

The Making of a Holy Nation: Pastoral Activity, Pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and Nationalism in Interwar Romanian Orthodoxy

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Abstract

After the end of World War I and the creation of Greater Romania, various actors tried to influence the official policy of the state by proposing political visions suitable to consolidate the Romanian identity and character of the country. The Orthodox Church, one of the most vocal of these actors, envisioned a variety of activities and programs with the goal of promoting the future development of the country alongside religious principles. In particular, in 1925 the Metropolitan of Ardeal organized the first “mass” pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the history of the Romanian people. Among the participants was Iosif Trifa, a close collaborator of the Metropolitan and the initiator and organizer of a widespread spiritual movement called the Army of the Lord. During the pilgrimage Trifa wrote notes that later constituted the basis of his travelogue *Pe urmele Mântuitorului* [In the Footsteps of the Savior], a book that, I will suggest, proposes a national – spiritual model for the building of the new political project inspired by the mythical image of the holy places. Trifa vested these pastoral concerns with political preoccupations that ultimately claimed the Holy Land as an ideal pattern for Greater Romania. Through a gradual literary process that morphed Palestine into the Christian Holy Land and reclaimed it for Orthodox Christians only, Trifa established a close connection between the holy sites and Romania by presenting the group of pilgrims and their itinerary as a symbol of the nation walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. A close reading of the narrative will show that Trifa aimed at using it as an exhortation to prompt Romanians’ commitment to Orthodoxy as the only successful solution to the national project.

Introduction

As Alphonse Dupront suggests, pilgrimage is one of the intense temporal dimensions of the individual and collective experience that has characterized religiosity from ancient Abydos in Egypt to modern day Lourdes in France (Dupront 1547-1553). In Christianity and, in particular, in the Orthodox Church, pilgrimage has a longstanding tradition encompassing rituals and practices enacted by believers traveling to holy places as expressions of spiritual fervor. Although over the course of time there developed many pilgrimage sites both at local and regional levels, the geography associated with biblical events and especially with the life of Jesus, has made the Holy Land the favorite destination for pilgrims. Apart from ancient and medieval evidences of pious travelers to these places, modern Orthodox Christians

have continued to regard this practice as a desired religious achievement, as studies on contemporary Orthodoxy show⁴².

In his analysis of the practice of pilgrimage in post-communist Romania, Mirel Bănică indicates that the sacred journey is a complex phenomenon that percolates not only into the deep structures of society, but also into the political and institutional life of the country engaging tens of thousands of people⁴³. It is also a fact that this period witnessed an increase in individual and organized pilgrimages to the Holy Land, given the liberalization of traveling outside the Romanian borders. At a first glance, the Communist atheism and isolationism that ruled over the Romanian people for almost half a century suggests that pilgrimage to the Holy Land is a new phenomenon that has sprouted only after 1989. Yet, a historical survey of modern Romania shows that the sacred journey to Jerusalem was a common practice among many individual locals, from the noble Elina Cantacuziono in 1682 to merchants, theologians, and clergymen in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, to organized groups in the 1920s and 1930s⁴⁴.

As these examples show, Romanian pilgrimages to the Holy Land could be either individual or organized in larger groups. Several elements ascribe the 1925 pilgrimage a singular place in this history. It was the first mass pilgrimage encompassing common believers and clergy, well organized in advance, and publicized in newspapers. Furthermore, it was led by important hierarchs such as Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan, who were involved in current debates on national issues. And lastly, it included the central figure of the widespread interwar Orthodox revival movement called Oastea Domnului [the Army of the Lord], Father Iosif Trifa, who further advertised the event through notes sent to his newspaper *Lumina Satelor* [The Light of the Villages] and eventually published it in the book *Pe urmele Mântuitorului* [In the Footsteps of the Savior]⁴⁵.

Given this complex constellation that characterized the 1925 pilgrimage to the Holy Land, it is arguable that an analysis of Trifa's travelogue could offer glimpses into the interface between religious experience and national ideals in interwar Romania. Studies of pilgrimage have pointed that this phenomenon could perform many functions simultaneously, from satisfying a personal need to setting the stage for cultural diffusion of new ideas⁴⁶. A close reading of *Pe urmele Mântuitorului* will show that Trifa tried to limn the pilgrimage as a national event with important consequences for Romanian identity. Moving from the personal level of the narrator to the immediate context of the eyewitnesses that accompanied him to

⁴² Limor and Stroumsa; Stavrou; Trandafir.

⁴³ Bănică.

⁴⁴ Păcurariu; Trandafir.

⁴⁵ Gogan.

