CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF AN IN-BETWEEN SOCIETY. A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT. This article starts from the question of what it means to be the church in the world. It is argued that the church is called to engage the society in transformative ways. The article starts with a brief analysis of the Romanian situation A few subsequent proposals for ministry in the public square by evangelical communities are then offered. The thesis presented is that if evangelical churches in Romania are to fulfil their mission, they must be morally distinct from the "world", while actively engaging it –socially, politically, culturally, economically, morally, etc – to bring a fresh wind of transformation, there where there has been little or none whatsoever.

KEY WORDS: social involvement, mission, Church ministry, Christianity in Romania, Gospel and culture

Introduction

"God exists! God exists!" So chanted thousands of demonstrators in the central square of Timişoara during the Romanian anti-communist uprisal of December 1989. The euphoria of a nearing longed-for freedom was irresistible. People who had previously paid little attention, if any, to matters of faith, were joining in the choruses, prayers and refrains of hundreds of believers that somehow found the courage to openly oppose one of the most oppressive communist regimes Eastern Europe had known. As Marcel Măcelaru describes it, this was "a turning point, with deep missiological implications, in the history of the region (Măcelaru 2018: 305). The cries of the crowds soared, defying decades of communist atheistic ideology. In this respect, as Măcelaru says,

> ... there was reason for hope – hope that the oppressive context in which I had lived would, at last, end; hope that my country would become a society in which freedom and truth would prevail; and hope that the newly discovered religious liberty would trigger a resurgence of true Christian commitment, perhaps even a fully-fledged, revival. (Măcelaru 2018: 327)

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Indeed, the sentiments expressed by the words above must have been quite strong among many evangelical believers during the early days of the free Romania. However, history, since then, has proven that the situation is much more complex and therefore complicated. The slow improvement of the social, economic, political make-up of Romania is accompanied by an equally slow moral betterment of the society. (Măcelaru 2016b: 35-53; cf. Măcelaru 2014: 169-174). Not only that the hoped-for Christian revival did not take place, but churches in the region continue to face a host of problems – structural, doctrinal, and moral (Măcelaru 2021b: 80-84; cf. Măcelaru 2020: 375-386). As Măcelaru (2018: 327-328) concludes, "the change of political regimes did not bring about changed mentalities." That is, the shape of Christian communities in Romania seems to parallel the dire situation of the Romanian society at large.

In the following pages I offer a brief analysis of the Romanian situation and argue that the time has come for Christian communities in the region to reimagine their vision role within the society. If there is any wisdom to be gained from the past three decades of "freedom" and "democracy", that would be a call to a search for a renewed approach to church-life, biblically founded and mission oriented. I will therefore ask what it means to be the church in the world, I will ponder on how the Romanian Christian communities can help their nation find a new moral center, and I will offer a few subsequent proposals for ministry in the public square by evangelical communities. My thesis is that if evangelical churches in Romania are to fulfill their mission, they must be morally distinct from the "world", while actively engaging it –socially, politically, culturally, economically, morally, etc. – to bring a fresh wind of transformation, there where there has been little or none whatsoever.

Residual Demons and a Nation in Transition – Lessons from History

The 1989-1990 collapse of Communism brought much jubilation to the nations of Eastern Europe. The "fire" of freedom and justice was rekindled in many hopeful hearts and the inauguration of "democracy" was seen as the doorway to achieving a more prosperous society. Those hopes were quickly doused, however, as the reality of what the transition toward a free-market economy really meant for the average citizen (Măcelaru 2021b). Many expected that the embrace of the free-market system would bring an immediate improvement to the day-by-day living. However, the move away from the "command economy" of communism to the "freedom" of the capitalist system, coupled with the change from a one-party political system to democracy has

proven to be more difficult than most were prepared to face; the decade of the 1990s stands as proof to that assessment (Vrcan 1997). For Romania, the path to democracy, civil rights, and financial sufficiency has been long and many things still need to change for the better.

Charles West (2002) shared an enlightening observation as he interpreted the transition occurring in former Communist countries in Eastern Europe through Jesus' parable of the unclean spirits found in Matthew 12:43-45. He argued that it was naïve for people to think that justice and freedom would come automatically; the simple negation (of Communism) did not bring liberation. Communism may be gone, but its evil spirits are still lingering. The promised freedom and prosperity of the anti-communist "revolution" can only come with a new vision of a just social order. Miroslav Volf takes the analogy further stating that if the house from which the demons have been cast out is left empty, worse demons will soon take their place Volf 1991: 78).

