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When the Gap between Academic Theology and the Church Makes Possible the Orthodox–Evangelical Dialogue

Dănuț Jemna ^{1,*} and Dănuț Mănăstireanu ²¹ Economics & Business Administration, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, 700506 Iași, Romania² Independent Researcher, Glasgow G32 0PA, UK; danutm@gmail.com

* Correspondence: danut.jemna@uaic.ro

Abstract: In the church tradition, we find that the great theologians were also deeply involved in the life of the church as bishops, priests, or pastors who served the believers in their parishes, though, even at that time, practicing theology started to drift apart from performing pastoral work. In Modernity, however, things began to change radically, especially with the development of theology as an academic discipline and even more so with the development of the profession of the theologian specializing in religious studies. This phenomenon penetrated Protestant churches in particular, but it is also found in Orthodoxy. In this study, we advance the hypothesis that, despite its negative connotation, the gap between academic theology and church life opens up the possibility of a promising dialogue between Evangelicals and the Orthodox in Romania. Especially in the last 30 years, theologians from both communities have interacted in the context of doctoral research, scientific conferences, and research projects, although the dialogue between church leaders and hierarchs is almost non-existent. We analyze whether this incipient theological dialogue could possibly create a bridge between the two communities and within them and between academia and the church. We believe that one of the best ways to reduce the distance between them is to build on the interest of the current generation of theologians from both churches in Biblical studies, in Patristic theology, and in the work of the Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae.

Keywords: Orthodox; Evangelical; ecumenism; Patristics; Stăniloae

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1. Introduction

Today, all church traditions face, to a greater or lesser extent, a certain fracture between academic theology and the life of the church. The idea of a priest-theologian or of a pastor-theologian (Hiestand and Wilson 2015) returns more and more to the attention of some specialists, who are also interested in finding relevant solutions for the abovementioned rifts. The theme of the distance between theology and the church has been analyzed by various theologians both in the Orthodox tradition (Florovsky 1972) and in the Evangelical Protestant one (Hiestand 2008). Some of these studies target specific contexts such as that of South Africa (Womack and Pillay 2019) or Romania (Coman 2019).

The existing literature on the gap between academic theology and the church emphasizes the implications of the problem in the contemporary context and aims at analyzing the past to identify where this fracture comes from. In our estimation, discussion about this phenomenon occurring (Womack and Pillay 2019) only after the Reformation is restrictive and does not consider several important dynamics regarding its evolution in the earlier Christian tradition, such as the relationship between faith and reason, on the one hand, and that between the charisma and the ecclesial institution, on the other. Moreover, the existing studies do not take sufficiently into account the importance of interconfessional dialogue, nor the mutual influence between the different ecclesial traditions from certain geographical areas.

With respect to Romania, the evaluation of the relationship between the church and academic theology is underdeveloped. We find only descriptive assessments made by

Orthodox theologians (Stăniloae 1993; Coman 1995), while leaders from the minority Evangelical denominations have not yet engaged with this phenomenon. In the context of the Orthodox–Evangelical dialogue, this theme is important, because it aims at a common reality in the two traditions and at possible implications of interconfessional interactions at the academic level that have been developed over the last few decades.

In this paper, we will analyze the gap between academic theology and church life in Romania. We advance here the hypothesis that the distance between the two is a reality that opens up the possibility of a certain degree of engagement between Evangelicals and the Orthodox at the academic level, which might not have been possible otherwise given the opposition to ecumenism of leaders and hierarchs from both traditions. We also appreciate that these theological interconfessional relationships could be an important source for bringing theology closer to church life by emphasizing what each community could learn from the other.

The next section of this paper briefly presents the evolution of the relationship between academic theology and church life during three historical periods: Patristic, Late Medieval, and Modernity. In Section 3, this legacy of a rift between the church and theology is analyzed within the Romanian context. Section 4 evaluates how this phenomenon allowed for the development of Orthodox–Evangelical dialogue in the academy. In Section 5, starting from the existing situation in Romania, we seek to identify some possible solutions to bring church life and academic theology closer to both Orthodox and Evangelicals. The paper ends with a set of conclusions.