⁴⁶ Thayer 169ss.

the larger setting of the Romanian nation, the narrative endeavors to propose the ideal image of the Holy Land as the supreme model to be achieved by the new people of God, the Romanians, in the new promised land, Greater Romania. Accordingly, it could be demonstrated that Trifa presents himself as a religious mystagogue who pleads for the national appropriation of the Holy Land model as the only means to the spiritual renewal of the nation and the subsequent success of the new Romanian political project. As such, the focus on figures like Father Trifa encourages the study of the relationship between religion and nationalism in interwar Romania from new perspectives able to evade the beaten track of radical politics and extremist ideologies that characterizes much of current scholarship.

To this end, the text will be examined from two major perspectives. On one hand, the focus will center on the meanings of pilgrimage in order to uncover both the various planes of this phenomenon, in particular the dialectic between personal and social impact⁴⁷, and the intertextuality between pilgrimage, narrator, readers, and historical, cultural, and ideological circumstances⁴⁸ (Coleman and Elsner 9-10). On the other hand, recent studies of the relationship between Orthodoxy and nationalism (Strickland) will inform the understanding of prescriptive ideas expressed by the text with reference to the national ideal. After a brief appraisal of the literary aspects of the narrative, the attention will first move to the exploration of religious themes as part of Trifa's pastoral concerns, then to the investigation of possible political tropes, in order to eventually conclude with an assessment of Trifa's national ideology.

Pe urmele Mântuitorului as a pilgrimage narrative

Scholars dealing with the phenomenon of pilgrimage have drawn increasing attention to pilgrimage narratives as a gateway to the mental universe that was shared by their authors and readers. In this sense, Trifa's travelogue is part of an "elaborate, intertextual discourse in which the journey to the Holy Land serves as an occasion" for conveying common concerns shared by both sides (Bowman 153-154).

As far as the narrator's mentality is concerned, one should employ what Victor Turner calls the "individual questions" suitable to reveal the primary motivation, reasons, intentions, and needs that prompted him to undertake such a long, dangerous, and costly task (Turner and Turner xiv-xv; Morinis 18). As noted above, Trifa published his pilgrimage experiences in successive articles in the weekly newspaper *Lumina Satelor* between 1925 and 1927, and a book, *Pe urmele Mântuitorului*. The latter, which appeared in two interwar editions in 1926 and 1928, was assessed by Trifa as a pastoral success (Trifa 6), a fact that was confirmed by its republication after 1989 with the blessing of the Metropolitan of Ardeal in a

⁴⁷ Morinis 21-28.

⁴⁸ Coleman and Elsner 4-5.

significant gesture of Trifa's rehabilitation into the Orthodox Church and appreciation of his important activity.

The structure of the book is organized around two major tropes which ultimately share the same symbolic meaning. The physical journey, which begins with preparations, descriptions of the way to the Holy Land, and portrayal of Jerusalem, reaches its climax at the moment of entrance into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. On the other hand, this temporal culmination leads the way to the apex of the spiritual pilgrimage that is embodied by the description of Jesus' passion story, a section that encompasses half of the entire narrative and as such constitutes its center. These two tropes that guide the narrative are interwoven with, on the one hand, descriptions of the travel, scientific information (climate, geography, history, and archaeology), details regarding the everyday life in Palestine, and curiosities, and, on the other hand, biblical pericopes and their interpretation, personal religious experiences, exhortations, and sermon-style passages, which form the bulk of the book. The particular combination of all these factors throughout the narrative indicates not only that Trifa envisioned the book as a polysemy of informative, religious, and political meanings, but also that he employed the informative passages only to shed light on religious, and possible, political issues, as the strong exhortative conclusion of the book shows.

Having illuminated these literary aspects, it could be stated that Trifa's goal in writing the book was foremost pastoral: the narrative appears as a parenthesis that urges the Romanian readers to engage in the spiritual pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem. This shows that for Trifa the physical pilgrimage and its narration constitute one process in which the retelling is at least as important as the actual trip because it makes available to the audience the same religious experience the author encountered at the holy sites. In this sense, the dialogical level that connects the author with his readers is further clarified by Trifa's commitment to the pastoral cause as his ultimate mission in life⁴⁹.

The pastor and his flock

The connection between the immediate situation of Trifa's individual experience and the cultural context of the readers is made possible by the image of the narrator as an "ideal type" of pilgrim whose travel is an act of worship that engages the audience in a religious ceremonial⁵⁰. To this end, Trifa employs two main pastoral mechanisms.

In a first place, it should be mentioned that Trifa does not understand his role of narrator in passive terms, but actively, as a mystagogue who initiates the reader

⁴⁹ Gogan 14-16.

