

Romanian Baptists and the State

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In Great Britain the Baptist Churches estimate that they have lost 7,000 members during the past year, whilst in the USSR and Romania, according to official figures, their sister Baptist Churches have gained 4,000 and 10,000 new members respectively.¹ The Romanian Church is now growing faster than all the European Baptist Churches and it is widely accepted that growth has in fact been greater than the official figures show. In one church alone, in Oradea, Pastor Liviu Olah baptised over 200 new members after only three months of ministry.² Churches in Bucharest hold regular baptisms of 30 candidates or more. Many of the baptised are young; some are members of Baptist families, but others had no clear religious affiliation.

The Baptist movement in Romania developed relatively recently. Three non-Romanian nationalities helped introduce it into the country.³ In April 1856 a German, Johan Scharsmidt, came to Bucharest as a Baptist missionary to work among his fellow countrymen. A little later in Transylvania, Hungarian and German Baptist evangelists created Baptist groups in Cluj and Bihor, again initially among their own nationalities. At the same time, a Russian Baptist, expelled from the Ukraine, began to work in the coastal region of Eastern Romania. He established a Baptist church in Tulcea. Soon, each of these independent groups were spreading their work among the Romanians. During the First World War Hungarian and German Baptists came into contact with Romanians and influenced them. Thus, by 1920 a core of young Romanian Baptists were pioneering the Baptist Church throughout Greater Romania. Baptist evangelism in the villages evoked considerable resentment from the more established Churches of Romania, particularly from the Orthodox Church. Occasionally the police would have to be called in to maintain order and Baptists often suffered in the ensuing confrontation. Sometimes they asked for trouble.⁴

At first many hoped that the Democratic Government, established in 1946, would help reduce the harrassment of Baptists. Churches and preaching halls, closed down in 1942 by the Antonescu regime,⁵ were reopened and the Baptists were able to carry out extensive evangelistic

work. By this time they numbered 93,843 members from all nationalities.⁶ Under the communists there has been a steady increase. Today's estimated official figure is now 160,000 (assessed unofficially the figure is more than 300,000). The Baptists have achieved this in a climate of increasing restrictions.

The Baptist Church was recognized legally by the government in the 1948 Law of Cults. Whereas other denominations such as the two Catholic Churches and the Orthodox group known as the Lord's Army were severely treated,⁷ the Romanian Baptists experienced a relatively relaxed time. Their refusal as a denomination to show concern for those then being harassed did not endear them to the sufferers, and may reflect their self-absorption – a feature which critics of the Baptist Church in Romania today have not overlooked.

From 1954 onwards, however, the State Department for Religious Affairs (the Department of Cults) began to take more interest in the Baptist Church. Baptist Church property, personnel and activity had to be approved by the Department of Cults which would negotiate only with the governing body of the Cult, that is the Baptist Union. In time the Union was composed of men selected because they were willing to comply with "instructions".⁸ They were satisfied so long as churches were open, even if only for services held at a time specified by the Department and conducted by the licensed pastors only.⁹ In the late '50s large numbers of believers (many from Transylvania) were arrested. They were charged with anti-state conspiracy and even pro-Hungarian nationalism.¹⁰ The full extent of the human injury of that campaign against religion has never been fully assessed. An entire generation was affected. Many Christians of differing denominations, however, began to learn from one another inside the prison camps. One survivor, whenever referring to that period of suffering in his life, would call it his time in the "Academy" where he learnt more about God than anywhere else.

Baptists did not suffer alone. After the declaration of a general amnesty in 1964,¹¹ which liberated over 12,000 "political" prisoners, most of the leading figures of the Churches returned to congregations which had been weakened by the events of the previous years. Hundreds of Baptist churches had been closed down. Men who had chosen a more conciliatory attitude towards the officials of the Department of Cults maintained a firm grip over church affairs.¹² But a new generation of Baptist believers was growing up within the Church, many of whom remained unaware of the methods of their church leaders.