2. The Rift between Academic Theology and Church Life: A Brief Overview from the Patristic Period to Modernity

The potential of a rupture between theological reflection and the life of the church is somehow intrinsically linked to both the nature of religious experience and its dynamics throughout history in the various social contexts in which the Christian faith has manifested. In addressing this issue, we are using two distinctions whereby the dynamics of the Christian community can be more easily evaluated: reason vs. faith and charisma vs. institution. The reason vs. belief polarity is widely discussed by theologians and philosophers who have proposed various models regarding either the unity or the opposition, including the conflict, between them (McGrath 2017; Swinburne 2005; Plantinga 1983). Regardless of the approach employed, the understanding and use of the reason vs. faith distinction has a direct impact on the relationship between theological thinking and church life. At the same time, the way in which the relationship between personal charisma and the ecclesial institution is managed (Weber 1968; Yannaras 2013) raises significant implications for the activity of theological reflection and its association with church life. The limitations of this paper do not allow for a detailed examination of these aspects. Therefore, starting from the above distinctions, we aim to emphasize several specific characteristics of three different historical periods and their legacy with respect to the present time.

2.1. The Patristic Period

A common characteristic of the Patristic period was a certain understanding regarding the knowledge of God that can be deduced from the life and writings of the Church Fathers. For these authors, theology was the mystical experience of knowing God (Farley 1983, p. 33), which was different from the knowledge that can be achieved through the human ability to explore reality, as in philosophy, for example. Furthermore, the purpose of knowing God was not animated by purely intellectual interests, but by the experience of believers, who believed that their relationship with God defined their life in the world and their eternal destiny. The theologian was the one who prayed (Evagrius 1981, p. 64), i.e., the believer who experienced a life of faith in the community and assumed the charisma of knowledge as part of the body of Christ. The Christian theologians in the early centuries were also pastors of local churches, and their theological reflection was anchored primarily in the liturgical life of the church, not just in the current thinking of their time. The development of theological ideas was very closely related to and prompted by the need of Christian

communities to respond to pastoral and identity challenges. The theological endeavor was perceived as something somewhat risky, as it involved engaging rationally and spiritually with the mystery of God, which required a responsible and even a doxological attitude.

During this period, the relationship between theology and a life of faith was influenced, on the one hand, by the need to clarify the meaning of true faith in relation to the ideologies of heretics and persecutors and, on the other hand, by assuming Christian identity within a certain historical context marked by opposition and specific social, political, and religious realities. Although some authors argue that, for this period, we cannot yet talk about a decline in the relationship between theology and church life (Womack and Pillay 2019), we believe that certain fractures between them could already be observed at various levels. The first refers to the use of philosophy in the work of theological reflection (Hill 2003, pp. 14, 15). While for several authors, reason and faith were in conflict (Tertullian) or in a relationship of subordination (Augustine), for others, the focus was on using reason to elaborate rational statements and to fight against heretics (Justin the Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Gregory of Nyssa).

Along with the institutionalization of the church, the Edict of Milan brought other important changes, especially regarding the vocation and charisma of ministers. In this matter, the position of the hierarch or leader of the church also received a political and administrative dimension. Moreover, the prophetic function of the theologian and of the defender of the faith was gradually impacted by their institutional and professional component also coming under the influence of political power.

After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, in response to the relative weakening of the Christian life caused by the massive formal assimilation of Roman citizens into the church (Brown 1981, p. 18), certain Christian leaders chose to isolate themselves in the wilderness. These ascetics initiated the monastic movement and adhered to an elitist model of spirituality oriented on the strict observance of certain disciplines. Although, by doing so, they aimed at reviving the spiritual life of the church by following some specific directions (prophetic function, discipleship, and spiritual formation), several negative effects inevitably arose. For instance, certain authors of this period emphasized the practical dimension and topics strictly related to a life of faith, sometimes neglecting, or even showing a degree of hostility towards, theological reflection on the being of God or the nature of reality, which was considered abstract, speculative, and without any real benefit to believers (Wortley 2019, pp. 147–49).

