

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
80 (3), pp. 148-169, 2019

The Contribution of Father Professor Ion Bria to the Development of the Romanian Missionary Theology in the 20th Century

Valentin Ionuț MOȘOIU

Valentin Ionuț Moșoiu
“Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu
Email: valentimosoiu@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this study we emphasize the great importance that Prof. Ion Bria's work had on the crystallization and development of an orthodox missionary theology in the second half of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. Father Bria, since the late 1970s and early 1980s of the last century, has attempted to develop a “genuine Orthodox missionary theology” that would bring refreshment and dynamism to the pastoral-missionary work of the Church. In this sense, he introduced the concept of “Liturgy after Divine Liturgy” as being organically related to the life and mission of the Church.

Unlike other Romanian missionary theologians, Bria made a critique of theology, but did not fall into the temptation of anti-sectarian theology. Denouncing any proselytism, he at the same time promoted a theology of openness to the Christian values of any Christian tradition and confession.

Keywords:

Fr. Ion Bria, Orthodox theology, mission, ecumenism, sects

I. Introduction

The present study starts from the premise that father professor Ion Bria, through all his theological, pastoral-missionary and ecumenical activity, remains a model to be followed by generations of today and tomorrow theologians¹.

The priest Ion Bria² was born in Telega (Prahova county) on June 19, 1929. He attended primary school in his native village, the high school in Ploiesti, and in December 1950 he was admitted at the Theological Institute in Bucharest, which he graduated (as a scholarship) in June 1954. In the same year, he began magisterium courses at the same institute; after graduation in 1957 he became a professor at the Theological Seminary in Buzau (until October 1962). He began the doctoral studies in November 1960 and he finalized them on June 18, 1968 with the thesis “Dogmatic Aspects of the Union of Christian Churches”³ (main referent being professor Nicolae Chițescu). Meanwhile, he had been appointed professor at the Theological Seminary in Bucharest, and then assistant professor at the Theological Institute (in 1965); He also began his ecumenical activity, participating in various meetings in Geneva, Cantesbury, Bossey or Prague. Professor Ion Bria’s involvement in the ecumenical movement is further intensified since July 1968, when he was elected a member of the Board of the Ecumenical Institute, in Bossey, and especially since April 7, 1973, when he was appointed Executive Secretary in the “Mission and Evangelism” committee of CEB.

Having established with his family in Geneva, Ion Bria does not only participates in a lot of meetings organized by the CEB, but also has a sustained journalistic activity (in September 1971 he was appointed

¹ The contribution brought by Ion Bria to the development of the Romanian Orthodox dogmatic theology is synthesized in: Cristinel IOJA, *Dogmatică și dogmatişti. Prologomena, privind aprofundarea Teologiei Dogmatice Ortodoxe în România în a doua jumătate a sec. al XX-lea și începutul sec. al XXI-lea*, Marineasa publishing house, Timișoara, 2008, pp. 175-214.

² For biographic data see Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Dicționarul teologilor români*, Univers Enciclopedic Bucharest, 1996, pp. 62-64, and especially “Biography and Bibliography” in: Nicolae MOȘOIU (ed.), *Relevanța operei Părintelui profesor Ion Bria pentru viața bisericească și socială actuală: direcții noi de cercetare în domeniul doctrinei, misiunii și unității Bisericii*, Sibiu, May 14-17, 2009, “Lucian Blaga” University Publishing House, Sibiu, 2010, pp. 9-30.

³ Published in: *Studii Teologice* XX (1968) 1-2, pp. 3-170.

associate professor at the catechetical and homiletic department and on January 1, 1978, professor at the Department of Dogmatic Theology and Missionary Guidance at the Theological Institute in Bucharest): *Martyria-Mission. The Witness of Orthodox Churches Today* (Geneva, 1980), *Faith we confess*, (1987), *Dictionary of Orthodox Theology* (Bucharest, 1981), *The Destiny of Orthodoxy* (Bucharest 1989), *Jesus Christ* (1992) or *Orthodoxy in Europe. The place of the Romanian spirituality* (Iași, 1995), *Liturgy after Liturgy*, (Athena Publishing House, Bucharest 1996).

Although in 1990 the great theologian Bria renounced his professorship at the Bucharest Theological Institute, his teaching activity resumed in October 1995, when he was invited and accepted as associate professor at “Andrei Șaguna” Faculty of Theology in Sibiu (where he will teach until 2001). On this occasion he edits *The Dogmatic and Ecumenical Theology Course* (Sibiu, 1996, re-edited as *The Dogmatic and Ecumenical Theology Treaty*, Bucharest, 1999, namely Sibiu, 2009) and, for the Master courses, *Theological Hermeneutics, its Dynamics in Structuring Tradition* (1999, the second edition at Sibiu, 2009).

Father Professor Ion Bria passed away suddenly as a result of a heart attack on July 2, 2002, being buried at Cernica monastery, very close to father Dumitru Stăniloae, his mentor. The recognition of his impressive ecumenical and journalistic activity was also achieved by receiving the title of *Doctor honoris causa* from the Faculty of Theology of Prešov (Slovakia). In any case, father Bria is “the Romanian theologian who published most of the books and studies abroad, the one who held the most conferences outside the country, the one who organized and participated in most ecumenical meetings”⁴.

In order to better understand the place occupied by the thinking of father professor Ion Bria in the present Romanian theology, the study will briefly present a picture of the Romanian Orthodox missionary theology in the 20th century. It will be noticed that Professor Ion Bria, unlike most of his predecessors, made a critical theology but he did not fall into the temptation of “anti-sectarian” theology. By denouncing any kind of proselytism, he will, at the same time, promote a theology of openness towards the Christian values of any Christian tradition and confession (emblematic, his

⁴ Fragments from two letters addressed by Father Dumitru Stăniloae to Father Ion Bria, dated 30.12.1978 and 06.02.1979, and published by Nicolae Moșoiu, “Cuvânt înainte” in: Nicolae Moșoiu (ed.), *Relevanța operei Părintelui profesor Ion Bria...*, p. 5.

