

# At the Beginnings of the Journey Towards Europe: The Protestant Reform and the Romanian Transylvanian Literature of the XVI<sup>th</sup>-XVII<sup>th</sup> Century

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*Motto:*

*“[...] that God hasn't made people for kings, but God has chosen the kings and rulers to look after and guard them [...] as shepherds take care of their herds, because this is their job [...]”*

*(Noul Testament, Alba Iulia, 1648, Predoslovie către Măria Sa Craiul Ardealului)*

*“[...] if you love the book then read, listen and learn, because it will make you follow the right path, it will give you a good name and unforgotten charity on earth and on heaven, and happiness to your soul.”*

*(Ion Zoba from Vinț, Cărare pre scurt pre fapte bune îndereptătoare, Sebeș, 1685, Predoslovie către cetitori)*

## Rezumat

### Debuturile literaturii religioase de expresie românească din Transilvania și influențele Reformei

*În secolele XVI-XVII, în Transilvania, în condițiile manifestării Reformei protestante, a reacțiilor Reconquistei Catolice, dar ale și bisericii ortodoxe vizavi de prozelitismul Reformei, se realizează un progres cultural incontestabil. Acest progres a fost generat de pretențiile Reformei protestante de a câștiga sufletele românilor și a fost miezul reformei resimțite de societatea românească transilvăneană, consecința efortului Bisericii românești de a adapta schimbarea impusă și a se renova din interior pentru ca astfel pe de o parte să răspundă solicitărilor de îmbunătățire a vieții spirituale reclamate de enoriași și, pe de altă parte, să evite reticența acestora în fața înnoirilor și revolta lor în fața pericolului convertirii. În acest context, tipăriturile literaturii religioase în limba română au fost, până la urma urmei, indiferent de influențele confesionale, spre „folosul și întrămarea neamului”.*

The present tendency of Europe, beside the anticipated material prosperity, has the great advantage because it obliges people to reevaluate the past. The historiographic speech insisted too much on what differentiated the Romanians, in this case the Transylvanians, from other ethnic communities with whom they lived

along time. On this cultural, confessional, social, economic, political difference, the base of their condition as tolerated towards which they were pushed along history, was built. Or, it is sufficiently proved that where there are more traditions, there are increased chances of development in any domain of human existence. The history of the Romanians from Transylvania between the middle of XVIth century and the end of the XVIIth century fully respects this direction and the purpose of the following lines is to remember that the miserable reality, mainly highlighted till now, wasn't the only manifestation form of the Romanians' presence on these regions. On the contrary, aware of the disadvantages of their statute, they weren't pleased to accept their fate submissively and acted according to the specific means of the period, „to the use and accomplishment of our nation“<sup>1</sup>. This reality which, also used specific means of the period, aimed at the closeness to the others, to diminish the differences, by renouncing to the isolation of some values anyway inaccessible in an ivory tower; it proves to be the opposite less and less medieval of the same temptation of Europe that we feel today.

The individualization of these temporal segments of the more than ample process of convergence of East towards West is given by the catchwords with which it was operated. If nowadays this catchword is *democracy*, in the XVIth – XVIIth century energies were consumed to impose *reform*. A reform which firstly was intended to be one of the spirit, but which included the whole society along time. A reform which began through naming as the Protestant Reform, then the Catholic Reform and that which nowadays is given several appellatives such as culturalization, social disciplination, confessionalization, tolerance, national spirit, as instruments to highlight the modernization process of religiosity and the European society on the whole.

Taking into consideration Transylvania, *reform* is associated with *tolerance* surprisingly early enough. Of course, not the tolerance barely referred to in the previous paragraph, but the one encoded by the edicts issued by the Diet's resolutions, through which Transylvania individualized as the state of the four denominations accepted officially (Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist and Unitarian) and situated in evident contradiction to the tolerant Orthodox denomination. Thus, a tolerance that is selective, selfish, oppressive at first sight.

The benefits which derive from the application of the tolerance principle are cast a shadow on too many times by evidencing the serious limits, forgetting, sometimes deliberately, that the limits were firstly of the period. Interpreting the Transylvanian tolerance as a function of state reason and a form of political weakness<sup>2</sup>, undeniably correct, diminishes the fact that the equality of the Catholic and Lutheran denominations was decreed for the first time in Transylvania in 1550; that Transylvania was the only state whose government was ran by a Unitarian prince; that the appearance of new ecclesiastic hierarchies in Transylvania wasn't accompanied by politic violence, and the fight for throne wasn't the consequence of a conflict to impose a certain belief. All these characteristics created real opportunities to manifest

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase belongs to Ioan Zoba from Vinț (*Cărare pre scurt pre fapte bune îndereptătoare*, Sebeș, 1685, *Predoslovie către Măria Sa Craiul ...*).

