



**Romanian-American Religious Interferences  
in the Twentieth Century**

Edited by IONUȚ BILIUȚĂ

*In God We Trust*  
**Romanian-American  
Religious Interferences  
in the Twentieth Century**

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## Table of Contents/Cuprins

<b>INTRODUCTION: Romanian-American Religious Interactions during the Twentieth Century between Survival, Adaptation, and Diplomatic <i>Soft-Power</i> (Ionuț Biliuță)</b> .....	10
<b>I. Predicatori și literatură misionară anglo-saxonă în dosarele Poliției și Armatei Române din Chișinău. Note pe marginea cercetărilor de arhivă (Dumitru Lisnic)</b> .....	16
I.1. Fondurile de Arhivă ale Armatei și Poliției Române.....	16
I.2. Documente privitoare la activitatea misionarilor anglo-saxoni.....	24
I.3. Concluzii.....	28
<b>II. A Prolegomena to the Study of the Southern Baptists (USA) Interwar New European Missions Project in Romania (Paul E. Michelson)</b> .....	29
II.1. Introduction .....	29
II.2. The Southern Baptist “New Missions” Project.....	30
II.3. The Southern Baptist New European Mission and Romania....	45
II.4. Instead of a Conclusion .....	61
<b>III. The Craighead Family: American Baptist Influence in Interwar Basarabia (Iemima Ploscariu)</b> .....	62
III.1. The Craighead Family: Linguistic and Other Cultural Preparations.....	67
III.2. Bălți as a Strategic Town.....	71
III.3. Religious Interactions Across Eastern Romania: Chișinău, Cetatea Albă, Bucharest, and Cernăuți.....	83
III.4. Conclusion: World War II and Enemy Nations .....	94

<b>IV. The American YMCA-ACT Organization in 1946 Oradea: Secret Police Harassment, Youth Mobilization, and Religious Americanization at Local Level</b> (Ionuț Biliuță).....	98
IV.1. YMCA-ACT in the Interwar Years: From Royal High Protection to Secret Police Surveillance.....	101
IV.2. Communism and YMCA-ACT in the late 1940s: The Case of the Oradea Branch.....	108
IV.3. Instead of conclusions .....	115
<b>V. Chestiunile religioase reflectate în documentele Legației României în SUA, 1946–1948</b> (Cristian Vasile) .....	117
V.1. M. Ralea și raportarea la chestiunile religioase înainte de 1945.....	119
V.2. Misiunea diplomatică din Statele Unite: primele priorități .....	126
V.3. Subminarea ajutorului umanitar religios .....	130
V.4. Chestiunile greco-catolică și național-țărănistă .....	135
V.5. Bisericile ortodoxe din SUA ca spații ale contestării guvernului Groza .....	137
<b>VI. A Religious Policy in East Central Europe: The Americans in Communist Romania</b> (Anca Șincan) .....	140
VI.1. The 1970s and the recuperation of the religious narrative .....	148
VI.2. A non-politic ambassador in a political ambassadorship: Funderburk in Romania .....	149
VI.3. Conclusion .....	155
<b>VII. „Romania keeps tight reign on religion”: intervenții americane în sprijinul bisericilor evanghelice din România în anii ’80</b> (Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy) .....	157
VII.1. Introducere .....	157
VII.2. Situația comunităților evanghelice neoprotestante la începutul anilor ’80.....	160

VII.3. Intervenții americane în sprijinul credincioșilor bapțiști din România.....	169
VII.4. Concluzii.....	178
<b>VIII. Southern Baptists and Romanian Baptists – A Strange Love Story (Dănuț Mănăstireanu).....</b>	<b>181</b>
VIII.1. The first hundred years of Romanian Baptist history .....	182
VIII.2. Southern Baptists – a checkered history.....	187
VIII.3. Romanian Baptists in the last thirty years – the meanders of a confusing history.....	200
VIII.4. Conclusions .....	210

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Romanian-American Religious Interactions during the Twentieth Century between Survival, Adaptation, and Diplomatic *Soft-Power***

