

“AUREL VLAICU” UNIVERSITY ARAD

INTERDISCIPLINARY DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

**A Protestant - Evangelical Perspective on the
Ecclesiology of Ion Bria**

- abstract of the doctoral thesis -

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2019

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Abstract of the doctoral thesis

Ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the Church, has been a constant concern of Orthodox theologians, but not only, especially since the last century, with its echoes to this day, for what the Church means in the public and personal consciousness, life and testimony, of every Christian.

This has led some theologians to define the twentieth century as the century of ecclesiology or the Church. Among them there is Ion Bria (1929 - 2002). On the other hand, we cannot but ask ourselves, where does this major concern stem from, related to ecclesiology? What intimate resorts have caused so many Christian consciences to have a remarkable passion for such a theme? To answer these questions, by calling upon the ecclesiological doctrine of Ion Bria, but also the Evangelical-Protestant one, we must refresh ourselves in our conscience, what is Church in fact? What relevance does it have to the world, for every believer in particular? What is its specific mission nowadays?

All these questions, along with many others, always wait for an answer, but in essence they point to the specificity, nature, mission or the being of the Church. However, some theological coordinates must be retained in this context, and the present paper seeks to come up with some answers, directions and perspectives in this regard.

Throughout the research, we tried to mainly use primary bibliographic sources, ie the corpus of Ion Bria's writings, especially those relating to the ecclesiological doctrine, of which we mention *Aspecte dogmatice ale unirii Bisericii creștine (Dogmatic aspects of the union of Christian Churches – t.n.)* (PhD thesis), *Martyria-Mission. The Witness of the Orthodox Churches today, The Liturgy after the Liturgy. Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective, Liturgy after Liturgy, Biserica - Una Sancta in light of the Orthodox tradition, Treaty of Dogmatic and*

Ecumenical Theology and others and also the studies "Ecclesiology of communion", "Christian ministry in the contemporary world", "Priesthood and Church", "Introduction to Orthodox ecclesiology", "The presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the Church", "Orthodox Contributions to Ecumenical Theology of Today ", " Pastoral Ecclesiology ", " Christian Testimony in the Orthodox Church. Current Aspects, Possibilities and Perspectives", "Church and Liturgy ", "Orthodoxy and Its Significance Today ", "Unité des chrétiens et mission de l'Église et le renouveau de la communauté humaine", "Ecclésiologie. Préoccupations et mutations actuelles", "Mission ans Secularization in Europe", to mention the most important ones.

All these have been passed through the filter of the latest papers and studies in the field, especially English and French, but also - especially where absolutely necessary - German or another language. Somehow, it was also a pioneering work because the Orthodox ecclesiological doctrine, in this case that of Bria's, did not benefit from special attention from the Protestant and Evangelical theologians, with a few exceptions, represented by the professors Emil Bartoș, Paul Negruț, Corneliu Simuț, Dănuț Mănăstireanu and Daniel Oprean.

In our research, we will focus especially on the dogmatic and missionary aspects, but we will also not omit the Christological, pneumatological, practical or ecumenical ones. In fact, the purpose of the research is to be an interdisciplinary one, with an ecumenical tendency, that is, to bring Bria's ecclesiology where it belongs, or as it is seen from the Protestant-Evangelical perspective.

We appreciate that the plan of the work considers the most important ecclesiological aspects, but also their implications for the life and mission of the Church. The seven chapters proposed (Ecclesiology in Orthodox Dogmatics, Orthodox Ecclesiology and Orthodox Church, Orthodox Ecclesiology and Orthodox Mission, Orthodox Ecclesiology and Practice, Orthodox Ecclesiology and Pneumatology, Ecclesiology and Ecumenism, Analysis and Assessment from a Protestant-Evangelical Perspective), together with the subchapters of each, represent attempts to present the stated subject in relation to the methodological, ethical and scientific requirements in force.

