

Politics, Property Restitution, and Ecumenism in the Romanian Orthodox Church*

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Abstract

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The author examines one of the most hotly contested and ecumenically difficult issues today, the state of the Greek Catholic Church (“Uniates”) in Romania and its relationship to the Romanian Orthodox Church, focusing in particular on the very difficult issue of property forcibly taken from the Romanian Greek Catholics in 1948 and given to the Romanian Orthodox. After providing a brief overview of Romanian secular and ecumenical-ecclesiastical politics, the author notes that the Greek Catholics have encountered a series of roadblocks in their attempts to have the question of property restitution addressed justly and fairly, and the author critically examines the role of the Romanian Orthodox in this situation,

* *Editor’s Note:* As always, the statements of fact or opinion made by contributors to *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* belong to the contributor rather than the journal, its editors or publishers. The jury to whom the editors of *Logos* sent this article for evaluation came back divided: interestingly, a Catholic reviewer recommended publication only “with reluctance” while an Orthodox reviewer recommended publication as it stands. The Catholic reviewer, justly concerned about ecumenical sensitivities possibly being inflamed by this article – whose author, by the way, is neither Catholic nor Orthodox – recommended inviting a Romanian Orthodox theologian to write a rejoinder. The editors made several requests of several people to do just that, but without success to date. Aware as we are that the question of the Eastern Catholic Churches and their property claims is a highly inflammatory one, we therefore (again) invite interested scholars with dissenting views to write such a response and submit it for consideration for publication in a future issue of *Logos*.

arguing that much Orthodox conduct in this regard is at odds with Orthodox relationships with other religious bodies and at odds with its own theology. This examination provides a microscopic overview of two larger, still unsettled problems: that of negotiating a new Church-state relationship following the collapse of communism in 1989; and that of rebuilding Orthodox-Catholic relations, in Romania and elsewhere.



The Romanian Orthodox Church (Biserica Ortodoxă Română) is slowly disentangling itself from its status of subordinate agent of the state. As the state desacralizes and decentralizes, the Church is displaying a more pastoral and less corporate face to the world – except in the case of the Greek Catholic “Uniates” (as they are pejoratively known), many of whose properties, seized in 1948 and given to the Orthodox by the Communists, the Orthodox Church is fighting vigorously to retain, despite laws providing for restitution.

While its hierarchs and priests still preside at state ceremonies – from National Anthem Day at the presidential palace to elementary school openings in villages – the Romanian Orthodox Church has forbidden its priests to engage in any sort of politics, and has criticized the government for several recent initiatives. As the Church sheds millennia of habits born in Byzantium and formed under Muslim, autocratic, and totalitarian rule, it is beginning to increase lay participation in the liturgy and in administrative matters, and to discuss theology openly with other Christians, whose Christian nature the Romanian Orthodox Church publicly affirms.

The adjustment to a new, more horizontal and secular polity conflicts sharply with the Church’s hierarchical organization and its claims to ultimate Christian truths. What looks to some like reasonable adjustment to a new state of affairs smacks of treason to others. A long tradition of obedience to the state has lately proven difficult to maintain when the state, under pressure from the European Union and from American demands for civil and religious rights, changes laws in ways the Church considers harmful to its members, such as legalizing homosexuality, recognizing the Jehovah’s Witnesses as a licensed denomination, or ordering the restoration of properties