

# **The Migration Phenomenon and the Neo-Protestant Denominations in Romania**

Lucian Ionel Mercea

**ABSTRACT:** In the emergence and spread of the Neo-protestant denominations in Romania the migration was an essential element. This phenomenon is related to the emergence and spread of the first Baptist, Pentecostal in Romania. Alongside the Seventh Day Adventist denomination and Evangelical Christians, which will come in through foreign missionaries, the Neo-protestant denominations will hardly make room for themselves among the historical denominations from Romania, most of the time with the price of martyrdom. The migration brings, besides the economic and social changes, other changes concerning the already existing balance of the ancient beliefs from a certain place. Sometimes the new beliefs can make room for themselves among the existing ones in a subtle way, almost unnoticeable, but other times they can produce breakage and disorder in the society, modifying the balance of the existing status quo. That is why this issue deserves to be submitted to our study and thoroughness.

**KEY WORDS:** migration, Neo-protestant, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostal, Evangelical Christians, freedom, state.

## **1. The Migration of the German Baptists and their arrival to Romania**

**T**he beginnings of the Baptist Movement in Romania can be traced back to 1856, among the German ethnics, and 1875,

among the Hungarian and Romanian population. The first known German Baptist was Carl Scharschmidt, a carpenter who, in 1856, had settled in Bucharest. Only 7 years later, in 1863, August Liebig, a German Baptist minister exiled from the North of the Black Sea, established in Bucharest's center, the first German Baptist Church, on Popa Rusu Street 22. The building continues to exist even today when it shelters a Romanian Baptist Church.

### **1.1. The Migration of the German Baptist to Russia**

On December 4, 1762, Catherine II of Russia ("the Great") sent an invitation to the people living in the central European countries to come and settle in the Russian steppe territories lying between the Volga River and the Black Sea, with the purpose of civilizing her subjects and, by means of European influence, to initiate a transfer of inventiveness and industriousness through the implantation of colonists. The invitation was directed in particular to the groups of Reformed "Separatists."<sup>1</sup> These were those who, by reading the Bible, realized that there can be no association between the Church and the political system. Outraged by the corruption of the Catholic Rome and also worried by the compromises that Luther and Zwingli had begun to make in order to justify the "holy wars", these evangelical believers, in some places named the "Moravian brethren", the "Swiss brethren", in other places known as "Anabaptists" (from the practice of re-baptizing the adult converts), rejected categorically any form of association with the political power of the time<sup>2</sup>.

In an absolute sense, these Anabaptists were not part of the Protestant Reformed Movement, although they appeared in the same historical period. By virtue of the same doctrine "of two swords", the Reformed territories became as exclusivist as the territories still affiliated to Rome. Loyal to the principle that "the preference of the senior" decides the mandatory religion of the land, the Reformed Protestant began persecuting the Catholics with the same zeal as the Catholics had persecuted the Protestants. These mutual persecutions caused large population movements. The Catholics ran into the "Catholic territories", while the "Reformed" gathered from everywhere fled to the "reformed" territories. Most unhappy of all were the "Separatists" Reformed.

They became “separatists” by daring to envision a society in which the State and the Church were to become two entities completely different in structure and destiny. The fundamental doctrine of the Anabaptists changed the aberration of “the two swords” with the doctrine of Church and State “separation.” Because the “Separatists” were protesting against the errors of the “Protestants”, they were named “Neo-protestants.”

Persecuted and hated to death both in the Catholic and the Protestant lands, the Anabaptists gladly accepted the invitation of Catherine the Great, herself a descendent of the German aristocracy, to settle in the Russian steppes between Volga and the Black Sea. In just a few years, over 68,000 German colonists, most of them Mennonites,<sup>3</sup> left toward Southern Russia. The invitation was followed on July 22, 1763, by another document signed by the Tsarina Catherine the Great, guaranteeing advantageous conditions for the “colonists,” such as: (1) total religious freedom; (2) exemption from taxes and any other financial obligations to the Russian Government; exemption from ordinary and extraordinary obligations to the Russian state; (3) exemption from military service; (4) the right of property over the territory received from the Russian state, with the stipulation that it was a collective property, and not a private one; (5) the land could not be alienated without the knowledge of the Russian authorities; (6) the right to buy another property as private citizens and register it as private property.<sup>4</sup>

Most of those who accepted the invitation of the Tsarina were coming from the German lands. Thousands of Anabaptists took the road to Russia. When the German government revoked the exemption from the military service granted to the Mennonites, in 1789, other thousands of Germans left to Russia. Living in “closed” communities, preserving their German language and their “home” culture, the colonists prospered materially and numerically. They were without equal in the cultivation of wheat, many of them becoming farmers and owners of wheat mills.<sup>5</sup> The first colonists settled in the Ekaterinoslav Governorate. In 1865, there already were 213 German colonies in the large territory lying between Bessarabia and Caucasus.

