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From the Ivory Tower to the Grass Roots: Ending Orthodox Oppression of Evangelicals, and Beginning Grassroots Fellowship

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Abstract: When considering the relationship between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Evangelical Church, can we both celebrate progress towards unity, while acknowledging where growth must still occur? Dr. George Hancock-Stefan, who fled the oppressive communist regime of Yugoslavia with the rest of his Baptist family, now frequently returns to Eastern Europe to explore topics of modern theology. During these travels, he has recognized a concerning trend: the religious unity and interfaith fellowship celebrated in Western academia does not reach the Eastern European local level. This is primarily due to the fact that Orthodoxy is a top to bottom institution, and nothing happens at the local level unless approved by the top. This lack of religious unity and cooperation at the local level is also due to the fact that the Eastern Orthodox Church claims a national Christian monopoly and the presence of Evangelicals is considered an invasion. In this article, Dr. Hancock-Stefan unpacks the history of the spiritual revivals that took place in various Eastern Orthodox Churches in the 19th–20th centuries, as well as the policies established by the national patriarchs after the fall of communism that are now jeopardizing the relationship between Orthodox and Evangelicals. By addressing this friction with candor and Christian love, this article pleads for the Orthodox Church to relinquish its monopoly and hopes that both Orthodox and Evangelicals will start considering each other to be brothers and sisters in Christ.

Keywords: Romania; Orthodoxy; interfaith; Evangelicalism; Serbia; spiritual revivals; Protestantism; Neo-Protestantism; Department of Religion

1. Introduction

In 2010, Reverend Dr. Eddie Glaude shocked African American churches by writing an essay entitled, “The Black Church Is Dead.” In the article, Glaude articulates three reasons for making his inflammatory statement:

- (1) First, black churches have always been complicated spaces.
- (2) Second, African American communities are much more differentiated.
- (3) Thirdly, and this is the most important point, we have witnessed *the routinization of black prophetic witness*.

As to be expected, hundreds of people responded by evaluating, critiquing, and criticizing the article (Fluker 2016). Although—or perhaps because—his points were debated so vehemently, Glaude’s article served as a clarion call for the Black Church. By speaking candidly about what was and was not working, the Church was able to clearly identify what work needed to be done for the Black Church to grow stronger as a community.

Similarly, in the hope that a candid critique can lead to growth, this article will make a statement that may also lead to visceral reactions in its readers: the Eastern Orthodox Church has become an oppressive church. The ecumenical gatherings held among theologians do not eliminate the oppression that occurs at the ground level.¹ (Jemna and Mănăstireanu 2021).

This research will start on a broad level, considering the spiritual revivals that have taken place in countries where the majority of residents are Orthodox. The study will be limited to Serbia and Romania, with few references to Russia, Bulgaria, and Greece. The author is aware that there are followers of Orthodoxy in many other nations (Namee 2020). According to Matthew Namee (2020) article, ten countries make up 89% of all the Orthodox believers, including Russia, Ukraine, Romania, and Greece, among others.

This article will be focused primarily on the local level in a small region of Serbia, called Banat (within Vojvodina). This area is populated by Serbs, Romanians, and Hungarians. It is an area of 10,465 mi² with a population of 979,119 as of 2017. More broadly, this article will look at the various spiritual revivals that have taken place and challenged the Orthodox Church. Secondly, this article will look at how the Orthodox Church reasserted itself after the fall of communism, when it became oppressive. Next we will look to the position of the Romanian Orthodox Churches as the ethnic defenders and the shapers of nationalism that affect art, music, literature, and village habits. Lastly, we will consider the historical presence of the Protestant churches and how the Romanian Orthodox Churches have responded by persecuting the Orthodox that left their village church to join these local Protestant churches. The emphasis of this research will be on the empirical evidence found in books, academic journals, and scholarly articles. This research will be further shaped by the personal experiences of the author who lives in the Orthodox-Evangelical context.

This article will review how the Eastern Orthodox Church at large (the “EOC” to save time and space; the Romanian Orthodox Church will be the “ROC”; and the Serbian Orthodox Church will be “SOC”) has demonstrated its unwillingness to share space or resources with other religious groups. Furthermore, the EOC refuses to allow other denominations to evangelize and has manipulated and monopolized both the media and the political system to assert its complete control.

Going back to the initial claim that the Orthodox Church has become oppressive, the author chose the term “oppressive” with fear and trepidation because he greatly admires and loves the Eastern Orthodox Church. However, many other scholars have referred to the EOC in similarly critical terms. Thus, this article is not the first indication that there are many religious scholars and clergy who are concerned with the absence of equal religious liberty for all believers that is notable within Eastern Orthodox nations (Guglielmi 2018, 2021).

Even Baptist historian Bill Leonard refers to the oppression of the Orthodox Church in his book, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Leonard 2003).

The EOC claims that there is no need for evangelism where it is the national church, because every Orthodox is already a Christian. Nevertheless, the Eastern Orthodox Church herself evangelizes internationally in what can be called Protestant and Catholic countries, such as Italy, France, and the United States. The EOC has become so far-reaching that in 2020, Giordan published a book entitled *Global Eastern Orthodoxy* where the Church’s religion, politics and human rights are studied from an international viewpoint (Giordan and Zrinscak 2020). The highly revered Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of Oxford also talks about the growing pains that the EOC experiences as it moves out of its ethnic moorings (Ware 1963, 2018). It is interesting that the EOC prevents other denominations from evangelizing but expects to receive the same religious liberties that she is not willing to give in her own countries. This perspective is unfortunately not de novo, as the 19th-century Roman Catholic church also had similar practices, claiming that “error has no rights.”

The term “oppressive” has also been used to describe the Orthodox Church in a different context. Upon wondering why Russia cannot open itself to more democratic principles, the Dutch economist James Peron suggested that the Russian church is composed of two different but equally oppressive strands—Russian and Byzantine.