2.2. Late Medieval Period

In addition to the elements underlined above, the Late Medieval Period brought about a distance, perhaps even a deeper fracture, between two Christian traditions that would develop differently to this day. Eastern and Western Christianity were separated not only by the use of Greek or Latin, but also by the cultural, social, and political contexts of the two Roman Empires, with their capitals in Constantinople and Rome. Based on this new matrix in the development of Christianity, we can highlight two aspects that marked the relationship between theology and church life.

The first is linked to an important change concerning theological thinking and the production of theological texts. On the one hand, theological writing was marked by the attempt to systematize and implicitly to elaborate a body of doctrines that would bring balance in the life of the Christian community, which was confronted with various schisms and internal tensions. The speculative dimension became increasingly important, and the tendency to elaborate a particular system of thinking became a priority. The aim was to build a theology centered on soteriology, able to respond to the need of the Christian community to have a coherent explanatory framework regarding the relationship between humanity and God. On the other hand, the monastic movement and the authors that embraced this way of life continued to highlight ideas about the practical life of the church and to elaborate various models of spirituality. Thus, during this period, the rift between dogmatic and spiritual endeavors became even more obvious.

The second aspect consists in the emergence of universities and the positioning of theology among the disciplines that underlay the training of the intellectual milieu (Holland 2019, pp. 223–46). Especially in the Late Medieval Period, European space was animated by the ideas of the ancient universalism of knowledge and by the development of formative institutions called to revive the great themes of ancient Greek and Roman culture. Theology became the queen of the disciplines that were developed during this period, each with their increasingly well-defined spheres of knowledge (Farley 1983, p. 38). Thus, Medieval scholasticism (Abelard, Aquinas) provided the platform of the relationship between theology and astronomy, mathematics, architecture, music, biology, etc. and was an expression of the intention to build an integrated system of knowledge. The result, however, be it unintentional, was an increasing gap between academia and the ecclesia.

2.3. Reformation and Modernity

Modernity was characterized by a series of ideological, political, and social transformations in relation to the previous period. The reality of tradition and religious authority, together with the role of the church institution, were re-evaluated, and their position in society was redefined. The Reformation supported these new directions, which led to the emergence of a new ecclesial tradition. Universities were among the institutions that played a central role in these transformations. In the academic sphere, theology remained an important discipline. Now, however, it was called to be defined by the rigors of scientific research: the need for a method, a careful conceptualization based on definitions and perspectives of thinking, and the development of clearly defined theological systems. The specific rationalism of this period influenced theological reflection and encouraged a reductionist approach that limited the production of ideas to what can be explained rationally. According to the scheme proposed by the university, theology became differentiated into several specialized disciplines (Farley 1983, pp. 40–42), which fragmented and further complicated its relationship with the church.

At the same time, in the space of Christian thought, the Reformation brought on an important change that shifted the attention of theologians away from the aim of developing inherited ideas towards finding answers to new questions by stimulating creativity and dialogue with other fields of knowledge on interconfessional polemics and dogmatic fairness. In addition to the positive aspects of revitalizing the life of Christian communities, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation marked the relationship between theology and faith by overemphasizing denominational identity and by the urge to deal with tensions between Christian communities.

Sometimes faith communities pushed back against the perceived sterility of academic disputes on various theological topics, which widened the gap between theology and church life even more. Such a reaction was the pietist movement in Germany. Overall, during the Enlightenment, the church tended to develop a self-protective attitude towards the wave of rationalist influence in the academy and focused primarily on its own experience (Pillay and Womack 2018).

3. The Gap between Academia and the Church within the Romanian Context: Why and How?

Most Romanians are Eastern Orthodox. Evangelicalism penetrated the current Romanian territory in the middle of the nineteenth century in its Baptist form and, in the first few decades, mostly reached some of the ethnic minority groups (Germans, Hungarians, etc.). The first Romanian-speaking Evangelical congregations (Baptist, Brethren, Pentecostal, etc.) were formed in the beginning of the twentieth century. For most of their history, these new communities were persecuted, first by the civil authorities with support from Orthodox leaders and, after the Second World War, by the communist regime (Dobrincu 2018). The Orthodox, themselves, constantly accused Evangelicals of proselytizing on their “canonical territory”, a concept which Evangelicals, who never developed a clear vision of “ethical Christian witness”, thoroughly denied. Such a context was obviously not conducive to benevolent interconfessional engagement.