Of course, such an incursion into the orthodox ecclesiology of Ion Bria, from a Protestant-Evangelical perspective, has its limits. These are given, on the one hand, by the many writings of the proposed author, which are at the order of the tens, some of which are unavailable because they appeared in limited editions within the World Council of Churches, and on the other hand, due to the fact that the Protestant-Evangelical ecclesiology is so vast, varied and dynamic, it would be virtually impossible to analyze everything written in this direction. Therefore, the work is

perfectible, not exhaustive, and any scientifically motivated opinion received in this respect is welcome.

In this paper we have tried to use a methodology that combines both dogmatic or ecclesiological and ecumenical aspects. However, the vision we have tried to comply with during the writing was that of their simultaneous application, so that the elements of historical analysis investigated by the exposure method were not presented as mere sterile historical data, unobstructed by ecclesiological and dogmatic content and meaning, but elements that determine the understanding of certain realities. Also, the systematic view has taken into account all the historical exposures. The exposure method is a secondary application in this paper, but it seeks to substantiate other useful methods. In countless passages we have made use of the analytical and exegetical method, or the exegetic-comparative one.

The working methods used required a selection of Bria's writings, given their complexity and variety. In this view, we used primary sources, that is, the consecrated basic works that touch ecclesiological or Church doctrine. The sources were predominantly Romanian, but where we felt absolutely necessary, we also used those published in the West, in English or French (as much as we had access to them).

Being probably the closest Orthodox theologian as a thinker and conception of the Protestant and Evangelical Theology, we have tried to pass his ecclesiological views through the filter of this theology, represented in our country by the three professors mentioned (obviously in the field of the Church doctrine). Their general view is that, with some inevitable theological nuances, Bria's ecclesiological doctrine is not very different from the Protestant-Evangelical one, which proves that, at first, the doctrine of the Church and that about the Church were one. Hence, the reception of Bria's work by these theologians is partly positive, the Orthodox theologian being cited and increasingly used in the works of the Protestant and Evangelical theologians, an aspect that can only make us happy, the present work belonging to this frame.

Considering the complexity and immenseness of Ion Bria's work and the fact that we do not intend to carry out an exhaustive study of his work, we have summarized the analysis of the main books and studies of the author dealing especially with ecclesiology: *Dogmatic Aspects of the Unity of the Churches Christian, Martyria-Mission. The Witness of the Orthodox Churches today, The Liturgy after the Liturgy. Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective, Liturgy after the Liturgy, The Church - Una Sancta in light of the Orthodox tradition, The Treaty of Dogmatic and*

Ecumenical Theology and others, as well as the studies "Ecclesiology of communion", "Christian ministry in the contemporary world", "Priesthood and Church" "Introduction to Orthodox Ecclesiology", "Presence and Work of the Holy Spirit in the Church", "Orthodox Contributions to Ecumenical Theology of Today", "Unité des chrétiens et mission de l'Église et le renouveau de la communauté humaine", "Ecclésiologie. Préoccupations et mutations actuelles", "Mission ans Secularization in Europe", to mention the most important ones.

We chose these books and studies because we believe that they best present the vision on the Church of Ion Bria. However, we emphasize that, perhaps with the exception of the first part of the *Dogmatic Aspects of the union of the Christian Churches*, the chapter dedicated to ecclesiology in the *Treaty of Dogmatic and Ecumenical Theology*, or studies such as "Ecclesiology of Communion", "Pastoral Ecclesiology" and "Ecclésiologie. Préoccupations et mutations actuelles ", Bria's work does not contain strictly ecclesiological elements, if we can call them so, but everywhere, his ecclesiology is treated in a differentiated and interdisciplinary way, that is, not only theoretically, with emphasis on dogma, but mostly practically, on its pastoral and social implications.

In this context, the books and studies chosen for this doctoral thesis did not necessarily address the theory (ie dogma), which of course we presented in all its complexity, especially the practical results of dogma, how it can be transposed in the life of the Church, the Christian community, how it can change the life of this community. Even if it is a revealed, immovable truth, dogma is best experienced in the community of faith, in the world and in society, a point very directly and eloquently emphasized by Ion Bria and increasingly present in the contemporary Protestant - Evangelical Ecclesiology.

