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## **Alternatives to Christian education. Atheist propaganda in Romanian schools during the communist period (The case of Mureş County)**

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**Abstract.** The communist regime in our country imposed atheism on the masses. In a state where morality and common sense were deeply linked to religion (Christian-Orthodox, Mosaic or Islamic) the concerted attacks by the communist regime, following the Stalinist model in the USSR of the 1920s, emptied people's conscience of any natural value scale. After the Second World War and the establishment of the communist regime in Romania, the influence of churches and religious institutions in public education was significantly reduced, and denominational schools were abolished or transformed into state schools. The education reform of 1948 also had an important impact on confessional education in Mureş County.

**Keywords.** religion, education, education, Mureş, atheism

### **The beginnings of persecution**

Shortly after the full seizure of power, the communist regime in our country imposed mass atheism. In a state where morality and common sense were deeply linked to religion (Christian-Orthodox, Mosaic or Islamic) the concerted attacks by the communist regime, following the Stalinist model in the USSR of the 1930s, emptied people's conscience of any natural value scale. In Russia, the persecution against the Orthodox faith was triggered after the Patriarch of Moscow, Tikhon, issued a pastoral letter on February 1, 1918 asking Christians not to participate in the actions of the "monsters of the human race" who "instead of Christian love, sowed evil, hatred and enmity between brothers".<sup>1</sup> In the interwar Mureş county press, news received from Moscow was reported regarding a 5-year plan initiated by the communists "for the eradication of religion". This plan was established by a decree of the council of people's commissars. In the first year (1932/33) a precise plan was established for the closing of all churches and houses of prayer. This operation was to be completed by the spring of 1937. In the second year (1933/34) all the religious nuclei within the families were abolished. At the same time, all persons with religious feelings were removed from state services and enterprises,

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<sup>1</sup>\*\*\*, " How did the denial of religion in communism come about and why?" – Digi24 report, from 17.06.2019, source: <https://www.digi24.ro/special/campanii-digi24/1989-anul-care-a-schimbata-lumea/cum-sa-ajuns-la-ateism-in-communism-si-de-ce-1148040> , accessed on 01.05.2023.

all religious literature and all religious cults being prohibited. In the third year (1934/35) they put the atheist nuclei into operation. Anti-religious films were produced, which were mainly shown in schools.<sup>2</sup>

In the fourth year (1935/36) all the edifices of churches, synagogues, etc., will be turned over to local authorities, who will turn them into cinemas, clubs, etc.

The last year (1936/37) will bring the end of the atheist 5-year plan. The Bolsheviks believe that following this plan the idea of "God" will be eradicated from the soul of the people!

### **The education reform of 1948**

The education reform of 1948 was one of the major events in the process of transforming the educational system in communist Romania. This reform took place under the influence of communist ideology and was aimed at restructuring and closer control of the education system by the state. The main features of the 1948 education reform were:

*Centralization and state control* - the state took control of education, eliminating the influence of the church and other private institutions. A centralized and standardized administration was established, in which all major decisions were taken by the communist authorities;

*Elimination of denominational schools* - the denominational schools, which were under the influence of the church, were abolished or transformed into state schools. Religious education was removed from the official school curriculum, and religious education was replaced by socialist education, according to communist ideology;

*Compulsory and free education* - the reform introduced free and compulsory education for all children in an effort to ensure universal access to education. However, in practice, equal access to education had been limited by socio-economic factors and political control.

Regarding religion classes, following the 1948 reform, the teaching of religion in schools was discouraged and subsequently significantly restricted. Religious content was removed from the official school curriculum and instead socialist education and atheism were promoted in schools. The church and religious institutions were subject to strict state control and were prevented from influencing education and public life significantly.<sup>3</sup>

### **Interwar Mureş confessional education**

In the interwar period, confessional education in Mureş county had a significant importance in the context of the ethnic and religious diversity existing in the area. Mureş County, located in Transylvania, was characterized by the presence of various ethnic communities, including Romanians, Hungarians, Germans and Jews. This type of education was mainly influenced by the presence of Hungarian and German communities. In areas predominantly inhabited by these communities, denominational schools were largely managed by the respective churches. In Mureş County, there were Catholic, Protestant (Lutheran and Reformed) and Unitarian denominational schools, which offered education based on the values and teachings specific to each denomination.