Furthermore, academic theological studies do not have a long history in Romania. They have existed for less than 150 years for the Orthodox, while university-level Evangelicals schools were formed only after 1989. Orthodox faculties are part of state universities, while Evangelicals created private schools, continuing the tradition of the old theological seminaries developed in the communist period. There are also two theological schools (a Baptist one in Bucharest and a Pentecostal one in Arad), which are integrated in state universities.

3.1. *The Orthodox Church*

Within Orthodoxy, the harmonious relationship between academia and the church is a valued tradition. This is considered a legacy from the Church Fathers, each generation having the responsibility to take it over and transmit it further (Săniloae 2005, pp. 87–89). Yet, Orthodox theological studies became part of academia at a time when university life was thoroughly dominated by the fragmentation of the various domains of knowledge characteristic to the Enlightenment paradigm. Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae (1913–1993) became aware of this rift before the Second World War, during his early theological studies, which almost made him give up his theological vocation (Stăniloae 1993, p. 635). He warned against the risk of academic theology being repetitive, past oriented, and influenced by scholasticism, which would have a negative impact on church life, blocking any spiritual renewal and progress. Finally, he believed that this kind of theology shows a lack of responsibility towards believers and towards the divine revelation (Săniloae 2005, p. 88). Similarly, Fr. Daniel Buda believed that “a theology cut off from ecclesiality or which does not resonate with the life of the Church is meaningless” (Buda 2012, p. 61).

In a recent book, Fr. Constantin Coman criticized Romanian theology’s lack of interest in church iconography, prayer, and liturgical life; the absence of the prophetic dimension; and its orientation towards the past. He also underlined the disconnection of present theology from its roots in the spirituality of the Church Fathers. Moreover, he complained that some Orthodox theologians, such as the Greek Nikolaos Matsoukas, even theorized on the legitimacy of a methodological distinction between the “scientific theology” practiced in academia and a “charismatic or a spiritual theology” manifested in the ecclesia (Coman 2019, pp. 171–92). Such dichotomy is a reminder of the scholastic tendency in many Orthodox schools, which comes from the reductionist approach to theology as an academic discipline, in sharp contrast with the holistic spirituality promoted by the Church Fathers and revived by the neo-Patristic theology in Orthodoxy.

After 1990, further tensions between academia and the ecclesia were nurtured by the excessive increase of the number of Orthodox faculties of theology (14 at present) and the number of their graduates far exceeding the need for new parish priests, in addition to the significant reductions of quality teaching in these institutions due to the lack of sufficiently well-trained teachers. This crisis was temporarily averted by redirecting some of these graduates towards teaching religious education in schools, but a permanent solution is still needed.

3.2. *Evangelicalism*

The freedom obtained after the fall of the communist regime permitted Evangelicals to create their first university-level theological schools. The initiators were motivated by the desire to contribute to the formation of a new generation of well-trained church ministers. Because the economic capabilities of minority Evangelical communities in Romania could not cover the costs required by these new institutions, they were mostly funded by Evangelicals in the West and took over their standards, curricula, and bibliography. The result was the creation of an ethos foreign to the life of the Romanian Evangelical communities, which was strongly affected by years of harsh persecution and by the ambiguities of surviving in the communist era. This led a number of Romanian and foreign authors to argue strongly for the need to contextualize theological education to the needs and the ethos of Evangelical churches in Central and Eastern Europe (Brown and Brown 2003).

Furthermore, the Western funders of these schools (be they foreigners or Romanians in the diaspora) often tried to impose their own priorities and peculiar theological views on these institutions, which, in the end, created huge internal tensions and led to the loss of many competent teachers who did not seem to conform to the views and intentions of the funders. These tensions had nothing to do with the actual needs of local Evangelical communities, which created a growing rift between churches and academic institutions.

The separation between the ecclesia and academia in Romanian Evangelicalism is not only due to the pathologies of academic institutions, but also to the characteristics of these particular ecclesial communities, which are dominated by pietism, spirit vs. matter dualism, anti-intellectualism, etc. These communities were confronted after communism with an identity crisis and with utter ecclesial fragmentation, which are not addressed theologically or otherwise either by the leaders or by the theologians in that church tradition (Jemna 2018).