When pagan Russia entered the society of Christian civilization, the missionary task was accomplished by monks and priests of Eastern Orthodoxy. Absolutist traditions of government were transmitted by the new society at the same time. The Russian state

which began to be reformed in the interregnum of the Tartar invasion, grew from the fusion of two tyrannical traditions of government—Orthodox absolutism and Tartar despotism (Peron 2000). This inherited authoritarianism has been on display in the politics of Putin and the discipline given by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in his dealings with priests and Ukraine’s attempts to seek a patriarchate (Higgins 2007; Mrachek 2019).

Going back to Glaude, although he is not accusing the Black Church of being oppressive, taking the main three points from his article and applying them to the Eastern Orthodox Church leads to some thought-provoking similarities:

The authors agree that the EOC has a highly nuanced and complicated history. Generalities are created by historians so that we can teach a subject, but nuances and complexities supply beauty.

The ethnic communities that make up Eastern Orthodox Christianity are highly differentiated. This leads to great diversified ethnic beauty, by which I mean the ways that worship is uniquely shaped by various ethnic groups’ music, art, cultural wisdom, et cetera. From the angelic beauty that the ambassadors of Emperor Vladimir have heard in the churches of Byzantium, to the beauty of the icons, to the wisdom of *The Philokalia* and the theology of the Holy Trinity written across the millennia, this cultural richness is to be treasured by all Christians.

Probably no one has assessed the third point regarding routinization and witness better than the well-known church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan when he wrote: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose, I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition a bad name” (Pelikan 1984). The Orthodox Church, by placing a greater emphasis on the past, has less to contribute to the vitality of the present. This focus on the importance of the past creates a powerful sense of nationalism as the Eastern Orthodox Church takes great pride in what it has overcome and tells any new groups that because they lack this historical connection, they cannot be considered part of the present. It is this historical, nationalistic approach that has become oppressive to anyone who comes into the national space (Djuvara 2012).

The asserted dominance of the Eastern Orthodox Church is expressed in many fashions. At the highest level, one can see that Moscow calls itself the Third Rome and claims to be the only one that is free (the first Rome is heretical, the second Rome, i.e., Constantinople, is under Islamic subjugation, especially since this past summer when Hagia Sophia became a mosque).

The dominance and intentional separation of Moscow was also visible when, after 60 years of planning for the Pan-Orthodox Meeting in Crete, the Russian Patriarch decided not to go. It is true that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church seeking independence from the Patriarchate of Moscow and the granting of that request by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew from Constantinople was a complicated issue. However, the absence of the Patriarch from the meeting showed a disregard for the immense amount of planning required for the event, as well as a lack of respect for the contributions of others. Likewise, when it comes to the concept of nationalism, the Romanian Cathedral that was dedicated in Bucharest is called The Salvation of the Nation.² This dedication was done despite major protests by Catholics, Protestants and Neo-Protestants.³

2. A Note on the Author’s Personal History

Before continuing with an analysis of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the reader must understand the personal history of the author, as it sheds some light on why this subject is of such great interest. For the sake of clarity, this requires the sparing use of personal pronouns. For my entire life I have been actively involved in both the Romanian Eastern Orthodox Church and the Romanian Baptist Church. I was baptized in the Romanian Orthodox Church as an infant and was then baptized in the First Romanian Baptist Church in Detroit when I was 16. In our family we have cantors in the Romanian Orthodox Church, priests in the Orthodox Church, and Pastors in the Baptist and Nazarene Churches.⁴ I have taken my children to worship in the Orthodox Church and I have sent hundreds of

my seminary students to do the same. Among my friends I am known as an evangelical ecumenist because the unity of Christ's Church is of paramount importance to me. I have written books and articles with my Orthodox brothers, and I have participated in seminars and colloquia.

Given this involvement, I do not mean that the only thing the Eastern Orthodox Church does is oppress people. Collectively with other evangelical church historians and theologians, I identify with the beliefs and many of the accomplishments of the Orthodox Church around the world. I agree in theory and practice with the first six of the seven ecumenical councils. I highly appreciate the presentation of the Word of the God so that nations that did not know the Gospel became Christians. I also agree that one of the bulwarks against the vicissitudes of the Ottoman Empire both inside the countries and on the battlefields have been the nations where the Orthodox Church was the religious leader. I also have a deep appreciation for those who have kept the Christian faith during the Communist regimes. The rise and fall of various religious and political revivals and regimes will be at the epicenter of the following section.

3. Revivals in Orthodox Churches—The Time of the Holy Spirit's Visitation

A spiritual revival is an occasion where God brings a sense of renewal or criticism to the existing church community or specific members of that church community. Those members then respond by inspiring correction within the church or by being pushed out by the majority who do not want to adjust or change their ways. By reflecting on these historical revivals, starting with the visitation to the Israelites by Jesus Christ and continuing through various groups, such as monastic orders, conciliarists, and Waldensians in the Middle Ages, as well as the Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth century, and different Charismatic revivals in the twentieth century, I will highlight how the Eastern Orthodox Church has historically responded to spiritual revivals among her own people.⁵ ([The Orthodox Church in America 2013](#)).

The majority of those who have criticized the Church are frequently pushed out of the community. This historical background will further support the claim that the Eastern Orthodox Church does initially welcome and seek to align potential revivals with herself, but later attempts to change the focus of the revival if it does not align with the Church's teachings. Then, if the leaders of the revival do not comply with this alignment, they are oppressed, marginalized, and finally, excommunicated.

Based on historical research, I am of the opinion that churches settle in and then get atrophied until God sends the Holy Spirit to revive the church. When spiritual revivals happen, they have their excesses, but they also add new life to the existing church if they are not pushed to the periphery or declared heretical. Although the Eastern Orthodox Church is hesitant to embrace change, the EOC is historically very aware of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.⁶

Certain spiritual revivals are extremely well-known beyond denominational lines, such as the Pietistic Movement and the Methodist Revivals of Europe, the spiritual awakenings of the United States from 1720–1740, and 1780–1870, and the Pentecostal Revivals such as that of Azusa, California, the Charismatic Movement, and the Vineyard movement. The spiritual revivals that occurred within the Orthodox church are less known. Thus, church historians and revivalists are indebted to Aleksandra Djurić-Milovanović and Radmila Radic who in 2017 published their impressive book entitled *Orthodox Christian Renewal in Eastern Europe* as a part of a larger series entitled *Christianity and Renewal—Interdisciplinary Studies*. From this seminal study we can see that almost every ethnic group in the family of Eastern Orthodox Churches have been visited by the Holy Spirit in various ways. As can be expected, a large portion of the book analyzes the many movements of the Holy Spirit in Russia and Ukraine, followed by different movements of the Holy Spirit among the Serbs, Romanians, Bulgarians, and Greeks.