⁵⁰ Coleman and Elsner 12.

into a spiritual journey to the heavenly Jerusalem⁵¹. Given the multiplicity of literary forms and meanings interwoven in the narrative, this process entails a complex fabric that reveals different layers of knowledge. While geographical and historical information aided by numerous maps and pictures restages for the reader the physical background of the *Heilsgeschichte*, and the detailed description of the holy sites serves as a guide through the Christian tradition, the plethora of biblical texts, hagiographies, and exhortations provide moral teaching and mediate spiritual experience. This is made possible by the fact that Trifa claims credibility⁵² both for himself and the Bible through first person accounts (direct witness), modern expertise (archaeology, maps), biblical and post-biblical traditions, and an intimate knowledge of the Scriptures whose accounts are proven to be entirely valid throughout the narrative⁵³. Thus, in an ontological-epistemological movement that recalls the patristic tradition, the reader is guided through a progression that advances from physical landscape to loci of divine presence to the pure spiritual realm⁵⁴, which taken together form a cosmic unity that is specific to Orthodox Christianity.

Having created this sacred space that resembles so much the Orthodox notion of the church⁵⁵, Trifa employs a second pastoral mechanism, that of presenting his narrative as a liturgical act⁵⁶. This requires a further sublimation of physicality through the construction of a Christian mythscape⁵⁷ that reveals Trifa's ultimate religious beliefs⁵⁸. First and foremost, the narrator tries to subsume geographical differences to the familiarity of religious texts. Though he enters a very different geography punctuated by a new climate, deserts, or strange flora⁵⁹, the dense presence of the Bible in the landscape he encounters metamorphoses Palestine into the familiar Holy Land: "The mapping of sacred places is still the same today [as it was in the time of Jesus Christ], only the political configuration has changed"⁶⁰. This translucent geography is made possible by a sort of anamnestic approach that enables Trifa to recall the things he has already seen in the Bible while in Romania. Indeed, the Holy Land becomes a "realistic icon"⁶¹ and coming to Jerusalem is, in a way, coming home⁶².

⁵¹ Williams.

⁵² Williams 28.

⁵³ Trifa 84.

⁵⁴ Trifa 53-54, 57.

⁵⁵ Stăniloae.

⁵⁶ Williams 20.

⁵⁷ Bowman 153.

⁵⁸ Cohen-Hattab and Shoval 10-11.

⁵⁹ Trifa 16, 24, 343-344.

⁶⁰ Trifa 24.

⁶¹ Bowman "Christian Ideology" 110.

⁶² Trifa 29-30.

The liturgical display of geographical data is further emphasized by the physical and spiritual presence of erstwhile and present saintly figures. In particular, the venerable image of Jerusalem's Patriarch Damianos, who is depicted as a living saint and apostle, the presence of holy sites such as St. Sabbas Monastery where saints of the church lived before, and the very places that witnessed the presence of biblical figures, denote that the Holy Land is like a church where continuous worship is given to God⁶³.

This celebration is joined by the group of Romanian pilgrims whose journey actually displays strong liturgical goals. The entire program of the pilgrimage is devised to follow Christ's itinerary to Jerusalem, from Bethlehem to Jericho to the Via Dolorosa and up to Golgotha, as it is related in the Gospels⁶⁴. As the text records, the pilgrims worshiped at key points on their route, while Trifa himself raised personal prayers, prayers for the readers of *Lumina Satelor*, and described intense mystical experiences, particularly at the site of the Holy Sepulcher where his life underwent a turning point⁶⁵. As a result, the entire journey appears as a worship that takes place in a sacred space and Trifa can use the physical act of the pilgrimage as a paradigm for holiness and piety capable of inspiring the readers⁶⁶. The narrative, on the other hand, could be employed as the interpretation of this act that conveys both the true meaning of physical gestures⁶⁷ and the spiritual importance of words⁶⁸, in the same way that Orthodox priests combine symbolic acts and their hermeneutic utterances during the liturgy.

Imagining the Orient

A close reading of Trifa's travelogue reveals, however, the existence of a polemical thrust throughout the narrative that vests the pastoral concerns with a politicized dimension. Trifa's understanding of religious experience along the lines of the fundamental interdependence between Orthodoxy and Romanianness eventually narrows his Christian construction of the Holy Land to national concerns. The process is, nevertheless, complex. To begin with, the literary mechanisms harnessed in subsuming differences to religious familiarity have a negative side as well. Whereas, as it has been previously pointed out, the intimacy with the Sacred Scriptures allowed Trifa to see geographical otherness as something familiar, the encounter with the human other became less embracing. It could be seen that the

⁶³ Trifa 87-90.

