

*Giuseppe Tateo*

## **Under the Sign of the Cross. The People's Salvation Cathedral and the Church-Building Industry in Postsocialist Romania**

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This book is the result of the doctoral studies of Giuseppe Tateo, former doctoral researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Halle/Saale, Germany) and recently a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Leipzig. Tateo's work is the result of his research and fieldwork in Romania conducted from 2015 to 2019. From his acknowledgement, we learn that the author spent several months in Romania (especially in Bucuresti) and that his research was assisted by several local researchers. Therefore, this book can be considered one of the good practice-examples of international collaboration between the emerging Romanian study of the sociology of religion and Western institutions and researchers.

In the introduction, Tateo cites the 2011 census of Romania, in which 86% of the population identified themselves as Orthodox. He argues that this absolute majority of the Romanian society created 4,200 Orthodox church buildings in the period 1990 to 2015, about one every two and a half days. Tateo strongly relies on the work of Katherine Verdery in his short analysis of the role of church-building projects in the re-occupation of spaces, signifying them with new religious buildings. The author barely mentions notions such as space sacralization, architectural atmosphere, and religious space monopolization; rather, he focuses especially on the notion of the "re-consecration" of spaces as a material and spatial symbol for the return to the traditions. The author correctly identifies the religious revival of the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) and its spatial conquest in public spaces as a strong signifier of the national revival in Central-Eastern Europe, which we can see in Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and even Greece. Tateo argues in his methodological chapter that his analysis of People's Salvation Cathedral in Bucharest is presented through the method of holism, a notion often used in urban anthropology and recently in religious studies too. The methodological chapter of the book is short, with many references, but is sparse with regard to the analysis of the complex anthropological, historical, and political role of the ROC in post-communist Romania.

The first chapter of the book presents the history of the Cathedral for the Salvation of the Romanian People in Bucharest, which is inseparable from the nation-formation process of modern Romania since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Tateo first presents the relationship of state and church in a macro-historical context between 1859 and 2017, which represents a useful attempt at a historical synthesis of the ROC, although an in-depth analysis of the history of

the ROC for the international academic community still is needed. The author also presents rare documents, such as the allocation bills of the “Bucharest Cathedral” from 1881, in which an amount of 4.5 million lei was apportioned to build the cathedral. The cathedral — as a spatial and religious symbol of the new Romania after the First World War — was expected to be built in Bibescu Voda Square. The consecration ritual was performed on May 11, 1929; however, the project was stopped because of the economic recession. The next period of the cathedral construction began in 1999, with a second consecration ritual by the patriarch Teoctist, who dominated the transition of the ROC from the end of the Communist era to the formation of the European Union (1986–2007). Tateo also describes the importance of the current location of the cathedral being accepted by the Romanian Parliament only in 2005 (law 261/2005). The space is located behind the Palace of the People, the symbol of the last period of the Ceaușescu era and the megalomania of the dictator. The topography of the new sacralized space thus represents a spatial re-consecration of history as well. In addition, the book has a short chapter focusing on the anthropologic analysis of the reception of the cathedral among Romanian Orthodox people, especially from Bucharest, based on interviews conducted by the author in his fieldwork. Tateo also describes the actors who contributed to the building of the cathedral: the construction companies, the artists, the patriarch Daniel (since 2007), the believers, the private contributors, and the politicians, as well as the secular humanists who opposed the project. The cathedral serves as a national symbol for Romanians, and it is part of the problematic history of the nation-building ideology of Romania from 1918 onwards, which had several phases, forms, and reinterpretations. The monumentality of the building reflects the historical reconciliation and compensation of the ROC: the iconostasis is the world’s largest, with a surface of 400 m<sup>2</sup> and over 4 million mosaic tesserae. It weighs 8 tons and required about 10 months of work. Although Tateo focuses on the historical background of the church and the historical legitimization of the building project, the notions of transgenerational historical trauma and collective woundedness do not appear in the book.

Chapter three analyzes the controversies related to the cathedral, which provoked an unprecedented public debate in civic society and the first serious discussions on religious secularism, the role and future of the ROC, and its economic, political, and ideological impact in the 21st century. In analyzing the name of the cathedral, Tateo again draws on the paradigmatic work of Verdery, arguing that the name of the cathedral (“Catedrala Mântuirii Neamului”) reflects a *“patrilineal kinship in which national heroes occupy the place of clan elders in defining a nation as a noble lineage”* and aims to *“celebrate Greater Romania as the realization of a national project aiming at territorial, religious and ethnic homogeneity”* (p. 205). In the legitimization of this ethnic-nationalist name of the cathedral — which does not reflect, however, the totality of the country and the ethnic and religious diversity of Romania — several conservative Romanian intellectuals played a crucial role. Tateo cites Petre Guran, Teodor Baconschi, and Adrian Papahagi (although he erroneously mentions his father, Marian Papahagi) as promoters of the cathedral and its ideological legitimization. The chapter presents in detail the issue of the monumentality of the church, which does not correspond to the traditional Romanian Orthodox churches from Maramureș or Bucovina, thus risking a loss of intimacy and mysticism, two essential elements of Eastern Christianity.

The fourth chapter presents the increasing conflictual nature of the Romanian Orthodox clergymen and the secular society (mostly urban young civilians). Tateo rightly observes the tragic nightclub fire in Colectiv in November 2015 as one of the turning points in the relationship of Romanian civic society and the Orthodox Church, who reacted in an unfortunate manner to the heavy metal concert associated with the incident, named by some clergymen as “Satanist music.” As a result of the financial burden of the cathedral, which was built mostly from public money, and the church’s response to the Colectiv tragedy, a strong anticlerical movement was formed in Romania, heavily affecting the popularity of the ROC, especially among young people.

In the fifth chapter, the author presents the monumental scale of church-building projects in Romania after 1990 (10,000 churches, including 4,200 Orthodox churches, with 5.5 billion lei allocated from the state budget for the salaries of the cleric personnel of the religious units and for the construction and repair of houses of worship between 1990 and 2018). Citing the early work of Peter Berger (p. 320), Tateo argues that the bureaucratization of the ROC is one of the main reasons for the internal secularization of the church and the external, anticlerical movement. The last chapter presents the political life of the cross, the occupation of the public space with religious symbols, and the use and reuse of Orthodox history, religion, and the materiality of religion in the political narrative of Romania. The use of crosses multiplied in the capital as well as in other cities (even in the religiously diverse Transylvania), and in 2015, they were used also in an islamophobic protest against the building of a mosque in Bucharest. This chapter would have been the ideal space to discuss the problematic relationship of the ROC with non-Orthodox communities and urban spaces, as well as the historical complexity and heterogeneity of Transylvania and the Hungarian community in Romania. However, the cultural and spatial colonialization of the ROC in Transylvania after 1918 is mentioned only briefly on a single page (page 322).

Tateo's book ends with a statistical listing of the 17,393 churches and their affiliations and the Orthodox cathedrals built in the period 1990–2019.

Giuseppe Tateo's book is an important contribution to the recent history of the Romanian Orthodox Church and its current crisis in a slowly secularizing Romania. His case study – elaborating on the People's Salvation Cathedral, the church-building projects, and the multiplication of crosses in the country – represents three elements from a large set of strategies of space sacralization, the re-consecration of civic life and space, and the ideological and political power dynamics of the ROC after 1990. Combining the sociology of religion, space theory, cultural anthropology, and church history, Tateo's book serves as an important example of a transdisciplinary approach in the academic study of religions in Central-Eastern Europe.

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