This reality has had a direct impact on the way theology is taught in Evangelical schools. In these institutions, the emphasis is not so much on the academic training of students or on forming their ability to think theologically, but rather on the technical abilities required by the pastoral profession, such as leading church services, preaching, running church councils, managing general assemblies, and pacifying dissent. In other words, in theological education, difficulties arise not only from the great distance between academia and the ecclesia. We should also discuss the negative effect of losing the distinction or of the overlap between the two. An adequate relationship between theology and the church would require, we argue, a clear distinction between the role of the two, which would allow each to challenge the other and foster a harmonious interaction.

The imbalance between academia and the ecclesia in Romanian Evangelicalism seems to be also perpetuated by the existence of a certain theological elite formed in the West. The ecumenical openness manifested immediately after 1989 encouraged some of the new Evangelical leaders to pursue not only postgraduate theological degrees in the West, but also to explore how their ecclesial tradition could be enriched by interaction with and in-depth research of Orthodox theology. An article published in 2007 listed 50 Romanian Evangelicals with PhDs in theology, many of them obtained in the West (Mănăstireanu 2007). It is estimated that today their number has at least tripled.

4. Premises for an Incipient Orthodox–Evangelical Dialogue

Theological dialogue between Evangelicals and the Orthodox in Romania is a quite recent phenomenon. Before 1989, a small number of Romanian Evangelical theologians did their theological degrees in Orthodox faculties, because their own denominations did not have university-level schools, which was a sign of openness even at that difficult time. This, however, given the latent hostility between the two ecclesial traditions, did not lead to any significant theological engagement between them.

4.1. Academic Initiatives

The situation changed radically after the fall of communism, when Romanian Evangelicals created their own academic theological institutions, and some of the emerging leaders who were doing their doctoral studies in the West made Orthodoxy one of their priority areas of study. One of the first to do so was Paul Negruț, currently the Rector of Emmanuel (Baptist) University in Oradea. His PhD thesis on the concept of authority in Orthodoxy opened the door for promising engagement with the majority tradition in Romania. Others, such as Emil Bartoș, Silviu Rogobete, Daniel Oprean, and Dragoș Ștefăniță, followed suit.

In 1995, Fr. Stelian Tofană, a Romanian Orthodox Biblical scholar, was invited to read a paper at the annual research conference at the aforementioned Baptist theological school. The presence of various Orthodox theologians became common place in the following years, not only in Oradea, but also at the Evangelical institutes in Bucharest, where the Baptist theologian Otniel Bunaciu and the Pentecostal theologian John Tipei led the way in opening up their schools to theologians from the Orthodox and other church traditions.

Romanian Evangelical scholars have also been involved, together with the Orthodox, Catholics, and mainline Protestants in the activities of the Romanian Biblical Scholars Union since its inception in 2005, which also resulted in several of their articles being included in the annual publication of the Union.

Orthodox theological schools were more reluctant to invite Evangelical scholars to their institutions. Yet, from time to time that happened, particularly for international conferences. Moreover, until now, no Orthodox scholar had been invited to teach at an Evangelical school in Romania. Alternatively, it is quite hard to imagine that an Evangelical scholar would ever be invited to teach at an Orthodox school.

One other dimension in the cooperation between Evangelical and Orthodox theologians was in the context of the Romanian Biblical Interconfessional Society. Even if these interactions have not resulted in the creation of an ecumenical translation of the Bible, as expected, and probably never will, which is reflective of the still-difficult relations between the two church traditions, nevertheless the mere existence of such efforts represents huge progress in contrast with the open hostility between them in the past.

Finally, the interaction between Evangelical and Orthodox scholars was occasioned by their participation in common publishing projects, resulting either from previous ecumenical conferences or from ad hoc initiatives. It is not by chance that these projects were related to the theology of Fr. D. Stăniloae. One recent opportunity for interaction between Romanian Orthodox and Evangelical theologians was their involvement in the events and publications initiated by the International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA), created in 2017, whose first congress was organized in 2019 in Iasi, Romania.