The Contribution of Father Professor Ion Bria to the Development of the Romanian Missionary...

manual is entitled “Dogmatic and Ecumenical Theology”). The intention was to distance from the temptation of a middle-class defensive orthodox theology that used Catholic theological arguments against Protestant theology and vice versa. On the contrary, the great Romanian theologian militated for a specific Orthodox theology, both in method and content, which made it original.

II. Romanian Orthodox Missionary Theology. Short references

Having various names such as *Missionary Guidance*, *Sectology*, *Missiology*, *Mission and Ecumenism*⁵, the Romanian Orthodox mission appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century, and soon became an academic discipline of study. The socio-cultural and religious context of that period facilitated this: we talk about the post-World War I period, the reunification of 1918, and the new breath of progress on all levels: political, technical and socio-cultural. It is not to be forgotten that this is precisely the role of the emergence and of the development of Missiology: “the systematic discussion, with a pragmatic opening that engages the teaching of the Church, in dialogue with the secular ideologies (philosophical, political, and scientific) and the offering of the Church’s discourse about the God of a world, created, loved, and saved by Him”⁶.

The liberation from the foreign powers, to which the Romanians had only faced united around the village church, also meant the unprecedented proliferation of the heterodox movements - especially the sectarian ones - by the slow but constant disengagement of some Romanians towards Orthodoxy. To this also contributed the travels abroad (in Western Europe and to the United States of America) in search of more sustainable jobs and sources of income. As Petru Deheleanu⁷ pointed out, some of the departed ones will return not only with more money, but also with other beliefs (especially in Transylvania): Baptism, Pentecostalism, Adventism, and so on. Thus, sectarianism was the most important motivational factor

⁵ Peter I. DAVID, “Rolul disciplinei, îndrumări misionare și ecumenism în pastorația vremii noastre”, in: *Studii Teologice* LIII (2001) 3-4, p. 82.

⁶ Gheorghe PETRARU, *Misiologie Ortodoxă I, revelația divină și misiunea Bisericii*, Panfilus Publishing House, Iași, 2002, p. 21.

⁷ Petru DEHELEANU, *Manual de Sectologie*, Archdiocese Printing House, Arad, 1948, p. 42 and so on.

in reactivating the explicit and the offensive missionary dimension of the Romanian Orthodox Church and in the emergence of missiology as an academic theological discipline. It is not by accident that sectology developed strongly in Transylvania, in response to the challenge of the plural-confessional context here. The Orthodox shepherds of the time sought to keep the believers away of wanderings through the creation of a sectological literature with a wide impact (the activity carried out in Arad between 1925-1935 by the Bishop Grigory Comsa being an eloquent example in this respect).

Not without some initial difficulties, the emergence and the consolidation of missiology as a Romanian Orthodox discipline is related to the name of Professor Vasile Gheorghe Ispir. He was said to be the first Romanian missionary and “the father of Romanian missiology”⁸. He was named on March 22, 1922, by the Patriarch Miron Cristea, at the Department of Missionary and Sectological Guidance at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest. The appointment of Professor Ispir was not accidentally, but it had been made at the proposal of the faculty’s council on the basis of the titles he possessed, as well as the studies and papers published by him in the field.

Professor Vasile Ispir shortly published *the Missionary Guidance of the Orthodox Church* (Bucharest, 1922). He will also set up the social-Christian meeting “Solidarity”, in which he will also publish a magazine. Over the course of a decade (1920-1930), he will publish numerous studies, articles and reviews.

In 1938 the department of missionary guidance and sectology is abolished, but law no. 386/1942 re-establishes it; Professor Ispir taught for a while at the Catechic and Social Pastoral Courses, and then he will be re-appointed on the old chair, functioning until 1946. After a disease that kept him in bed, Vasil Ispir dies on June 5, 1947. Prof. Ispir showed generosity and dedication to the service of the church until the moment of death, because in his will left a state grant worth 50 million lei for a student to go to study abroad, the library was donated to the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest, as well as the sum of 1000 pounds for the creation of a Balkan theological study institute, an intention which had been expressed several times by essays to congresses and international conferences⁹.

⁸ Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Dicționarul teologilor români...*, p. 152.

⁹ Constantin BERCUS, “Moartea prof. Vasile Gh. Ispir” in: *Revista Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, LXV (1947) 4-9, pp. 254-256.

The Contribution of Father Professor Ion Bria to the Development of the Romanian Missionary...

From the rich theological literature of Prof. Vasile Ispir we recall: *On the issue of the reorganization of our church*, Bucharest, 1920; *The Missionary Guidance of the Orthodox Church*, Bucharest, 1922; *Religious Sects in Romania*, Arad, 1928; *The reform of the university Education*, Bucharest, 1932; *The Christian Mission in the New Romania*, Bucharest, 1933; *The present mission of the Orthodox Church of the East (External Mission of our Church)*, Bucharest, 1938; *The Church in Social Service or What is Social Christianity*, Bucharest, 1938; *Active Church*, Bucharest, 1941; *Religious Sects a National and Social Danger*, Bucharest, 1942.

In any case, Prof. Ispir's outstanding work remains *the Missionary Guidance Course*, Bucharest, 1929, 552 p. The work can be considered the first missiology manual in the Romanian Orthodox Church.

The author claims his creed and his missionary motivation from the preface of the book. Thus, he says:

“The mission is the reflection of the religious life, a church is alive insofar as it performs the missionary work. Besides, the missionary movement in our contemporary church is brilliantly exemplifying in this statement. Undoubtedly we are witnessing a rebirth of the religious life. To the extent that good guidelines, directives, will be given on the basis of the Holy Scriptures and of the Holy Tradition of our Church, so am I convinced that our people will rise higher on the spiritual culture scale ...”¹⁰.