These denominational schools placed particular emphasis on religion and the specific traditions of the respective religious communities, offering religious education alongside secular education. In these schools, religion classes were an integral part of the curriculum and

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<sup>2</sup>\*\*\*, "The struggle of the Bolsheviks against religion" in *Gazeta Mureşului*, no. 38/30.10.1932, p.6.

<sup>3</sup>Decree no. 175/1948 for education reform. Text published in M. Of., Part I no. 177 of 03.08.1948.

It was in force until 31.08.1968, being replaced by Law 11/1968.

were taught by teachers specializing in theology. Confessional education in that period had an important role in maintaining and promoting the cultural and religious identity of different communities. Denominational schools have had a significant impact in educating and training younger generations in accordance with the values and traditions of their denomination. They also contributed to the development and preservation of each community's own language, literature and culture.

At that time, there was also state education, which was open to all communities and promoted a secular education. Denominational and state schools coexisted in the same region, offering different educational options according to the preferences and beliefs of parents and students.

After the Second World War and the establishment of the communist regime in Romania, the influence of churches and religious institutions in public education was significantly reduced, and denominational schools were abolished or transformed into state schools. The education reform of 1948, which I referred to in a previous discussion, also had an important impact on confessional education in Mureș County.

### **Communism and the view of religion**

According to the provisions of the Constitution of the Romanian People's Republic "voted by the people" in 1948, "no denomination, congregation or religious community can open or maintain general education institutions".<sup>4</sup>

The Education Reform translated this provision of the Constitution into life. Likewise, the communists, through the education reform, wanted to emphasize the fact that only the church, not the school, should be the place for the exercise of religion. Therefore, it was no longer planned to schedule a religion class within school courses.

Communist propaganda presented the situation as follows:

*"The Church has, in the eyes of the faithful, a well-defined mission. It is the believer's place of prayer, the place where he freely exercises his religious faith. As for the school, in the eyes of the State and the citizen, it has the mission of giving the young generations the necessary knowledge of general culture and science, of raising the cultural level of the entire people, of giving the country specialists in all fields of human activity, and finally, of giving the country's youth moral education based on the ideas of progress, to raise them as conscious, devoted and active citizens of the Romanian People's Republic. For any man with sound judgment and good faith, it is clear that the school cannot and must not fulfill missions that the church has, and the church cannot and must not fulfill missions that the school has."*<sup>5</sup>

Communist propaganda sought, at every opportunity, to justify the decision to abolish confessional schools and the elimination of religious classes from the framework plan. "Guilty" were certain so-called reactionary elements, "still remaining in the ranks of the teaching staff, reactionary elements from the clergy, as well as provocative fascist-reactionary elements", sneaked in some places into the ranks of some State bodies and democratic organizations. They were guilty of trying to strike at the interests of the popular masses, to whom the education reform tried to ensure "the power to enjoy the benefits of education. The faithful were

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<sup>4</sup> *CONSTITUTION of the Romanian People's Republic from 1948*. The text of the act was published in M. Of. no. 87 bis/13.04. 1948. Although Article 27 stated: "*Freedom of conscience and religious freedom are guaranteed by the State*", things were completely different, and religious cults were free to organize and could function freely only if their ritual and practice were not contrary to "the Constitution, public security or good morals."

<sup>5</sup>\*\*\*, "In the matter of religious freedom" in the daily *Scântea* no. 1357/23.02.1949, p.3.

considered enemies of the people, provocative elements who spread untruths among the population. However, although a separation had been made between the role of the school and that of the church, the communist regime did not recognize the fact that it affected the religious freedom of the citizens.

For the communists, the materialist-dialectical education had to be acquired by the masses only through the work of raising consciousness by spreading scientific knowledge to the broadest strata, and by no means through threats to freedom of conscience and religious freedom.

In his famous article "On the attitude of the workers' party towards religion", Lenin repeated the idea of Engels, who ruthlessly fought the pseudo-revolutionary idea regarding the prohibition of religion in socialist society. Engels showed that such an idea could only harm the cause of the proletariat because it prioritized religious differences over political differences and diverted the attention of some working people from the vital issues of the revolutionary class struggle.<sup>6</sup>

