

THE SETTING UP OF THE NATIONAL BIBLE FOR ROMANIANS (1550-1795)

The German Reformation carried off by Martin Luther changed in no time the course of European history and the social-spiritual configuration of the Continent. Once consolidated among Germans, the Reformation extended across the whole territory inhabited by them and carried on by virtue of its standard thought process soon over passed its ontological borders. Popular hope and weak-willed proselytism were the routes followed by the new religious programme initiated by Luther. It's necessary to observe that from the very outset the external success of Lutheranism benefited by a Central-European environment in which Jan Huss and Jean Calvin had increased public awareness through attempts of the kind made. The two of them were implicitly the forerunners of the nationalistic component of the entire Reformation movement. In the sphere of religious life, the Middle Ages ended for a large part of the European continent with a separation from its Latin speaking empire and an establishment of the vernacular, preceding its national languages. As a lucky beneficiary of these older rather harsh reformatory efforts, Martin Luther crowned the theological nationalism of the Reformation by translating the Bible into German and printing it, in 1543.

Cultural religious nationalism of a Protestant type extended over two vulnerable areas: that of the French milieu in endemic dissidence with Rome and that of the orthodox South-Eastern part of the Continent, whose schism with Rome had started way back, in 1054. Of interest for the case we are dealing with is the latter, since it was in its affluence that the process of setting up the Romanian national Bible was started.

The great bulk of the Romanian population within the ancient boundaries of Dacia belonged historically to Byzantine orthodoxy, divided, as it was by the Carpathians into two habitats most differently fated. During the Middle Ages, the Romanians from outside the Carpathian arch who populated the territories of nowadays Moldavia and Wallachia led a plenary orthodox church life, their medieval princes and state dignitaries belonging to the elite of the orthodox Church, as great supporters of the Eastern centres of pietism, among which Athos held the most important place. Belonging to the Orthodox Eastern Church, the Romanian inhabitants of the intra-Carpathian area, as far as the Tisza, Western Galicia and Slovakia, were subject to the Hungarian Kingdom, a powerful Catholic state up to the Mohács disaster and the dispersion of the Hungarian population in various countries, where it was subjected to obedience of different kinds. These Romanians from Transylvania (extensively considered) had a deplorable religious status, of tolerated and undesirable people irrespective of the religion adopted by Hungarians. Credible historians such as David Prodan, an Orthodox Christian, describe an Orthodox Church ceaselessly on the point of disintegration due to the systematic oppression exerted on it. Unfortunate from a religious point of view, these Romanians were the first to come into contact with the ideas of the Reformation and with the proselytism of the trend, due to their immediate cohabitation with the Hungarians and Saxons converted to the Reformation.

The Romanians' accomplishment of their national Bible started under the influence of messages of a national type propagated by the Reformation. There have been clashes of opinion between Romanian specialists with regard to the weight of the influence exerted on Romanians by one or another of the sundry reformist variants. **Hussitism** was engendered in Transylvania by a great peasant uprising in 1437. The spirit of Jan Huss exerted its influence on the popular Romanian mentality to the effect of stirring a social awareness connected the religious one. **Calvinism** was frantically adopted by a large part of the Hungarian population especially in Transylvania, as a desperate reaction to the wiping of medieval Hungary off the map of Europe in the only too well known year 1526. An assiduous propaganda for the conversion of Transylvanian Romanians to Calvinism by brutal means and with the assistance of the new government of a princely set up by John Zápolya was started almost instantly. Quite obversely, **Lutheranism** was brought over to Transylvania in peaceful and scholarly ways, through the Saxons lining in the principality, who benefited from the dissolution of the Hungarian kingdom. Johann Honterus was the spearhead of Lutheranism on Romanian territory. Its peaceful and inductive proselytism led to the configuration of the first cultural movement of a Protestant type among Romanians, after 1550.

