

**MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF CRAIOVA
FACULTY OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY
DOCTORATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY SAINT NICODIM**

The Orthodox Church and Religious Movements

Resume of doctorate thesis

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Craiova, 2018

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Key words: Church, religious movements, mission, proselytism, conversion, freedom

Thesis resume

The Orthodox Church finds itself today in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-confessional and pluri-religious context. In Romania today there are 16 cults legally recognised and over 2.000 associations, foundations, and Christian or non-Christian religious groups. European integration meant opening the borders not only for the Romanians who wanted to go abroad, but for a large number of missionaries who saw here the ideal place for preaching God as they see him.

It is real that we find ourselves under the same sky, share the same country and we are sons of the same God, but the differences in faith, culture, thought, as well as in attitudes are easily observed between orthodox and members of other religious groups. At home, as well as in diaspora, members of the Romanian Orthodox Church kept a attitude of respect towards one's religion, they did not intend or search to bring their faith upon others, they respected their freedom and wanted their freedom to manifest their religious beliefs to be respected. This attitude was interpreted by some leaders and members of new religious movements as a quiet invitation to proselytist activity, often done invasively and manipulatively and with negative effects for the proselyts.

In this context, the needs of approaching the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the religious movement from the perspective of mission and proselytism is highlighted. The realist approach of these aspects, sometimes, self-critical for the orthodox missionaries, allows emphasising the strong points, as well as the weak points, of the internal and external mission, identifying the vulnerability factors for breaching and development for the heterodox ,movements.

Not all religious movements have this aggressive attitude for proselytism. Most of the cults recognised by law belong to older religious movements and most of the new ones have learned the lesson for mutual respect. However, the Orthodox Church in Romania has cordial relations, a constructive dialogue and made big steps towards mutual understanding and knowledge. The other religious groups belonging, with small exception, to the new religious movements, manifest a different attitude based on the belief that for them Romania is populated by non-Christians, barbarians, pagans, and those who kneel in front of idols (as they describe the cult of icons), people who are waiting for the new gospels or the new

revelations. Starting from this kind of prejudices which exclude mutual knowledge and understanding, respect and wellbeing in the spirit of tolerance, the missionaries of heterodox groups activate in our country trying to convert through any means the orthodox Christians. This attitude insults, dissatisfies and provokes negative reactions from the clergy as well as the believers. Theologians from other confessions justify this attitude through the wrong idea that the Orthodox Church is not a missionary church anymore and that in fact the nominal orthodox people have lost, by being passive, the status of Christians.

On the other hand, the number of orthodox Christians, according to the census from years 1992 and 2011 has lowered in this period, while the members of neo-religious groups have become more numerous. At the population census in 1992, 19.802.389 people (86,81%) people declared to be part of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and the members of neo-religious groups were 514.124 in number. After the last census in 2011, the number of members of the Orthodox Church is 16.307.004 (86,45%) people and the number of members in heterodox movements rose to 694.495 members. Their growth is big, if we consider the fact that the Romanian population had a demographic decrease of 2.688.394 people and other 1.259.739 are abroad, having a stable population of 18.861.902 citizens.

The chosen subject, *Orthodox Church and the religious movements*, proposed realising a research with a double purpose. On one hand it wants to show that the Orthodox Church is a missionary institution which proposes itself to the world in a right, noble way, based on the evangelical principles of respect and freedom, with an honest missionary work, with a biblical foundation, with an uninterrupted historical tradition, from the apostolic period until present. On the other hand, starting from the empirical observation of the fact that the representatives of some of the religious movements, starting from the wrong way of seeing our country as a *terra deserta*, approach the Romanian orthodox through a false mission which proves to be incisive, abusive proselytism with no respect, applied in different ways with the purpose of converting them to new cults and religious movements, the research wants deeper knowledge in the matter, by describing the proselyte means and methods identified, the effects of this phenomena on an individual and community level, as well as some means of preventing and fighting it.

From these goals the following objectives derived:

1. Highlighting the main missionary steps of the Orthodox Church, identifying and portraying actors engaged in mission and the methods used.
2. Identifying religious groups belonging to new or old religious movements which practise different forms of proselytism in front of members of the Orthodox Church

from our country, presenting to each group different historical and doctrine based milestones, the evolution of the number of followers and the proselytism particular to each group. Highlighting the proselytist conversion process practised by Christian and non-christian heterodox groups and that affected Church's unity.

