

## CHRISTIANITY AND THE ROMANIAN COMMUNITIES NAMED *OBȘTE*

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### ABSTRACT

The question when and how the Romanian ethno-genesis took place is controversial. Noticing the similarity between the social organization known as *obștea* and the covenantal organization of Early Christians this work argues that the Romanian culture and language came into existence as a consequence of the Roman retreat. The political vacuum thus created accelerated conversions to Christianity and the formation of covenantal Christian communities. These communities later called *obște* constituted the cradle of a new Christian *ethnos* which evolved into the modern Romanian nation.

**Keywords:** Obște; communalist society; covenantal society; Romanian ethno-genesis; military democracy; Early Christians.

### 1. CHRISTIANITY AND ROMANIAN ETHNOGENESIS

#### *ARGUMENTUM AD QUEM*

This work offers new arguments regarding the critical role played by Christianity in the ethnogenesis of the Romanian people. The discussion formulates new hypotheses regarding the circumstances of this process rationalizing how the new religion contributed to the birth to a new nation. At the same time this investigation observes the reverse effect, the one of the societal type adopted by the population constituting the demographic base of the Romanian *ethnos* on its fast rate of conversion to Christianity. This positive feedback loop is consistent with scholars and theories arguing that the process creating the Romanian language and people and the process of Christianisation are one.

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At this point it is worthwhile mentioning the particularities of the rapid Christianization of the Romanians. Unlike other apostolic Christian people, e.g. the Greeks, the Romanian process of conversion to Christianity is poorly documented. The absence or rarity of documents referring to the Christianization of the Romanians, which already started in the first century, indicates that this process happened spontaneously, i.e. not as a result of a royal edict.

#### *SOCIETAL TYPES AND ETHNO-SPIRITUAL PROFILES*

“Ethnogenesis is the historical creation of a people with a sense of their collective identity...”(Patterson 1992, 31)

One can study this process from two complementary points of view. For McGuire (1982), the key variable in the process of creating ethnic borders is the differential power distribution. Examining through this prism, the collective spirituality derives from the collective interest.

Another school of sociologists was founded by Frédéric Le Play (1874). Despite the regrettable association of a few of Le Play’s disciples with the ill-reputed organisation named Action Française, the paradigm promoted by this sociological school has enlisted numerous distinguished scholars (in other places and periods of time) among which three relevant Romanian scholars namely Henri Stahl, Dimitrie Gusti and, more recently, for some of his studies, Ilie Bădescu. This school also considers that researching the great process of peoples’ formation and of the crystallization of their ethno-spiritual profile requires exploring how their social types came into existence. The social type serves both as criterion of comparison and as bridge of comparative approach because it is the common element of communities named the people. However, for scholars like Stahl, Gusti and, in more recent studies, Bădescu, Sisestean and other researchers, the social type becomes fully intelligible only through its spiritual dimension. This universal dimension is nothing else but the one that derives from the relation of peoples with the supreme source of authority, (divinity), and from both the intracommunity and intercommunity relations. In Bădescu’s words:

„Nu găsim în istorie vreo comunitate umană, oricât ar fi de mică dimensional, care să se plaseze completamente în afara relației cu divinitatea și/sau căreia să-i lipsească efectul coagulant al interacțiunilor dintre membrii alcătuitoari. Oricât ar fi de puține și oricât ar fi ele de conflictuale, relațiile dintre membrii unei comunități și cele cu divinitatea ne ajută să definim tipul ei social. O atare raportare este esențială pentru actul de autoidentificare etnică a popoarelor” (Bădescu, 2015).

“We do not find any human community in history, no matter how small, with absolutely no relationship with divinity and/or without the coagulant effect of interactions between constitutive members. No matter how few they might have been and how conflicting they were, the relationships between community members and the divinity define the community’s social type. This linkage is essential to the act of ethnic self-identification of peoples” (translation of left column).

