

Recenzii / Book Reviews

Dorin Dobrinu and Dănuț Mănăstireanu, eds., *Omul evanghelic. O explorare a comunităților protestante românești*, Iași, Polirom, 2018.

The book under consideration is a brilliant, groundbreaking, and indispensable enterprise that—finally—puts Romanian Evangelicals on the broader scholarly map. Produced by a major publisher in a handsomely presented and carefully edited work, the book will be a standard reference for the foreseeable future. The editors are well known, thoughtful Evangelical scholars who have assembled a diverse and impressive team of peer-reviewed contributions from experts to explore the past, present, and future of Romanian Evangelicalism. Though space does not permit a thorough-going analysis of the riches of this volume, perhaps this essay will encourage others to buy, read, and utilize an important new work.

The analysis begins with a lengthy introduction by the co-editors (pp. 19-34), describing the genesis of the work, their take on the current status of the field, a discussion and clarification of the complex and sometimes confusing terminology connected with the study of evangelicals, an outline of the structure of the volume, and a synthesis of the contributions.¹ The project was initiated in 2006 under the auspices of the unfortunately no-longer extant Societatea Academică a Românilor Evanghelici. The editors have had to deal with the usual problems related to herding such a large group of collaborators involved in a project of such magnitude and scope, but on the whole have arrived at a highly commendable end product. They mention their hope that a 2nd edition will include treatment of neglected aspects, such as evangelism and missions, ecumenism, religious liberty, publications/mass media, and the role of women in the Evangelical community among other topics, but it would be churlish to complain of the missing elements in the presence of such riches.

¹ The present review has deliberately chosen not to draw on the editors' summary so that readers could peruse pp. 25-33 for another perspective in the contents of this book.

So who is “Omul evanghelic”? Briefly put, the editors emphatically reject the common usage of “sectarian neo-Protestant” in favor of “Evangelical” which they understand on historical, theological, and sociological grounds to mean Romanian Baptists, Brethren (*Creștini după Evanghelie*), and Pentecostals. Their reasons for this are clear and convincing.² The volume consists of four principal sections. And, unusually for a Romanian academic work, each piece concludes with a helpful and essential bibliography.

I. The first section, “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*,” begins with Dorin Dobrințu’s “Under the Power of Caesar: A Political History of Evangelicals in Romania (from the second half of the 19th century to 1989),” (pp. 37-243). This is a superb study of the century and a half of the Romanian Evangelical past up to 1989 based on a thorough examination of the published and unpublished primary and secondary sources (a surprising amount of important historical work on Evangelicals exists only in manuscript). Following a review of the materials, Dobrințu’s study is divided into three parts. The first deals with the origins of the three Evangelical communities in question: the Baptists, the Brethren, and the Pentecostals.³ This task is complicated by the fact that present-day Romania was not always a unity and prior to World War I fell into four distinct legal/political entities: the old Romanian Kingdom (the *Regat*), Hungarian Transylvania and related territories, Imperial Austrian Bucovina, and Tsarist Russian Basarabia. The second part deals with Evangelical groups during between 1918 and 1944, when their struggle for legal recognition under the new Romania was a primary issue, new places of worship were established, their institutions (publications, seminaries, and the like) were formed, and Evangelicals were the target of repression and violence (culminating with the abolition of Evangelical groups entirely in 1940). There are sections on Evangelicals in the World War II army, on plans to deport them, and on their fate in Soviet-occupied Bucovina and Basarabia (which became permanent after 1944), and Hungarian-occupied Northern Transylvania (which ceased at the end of the war). The author is also

² It is to be hoped that the use in English of the upper-case “Evangelical” for these three denominations will become customary.

³ There is also a short treatment of the so-called Tudoriști or Christians According to the Scripture movement which is not now considered part of Romanian Evangelicalism, though intertwined with them, and indeed fused with the Brethren for a period of time.

candid about the role of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the repression of Evangelicals. The third section deals with Evangelicals between 1944 and 1989, that is during the installation of the Communist regime, 1944-1947, and then under the Romanian People's Republic and Socialist Republic of Romania. This is the best documented part of Romanian Evangelical history, and Dobrinu is the master of the materials. The sad but uplifting story of Evangelicals during the development and evolution of the Communist legal framework, the policing role of the dreaded Securitate, regulatory role of the Ministry of Religion, and the abuses of the regime (including the use of violence, the Romanian Gulag, and murder) as well as the resistance to Caesar (naming names) are clearly elucidated. Information about places of worship, institutions, and so forth that parallels his treatment of the 1918-1944 period is also included. Without a doubt, this micro-monograph provides an essential starting point for any future study of Romanian Evangelicals.