What was the offer made to Romanians in the message of the Reformation? The peoples who had adopted the Reformation, be it of a Calvinist, or Lutheran type had been cut off from the Catholic

world by accepting – through a revolutionary act – the new dogma, which crushed that of Rome. When Protestant proselytism set its eyes on Romanians, it could behold a large un-Catholic people of a faith with which the Reformation was not at war. Since salvation of the soul was observed by Romanians in accordance with Eastern religious tropisms dating from times immemorial, the dethronement of a hope didn't mean too much to them, whereas the iconoclasm and sanctiphobia of Protestants meant quite a lot, in the sense that it stirred their repulsion. The Calvinist proselyte experience, which attempted a brutal dogmatic interference, was doomed to failure. More successful was, however, the cultural offer, concerning the promotion of national languages to be used in church for the clerical service instead of the old „sacred” ones. The language of the Romanian creed was Slavonic. The old Romanian spirituality was dressed in a Slavonic garment, in which hand – written manuscript masterpieces greatly admired even nowadays were skilfully achieved. The pawns of Lutheranism identified, however, in the sphere of the Romanian mentality no reserve regarding the abolition of Church Slavonic. The basic explanation resides in the ancestral attachment of Romanians to their Romance language, which made the great historian Antonio Bonfini remark in amazement that Romanians would fight for their language more fiercely than for their life „*Non tantum provitae, quantum pro linguae incolumitate certasse videntur*”). On this background, the Protestant direction of nationalization yielded early fruit. Lutherans provide with the necessary tools printing centres for propaganda books in the Romanian creed. The earliest printed texts were chapters from the Bible. The name of a scholar, clerk Coresi, who has enjoyed in the history of Romanian culture the fame of an apostle is linked with this pioneering stage of printing.

Like in all European cultures, the printing of the Bible in Romanian was preceded by translations, which circulated in manuscript form. The best known of them are three manuscript Psalters subsequently called *The Psalter of Șchei*, *The Psalter of Voroneț* and *The Hurmuzachi Psalter*, as well as a composite manuscript comprising fragments from *the Apostles Deeds* and the ecumenical epistles of Apostles Jacob and Peter in *The Codex of Voroneț*. Manuscripts and elementary printings have one point in common in so far as biblical texts directly connected with religious service officiated at church are concerned. Between 1561-1580, Coresi managed to print in Romanian 12 works, among which *The Gospels* (1561), *the Apostles Deeds* (1563) and a *Psalter* (1567). The translation trend took over from 1 Corinthians 14, 19 the Protestant slogan in which Apostle Paul reckons that „in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice. I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue”. The quote is available in the foreword to the majority of the mentioned biblical publications. The school of translators grouped around Coresi was important on account of its extension so as to comprise within its range the Romanians from Moldavia and Wallachia with regard to the translation of clerical Books. Come from the South of the Carpathians, of Greek origin himself, master Coresi and his disciples cultivated their charisma in both of the Romanian areas geographically and politically split. He was a unifying factor in the pursued end of begetting a national Bible.

As academician Virgil Cârdea has rightly observed, the translation of the Bible was not entailed in Europe by spiritual necessities, but by cultural ones, pertaining to the general image of a faith, rather than to the petty requirements of its sanctuary. The first attempt at achieving a systematic translation of the Bible into Romanian occurred in Transylvania under Calvinist influence. It comprised the first two Books of the *Old Testament: Genesis* and *Exodus*, translated after a 1551 Hungarian edition of the *Pentateuch* ascribed to Moses, printed by Gaspár Heltai at Cluj. The respective Romanian translation was printed at Orăștie in 1582. Beyond its significance as a début in the field, *The Pentateuch of Orăștie*, as that printed work is called, also reflects a linguistic reality specific for the Romanian population of Transylvania. In the introduction to that book, our ethnic name is for the first time spelt with an „o”: *Romanians* instead of the earlier spelling variant with a „u”: *Rumanians*, meaning that the Latin etymon is more closely observed.