This article will focus on two of these movements: the Romanian Lord's Army movement and the Serbian God Worshipper Movement. While the Orthodox Church had an

opportunity to grow through revival in these instances, it instead chose to marginalize these movements and push out their proponents. The Orthodox Church responded similarly to other revivals but, for the sake of time, we will just explore the aforementioned two.

In Romania at the end of World War I there was a lot of excitement because what was long known as the desire of Romanians, the One Great Romania had been established. Now that all the Romanians were together in one country there was also time to assess the spiritual reality of this newly formed nation that was nationally Romanian Orthodox.

In this post-World War I period, there were three Romanian Orthodox priests who sought to deepen the spirituality in the ROC. All three of them were young, were assigned to churches after they completed their seminary training, and became remarkable at preaching the full Gospel, which they believed the entire ROC needed to hear. They did not want to leave the church—they wanted to see the church revived. These three priests were Dumitru Cornilescu (1891–1975), also known as the translator of the Bible in modern Romanian; Tudor Popescu (1882–1963), also known as the preacher of the new life in Christ; and Iosif Trifa (1888–1938), known as the founder of the Lord's Army (*Oastea Domnului* in Romanian).

Cornilescu came from a family of priests and decided to become a priest himself. While in the seminary, he found that he loved languages and translated many religious works into Romanian from English, German, and French. When he became a priest, he found out that people did not know the Bible and the existing Bible was difficult to understand; however, he believed that the Orthodox people would only change through direct access to the Bible. As Cornilescu was translating the Bible, he had a conversion experience and wrote the pamphlet, "How I Came Back to God and How I Started to Tell Others about It." However, as Cornilescu told others about his experience, he came to realize that there was a great difference between how he viewed the Bible and how the Orthodox Church saw the Bible. The ROC saw the Bible as the book of the institution, while Cornilescu saw it as a book for the people. His new translation was published in 1921 and he continued to hold Orthodox liturgical services, but also organized small groups for studying the Bible. Over five million copies of Cornilescu's Bible as it became known were printed by the British & Foreign Bible Society. In response, the Orthodox Church rejected Cornilescu's Bible by calling it the Protestant Bible.

Despite this rejection, Cornilescu's Bible inspired one of his colleagues to start reading the Bible. Tudor Popescu started to preach, and he became a phenomenal preacher in Bucharest. Thousands would come to hear him preach in a church known as The Stork's Nest. In collaboration with Cornilescu, Popescu started a journal called *Adevărul Creștin* (The Christian Truth) in which they analyzed the Orthodox Dogma and called people to develop personal relationships with God. It is because of their preaching and this theological work that both Cornilescu and Popescu were excommunicated from the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1924.

After Popescu's excommunication, he started a house church movement and the attendants were called "Tudorists," after the first name of Popescu. When the Communists came, they forced this group to join the Brethren Church where they were welcomed to keep their specific practices, among which was the infant's baptism. Thus, today Popescu's "Tudorists" practice both adult and infant baptism as a result of the merger with the Brethren movement.⁷

As a teacher and priest, Trifa became aware of the distance that the village people had from God and the Bible, and he also noted that the parishioners' lifestyles were pretty pagan as they repeatedly passed by him on their way to and from the bar. In his writings, Trifa confessed that he graduated from seminary without knowing the Bible; however, once he started to study it, he shared it with his parishioners. In 1921, Metropolitan Nicolae Balan called Trifa to be the chaplain of the Orthodox Theological Seminary at Sibiu and the editor of a weekly publication called "The Light of the Village" (Constantineanu 2017). In this publication, Trifa gained a national audience in which he preached on Christian life and asked why the Orthodox Church was silent regarding so many sinful practices. In

1923 he published a call asking those who wanted to be the followers of Christ to respond to this invitation. This invitation concluded with these words:

“Ahead of our army is the Savior Christ, and He will lead us to victory.

Asking my Savior Jesus Christ to help me fight in his Army, I sign this decision that was made for my good and my salvation.”

On Easter in 1924, Trifa published the first list of people who wanted to follow Christ and they became known as the soldiers of the Lord’s Army. For the next two decades Trifa and other leaders from the Lord’s Army sought to define what the religious group was. Trifa and the Lord’s Army continued to worship in the Orthodox Church and Trifa never challenged the ROC’s liturgy or the icons. The soldiers of the Lord’s Army were faithfully present in the Orthodox Church and in their local gatherings. Their four main theological principles were: The Crucified Christ, the struggle against sin, the moral and ethical renewal which come from a relationship with Christ, and an emphasis on lay people’s voluntary involvements.

At the same time, they placed great emphasis on daily activities which included: the daily life of a Christian which is a daily sermon for all to see, acts of mercy, love and prayer, forgiveness and suffering, and the distribution of Christian literature.

Eventually Trifa was excommunicated on 4 April 1937, from the ROC priesthood, but he declared that he and the Lord’s Army would never leave the Romanian Orthodox Church because the Lord’s Army was a movement within and of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Despite this relationship, the ROC disagreed with Trifa regarding salvation through Christ versus salvation through the Church and Trifa’s insistence that the leadership of the Lord’s Army had to always be in the hands of laity, not the ROC priests.