The course is structured in three major parts: 1. Theory of Mission, 2. History of mission, and 3. Christian Mission in the Light of Social Issues. In the last part of the first part there are aspects of the internal mission referring to the three major Christian branches, so that the author can stop at the internal missionary activity of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The second part provides the milestones of the history of mission, including the presentation of some great personalities of the Christian mission, in all the three great confessions: Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. Under the influence of the serious social problems created by World War I and not only, Prof. Ispir considers that the social mission of the Church should be widely debated in the third part of the course. Here are mentioned the parchments that the Church has in combating and preventing various

¹⁰ Vasile Gh. ISPIR, *Curs de îndrumări misionare*, Bucharest, 1929, pp. 3-4.

negative social phenomena, its belief being that “the division between the individual and the social morals is meaningless from the point of view of the Christian ideal, for personal salvation cannot be done out of social salvation”¹¹.

As I have already said, the sectarian phenomenon strongly influenced the attitude of the Romanian Orthodox Church towards the missionary activity and contributed to the emergence of missiology as a theological discipline. The pastoral-sectological orientation has proliferated especially in the plural-religious Transylvania. By far, it is necessary to introduce the figure Bishop Grigorie Comșa when creating a genuine sectological literature for the Orthodox broad public. Especially in the period 1925-1935, he was noted as an appreciated preacher, writing and publishing a series of volumes of anti-sectarian sermons and brochures, as well as articles of defense of the right faith in publications such as *Telegraful Roman* and *Revista Teologica* of Sibiu and *Biserica și Școala* of Arad.

The attitude of the hierarch was deeply anti-sectarian, which he also confessed on many occasions. In order to intensify the missionary life, Bishop Gregorie Comsa made 379 visits to the parishes in his shepherd, organized the missionary mission on deaneries, and for its good organization and development he edited the *Instruction booklet on missionary activity and propaganda in the Diocese of Arad*. He also organized in 72 parishes gatherings of the Lord's Army, set up new parishes and 117 cultural houses and libraries that he endowed with books. He organized in Arad, 25-28 October 1928, the first Congress of the Orthodox priests in Romania, a gathering that will raise the interest of the priests to revive the missionary consciousness of the Church in order to save the people.

Starting with 1926, as a way of counteracting the sectarian influence and proselytism, Gregorie Comsa organized “religious missions” in the parishes where the sectarians were active. The duration of these missions was one year, and 2-3 priests attended it. Their planning was under the responsibility of the archpriest who did this during the Easter fastening. The work was coordinated after the work *Mission for the People*, written by Bishop Gregorie Comsa, and published in the same year. Also, for the purpose of strengthening and facilitating missions, the job of “eparchial missionary priest” was established. Candidates at this job were required to demonstrate sectarian knowledge and real knowledge of sectarian

¹¹ Vasile Gh. IȘPIR, *Curs de îndrumări misionare*, p. 526.

The Contribution of Father Professor Ion Bria to the Development of the Romanian Missionary...

activity. Their work involved at least two missions per month. Also for the dynamism of the Orthodox mission was attempted the reactivation of the «lay apostolate in order to prepare the land of the pastoral apostolate». The action was concretized in the establishment of parish missionary committees, and to support all these missionary activities, the bishop Gregorie Comsa set up the “*Religious Propaganda Fund*”¹².

Another hierarch with a powerful missionary and anti-sectarian spirit was the martyr Bishop Gregory Leu. He was elected archbishop-vicar of the Archdiocese of Iași in 1924, afterwards he held the rank of bishop of Arges (1936-1940) and then the bishop of Husi (1940-1949). Two of his works are remembered: *Confessions and Sects. Historical Missionary Study*, Bucharest, 1929, 242p., and the *Sects of Romania*, the Eparchial Printing House Cartea Romneasca, Chisinau, 1931, 130p.

Professor Petru Deheleanu, who worked at the theological academy of Arad (1938-1949) was also the director of the Missionary Guidance Center of the clergy in Arad (1949-1952), will illustrate the anti-sectarian attitude and orientation of the Romanian Orthodox missiology during the wars period. Thus, he compiled the most complete Sectology Manual of the time¹³. The method of treatment refers to “thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The thesis is our doctrine, on which we must first document. The antithesis is the doctrine and the sectarian objections in opposition to our doctrine (with the thesis)... As for synthesis, the reader himself is to formulate it, from the confrontation of the thesis with the antithesis and with its ingenuity. Synthesis does not have the meaning of a synthesis, but of a conclusion, identical to the thesis it self”¹⁴.

The handbook is structured in three major parts. The first part deals with some introductory issues: the definition, the object, the purpose and the method of sectology, the history of the sectarian phenomenon, the causes of the emergence and of the spread of the sectarian phenomenon, the relation to the sectarian phenomenon (attitude and means of fighting), as well as a brief historical look of the most widespread sects in Romania. “The Orthodox doctrine in relation to the common heresies of all sects” is

¹² Details at Filip ALBU, *Atitudinea predicatorială a ep. Grigorie Comșa al Aradului față de confesiunile din vestul țării*, Presa Universitara Clujana Publishing House, Cluj, 2008, pp. 374-387; Filip ALBU, *Opera omiletică a episcopului Grigore Comșa al Aradului*, the publishing house of Aurel Vlaicu University, Arad, 2011.

¹³ Petru DEHELEANU, *Manual de sectologie*, 577p.

¹⁴ Petru DEHELEANU, *Manual de sectologie*, p. 9.

the title of the second part, which gives a brief overview of the doctrinal elements denied or altered by the sectarians, the Orthodox position towards them and the sectarian objections. In the third part, titled “The Orthodox Doctrine in relation to the specific heresies only common to some sects”, some doctrinal aspects are approached, which are reproached to the Orthodox Church and which give the specifics of certain sects (such as glossolalia, seventh day Adventist church, chiliasm and so on).

The biblical theological specialization of professor Peter Dehealnu is also observed in his working way. The Holy Scripture will be the priority land on which the struggle with the sectarian ideas will be conducted, calling for more correct interpretation by using “the hermeneutical rules that use the exegesis and the data of Dogmatics, with which sectology, to a certain point identifies”¹⁵. Taking into account that Holy Tradition cannot constitute a way of transmitting divine revelation to sectarians, the appeal to this it is not seen as a way of arguing, but of revealing the “historical continuity of a point of faith”¹⁶.