In the conception of Marxist philosophy, the criticism of religion was implicitly constituted as a humanist act, being considered an act of spiritual liberation of the personality. Humanism integrated atheism into its essential articulations. The liberation of man from religious opium, as from any other spiritual enslavement, was a fundamental condition for the realization of socialist humanism. Marxist-Leninist atheism was a militant ideology, which proposed the radical humanistic transformation of people's consciousness, and by the way it explains the appearance and social function of religion, as well as the historical disappearance of this social phenomenon, atheism completing the criticism of religion. For the Romanian communist, to embrace the ideology of atheism meant to acquire a scientific conception of the world and to adopt a complex of higher moral values, which appeared as a result of the secular development of humanism. Atheism represented "an ideology of human freedom, a philosophy which regards man as the supreme value."<sup>7</sup>

### **Anti-religious manifestations in Mureş education during the years of communism**

The specifics of education in Mureş from 1948-1989 were not very different from those in the rest of the country's counties. The education system at that time was centralized and tightly controlled by the communist regime, which imposed a specific curriculum and an official ideology. In schools in Mureş county, as in the entire country, a strong emphasis was placed on the propagation of communist ideology and the promotion of the regime's values. Thus, history and geography were taught based on the communist interpretation of events and the promotion of the regime, and the subject of civic education had as its main purpose the formation of a positive attitude towards the communist party and the socialist system.

The communists' fear of teachers and religion was somewhat understandable, considering the fact that in the interwar years the press often reminded that "only holy words can come out of the mouth of the professor, which must be kept in the closet of every soul carrying pure and Romanian thoughts. The teachers started the long-awaited carol, let's sing and rejoice together with them from the never-ending source of light, the nation's history and

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<sup>6</sup> Constellation Lambru , "Church and Communism", *Radio Romania International* report , 02/04/2019, source: [https://www.rri.ro/en\\_gb/biserica\\_si\\_comunism-2593434](https://www.rri.ro/en_gb/biserica_si_comunism-2593434) , accessed on 05/01/2023.

<sup>7</sup>\*\*\*, "Being an atheist and atheism" in *Red Star* , no. 236/07.10.1979, p.4.

moral teachings. Today, we must realize that foreign nations want us evil, which we can defeat only through love for our nation, religion and our ancestral customs."<sup>8</sup>

Teaching staff were subject to strict control, and deviating from the official line or criticizing the regime could have serious consequences, including disciplinary sanctions or even losing one's job. This has led to self-censorship and a tendency to avoid sensitive or controversial topics.

In terms of school infrastructure and resources, these were often limited. School buildings could be old and cramped, and teaching materials were often insufficient. However, there was an important emphasis on education, and access to education was in principle ensured for all children.

Over the years, the Mureş education system has undergone some changes and adaptations according to the official policy of the communist regime. In general, however, the specifics of Mureş county education during this period were characterized by a strong ideological influence, the close control of the regime and the limitations imposed by it on the content and teaching methods.

#### **Atheist education through literature lessons during the communist period**

Literary works, reflecting the social truth in its complexity, also contain echoes of the philosophy of each era, literature being the expression of a general attitude towards life. For communists, the church exists as a social reality, and mysticism as an ideological and philosophical reality. Literary works could not avoid these aspects received as integral parts of a certain historical time, whether they (the church, religion) were associated with the artistic image only to achieve the local color, to reveal an archaic spirituality or because they provoked internal debates and dramas of knowledge. Since these realities existed in the literary work, they could not be ignored by the authorities regarding the study of literature but had to be interpreted in a materialistic spirit. A support was offered by the work itself, because none of the literary works validated as such communicated a mystical message, even if they contained a religious issue. The methods of revealing a message, which excludes the divine existence that intervened in human destinies, were the heuristic ones. Among these, the most important was problematization, which involves two terms of opposition, the first being the literary work, the other in relation to the religious phenomenon. A term of opposition was often necessary, because none of the literary works studied in the gymnasium classes had a religious theme. For the communists, the ballad "Miorița" revealed the feeling of death - so speculated by religious doctrines - in our people. At the threshold of adolescence (in the 7th grade) the students showed a keen interest in philosophical generalizations. Thus, the teachers had to demonstrate at the level of this class, the nonmystical background of the people, among the many ideas that the exceptional masterpiece contained. The goal was, based on the formation of atheistic moral convictions, to determine behavior as such.<sup>9</sup>

#### **The 1980s – Intensification of materialist- scientific education work in the county**

The polytechnicization of education in the country and in Mureş County led to the intensification of materialistic-scientific education work. The county authorities boasted that at the beginning of the school year, 15 new laboratories (physics, chemistry, biology) and 8 offices (philosophy, economics, history) were put into use. More than 57,500 pupils and students from

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<sup>8</sup>Remus Şenchea , "Indemn la labor" in *Glasul Mureşului* , no. 47/24.01.1936, p2.