3. Identifying and portraying social actors engaged in proselytist activity
4. Making an inventory and describing the proselytist methods and means used by the new religious movements
5. Making an inventory of the different types of proselytism and realising their taxonomy
6. Highlighting dogmatical implications of the Church's mission, as well as those of proselytism
7. Analyzing and evaluating the mission's and proselytisms' consequences and implications on an individual plan, under personal, familial and social aspect, as well as on the communitary-ecclesial plan.
8. Identifying means of preventing and fighting proselytism, and of therapy and spiritual help for those who come back in the Church's community.

The subject on the *Orthodox Church and the religious movements* was approached, from different angles, by valuable Romanian or foreign theologians. As Romanian authors we mention priest professor Mihai Himcinschi, priest professor Gheorghe Petraru, priest professor Valer Bel, priest professor David Pestroiu, priest doctor Ciprian Marius Clo c or priest professor Radu Petru Mure an. Relevant works in this domain on an international level are those of authors: David J. Bosch, George D. Chryssides, Jean Vernet, Jean Marie-Abgrall, James Stamoolis, Dimitrios Papanicolau, Dimitriu Havelaki and those of the well-known greek researcher in the domain of religious groups Antonios Alevizopoulos.

Originality and freshness of the proposed subject for this doctoral thesis includes the following aspects. Firstly, social actors engaged in Church's mission are portrayed as a parallel to proselytism in religious movements. Secondly, actual proselytist means and methods particular to different neo-religious groups are identified, highlighting especially, where the case needs it, the methods of constraint, determination and manipulation used in gathering new followers. Third, factors which raise the vulnerability to proselytism in the members of the contemporary Romanian Orthodox Church are identified, analysed and systematised. Fourth aspect is the actualisation of the list of heterodox groups active from a proselytist point of view, some of them having a recent

date of apparition (after 2010) and not being included in the autochthonous specialty literature. Another original contribution is represented by the identification of prevention and control methods to proselytism, as well as therapy and spiritual help for the members of the Church converted to Christian or non-Christian heterodox religious groups, who come back, methods that can be the foundation of a unitary missionary plan implemented at a eparchial and parochial level.

The big amount of information available on the problem approached constitute an opportunity for thoroughly knowing the subject, but also a dare for the research process, the gathering of information found in different works, sequential, partial and non-homogenous being necessary, as well as analysing them from the perspective of the proposed subjects.

We realised a qualitative type of research, using the interdisciplinary research method, approaching theological, biblical, historical, sociological and psychological aspects. Thus, the Church's mission was biblically, patristically, dogmatically explained and interconfessionally and historically approached. The historical evolution of the Orthodox Church's missionary work and that of the new and old religious movements were presented. From a sociological perspective the effects of mission and proselytism on a community plan were qualitatively analysed together with the social factors influencing vulnerability to proselytism. Likewise, a series of concepts from the sociological sphere were used, such as: status, role, social actor (in the concept of symbolical interactionism of George Herbert Mead). Using the method of analysing social documents a certain analysis of neo-religious groups which are active in Romania from a proselytist point of view was made, analysis which made possible their classification.

Communication sciences and psychology gave valuable information regarding individual and group manipulation techniques, which were recognised as being applied in different proselytist strategies. From a psychological perspective were also analysed the effects of proselytism on an individual plan and the psychological vulnerability factors to proselytism.

This research proposes to analyse the relation between the Orthodox Church and the religious movements from the perspective of mission and proselytism. In realising this objective some strategies were used.

The first step was highlighting that the Orthodox Church is an active organisation from a missionary point of view, despite the opinions of non-orthodox theologians. In this aspect we highlighted the characteristics of the divine mission and pointed the Church's

mission's steps from the beginning until present. With all the political, economical and social changes through which the Orthodox Church had to go, especially in the ex-communist countries, it maintained its apostolical missionary ethos, proposing itself to the world who has not heard of Christ in a honest, delicate and constant way. Actors who contribute to realising this are clergy, laity, the Christian family and the missionary parish, and the means of mission propose the Gospel of Christ in the same delicate and free way. Highlighting some theological aspects helps understand that the Church's mission is fair only when it is done through honest ways and is based on a right, orthodox theology.