In this spirit I hypothesize that Christianity played a decisive role in the ethnogenesis of the Romanians (a theory that I uphold in spite of the impediment of my relative ignorance regarding the history of Romanians). In another investigation that I co-authored (Livni & Stone, 2015), I worked on a mathematical model analysing the conditions of stability of a type of society known as covenantal society. The term “covenantal society” has been coined by Elazar (Elazar 1998; Elazar & Cohen 1985) together with the hypothesis that pre-monarchic Israel was the prototype of this social system. Elazar founded his hypothesis on the Hebrew Bible, which many scholars reject as historic evidence. However, our investigation (Livni & Stone 2015) observed that the archaeological evidence (Faust 2008, 92–106) confirms Elazar’s hypothesis.

Although I shall return to the clarification of this term, I will first discuss the related Weberian term “communalist society” used by Bădescu who defines it as being based on the:

„acord deplin al membrilor ei și deci pe o „democrație comunitară” din care lipsește stratificarea pozițiilor, adică scara socială a rangurilor, chiar dacă „membrii se disting între ei pe scara intensității spirituale a legăturilor reciproce. Atâta vreme cât intensitățile relaționale nu se degradează devenind ierarhii de poziții și hrănind avantaje derivate din aceste ierarhii” vorbim încă de o societate comunalistă (Bădescu 2010)

“full agreement of its members and consequently on a ‘communitarian democracy’ without stratified positions, i.e. without a social ladder of ranks in spite of distinctions among members as far as the spiritual intensity of their mutual relationships is concerned. As long as the relational manifestations are not degraded into a hierarchy of positions feeding derived benefits” one still talks about a communalist society” (My translation of left column)

Later I shall pin down that the “covenantal society” of Elazar is a particular sub-category of the “communalist society” not for the sake of hairsplitting but because the term “covenantal society” is a key term for this investigation. However, for the time being I propose to use Bădescu’s general term “communalist society”.

I worked together with Stone (Livni & Stone 2015) to investigate the justice administration of a society without police, without correctional services, i.e. without institutions dedicated to maintaining public order. One guesses already the relevance of the previously mentioned sociological type: the communalist society: the Early Christian communities had no police, no jails and no other institutions dedicated to the prevention and punishment of crimes. In other words, sociologically speaking, the Early Christian communities were communalist societies.

In spite of being communalist societies the Early Christian communities had special functions like presbyters (πρεσβύτεροι, elders) and bishops, (ἐπίσκοποι, overseers) (Baynes 1833, 699). These functions were not inherited and the office-

bearers that filled them were responsible to the general assembly named *ecclesia*. The office-bearers had authority due to “possession of gifts suitable to the edification of the community and the recognition of this fact by the people”(Baynes 1833, 699). So far, the Early Christian communities perfectly fit the definition of communalist society of Bădescu (2010).

## 2. THE COVENANTAL SOCIETY

The communalist Early Christians had no ruler, however they had a rule: the rule of law. They obeyed both a general Law: the Bible and a local law: the decrees of Councils (Hatch 1882, 7).

Not all communalist societies have laws of behaviour defining transgression, guilt and punishment. For example, in Mohawk communities an offense comes into being any time a victim declares feud against his perpetrator. The conflict is solved by mediation (Amott & Matthaei 1996; Dickson-Gilmore 1996; O'Brien 1993). In Arab communities the offense is followed by a cycle of retributions until the parties reconcile in a “sulkha”, ceremony (Bercovitch 1996).

Consequently, a covenantal society is a communalist society with the rule of law. I shall proceed by vicariously defining the term and then complete its explanation by reference to various historical covenantal manifestations. First I shall address the need to derive the meaning of a concept by invoking a procedure of structural definition, i.e. by discussing the conditions of stability of a society, in our case the covenantal society. Subsequently, I shall coextensively proceed, i.e. I shall set the socio-dynamic profile of the social type by linking it to the historical circumstances of its coming into being. In other words, I shall invoke the historical situations allowing the perception of the socio-dynamics of the covenantal society namely the genesis and the evolution of this type. Proceeding accordingly, one respects the minimum conditions of validation of a new notion, which require withstanding both a static or structural verification as well as a dynamic or historical verification. So, what does our study (Livni & Stone 2015) reveal regarding the stability conditions of the covenantal society?