The double aspects of the analogy of the unclean spirits highlighted by West and Volf illuminate current problems in Romania in two ways. The demons still lingering are aspects of society and governance that are residual, or "left-overs," of old mentalities. Volf's metaphor of the encroaching "demons" is a warning against the oppressive candidates waiting to replace the vacancy left by the old power structures. Old and new "demons" are interrelated. They are a result of the challenges faced as the inherent weaknesses of the new system – capitalistic market economy and democracy – collide with the residual problems left by communism.

The parable of the unclean spirits gives a further clue to understanding the problems of transition – the vacant house. There void left by the departure of communism – philosophical, spiritual, moral, and economic – needed to be filled. Gerald Shenk (1990) picks up on this fact, noting that the communist "sacred canopy" has been torn out and thrown away. The communist system itself was based on the absolute character of the state and the supremacy of its own doctrine. To achieve this, all other philosophies and religions were suppressed, often directly persecuted, or at least partially marginalized (Măcelaru 2016b: 37-45). In Romania, the consequence of 50 years of such marginalization was, first, the incapacity of the church to counterbalance the secularization of culture, and that amid an apparent resurgence of the religious sentiment after the turn of the third millennium (Măcelaru 2014); and second, the incapacity of the society to fill the void left by the removal of communism as the unifying principle of the society. The result – the transition period that started with the fall of communism, continued after 1989 with a new batch of demons: cold-blooded economism, expressed as unbridled greed that destroys both people and environ-

ment; nationalistic totalitarianism, expressed as elevation of one ethno-religious national identity to the detriment of other identities; and political opportunism, expressed as the melding of national and personal interests leading to severe corruption. These aspects, and others such as these, have been, and still are, threats to the security and well-being of Romania.

Romania, Thirty Years Later

Problems confronting Romania nowadays are multitudinous, multifarious, and they seem to be multiplying daily. Therefore, to assume that one could neatly label, package, and correct them within the body of a paper would be ludicrous. However, since any such exercise must begin somewhere, I sketch below what I consider to be the situation in Romania after thirty years of "freedom."

I firstly argue that the main problem facing Romanian society nowadays is the lack of consistent moral standards, private and public, individual and institutional. The high levels of corruption, evident across the board, from the political arena to the simple life of individuals, is a symptom of a repulsive, morally and spiritually sick society. This is also proof that the religious and the social life in Romania are disconnected. It almost seems that the more people are religious, the worse the social situation becomes. There seems to be no concept in society that faith should have practical and social implications, or of what those implications could or should be. Professor Măcelaru (2021b) has explained this phenomenon by pointing out that communist pressure on Christian communities had the nefarious result of privatising faith and keeping Christian witness out of public affairs. The consequence is a sacred-secular divide within the individual believer and the believing community, whereby the moral standards applicable at home and within the church, are not observed in the same way in public and civic life.

Secondly, the lack of democratic consciousness represents another problem. Not only are Romanians still unprepared and unschooled in basic democratic principles, but they also lack the commonality, based on open dialogue, that makes true democracy possible. This becomes evident when considering the pervading model in our leadership structures, both political and ecclesial. It is precisely here, I argue, that authoritarianism, as a communist residue, becomes visible. This mentality continues to prevail among those in power and is characterized by a paternalistic "I-know-it-all-and-can-do-it-all-and-you-just-be-quiet" attitude. It functions because many within our communities are still acting out of fear and suspicion toward anything that may require a change of mentalities and procedures. As a dictatorial system, communism created dependent, docile persons. It seems that that mentality has remained unchanged.

Thirdly, passivity and hopelessness are further impediments to the development of healthy communities, Christian and otherwise, in today's Romania. The loss of employment and the meagre financial means of the first two decades of freedom produced a lot of anxiety and depression. The result was massive economic migration, most times of one parent, that led to the destruction of true family life.