Father Bria¹⁷ pointed out that another missionary orientation of the Orthodox Church in the interwar period “was that centered on liturgical education and catechetical participation.” Unlike the sectological manner, this orientation provided another type of approach which aimed at valuing the Orthodox potential by “reconstructing and consolidating the parish as a liturgical, pastoral and ministry space for all parishioners, widening and renewing the spiritual life of each individual believer and the community as a whole”¹⁸. According to the theologian, in this way, the sectarian attacks or any other kinds of attacks are implicitly rejected, the advantage being that the polarizations of attitudes, interpersonal conflicts, interconfessional and inter ethnic hatred can be avoided in an elegant way. The most prominent representatives of the catechetical-liturgical orientation were the father professors Grigorie Cristescu and Petre Vintilescu¹⁹.

¹⁵ Petru DEHELEANU, *Manual de sectologie*, p. 10.

¹⁶ See Petru DEHELEANU, *Manual de sectologie*, p. 11.

¹⁷ Ion BRIA, “Mărturia creștină în Biserica Ortodoxă. Aspecte, posibilități și perspective” in: *Glasul Bisericii* XLI (1982) 1-2, p. 96.

¹⁸ Ion BRIA, “Mărturia creștină în Biserica Ortodoxă. Aspecte, posibilități și perspective”, p. 97.

¹⁹ Ion BRIA, “Mărturia creștină în Biserica Ortodoxă. Aspecte, posibilități și perspective”, p. 96.

The Contribution of Father Professor Ion Bria to the Development of the Romanian Missionary...

After the passage to the eternal ones of Prof. Vasile Ispir, in 1947, the Missionary and Sectological Guidance Course will be taken over by father. Ph. D. Gregorie Cristescu (1895-1961) from the Department of Catechetics and Omiletics (1929-1940), who will be helped by Pr. V. Gregorian. Among the works written by him we mention: *The Christian Imperative. Evangelical Suggestions for Social Reform*, Buzau, 1922; *Social and Cultural Perspectives in the Light of the Gospel*, Arad, 1925; *The perception of mystery. Studies of Religious and Missionary Psychology*, Sibiu, 1926; *For the revival of pastoral enthusiasm*, Sibiu, 1926; *Theology and sacerdotal. The classic type of Orthodox shepherd and modern pastoral hills*, Sibiu, 1928; *Cultural missionary*, Sibiu, 1928; *Do the work of the evangelist*, Sibiu, 1929.

Another supporter of the defense and the promotion of Orthodoxy through “liturgical education and Eucharistic participation” was Prof. Petre Vintilescu. As a professor of liturgical and pastoral theology at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest, he advocated “the reconstruction and consolidation of the parish as a liturgical, pastoral and ministry space for all believers”²⁰. Ever since he sustained his doctoral thesis in 1926²¹, Petre Vintilescu will seek to demonstrate the interdependence between dogmas and doctrine on the one hand and the outer forms of cult on the other, in the same time making a diachronic outline of the liturgical dimension of orthodoxy in relation to the sectarian manifestations. In the following period, although he was largely devoted to liturgical studies, Professor Vintilescu’s research still highlights studies that present the valences of a liturgical-missiological approach²². Like all theological education in Romania, Orthodox missiology experienced a series of restructuring and contractions during the Communist period (1949-1989). Thus, until 1975, missiology is practically reduced to the “Missionary Guidance” that

²⁰ Ion BRIA, “Biserica Ortodoxă și mărturia creștină”, in: *Revista Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, XCIX (1981) 1, p. 63.

²¹ Petre VINTILESCU, *Cultul și ereziile* (Doctoral Thesis), Pitești, 1926, 180p.

²² Petre VINTILESCU “Valoarea socială a liturghiei”, in: *Studii Teologice* II (1931) 1, pp. 37-48; Petre VINTILESCU, “Parohia ca teren de dezvoltare a spiritualității creștine”, in: *Studii Teologice* IV (1937) 1, pp. 31-60, Petre VINTILESCU, “Cântarea poporului în Biserică în lumina Liturghierului”, in: *Revista Biserica Ortodoxă Română* LXIII (1945) 9, pp. 409-423; Petre VINTILESCU, “Funcțiunea eclesiologică sau comunitară a Liturghiei”, in: *Revista Biserica Ortodoxă Română* LXIV (1946) 1-3, pp. 1-28; Petre VINTILESCU, “Funcțiunea catehetică a Liturghiei”, in: *Studii Teologice* I (1949) 1-2, pp. 17-33.

students receive in college courses at the disciplines in which they were integrated (for example Exegesis, Patristics, in the 1971-1975 period). In 1975, the discipline of Missionary Guidance becomes stand-alone in the Department of Systematic Theology at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest. It receives the title of “Dogmatics and Missionary Guidance”, supported by father Dumitru Radu. Shortly, as a confirmation of the new ecumenical tendencies, this discipline becomes “Missionary Guidance and Ecumenism” (1977). As we have seen in a previous chapter, tenured professor at the Department of Doctrinal Theology and Missionary Guidance is named by contest the father Ion Bria. Because he had been co-opted since 1973 in the working group of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Patriarch Justin entrusted the chair and the post of associate professor to the deacon Peter I. David, editor in chief of the patriarchal magazines. Between 1978 and 1990 fathers Alexandru Stan, Nicolae Dură, Stefan Buchiu, Stefan Sandu, Sterea Tache, and others would work together as assistants at this chair²³.

In conclusion, between 1949 and 1989 the Romanian Orthodox mission is linked only to these two names: father Ion Bria and deacon Peter I. David. In fact, the two will have two distinct speeches and two distinct research directions: the pastoral-sectological orientation by deacon Peter I. David, and the missionary-ecumenical orientation by Father. Ion Bria.