4.2. Ecumenical Meetings

Although Romanian Evangelicals are not institutionally involved in the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, associated with the WCC, organized in the past few decades several theological dialogues between the Orthodox and Evangelicals, in which several leaders from both traditions were involved. Fr. Ioan Sauca, the director of the institute and currently General Secretary of the WCC, played a major role in this initiative and is deeply committed to facilitating the interaction between theologians and church leaders from the two traditions.

Although it would be hard to argue that such encounters brought major changes in the two theological camps, and even less so in relations between the two ecclesial communities, nevertheless these meetings forged some strong friendships and partnerships across the denominational divide. The most important contributions to these Bossey meetings were published in 2012, which included the works of Romanian authors, Evangelicals, such as Emil Bartoș and Otniel Bunaciu, and Orthodox, such as Ioan Sauca, Vasile Mihoc, and Stelian Tofană (Grass et al. 2012).

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (18–25 January) used to be a good annual opportunity for some ecumenically minded Romanian Evangelicals and Orthodox members to meet and worship together. Since 2009, however, when the Orthodox Metr. Nicolae Corneanu participated inadvertently in a Greek-Catholic eucharistic celebration, Orthodox priests have been actively discouraged from participating in ecumenical worship.

One of the most active current platforms for encouraging Evangelical–Orthodox interaction, particularly in the area of mission work, is the Lausanne–Orthodox Initiative, initiated after the Third Congress of the Lausanne Movement¹. Evangelical and Orthodox Romanian theologians are actively involved in the projects and actions of this movement (for details, see <http://loimission.net>, accessed on 15 April 2021).

Ecumenical meetings have been opportunities for Romanian theologians from both traditions to interact and learn from each other, as Metr. Kallistos Ware suggests (Ware 2011). This allowed Evangelicals to become more open to the spiritual treasure of the Christian tra-

¹ The Lausanne Movement was founded with the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization as a platform for Evangelical leaders with the mission “to connect influencers and ideas for global mission”.

dition, to appreciate the works of the Church Fathers, to comprehend the communitarian dimension of salvation, and to assess the value of the sacraments and of the liturgy. The revived interest in Patristics in many Evangelical theological schools is a clear indication of this trend. The Wheaton Center for Early Christian Studies (<https://www.wheaton.edu/academics/school-of-biblical-and-theological-studies/the-wheaton-center-for-early-christian-studies/>, accessed on 15 April 2021) at Wheaton College, IL., is just one example.

In turn, the Orthodox could be challenged by the Evangelical passion for the study of the Bible and mission work, the active role of the laity in the life of the church, and the personal character of salvation, which could enrich and revive ecclesial life in Orthodox parishes. A further contribution in this direction came from Orthodox scholars who studied in Evangelical institutions, mostly in the West, under the supervision of competent Protestant professors.

4.3. Local Projects

One of the most important gains of the last three decades of academic interactions between these two ecclesial communities was the building of personal friendships and trust between Romanian Orthodox and Evangelical theologians. In the delicate context of the little support for ecumenical encounters, if any, received from church leaders and hierarchs, such strong personal relationships account for the unlikely accomplishments of their interactions. These important human connections of friendship and reciprocal appreciation have been the basis of several local projects in which leaders and members of both communities have been involved. Their potential, especially in terms of common service to the needs of the world, should not be neglected.

Humanitarianism is one area where Evangelicals and the Orthodox could cooperate despite their theological differences. Thus, building on a strong personal friendship nurtured in the academic context, Fr. S. Tofana was invited after the year 2000, by one of the authors of this paper, then Regional Director for Faith and Development for the Middle East and Eastern Europe Region of World Vision International, to act for about a decade as chaplain for the staff of the microcredit branch of World Vision Romania, his involvement in which benefited all members of the staff and, implicitly, their clients.

One special ecumenical project, which left a lasting impact on the local community, was a weekly two-hour live religious radio program produced by a local station in Iași, Romania, of which the authors of this paper, together with an Orthodox and a Catholic priest, discussed matters of current interest to the community and responded to questions addressed by the public, with an emphasis on what unites rather than what differentiates our three ecclesial traditions. Currently, many such media opportunities are offered by radio and TV stations, as well as by various web platforms, religious or secular, in which theologians and church leaders from both traditions are invited to contribute. Such encounters contribute to overcoming taboos and demonstrating that despite their ecclesial differences, Evangelicals and the Orthodox can learn from each other and live peacefully together in their communities.