Opposing the mission is proselytism, specific to many groups belonging to older or newer religious movements. Proselytism is a false mission, proposed in the wrong way, with a wrong purpose and a destructive effect. It characterised groups split from the Church which used different methods, insinuating, proposing or imposing themselves to the members of this Orthodox Church with the purpose of attracting them away from it. Unmasking the determinative-manipulative forms of proselytism applied in present by some neo-religious groups explains the success in converting a big number of people, manipulated to take certain important decisions for their lives.

Not all those exposed to heterodox messages convert, so it is necessary to emphasise the factors which raise people's vulnerability to proselytism. A classification of those was also made, subject met in the consulted literature. Therefore, we identified three categories of factors which semnalate a orthodox christian's vulnerability to sectar proselytism: personal factors, socio-cultural factors and factors connected to the Church.

Another original contribution is represented by the identification and systematisation of some theological implications of proselytism, that bring extra arguments in sustaining the idea that these movements practise a false mission.

The realisation of a classification of the different types of proselytism practised by the actual religious movements in Romania, based on the methods and means used in this activity, is also an original element of this thesis. Thus, we have identified four categories of proselytism. Type A proselytism, proselytism of the books or of the word, in which a main role is represented by using books considered sacred such as the Bible, the Quoran, and promoting the group's own ideas through preaching, discussions, seminaries, typed, audio, video, on-line materials. Type B proselytism, proselytism of the good deeds, is masked by social-philanthropical actions, medical services, spiritual help (counselling, support) and so on. Type C proselytism, proselytism of the mind, manipulative-

determinative is suggested or induced, involving different types of manipulation applied to groups or individuals. And type D proselytism, proselytism of the force, a violent and constraining type, involves using rough methods of conversion based on physical or psychological violence, threatening, economical, psychological, political, familial constraint etc.

This classification is important because it offers an instrument of identifying the level of danger of some neo-religious groups, those who practise type C or D proselytism, respectively use manipulation techniques or different means of constraint, being the most dangerous. Based on the same typology we can identify adequate means of prevention, intervention and support to those who want to return into Church's community after a period of activity inside a neo-religious group.

Realising a taxonomy of the actual types of proselytism allowed the analysis and classification of religious movements in our country, active from a proselytist point of view. For this purpose, the method of studying social documents was used and applied to: written materials, in typed form (books, textbooks for mission/ proselytism, magazines, fliers, brochures) or electronic format, available online (web pages of different religious groups), audio and video materials, elaborated by members of some groups. The analysis file for social documents included the following elements: date of apparition and/or arrival in Romania (historical aspect), evolution of the number of members (demographic aspect), the specific doctrine to each group (dogmatic aspect), specific means of proselytism and the target group to which they address themselves (apologetic aspect). We searched for pertinent information from the source, a method made hard by the particularities of closed neo-religious groups which refuse any kind of collaboration. Also followed the actualisation of the heterodox religious groups list, some of them being religious forms that appeared recently (after 2010) in Romania, and are not included in the autochthonous specialty literature yet, such as The Theophanic Charismatic Movement, The Universal Church of God's Kingdom and parallel orthodox churches.

The consequences of the Church's mission, as well as those of the proselytism of the religious movement have become the subject of an analysis on multiple plans: personal, familial, social, economic and community-parochial. One of the conclusions of this method is that the mission, as well as proselytism, derive from a specific way of perceiving the social and religious reality. This specific perception imprints a distinct character to the way of approaching persons who do not share the religious doctrine of that group, and, in consequence, on the way in which they conceptualise the missionary role and organise the missionary activity. We made a distinction between two

diametrically opposing perspectives: the way in which the church perceives heterodox groups, on one hand, and their perspective on the Church, on the other.

The work *The Orthodox Church and the religious movements* is structured in four chapters preceded by introduction and followed by conclusions.

The first chapter, *The Church's Mission*, presents first the concepts used in our research, followed by approaching Church's mission from a historical perspective, highlighting the steps and important factors of the mission and analysing the theological implications of the Orthodox Church's mission. The novelty of this research in this point represents presenting the present portrait of the orthodox Christian missionary. The exposition follows the emphasis on the fact that the Church, from our Saviour Jesus Christ until now, worked on its mission as a continuation of the divine mission, correctly dogmatically based, applied in a noble way and respecting the freedom of the one to which it proposes itself.