### STABILITY CONDITIONS

No society can function if no one respects the law. The justice administration fails when the ratio of transgressors is in the vicinity of 100%. As opposed to that when this ratio is zero or negligible the system is successful. The results of our model, (Livni & Stone 2015) show that combatting transgression in a covenantal system requires an adequate tuning of its variables: the *frequency of assemblies*, the *contagion of the transgression* and the *cohesion factor*. This *cohesion factor* is a mathematical magnitude measuring the efficiency of the “psychological

mechanism of the community” (Bădescu, Cucu-Oancea & Șișeștean 2005). Among others, the cohesion factor depends on the battle against poverty and the conservation of the distinctive traditions, (Livni & Stone 2015). Consequently one of the conclusions of our investigation was that it is difficult to copy a covenantal society and its “invention” is practically impossible. For example, the Early Christians replicated the Jewish communities of the first century, (Baynes 1833, 699). This replication “accelerated the Christian ecclesiogenesis which obviously does not exclude the significance of the Galilean moment to the appearance and expansion of the Christian ecclesiarchy” (Bădescu 2015).

#### *CALVINISM – CONTEMPORANEOUS COVENANTAL SYSTEM*

However, the majority of Christians have been organized in hierarchic systems (Robertson 1854, 146–147; 282–283; Schaff 2015) and consequently they are not any more exclusively covenantal as a societal type, although there are significant denominational differences with this respect. The terms have been conserved; however they comprise significant semantic differences to the extent that they seem to designate something else. The term presbyter became *prete*, *prêtre*, *priest* in Italian, French and English respectively. The bishops acquired hierarchic positions and the term *ecclesia* (Chiesa, Eglise) does not refer to a community, but instead it designates a great powerful organisation either catholic or orthodox; the lower-case words, (*chiesa*, *église*) primarily mean the physical building of a church and only rarely does the context refer to a congregation.

This being said, the Christian covenantal system did not disappear. The Calvinist communities such as Scottish and American Presbyterians, English Puritans, Calvinists, of Switzerland and Holland are covenantal societies. Calvin maintained that his system is a replica of Early Christians. However, our mathematical model (Livni & Stone 2015) predicted that a covenantal system cannot be invented. This raises the question: Where did Calvin copy his system from? We searched for an answer and found one. A Christian sect in the Provençal Alps named Vaudois (Gilly 1831; Muston 1851; Peyran 1826) is organized in a covenantal society. They claim that they have kept their system from the beginning of Christianity. This claim is consistent with the prediction of our model which concluded that the societies of this type replicate previous societies; otherwise the type cannot appear either by spontaneous generation or by innovation.

#### *COVENANTAL SOCIETIES IN ROMANIA?!*

If the Vaudois sect has kept its covenantal character in spite of the pressure applied by the Vatican then it is likely that there are other covenantal islands in the Christian ocean. I searched and found covenantal islands in ... Romania (so far only in Romania):

„Vrancea se prezenta geografic ca o țară închisă, izolată, adevărată cetate de margine privilegiată; condiții biologice de masă demografică restrânsă, relativ puțin densă; trăind în formă de grupe familiale devălmașe; condiții psihice de obște tradițională difuză; condiții istorice de autonomie locală perfectă; manifestări spirituale de puternic folclor; manifestări economice de gospodărie casnică închisă, grefată pe autarhie devălmașă; manifestări juridice de drept obișnuielnic viguros și atotstăpânitor; manifestări administrative de conducere în democrație primitivă născătoare a unei confederații intersătești...” (Filipescu 2006).

“Vrancea appeared as a closed geographically isolated land, a true citadel of frontier township; biological conditions of a reduced demographic size, with a relatively low density; family groups living in the form of common property; diffuse traditional community psychological conditions; historical conditions for perfect local autonomy; spiritual manifestations of powerful folklore; manifestations of closed economic husbandry imbedded in the autarchy of joint tenancy; justice served by a vigorous customary Law that rules over all; administration lead in a primitive democracy generating inter-community confederations...” (My translation of the left column)

At this point we are ready to precisely identify a covenantal society. I propose to listen to the description of the joint-ownership (*devălmășia*) society of Romania because it portrays nothing else but the covenantal society:

„Este forma de conviețuire socială, pe un trup de moșie, a unui grup biologic închis, deseori legat prin rudenie, trăind în gospodării familiale, asociate într-o obște, care, prin hotărâri luate de către adunările ei generale, are dreptul de a se amesteca în viața particulară a fiecărei gospodării, potrivit regulilor juridice ale devălmășiei, și conform mecanismului psihic al obștei pe baza de tradiții difuze” (Bădescu *et al.*, 2005, 539).