In 1590 was also published the first unabridged edition of the Bible in Hungarian translation done on the territory of Transylvania, an epoch-making work achieved by Gáspár Károli. Thus, the example set by the national Bible was brought very close to Transylvanian Romanians, a great deal of which knew Hungarian. It was with such antecedents as those of Luther and Gáspár Károli submitted to their attention – for no one could have missed seeing them with half an eye – that Romanians entered the golden age of 17th century Humanism. In so far as the nationalization of the clerical cult is concerned, the relay race was now strongly taken over by the Romanians from outside the Carpathian

arch. In Wallachia and Moldavia, favourable social and cultural conditions led to the rising a strong intellectual class represented by such polarizing personalities as those of the Moldavian hierarchs Varlaam and Dosoftei, the cultural pilgrim Nicolae Milescu, or the Walachian Udriște Năsturel, to mention only some of those involved in clerical literature. Under their pressure a strong campaign of nationalizing the language used in officiating the religious cult, as well as in culture (taken in a wider sense) was started in Moldavia and Wallachia. Its intensity overpassed by far the timid efforts of the kind made in Transylvania. Since in the orthodox world the Church did not undergo a revolution comparable in amplitude to that of the Western Reformation, things did not occur with the alertness they had in the case of Protestant peoples. The entire 17th century was necessary in this sense as a turntable for the elimination of Paleoslavonic from the Romanian Church and the setting of a regency of the national language. With this wide process also harmonize the efforts of achieving a Romanian version of the Bible. It's worthwhile noticing that although they had used Slavonic for centuries in their Church, Romanians did not make even the slightest attempt at editing the Bible in that language. They inherited *The Song of Solomon* directly from their forefathers' language, which in its turn was continuously polished and got standardized in the process of fixing the biblical matter.

Propitious on the whole, the 17th century did not, however, yield any genial Romanian Biblicists, such as the German and Hungarian ones of the previous century. Well-known in that sense was the effort made for fixing as a major cultural target the achievement of the national Bible. Researchers may at this point ignore the very numerous works containing liturgical chapters from the Bible, so as to follow the sheer process of translating the Bible itself. A well-known achievement is the unabridged translation of the *New Testament* and its publication at Alba Iulia, in 1648. This is another instance of a work tributary to Hungarian Calvinism which had for long taken the proselyte initiative over from the Lutherans, who had had it in hand, so as to draw the state power in the campaign of converting Romanians to the Calvinist faith. The respective printed work is known under the name of *The New Testament from Bălgrad* with which it made its entrance in our cultural history by means of a few undeniable qualities. Methodologically, a new biblical model of an explanatory type was settled by it and provided with ample forewords to the books of the Bible, so as to render them easier to be followed by a population rather deficient from a cultural point of view. The model was not left without consequences. Philologists appreciate, however, above all, a preceding fact, which occurred on the respective occasion. Simion Ștefan, the author of its *Foreword*, compares the words of a language to money, or currency, which the more widely it circulates in countries overseas, the more valuable it is. Liken rise, words are good, when everyone can follow them. In embryo form, this is the theory of word circulation, implemented into 19th century Europe. The quality of the language of *The New Testament from Belgrad* does not, however, correspond to Simion Ștefan's justified requirement. The diction of the book is awkwardly imbued with elements of the local Transylvanian dialect, which underwent an unmistakable Hungarian influence. Mottled, with Hungarian words and phrases, it amounts in many places to a mere Hungarian decalcomania. Its language is dull and artificial in an age during which the European process of the setting up of national Bibles required one's being on the lookout for usage of worldwide items, familiar to a large number of members of the community for which they were meant.

The awkward elements comprised in the 1648 version were substantially rectified four decades later, in 1688, when an unabridged version of the Bible was printed for the first time in Romanian at Bucharest. The cultural drive was in this case exceptionally strong for an unabridged version of the Bible in Slavonic, printed at Ostrog in 1581 had been extant ever since. That Bible had circulated in the Romanian milieu, in which Slavonic was familiar to scholarly clergymen. Far from being a national enterprise, the *Bible of Ostrog* was a most belated printing of the Holy Writ in Slavonic, the third language of widespread circulation in the religious cult officiated in European churches, coming a century after the similar attempts made in Latin and Greek. Far from being the mark of a typical cultural event, the medieval impulse, which engendered it, was rather anachronistic in that age dominated by the national Bibles filling the Continent at the time. In so far as its Southeastern area is concerned, it's worth mentioning the fact that even the Greeks' through their scholar Maxim Gallipoli, printed at Geneva, in 1638, achieved a Bible of a Protestant national type. A few facts of great historical relevance compel recognition in so far as the Romanian Bible of 1688 is concerned. One can clearly infer from it that out of the patrimony of the Reformation, Romanians had followed only the urge concerning the usage of their own language in religion and theology. *The Bible*