⁶⁴ Trifa 71.

⁶⁵ Trifa 6.

⁶⁶ Coleman and Elsner *Pilgrimage* 91; Preston 41.

⁶⁷ Trifa 132.

⁶⁸ Wuthnow 316.

figures of the Arabs, Africans, and Jews raised serious questions for Trifa's perception of the Holy Land with the result of reclaiming it for Christians only.

In this encounter with the other Trifa employs "forms of definition and classification which elevated the western model of society and religion"⁶⁹. More specifically, two methods seem to guide the narrator's perception of alterity. On one hand, characterology determines Trifa to conclude that "different peoples exhibit essentially different characters"⁷⁰. The first encounter with black people in the port of Jaffa is quite memorable for the major part of the pilgrims:

Many of us see black people for the first time. We look at them and wonder and, unwillingly, start laughing at them (and they wonder and laugh at us). Some of them are so black that they shine as if they were polished with shoe cream. In particular, a black with flattened face draws our attention. If people from our villages were to see him neither one nor the other they would chase him with pitchforks as if he were the devil ('bată-l crucea')⁷¹.

The image of the Arabs is more nuanced. While some of them are indeed Christian⁷², Muslim Arabs generally seem to be sympathetic toward Christians⁷³ and to profess many beliefs that support Christian teachings about Abraham and the Day of Resurrection⁷⁴. Yet, more important, their presence is extremely helpful to the understanding of biblical customs and manners: "People mounted on donkeys and camels move hastily. Almost everyone wears long coats. Only now we begin to understand the vestments from the time of our Savior that we can see in icons"⁷⁵. Indeed, this biblical outfit emphasizes the spiritual state of these people, as was the case with the Christian women of Bethlehem: "Women living here have an appearance of great religious beauty and this beauty is amplified by their beautiful vestment. They wear long coats, from top to bottom and on their head a veil like Virgin Mary has"⁷⁶. Trifa nevertheless sometimes accuses the Muslim Arabs for being fanatics⁷⁷ or unbelievers that irreverently sit as "pagan" guards at the gate of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher⁷⁸.

As regards the Bedouins, Trifa compares them with the gypsies in Romania: they are dirty, unwashed, lazy, and unreligious.

⁶⁹ Coleman and Elsner *Pilgrimage* 75.

⁷⁰ Coleman and Elsner *Pilgrimage* 76.

⁷¹ Trifa 22-23.

⁷² Trifa 63, 79.

⁷³ Trifa 24.

⁷⁴ Trifa 308-310, 367.

⁷⁵ Trifa 23.

⁷⁶ Trifa 79.

⁷⁷ Trifa 36.

⁷⁸ Trifa 242.

This Bedouins are different from the Arabs. They are a sort of ancestors of the gypsies, having many similar things in common, among them laziness, idleness. Many of them are nomads, that is, tent travelers, like gypsies. As regards religion, they are Mohammedans, like the Arabs, but they do not bother themselves with it (123).

A particular place in the narrative is devoted to descriptions of the Jews. While in most instances Trifa uses the terms “Jew” and “Hebrews” and the post-communist editions (the editions of 2002, 2010) employ only these two terms, the first edition of the book used the disparaging terms “jidān” and “jidov” as well (the edition of 1926: 13, 107, 196). In any case, strong anti-Jewish stances punctuate the narrative in many places. From the very first day after landing in Jaffa, Trifa presents the Jews as a people despised by the Arabs. Most commonly, the image of the Jew is depicted from a religious standpoint as anti-Christian: they are the murderers of Jesus and of Christian martyrs, live in spiritual blindness lacking true knowledge, and continue their existence under God’s curse⁷⁹. Yet, this theological anti-Judaism is complemented by anti-Semitic myths, some of them deriving from medieval polemics. In the central part of the book where he discusses Jesus’ passion, in what is intended to be a sensitive moment of mnemonic representation of suffering, Trifa recalls the story of Ahasverus, the impious Jew (“jidov”) who persecuted Jesus without mercy:

O, how anguished and painful our Lord looks! Yet, the Jews are not moved by his suffering; they continue to beat him ruthlessly and mercilessly. As I was proceeding on this place I remembered the story of the Jew Ahasverus (a beautiful religious novel) who, while staying in front of his house, saw the Lord going to Golgotha in great anguish and pain, but, instead of showing mercy, he kicked the Lord with his foot shouting with a hateful grin: ‘Go on, Jesus!’ (186).