Without an adequate pastoral assistance, the colonists’ church life degenerated into formalism and repeated fragmentation. Around

the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a movement of spiritual reawakening began among them. The German ethnics started to gather together in their homes, forming small groups of prayer and Bible study. Before long, they realized that they needed answers at many questions and sought them at people learned in theology. One of those whom they contacted was Johan Gerhard Onken (1800–1884),<sup>6</sup> who, in 1834, had founded the first Baptist Church in Germany and was passionate to train new missionaries.

Onken started a dialogue with the Germans in Russia, by mail. Some of the German colonists realized that, in general, they agreed with Onken's principles and teachings, especially with the teaching regarding the baptism by submersion of those who had become personally convinced of the Christian faith. The teaching regarding the baptism of the adult persons caught on especially in the Mennonite communities and led to the formation of new groups named the „Churches of the Mennonite brethren.”

### **1.2. The migration of the German Baptist from Russia to Romania**

The evangelistic fervor of the Baptists in Russia eventually led to reprisals from two distinct directions: the colonists and the Russian authorities. The colonists were not happy with the increase in numbers of those “perturbing” the community life with their pretensions of being called to “holiness”. The colonists' Christianity was seen more as a facet of their German patriotism. Like an island surrounded by a sea of Orthodox Slavs, the Germans contented themselves with the religious form and, thus, were upset by the Baptists' “excesses” of godliness.

On the other hand, the Russian authorities were faced with the inevitable. The native population was embittered by the fact that the colonists were doing better economically and enjoyed the privilege of being exempted from obligations and taxes to the State. The occasion for the conflict to break out was offered by the Baptists themselves. In their missionary zeal, the German missionaries preached the Gospel to the Russian, too. Those convinced by the Gospel asked to be baptized – which was prohibited by the law and the agreements between the Russian government and the German colonists. Two

Russian believers had been baptized, namely Elim Zseibel and Trifon Chlystun, by the pastor Abraham Unger. The baptized Russian went on to preach the Gospel and baptize multitudes of Russians who were embracing the Baptist faith. Consequent upon these, the initial astonishment of the Russian Orthodox Church changed to wrath. In reprisal, in 1871, the Russian Government annulled all the privileges warranted in the “invitation” and edict issued by Catherine the Great. After 100 years of privileges, the Germans were forced to live under the same laws and obligations as any other Russian citizen. In fact, without the protection of the laws, the Germans had a harder life than the Russians, becoming the target of all sorts of abuses. They were forbidden to have schools in their own language, and in some places, they had been forced to take on Russian names.<sup>7</sup>

Forced by the events, many German colonists moved to Moldavia and Romania. Many of the Romanian Baptist communities can trace their beginnings back to the activity of the German Baptists who came to Romania from Russia.<sup>8</sup>

The majority of the Germans going out of Russia chose to “discreetly” travel through Europe to America. Persecuted in the past in Germany, and now in Russia, they had no other choice than to migrate to the New World. Nonetheless, the invitation of the Tsarina had at least in part the desired effect. The civilizing traces of the German “Separatists” continue to be visible even today in Crimea, and in some places in the northern territories of the Black Sea.

The beginnings of the Baptist Movement in Romania can be traced back to 1856, among the German ethnics, and 1875, among the Hungarian and Romanian population. The first known German Baptist was Carl Scharschmidt, a carpenter who, in 1856, had settled in Bucharest. Only 7 years later, in 1863, August Liebig, a German Baptist minister exiled from the North of the Black Sea, established in Bucharest’s center, the first German Baptist Church, on Popa Rusu Street 22. The building continues to exist even today when it shelters a Romanian Baptist Church.