When Trifa died in 1938, the Metropolitan Balan who invited him to be the leader in 1923, sent a delegation to unrobe him of his priestly vestments before he was buried. The Lord’s Army nevertheless continued under the leadership of Traian Dorz (1914–1989) who was called by Trifa to be his assistant in 1929⁸ (Dowley 2015; MacCulloch 2003; Woodbridge and James 2013; Noll 2001; Shelley and Shelley 2021). The tension between the Lord’s Army and the Orthodox Church continues in the 21st century, but the Lord’s Army continues to withstand this tension and produce great spiritual leaders among both the laity and current and future priests. In Djurić-Milovanović’s *Orthodox Christian Renewal in Eastern Europe*, Mircea Maran shows that the Lord’s Army was as influential in Banat, Serbia as it was in Romania. In Banat almost every village had a Lord’s Army group that faithfully attended both the liturgy in the local Orthodox Church and the gatherings of the Lord’s Army (Maran 2017).

One wonders what would have happened to the Romanian Orthodox Church if they would have allowed Cornilescu, Popescu, and Trifa to continue the work which they felt that God was calling them to do in the Romanian Orthodox Church. What would have happened if the new emphases they brought into the Church, such as the reading of the Bible, a deeper relationship with God, and a greater involvement of the laity would have been internalized, not rejected? (Clark 2018).

Similar to the revival that the Romanian Orthodox Church experienced through the Lord’s Army, the Serbian Orthodox Church experienced revivals through the Nazarene Movement and the God Worshipper Movement.

The first group that challenged the SOC was in the second half of the 19th century. The Nazarenes came to Serbia and were initially well received, but that reception changed within a decade. In 1872, *Orthodoxy*, a Serbian language newspaper was full of praise for the Nazarenes’ charity, modesty, friendliness, naturalness, and decency. Especially noted was their respect for the elderly and their strict adherence to the Ten Commandments. By late 1880, however, the situation had changed and the numerous Orthodox Serbs converting to become Nazarene provoked unanimous hostility from the SOC. The initial backlash was in the forms of mockery and jokes; however, the jokes were replaced with panic and

the Nazarenes were eventually compared to a cholera epidemic (Djurić-Milovanović and Radic 2017).

In some villages the conversions were numerous, such as the case of Bavaniste, Banat where 108 families left the Serbian Orthodox Church to become members of the local Nazarene Church (Djurić-Milovanović and Radic 2017). In the 1880s, the Serbian prelates started to argue that Nazarenes were heretics, and that the Orthodox faith was innate to the Serbian people, however the congregants and intellectuals who remained loyal to the SOC challenged the church by stating that the attraction of the Nazarene movement was the reading and the preaching of the Bible so that the lay people could understand it.

Under the leadership of Jaša Tomić, the Serbian Radical Party started telling the SOC to adopt the tactics of the Nazarenes at the village level in order to keep the parishioners within the Serbian Orthodox Church and to further solidify the national consciousness against potential Magyarization (Djurić-Milovanović and Radic 2017). Other politicians, such as Djoka Iovanovic, asked for the Nazarenes to be expelled from Serbia, which fortunately did not happen.

In the battle against the Nazarenes, the Serbian Orthodox Church responded to some of the intellectuals' criticisms and, by copying what the Nazarenes did, they became more attentive to the needs of the people. As a result, the liturgy of the SOC was translated into the vernacular so that the people could understand. The Serbian Orthodox Church also eventually adopted Vuk Karadzic's translation of the New Testament, which had been completed in 1847 but was rejected by the Church until 1868, when it was printed and distributed among the priests and people.

While the Nazarenes had a Protestant doctrine which was distinctive from the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Bogomoljci or God Worshippers (this is not the same as the medieval dualist group), developed an independent life from the Church but continued to consider themselves Orthodox and practiced Orthodox doctrine. The God Worshippers were initially illiterate but learned to read and write out of their love for the Bible. The local Serbian Bishop of Banat and Backa excoriated the God Worshipers. He was afraid that soon they would become sectarians such as the Nazarenes. However, the greater danger lay in the fact that the Bogomoljci interpreted the Bible and tried to establish a set of moral norms apart from the Church, which for Dimitrijevic should have a monopoly in both (Djurić-Milovanović and Radic 2017).

The two fears of the Serbian prelates in assessing the Bogomoljci's piety was that they might eventually abandon Orthodoxy and more importantly, Serbdom. Other leaders such as Bishop Nikolaj Velimirovic, who himself brought changes in the Serbian Orthodox Church wrote, "Try to understand the Bogomoljka. Refrain from throwing stones at them, you might easily hit Christ himself. Do not reject them so that they do not reject you" (Djurić-Milovanović and Radic 2017).

Like Velimirovic, some priests welcomed the Bogomoljka because of their enthusiasm and singing while others remained embarrassed by their excessive enthusiasm, spiritual in-discipline, and visions. In these conflicting situations with other bishops, Velimirovic directed the God Worshippers into monastic orders, and together the monks and the peasants who started to attend monasteries created a movement called Svetosavlje.

Velimirovic spent part of his formative education in the West and returned to Serbia as an enthusiastic advocate for religious revival in Orthodoxy. He spoke of Christianity as alive and changing. He also combined Christianity and nationalism, writing, "If I am for Christ, then I have to help my oppressed people liberate themselves." Because of his Christian views and nationalism, Velimirovic and his writings were banned during the Communist regimes. In 1990 however, he was celebrated as Serbian's greatest churchman and was canonized in 2002.

Radic writes succinctly about the God Worshippers Movement, saying that it "revived religious life in Serbia in the interwar period"; "contributed to the spread of the religious press"; and "revitalized the monastic movement" (Djurić-Milovanović and Radic 2017, p. 158). Despite these contributions, the gatherings of God Worshippers in the beginning

of the Communist regime were forbidden and the press would report where they came together. The Bishop of Banja Luka wrote that he would prevent their influence from growing in the region where he served. It seems he was successful, as in the 1980s, the Church tried to find out how many God Worshippers were left but concluded that the movement was over. They formed a new program for involving people in the church, but the emphasis was not on being religious, but how much they were ready to fight for the interest of the Church and Serbianism ((Djurić-Milovanović and Radic 2017, p. 160).