In the same context of the passion story Trifa condemns the Jews for attempting to bribe Pilate to spread the lie that Jesus did not resurrect from the dead. According to the author, the Jews tried to do then the same thing they try to do today, that is, to control and distort the truth with money. He thus concludes that “Since those times it seems that corruption, bribery were in the nature of some of those who are part of the Hebrew people”⁸⁰.

Apart from these myths inspired by ancient stories, Trifa describes the modern conspiracy of the Jews as it could be seen in the actions of the Bolsheviks. Although he admires Jews’ enduring love for Zion and the preservation of their identity in the Diaspora, he nevertheless criticizes them for tainting this God-given

⁷⁹ Trifa 170, 230, 316-320.

⁸⁰ Trifa 231.

ideal by “religious and national chauvinism”⁸¹. More precisely, the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem unites the Jews in a global anti-Christian conspiracy as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion clearly show⁸². One of the most compelling evidence of the Zionist conspiracy is, in Trifa’s eyes, Bolshevism with its emphasis on “internationalism, revolution, anarchy, atheism”⁸³. Indeed, the Jews are so much more dangerous as they control the world finances, the press, and the alcohol industry, which they use to harm “the soul of Christendom”⁸⁴.

The spiritual and political blindness of the Jews materializes in the disfigured appearance of their bodies. This could be seen in their worship in front of the Wall, where they “pray, cry, and lament” loudly and with their back hunched⁸⁵. Trifa even distinguishes several types of Jews according to their physical appearance:

Here is the Jew of Galicia, the ugliest type, hunched and with curls over his ears; here is the Jew of Turkey, the one from Asia, the one from Russia together with the one from Romania, the one from Hungary with the one from Poland, Germany, etc. . . . Their appearance, however, is the same: ugly and repellent. As if the sentence and punishment they bear are written on their faces (315-316).

On the other hand, Trifa’s encounter with the Orient is modulated by theology with the aim of appropriating its foundational religious traditions for the cause of Christianity. It has been previously shown that the familiarity with the Bible helped Trifa transfigure the geography of the Holy Land into a mythscape. He nevertheless goes further and tries to reclaim for Christianity the sacred time as well. Given the chasm that separates the Old Testament history from the spiritual blindness of the Jews, the author concludes that the Hebrew Scriptures belong to the religion inaugurated by Christ: “Prophet Isaiah belongs to Christianity. He was the prophet chosen by God to predict the life of the Savior to the smallest detail”⁸⁶. Thus, the orientalizing gaze that first reifies the figure of the other eventually elevates Christianity to the position of the sole religious model that is entitled to define the Holy Land.

The Christian Orthodox Holy Land

Although Trifa imagines the Holy Land as a site that is essentially Christian, he nevertheless claims it entirely for the Orthodox tradition. The ideological

⁸¹ Trifa 320.

⁸² Trifa 320-321.

⁸³ Trifa 321.

⁸⁴ Trifa 321.

⁸⁵ Trifa 314.

⁸⁶ Trifa 282.

underpinnings of the narrative show that Orthodox exclusivism is an active factor that influences Trifa's view of Christianity, religious leadership, and pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Indeed, the author challenges the reader to view Eastern Christianity as the true spiritual inheritor of the holy sites and traditions that stands against the false pretensions of a degenerate western civilization.

First and foremost, Trifa emphasizes the privileged role of Orthodoxy in the development of Christian traditions of the Holy Land. In a veritable spirit of Orthodox theological understanding, he underlines the continuity between biblical and post-biblical traditions that actually developed into an organic unity. Sainly figures highly appreciated in Eastern Christianity, such as Helen and her son, emperor Constantine, are credited by Trifa with a special care for the rediscovery and introduction of the Palestinian holy sites into the circuit of Christian spirituality through their divinely inspired patronage. Thus, the narrator apportions large sections of the text to descriptions of the erection of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher⁸⁷, the miracle of the finding of Jesus' cross⁸⁸, the building of the Monastery of the Holy Cross near Jerusalem⁸⁹, the construction of the Church of Nativity on the spot of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem⁹⁰, or the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher of Virgin Mary, which, as the author proudly remarks, "entirely belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church"⁹¹. It should be noted that all these accounts connect the biblical time of revelation with the early church, a period of special importance for the formation of Orthodox tradition, by means of miracle stories that attest the divinely ordained continuity between them. Although in a few cases Trifa acknowledges the presence of other Christian confessions in the Holy Land, overall he nevertheless extols the superiority of Orthodoxy.

