

The Evangelical Wing of the Orthodox Church in Romania

ALAN SCARFE

At the end of the first world war, the Orthodox Church of Romania was faced with an unprecedented challenge to its hitherto unquestioned hold over the Christian believers. Several soldiers returned from the battlefield having discovered the message of the Gospel preached to them by Protestant Evangelicals of other allied countries. These men became the pioneers of a new vibrant brand of Christianity which, though it had been known in the Western world for many centuries, was as yet foreign to the traditionally conservative life of the Romanian Orthodox. Some Evangelicals remained outside the national Church and formed the nucleus of the Baptist or Pentecostal Churches, which began to penetrate the town and were spread by travelling evangelists to the villages. Others, however, attempted to stay within the fold of the "mother Orthodox" Church and endeavoured to bring fresh life and relevancy to their fellow brethren within that denomination.

Two movements of considerable significance in this respect and which in one form or another still exist today, were those which grew up around the priests, Tudor Popescu of Bucharest in the 1920s and Josif Trifa a decade later. The originator of the first of these movements was not Popescu but a young deacon of the Orthodox Church called Dumitriu Cornilescu. He was encouraged by a noble lady of Moldava, Princess Calimachi, to translate the Bible into contemporary Romanian. She had seen similar editions in other languages whilst in Switzerland and considered Cornilescu equipped for the task. At the time, he considered himself a devout believer, but, during his work of translation, grew hungry for a personal faith. Like Wycliffe, Luther and Wesley before him, it was the study of St. Paul's letter to the Romans which enabled him to find the answer to his spiritual needs. Having completed his translation, he returned to Bucharest and was invited by Fr. Popescu to join him as deacon at St. Stephen's, known as Cuibul cu Barza, in Bucharest, which by some coincidence stands next to the present Baptist Seminary.

Popescu was himself converted to the evangelical faith and began to preach salvation by a personal faith in Christ. The appeal of his sermons attracted an increasing number of people to his church and soon others were being revived in their spirits and faith. The belief in Christ which

on the most part had meant dependency on the priestly hierarchy became a living experience for many of the congregation. Soon other "evangelical traits" were being manifested by the believers, as singing and more congregational participation became routine.

Nor were the happenings at Cuibul cu Barza restricted to that one church; there was a powerful influence elsewhere. A prayer and Bible study group would meet weekly in Popescu's house to which other prominent Orthodox laymen and priests would come. However, certain deviations from the absolute Orthodox rule were found objectionable by the Church authorities who felt unable to contain the movement within the bosom of Orthodoxy. Consequently, Popescu was dismissed from the priesthood on the grounds that he had become a Protestant deviator from Orthodoxy. A new denomination was then established elsewhere in the city. Unfortunately, the young church was not able to resist the tendency which often affects bodies without a long standing tradition: further splits occurred on issues of infant baptism and church organization.

For some time Popescu preached in the *Hebrew Mission* in Oltenia Street, Bucharest, which was led by the Rev. J. H. Adeney of the Anglican Church. After 1940 this mission was amalgamated with the Norwegian Mission to the Jews and often became the preaching house for a better known Romanian, Richard Wurmbrand.

Popescu called his new denomination "The Christians after the Scriptures". The breakaway group in its turn adopted the name "Christians". Their centre was mainly in Ploiesti, the oil town 40 miles north of Bucharest. The closest approximation to the two groups in Western Europe would be the open and closed Brethren. The confusion was increased by the presence of a third denomination called "The Christians after the Gospel". It came from the West through the efforts of a Brethren missionary from Switzerland, Bernei, who started house meetings throughout Romania in 1903-1904. Protesting priests got him expelled from the country only for Bernei to return in 1907 and find a house fellowship meeting on a regular basis in Bucharest. Two years later he was expelled yet again, but Peret, a colleague, was able to remain and work until 1944.