The Gospel in Context

In the light of the above, how is the church to live up to her call? How is she to minister the Gospel of Jesus Christ within the context in a way that makes the Christian worldview available within the public square and therefore contributes to the transformation of the Romanian society? What is the way in which such a task is to be carried out? Richard Niebuhr (1951) pointed out five models of such interaction: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transformer of culture. However, while Niebuhr's taxonomy has been helpfully used for decades, the critique of Niebuhr's categories offered by Hauerwas and Willimon (1989: 30-48) shows that these are unconvincing and essentially unhelpful in the actual ethical task. The rigid way in which Niebuhr's categories have been interpreted, whether fair or not to Niebuhr's original intention, has resulted in the exclusion or marginalisation of differing ethical stances – usually stances that do not seem to be sufficiently "transformative." Furthermore, as Yoder points out, Niebuhr's definition of culture is incomprehensibly monolithic; so, to reject, or to accept, or to transform, culture means to reject, or to accept, or to transform, it all (Yoder 1996: 54). Ever since first uses, the concept of "culture" has been a much broader concept (cf. Page 2005: 35-37) than Niebuhr's models allow for. Niebuhr's narrow treatment of culture leaves little for the ethicist and church to work with.

In the light of the above, I argue that a new framework for Christian engagement in the society is needed, one that offers a more realistic view of culture and its complexities, while upholding a biblical view of human existence. Walter Wink's insight into the New Testament concept of "principalities and powers" (cf. Eph. 6:12; Col. 1:16-17, 2:15) is helpful at this point. He points out that these represent power structures which are both spiritual and cultural realities Wink 1992: 3). According to Paul, these are created by God through Christ (Col. 1:16-17) but have rebelled against God's reign (Col. 2:15). As such, they are both the "discerned spiritual center" of physical structures such as politics, economics, and cultural institutions, and the physical manifestation of spiritual realities (Wink 1992: 6). Seen in this light, reality is a unified and indivisible unit made up of the spiritual and the physical. Wink (1992: 10) concludes that, "the powers

are good" in so much as they are created and obedient to God's purposes and "the powers are fallen" in so much as they rebel against God's purposes; in such case the powers are to be redeemed.

It follows from the above that, as a part of a unified reality, culture can be seen as serving God's purposes (good), as rebelling against God (evil), and in need of redemption. As Yoder has put it, "everything we call culture is both in some way created and creative and positive, and in other ways rebellious and oppressive… we are called to exercise discernment" (Yoder 1996: 85). As the messenger of the gospel in the world, the church is therefore called to discern what is good and what is evil in culture, and from there to seek to appropriately offer the gospel to the society. In other words, "the Church needs to discover how to relate our church life most effectively to our cultural environment" (Kraft 1980: 211). Thus, it is the task of the Christian community to redeem "culture," that is, to redeem human societal structures. This is done through a process of engagement as the Christian recognizes God's good and creative activity in the world, exposes the lies of the rebellious powers, and responds to God's redeeming action (Stassen 1996: 218-220).

The Task Defined – Three Modes of Ministry
Responding to God's redeeming activity may take different forms. I propose that at least these include exemplifying God's purpose for the creation within the society, proclaiming God's good news to the society, and engaging redemptively the society.

For the church to redeem culture she must herself be transformed. In contrast to the surrounding society, Christians have a distinct identity. Volf (1994) labels Christian distinctiveness as "soft difference", noting that while Christians are "aliens and strangers" in the society because of their new birth into Christ (1 Pet. 2:11), they are also a part of the society. Although this distinction is not for the purpose of isolation, it is a prerequisite to the fulfilment of the calling to transform society. Thus, the church is the community that lives "an alternative way of life within the political, ethnic, religious, and cultural institutions of the larger society" (Volf 1994: 20).

Speaking of the above, Yoder affirms that "the church's responsibility to and for the world is first and always to be the church" (Yoder 1994: 61). The Church is to live as the redeemed people of God, embodying the judging and redeeming power of God in the world (West 1999: 111). In this way the Christian community transforms society by being faithful to its identity and obeying the commands of Jesus Christ, all of which is expressed in the form of a public witness to this new life. This, of course, without neglecting the fact that there is a natural dis-

tance between the larger society and the Christian community, without which the church loses her identity and calling.

The church acting as an example to the larger society enables a second form of mission in the world – proclamation. Leslie Newbigin defines the Gospel as

> the announcement that in the series of events that have their center in the life, ministry death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ something has happened that alters the total human situation and must therefore call into question every human culture. (Newbigin 1986: 3-4)

This good news in Jesus Christ is, as Paul noted, the promise of hope and salvation to those who believe (1 Cor. 1:18). Yet, to those who are rebellious it is judgement, for the Christ event has turned over the foundations upon which oppression and wickedness is built (1 Cor. 1:27-28). Thus, the Church as a witness of God's transforming power, proclaims both God's salvation and judgment to the world (West 1999: 124).