5. Potential Solutions for Reducing the Distance between Academic Theology and the Church

In Romania, for both the Orthodox and Evangelicals, the relationship between the church and academic theology has a paradoxical character, which is manifested in specific ways. Most Romanian theologians are priests and pastors who serve in local communities. Despite this reality, they play two different roles at the same time and somehow participate in two different worlds, between which, over time, a certain distance and tension was created. To identify potential solutions to bridge the gap between academic theology and church life, we need to consider not only this specificity, but also some resources that have been insufficiently utilized. In our opinion, at least three areas could provide support for concrete actions and projects with an impact on the relationship between academic theology and the churches: the significant number of competent theologians and their

work; the national and international dialogue in which theologians from both traditions participate; and the infrastructure of religion teachers in the general education system.

5.1. *Theological Resources: Persons and Their Works*

Nowadays, the Orthodox and Evangelical churches in Romania have at their disposal important resources, having produced valuable theological texts validated by specialists at national and international levels. This academic potential could be a solid foundation for initiatives that bring the church closer to academic theology.

Within the limits of this study, it is sufficient to appeal the most notable example of Fr. D. Stăniloae (Nassif 2001). Along with other neo-Patristic thinkers (Florovsky 1972, pp. 110–15), this Romanian theologian underlined the real danger of the split between the academic and ecclesiastic areas and between a scholastic theology and the church liturgical life. He was convinced that the development of Romanian theology requires the translation of the Church Fathers, so that believers have access to Christ as reflected in the great Patristic texts (Stăniloae 1993, p. 637). At the same time, Fr. D. Stăniloae understood that the church needed sermons with a message about the real person of Christ and not about the rules of Christian morality. He confessed that a theology of Christian love and ecumenical unity in Christ can be developed only on the basis of the Christian faith of the real, ontological connection between the Triune God and humanity (Stăniloae 1993, p. 639).

For a new generation of Romanian theologians and also for pastors and priests who are open to getting involved in the double effort of rapprochement between denominational churches and the life of Christian communities and academic theology, the life and work of Fr. D. Stăniloae can be used in several directions: as fundamental references in theological schools especially at the bachelor's and master's degree levels; as a field of research that allows for the organization of conferences and the production of theological works; as an example of spirituality and service; as a support in organizing pastoral meetings and seminars; and as a platform for ecumenical meetings.

5.2. *The Existing Experience of the Orthodox–Evangelical Academic Dialogue*

In Romania, the Orthodox–Evangelical dialogue takes place especially at the academic level. Although this could contribute to maintaining the distance between the academy and the church, it may also impact the evolution of this relationship in the opposite direction. The last three decades of dialog between Orthodox and Evangelical theologians represents for Romania a resource that can also be beneficial for local churches from at least two points of view.

First, any type of meeting between theologians represents an opportunity for them to become more openminded to other Christian traditions and to better understand their particularities. As Romanian and foreign theologians often argued, both the Orthodox and Evangelicals have a lot of things to learn from each other (Nassif 2004; Ware 2011; Mihoc 2012). It is not just a matter of understanding the other's theological discourse, but also of going deeper into the knowledge of the spirituality and practical life of each tradition. Moreover, this reciprocal enrichment with theological and spiritual knowledge contributes to the formation of theologians involved in academic dialogue and represents a potential that can be used in the concrete ministry within local churches.

Additionally, Orthodox–Evangelical interactions are most frequently occasioned by international conferences or projects. In these meetings, the exchange between theologians from different traditions is not only important, but also the exchange between the members of the same denomination who express their faith in a highly culturally diverse world. Such exposure could lead to changes of perspective and is an important source of renewal for the ecclesial service in the local church to which every theologian belongs. In this sense, a suggestive example is offered by His Beatitude Daniel, the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, who has great international and ecumenical experience. In a well-known interview (Coman 1995, pp. 151–60), Bishop Daniel (at the time) stressed that, in Romania, there is need for a theology that is pastorally oriented to rediscover the model of the Church

Fathers in which there is no fracture between theological thinking and the real life of the local churches.