“It is a form of social living on a lot of land of a closed biological group, often bound by kinship, living in family households, associated in a community (obște), which has the right to interfere with the private business of every household, by decisions taken by its general assembly, according to laws of the joint-ownership (devălmășia) and to a psychological mechanism set by diffuse traditions”. (My translation of the left column)

### HYPOTHESES

At this moment I can formulate and defend two interrelated hypotheses:

1. The ethnogenesis of the Romanian people, the birth of the communities named “obște” and the Christianisation of the Romanians are one single process.
2. The Romanian community named “obște” is a descendant of Early Christian communities.

### HYPOTHESIS 1

The rapid Christianization on the left shore of the Danube is due to the administrative vacuum created by the withdrawal of Aurelian and to the immediate and favourable alternative offered by the Christian covenantal type of life.

Under the circumstances of lawlessness and disorder of Dacian cities and towns due to ditched justice administration, the Christian covenantal community promised the fulfilment of one’s social aspirations of order, honour and mutual respect. Old ethno-spiritual ties of Dacians, Romans, Slavs and probably others loosened; pagans became Christians and a new ethnicity was bound to be born: the Romanian people.

In retrospect one notes that the ancestors of the Romanians did not make a mistake when hoping for a better life they joined covenantal societies because Romanian covenantal formations have been conserved until now. This longevity is remarkable in view of the sustained conflict between the communalist type and the elitist type peaking in the 18<sup>th</sup> century under the phanariot rule (Bădescu 2015):

„Tipul elitist negativ va lucra constant la eliminarea tipului societal... pe care românii l-au conservat până în pragul acestui al treilea mileniu, precum s-a menționat, mai cu seamă în cadrul ruralității. Acesta a fost războiul societăților, mai exact spus a tipurilor societale de societăți, astfel că popoarele au avut de rezolvat o asemenea teribilă tensiune datorată unor confinii tipologice. Succesul sau performanța identitară a unui popor și deci șansa lui de supraviețuire depind hotărâtor de capacitatea lui de a transfigura confiniile tipologice în confluente spirituale” (Bădescu 2015)

“The negative elitist type will constantly act to eliminate the communalist type which the Romanians have conserved until the threshold of the third millennium, mostly in the rural population. This has been the war of societies, more precisely of the societal types; peoples had to solve a terrible conflict due to typological borders. The success or the performance of a people and as a consequence its chance of survival definitely depend on its capability to redraw its typological borders to spiritual confluences” (My translation of the left column)

The study of this conflict is without the scope of this work; I mentioned it because it underlines the remarkable peculiarity of the survival of the Romanian covenantal type and because I planned with Bădescu to study it on a future occasion.

## HYPOTHESIS 2

This hypothesis contradicts the conventional theory, which maintains that the roots of Romanian communities called *obște* consist of the “*military democracy*” of the Dacians (Buzdugan 2006; Olteanu & Moraru 2013; Părăușanu 2008). First, I shall point out that this theory is unconvincing and then I shall argue the case for my second hypothesis on grounds of striking similarities between the Romanian *obște* and the Early Christian covenantal organization.

The oxymoron term *military organization* has been coined by Friedrich Engels, (Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 191). The application of the term to the Geto-Dacians is probably related to the general assembly celebrating the victory of Dromichete over Lysimachos (Părăușanu 2008). However, very little is known about this “democracy”, while about the Dacian one knows rather the opposite, i.e. that they were strongly stratified (Brie 2005, 42). In virtue of Bădescu’s definition of communalist society (see “*Societal types and ethno-spiritual profiles*”, above) the Dacians could not be communalists let alone covenantal.

It is more likely that the *obște* evolved from Early Christian communities. Opposed to the thin data about Dacian “military democracy” one has ample knowledge about Early Christian communities, (Baynes 1833, 699; Fitzmyer 1974, 293; Hatch 1882, 7, 39, 46; Sack 1986, 102–103) and everything known indicates a tight similarity with the *obște* as explained in the following paragraphs.