The basic principles of the movement emphasized strict personal morality, the importance of reading the Scriptures, and the significance of praying and singing hymns. However, the God Worshippers were willing to stay in the Serbian Orthodox Church while the Nazarenes were not. The SOC was uneasy with the God Worshippers—they wanted the movement to be a part of the church, but when they tried to control it, the God Worshippers wanted their liberty. Indeed, one can argue that for the duration of the movement, they were the missionary arm of the church—experiencing revival and encouraging many people to come back to the Mother Church. Nevertheless, like any movement, for the God Worshippers there were only the following options: they could become a part of the entity that they wanted to help, namely the church where they started; they could become an independent body or denomination; or they could disappear. It seems that the God Worshippers Movement in the Serbian Orthodox Church has indeed disappeared.

As with the Lord's Army Movement in the Romanian Orthodox Church, we are wondering what would have happened to the Serbian Orthodox Church if more priests would have welcomed the God Worshipper Movement in their parishes. What would have happened if the new emphases they brought such as the reading of the Bible, a deeper relationship with God, and a greater involvement of the laity would have been internalized, not rejected?

Is there something in the structure of the Church that is not willing or capable to accept newness or challenge? Is there a possibility that a theology that declares the newness of the redeemed person in Christ and the fact that the mercies of the Lord are new every morning, has closed the windows and the doors of the church to anything new?

While the spiritual newness brought by the sons and daughters of the Church was rejected, the newness that was brought by Protestants and Neo-Protestants was met with systematic persecution from both the Eastern Orthodox Church and the government. That is the subject to which we will turn next.

4. The Orthodox Gaining Control after the Fall of Communism

The majority of church historians agree that there were no Protestant Churches in Eastern Orthodox countries before the middle of the 19th century.⁹ This means that the Eastern Orthodox Church considers that every Bulgarian, Greek, Romanian, Russian, or Ukrainian could not be any religion or denomination but Orthodox. To be ethnically Russian was to be Orthodox and to be Orthodox was to be ethnically Russian. However, good history challenges us to talk about the presence of Protestants in these countries; they did exist under the radar, and they were known as ethnic Protestant Churches. The presence of these ethnic Protestant churches is extremely important to the Neo-Protestants, as it confirms their historical legitimacy, versus Orthodox claims that the Neo-Protestants have no roots in Eastern Europe.

Despite national claims, towards the end of the 18th century there were already Mennonites in Russia, German Lutherans, and Reformed Hungarians in Romania and Serbia. These churches agreed that they were specifically for the ethnic groups that were founded in these territories and little evangelism, or proselytism, was done towards the local residents. The few people that did convert to these non-Orthodox churches became a part of these ethnic congregations and sometimes married into those churches. The evangelical churches or what are now called Neo-Protestants (Baptists, Pentecostals, Plymouth Brethren, Seventh Day Adventists, etc.) started to come into Orthodox countries

in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Initially when the Baptists came to Eastern Europe and Russia they started evangelizing with the other ethnic groups such as Germans, Hungarians, Slovaks, but within a couple of years they started churches with the local people. The person who started this fantastic trend was Johannes Oncken, from Hamburg, Germany whose motto was “Every Baptist a missionary and every place a Baptist mission field.” During his lifetime he organized Baptist Churches in almost every capital city of Europe (Leonard 2003, pp. 307–37).

The main distinction between the Protestant Churches and the Neo-Protestant Churches in Orthodox countries is that the Protestant Churches rarely tried to evangelize the native people—they kept to themselves. The Neo-Protestants were not an ethnic group, but an international group. While Lutherans in Eastern Europe and Russia are ethnically German, the Neo-Protestants evangelized the Orthodox or, to use a phrase from Miroslav Volf, “they fished in the Orthodox pond” (Volf 1996).

As the Neo-Protestants became established in Serbia and Romania during the first half of the 20th century, they were called many accusatory names by almost everyone who saw them. They were called American spies (because Baptist and Pentecostal missionaries were from America), they were called Communists because they had many concerns for the poor and the working class, and they were called ethnic traitors because they had left Orthodoxy, the religion of the ethnic group. Patriotism ran high during World War II and all the Romanian Baptist Churches were closed for a couple of years. This decree was done by the government at the request of the Orthodox Church, which felt that they could use the opportunity to get rid of the Neo-Protestants, who they accused of being unpatriotic.

It is true that during the time of Communism in Eastern Europe (1945–1990) and in Russia (1917–1990), many of the Christians, but especially Christian leaders were persecuted, tortured, imprisoned, and killed. There are stories of Christian suffering that parallel the Patristic times and John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*. Church history records hundreds and thousands of martyrs, but the millions are only known by the Lord. Some missiologists argue that the 20th century, primarily in communist lands, begat more martyrs than the previous 19 centuries put together. While the communist regimes being atheistic imprisoned anyone (or any religion) who opposed them, even in these times of persecution the Eastern Orthodox Church managed to retain its position of honor and prestige because many the Communist leaders came from the Orthodox Church (including Stalin, who was an Orthodox seminarian for one year).

Two more things need to be mentioned in order to clarify the situation between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Neo-Protestants. The Department of Religious Affairs was established during the reign of Communism. The minister in charge of the Department was usually an atheist comrade and his responsibilities were making sure that churches were persecuted, and seminarians and priests were harassed or turned into spies for the government, especially those who had the privilege of traveling abroad. Since the fall of Communism, the Department of Religions has continued its existence and all of its officials are members of the EOC. This department now exists in all Eastern Orthodox countries as a branch of the Patriarchate and there are no Catholics, Protestants or Neo-Protestants in it.

The second thing to mention is that the Eastern Orthodox Church does not recognize any of the evangelicals as churches, but calls them cults or sects. For example, in Romania the Department of Religion is also called the Department of Cults, and Protestants and Neo-Protestants are reduced to “sects,” which in popular parlance, have a dismissive, pejorative connotation.