of Bucharest was translated after the Septuagint of the Eastern Orthodox Church with its whole content derived from days of yore, with no heed taken of the codifications commended by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), or the Protestant syncretisms with regard to certain books in the Bible. The main merit of the Bucharest Bible is its fixing for posterity the image of the Romanian orthodox Church as faithful to its own history even after the abolition of Paleoslavonic which had for centuries ruled undisturbed by claiming the Romanians essential affiliation to the Eastern faith. Through the Bible of 1688 they strongly contradicted that orthodox cliché. As a matter of fact, this unabridged version of the Holy Writ concluded the age of the nationalization of the Romanian Church service, which gave a strong impulse to theological disciplines. Specialists have not ignored the contribution of printing to the development of standard Romanian, either. However, the aim of the national Bible was not reached in 1688. Like *The New Testament* of 1648, *The Bible of Bucharest* suffered the powerful influence of a dialect: Moldavian in the present case. Its translator, Nicolae Milescu, was a scholar of vast erudition, who never cared for cultivating Romanian in a unitary way. In the later opinion of a Romanian hierarch, the national Bible had to be, however, one „for an entire people”, an element of solidarity more important than even the readers Christian creed. Such solidarity could be achieved especially at the formal level of the language. Specific historical conditions entailed the development of the cleanest Romanian – which enjoyed the greatest popularity among men of letters neither in Transylvania, nor in Moldavia. But in the Southern piedmont of the Carpathians, in Wallachia, only a Bible with its text mainly centred on this dialect turned into standard language had any chance of becoming the national Bible of Romanians.

More than a century was to lapse till the achievement of that aim. The 18th century, also known as that of „the Enlightenment”, changed the political face of Europe, through the rise of the Continental Empire and the driving of the Turks away from the mid-Danubian Basin. Now a part of the Romanian population, the inhabitants of Transylvania, which had meanwhile become Habsburg, found itself set in „one of the recovery provinces in the East” as defined by Pierre Chaunu, meaning the new areas for the reception of Western culture. This recovery occurred very alertly so as to comply with the efforts and satisfy the anxious expectations of the Holy Alliance led by Emperor Leopold I. The essential aspect of this recovery – with regard to Romanians – resided in their conversion to Catholicism and the setting up of the Romanian Church United with Rome in 1700. The political power from Vienna invested propaganda capital and substantial material in this operation. Its consequence on a political plane was the gradual unfettering of Romanians from the tyranny of a feudal type they had been subjected to. Much more important was, however, the cultural impact of this Union with Rome. On a cultural ground of saddening poverty verging on primitive barbarousness (according to the testimony of some witnesses of the time) entailed by the demolishing action of Calvinism, the Catholic management could bring fertility quite soon. A lawful and organized clerical hierarchy and above all a dense, cultivated and competent class developed in the community of Romanian Catholics. The great institutes of Catholic education from Rome, Vienna and other traditional cultural centres opened their gates for Romanian Catholic youths. Returned from Europe with modern cultural views these clerks in holy orders gathered together at Blaj, the residence town of the bishop Uniate with Rome. Time and competition selected from among them a few outstanding personalities, which set up between themselves a creative guild, organized so as to meet the standard requirements of their age. Historians subsequently called the cultural movement initiated by them the Transylvanian School. In an interval of un hoped for chronological shortness, the mentioned wasteland got filled up with documentary sources and human resources of a competent kind: i.e. with the essential prerequisites for the springing of a new and fertile culture. Within a few decades, the actors of this important cultural risorgimento endowed with pertinent works all the spiritual fields of vital importance to the Romanian people: liturgical literature, theology, philosophy, philology, history. It was within the framework of this trend that the true national Bible was created towards the end of the 18th century.