The second orientation is more than obvious in the research that we will continue to undertake on father professor Ion Bria’s thinking. We highlight here a single aspect. Constantly activating within the World Council of Churches, from 1973-1994, father Bria had the opportunity to look more “detached”, but also “contextually” to Orthodoxy and its presence in the contemporary world. Appointed in 1987 as director of the “Revival and Life Parish” section, he realized “the gap between the program and the ecumenical and missionary institutions launched by the Roman Catholics (faculties, hospitals and monasteries, charity and hospitality centers), by Protestants (publishers, publishing houses, Sunday schools, bookstores, prayer houses, religious programs on radio) and those initiated by the Orthodox, focusing on chapel constructions, improvised churches in

²³ Details at Petre I. DAVID, “Rolul disciplinei îndrumări misionare și ecumenism în pastorația vremii noastre”, in: *Studii Teologice* 53 (2001) 3-4; Petre I. DAVID, “Catedra de Îndrumări misionare la Facultatea de Teologie și Institutul Teologic din București”, in: *Studii Teologice* XXXIII (1981) 5-6.

The Contribution of Father Professor Ion Bria to the Development of the Romanian Missionary...

improper places”²⁴. The faculties of theology in Eastern Europe confused “pastoral missiology with pastoral, ecumenism with proselytism and reduced evangelism to liturgical time and space”²⁵.

In the face of these realities, the work of father Ion Bria channeled on two major directions: 1. the formation of an Orthodox missionary stream, entitled “Liturgy after Liturgy”, to enter the ecumenical scene; and 2. Making some university courses and lectures, publishing some books and dictionaries of theology, having as a goal

“to free the presentation of Orthodoxy in the West of the dominant culture of the Russian-Byzantine past ... and to bring forth new local theological orientations in the development (evolution) of the history of tradition, making a hermeneutical analysis of the contemporary experience”²⁶.

III. Missiology as sectology

The dominant figure in the sphere of Romanian Orthodox sectology, both before and after 1989 remains deacon Petre I. David. He is the author of the famous *Christian Guide*²⁷ published in a first edition in 1987 and re-edited several times (see, for example, the 1994 edition). The text was revised and updated in an edition in 3 volumes, to which added new themes born from post-December realities.

The first volume entitled *Invasion of Sects in Secular Christianity* has as its theme the old heresies at the religious sects of our time. The material is grouped into two major chapters: biblical religious sects (Some religious groups named by the Scripture and the Heresies Condemnation) and Neo-Protestant Proselytism, 20th Century Disease (Major Neo-Protestant Cults and Dissidents and Socio-Religious Sects).

²⁴ ION BRIA *Al Doilea Botez, Itinerarele unei credințe și teologii de deschidere (Autobiografie)*, Ed. Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2005, p. 176.

²⁵ ION BRIA, *Al Doilea Botez*.... p. 142.

²⁶ ION BRIA, *Al Doilea Botez*...., p. 146-147.

²⁷ PETRE I. DAVID, *Călăuză creștină pentru cunoașterea și apărarea dreptei credințe în fața prozelitismului sectar*, Arad, 1987. Over time, he appeared more open to other Christian confessions. We remind in this respect the work: *Ecumenismul, factor de stabilitate în lumea de astăzi*, Bucharest, 1998.

The second volume bears the title “*Prophets*” of time, false teachers, antichrists, “evangelists” and deals with the apocalyptic heretic-schismatic spectrum at the beginning of the third millennium. If in the first chapter there are exposed the Christian associations and groups (confusions or contradiction between science and faith, movements with “zealous” brothers, “ecclesiastic” spaces with religious structure, manifestations and superstitious practices), in the second chapter there is a broad analysis of the theme of violence at some religious sects such as the ones with “sacred” doctrine of Indian influence, the persist neo-pagan movement mirrored at the Persian-Arab sects, occultism and Asian fanaticism under the religious mask, anti-Christian Kabo-Western syncretism of the New World, terrorism and the threat of religious sects.

Entitled *From personal interpretations and commentaries, subjective to contradictory biblical translations*, the third volume treats dogmatic aspects in an apologetic and sectological approach. Here are theological themes such as: Revelation, Church, Holy Sacraments, Honor of Saints and of Sacred Objects, Divine Worship, Neo-Protestant Eschatology, and so on. The volume also includes some annexes.

The Christian guide of P. I. David is not only an index of the Christian sects but also an attempt to respond to the concrete needs of a parish, an attempt to offer priests methods to be used for missionary-pastoral purposes, for the building of the Body of Christ, but also for the return of the lost to the Church. In his view, ways to counteract the harmful activity of the sects must be grounded in the biblical and patristical practice of the Church. For example, the Holy Apostles had in their writings such counsel and methods: avoiding the wicked ones (Romans 16, 17-18), bypassing those who are nagging (Titus 3, 9-11), counteracting insults and offenses that will be done not by purposeless justification, but by personal example, through the fulfillment of the holy work of the priesthood (2 Cor. 6, 7-10). To these can be added other methods: 1. transmitting the teaching of faith through: sermon, catechesis, explanation of the Holy Scriptures, meditation, questions, research of believers, their spiritual experiences and their relations, by regular and traditional spirit of divine services, and so on; 2. Strengthening the believers’ faith in the servant and renewing the ancestral godliness; 3. Strengthening the conscience of the faithful about their status as guardians of secular artistic and cultural treasures; 4. Intensifying the soul-to-soul connection by confessing and removing the

The Contribution of Father Professor Ion Bria to the Development of the Romanian Missionary...

antisocial attitudes of the parish (alcoholism, tobacco, divorce, and so on); 5. Participation in the community's household issues.

Other methods can be added to these methods: 1. Restoring the order (economic, administrative, pastoral, and so on) in the parish leadership (if the priest is also found to have shortcomings and deviations, or by straightening in the case of the priests with seniority in parish); 2. Co-opting in the parish leadership of trust people from the community, Christian living parables.

In the case of those who left the Church the following methods could be used: 1. The localization and even the isolation of the one who has turned from the right-faith (Titus 1: 10); 2. Calling to original unity; 3. Human love contacts; 4. Dialogue and lack of labels that could be offensive; 5. the use of the Holy Scriptures (in an Orthodox form) as the only field of religious discussion accepted by heretics; 6. Confronting the various translations of Scripture to highlight possible falsifications; 7. The irenical attitude; 8. Avoiding dogmatic discussions if these are not the real causes of justification for true faith; 9. Providing personal example; 10. Avoiding violent members of the sects.