When the Communist regimes fell in Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania, the evangelicals expected an end to their persecution. The religious sphere became more accepting for about two years until the Orthodox Church asserted its power through the Russian Duma and the Parliaments of Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria (Shellnutt 2016; Silliman 2020). Laws were passed in Russia claiming that since Russia is Orthodox, other religious groups should not have the same liberty.¹⁰ (Kohlhofer 2004) In Romania, the Patriarchate built the first Romanian Cathedral called *Mantuirea Neamului* (The Salvation

of the Nation). There were protests from the Catholic Church as it attempted to reassert its historical presence which had been eliminated during the time of Communism. This elimination was done with the help of the Orthodox Church which took over Catholic Churches and transformed them into Eastern Orthodox Churches. The Protestant Churches and the Neo-Protestant Churches also protested the name of the Cathedral, saying that the salvation of the nation was not preached only by the Romanian Church, but by all the churches that call people to Jesus. Despite these protests, the Cathedral was consecrated in November 2018 with the participation of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. At the height of 443 feet from ground to the cross, it is the tallest Orthodox Cathedral in the world, and it cost 125 million dollars, the majority of this money coming from the taxes of the Romanian people, whether they belong to the Romanian Orthodox Church or not.

While the ROC continues to claim its religious dominance, it also refuses to interact with other denominations or religions. For example, at the University of Bucharest in 2017, there was a celebration of the 500th year of the Protestant Reformation. The apex of the celebration was a concert with representatives from all the religious groups—Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, and the Church of the Brethren. The exception was the representation from the Orthodox Church which, by its absence, declared that the other groups were not as important as the Orthodox. According to previous experiences, if something is organized by the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, everyone is expected to come. If it is organized by another religious group, the Patriarchate will send a delegate of low standing or be completely absent.

In Romania, due to the fact that the Baptists, the Church of the Brethren, and the Pentecostals, have large denominations, with the Pentecostal Churches growing at an internationally known speed, the Patriarchate is less active in stirring persecution against the non-Orthodox. On the contrary, the Patriarchate has become highly active in renewing the popular interest for pilgrimages to monasteries and holy places, building new churches and creating the nostalgia that the Romanians are still all Orthodox, or always have been. The other aspect that has helped the Romanian Evangelicals is the post-Communist presence of Protestants and Neo-Protestants in local governments all the way to the Parliament and the President's Cabinet.

The same cannot be said to be true of Serbia where the Neo-Protestants remain in small numbers and where the Serbian Orthodox Church has passed draconian laws against them through the Parliament.

5. Continued: The Serbian Orthodox Church

In the realignment that took place after the division of the former republics of Yugoslavia and the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, the Serbian Orthodox Church sought to consolidate its stronghold over the land. A new law was passed in April 2006 in which the religious community was divided into four categories: first, the traditional or the national church, the Serbian Orthodox Church which is also called the canonical church and has jurisprudence over the whole country. On the second level with less power and privilege are the ethnic churches. These are the Catholic Church, the Islam community, the German Lutheran Church, the Hungarian Lutheran Church, the Hungarian Reformed Church, and the Slovak Reformed Church. The idea is that these churches belong to people who are not Serbians and so they do not decrease the number of Serbian Orthodox. In the third category are the Evangelical Churches such as the Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah Witnesses. Not only were they placed in the third category, but they were all declared nonexistent even though Baptists existed in Yugoslavia for over 100 years. They had to apply *de novo* with one hundred signatures for each applicant church. In the fourth category are NGOS and religious organizations such as World Vision and Bread for the World.

Once this law was proposed in 2006 there were international cries from various defenders of religious freedom because Serbia did sign the United Nations and European Union agreements on religious freedom and declared that there is freedom in the country

for every religious group. The seven churches on the second tier have all the same privileges but are not at the same level of power as the Serbian Orthodox Church. These confessional churches are completely discriminated against as never before. The SOC has made it so that they have to pay residence taxes on their buildings; they have to register as though they were not a part of Serbia's history; and lastly, they are treated as for-profit companies.

Various Neo-Protestant Churches protested this law, but they lost their case before the Serbian Supreme Court in 2012. After that, they then appealed to the European Court in Strasbourg. In summary: All the historic Neo-Protestant churches were denied historic standing and told to register again even though some of them had been in Serbia close to 100 years. These churches had to be registered again and then their registration could be rejected by the Supreme Court of Serbia. These denominations appealed to the Serbian Supreme Court and lost (Vidovic 2020, 2021).

It was decided that the Baptist Church of Belgrade in the name of the Baptist Union which no longer existed, would appeal the case of these churches at the Strasbourg Court for Human Rights. The waiting period for this court is long and in the meantime the government pressured the Baptist churches and other Neo-Protestant churches to apply and become a Union again. Thus, two Baptist Unions were formed—one for the Serbians and one for the Slovaks, registered as of 2017 (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia 2021). Once the Baptist Churches accepted this new registration, the Strasbourg Court for Human Rights dismissed their appeal. Currently, only the Baptist Church of Belgrade is not registered. The four-tier category of religious groups function with all the privileges given to the Serbian Orthodox Church, fewer to the Jews, Moslems, Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed, even less to the Neo-Protestants who are registered and then even fewer to the NGOs who function in what we in the West would call a parachurch organization.

In view of all the objections that the Serbian Orthodox Church has received from international bodies and the objections that the Serbian Parliament has received in passing this draconian law, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Serbian Parliament, in cooperation with the media and the police, continue to harass, persecute, and denigrate those who are not Orthodox.

This lack of legal status makes Neo-Protestants vulnerable, and violent attacks against and persecution of church members, and the deliberate destruction of church property have become everyday occurrences. Because of this oppression, the “unofficial” Serbian evangelicals have responded in three different ways: there are those who have been speaking out for the past twenty years against the injustices that have been perpetrated against them. There are those who agree that the situation is bad, but they are afraid that if they speak out, the situation will get worse. Lastly, there are those who argue that the church has historically suffered under religious persecution and then Communist persecution, and now they are being oppressed by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Besides being witnessed firsthand, these oppressive measures have been documented by researchers from the Fuller Theological Seminary, George Fox Seminary, and Princeton Theological Seminary. Researchers have identified at least three trends amidst this oppression: the rejection of those from inside of the church who want to make corrections, those who want to work together but are neglected, and those who are in a small minority and are considered insignificant or without protection who experience the greatest oppression. To this group we turn now.