It's interesting to follow the axiological context in which Romanian Catholics perceived the setting up of their national Bible. In 1700, the union with Rome was done by the permissive canons of the 1439 Council of Florence. As a consequence of that Romanians became catholic in dogma, but remained Eastern orthodox in their rite. The rough element of religion, dogma, lost, however, with Romanians, the media competition, since their religious ritual hadn't changed. In the popular mentality, the Romanian Church United with Rome continue to be the ancient Eastern Church

administratively polarized in its new orientation towards Rome. So was it entered in the very nomenclature of the Vatican: Catholic of Byzantine rite and so has it been regarded ever since. In what way could the new Bible that was in process of elaboration at Blaj reflect this dual reality? To what extent did it have to? Was it to adopt the Vulgate in accordance with Catholic dogma? Was it to prefer the Septuagint proceeding from the Byzantine rite and the popular option? The bafflement sprung on the horns of this dilemma was to be shortly dissipated by genius, which didn't fail to show up in the nick of time so as to play its fortuitous part. It was impersonated under the guise of friar Samuil Micu from Blaj, who shouldered the East of making a new, fundamentally original translation of the Bible. He opted for the Eastern Septuagint at whose rendering into Romanian he worked for 12 years and which was published at Blaj in 1795.

It's rather hard to sum up in brief space the multiple elements, which render this work an unsurpassed summit of Romanian religious culture. Though sprung up relatively late, the national Bible got materialized in due time to serve the Romanians' spiritual unification and to contribute to the setting up of their classical culture. Samuil Micu, the author of this Blaj Bible was remarkable to an equal extent as a theologian and linguist who enjoyed a well-deserved prestige consolidated in all the areas populated by Romanians. Fully aware of the shortcomings of all prior attempts, he interspersed the diction of his translation with lexical structures pertaining to all of the areas to which they belonged. He granted special emphasis to the South-Carpathian dialect, which had meanwhile become the standard language in Muntenia, one of the three Romanian „lands”, better known in Europe under the name of Wallachia. Through this linguistic synthesis marked by the well-inspired priorities devised by Micu, the Bible translated by him and printed at Blaj set in a unitary language understood by all Romanians, just as Luther's is by Germans and Gáspár Károli's by Hungarians. This was an essential element, quite worthy since it matched the Romanians' basic fondness of their mother tongue. An attachment of a similar kind, that to the Eastern Orthodox Church, was flattered through the author's option for the Septuagint, in its genuine form, without the slightest alteration and within a trace of Tridentine influence. All these resulted in the fact that from the Catholic environment of Transylvanian Blaj sprang up a Bible which instantly conquered all Romanians, both on the horizontal line of their geographical spreading and up the vertical at all the levels of their social hierarchy.

The *Bible of Blaj* entailed among Romanians an ecumenical phenomenon as a consequence of some well-known problems entailed by their adoption of Catholicism in Transylvania, in 1700.

The noteworthy personalities of the Romanian orthodox world appropriated that Bible achieved by Romanian Catholics and had it republished three times during the 19th century: at St. Petersburg in 1819, at Buzău, between 1854 and 1856, as well as at Sibiu, between 1856 and 1858. Its acknowledgement by the Romanian Orthodox massive religious majoritary bulk ascertained its quality as a national Bible of an authentic and mature stamp, assimilated to that of Blaj. Much later, in 1914, when the Romanian Orthodox Church appointed for its official employment a text called *The Bible of the Holy Synod* did it resort to the one achieved by Samuil Micu at Blaj, in 1795, with insignificant lexical-updating. In other words, the „Bible for a whole people” passed the test of time. Forever two centuries it was still to dominate the Romanian biblical diction. Its language influenced the manner of expression of the lay Romanian literature from the age of its maturation in the 19th century. The most celebrated case is that of Mihai Eminescu, the national poet, whose attachment to the text of this Transylvanian Bible is well known.

In the present paper I've preferred the method of a chronological approach to the setting up of the Romanian national Bible. The mentioned preparatory steps required by its working out, the achievements and failures that occurred in the process of its elaboration are as many means of throwing light on the thorough success achieved by it in 1795. The brilliance of this *Bible of Blaj*, its exquisite quality that no one has as yet contested situates it close to the masterpieces of Romanian culture. It's the reason why a group of historians and philologists from the Romanian Academy thought of publishing an updated scientific edition of this *Bible of Blaj*, the national Bible of Romanians. That edition was printed in 2,000 A.D. in Rome, with the assistance of His Sanctity Pope John Paul II, in graphic and typographical conditions of an exceptional kind.