrored in social life: just government, protection of

the poor, respect for law, and communal peace. Qoheleth sees oppression, envy, rivalry, corruption, bureaucratic exploitation, and fear. Qoh 4:1–3 places the tears of the oppressed before the reader. Qoh 5:7–8 exposes distorted justice within administration. Qoh 8:1–9 and 10:16–20 portray a world of power in which the subject is vulnerable, speech is dangerous, denunciation may be ordinary, and wisdom has limited practical force. Social order, in this reading, has failed to reflect the order of creation. Piotti gives the claim historical weight by setting it against Hellenistic, especially Ptolemaic, systems of taxation, administration, and economic control. In such a setting peasants, the poor, and the socially weak could easily become victims of local and imperial mechanisms of power.

“Come afferrare il dono divino della gioia?” turns back to human action and joy after the darker social chapters. Work “under the sun” remains ambiguous. It can mean toil, futile effort, disappointment, and rivalry. It can also open a space in which the fruits of labour are received as God’s gift. Qoheleth’s account of failure does not end in passivity. Wealth may be lost. Another may inherit the results of one’s labour. Rivalry may damage relationships. Laziness can become self-destructive. Unforeseen events can undo plans at any moment. Still, the text calls for action: work, sow, take risks, and seize the brief occasions when joy is given in labour’s fruit. Piotti’s reading is strongest when it keeps joy from becoming either a reward for achievement or the automatic result of success. It remains fragile and unpredictable. The comparison with the parable of the talents in Matthew’s Gospel supports the same point: gift calls for use and risk. Qoheleth’s theology of joy is worked out from fragility, not from ease.

The concluding reflections place the argument in a broader historical and hermeneutical frame. Piotti relates Qoheleth to the socio-political experience of Judea under Hellenistic rule, more specifically under the Ptolemies. The implied world is hierarchical, tax-based, economically oppressive, and bureaucratically controlled. Greek philosophical influence is treated cautiously. Qoheleth appears instead as an author deeply acquainted with Israel’s wisdom and religious tradition, yet willing to reread that tradition from the standpoint of experience. Piotti gathers the main results around five areas: the critique of inherited religious language, the questioning of anthropocentric readings of creation, the demythologizing of royal power, the disintegration of social order, and the ambivalence of work and human action. Qoheleth stands within Israel’s faith. Its customary formulas are tested against injustice, abuses of power, social vulnerability, shared mortality, and the fragile results of labour.

Piotti's work deserves attention as a scholarly monograph and as an exercise in close reading. It is especially suitable for theological and humanities libraries, as well as for university and departmental collections, where it can support the study of Qoheleth, biblical wisdom literature, and Old Testament hermeneutics. It may also serve readers pursuing self-directed study. Where the book is not locally available, it is worth seeking through interlibrary loan or, where possible, acquiring as a personal copy.

Beyond its scholarly utility, the book offers a reading of Qoheleth that speaks to the tensions between faith, doubt, experience, and institutional religious discourse. Near the end of the volume, Piotti formulates the contemporary relevance of Ecclesiastes in especially direct terms:

“Qoheleth's word therefore undoubtedly proves to be an outstretched hand to those who, even in our own day, whether mature believers or doubting seekers, may find themselves in serious difficulty when faced with the monotonous and uncritical repetition of theological and dogmatic assertions lacking biblical grounding and expressed in forms and language now obsolete and alien to modern sensibility, or when faced with the frequent divergence between principles proclaimed in theory and the practices actually implemented by those responsible for governing and guiding the ecclesial institution.” (p. 285; translation mine).

This is where Piotti's reading finally rests. Qoheleth remains an indispensable interlocutor because it presses faith toward a form of speech that is more honest, more credible, and more attentive to experience.

**„TEKINTS REÁNK, TEKINTS, SZABADSÁG” AZ 1848–49-ES
FORRADALOM ÉS SZABADSÁGHARC 175. ÉVFORDULÓJA
ALKALMÁBÓL TARTOTT MAROSVÁSÁRHELYI NEMZETKÖZI
TUDOMÁNYOS KONFERENCIÁK TANULMÁNYKÖTETE
[„LOOK UPON US, LOOK, FREEDOM” CONFERENCE VOLUME
OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCES HELD
IN TÂRGU MUREŞ ON THE 175TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE 1848–49 REVOLUTION AND WAR OF INDEPENDENCE] ED.
ZSOLT-JÓZSEF TAMÁSI. TÂRGU MUREŞ,
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REVIEWED BY LORÁND NAGY¹

The memory of the 1848–1849 Revolution and War of Independence remain one of the most intensively researched fields in Hungarian and Transylvanian historiography. Among the commemorative volumes published on the 175th anniversary, however, the book entitled “Tekints reánk, tekints, szabadság”, edited by Zsolt-József Tamási, clearly stands out. The publication contains the edited proceedings of two international academic conferences held in Târgu Mureş. The volume brings together sixteen studies by ten authors, including the editor himself, who contributed two independent papers in addition to the foreword. Although the studies are presented sequentially in the book, from a reviewer’s perspective it is particularly instructive to examine the material by grouping it into three distinct thematic categories. This analytical framework effectively follows the internal logic of the volume, guiding the reader from microhistorical military events through ecclesiastical dimensions and individual destinies to the complex questions of collective memory. The studies are methodologically sound and written in a clear, readable style that avoids unnecessarily dense academic jargon. As a result, the volume is accessible and engaging both for professional historians and for a broader readership.