In relation to believers and other confessions, the attitude of the priest may be the most effective method and mean of combating sectarian proselytism. Here are mentioned: 1. Personal ardour or zeal; 2. Devotion to the service of God; 3. Availability for a clean sacrifice; 4. Defending the believers from sectarian attempts and temptations through sermons, catechesis, or particular discourses; 5. Conscientious Liturgy; 6. Introduction / maintenance of traditional church hymns; 7. Concern and interest in the real life of believers; 8. Involvement in reactivating the social apostolate; 9. Establishing the home in the parish.

Particularly compared with the sectological line, the contribution of father Ion Bria in the development of the Romanian Orthodox missiology appears even more conspicuous.

IV. The original contribution of father Ion Bria to the development of the Orthodox missionary theology in the 20th century

Regarding the contribution made by father Professor Ion Bria to the development of the Orthodox theology in general and the missionary-

ecumenical one in particular, father associate professor Daniel Buda highlights two interleaved aspects:

1. We can discover at father Professor Ion Bria *a theology of history with obvious ecumenical valences*. History is presented as the reality of the “organic unity” in the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit renews the community continuously in a continuity that is historical. This unity offered by God is ontological and indivisible of the Body of Christ, and is made and preserved in history, and has existed continuously and without interruption in the Orthodox Church. Without accepting this fundamental principle, namely that the uncircumcised Church existed in the past and still exists today from the Orthodox view the common search for unity is condemned to be an endless and hopeless effort. The conclusion is that no Orthodox will accept the claim made by some Protestants that the Church can never exist in history as a Church, but only as a multiplicity of different confessions. Father Professor Ion Bria speaks of an “historical attitude” in terms of the unity of the Church, defined in opposition to the “static attitude”. Historical attitude therefore implies dynamism, searching, straightening of one towards the other, using the dynamic elements and therefore historical of the tradition.

2. Recognizing the possibility that the Orthodox Church has made mistakes in history. Indirectly to father Professor Ion Bria, we find references to this delicate matter. He admits that members of the Orthodox Church, “whether as individuals or as a historical group”, failed to realize and manifest the implications of the presence of the divine grace. He also writes that “the bishops, priests and synods may commit errors and have committed errors throughout history”²⁸. Finally, he courageously states that “Christians should not fear humiliation, but they should fear of an unrepentant church”²⁹.

The second idea arises as a result of the fact that the Romanian theologian systematically sought to avoid the temptation of triumphalism, of posturing a superiority that results from the fact that the Orthodox Church is one and uninterrupted with the Church of Jesus Christ and of the Apostles. He also pointed out, after the fall of communism, that the Orthodox had approached a kind of “discreet and tacit” resistance

²⁸ See Ion BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, Editura Astra Museum, Sibiu, 2013, p. 200.

²⁹ Ion BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 41

The Contribution of Father Professor Ion Bria to the Development of the Romanian Missionary...

against communism, which contributed to its fall³⁰. He acknowledged - in response to the cruel criticisms made against the Orthodox Church that it had collaborated with the communist regimes and that now the Church needs to make public repentance - that sometimes, in certain contexts, “the Church failed to make the gospel values transparent”³¹. For the quicker normalization of the confused situation in the post-communist countries, father Bria tried to clarify the relations between the Church and the state and of the religious law. The nostalgia of the Constantinian-Byzantine model of the so-called “symphony” between the state and the Church was not a realistic approach for him. He also drew attention on the fact that “the pious veneration of national conformism in the East of Europe” is an approach that goes against the current of European history³². On the other hand, father Bria proposed a “critical partnership with the state”³³ in which all churches, including minorities, participate in a partnership that would allow the Church to maintain its prophetic voice in relation to the state and society.

Again, on the one hand, father Professor Ion Bria showed that the Orthodox Churches still have values which in other churches have diminished or even lost. One of these values, explicitly emphasized by Father Bria, is that Orthodox Churches can count on the fidelity of the people, with a close link between clergy and believers, between the Church understood as an institution and the faithful people. Conscious of this attachment, and perhaps of the fact that communist isolation has helped to preserve certain Christian values simply because we have been protected from certain influences with negative effect, father Bria pointed out how superficially know the situation in the post-communist countries those who speak of a “religious vacuum”³⁴ in this region in the post-communist era.

On the other hand, reading some studies by Father Professor Ion Bria, we understand that beyond all the strengths and negative effects of this world, he was firmly convinced that the rebirth of the Orthodox Churches is in connection with God’s desire. At the same time, however, he was the fearless adversary of any Orthodox triumphalism based on a cheap trust in

³⁰ ION BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 170.

³¹ ION BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 177.

³² ION BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 171.

³³ ION BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 176.

³⁴ ION BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 185.

God that protects and enhances his true Church regardless of the effort or the quality of its members.

Father Professor Bria also opposed the idea - widespread in Romania - that communism should be treated as a “historical bracket”³⁵. Such an approach postulates the utopian attempt to restore the values existing in the pre-communist era. The world has evolved, and communism has had its consequences on it, which we have no right to ignore. Without saying them explicitly, we can deduce that the communist was for father Ion Bria, among other things, a painful lesson from which the world has much to learn. He pleaded for a “serious assessment of contemporary history”, that is, of the period 1948-1989, and deplored the fact that this assessment is delayed³⁶.