6. The Analysis of the Orthodox—Evangelical Existence at the Village Level

Now we come to the concept of the “double minority,” established and described by Djurić-Milovanović in her text, *Double minorities in Serbia: the distinctive aspects of the religion and ethnicity of Romanians in Vojvodina* (Djurić-Milovanović 2015). To understand this concept, one must first understand that the northeast part of Serbia is broken into three areas—Banat, Backa and Srem. The Banat Area is populated by both Serbians and Romanians, and it is this area that Djurić-Milovanović examined, concluding that the

Romanian Evangelicals are firstly a minority because they are not Serbians, and they are secondly a minority because they are not Orthodox. This double minority status is further exacerbated by the intentional way that the Serbian government and SOC attempt to reduce non-Serbian ethnic populations and pressure the non-orthodox into returning to or joining the Orthodox church. Her historical findings have not been challenged.

In addition to the book by Djurić-Milovanović, four experiences in the author's life have contributed to his understanding of what is going on in the countries and communities that are oppressed by the Orthodox Church. These experiences are similar to those described by Djurić-Milovanović. The first event was his becoming involved in building Baptist churches in Serbia. Returning to the use of informal personal pronouns, I quickly found that registering the rebuilt and restored church was almost impossible because Baptists are no longer recognized in the nation. History had been blatantly eliminated, as I had personally attended that Baptist church from 1956 to 1965 before my family immigrated to the West. When I contacted various governmental employees about speeding the church registration process along, I received the answer that "This is Serbia and things just go slowly!" as well as the warning that I should not pressure the system because things could become even more convoluted and slow-moving.

Secondly, amidst these personal experiences that suggest oppression, there have also been glimmers of hope for a more collaborative future for the Orthodox and the Evangelicals. I attended the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation and the Celebration that was put on by the Evangelical Student Union of Serbia and Montenegro. This was run with the Orthodox Faculty of Theology and was a fantastic opportunity for fellowship and conversation. Thus, this experience confirmed my hope of broadening the dialogue with the Orthodox Church.

Thirdly, during the 500th Reformation Anniversary of 2017, while I was speaking before the Serbian Parliament, Djurić-Milovanović's book, *Double Minorities in Serbia*, served as a reference point to confirm the argument that Serbian Protestants are sidelined and marginalized. Dr. Djurić-Milovanović herself was present as a historian, scholar, and member of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Lastly, while at the 500th Anniversary, I also attended the Belgrade Book Exposition which is the second largest in Europe. While there, I saw the 2017 *Almanah* published by Libertatea (Liberty), the only Romanian newspaper in the region of Banat. I found that there was a lack of religious equality evident in the newspaper's focus on Orthodoxy. When I considered the *Almanah* which was meant to represent the culture and life of the Romanian villages, it eloquently described the things that happened in every village, paying particular attention to the Romanian Orthodox Church and its events. The introductory article of the *Almanah* was not written by the editor, but from the Orthodox Bishop who had jurisprudence over Banat, Bishop Daniil, as well as a photo of an Orthodox priest from each village. However, there was no mention of Nazarenes, Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, or Jehovah's Witnesses.

I wrote a letter to Mr. Vasile Barbu, the editor of the *Almanah*, explaining to him that when I was a child growing up in Yugoslavia, my homeroom teacher repeatedly told me that I had no future in Communist society because I was a Baptist. Even more troubling, the local Orthodox priest told me that I was not Romanian since I was not Orthodox. My reason for sharing this personal history was because at that time, my identity was denied by both the Communists and the Orthodox. According to them, Baptist Romanians did not exist, so we could not exist. I explained to Barbu that his newspaper (Barbu 2017) was perpetuating that same historical denial; I wrote that Romanian Protestants exist and have contributed to the development of village culture and asked him to share his justification for this negation of the Romanian Evangelical existence. I also recommended both of Djurić-Milovanović's books for his perusal.¹¹

It is exactly because of this absence of any mention of the evangelical churches that the research provided by Djurić-Milovanović together with her colleagues Mircea Maran and Biljana Sikimic is of superlative importance. Their first book, *Rumunske Verske Zajednice u*

Banatu (The Assemblies of the Romanian Believers in Banat) published in 2011 presents incontestable historical documentation that the Greek Catholics as well as the Neo-Protestants such as Adventists, Baptists, Nazarenes, and Pentecostals existed in Serbia at the beginning of the 20th century. By the middle of the 20th century there were Neo-Protestant Churches that had over 300 members, such as the Nazarene Church in Lokve, or the Romanian Baptist Churches in Vladimirovac and Nikolinti that had close to 100 members (Djurić-Milovanović et al. 2011).

In the conclusion of *Double Minorities in Serbia*, Djurić-Milovanović writes:

“The neo-Protestant Romanians provide a paradigmatic example of looking into the complex relationship between key elements of identity—ethnicity, language, and religion. The study of the four neo-Protestant communities to which Romanians of Vojvodina belong has shown that the ultimate ethnic and religious identities in those communities is more complex than in the case of Orthodox Romanians where religion is a reliable indicator of ethnic.” (Djurić-Milovanović and Radic 2017)

Additionally, in contrast with Barbu’s 2017 almanac in which there is no sign of any evangelical churches in the area, Djurić-Milovanović lists 15 villages where there are Nazarenes, Adventists, Baptists, or Pentecostals.

Now that the consistent presence of Evangelicals has been established, we have to return to the way they are treated. What makes the Eastern Orthodox Church behave oppressively in a century that seeks to be more open, or to paraphrase Paul who says, “I have opened my heart towards you, why are you not willing to do the same?”

By international agreements, the Eastern Orthodox Church claims that it practices and supports religious liberty, but by looking at all the laws that it sought to have implemented in Russia, Romania, Serbia, and Bulgaria after the fall of Communism, it seems that the Orthodox Church’s natural instinct is to establish itself as the defender of what they believe to be the one true religion, nation, and culture. However, as Djurić-Milovanović has described, this direct correlation between ethnicity and religion is no longer the norm. Our countries have changed and the EOC must acknowledge that change.