<sup>9</sup>Ion Maşca , "Atheist education through literature lessons" in *Steaua roşie* , no. 91/18.04.1974, p.2.

the county started a new school year on Wednesday, September 15, 1982. The school year 1982-1983 had the largest generation of pupils - 12,600 - who entered the first level of high school. Also in that year, as a novelty, we mention the new constructions at the Chemistry High School in Târgu-Mureş (workshops, laboratories, gym, and boarding school), the new construction of the Industrial High School No. 1 in Reghin and the new constructions of the "Electromureş" School Group, the sports hall and the workshops at Secondary School no. 5 in Târgu-Mureş.

The practical training of students started in the fall of 1982 under a new form: all school workshops were directly subordinated to the ministries and sponsoring enterprises for the solution of specialized guidance. The agricultural practice continued, the statistical reports on the work of the students, the quantities of fruits/vegetables/cereals harvested being, from year to year, increasing.

The winter vacation is characterized by increasingly numerous and varied thematic activities, organized within the vacation clubs. There was no lack of themes regarding the cult of the personality of the ruling family, communist or materialist-dialectical education: "Carnival of snowflakes" (Băița Secondary School), fun games in the open air, sports competitions and contests under the banner "Merry, merry!" (Corneşti-Adămuş Secondary School), table tennis competition at the Măgherani Holiday Club, songs in English (UNICEF circle members, Iernut Secondary School), "The Oak Tree from Scornicesti (activity dedicated to the birthday of the leader Nicolae Ceauşescu and recital of patriotic poetry at Rusii Munţi Secondary School and Livezeni Secondary School, "Talking with communists" (conversation with a participant in the National Conference of the PCR, Zau de Câmpie Secondary School), "What do we know about the activity of Comrade Nicolae Ceauşescu?" (Lechința de Mureş Secondary School), "From the 12th Congress, to the National Party Conference" (CPSP holiday club in Luduş, members of the political-ideological debate circle), "Romanian homeland - country of heroes" (visit to the archeology exhibition in Gorenii made by the students of the Batoş Secondary School), "Comrade Elena Ceauşescu - a world-renowned scientist" (January 7, tribute activity at the Beica de Jos Secondary School), "Is there life on other planets?" (Meştera – Stânceni Secondary School).

On March 24, 1983, under the auspices of the Mureş County School Inspectorate and the Mureş CCD, a meeting took place between the physics-chemistry teachers from the county and Capt. Eng. cosmonaut Dumitru Prunariu who, at the invitation of the physics teachers from the county, participated at the exhibition-debate with the theme: "Romanian experiences on board the "Saliut 6" orbital station. The first part of the meeting included the space epic carried out on board the spacecraft "Soyuz 40" and on board the orbital complex "Saliut 6 - Soyuz T4" - an event that marked the successful flight into outer space of the first Romanian cosmonaut, Dumitru Prunariu.

Regarding education in Mureş, at the end of the third quarter - 1983, on the 18th anniversary of the party's 9th Congress, the general school inspector, Prof. Ştefan Benţa, stated the following in an interview:

"Through the care of our party and state to ensure the necessary conditions for the smooth development of the educational process, the schools in our county have 3,289 classrooms, 490 specialized offices, 143 gymnasiums, all outlining a universe of the harmonious growth of the young generation. A special concern was shown for the development of the students' production base realized through the 414 school workshops with over 3,000 jobs, numerous school lots that offer good working conditions and for work, achieving a fair correlation of theoretical training with practical training".

In the opinion of the general school inspector, all these achievements were due to the general secretary of the party, who developed "a revolutionary conception of education", according to which the school, in addition to general culture, had to ensure, in the training of students, the integration of education with research and production. Moreover, at the county level, in 1983, over 150,000 students were enrolled, and their training had to be done in the context of the economic development of the country. The 31 high schools and vocational schools trained qualified workers in 19 profiles with over 30 trades.