Last but not least, father Professor Ion Bria observed the depreciation of the ecumenical situation in the former communist countries. Many factors have contributed to this: confessional conflicts, proselytism, increasing nationalism, but also the lack of ability of the ecumenical organizations to redefine their role to be relevant to the new situation created³⁷. As a possible antidote to anti-ecumenism, father Bria proposed the openness of the Orthodox to new experiences, an approach without timidity or complex, but openly and directly of complex and delicate ecumenical themes³⁸. To the isolation imposed by anti-ecumenists undoubtedly contributes the feeling of defense against the Western postmodernism developed in wider eastern circles a few years after the fall of communism, when the enthusiasm for Western values came back to reality. As the Orthodox became more and more aware that the West brings challenges, some even similar to those of Marxism³⁹, the tendency to repel towards West has increased. This tendency, although it is in minority, is not to be neglected. Much discernment is necessary in choosing what is good of what is negative in the amalgam of values labeled as “Western”. This uncertainty about the discernment and the separation of values can lead to the rise of nationalism, especially that the germs of this growth have received impulses from the communist ideology⁴⁰ and only awaits the favorable environment to develop. For the emergence and development of such phenomena in the East of Europe

³⁵ Ion BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 202.

³⁶ Ion BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 213.

³⁷ Ion BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 181.

³⁸ Ion BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 191.

³⁹ Ion BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, pp. 193-194.

⁴⁰ Ion BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p.199.

The Contribution of Father Professor Ion Bria to the Development of the Romanian Missionary...

as nationalism, isolationism, anti-ecumenism are not only East Europeans responsible. Father Professor Bria points out that the Westerners have their share of negative contributions to these phenomena. Thus, the insinuation that the spirit of Europe is only identified with Western Christianity makes many Orthodox feel marginalized⁴¹. Other groups simply refuse to accept “historical evolution”⁴², which makes them even more fundamentalist.

Animated by this vivid desire to give a Christian response to the existential problems of the contemporary world, father Bria succeeded in consolidating a missionary theology that can be summed up in the following points:

1) The triadological nature of all ecclesial and human existence. The Holy Trinity is the eternal source of communion. “God is love” (1 John 4, 8). God is thus the absolute and perfect goal of human life, the culmination and the model of perfection. The mission of Christians is to highlight the special importance of the trinitarian dogma on the destiny of Christians in particular and of all people and of all creation in general.

2) The Christological character of humanity and the mission of the Church, for this is nothing more than a confession of the Logos’ centrality in all creation. The understanding of Christ as God’s Logos was doubled by the rediscovery of the doctrine of the “cosmic” Logos. Jesus Christ is the “central Man” through whom all are understood, the unifying basis of all humanity. This christological character is doubled by the pneumatological one: the presence of Christ is one in a permanent dynamism, and this dynamism is made by the Holy Spirit. Thus, He is present in the words of Scripture, spoken by Himself in His Messianic ministry, words, liturgically and sacramentally repeated, and with the same evangelistic effect that penetrates the heart and converts to the divine mystery, but also in the words of prayer as human response in love to divine loving and saving intercession.

3) The work of the evangelizing - founded by the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and by sending the Holy Apostles to the Gentiles - is nothing but the proclamation of the Person and the salvation work of Jesus Christ. The gospel has an universal character, and the work of evangelism is an incessant requirement of the members of the Church at any time and space. The action of evangelism is essential to the building of the Church,

⁴¹ ION BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 200.

⁴² ION BRIA, *Studii de misiune și ecumenism*, p. 205.

the Body of Christ in history; the extension of the Church is the very purpose of the Christian mission. The incessant presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church since its founding reveals another dimension that it possesses: the eschatological dimension. It is the sign, the parable, and the anticipated presence of the kingdom of God. Testimony through the quality and holiness of life is the most effective mean of mission, for it is the most favorable mean to show the living presence of God in the lives of men.

4) The mission coincides with the “extension” of the Church - the mystical body of Christ. Although apostolicity is most clearly reflected in the succession of the Apostles in the sacramental hierarchy of the three clerical steps, at the missionary work should not lack laity. Thus, father Ion Bria speaks of an “apostolate of laity”. Especially in and through Liturgy, the whole Church expresses its sacramental role, a role that cannot be separated from its state of being “the people of God”.

5) The liturgical orientation of the Orthodox mission represents one of the most important contributions brought by the priest Ion Bria to the development of the missionary theology of the 20th century. He strongly emphasized the indissoluble relationship between the Church, mission and the Holy Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist. In this respect, he paid great attention to the phrase “Liturgy after Liturgy”, which brings together charity, spirituality, theological education, social ethics, Christian political discipline. The formula “With peace come out”! from the Byzantine Liturgy symbolically and sacramentally marks the “sending” of believers to the world. At this time there is no “going out” of the Church, but its “entry” into the world, a passage in another mode of liturgy that is the “Liturgy” after the Liturgy. Consequently, the relationship of Liturgy - Spirituality - Mission is based on the richness of Church life in its sacramental aspects.

6) The mission cannot bypass the relationship of the Church with the world, and the merit of father Professor Ion Bria is that he did not avoid the “confrontation” with the secularized tendencies of the (post) modern world in which he lived. Challenged to give pertinent answer to the present problems of humanity, the Church must reaffirm in a truly re-evangelization some of its fundamental principles: the value of every human person, the universal character of the saving work of Jesus Christ, the purpose of man – “Deification” or socio-ecclesial reality as between “already” and “not yet” 7) The optimistic view of the Romanian theologian towards today’s socio-cultural realities is also emphasized in his command for the

The Contribution of Father Professor Ion Bria to the Development of the Romanian Missionary...

realization of a “Christian culture”. It is the expression of the gospel and of the Christian faith in the intellectual thinking (philosophy), in the artistic manifestation (poetry, art, music), in social organization (ethics, morals), in the historical view (political regime, state form). Christian culture is also said to be “all that gives the identity of a human community through faithfulness to its origins and openness to the future”. The affirmations are the theological basis of recognizing the consistency and value of creation, of humanity, of substance. The ultimate being the transfiguration of the world, Christian Revelation neither degrades the substance nor destroys natural and human products.