<sup>2</sup> See the remarkable works written by Binder 1976, and Murdock 2000.

the liberty of conscience, determining the confessional environment and the political one, at last, from Transylvania to be one of the most relaxed along the epoch- that epoch that generated the 30 year war, and lived under the pressure of its consequences afterwards.

The place and the role of the Romanians couldn't be exclusively outlying in the sketched atmosphere from this introduction. The evolution of the Orthodox Bishopric of Transylvania, whose residence in Alba Iulia conferred a spiritual conotation to the political-administrative capital of the Principality too, although was marked by the virulent means the Calvinist proselytism used to seduce it, evidences an extraordinary capacity to adapt to the requirements of time, more visible especially along the XVIIth century and whose tangible proofs make today the priceless book stock printed under its patronage. Actually, the intellectual increase which accompanied the adjustment process proved to be good for the Romanian society on the whole, reviving most varied domains. Thus, the compulsoriness of using the Romanian language as cult language, of learning the fundamental prayers after the Calvinist catechism, of the elimination of superstitions which were contrasting flagrantly with the teaching of the Church, of the usage of the sermon as a means of educating the believers in the spirit of some authentic Christian values, although there have been imperatives of the Calvinizing programme conceived by the Hungarian superintendents and imposed to the spiritual leaders of the Romanians, the ability and diplomacy of the latter transformed them into efficient means of outrunning the inertia and self-importance that characterised the Orthodox world then, but also into means of eluding the Church status and tolerated nation acknowledged through *Approbatæ Constitutiones*. The missionary and disciplinary effort promoted by the Orthodox Church of Transylvania aimed at a necessary reform, whose characteristics and directions of action took shape as people became aware of their importance, on the one hand, the real privations of the Christianity practiced by the Romanians, on the other hand the advantages that could be obtained through the application of certain Protestant principles. The attempt to renovate the Romanian spirituality, especially promoted through printed book, proves the existence of a Church aware of its role it had in the historic evolution of the people it represented in the XVIIth century.

Till now, more often an affirmation like this was sustained by the well known quote from the preface of the *New Testament* from Alba Iulia which associated words with money, underlining the efficacy of an understood thing, no matter what its domain is: „We ask you to remember this that the Romanians neither speak the same language in the whole countries, nor in a country the same[...] We know that words must be like money, that money which is found in all countries is good, so words that everybody understands are good; we tried, as much as we could, to translate so that everyone can understand [...]”<sup>1</sup>.

The referred documentary source also offers a sample of almost exceptional modernity for the environment in which it was created and which we place it as a

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<sup>1</sup> *Noul Testament*, Alba Iulia, 1648, *Predoslovie către cititori*, f. [I<sup>v</sup>]. This paper benefits from a critic edition published with the blessing of the Emilian of Alba Iulia bishop, in 1988 and republished with the blessing of archbishop Andrei in 1998.

preamble to the present lines. It is about the invocation of the metropolitan bishop Simion Ștefan of what the philosophers of the age named the social contract. It is completely new the image that presents Simion Ștefan the one who was tolerated two times, as Orthodox and as Romanian recalling to the authoritative prince Gheorghe Rákóczi I which are his obligations towards the poor of the poorest. His tone, moderate without being servile, even if it brings forward the founding merits of its „king“, already proves a certain detachment with which the Romanian elite used some of the most advanced ideas of the time<sup>1</sup>.

The ruler's care for his subjects is efficacious only with a direct answer from the latter, who must be open to listening and learning, reaching a harmony that may be applied both to the every day living, which stops being to be a „vale of tears“, and the timeless living, where soul's salvation becomes this way more than accessible. This is the message of printed books sent by the greatest Transylvanian scholar of the period, archpriest Ioan Zoba from Vințu de Jos at the end of XVIIth century; he is a personality whose biography still controversial never stops to fascinate.

Both speeches, that of Simion Ștefan and Ioan Zoba, place as connection points between the participants at the dialogue – the prince and the Romanian subjects -, but especially as opportunities towards progress, two essential elements for the functioning of any modern society: the printing house and the school, reduced to one common thing: the book. It is the way through which „ the enlightenment of our Romanian people“, will bring „ gain and recovery“ meaning that it will make possible to get jobs, it will increase the number of those who owned noble titles, it will assure the wellbeing and finally when the journey ends here on the Earth, it will open the sky's gates.