This is followed by Dănuț Mănăstireanu's analysis of "The Identity of Romanian Evangelicals: Origins, Today, and Perspectives for the Future," (pp. 244-296). The author sees Romanian Evangelicalism as rooted in three defining traditions: the radical (anabaptist) Reformation of the 16th century, Pietism of the 17th century, and 20th century American fundamentalism/ "new" evangelicalism. Present-day Romanian Evangelicalism is defined, according to Mănăstireanu, by David Bebbington's "quadrilateral": Bibliocentrism, Crucicentrism, Conversionism, and Evangelism/Missionarism. These are accompanied by a number of other characteristics: some positive, such as charity, priesthood of the believers, and stress on community (= *koinōnia*); and others not so positive, such as political conservatism, ahistoricism, anti-intellectualism, lack of toleration, and anti-ecumenicalism. He feels that Romanian Evangelicals are too influenced by culture rather than transforming culture, interested more in assimilation than in prophetic mission. The author also has reservations about Evangelical hermeneutics, which he thinks verge on docetism and is too much a product of modernity and individualism. He would also like to see an Evangelical dialogue on ecclesiology, since as Evangelicals have proliferated and fragmented, the lack of historical perspective has become even more glaring, and their élan and spiritual reach seem to be diminishing. He concludes with

a call for a “transition” of Romanian Evangelicalism as part of the Romanian transition at large, though he seems to be a bit doubtful that this “project for the future” is feasible. In all of this, one senses a lover’s quarrel between the author and Romanian Evangelicalism as it has evolved since 1989.

II. The second section of the book deals with Romanian Evangelicalism and the Bible. Octavian D. Baban leads off with an excellent survey of “The Bible in the Life of Romanian Evangelicals: A Theological and Cultural Perspective,” (pp. 329-358). He covers the historical element and the centrality of the Bible (theologically and ethically), providing the Romanian context along with comparing and contrasting Romanian Evangelicals with Eastern Orthodox tradition and practice. He also deals with how the Bible is communicated by Romanian Evangelicals (translation issues), in Bible study, and in preaching. The author notes that their appreciation and application of the Bible has had a decidedly “practical” focus combined with a skepticism about theology as a discipline in particular and higher education in general.

The second contribution to this section, by Emanuel Conțac, is an in-depth historical treatment of Romanian Evangelicals and Bible translation (pp. 359-384). The author is deeply and expertly versed in the history of the Cornilescu Bible, which became the more or less authorized version of Romanian Evangelicals. He reviews Romanian Evangelical exposure to modern Bible translations from those spread by 19th century British colporteurs through the three (1921, 1924, 1931) Cornilescu versions. The study is a model of its kind.


Radu Gheorghiuță is next with a study of Evangelical hermeneutics (pp. 385-420). The analysis tackles serially Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical perspectives, concluding each with a balanced critique. His secondary goal is to provide a basis and context for further inter-confessional dialogue, since in his view all three traditions take the Scriptures seriously. The author believes such dialogue will be profitable, since he finds a surprising similarity between the three in regard to the Bible. A brief epilogue compares recent “study Bible” editions which highlights these similarities.

“The Roots and Perspective of Romanian Evangelical Theology” (pp. 421-457) is the well-organized contribution of Eugen Matei. He surveys basic aspects of Romanian Baptist, Brethren, and Pentecostal theology and practice

with an emphasis on what distinguishes them. The purpose of this is to lay the ground for what the author sees as two imperatives for Romanian Evangelical theology today: 1) to pursue affirmation rather than a purely reactionary/anti-Orthodoxy stance vis à vis the dominant Romanian Orthodox Church; and 2) to focus on defining its mission in post-1989 Romanian society.

The final contribution to this section is Corneliu Constantineanu's "The Social Significance of Reconciliation in a Romanian Context: The Role of the Churches in the Public Arena," (pp 458-490), an apt follow-up to Matei's study. It is a reflection on how Pauline understandings of love and reconciliation might inform Romanian public space in inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, based on a comparative look at both Romanian Orthodox Church and Romanian Evangelical views. The author is touchingly hopeful about the future.

III. The third section deals with political and demographic aspects relating to Evangelicals and Evangelicalism in Romania. Sorin Gog and Claudiu Herteliu's valuable "The Socio-Demography of Evangelical Denominations in Romania—An Analysis of Religious Values and Practices," (pp. 493-531) is a careful review of the statistical context for Romanian Evangelicalism as far as this can be determined. The study begins with Romania generally and then moves on to an analysis of always tricky census data, the demography of Romanian evangelicalism, and survey of Romanian religious values and practices, all liberally illustrated with appropriate tables and charts.

This is followed by Nicolae Geantă's "Territorial Dynamic of Evangelical Churches in Romania," (pp. 532-572) which drills down further into the demography of Romanian Evangelicalism, beginning with an overview of the introduction and spread of Evangelicals (Baptists, Brethren, and Pentecostals) in Romania, and then how this evolved in the interwar period, under Communism, and after 1989. The picture which emerges—fleshed out with excellent maps and tables—is that Romanian Evangelicals are at present most vibrant in their traditional areas of concentration (Western and Northern Transylvania) as well as in a few new areas, such as Northern Moldova. Their fertility rate is about double that of Romania as a whole, with a relatively young median age  below the national average.