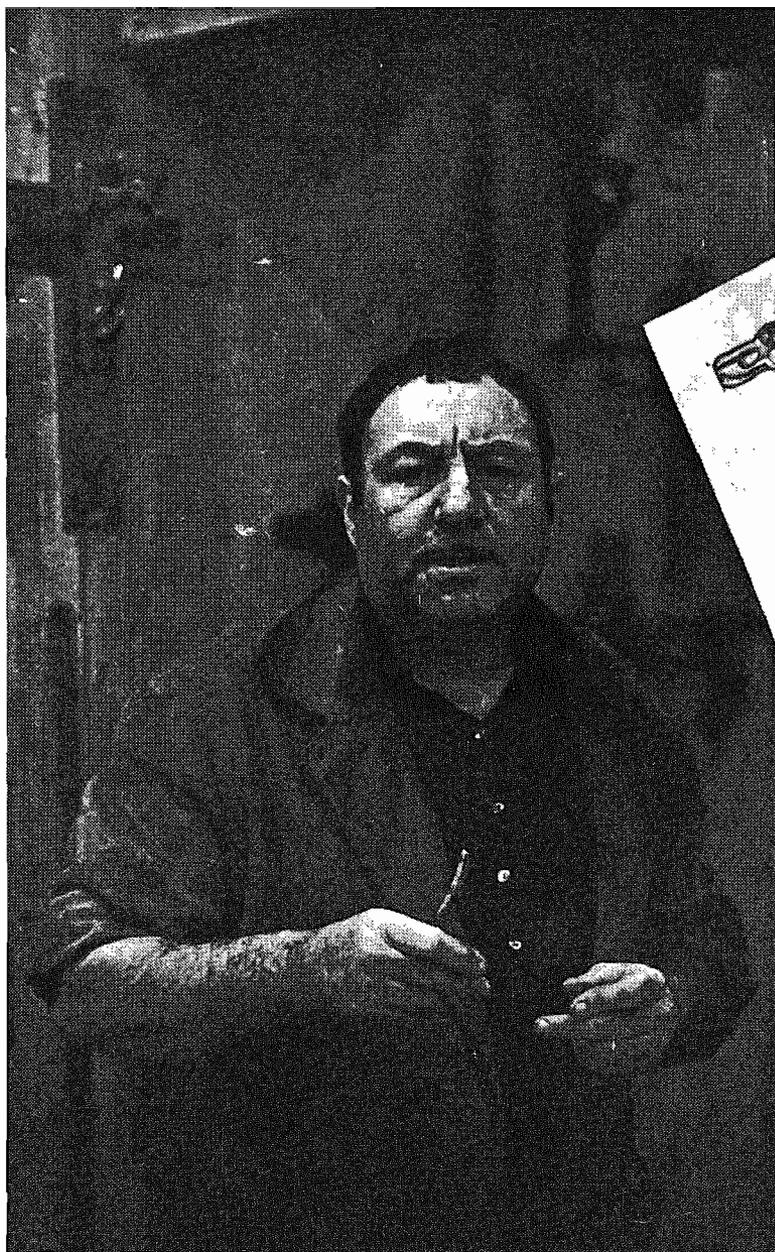
The authorities were able in fact to use the leaders of the Baptist Union to impose restrictions upon the Church. This situation was described by pastor Josif Ton in a paper written in the autumn of 1973.¹³ He was then a teacher at the Baptist Seminary in Bucharest. Ton listed seven areas of church life which were controlled in practise by the State. The Church

could not appoint its own pastors without State control; baptisms could only be performed if candidates were approved by the Department of Cults; church finance, church leadership and even church membership were also subject to government control. Ton pointed out that this was achieved through unwritten instructions from the Department, implemented by obliging Church Union leaders. But not only had the Baptists' legal rights been infringed. Ton claimed that the doctrinal assertion of Christ's Lordship over His Church was threatened. Baptist leaders, he demanded, should teach their people to stand up for their rights and become men of courage and principle.