The two scholars met among the contemporaries enough examples that proved they didn't have vain hopes. By implicating the clergy in the spritual recovery of the nation, beginning with the supreme archbishop resident in Alba Iulia to the anonymous priests, often proves civic capacities and through these, once more draws near to the epoch's standards, breaking up the lethargy of the medieval world.

The nobleness of the spirit, evidenced through the effort of spreading culture in the Orthodox Romanian environment, became a quality which the politic authorities do not hesitate to frame as „vera et perfectae nobilitatis titulo“. Since the recompensation of such „faithful services“ had some benefits on the near relation too, and all their offsprings, the contribution brough by the Romanian scholars to the increase of the social category of the nobles in the XVIIth century is of great importance. An attentive study will clarify even better the truth, only intuited till recently, that the noble origin of those who will get involved in the national fight in the following centuries belongs to the XVIIth centuries.

The Romanian book and the nobleness it was associated with or the one it generated, benefits from such a recognition of the merits for lesser time, and the reserves in front of the progresses obtained under the pressure of the Protestant Reform are still pretty serious. More diminished, especially by the philologists' researcherches, the opinion that printed literature in Romanian language from the

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<sup>1</sup> See Miskolczy too 1994 and 1995.

Transylvanian area in the XVIth-XVIIth centuries could have an anti-Romanian destination and aimed at the disintegration of the spiritual superstate unity based on Orthodoxy continues to dominate the circle of the specialists, theologians and historians alike. The opinions that propose an individualised discussion, on each title, as those which through a thorough analysis reveal an extraordinary symbiosis between the Protestants' performances regarding the interpretation of the Scriptures and the liturgic necessities of Orthodoxy, are more and more present too<sup>1</sup>.

A synthesis of the latter puts us in front of a stock of 25 printed books in Romanian language in Transylvania, between 1544-1696<sup>2</sup>, among which one (*Diplome privilegiale*, Alba Iulia, 1653) is different from a thematic point of view, being the only period with a laic character<sup>3</sup>, two of them are republished (*Evanghelie cu învățătură*, Braşov, 1580-1581, republished in Alba Iulia in 1641; *Ceasloveş*, Alba Iulia, 1685-1686, republished in Sibiu în 1696), three are colligata (*Tâlcul Evangheliilor și Molitevnice rumânesc*, Alba Iulia?, 1567-1568; *Scutul catichizmului și Cinul și învățătură pre scurt de Sfintele Taine*, Alba Iulia, 1656; *Molitevnice și Cazanii la oameni morți*, Alba Iulia, 1689), 24 were written in Cyrillic and two of them in Latin (*Carte de cântece*, Cluj, 1570; *Catechismus*, Alba Iulia, 1648). The last ones are books with a clear Calvinist content, destined almost exclusively to the usage of the Romanians already converted to Calvinism. The deliberate Protestant proselytism is owed to the first two colligata, which are catechesis books combined with liturgic texts that propose a Calvinist ritual, and other two catechesis books (*Catehism*, Sibiu, 1544; *Catehismus creștinesc*, Prisac, 1642).

Within the content of the other books left, the Protestant spirit is combined with the Orthodox one in a bigger or smaller percent, depending on the case. Generally, the balance inclines in favour of the Protestant spirit for the prints from the XVIth century; it stays in a relative equilibrium at the middle of the XVIIth century, so that towards the end of this century it would incline in favour of the Orthodox spirit. Lack of balance periods are not under the sign of aggressiveness which the Calvinist proselytism was associated with, we rather have to do with imbalances determined by inherent hesitations of the beginnings. The disproportion that initially favoured Calvinism gets smaller as modalities through which the efficient Protestant principles of organizing and coordinating the religious life may be combined with dogma and Byzantine ritual. Unfortunately, in neither cases the elements of the equation haven't been kept to may establish how much of what today appears added to the Protestant spirit really was the contribution of the proselytism's pressure or is rather the reflection, in the only „mirror“ had at disposal, of the own need to reform the Transylvanian Orthodox Church<sup>4</sup>.