To remove any trace of doubt regarding the eminence of Orthodoxy, Trifa contends that Christian Orthodox possess the best churches and oldest monasteries among the holy sites in Palestine. Hence, the Greek Orthodox Church within the architectural ensemble of the Holy Sepulcher is "the largest and prettiest church"⁹². The different Orthodox churches also are the custodians of the Monastery of the Holy Cross built on the original site of the tree out of which the cross was carved⁹³, the monastery on the site of Elijah's cave⁹⁴, the Monastery of St. John the Baptist near the river Jordan⁹⁵, the church built on the place where St Stephen, the first

⁸⁷ Trifa 46-47.

⁸⁸ Trifa 65-66.

⁸⁹ Trifa 73.

⁹⁰ Trifa 81-82.

⁹¹ Trifa 269.

⁹² Trifa 61.

⁹³ Trifa 73.

⁹⁴ Trifa 74.

⁹⁵ Trifa 112.

martyr, had died⁹⁶, or the St. Sabbas Monastery, “a nest of Orthodoxy”⁹⁷, which the tradition linked to anti-heretical figures such as St. Sabbas, St. Theodosius, and St. John of Damascus⁹⁸. On the most holy site of the cross the Orthodox erected an altar with the help of Russia’s tsars⁹⁹. Yet, the Orthodox know how to administer these places as true Christians, as the case of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher of Virgin Mary shows, since they “proved to be here as well highly tolerable with other confessions”¹⁰⁰. Apart from these examples, most likely one of the major illustrations of the divine legitimacy of Orthodoxy comes from the miracle of the sacred light at the Easter. Though Trifa did not visit the Holy Land during that period of the year, he nevertheless describes the liturgy that takes place in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher at Easter and the light that miraculously springs out of the Tomb and does not extinguish for a whole year.

Second, the Holy land belongs to Orthodoxy because the western civilization betrayed its Christian legacy. At the sight of English policemen who behave irreverently in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher¹⁰¹ or contrasting the holy biblical women with modern women that show no interest in pious life¹⁰², Trifa reiterates a trope commonly used in his exhortations in *Lumina Satelor*. However, the most important evidence of the fraying of the western social fabric lies in the nature of its major religious vector, the Catholic Church. The critique of Catholicism is built in contrast with the commendation of Orthodoxy. More precisely, the former is depicted as a heresy anchored in the Pope’s pretention of being the representative of Christ. Its rupture with the biblical teaching is evident in the fact that while Peter repented of his haughtiness, this sickness continues to be present today in the one who calls himself the heir of Peter, in the Pope of Rome . . . This aberration (rătăcire) and this illness of haughtiness went so far that the Pope of Rome started to call himself: ‘the vicar (substitute) of Christ on earth’ (o, what an aberration!)¹⁰³.

Compared to this heretical attitude, Orthodoxy appears as the true faith because it is anchored in the Holy Land and Jesus. This privileged state is further confirmed by the contrast between the Orthodox monks who, devoting themselves to spiritual fervor, were acclaimed even by Catholic scholars as representatives of “the spirit of the true monastic life,” and the Catholic monks who live in gaiety and

⁹⁶ Trifa 327.

⁹⁷ Trifa 332.

⁹⁸ Trifa 330.

⁹⁹ Trifa 269.

¹⁰⁰ Trifa 269.

¹⁰¹ Trifa 64.

¹⁰² Trifa 352.

¹⁰³ Trifa 141-142.

wealth¹⁰⁴, on one hand, and by the disparity between Patriarch Damianos of Jerusalem, an apostle figure-like characterized by profound spirituality, love, zeal, and wisdom, and the Pope who, “carried by diabolical haughtiness” pretends to be Christ’s vicar and entitled to receive worship from Orthodox patriarchs¹⁰⁵.

The Making of Holy Romania

Seen against this background of pastoral, orientalist, and sectarian concerns, the dialogical level that permeates the whole narrative becomes much more complicated. It is hard to trace clear borders between these lines of thought. Indeed, they form an intricate web of relations that support and reinforce each other and consequently should be approached globally. Yet, this raises further questions regarding the relationship between the narrative and the primal pastoral concern which, as it has been pointed out, constitutes the reason for writing this travelogue. How did, in this situation, Trifa envision the impact of his narrative on the Romanian readers back home? And did he find a unifying principle to sensitize the readers to his message?

To answer these questions, it should be recalled that for Trifa the physical act of pilgrimage to Jerusalem is not only a symbol of the more important spiritual pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem, but also a motivation and help in this journey. Because of this, he wrote the book to be an aid for the reader and, to this end, he continually engaged the people back home through countless exhortations. A close look at the narrative shows that while these rhetorical devices often targeted individuals who needed spiritual regeneration, they ultimately aimed at a collective audience that could be identified with the Romanian nation.