**Ionuț Biliuță**

Throughout the twentieth century, the United States–Romania relationship on various levels was deeply contested on both sides of the Atlantic, and remained unclear, underexplored, and often neglected in scholarly research. The challenges posed by Romania’s geographical position across the Atlantic in Eastern Europe and its shifting political regimes over the past century, from a quasi-democracy during the interwar period to a totalitarian dictatorship during communist years, have significantly shaped the trajectory of diplomatic, economic, cultural, and religious encounters between Americans and Romanians. One of the most overlooked dimensions of U.S.-Romanian relations involved the religious interconnections among churches, splinter groups, communities, and individuals on both sides of the Atlantic, but also how the United States diplomatic structures in post-Wilsonian Europe instrumentalized these religious connections in the benefit of US interests on the European continent, especially from 1920s onwards.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Kirk, Mircea Răceanu, *Romania Versus the United States: Diplomacy of the Absurd 1985–1989*, Palgrave, New York, 1994; Bogdan Barbu, *Vin Americanii! Prezența simbolică a Statelor Unite în România Războiului rece*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2006; Mariana Neț, *Once upon Two Cities. A Parallel between New York City and Bucharest by 1900*, Common Ground

Based on the papers from two panels in an international conference organized by the Gheorghe Șincai Institute in June 2023 on the US-Romanian cultural relations, this collection of essays examines various facets of religious interactions between U.S. Evangelicals, their Romanian counterparts, and state authorities. It also explores missionary organizations with a transatlantic presence, such as the YMCA-ACT, and cultural intersections grounded in religious experience. Far from presenting a monolithic or unilateral narrative, the volume offers a nuanced account of constant negotiations between religious groups and the Romanian state through the twentieth century. It delves into processes of ideological and institutional adaptation, the tension between tribal nationalism and transnational cosmopolitanism, and the complex interplay between ethnic/religious identity and the multifaceted condition of Romanian Evangelical Protestants from the interwar period through the post-socialist era.<sup>2</sup>

A central theme explored in this volume is the Romanian state's encroachment, under quasi-democratic and totalitarian regimes, on the autonomy, development, and self-awareness of distinct religious groups throughout the twentieth century, or on individuals struggling

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Publishing, Champaign, 2016; Paschalis Pechlivanis, *America and Romania in the Cold War: A Differentiated Détente, 1969–80*, Routledge, London, 2019. For the Wilsonian diplomatic and political architecture of post-1918 Eastern Europe, see Susan Pederson, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015; Larry Wolf, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2019. Please also see W. Culbertson, A. M. Oswley, *Pagini de jurnal: doi diplomați americani în Bucureștiul interbelic*, Vremea, Bucharest, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Clark, *Sectarianism and Renewal in 1920s Romania: The Limits of Orthodoxy and Nation-Building*, Bloomsbury, London, 2021; Iemima Daniela Ploscariu, *Alternative Evangelicals: Challenging Nationalism in Interwar Romania's Multi-ethnic Borderlands*, Brill Schöningh, Leiden, 2024.

with state persecution or infringements on their basic rights. The essays highlight how the state's harassment and persecution of non-sanctioned religious communities began in the interwar years, targeting groups such as the Old Calendarists, the Tudorists, the Inochentists, and certain Evangelical Protestant communities.<sup>3</sup> The volume investigates the survival strategies, cultural exchanges, and forms of adaptation adopted by these groups under pressure from the state and the sympathetic eye of the American authorities and various religious groups towards their sufferings inflicted by the repressive organizations such as the secret police (Siguranța Statului, Securitate).<sup>4</sup>

Through the lens of U.S. diplomats, missionaries, and religious personnel involved in missionary work in Romania – or in defending the existence and fundamental rights of U.S.-affiliated or Romanian Evangelicals – these essays trace the presence or the lack of American influence. This influence manifested either as a form of soft power diplomacy or as an expression of religious kinship uniting Evangelicals across the Atlantic. By analyzing the evolution of formal and informal U.S. protection extended to various Romanian religious groups – through the efforts of diplomats, churches, missionary organizations, politicians, and intellectuals – this book aims to open new avenues of research for historians, theologians, and political scientists. Moreover, beyond the overrated topic of U.S. protection and diplomatic pressure applied to Romanian institutions, the essays collectively focus on the transatlantic transfer of religious practices, financial

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<sup>3</sup> Anca Șincan, James Kapaló, (editors), *Religia clandestină în documentele poliției secrete: O istorie în imagini*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy, „Redeeming memory: neo-Protestant churches and the secret police archives in Romania,” in James A. Kapaló și Kinga Povedák, (editors), *The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, Routledge, London, 2022, 316–335.

support, theological knowledge, and survival tactics. These transfers, spanning the twentieth century, illustrate how religious communities in Romania adapted and persisted under state scrutiny and repression, aided in part by their American connections.<sup>5</sup>

Another key point of novelty in this book is its interdisciplinary and non-denominational approach. The contributing authors employ cutting-edge perspectives from religious studies, history, cultural history, theology, and religious anthropology to analyze their case studies within theoretical frameworks that allow for broader regional relevance. Reflecting the complex realities examined in the book, the cohort of scholars comes from diverse intellectual backgrounds – including religious studies, history, theology, and anthropology – in pursuit of a multi-faceted and beyond the nation-centered understanding of religious interactions and the potential for distinct analytical interpretations across various cases and contexts.