In 1928 "the Christians" united with the "Christians after the Scriptures" realizing that no other way for full recognition by the State authorities lay open to them. After the communist takeover in 1944, these various movements were amalgamated under the name "Christians after the Gospel" (Crestini dupa Evanghelie). Today they represent the Brethren Movement in Romania, though it must be remembered that only one third of the denomination actually originated from the

Western Brethren Mission. Today they are said to have 120,000 members.

Popescu's movement was unable to continue having any direct influence on the Orthodox body once it established itself as a separate group. Another such revival began, however, ten years later in the north of Romania. This group was known as The Lord's Army and consisted of Orthodox believers who wanted to maintain the spirit of Orthodoxy, while at the same time creating a more personal faith among the believers. The initiator was a gifted priest by the name of Josif Trifa, and at the outset the movement received the blessing of the Church authorities, especially that of the Metropolitan Nicolae Balan of Ardeal, one of the most outstanding prelates of the modern Romanian Church. Inspired by the so-called Oxford Group, Trifa was at first concerned to improve the morality of the faithful in the Sibiu area of Ardeal, but later his emphasis moved on to the importance of the new birth in Christ as a personal experience for every Christian. Again the appeal of his message was considerable. Hymn singing and preaching by both lay and ordained persons were a regular feature of his services. Eventually the Church body attempted to control the movement within the existing ecclesiastical structure, making the entire "Army" the direct responsibility of the Metropolitan. Trifa feared that such a development would only impede the work of involving the laity in the Church. The consequent quarrel led to the defrocking of Trifa who remained unrecognized by the Orthodox authorities until his death in 1938. He was not even allowed to be buried in his priestly robes as was the custom.

His movement, however, never lost either its initial impetus and objective or its united allegiance to the Orthodox Church, despite the refusal of the latter to accept it as genuinely Orthodox. According to Orthodox sources, the movement was an attempt to counter the growth of the evangelical churches and to produce an "evangelical" Orthodoxy which got out of hand and which, once separated from the mother Church, quickly dwindled in numbers until it reached extinction around the mid-50s. In reality, the "extinction" of the mid-50s was promoted by the State through force, when many members were imprisoned alongside "regular" Orthodox as well as Protestant Christians. Today there is evidence that the numbers of The Lord's Army are actually increasing despite the anti-religious campaign.

Ever since 1947, The Lord's Army has asked to be recognized as part of the dominant Orthodox Church, or at least as an independent denomination in its own right. Both attempts have been unsuccessful, no recognition having been granted by the Church or the State. Consequently, these believers have suffered further harassment – imprisonment of their

leaders and fining of the faithful who, often due to the lack of official recognition, are obliged to meet privately in homes, thus running the risk of being considered conspiratorial groups by the State Police.

There was a time when The Lord's Army made requests for acceptance, but in its view that day is now over : it is to some extent resigned to its situation but nevertheless sees the blessing of God with it in its struggle. These Christians really do not want any other name than that of "Orthodox", for they still feel that they should exist as a reviving force *within* the national Church.

Fr. Popescu and his Flock

The following article describing Fr. Tudor Popescu preaching and serving in his church, was published in the Romanian magazine Tara Noastra No. 2, 13 January 1924. Written by Octavian Goga, it is entitled "The Storm at the Stork's Nest".

Two years ago, while still Minister of Cults, I remember my attention being drawn in passing to an interesting phenomenon which had appeared in a church in a lesser known area of Bucharest. I was told that in the suburban church of "Cuibul cu Barza" (The Stork's Nest) a silver-tongued priest was gathering together an ever increasing number of people concerned with religious problems. Such a novelty in this noisy whirlpool of a city seemed to me quite extraordinary, and it set me thinking. The following Sunday, unannounced, as a simple believer, not a Minister, I went to the church and entered it for the first time. From the start I was amazed to find the holy place overflowing with people who were a strange mixture of all classes of society. With difficulty I pushed my way through the crowd to take a place at the corner of the lectern on the right hand side of the iconostasis, from where I could observe the pious assembly. We were at the end of the liturgy and the priest was giving the blessing from the door of the altar. He was a devout figure, 40 years old, tall and thin with a dark beard and shining eyes. He read the service slowly, emphasizing every word and interpreting their meaning in a civilized manner. He did not speak mechanically nor was there any hint of that nasal accent so customary to the Orthodox.