Moreover, we note from these works Bria's interest in biblical ecclesiology, a fundamental aspect of the Protestant-Evangelical position. Also, the emphasis on pneumatology, as well as the social implications of the doctrine of the Church, are visions specific to the Protestant-Evangelical ecclesiology. Obviously, we cannot agree with some historical aspects, such as the unity and uniqueness of the Orthodox Church in relation to other Christian denominations, or aspects related to the founding, being and attributes of the Church, but if we first seek what unites us, surely, through open and sincere dialogue, the other divergences can be resolved.

Among the Protestant-Evangelical theologians, we selected mainly those theologians who focused their work on Eastern Orthodox theology, with a special look at the theology and ecclesiology of Ion Bria. Of these, it is worth mentioning Anna Marie Aagaard and Peter Bouteneff (*Beyond the East-West Divide: The World Council of Churches and "the Orthodox Problem"*, 2001, a work published under the aegis of the WCC, edited by an Orthodox and Lutheran theologian, seeks to present common points of view in inter-Christian dialogues, insisting, among others, on the role of Ion Bria in the ecumenical dialogue); Carl S. Tynah (*Orthodox Christianity: Overview and Bibliography*, 2003, a monumental work dedicated to Eastern Christianity and its doctrine, accompanied by a rich index arranged by title, subject and author, including Ion Bria); Corneliu Simuț (*Traditionalism and Radicalism in the History of Christian Thought*, 2010, in which the author dedicates an entire chapter to Ion Bria's pastoral ecclesiology and its relevance to the Christian theology of the 20th century) and Henning Wrogemann (*Intercultural Theology, Volume Two: Theologies of Mission*, 2018, an outstanding theological work dedicated to Christian Missiology, in which the author, who is also the president of the German Society of Missiology, approaches and accepts positively some aspects of Ion Bria's missiology.)

We chose these works, besides the others in the bibliographic list at the end of the thesis, because the theologians concerned analyzed the issue from an open ecumenical perspective, emphasizing the common Orthodox and Protestant-Evangelical elements. Theology should focus on common elements, recognized by all parties, which are real means of dialogue, but also of openness, tolerance and mutual support. It is worth emphasizing here the role of Professor Corneliu Simuț, who, in the above-mentioned work, dedicating a whole chapter to Bria's pastoral ecclesiology, underlines his role and contribution in the Romanian Orthodox Church, but from a Protestant-Evangelical perspective. By this, we consider it absolutely beneficial that the author, beyond confessional boundaries, speaks of an Orthodox theologian in Protestant-Evangelical language.

The results of our synthetic attempt are considered to be multiple. First of all, we have a presentation of Ion Bria's orthodox ecclesiology, a novelty in evangelical Romanian theology.

Then this ecclesiology is passed through the Protestant-Evangelical ecclesiology filter, and finally, through the filter of ecumenical ecclesiology promoted so much by Bria.

Presenting the role and mission of the Church today is again an important result of our research so that we can better understand what we need to change or what we must do to bring as many people as possible to faith and eventually to God.

This thesis is divided into seven chapters, of unitary length and complexity, in which we have tried to cover the whole topic announced, obviously, without claiming to have exhausted the subject, given the relatively extensive research scope.

Thus, the first chapter, entitled "Orthodox Ecclesiology and Dogmatics", wishes to discuss, inter alia, the concept of "ecclesiology" (or the doctrine of the Church) and its place in Orthodox dogmatics. To understand this concept, there is a need to review what the concept of "dogma" means in the theology of Ion Bria, who speaks in his writings about the meaning and ecclesiological value of Orthodox dogmas, too. That is why, in his vision, ecclesiology is dogma and dogmatics in the same time, by virtue of the many dogmatic and ecumenical implications which the doctrine of the Church implies.

The second chapter, entitled "Ecclesiology and the Orthodox Church", is basically a synthetic presentation of the concept of "church" (*ecclesia*) in the dogmatic thought of the Orthodox theologian. Thus, in Bria's vision, the founding of the Church is the foundation of ecclesiology, the doctrine of the Church in time and space. At the same time, the manifestations of the Church, its appointments and its being are essential points in the understanding of the ecclesiological doctrine. Finally, passing through all these, Bria comes to the conclusion that the Orthodox Church is "Una Sancta" in light of Orthodox Tradition, which is why this concept becomes fundamental in its ecclesiology.