This interdisciplinarity is further reflected in the wide range of primary sources (archival materials, oral testimonies, diaries, and publications) and secondary sources utilized by the authors. These sources help to contextualize, explain, and interpret the nature of U.S.-Romanian religious interactions from the interwar period through the post-communist years.

In contrast to mainstream historiography on religion in Romania, which often adopts a denominational, partisan lens of analyzing different religious groups, all the essays in this volume maintain strict denominational neutrality. Each case study is approached from an academic, non-confessional perspective. Rather than focusing on denominational or church history, the book adopts a transnational

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<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Schweitzer, Peter Schreiner, „International Knowledge Transfer in Religious Education. Interpretations and Further Perspectives,” in Friedrich Schweitzer, Peter Schreiner, (editors), *International Knowledge Transfer in Religious Education*, Waxmann, Munster, 2020, 13.

and religious studies-informed framework that privileges no specific religious group. In some cases, even major religious institutions such as the Romanian Orthodox Church appear only peripherally, as silent or contextual actors.<sup>6</sup>

The primary emphasis of the book lies in the exchanges of practices and individuals, institutional and intercultural perspectives, and the juxtaposition of U.S. diplomatic pressure against Romanian state persecution, particularly targeting clandestine religious groups with American origins or backing. While institutional actors (churches, splinter groups, missionary organizations, the U.S. Embassy, the State Department, the Romanian state, the secret police, etc.) are certainly present, they are treated largely as contextual elements. The core analytical focus lies in how these religious connections were formed, utilized, or manipulated by various institutional, communitarian, or individual actors, and how strategies of survival or subversion, particularly under secret police surveillance, were developed and enacted. Far from adopting a triumphalist tone or limiting the scope to a single historical period, each chapter offers a comprehensive, *longue durée* perspective on what were at times painful, yet also fruitful, collaborations between Romanian and American religious actors, often mediated by both the Romanian state and the U.S. diplomatic system.

To ensure greater accessibility and expand the book's reach beyond academic audiences, the editor has chosen to preserve some chapters in Romanian. While this decision may slightly impact

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<sup>6</sup> For the religious studies perspective, see Gavin Flood, „The study of religion as corrective reading,” in David F. Ford, Ben Quash, and Janet Martin Soskice, (editors), *Fields of Faith Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-first Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, 56–75; Richard B. Miller, *Why Study Religion?* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021, 239; Robert Ellwood, *Introducing Religion: Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century*, sixth edition, Routledge, London, 2025, 231–251.

the book's linguistic consistency and might prejudice some of the key arguments for a foreign readership, it reflects a commitment to engaging Romanian readers and recognizing its relevance for local scholarly and general audiences. Also, for the same reasons, the chapters have been arranged in chronological order to offer the reader a diachronic perspective adapted to the specific particularities of every period and a glimpse into the interconnectivity linking cases to each other and different denominational and geographic contexts. Faithful to a comparative perspective, the reader can identify throughout the text's references to other religious organizations or communities that do not concern the main scope of the book, or to different national or ideological case studies, to avoid the danger of historical and analytical exceptionalism that might describe the US-Romanian religious relation.

The present book constitutes a starting point for contemporary discussions on the transferability of religious extremism, the political engagement of contemporary Protestant Evangelicals in Romania, or their memory of repression and totalitarianism. It would be a useful instrument for scholars of religion, theologians, historians, and everyday readers interested in religion *per se* in their attempt to grasp the intricate nature of the American Romanian religious relations over the twentieth century.

**Dr. Ionuț Biliuță** works as a researcher at Gheorghe Șincai Institute/Romanian Academy in Târgu Mureș. He earned his PhD in History at Central European University (Budapest, Hungary) in 2014 and a ThD in Church History at Babeș-Bolyai University (Cluj-Napoca, România) in 2017. He was the recipient of several prestigious postdoctoral fellowships at the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C.), Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History (Munich, Germany), The International Institute for Holocaust Research, Yad Vashem (Jerusalem, Israel), and Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars in Washington D.C. (United States of America). He published extensively on the relationship between Orthodox clergy and fascism, the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Holocaust, antisemitism in Orthodox theology, and the intersection between neo-fascism and religious practices in contemporary Orthodox milieus.



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