More specifically, the pilgrimage is presented as an official mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church. In several notes regarding the organization of the pilgrimage published by Trifa in 1925, he reveals that initially the journey was planned as part of a larger ecclesiastical project regarding the organization of an ecumenical council of Orthodox churches in Jerusalem. By the beginning of 1925 the news of the pilgrimage was widespread at least due to Trifa’s newspaper. Because the council was postponed for a future date and the materialization of the pilgrimage was jeopardized, Trifa informs the readers in the summer of 1925 that the trip will still take place under the leadership of Metropolitan Bălan (Trifa “La Ierusalim, la mormântul Domnului;” Trifa “Vom merge la Ierusalim, la locurile sfinte – costul și durată.”).

It should be noted that the beginning of the same year marked an epochal event for the Romanian Orthodox Church by the establishment of the Patriarchate, which paralleled, from a religious standpoint, the achievement of political ideal.

¹⁰⁴ Trifa 332.

¹⁰⁵ Trifa 235-237.

Moreover, the 1925 pilgrimage was followed by the visit of the newly Patriarch Miron Cristea (1927) and the mass pilgrimage led by Metropolitan Nectarie of Bucovina (1930) to Jerusalem¹⁰⁶. The delegation lead by Metropolitan Bălan could be seen as an effort of affirmation of Romanian Orthodoxy's preeminence in the context of its elevation to the status of the most populous free Orthodox Church after the demise of the Russian Church in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution¹⁰⁷.

This official dimension of the pilgrimage is stressed by Trifa throughout the narrative by the description of the organizational details of the travel and the meetings of Romanian delegation with important religious figures such as the Patriarch of Constantinople, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and Metropolitan Basil¹⁰⁸. The speeches addressed by Metropolitan Bălan with the occasion of these meetings show the consciousness of living a historical and national event. Thus, at the meeting with Patriarch Damianos of Jerusalem, he states that "we were prompted here to Jerusalem by the gratitude of an entire nation (neam) that gives thanks to our good God for helping it to see its national ideal fulfilled. We came to Jerusalem to express our appreciation for all that the Lord has done for us"¹⁰⁹. Apart from this, Romanian Orthodox also aimed at enhancing the Romanian presence in the Holy Land. As Trifa indicates in one of the articles published in 1926, Metropolitan Bălan had plans to build a Romanian church at the site of Jacob's well, "a church that would be ours and would allow us to drink grace (dar) and power from the very source of the well" (Trifa "O biserică românească la fântâna lui Iacob").

Having presented the character of the pilgrimage as an epochal event in the history of his nation, Trifa points to the role of the Orthodox Church in the construction of Greater Romania. For him, the entire phenomenon of this pilgrimage, the religious leaders, the common people, the itinerary, and the practices performed throughout the journey and particularly in the Holy Land, have a symbolic function that signals that the church is the only institution capable of providing the ideological and cultural cohesion needed by the country to succeed in its new political project.

In particular, the initiative of the church in organizing the pilgrimage is seen as an occasion for symbolically uniting all Romanians into a religious endeavor. A glimpse into Trifa's appreciation of the group of pilgrims shows that he sees it as the Romanian society *in nuce*: apart from the clergy (prelates, priests, monks), there are professors, intellectuals, and common people, men and women, from both urban and rural areas from different parts of the country¹¹⁰. This perception was shared by the leader of the pilgrimage when Metropolitan Bălan is presented stating before

¹⁰⁶ Păcurariu 337.

¹⁰⁷ Ioniță.

¹⁰⁸ Trifa 16, 23, 38, 70.

¹⁰⁹ Trifa 70.

¹¹⁰ Trifa 12.

Patriarch Damianos that “he brought to Jerusalem the soul of an entire people . . . to worship and give thanks for all that God has done for us”¹¹¹. Hence, the “worshipping Romanians,” as they were called according to the official program of the pilgrimage¹¹², are seen as the embodiment of the nation going to worship God to Jerusalem. In other words, he identifies the church with the nation and Orthodox identity with the quality of being Romanian.

This liturgical image of the nation is better grasped in the context of Trifa’s pastoral concerns that morphed Palestinian geography into a biblical – Christian mythscape. This perspective indicates that Trifa introduces a new clarification in his narrative appropriation of the Holy Land: while he orientalized it in order to make it Christian, and made it Christian to underline its Orthodox legacy, he further claims the holy sites for the Romanian nation. Accordingly, Trifa specifies that the group of pilgrims followed in the steps of Jesus¹¹³ and worshipped at key sites and in key moments, appropriating thus the sacred space and time as a foundational basis for the destiny of Greater Romania. In particular, the author describes liturgical scenes as if “a whole nation (neam) seems to walk and sing with us”¹¹⁴ or the Romanian language is for the first time heard to bring praise to God.