With Chapter Three we enter into the practical sphere of ecclesiology, namely the connection between ecclesiology and missiology, from the point of view of our theologian. We could not begin this presentation without specifying some general missionary aspects in Bria's work, which starts in defining and applying them from the Pentecostal or missionary character of the apostolic and primary Church. For today, he proposes a new pastoral-missionary desideratum, which consists in "setting new perspectives and pastoral, missionary, cultural and social institutions that the today's society needs." These new missionary perspectives include, among other things, the consolidation of parish life, the integration of believers into the rhythm and the liturgical mystery, the ways of transmitting the Christian faith to today's society, the quality and responsibility of the

priest as the shepherd of souls, and the encouragement of the common witness of the Orthodox with the others Christians in our country.

Naturally, this chapter is followed by the fourth, which deals more closely, from the point of view of Orthodox practice, with the ecclesiological missionary principles enunciated by Ion Bria. To begin with, we consider it necessary to review the situation of the Church and society both in communism and after 1989, periods of great trials and challenges to the Church, such as the persecution (in the first period) and the libertarianism (in the second, until today). However, Ion Bria insists on the unity that must exist between the parish and the local Church, using as a model the parish's internal unity, which must extend to the whole Church. Another important aspect is the common witness that the Orthodox are obliged to practice, along with the believers of other Churches and Christian denominations, and above all, towards non-Christians.

Next, reference is made to the concept of "Divine Liturgy", understood as the continuation of the Liturgy, communion with God and outside the walls of the church, in the world and in society seven days out of seven. In this view, the Christian is obliged to take the gospel message home, on the street, at work, in other words, to make a mission anywhere, anytime. To this, the pastoral ecclesiology proposed by Bria deals with concepts such as Church and mission, universal priesthood, Church and theology, morality of church servants, Church and politics, etc.

The fifth chapter, fundamental to understanding the pneumatological realities of the Church, discusses the internal and existential link that exists between ecclesiology and pneumatology. Ion Bria claims that there is a mysterious relationship between Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Church, a relationship that has been fully felt at Pentecost, which is at the same time God's revelation and communal gift to men. Next, it analyzes the issue of Pentecost and the historicity of the Church, as well as its logical conclusion, namely that the Church is essentially a continuous Pentecost. Bria does not leave aside either the Trinitarian aspect of ecclesiology, giving the Spirit the main place It deserves in this context. The last part of the chapter explores the relationship between the Christological and the Pneumatological principle from an interconfessional point of view

An important chapter of the thesis is the Sixth Chapter, entitled "Ecclesiology and Ecumenism". Starting from the dogmatic aspect of ecumenism, Bria proposes an ecclesiology of communion, following the model of Olivier Clement (1921-2009), ecclesiology to be applied to the Church not only in terms of its sacramental structure but also in terms of opening its ecumenical

relationship, its existential relationship with the world. Ecumenism and its role in a united Europe, theology of service, and the connection between the Church and the world are other concepts analyzed in this chapter, which concludes with the interpretation of the ecclesiological character of other Christian confessions, from an ecumenical perspective.

The last chapter is the Protestant-Evangelical analysis and evaluation of Orthodox ecclesiology in general and of Ion Bria's ecclesiology in particular, without entering into polemical or proselytizing debates. We start with the main Protestant ecclesiological directions, from Luther to the present day, conjugating them with some ecclesiological proposals and perspectives for the future of the ecumenical dialogue, as Bria did in his PhD thesis, in which, in the end, he also gave some suggestions and recommendations for the unity of all Christians, given that "the divisions among Christians are not so radical that there is no hope in their encounter ...".¹

The impressive theological work of Priest Professor Ion Bria is of extraordinary importance in many aspects of Orthodox theology and beyond, which is why it has been received positively since his lifetime, with some minor exceptions, which address some questionable aspects of the theology expressed by him. All this is nothing more than the consequence of a certain way of understanding ecumenism, of engaging in solving its problems, and of understanding the rapprochement of Christian confessions on the path of dialogue.