Chapter two, *Proselytism*, offers a broad image of the false mission phenomenon. Consulting history, there are highlighted a few milestones of this negative phenomenon, easy to identify in the activity of some of today's preachers of new religions. A pertinent analysis and a new classification, a current one, of proselytism, added to a theological analysis, will clarify the difference in meaning between the mission based on divine love and proselytism based on human ambitions. The portrait of the proselytist missionary and that of the possible follower, as well as identifying vulnerability factors to the anti-mission actions of the neo-religious groups are original contributions to the current thesis.

The third chapter, *The religious movements*, proposes an analysis of the main Christian and non-Christian religious groups, old or new, active from a proselytist point of view in our country. There are highlighted, together with historical milestones regarding the apparition of new religious groups, aspects such as: their arrival in the Romanian space, the evolution in the number of members, their specific methods of proselytism, their existence and the type of official relationship with the Orthodox Church. We have empirically concluded that, most of the times, the most incisive groups from a proselytist point of view refuse or avoid contact with representants of the majoritar Orthodox Church, while the groups who have good relationships with us manifest an attitude of respect and peaceful cohabitation, and their proselytism is rare and accidental.

The last chapter, the fourth one, *The Orthodox Church and the religious movements*, refers to the consequences and aftermaths of the divine mission done in and by the Church on a personal, as well as familial, ecclesial, social level, and the effects of

proselytism on a personal, familial, community level and from the perspective of the religious group left by the one who was recruited. Proselyts who at some point realise that they don't belong in that religious group come back to the orthodox Christian community, but are still affected on a personal, psychological, social and sometimes familial level, needing sustained support to recover. Thus, the necessity to present some methods of prevention and control of proselytism became clear, as well as ways of recovering and helping the orthodox Christians who spent some time in heterodox groups. In the same chapter the relationship between cults in the limits of tolerance and intolerance, from the perspective of the proposed research. There are exposed in a comparative way the perception the Orthodox Church has towards proselytist heterodox groups and the perception neo-religious groups have towards the Orthodox Church, aspect that can influence tolerance and knowledge about each other.

Based on the results obtained from the research process, the work's conclusions highlight the reality that the Orthodox Church has maintained its living, missionary organism character, and today, according to the principles of Saviour Christ, a correct mission, without abusing the freedom of choice of those to whom the Gospel is proposed. On the other side, neo-religious groups have lost the true meaning of missionary work when they propose themselves through aggressive, incisive, insinuating, manipulative proselytism, disrespectful towards the Christian culture of Romanians. Naturally, a series of proposals regarding the development of Church's mission are made, as an answer to the necessity of identifying and counteracting proselytist methods specific to religious movements, with the purpose of maintaining the unity of Christ's Church.

Concluding, we consider that we have reached through the subject the objectives initially proposed. The Orthodox Church and the religious movements is a broad theme, with different aspects, and it cannot be worn out in a single doctorate thesis. Mission and proselytism represent a sensitive aspect in the relationship between the Church and the religious movements. In our opinion, the Romanian Orthodox Church finds itself in front of a difficult situation, having to deal with political pressures determined by the new European context, with ideological pressures of political fairness, imposed more aggressively, with internal needs marked by growth in emigration which determines an ageing and de-population of the rural environment, but also with the re-evaluation of Church's attitude towards some members influenced by the anti-clergy and anti-christian attitude shown by a significant part of mass media. To these are added intensive, incisive, manipulative, continuous and hard to stop proselytism from groups belonging to some of

the religious movements who misunderstand the tolerance and kindness of the orthodox Romanian. The number of these neo-religious groups is rising and their missionaries perceive the members of the Orthodox Church as pagans, and Romania as a perfect territory for mission.

The general conclusion of this thesis is that the Orthodox Church still keeps a fair, honest kind of mission, based on evangelical principles passed down by Lord Jesus Christ. Through this type of mission the Church proposes itself to the world in a delicate, noble way, praying and waiting for everyone's salvation. Religious groups, old or new, have stepped in numerous occasions over the level of fair, honest mission, orientating themselves towards a false mission based on violent determination methods and abusive manipulation techniques. Their proselytism assiduously follows the immediate and quick growth in the number of followers, not caring if those approached are already christian and ignoring the negative effects of their conversion.

In front of this situation, the Orthodox Church has the duty, on one side, of taking firm measures, necessary for educating its members and supporting those who want to come back home, and on the other side, is called to work towards creating a climate of peaceful and good inner-cults cohabitation and inter-religious.

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