It has to be mentioned that Trifa believes that he has to play an active role in this religious – national project. If the unifying principle capable to touch Romanians’ hearts could be located at the interface between a resolute imitation of Jesus, in the way the group of pilgrims did, and a strong belief in the bright future of the nation, the author identifies the means to shape Romanians’ national self-consciousness with the Orthodox Church’s action of backing the pastoral – missionary activity of the Army of the Lord. Accordingly, Trifa conceives his account of the pilgrimage as a relic that has the power to impart the sacred to those at home¹¹⁵. The urgency of sending informative and exhortative notes to his journal *Lumina Satelor* while on journey¹¹⁶ and his explicit goal of writing the book as to describe “all that I felt and sensed in Jerusalem”¹¹⁷ in order to prompt others to follow Jesus reveal Trifa’s sense of responsibility toward his nation:

I always feel overwhelmed by the great responsibility I have in regards with the grace (darul) showed to me by God to see the holy places. I always think that I have to repay this grace by writing in detail all things seen and experienced at the holy places as a means to spiritually bring others in the footsteps of the Savior (Trifa 37).

¹¹¹ Trifa 38.

¹¹² Trifa 38.

¹¹³ Trifa 70.

¹¹⁴ Trifa 80.

¹¹⁵ Williams 27-28; Preston 41.

¹¹⁶ Trifa 37.

¹¹⁷ Trifa 369.

Trifa himself confesses at the beginning of the book that the pilgrimage represents for him a “turning point” (“răspântie de hotar”) in life that prompted him to renew his decision to serve God (Trifa 5). The activity during the trip, his prayers for the Army of the Lord, the innumerable exhortations for the readers, and the sustained implication in renewing people’s commitment to Orthodoxy after returning home, all show that for Trifa the national project of Greater Romania cannot be conceived as successful without the spiritual model of a pious life in the Holy Land. Eventually, by means of a veritable *translatio religionis*, Trifa prompts his readers to look at themselves as the new chosen people and to their country as the new earthly Canaan:

When we saw for the first time these barren and poor places, all of 160 pilgrims exclaimed in unison: ‘Lord, what a rich land is our country Romania!... What a blessed country!... The Canaan is ours!... We do not know how to value the blessings we have in our own country...’

Indeed, what a blessed land is our country! Canaan moved here, to us, and we are the chosen people that God said: ‘I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be their slaves no more, breaking the bars of your yoke and making you walk erect’ (Leviticus 26.13). . .

We, however, forgot this covenant and do not know how to value the Canaan given to us by God (347-348).

How could this appropriation of the Holy Land be interpreted in respect to modern nationalism? If this concept is defined as the affirmation of a socio-political communitarian organization that excludes or attributes religion a secondary place (Anderson, Hobsbawm), then Trifa’s national model does not fit into it. Trifa’s formation and concerns do not envisage a secular type of nation. On the contrary, he identifies the nation with the church. If, however, nationalism entails only the ideas of common ethnicity, territory, language, culture, and religion that develop within a polity (Hobsbawm), then Trifa could be categorized as a nationalist. It should, however, be stressed that he interpreted Romanian identity in terms of religious ethnogenesis, by stressing the Orthodox character of this people. This allowed him to equate the nation (“neam”) with the Orthodox Church and is most likely the reason for the strong critique of Catholics and Jews who, given their large numbers within the Romanian borders, represented a threat. On the other hand, when Trifa was pressed by Metropolitan Bălan to associate with Father Ion Moța’s radical nationalist newspaper, he hesitantly followed his superior’s directives and eventually separated from politicizing too much his pastoral-missionary activity in the name of Christian universalism. Thus, Trifa’s national model resembles more with the religious-based patriotism proposed by Strickland (Strickland xviii), though it is hard to define it without any reference to post-Enlightenment nationalist ideologies.

Conclusion

In the context of the development of the new political project of Greater Romania, when many contending views competed for monopolizing the trajectory of the country, Father Iosif Trifa emerged as an advocate of a Christian Orthodox vision of the nation. The pilgrimage to the Holy Land that took place in 1925 was seen as an occasion to encourage people to embrace this religious ideal as the exclusive approach to the national issue. By identifying the nation with the Orthodox Church and equating Romanianness with Orthodoxy, Trifa posited himself in an active role in this project, according to his pastoral-missionary activity embodied by the Army of the Lord movement. Trifa's national model eventually indicates that he was part of a larger ideological trend that encompassed many nationalists of interwar Romania, though his subsequent activity shows that he avoided engaging in radical politics.

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