In this context, the doctrine of the Church is at the center of contemporary ecumenical studies, since it is necessary to specify the nature and structure of the Church in which all Christians will come together. The main issue of theological dialogue on the issue of Christian unity is therefore the doctrine of the Church, or ecclesiology, although the ecumenical issue cannot be limited to the comparative ecclesiology studies.

In the first two chapters of the present thesis, analyzing some of the tendencies and currents that manifest in contemporary ecclesiology ("Church - prolongation of the Incarnation", the Church and the two iconomies, the Son and the Spirit, the Eucharistic ecclesiology, etc.) we have tried to show that they remain limited to an ecclesiological aspect or another. That is why Bria himself proposed an overall view of ecclesial reality, an "ecclesial realism" that takes into account all the "relations" in which the Church is integrated with its various aspects and dimensions.

¹ Ion Bria, „Aspecte dogmatice ale unirii Bisericii creștine”, teză de doctorat, în *Studii Teologice* 2 (1968), p. 363.

If Roman Catholicism inclines towards the Church - institution, Protestantism towards the Church - event, Bria, in consonance with the Orthodox vision, prefers the church - koinonia, not only because the notion of "koinonia" is more comprehensive but also because it has a fundamental ontological meaning.

In Chapters Three and Four we identify a series of extremely important issues for pastoral and missionary ecclesiology of today, in the vision of Ion Bria. Thus, after a brief presentation of the reality of contemporary society that does not know the essence of Christianity, our theologian proposes some methods and mission models in the context of the Church's need to evangelize (better said, a re-evangelism) in the world, in the world, in order to spread the knowledge of God and of His Son, Jesus Christ (cf. John 3:16). We therefore considered it necessary to emphasize the extraordinary importance of the universal priesthood, a reality and equally an evangelical teaching which should mobilize, in a missionary and evangelistic spirit, the mission and pastoral care of today's priests. The involvement of the laity in some pastoral and missionary problems of the Church can only have beneficial effects that ultimately will shape the future of theology, but also of the Church, in its concrete, visible existence. This desideratum cannot be put into practice without the promotion of morality and strict discipline (in the case of priests), but which extends to the society as a whole, a society which in turn is practically served by priests, but also by the loyal believers. A fundamental role here is the concept of "Liturgy after Liturgy" through which the Liturgy of the community is taken up in a personal liturgy, or extends its work in a work of continuous gratification of the believer. This part of the thesis ends with a brief analysis of the concept of political neutrality that promotes, apart from the separation of the Church and its servants from the official political issue (the state as a political organization), their active involvement in the world and the city, *urbi et orbi*, ie in all the fundamental (social, economic, cultural, intellectual) issues of the society of our time.

Chapters five six present three main dimensions or relationships of ecclesiology in Ion Bria's vision: Jesus Christ - Holy Spirit – Church, Church and Churches and Church and ecumenism, in which it is framed and relationship of the Church with the world, of particular importance in Bria's ecclesiology.

The first relationship (Jesus Christ - the Holy Spirit - the Church) is the relationship that gives the Church an ontological meaning, of participation in Christ's life through the Holy Spirit. For Ion Bria, the Church is a Christocentric reality, but the Church's Christ-centered principle is not

to be understood only in the sense that Christ is "the center of history" or "the icon of salvation," in which the Church has a soteriological function. The Church is not simply the historical-subjective relationship with the events that form the "iconomy of salvation". Bria understands the Christological aspect of the Church as "ontological Theandric exchange" which was produced between Christ and humanity in all saving events in the life of Jesus Christ, by assuming our nature to the gift of His Spirit; therefore, His humanity has become our "contact" with God, the renewed humanity of the Church. In ecclesial communion, therefore, the fullness of life in Christ is experienced, which, according to patristic theology, is the very mystery of the Church.