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The first thematic category identified in this review focuses on military events, national defense, and the organization of local units. Dezső Garda offers a detailed analysis of the 1849 War of Independence in the Gyergyó region, highlighting the reorganization of the Honvéd army and the National Guard under the leadership of Sándor Gál. He outlines the successful containment of counter-revolutionary forces arriving from the directions of Reghin (Szászrégen) and Toplița (Maroshévíz), as well as the heroic battles fought against the Tsarist intervention troops. One of the major source-based contributions of Garda's study is the publication of a nominal list containing the names of 221 deceased local freedom fighters. Gyula Nemes draws on extensive village-history research to demonstrate the intense participation of the population of Marosszék in the revolutionary turmoil, paying particular attention to local institutional leaders and political commissioners such as József Magyarósi Szőke and Baron Károly Apor. Sándor Pál-Antal contributes two studies to this section. The first analyses the administrative and military measures taken by István Dobozy as government commissioner for Marosszék and Târgu Mureș in the spring of 1849, while the second provides a much-needed overview of the military career and tragic execution of András Tamás, a Honvéd lieutenant colonel and martyr of Csík, enriching the local history of post-war reprisals with valuable data. Attila Süli's comprehensive study concludes this military section. Based on original archival research, it reconstructs military organization in Marosszék and Târgu Mureș and details the logistical and armament difficulties faced by the local national guards, the 12th Honvéd Battalion, the Kossuth and Mátyás Hussars, and various rifle units up to the Russian occupation of 1849.

The second—and perhaps most nuanced—analytical category consists of the papers examining the role of the churches, contemporary sermons, and pastoral careers. Jenő Imreh's first study analyses a festive Sunday sermon delivered on 26 March 1848 by Lajos Medgyes, a Reformed pastor from Dej (Dés), exploring how revolutionary ideology was reflected in pastoral rhetoric. In his second paper, Imreh analyses the synodal minutes compiled in November 1849 by Sámuel Z. Bodola, offering a precise and striking account of the immense human and material losses suffered by the Transylvanian Reformed Church. The situation of the Franciscans within the Mureș Deanery is also thoroughly explored in a study focusing on the monasteries of Târgu Mureș and Călugăreni (Mikháza). This paper discusses the circular letters of Provincial Minister Márton József Keresztes and the capture of Târgu Mureș, while also highlighting the distinctive figure of Rafael Pál András, the guardian of Târgu Mureș, who served as the only Transylvanian-born army

chaplain in the Hungarian army. The study concludes by examining the post-revolutionary reprisals that affected the friars. Zsolt Tamási contributes two papers to this ecclesiastical section. His first study compares the Roman Catholic diocesan initiatives of 1822 and 1848 concerning the situation of monks, shedding light on the enduring decentralizing effects of Josephinism. His second paper analyses the complex legal and political relations between the Hungarian revolutionary government and the Catholic rites in Transylvania—Roman, Armenian, and Greek Catholic—explaining the historical factors that eventually pushed Romanian Greek Catholic believers into the opposing camp. This section is completed by two papers by Péter Zakar. The first introduces Sándor Bíró, the Reformed pastor of Réty, who supported a radical political program, organized a national guard, and was later forced into hiding. The second analyses the radical, pro-republican speeches and Transylvanian agitation tours of the young Roman Catholic priest János Bardocz.

Finally, the third category brings together the studies dealing with the involvement of social groups, female narratives, and collective memory. Sándor Pál-Antal recalls the spring of 1848 in Târgu Mureş, focusing on intellectual youth—chancellery clerks and college students—and on the widening ideological rift between Hungarian and Romanian national ideas during the debates. Gréta Somogyi further deepens this local context through two highly insightful studies. The first examines the role of nearly 200 chancellery clerks and law interns attached to the Royal Court of Appeals, highlighting how their initial, shared multi-ethnic enthusiasm was gradually shattered by emerging ethnic conflicts, ultimately leading to civil war. Somogyi's second paper presents a fascinating female narrative through the memoirs of the writer Janka Horváth, sister of the martyr Károly Horváth. It reveals the deep family tragedy behind the Makk conspiracy of 1854, including house searches and harassment by the state authorities. As a fitting conclusion to the volume as a whole, Mihály Sebestyén analyses the political processes of collective memory, pointing out that, because of absolutist censorship, the earliest memoirs remained personally motivated and self-justifying, and that the official public commemoration of 1848 had to wait almost half a century, until the political rise of liberalism.

From a professional standpoint, this volume is unquestionably credible and has considerable source value, since the authors do not merely repeat well-known historiographical narratives. Instead, they successfully incorporate previously unpublished archival sources, synodal minutes, ecclesiastical schematism, and private memoirs, while maintaining an appropriate critical distance and a high degree of objectivity throughout. Although the volume offers exceptionally rich

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regional and thematic coverage, the inclusion of a comprehensive index of names or historical maps illustrating military movements would have further enhanced its practical usefulness, especially for international researchers. Nevertheless, this volume, edited by Zsolt-József Tamási, is a methodologically sound, multifaceted, and pioneering work. It demonstrates that it remains possible to say something fresh, original in perspective, and scholarly valuable about the events of 175 years ago. The book addresses a significant lacuna in historiography, serves as an indispensable source base for historians, university students, and local researchers, and fully deserves the attention of the international academic community.