This obscurity of the documents, which determines the same information to have several interpretations, more often in total contradiction, will probably disappear when the mentality of the epoch is known better. For now we may say that the index of the Romanian Transylvanian book from the XVIth-XVIIth centuries contains

<sup>1</sup> To see especially Gheție (coord.) 1982, Gheție, Mareș 1985 and 1994.

<sup>2</sup> For their references see BRV, vol. I and vol. IV.

<sup>3</sup> See Răduțiu 1975.

<sup>4</sup> See Dumitran too 2003 a.

beside the already enumerated titles, six translations after the texts of the Scripture; they were made at least at the suggestion of the prozelytism's promoters, but which may have an important part in improving the pastoral service of any Church and, so, that of which mainly the Orthodox Church benefited from (*Tetraevanghel*, Braşov, 1560-1561; *Apostol*, Braşov, 1566; *Psaltire*, Braşov, 1570; *Palia*, Orăştie, 1581-1582; *Noul Testament*, Alba Iulia, 1648; *Psaltire*, Alba Iulia, 1651). The most obvious case is that of *The New Testament* from Alba Iulia, with a highly scientific content and great typographic quality, whose realisation is a part of the editorial programme conceived for the Romanian Church by the Calvinist superintendent: the translation followed the most advanced Protestant editions of the epoch, but the typical indications strictly respect the Byzantin rite<sup>1</sup>.

The index continues with the catechesis papers: a catechism (*Întrebare creştinească*, Braşov, 1560) and five collections of sermons, all edited under the Orthodox Church patronage, in a close relationship with the Protestant environment. In what concerns the catechism, the extraordinary dogmatic complexity makes impossible the establishing of a certain confessional affiliation. The two *Evangelii cu învăţătură* (Braşov, 1580-1581 and Alba Iulia, 1641), in spite of the „clean Orthodox“ content, because they are Romanian transpositions of some sermons made by the patriarch from Constantinople John Calecas, do not escape the accusation of compromise with the Protestantism because of the selective publishing of the sermons that composed the initial collection after which the translation was made<sup>2</sup>. The two collections of funeral sermons, both owed to archpriest Ioan Zoba from Vinţ (*Sicriul de aur*, Sebeş, 1683, and *Cazanii la oameni morţi*, Alba Iulia, 1689) are real lessons of Orthodoxy, inspired by the Protestant reform as literary genre, as way of organizing the speech, and last but not least, they are the consequences of the readings from the specific literature of their author<sup>3</sup>.

More evident it is the Protestant origin of the only paper with moral content printed in Romanian in the epoch, because it is a translation, through Hungarian intermediary, from the pietist English literature, made by the same controversial scholar from Vinţ, archpriest Ioan Zoba. It is surprising to notice the sensibility with which he chose the text, it does not propose a certain creed, but recommends a daily behaviour whose respecting would honour every Christian<sup>4</sup>.

At first sight the rest of the seven papers is believed it doesn't have anything in common with the Protestant Reform. In reality only passing time made more difficult to reveal the implication of the Reform in renouncing to the sacred Slavonic language in favour of the spoken and understood language, and the constant defensive attitude which the Transylvanian Orthodox Church had to adopt along its dialogue with Protestantism, necessitated the usage of the Romanian language too to be efficient. So it is that although in the juridic literature (*Pravila*, Braşov, 1560-1562), catechesis

<sup>1</sup> For details see Gherman 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See Gheţie, Mareş 1994, p. 108-113 (for *Evangelii cu învăţătură*, Braşov, 1580-1581) and Mărza 1998, p. 27-30 (for *Evangelii cu învăţătură*, Alba Iulia, 1641).

<sup>3</sup> Pentru ele vezi *Ioan Zoba din Vinţ, Sicriul de aur*, ediţie îngrijită de Anton Goţia, Bucureşti, 1984, şi Dumitran 2003 b, p. 279-296.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of its content see Dumitran 1995, p. 144-145.

literature (*Poveste la 40 de mucenici*, Alba Iulia, 1689, but beside the already remembered papers) and ritual literature (*Liturghier*, Braşov, 1570; *Ceasloveţ*, Alba Iulia, 1685-1686; *Rânduiala diaconstvelor*, Alba Iulia, 1687; *Molitvenic*, Alba Iulia, 1689; *Ceasloveţ*, Sibiu, 1696) we have the most intimate joining of the Protestant principle of the native usage with the Eastern Orthodox teachings; nevertheless only the latter is obvious, because it is the only one that offers confessional identity. An identity which, essentially Orthodox, through its effort to reach the surface, suffered an inevitable reform. Or this is the great merit of Transylvanian Orthodox Church that it succeeded, overcoming all the vicissitudes of the period and the so specific conservatorism of the ecclesiastic environment, to prove a real civilizing force.