A central place in Bria's ecclesiology occupies the iconomy of the Holy Spirit. Bria points out that the pneumatological aspect does not abolish the centrality of Christ in the Church, and thus does not abolish its institutional, sacramental reality. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit constitutes "ecclesia" as a historical reality, in the image of the heavenly Church. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of personal experience, the spirit of communion; therefore, in and through the Holy Spirit the ecclesiological event takes place at the level of individual and collective life. He brings together the limbs in the Body of Christ, and It expands Christ into the world, forming "the people of God" (cf I Peter 2:10), intended for ecclesiological promises. The Holy Spirit makes the Church a sacramental body, that is why the "extension of incarnation" in the Church should not be understood either in the physical sense or in the sense of an ontological identity between the Church and Christ.

The second relationship is "the Church and the Churches", that is, the connection between the one Church and the local Churches, the application of the ecumenicity at the local level or the integration of the local Churches into the universal one. The local community, present and its authentic manifestation, its own organization, is a natural discovery of the diversity that the ecumenicity involves. The unity between the local Church and the universal Church as Bria understands it is a communion in which some common ecclesial structures are recognized. Therefore, any member of the Church makes experience of the fullness of life of the whole body.

Bria's studies on "Eucharistic ecclesiology" have shown us that any local Eucharistic community is a manifestation of the ecumenical Church, a total presence of the Church in that place. Through its sacramental structure itself, the local community is a plenitude, but local Churches should not be considered as isolated parts of the universal one. Contrasting the Eucharistic ecclesiology with the universal one, as has been done in these studies, is not in the spirit of authentic ecumenism, because the local Church justifies its existence by its organic integration

into the ecumenical plenitude. It exists in the ecumenical body to the extent that it participates in what is universal.

The third relationship, Church-Ecumenism-the world, expresses an existential reciprocity that takes the form of dialogue and collaboration between the Church and humanity. For the eschatological kingdom, the Church inevitably makes the experience of society and of the history in which it lives. The world is a common place for the Church and for mankind, and in the world, the Church cannot deny the human and historical reality, because it is placed in the world as the "sacrament", "the contact" between humanity and Christ. Regarded as such, any form of dualism contradictory - ontological, historical, sociological - between nature and grace, holy and secular, between history and eschatological disappears.

On the other hand, the participation in the life of the Church means to be engaged in all its ontological and functional relationships. For Ion Bria, the faith in Christ is correlated with the faith in the Church, with the incorporation into the Body of Christ, with the opening for the renewal of humanity and the world.

The last chapter of our thesis consists of an analysis and evaluation from a Protestant-Evangelical perspective of the ecclesiological doctrine of Ion Bria. It has been shown that our theologian identifies in the Protestant and Evangelical doctrine of the Church some positive aspects, such as the recognition of the Church's Christological center and the value of the experience of the ecclesiological event on a personal level. Also, under the influence of the discussions within the ecumenical movement, some Protestant and Evangelical theologians are trying to overcome the opposition between Church-institution and Church-event, even if the Protestant-Evangelical conception that the work of the Spirit is incompatible with institutional church structures still persists.

The thesis ends with a question (rhetoric, for the moment), if there may be a common ecumenical ecclesiology, including the ecclesiologies of the three great Christian confessions. Unfortunately, it has been noticed that Ion Bria considers the protestant ecumenism unilateral in the sense that it would rather pursue a spiritual unity of the Church than a structural, historical one. It would not be an organic link between the seen unity and the constitutive structures of the Church. Moreover, Bria points out, some evangelical Protestant – Evangelical theologians deny the possibility of restoring the visible church unit, because, according to them, there is a continuous rupture between the historical denomination and the invisible ideal Church of Jesus Christ. The Protestant-Evangelical doctrine speaks of a mystical, latent unity which manifests itself, yet this manifestation cannot be controlled, because the Holy Spirit is not tied to institutions. However, the emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in creating a visible unity of a local community is a positive

element, as the charismatic aspect is a reality of the Church seen. Therefore, we consider that the future of ecumenical dialogue should focus on pneumatological ecclesiology, but also on the practical and missionary ecclesiology, the only ones in Bria's opinion and ours, which can "smooth" the path of unity, "that we may all be one" in Christ , Our Lord.

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