We established earlier that the *obște* is of a communalist societal type. In virtue of Schneider’s principle, (Boehm 2001), the communalist societal type is the exception rather than the rule in sedentary societies. Not only is the *obște* both sedentary and communalist, but it is also covenantal as was the Early Christian ecclesia. However, the similarities with the Early Christian organizations go further because they apply to the modes of implementation of the covenantal life.

In conventional societies the virtue is to “mind your own business.” We read earlier that is not the case in the *obște*. The *right to mind other peoples’ business* is one of the fundamental secrets of the covenantal society. In Christian communities this peaks Sundays at the weekly assembly. This observation generated the mathematical study of the stabilizing role of the Sabbath (Livni & Stone 2015).

The “*psychological mechanism set by diffuse traditions*” (Bădescu *et al.*, 2005, 539) is another secret ingredient of the covenantal organization. Since one cannot spontaneously create traditions the need for this constituent is consistent with the results of our model, indicating that the covenantal society cannot be invented and it has evolved from one copy to another. The results of the

mathematical model (Livni & Stone 2015) indicate that both the *right to mind others' business* and the *psychological mechanism set by diffuse traditions* feed the cohesion factor and as a consequence the stability of the covenantal system.

Another similarity consists of the *nomenclature of the office-bearers* of the two societies. In the *obște* these officers were called *oameni buni și bătrâni* (Bădescu *et al.* 2005, 532), or good and old men which reminds of the *πρεσβύτεροι* of the Early Christians and the *elders* [Judges 21:16] of the first known covenantal society: Israel of the Judges. However, scientifically speaking, the *authority of the office bearers* is more important than their designation:

„Ar fi o greșeală să socotim că acești oameni buni și bătrâni ar fi conducători sau „șefi”...în dosul oamenilor buni și bătrâni se aflau întotdeauna obștea” (Bădescu *et al.* 2005, 542).

“It would be a mistake to consider that these good and old men were leaders or chiefs ... the good and old men were always under the control of the *obște*, (my translation of the left column)”.

It is more surprising that some functions of the Romanian covenantal version are identical with none other than the oldest known covenantal society: Israel of the Judges or of Iron Age I. For example the function of justice: judge, (*jude* as the Romanians called it) or the function of military commander<sup>1</sup>: saviour in Israel of Iron Age [Judges 13:15] which corresponds to the Romanian *cneaz*. The functions of judge and officer did not exist in either Jewish or Christian communities of the first century.

Again it is important to mention that the authority of the military commander did not contradict Bădescu's definition of communalist society. The Romanian *cneaz* was subordinated to the general assembly (Ursprung 2007, 106) like the *saviour* of Israel during the period of the Judges. The “army” of both consisted of all fit for combat men of the community. This similarity is explained by the circumstances in which these two societies came into being: both the decline of the Egyptian administration in the Holy Land and the evacuation of the Roman administration in Dacia needed the function of justice; the confrontations of the Israelites with Philistines and of the Romanians with invaders (e.g. Tartars) required the function of commanding officer.

As discussed earlier (see “*Societal types and ethno-spiritual profiles*”) not only intra-community but also inter-community relations describe the societal type. The Romanians communities of the first centuries were organized in tight confederations named *lands* („*țări*”) and a larger more confuse national confederation mirroring the Israelite primary inter-community network (tribes) and

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<sup>1</sup> A commanding officer served also as in the Vaudois sect and in the American Pilgrims' society. Both called their military officers captains. These captains commanded a militia consisting of the congregation and were responsible to the general assembly.

the more random confederation of the tribes. Scottish Presbyterians, (Baynes 1833, 701) and the Americans of the same persuasion (Gillett 2001, 44) are also organised in the same way.

However, the similarity between Israel of the Judges and post-Aurelian Romania goes further because by virtue of my first hypothesis both catalyzed the birth of the two nations.

### CONCLUSIONS

1. Counter-intuitively, the ethnogenesis of the Romanians accelerated after the Roman evacuation of Emperor Aurelianus.
2. The spread of Christianity played a critical role in this process.
3. As in the rest of the Christian world, Romanian Early Christians adopted covenantal formations following the models of Judaea and Asia Minor.
4. These communities disappeared almost everywhere; two exceptions of continuity are known so far: the Vaudois sect in the Alps and the Romanian communities named *obște* in the Carpathians.

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