The government's opposition to Ton's paper centred on two points. First, it insisted that the Baptists had accepted the authority of the Department of Cults when they agreed to abide by the 1948 Law of Cults.¹⁴ This Law as well as stating the conditions under which the recognized denominations could function also defined the activity of the Department of Cults. Since 1948 the Department claimed to have kept within its boundaries. Second, the Department claimed that it had to provide for the good of the whole religious community of Romania and keep the denominations within the limits of the law. This included not only the Law of Cults but also the laws to which religious believers as ordinary citizens of the Socialist Republic of Romania were subject. However, particularly in connection with the Law of Cults, the Department recognized a special duty, and that was to prevent rivalry between the denominations. Proselytism, or "sheep-stealing" had been a problem for the peace of the Romanian Christian community for centuries. The Department of Cults therefore was concerned to channel Baptist growth within Baptist families and to prevent it creating bad feeling or jealousy among other Churches.

To both these objections, Ton had a legal answer. He accepts that the Baptist Union recognized the boundaries of the 1948 Law of Cults but added that in its turn the Department had recognized the legality of the Baptist Statutes. His challenge to the Union had been but a call to reaffirm what was laid down in those Statutes. On the second point he showed how the Law guaranteed a citizen's freedom to change from one denomination to another.¹⁵ Rather than being concerned for the peaceful co-existence of all Christian denominations, the Department of Cults, in Ton's opinion, was following a long term policy to reduce the effectiveness of the Christian religion among its citizens, and the Baptist Church represented the greatest danger in countering its aim.

As background to Ton's paper on the relations between the Baptist Church and the State, it should be remembered that, unlike the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Baptist Church had not been identified historically with the Romanian nation. The Baptist movement was introduced by Hungarian and German missionaries, and although it had become mainly



The sculptor, Ernst Neizvestny, whose work is the subject of an article on p. II.



The theme of the Cross is seen in these two examples of Ernst Neizvestny's work.

Romanian in membership and character it did not enjoy the same respect from the State as did the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Ton's paper was a "revelation" to the younger pastors and to young Baptists. Older and more experienced Baptists who had passed through the "dark age" of the '50s reacted differently. All agreed that it was a correct assessment of the situation but some were not sure whether Ton's solution would be of any value. To call the Baptist Union to repentance was not enough. The Union had to be completely changed. Other Baptists were concerned for Ton himself for they had known him as a young pastor in Arad where he had overstretched himself and become disillusioned. The authorities had tried to take advantage of this. He had spent a subsequent 10 years away from the Church. Those who remembered his past failure hoped that his present public activity would not lead him down the same road.¹⁶

The official response in September 1973 to Ton's paper was ambivalent. Romanian Baptists were thought by Western observers to have reached an impasse like the Russian Reform Baptists a decade earlier. Such speculations were proved wrong however by the apparent readiness of the Department of Cults to grant concessions. In fact the Department claimed that with the cooperation of the Baptist Union it had been in the process of dealing with the issues raised in Ton's paper and that the concessions granted had nothing to do with Ton's challenge. In April of the following year Ton was removed from Bucharest and placed in a small Baptist church in Ploiesti.

An alternative way for survival had nevertheless been shown by Ton. Many were ready to support his stand. Four pastors from the Bucharest Association drew up a memorandum similar to Ton's and presented it, signed by 46 other pastors, to the Council of Ministers. In the churches there was an atmosphere of confidence. Services were held more regularly. Gradually the practice of referring all appointments of preachers, deacons and baptisms to the local Inspector of Cults was abandoned. No written instructions had formally announced these changes, for the Department of Cults preferred to keep silent. Baptist believers felt their strength renewed, and many pastors decided to claim their legal rights. Fear had been broken and thus the authorities lost their main lever of control. The support of the Baptist World Alliance at a relatively early stage also helped the Church through this period of self-discovery.