So that the editorial image to be completed, there must be added to these 25 Romanian printings another four Slav-Romanian titles (*Evangheliar*, Sibiu, 1551-1553; *Psaltire*, Braşov?, 1568; *Psaltire*, Braşov, 1577; *Psaltire*, Braşov, 1588) which beside the didactic character they presume and theoretically may absolve them from the „guilt“ to be subordinated to the Protestant proselytism, remain the best example of convergence between the Protestant missionarism and the Orthodox one. The first is found in the similarity of the Romanian versions of the translations from these publications with the version printed for sure under Protestant patronage. The latter is revealed by the need of improving the professional service of the Orthodox clergy, thus indicating a predisposition of the Orthodox Church to reform from inside<sup>1</sup>.

This review of the books through which „our Romanian kin“ had „to recover spiritually“<sup>2</sup> cannot be complete without some mentions about „the hard-working people“ who made them. Unfortunately, the information we have on them is more than modest, even for the most famous names. Most of them are anonymous, whether it is about simple workers from the printing establishment, those who made the translations or those who have given the final form to the printed item. Even for those renowned more than often information is reduced to a name, an uncertain registering of their presence in a certain place or function. At the best cases, a diploma of ennoblement completes the poor sketch of some biographies. Despite these shortcomings, some of them became important figures, their name being closely connected with some phenomena from the cultural and religious life of the Romanians from the XVI-XVIIth centuries. It is the case of Coresi – the brave deacon typographer from Braşov in whose printing establishment the basis of the Romanian language were set –, the case of Simion Ştefan – the author of the *New Testament* from Alba Iulia –, the case of Ioan Zoba from Vinţ – the restless generator of conflicts inside the Romanian church, initially characterized by the historians as a notorious Calvinist, and then philocalvinist –, the case of Gheorghe Pop from Daia – his principal assistant who abandoned the Calvinization programme just to become the

<sup>1</sup> See especially Demény, Demény 1986 and Gheţie, Mareş 1994 for questions raised by the Slav-Romanian printings.

<sup>2</sup> *Ceasloveţ*, Alba Iulia, 1685-1686, the preface is dedicated to the metropolitan bishop.

„first Greek-Catholic“<sup>1</sup> but both authors of some books that were famous in the ecclesiastical history of the Romanians from Transylvania.

An interesting fact is that the profoundness of the researches revealed each time a different side of the physiognomy of those involved. In a new hypostasis, Coresi and Simion Ștefan, the most deserving, begin to share laurels with a whole pleiad of scholars, lots of them still being anonymous, while the defects which represented almost the only elements that made the portrait of Ioan Zoba or Gheorghe Pop from Daia, fade away leaving place to some positive traits beyond a doubt.

These changes of situation serve the whole image about literature and the Romanian Transylvanian literature in general in the XVI-XVIIth century; they proved that those who formed characters weren't isolated figures, even exotic, acting in an environment mostly timeless because lack of knowledge. On the contrary, the Romanian scholars of the period appear as persons of their time, preoccupied with the quality of the scientific prestation to which they had to contribute, conscious of how valuable the cultural act is, eager to develop personally and the ethno – confessional group they acted for. For this reason they didn't shrink from appealing to the most unusual means, the dexterity with which some of them handled the means make them accusable of succeeding in, opportunism, collaborationism, betrayal of the traditional creed, joining the kin's oppressors. And yet, they are the leaders of the modern spirit in the Romanian world, they were the first who intuited that future will be better only if they turned towards western Europe, and they didn't hesitate to negotiate their soul so such an ideal to get shape in the Romanian society. That is why it should be better not to judge them after results, meaning after the distorted results that reached till us, but after the courage and generosity that animated them, the perseverance they strived to reshape times. Their culture was for sure an European one, and it is more frustrating that we don't know where they got it from. Their adventure was for sure European too, following the highest standards of time, and it is more frustrating that nowadays there are so many reservations in knowing their greatness, reproaching their modest wealth, or even worse, preferences for a certain confessional identity.

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<sup>1</sup> The expression belongs to Gheorghe Bogdan-Duică and is owed to the major role that Gheorghe Pop from Daia had, in the last years of the XVIIth century, in the union process of Rome with the Transylvanian Romanian Church. See Bogdan-Duică 1928, no. 297.



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