Furthermore, Christian proclamation is necessarily public proclamation. This means more than evangelistic rallies (cf. Măcelaru 2018) and more than the preaching of personal salvation (cf. Marshall 1980). When it comes to God's redemptive work, the division between the public and the private is a false dichotomy springing out of Enlightenment scepticism and materialism (Newbigin 1986: 15). Furthermore, equally false is the division between the sacred and the secular (Măcelaru 2021b). Such dichotomies relegate Jesus Christ to the world of private inner values and yields him irrelevant to public life. Salvation and transformation cannot and should not be separated, for the church is to proclaim Jesus as Lord over the entire reality, which includes the social, the economic, the political, the aesthetic, the cultural – it includes all aspects of human existence. As Măcelaru (2016a: 79-83; cf. Măcelaru 2009: 141-145) has argued, true proclamation invites all and everyone to receive, and become part of, God's story with and for the world.

It is true that, at times, Christians have understood their role in the world in narrow ways, fashioned according to escapist eschatologies and a misunderstood spirituality (Măcelaru 2021b). However, being an example and proclaiming the good news ought to be accompanied by active engagement in society. Such engagement takes on concrete forms, addresses concrete needs (e.g. Măcelaru and Măcelaru 2016), and it is guided by a holistic vision regarding the true value of human beings (cf. Măcelaru 2021a).

The Task Applied – Areas of Engagement

I have begun the present paper with a discussion of the Romanian situation, and I identified three aspects that pose problems to the health and well-being of the nation. Here I propose to conclude the discussion by considering some concrete ways in which the church in Romania can be a catalyst for transformation at the national level.

The first task of the church, I propose, is to live publicly and truly the virtues of honesty, responsibility, humility, and practiced love. This is vital, for if authentic change is to be experienced within the society a drastic change of mentality at the national level must first take place. Such change would begin with the admission of past failures and the commitment for a better future. Christian communities can and should seek to provide a model of justice and righteousness to the surrounding society.

Furthermore, the church is to raise its voice prophetically in opposition to injustice, corruption, and environmental degradation, wherever and in whatever forms they are found. These issues are but a few examples of how immorality in the form of greed and selfishness manifest themselves as structural evil. Such principalities and powers should be identified and unmasked. When the church speaks out against injustice, she acts publicly her love for the neighbour – it is but a public demonstration of Christ's loving sacrifice upon the cross (Volf 1991: 84). In a society fractured by betrayal, distrust, and hatred, the church must and can present a model of unity. As Kuzmič (1996: 74-75) pointed out, "only … a gospel … consistently lived, lovingly exemplified and powerfully demonstrated, will restore credibility to the message of Christ."

Finally, in the biblical vision, the church is, without a doubt, a community defined by hope. That being said, the question must be asked in what ways can the contemporary church bring hope amidst public realities? The sharp dichotomies between the public and the private, and between the sacred and the secular, noted above, have often led to an understanding of Christian hope in terms of a future deliverance from an unfriendly world. Undoubtedly, Christian hope *is* an eschatological hope, but it is never a passive one. It can never be the "just-waiting-for-heaven" attitude found among some of the evangelicals in the region. The Christian should not take on a passive, apathetic stance to the world, but should rather actively "witness towards the coming Kingdom of God" (Newbigin 1986: 134).

Conclusions

The Church is at the same time at home and a stranger in human culture. The rehearsal and repetition of the Gospel naturally leads to a tension between the church and the surrounding societal structures, values, and ideologies. Yet, the church is mistaken when it attempts to see this difference as a call to retreat or a battle cry to conquer and obliterate. It is instead a "soft difference" that should lead followers of Christ to engagement with the world for the purpose of transformation.

Transformation, however, easily remains an idea if not taking concrete forms of engagement with the society. This is where failure, frustration, and disillusionment loom in the background. Without active engagement for transformation we begin to wander when the promised kingdom will come. Losing hope, our liturgy turns to the exalted heavens and forgets the rejected others. To the disciples' impatient question concerning the coming of the Kingdom Jesus replied by sending them out into the world. I suppose he would respond to us the same.

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