A perfect silence enfolded us and in the light of the beeswax candles, through the smoke from the incense, I could study faces ecstatic with faith. I had stumbled across an aspect of life which was very peculiar, yet full of meaning. I do not know whether one would find elsewhere in Bucharest a man in a sheep-skin so caught up in religious mysticism as the man in front of me, nor in all the churches in our land would I ever meet cheeks so flushed by the divine Word as those of the women only three feet away from me. After he had finished the liturgy, the priest began to preach. If I remember correctly he started with the parable from the Gospel which he had read, and basing his sermon upon it he outlined the principles of Christian morality. It was not a sermon of minutely detailed exegesis, not one of refurbished, well-worn clichés of theological doctrine. From the vicinity of the altar, a bold orator was speaking with the

tone of a militant cleric, arousing questions and passions in his listeners with his round and sonorous phrases.

The priest was caught up in the magic of the Word. He quivered in his whole being, screwing up his pale, ascetic forehead, his face so animated, and from the depth of his eyes two specks of strange light appeared, reminding me of the paintings of Ribera. The multitude was devoutly involved in all his analytical points. They followed his logic and accepted the argument with lively agitation. Ending the rhetorical assault in which he had pointed out the instincts of evil and harshly judged the inadequacies of our society, the servant of the Lord withdrew and a young man from the rows of mesmerized people began to hand out small booklets which contained the outline of the subject of the last six sermons. Conversing in whispers the faithful filed out of the church, taking the leaflets as they went. Gradually I separated myself from the crowd, very aware that there, far from the daily dross, I had somehow revisited for an instant my soul wounded from the reproach and tender to touch like a sick mimosa plant.

Since that occasion I have not seen Fr. Popescu but I have remembered him with respect and appreciation.

Today I see him in a new role: the case of his reverence is being discussed in the press. The newspapers say of the reverend Father that a peculiar evolution of thought must have made him depart from the true dogma of the Eastern Church and that in his recent sermons and especially in certain ill-counselled changes of the Orthodox ritual, he has gone beyond the consecrated limits of the Church statutes and its Canon Law. Fr. Tudor, then, is being displayed as a rebel against Church order and as a reformer who has abandoned the duties of his station. A few days ago the Council examined the matter and it seems that the Holy Synod will soon have to pronounce a verdict, weighing up the blunt claims of dogma and applying in all its severity the bi-millennial authority of the Canons. Yet in the light of this decision we will be able to investigate an interesting case of conscience, the wanderings of a soul through the dark depths of religious doctrine. The trial will be instructive whatever the outcome, because it will draw us close to the psychology of a distinguished man whose moral concerns attract us all alike.

What justifies this additional layman's comment on the problem is that the "rebellion" of Fr. Tudor is not being presented as a simple individual act; it has been made more complicated by a mass revolt of the parishioners who are standing by their spiritual pastor and expressing their opinion. The same multitude which I saw two years ago on that winter Sunday enraptured by the fiery pulpit-preacher, is today forming a wall of protection around him. They are identifying with him, confessing their faith in the one who is being brought to answer by the Hierarchy. Indeed there is rebellion at Cuibul cu Barza: the faithful have refused a new priest, the doors of the place have been locked and it is said that the parishioners in their fervour are decided and ready to follow their priest, even if it means building a new church.

An extraordinary spiritual revolution is happening under our very eyes, here in the centre of Bucharest only a few paces from Calea Victoria, a street more walked upon by sin than by virtue, where the invasion of every kind of foreign trader has obliterated any impulse of Romanian traditionalism. In the midst of this furnace of profane passions, not far from the wild shouts of the tradesmen of every kind of ware, there exists a consciousness sensitive to the abstract realms, a flame which is kindled at the feet of Christ. (*Extract*)