### **Materialist-dialectical education in the Mureş university environment**

In the 1980s, in Târgu-Mureş, there was a well-established tradition at the department of social sciences of the Institute of Medicine and Pharmacy, to give future medical specialists the opportunity to have a dialogue with philosophy and atheism, to facilitate their "path to knowledge and truth". Students from the first and second years participated in the activities of the circle of philosophy and atheism. According to the propaganda, the circle enjoyed a wide audience from students, who were "more than interested in the "resurrection" of ideas that encourage conscious action, but especially in the knowledge and deepening of some philosophical and atheistic problems, of the materialist-dialectic conception about the world and life." The circle of philosophy and atheism of the medical students was led by a president, vice-president and secretary, it had its own newspaper, entitled "Truth and knowledge", with editors from among the students. Among the topics discussed by the circle, we mention: "The concept of the Romanian Communist Party regarding religion", author Eugen Silvăşan; "The role of socialist art in promoting the social consciousness of youth" - Huszár Hajnalka; "Space, movement, time" - Elena Bojiţă; "Kant and the philosophy of beauty" - Zeno Opreş; "Chance and necessity in biology" - Silvia Raţiu, "The incompatibility of religious dogmas with living thought, with social experience, with the revolutionary spirit" - Mirela Paul; "Socialist consciousness. The PCR activity of formation and development of the socialist consciousness of the masses" - Adrian Suci. Some of the papers were presented at the annual scientific session of the student circles.<sup>10</sup>

### **The end of the 80s. Materialist-dialectical education reaches its peak**

Considering atheism "as a lever of a new value edifice, with a fulfilling purpose for man", and not as simple nihilism of outdated values, Marxist philosophy conceived atheism as humanism, as a basic dimension of a revolutionary conception that took into account not only man, at the level of his social existence, but also the practical process of humanization and human achievement.

Atheism represented "the process of demolishing a demiurgic chimera and the effort to give the real demiurge, man, the consciousness of his real value and possibilities, the axiological compass necessary for responsible and vigorous participation in the building of a new, truly human world."

This general thesis was enriched by the communists, especially after the Ninth Congress of the PCR:

*"Synthetically expressing the multilateralism of this ideological task, Comrade Nicolae Ceauşescu emphasized that "the socialist order aims to create a new man, with a broad horizon of thought and understanding, capable of deciphering the meaning of the objective laws of social development". The purpose and deep meaning of this complex activity is the removal of*

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<sup>10</sup>Dorin Borda, "Students, in dialogue with philosophy and atheism" , in *Red Star* , no. 285/03.12.1982, pp. 1,4.

*mystical, retrograde conceptions, which inhibit the full affirmation of people in social life, confine the courageous, human and demiurgic spirit of the individual and the social masses, limit their participation in the continuous rise of Romanian socialist civilization and culture towards the new horizons of the communist society.*<sup>11</sup>

Other specific forms of carrying out political-ideological and communist education in Mureş schools were leadership classes, history circles, atheism or scientific socialism, activities carried out outside the usual educational process, such as thematic trips and symposiums. In order to broaden the political-ideological horizon of the students, activities aimed at acquiring and understanding some political, economic and philosophical notions and concepts of the internal and external policy of the party and the state were also organized.<sup>12</sup>

### Conclusions

The communist regime implemented a number of measures to enforce atheistic education and restrict religious influence in the education system. Among the measures taken in this regard, we mention: the elimination of religious education from schools, the strict control of educational content, the promotion of atheistic ideology, the persecution and intimidation of believers. Thus, religion classes were removed from the school curriculum and replaced with subjects that promoted communist ideology and atheism. The communist regime imposed strict control over school textbooks and teaching materials, removing any religious content and instead promoting atheistic and communist propaganda. Atheist propaganda was encouraged in schools and in society at large. Children were encouraged to adopt atheistic beliefs and reject religion. The Church was subjected to pressure and persecution. Priests and believers who opposed the regime or promoted religion were subject to repression, including arrest, imprisonment, and intimidation.

It is important to mention that, despite the efforts of the communist regime, many Romanians kept their Christian faith clandestinely and transmitted their religious values in the family environment. There are also examples of priests and believers who continued to serve openly, even if it meant the risk of being persecuted. Over the years and in the post-communist period, there have been changes in the education system and the approach to the teaching of religion. Starting from the 90s, Romania introduced options for students to participate in religious classes or other alternative activities. These changes reflected a greater openness to religious freedom and respect for religious diversity in the country.

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<sup>11</sup>Cornel Groza, "Atheism as Humanism" in *Red Star* , no. 192/13.08.1988, p.3.

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