7. Conclusions

The method pursued in this paper was to move from an international documented discussion to a local discussion. Eastern Orthodoxy is an international entity and as such has international activities. It has patriarchs, synods, theologians, and historians who present the best aspects of the church. At the international and national level, it is natural that only the best is presented and celebrated. The evangelicals would like to continue to celebrate the positive aspects of Orthodoxy. Thus, most of the people that live in Orthodox countries show substantive appreciation for the Church. The history of those nations is intertwined with the history of the Orthodox Church in matters of history, politics, economics, paintings, sculpture, literature, etc. One must also accept that the future of these countries is inextricable from the presence of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Having stated all these positive realities with a deep sense of gratitude, one cannot erase those specific items and instances mentioned in this paper with which and wherein the Orthodox Church has oppressed and continues to oppress other churches. Because of this continued oppression, what follows are a number of suggestions to encourage fellowship and worship between the Orthodox and Evangelicals as we hope to move forward together at the international, national, and local village level:

1. Declarations of the oneness of the body of Christ. Jesus Christ in his prayer for John 17 tells us that by our love for our another, the world will know that we are his followers of Christ. The Eastern Orthodox Church has to demonstrate this love, and beyond this in the words of Orthodox theologian Dr. Radovan Bigovic, the Orthodox Church has a responsibility to protect minority churches—Protestants and Evangelicals (Bjelajac 2014).

2. Orthodox teaching of the sacredness of every church and religion. From the altars of the Orthodox Church, it has to be preached that people who deface other churches in any way are in the same predicament as when they would deface the Orthodox Church. (It is interesting that in the Romanian press there was a discussion that the hierarchy of the Romanian Orthodox Church should not be criticized in public!)
 3. Adjusted curriculum. The Orthodox seminary curriculum has to modify the teaching of Sectology, wherein priests are taught negatively about Neo-Protestants. Some of the oppressive actions described throughout this paper have been done as the result of the instigation and sometimes the participation of the local Orthodox priest whose seminary teaching about Neo-Protestants was negative (David 1994).
 4. The abolishment of the Department of Religions. This department was formed by Communists to persecute both Orthodox and Evangelicals. The Orthodox Church has retained this department after the fall of Communism and instead of being staffed by Communists it is now staffed by the Orthodox. It employs the church, the state, and the media for the sake of the Orthodox Church.
 5. Interdenominational events. Positively, there are many things that the Orthodox and Evangelicals can do together. Pastors and priests can meet on a regular basis; there are holidays such as Pentecost or Harvest when all of the local believers can celebrate together. There can also be community events such as VBS or youth retreats that churches can do together.
 6. Unity in the defense of Christian values. The European Union has declared that it is not only an economic, political, and militaristic union, but it is a union of values. The values that the EU has imposed over the last 5 years are diametrically opposed to the values of the Orthodox Church and the values of the Evangelicals. Just from considering the European Union's Preamble, it is clear that from its inception, the EU has been secularist and its secularism now has become militant in its imposition of values. The Orthodox and the Evangelicals who take the Bible seriously and who are, for the most part conservative, can present a united front in the name of Christian values.
 7. Services of reconciliation and forgiveness. It may be that after the Orthodox and Evangelicals work together for a while from the patriarchal level to the local level, they can have a service of reconciliation where both groups will ask forgiveness for what they have done against one another and pledge to go forward as the body of Christ, since Christ has only one Church and one Bride looking forward to His return.
- May this be the decade when we experience these harmonious realities together.

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Notes

- ¹ The emphasis of this paper does not minimize the importance of the many meetings that are conducted between members of Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism as described in the recently published articles in April 2021 by Jemna, entitled "When the Gap between Academic Theology and the Church Makes Possible the Orthodox-Evangelical Dialogue" and Stanciu's 2019 "după 30 de ani: Evanghelicii față cu dialogul interconfesional" ("After 30 Years, the Evangelicals in the Interconfessional Dialogue"). The author of the article has personally participated in as many dialogues between Evangelicals and Orthodox as possible.
- ² The People's Salvation Cathedral cost over 125 million dollars, $\frac{3}{4}$ of which came from taxing all the residents of Romania, including the 15% who do not identify as members of the Orthodox Church.
- ³ In contrast with historical Protestants whose religious affiliation was largely ethnic, such as the Reformed Protestant Hungarian Church and the German Protestant Lutheran Church, starting in the 16th century, the Neo-Protestants were formed towards the end of the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century. Neo-Protestants include Pentecostals, Baptists, Plymouth Brethren, and a smattering of Methodists and Presbyterians later on.
- ⁴ These Nazarene Churches were connected with the Nazarene Churches of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.
- ⁵ The activity of St. John of Kronstadt is an exception to this pattern see (The Orthodox Church in America 2013).

- 6 One of the church's great doctrinal debates, between the East and the West, had to do with the procession or the sending of the Holy Spirit. The Eastern Church believed that the Father sends the Holy Spirit, while the Catholic added the term *Filioque* and by or of the Son.
- 7 As the followers of Luther became Lutherans, so the followers of Tudor Popescu were known as "Tudorists" or believers according to the Scriptures.
- 8 Traian Dorz from 1945–1989 spent more time in Communist jails than in liberty but produced thousands of songs and poems and today is considered one of the greatest Romanian Christian poets of the 20th century.
- 9 These historians include Alexa Popovici and their *Istoria Baptistilor*, Vol. 1, 1856–1916, Vol. II, 1919–1944, Vol. III, 1944–1989. Additionally, see Ciprian Balaban and their work, *Istoria Bisericii Pentecostale din România, 1922–1989*, Libraria Scriptum, Oradea, 2016.
- 10 In Serbia, the initial draft limiting the Neo-Protestants, was written in 2004 and passed in 2006 under the heading of "Laws on Churches and Religious Communities." In Russia, the Yarovaya Law, passed in 2016, limited the activities of Protestants outside of their physical church buildings. Similar laws were defeated in Bulgaria in 2018.
- 11 As of writing this article the author has yet to receive a response.

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