One cannot deny the benefits of these changes for the Baptist Church in Romania in the past three years. Yet much remains to be desired. Should a pastor be vulnerable to intimidation and opportunism the Department of Cults will try to use him to undermine the confidence of the believers. Those known to be leading Christians are closely watched. They live in an apocalyptic atmosphere never knowing when they might be removed from their jobs, summoned for interrogation or even arrested.

At University and in the schools young Baptists are humiliated because of their faith. To attend a Baptist youth meeting could mean the end of social and educational opportunities. Nor does the regular atheist propaganda encourage Baptists to relax their sceptical attitude towards the State's religious policy. Nevertheless some discover an inner freedom after accepting the cost of being a Christian. When Baptists have openly refused to be intimidated, large numbers of new believers have been attracted to the faith.¹⁹

The change of spirit within the Baptist movement was also shown by the joint protest of Baptist, Brethren and Pentecostal believers in May 1974 at the arrest and imprisonment of Vasile Rascol. Rascol was sentenced to two years in prison for distributing Bibles and other Christian literature.²⁰ Those who signed the protest document claimed that they were guilty of the same crime and offered to stand in the dock beside Rascol. In a second paper ("The place of the Christian in the Socialist Society") written shortly after the imprisonment of Rascol, Josif Ton challenged the State to reconsider its attitude towards believers, to question whether atheism was necessarily part of socialism, and to give Christians the freedom to contribute to society *as Christians*. Only another St. Bartholemew's night, he wrote, could break them. But even this would not destroy them altogether.²¹

State reaction to the Rascol Memorandum and to the second Ton paper was reminiscent of the late '50s. There were fears of a wholesale persecution of believers. However, the proceedings which opened on 4 October 1974 against 10 leading "troublemakers" were organized less harshly than in the '50s: each was interrogated and had his personal papers and books confiscated. At first the interrogations centred on three men – Josif Ton, Aurel Popescu and Pavel Niculescu – but soon hundreds of others were involved. Police visited many homes and discovered much Christian literature. Although by the end of the official enquiry no one had been imprisoned, people had been reminded of the power of the Secret Police.

A large number of Baptists are now demanding a different role from their leaders. Will the Baptist Union be able to preserve unity in the Church? By 1975 the church leaders, including pastors who had originally signed the memorandum of the 50 in 1973, had to some extent withdrawn from the fray. In contrast an influential movement among lay Baptists demanding better representation had developed. This movement pinned its hopes on the local association elections of delegates to serve in a new Baptist Union. The normal electoral procedure is that each of the six local associations in Romania vote for a proportionate number of delegates. These delegates are then elected to specific Union offices at the Baptist Congress. The local elections were held in December 1975.

These elections are of vital importance for the unity of the Baptist

Church. The Baptist Union President, Nicolae Covaci, on his retirement sent a letter²² to the Union explaining why he was retiring. He feared that a split could be imminent if the authorities attempted to interfere in any way in the selection of candidates for the new Union. Covaci spoke of "a movement for greater freedom" which had been steadily growing among Baptists over the past two years and he admitted that their grievances were not altogether unjustified. He mentioned his own problems in trying unsuccessfully to obtain permission to build or repair church buildings. He saw in this group a strong force which would not accept the old tactics of the Department of Cults. When elections were held in December last year, it appeared that the President's fears had been allayed. Several men were elected who are trusted by the people and hopes of strong representation were raised. The latest reports, however, indicate that the government has not recognized all the elected delegates and that the Congress is being delayed until the matter is settled. (The Congress should have been held last February-March.) The unity of the Baptist Church, therefore, remains in flux and its relations with the State continue to demand courage and wisdom from the Baptist faithful.

¹ "Trend reversed", *Baptist Times*, 3 July 1975, p. 3.

² For a Western Baptist's impression of Olah's preaching, see: John A. Moore, *European Baptist Press Service*, 24 December 1974, pp. 3-4.