Even more specific is József Kovács's contribution: "Evangelicals Among the

Magyar Minority in Romania,” (pp. 573-601). This is a fascinating story of two minorities within a minority, of almost churches within a church, but not quite. These are the Hungarian Baptist Convention within the Romanian Baptist Union, and the Bethanist or Christian Endeavor Association within the Hungarian Reformed Church in Romania. He starts with a brief history of Hungarian Baptists in Transylvania from early years in the 19th century, to their partial amalgamation with the Romanian Baptists after 1918, through their abolition during the Communist era. Today they have more opportunities than they have had since 1914, organized into a kind of Hungarian section (community) of the Baptist Union (about 10% of the Baptists in Romania are Magyars) with their own seminary and language publications. The second group discussed, the Bethanists, are, strictly speaking, not Evangelicals. Whereas in North America, Christian Endeavor functions as an inter-denominational para-church organization, in Romania it is an independent reform/rebirth movement existing within the Hungarian Reformed Church in a very strained relationship.

Mihai Curelaru’s “A Psychological Analysis of Religious Conversion in the Evangelical Communities” (pp. 602-640) is primarily a theological and empirical study of the dynamics and attitudes of Evangelical Christianity toward religious conversion. (Surprisingly, the issue of proselytism is not confronted head-on.)

This is followed by Daniel Barbu’s contribution on “The Political Invisibility of Evangelicals” (pp. 641-656), which raises the question of why Romanian Evangelicals consistently punch beneath their weight when compared to other religious groups in Romania of similar size (or compared to those in other countries, such as France, for example). The explanation is complex, involving a Romanian political culture that reduces minority religious groups automatically to inferiority, weak accumulation by Evangelicals of what might be called cultural capital, the lack of a real middle class stratum in Romania, an establishment phobia concerning proselytism, a basically nationalist/statist cultural tradition, the lack of a Reformationist religious tradition, and low levels of education among Evangelicals who come from largely rural and working class backgrounds. His conclusion is that Evangelicals have two basic characteristics that are fundamentally “un-Romanian”: incompatibility with Romanian politi-

cal culture and, paradoxically, a religion of the Book in an illiterate, oral society that celebrates traditional ritual and themes. This study is loaded with the kind of provocative intuitions that Barbu's work is renowned for: following up on many of these would be a fertile research agenda for the future.

IV. The fourth and final section, entitled "The Challenge of Culture," consists of four specialized studies: "Architecture as an Instrument of Reformation: Evangelical Architecture in Contemporary Romania," by Augustin Ioan (pp. 659-675); Mircea Păduraru's "Characteristics of the Evangelical Literary Imagination" (pp. 676-704); "Music in the Minority Church Context: Socio-Cultural Functions, Identities, and Roles," by Marin Marian-Bălașa (pp. 705-719); and "The Basis of Evangelical Worship: The Romanian Evangelical Case," by Vilmos Kis-Juhász and Iulian Teodorescu (pp. 720-750). Their titles are reasonably indicative of their contents. Ioan finds that Evangelical church architecture is a mixture of traditional and modern styles. He believes that buildings with a frontal appearance similar to other churches in the area are the product of an implicit evangelism strategy to utilize the familiar. On the other hand, he sees a distinctive architecture as a deliberate attempt to avoid confusion with traditional or established Christian groups. However, the tradition of Evangelical churches in Romania is brief and not very distinguished. It remains to be seen how it will evolve. Păduraru notes that Evangelical fiction is also in its infancy. Thus far it has refrained from trying to "compete" with secular literature, is not involved in a dialogue with contemporary Romanian literature, and indeed "celebrates" its marginal status. Marian-Bălașa, an academic musicologist, has been long involved in interviews and the study of minority churches, and admits to being motivated by a sadness over the marginalization and repression of such churches as well as by the desire to provide scholarly study of the role of music in minority religious expression and how this both expresses and creates the identity of these groups. Kis-Juhász and Teodorescu present a concise survey of the role, effects, and importance of worship in Romanian Evangelicalism. This involves prayer, Bible reading and study, preaching, the sacraments, and especially music. They give attention to the Judeo-Christian heritage, Latin and Greek hymnography, the effects of the Reformation and German pietism, and the impact of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. This is followed by a discussion of Romanian

contributions to their worship as well as the development and characteristics of Evangelical hymnology from the 19th century to the present, including the evolution away from hymnbooks to the use of audiovisual texts.

The volume closes with Dorin Dobrinu's exhaustive bibliography on Romanian Evangelicals (pp. 751-774) and a name index (pp. 775-797). The bibliography is divided into sections on documents, official publications, diaries and memoirs, interviews, specialized studies, manuscripts, and polemical works. Such a bibliography is a rarity in its thoroughness and completeness of information.

All in all, this is a first-rate work that will richly repay both the casual and the scholarly reader, providing a substantial foundation for study of Romanian Evangelicals, and a solid basis for further analysis and meditation. "Omul Evangelic" should be pleased and proud. This book is a promising sign of the opening of the Evangelical mind in Romania.

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