8) The Christian mission also involves the issue of inculturation or the problem of transmitting the revealed content of the Holy Tradition in all times and to all people everywhere. The first aspect raises the issue of receiving the Gospel, meaning the interpretation of the biblical text according to the cultural and social context in which the mission is carried out. The second concerns the mechanism of self-criticism that maintains the synthesis function, the metamorphosis of Tradition. Here the Orthodox Church has a decisive role, whose “genius” lies precisely in its dynamic conception of Tradition. Its “development” marks two other interdependent aspects: on the one hand, *the whole work* of Jesus Christ in time, that is, the message of the Apostles sent to the Church, and on the other hand, the mode of transmission of the Divine Revelation in the history of the Church, from one generation to another, but as a succession in which the Church, at the same time continues and renews the faith from the beginning (John 16, 13). There is an application and a deepening of the evangelical message in Tradition to meet the spiritual needs of believers in every new generation of the Church, and this work takes place as an ecclesial “charisma” under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of Truth”. It is an act requiring discernment (*phronema*, the “conscience of Christ”) of the entire ecclesial body (it is done through *consensus ecclesiae*); is a critical act of continuous definition and reception, in freedom and unity in diversity.

9) Another merit of father Ion Bria is the alarm signal he drew: without *orthopraxy*, Orthodoxy risks falling into isolationism and sectarian exclusivity. *Lex credendi* is indissolubly linked to *lex orandi*. From a Christian perspective, the Church’s mission to eradicate poverty and eliminate social injustices brings into discussion the Christian philanthropy (and implicitly the role of the parish in today’s world). Father Bria sees the unity and integrity of Christian life in the triangle of 1) spiritual life,

personal mystic through prayer that makes the heart the altar of self-sacrifice to God to make room for full grace and divine love to dwell inside so that we do not live anymore but Christ in us, 2) Eucharistic Liturgy and 3) “The Sacrament of Brother”, social service that establishes a new ethical community, the evangelical one conforming the divine and ecclesial will and work for the world. Also, the denunciation of social strata, of all kinds of injustice, is done simultaneously with the denunciation of missionary methods contradicting the evangelical spirit, in this case proselytism. (As father Dumitru Stăniloae says, among the proselytizing work of the 20th century, not only the activity of certain sects is included, but also the Uniatism promoted by the Roman Catholic Church.)

V. Conclusion

At the end of our study, we emphasize the great importance that Prof. Ion Bria's work had on the crystallization and development of an orthodox missionary theology in the second half of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. Thus, Father Bria, since the late 1970s and early 1980s of the last century, has attempted to develop a “genuine Orthodox missionary theology” that would bring refreshment and dynamism to the pastoral-missionary work of the Church in the midst of the people of God. Being a “wonderful expert on missions”⁴³, for example, the Romanian theologian has integrated the concept of “Liturgy after Divine Liturgy” as being organically related to the life and mission of the Church⁴⁴.

Thus, unlike other Romanian missionary theologians, Bria made a critique of theology, but did not fall into the temptation of anti-sectarian theology. Denouncing any proselytism, he at the same time promoted a theology of openness to the Christian values of any Christian tradition and confession (emblematic, his manual is entitled “Dogmatic and Ecumenical

⁴³ Christoph TAPERNOUX, “The Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches (WCC) - Background of a Process as Reflected in Some Contributions by Father I. Bria”, in: Ioan TULCAN, Cristinel IOJA (eds.) *Omagiu Pr. Prof. Dr. Ion Bria (1929-2002). The Reception of his Theological Thinking and its Relevance for the Overpass of the Ecumenical & Missionary Deadlock, The International Symposium, Arad 25-26 February 2009*, Ed. Universității Aurel Vlaicu, Arad, 2009 p. 287.

⁴⁴ Ioan TULCAN, Cristinel IOJA, “Cuvânt înainte”, in: Ioan TULCAN, Cristinel IOJA (eds.) *Omagiu Pr. Prof. Dr. Ion Bria (1929-2002)...*, p. 10.

The Contribution of Father Professor Ion Bria to the Development of the Romanian Missionary...

Theology”). The intent was to distance itself from the temptation of a “middle” defensive orthodox theologian who used Catholic theological arguments against Protestant theology and vice versa. On the contrary, the Romanian theologian fought for a specific Orthodox theology, both in method and in content, which made it “original”. The promised prospect was a positive one, not a negative one.

Ion Bria himself was perfectly aware of the role that the theologian now needs to play - as he was said to exert a true “charisma”⁴⁵ - and the words spoken in his provocative autobiography can be regarded as a kind of “creed” animated throughout his life:

“Every generation has its «Ambiguity», especially the current generation living in a landless world. Today, at a radical turning point in history, the turns are extreme and dangerous drifts. It is in the responsibility of the theologian to help students, priests, Christians, young people and adults, to find in the labyrinth of postmodern society and civilization, the itinerary of personal salvation following Christ to reach the knowledge of the Truth. I am convinced that the Church suffers when it is not sustained and accompanied by a lucid, critical and creative, hopeful theology”⁴⁶.

In our opinion, the above desideratum was embodied in the theology of Father Professor Ion Bria. His main quality was that of orthodox missionary theologian and lately his contribution to the development of pastoral-missionary theology is increasingly emphasized, a contribution that was paradoxically recognized more in the West than by us⁴⁷.

Our study had this very purpose: (re) discovery and (re) valuing of one of the most original and provocative contemporary Romanian Orthodox theologians, as was the case of father Ion Bria.

⁴⁵ See in this respect especially Ioan C. TEȘU, “Teologul și Teologia, în gândirea Părintelui Profesor Ion Bria”, in: Ioan TULCAN, Cristinel IOJA (eds.) *Omagiu Pr. Prof. Dr. Ion Bria (1929-2002)*..., pp. 291-314, and Ciprian Iulian TOROCZKAI, “Părintele Profesor Ion Bria și harisma teologului”, in: Nicolae MOȘOIU (ed.), *Relevanța operei Părintelui profesor Ion Bria...*, pp. 535-549.

⁴⁶ Ion BRIA, *Al doilea botez...*, p. 266.

⁴⁷ “The fame of the missionary of the right faith of Prof. Dr. Ion Bria far exceeded the boundaries of the Romanian theology...”. See David PESTROIU, “Părintele prof. dr. Ion Bria – misionar al Ortodoxiei”, in: Nicolae MOȘOIU (ed.), *Relevanța operei Părintelui profesor Ion Bria...*, p. 447.