³ Dr. Alexei Popovici, "A hundred and ten years of Baptists in Romania", *European Baptist*, Vol. VII, No. 1, 1967.

⁴ In the villages it was common strategy for the Baptist preachers to score points in their preaching at the expense of the reputation of the local Orthodox priest. They would publicly denigrate his character and urge men to follow their way. There was not only strife between Baptists and the Orthodox, but often between neo-Protestant groups, such as Baptists and Pentecostals.

⁵ Decree No. 972, 1942.

⁶ Popovici, *op. cit.* Another estimate has placed the number of Baptists at that time in the region of 38,000.

⁷ In 1948 the Uniates were forcibly reintegrated into the Orthodox Church. Many who refused to accept this were arrested and imprisoned. The Latin-rite Catholics stood by their fellow Catholics and sometimes shared their suffering. Among the Orthodox, the group known as the Lord's Army, also suffered from lack of legal recognition. This was a revivalist group within the Romanian Orthodox Church which had been disassociated from the Church but had functioned freely up to the time of the Second World War. Its leaders have probably spent more time in prison than any members of the other denominations in Romania since 1948. See: "Evangelical Wing of the Orthodox Church in Romania", *RCL Vol. 3, No. 6, 1975*, pp. 15-18.

⁸ "Instructions" refer to the unwritten dispositions which are handed down to the various Churches by the Department of Cults through the denominational leaders. See: Josif Ton, *The Present Day Situation in the Baptist Church of Romania*, *RCL Supplementary Paper No. 1, 1973*, p. 15.

⁹ Ton, *op. cit.*, p. 15. Church services were held until 1974 over the twenty-four hour period of Saturday dusk to Sunday dusk. The churches normally had services on Saturday evening and on the following Sunday morning.

¹⁰ Such as the "Moisistii" from Arad. The name derived from that of their alleged "leader", Vasile Moisesescu. He was a gifted scientist and theologian who gathered round him believers who wished to share their faith more frequently and in

greater intimacy than the conditions in society and Church would then allow. Many of this group, including Moisescu, are alive today. They are still carefully watched by the Secret Police. Their efforts to serve within the Church structure have been hampered.

¹¹ Official figures show that approximately 12,750 prisoners were released between 1962-65.

¹² Ton, *op. cit.* pp. 5-7.

¹³ Published in English as RCL Supplementary Paper No. 1 in November 1973. Still available at Keston College.

¹⁴ The Department of Cults was at that time known as the Ministry of Cults. The functions of the Ministry were outlined in the Decree No. 33, 1949. It gave the Ministry powers of supervision and control. These were handed over to the Department of Cults when it was defined by law in Decree No. 334, 1970. More accurately, therefore, the phrase "Law of Cults" should include the other specific laws on Cults, which at the time of writing were not available at Keston College.

¹⁵ Decree No. 177, 1948, Art. 38.

¹⁶ Ton's own attitude towards his past failure is reflected in his sermons which are dominated by two themes: God's victory revealed in the Lamb, His Son, i.e. through suffering; and the mercy and forgiveness of God, offered to the worst of sinners, whom the Holy Spirit can transform radically.

¹⁷ Dr. Ronald Goulding, "Links are getting stronger", *Baptist Times*, 30 May 1974, p. 3.

¹⁸ Pavel Niculescu, RCL Vol. 2, No. 4-5, July-August 1974, pp. 36-37.

¹⁹ An unusual source of Church advertising for the Baptists have been broadcasts about their troubles from outside. In some cases it has encouraged Christians from other denominations to speak out about their own difficulties.

²⁰ KNS No. 4, pp. 3-6.

²¹ Josif Ton, *The place of the Christian in the Socialist Society*, RCL Supplementary Paper No. 2, 1976, p. 19.

²² "Letter of the President of the Baptist Union, Nicolae Covaci, to the Union Council members", dated November 1975. (KNS No. 19, 12 December 1975).