5.3. *Religious Teachers in the General Education System*

In 2014, the teaching of religion in general education schools in Romania became optional rather than mandatory. This stirred a series of debates both on the role of religion in the public space and the situation of teachers who have taught this discipline and who risk losing their jobs. In this context, at a conference organized by the Iasi School Coordination Authority in 2015, which was attended by religion teachers and church representatives, one of the authors of this paper argued that this situation could be transformed into an opportunity for the church. In Romania, teaching religion in schools means that students participate in catechism classes organized according to the confessional specifics of each church. However, that is the responsibility of the church, not of the school. Therefore, a paradigm shift is needed in this field. Thus, at the school level, religion professors could teach general religious education, while at the same time, they could be involved in catechesis programs for members of local churches. As a result, this human resource does not need to be reclassified or reoriented. If such a solution were to be implemented, the benefit for the church would be enormous.

In our opinion, religious teachers could also play a key role in creating a strong connection between local churches and academic institutions. On the one hand, teachers need theological formation and should be in continuous dialogue with academics from universities. On the other hand, their contribution concerns the instruction of believers in local churches according to their specific spiritual needs. Therefore, religion teachers could be a strategic interface between church life and academic theology and a catalytic factor for stimulating theological reflection in relation to the spiritual needs of the Christian community (Luodeslampi et al. 2019). Finally, by being present in schools, they could support the culture of interfaith dialogue and knowledge and respect for the diversity of expression of the Christian faith. This, however, depends on the ecumenical openness and expertise of these teachers, the formation of whom needs to become a priority of academic theological formation programs.

6. Conclusions

We conclude our study with a series of summary considerations. We began by underlining the importance of being aware of the tendency of separating the life of the church from theological reflection, which we have inherited from the past. This, we believe, dates not just from after the Reformation, under the influence of the Enlightenment; however, as important as its impact might have been in this direction, its incipient manifestations could be identified even in the Patristic era, with each of the following periods adding their specific contribution.

This distancing is also evidenced within the Orthodox and Evangelical communities in Romania, even though the majority of the theologians in these traditions are also church ministers. In the case of the Orthodox, the rift between the ecclesia and academia appeared under the impact of the secular model of the modern university and as an effect of the scholastic approach that still dominates Orthodox theological education, although this way of practicing theology is perceived by many neo-Patristic theologians as being foreign to the spirit of Orthodoxy. For Evangelicals, the distance between the theological formation and the life of the local Christian communities is rooted in the ecclesial fragmentation specific to Evangelicalism and its inherited anti-intellectualism, which leads to downplaying the importance of academia.

Certainly, each of these ecclesial traditions is responsible for finding adequate solutions to bring healing to this rift within their own communities. It is our contention, however, that more inspiration in the search for such necessary healing could come from lessons learned in the various kinds of interactions between Orthodox and Evangelical theologians. Because dialogue and cooperation between these church traditions has not yet been institutionalized,

the only chance for such exchange of views to take place is in the context of academic, ecumenical, and local initiatives that allow representatives of these communities to work together and learn from each other. As this sort of interaction becomes more visible and its positive impact in the life of the respective communities is more convincing, there is a growing chance that Evangelical church leaders and Orthodox hierarchs will have more positive feelings towards ecumenical engagement, which, in turn, could lead to common efforts for finding adequate solutions to a common problem.

For Romania, the future of the relationship between academia and the ecclesia, as well as that of interconfessional dialogue, depends to a large extent on the quality and vision of the leaders of the respective communities. In both traditions, we already have in the country a solid and growing number of theologians who are meeting regularly, exchanging views, and cooperating in various projects of smaller or larger scale. The theological work of Fr. D. Stăniloae has already proved to offer a fertile meeting ground for these efforts. These open-minded theologians could contribute to the formation of a new generation of priest and pastors, who are solidly rooted in the identity of their own church traditions and do not feel threatened in reaching out to their brothers and sisters in Christ from other communities. Furthermore, they could also contribute to the formation of a new cohort of ecumenically minded religious education teachers, who would be able to bring the faith treasury of the church closer to the hearts of children and adults, either in the context of the school or in the catechetical context of local church communities.

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