Other Baptists exiled from Ucraina, in 1864, established in the same year, a German Baptist Church at Cataloi, in Dobrogea – at the time, under ottoman jurisdiction.<sup>9</sup>

A third center of the German Baptists was at Tarutino, Bessarabia (today Ukraine). This church was established as mission in 1875, and was granted the status of independent church in 1907. Through its activity, the German church in Tarutino established and sponsored many missionary spots. In the first part of the 1930s, the Germans had ten churches in Bessarabia, but the number of believers was less than 1000.

In spite of the fierce opposition of the Orthodox Church, the first Romanian Baptist Church in Muntenia was established in 1909, at Jegălia. The Romanian Constantin Adorian (1882–1954) had studied theology at Hamburg, Germany. Returning to Romania, he joined the German Baptist Church in Popa Rusu Street and, in 1912, began a missionary work among his co-nationals.

After the Union of Transylvania and Romania (1918), all the Baptists in Romania united in 1919, forming the Union of the Baptist Churches in Romania. However, each ethnic group had its own interests, thus making the collaboration extremely difficult. The Germans had their own associations, and in 1929, the Hungarians in Transylvania and the Russians/Ukrainians in Bessarabia also founded their own associations.

Besides their fiery missionary zeal, the Romanian Baptists observed the puritan code of living, abstaining from tobacco and alcohol, prohibiting jewelry and observing Sunday as the Sabbath day. The relations with the state were, at times, very difficult, especially in the period between the wars. Under the pressure of the Orthodox Church, between December 1938 and April 1939, all Baptist Churches in Romania were officially closed.

## **2. The Emergence of the Pentecostal Denomination in Romania**

### **2.1. The immigrants from USA and the spreading of the Pentecostal faith in Romania**

The spread of the Pentecostal faith in Romania owes its origins to the influence of the US Pentecostal ideas. Signals of the emergence of this faith in Romania date from 1915, in Surducu

Mic.<sup>10</sup> Later on, a historian of the Pentecostal Church mentions the year 1919, as the year when a Pentecostal baptism was officiated by a German Baptist lady, returned from USA, in Dârlos, Sibiu, thus being founded the Pentecostal churches in Curciu and Dârlos, among the Lutheran Transylvanian Saxons.<sup>11</sup> Through the activity of Zigler Susana, Michael Teleman was converted to the Pentecostal faith. For many years, he will be member of the leadership of the Pentecostal denomination, as the Transylvanian Saxons' representative. Following a local complaint, in 1922, a number of Pentecostal believers from Curciu had been arrested and sent to be judged by the Martial Court in Cluj–Napoca. After a week of interrogations and beatings, they were released.<sup>12</sup>

## **2.2. The beginning of the Pentecostal denomination in Păuliș and the first organizational endeavors**

Nevertheless, the prominent role in the emergence of the Pentecostalism in Romania, and implicitly in Transylvania and Banat, will belong to Gheorghe Bradin, born in Cuvin and married in Păuliș, both villages in Arad County. The first historian of the Pentecostal denomination was Gheorghe Comșa, the Bishop of Arad.<sup>13</sup> In 1925, a few years after the emergence of Pentecostalism in Romania, Comșa was describing the “Pentecostal sect” as having the smallest number of followers and regarded it as “imported from America to Cuvin, Arad County.”<sup>14</sup> In Cuvin, 1925, the “sect” was numbering 25 believers, according to the data provided by the Comșa, and they were led by Vasile Semenașcu. In Păuliș, as we read in the autobiography of Gheorghe Bradin, was formed the first nucleus of the Pentecostal denomination. “...on September 10, 1922, we have inaugurated in our house, the first Pentecostal congregation in Romania.”<sup>15</sup> In 1921, a group of seven Romanians emigrants to USA attended the meetings organized by a Pentecostal “healer” in Los Angeles, Aimee Semple McPherson, founder of the Pentecostal International Church of the Foursquare Gospel and during these meetings, the Romanian group received the Holy Spirit baptism. Two of them were the Baptists Petru Andreș and Constantin Sida who, afterwards, would write about their experience to their relatives and friends in Romania. Thus, the Baptist believer Petre Pernevean, from

Păuliș, received a letter from his friend Constantin Sida, relating the activity of the Pentecostal evangelist in L.A., as well as the miraculous healings Sida had witnessed. Petre Pernevean read the letter to other Baptists, including Gheorghe Bradin.<sup>16</sup> Gheorghe Bradin took the greatest interest in these religious experiences, as his wife had long been ill.<sup>17</sup> Petru Andraș, related to Gheorghe Bradin, on his wife's side, sent a letter to one of his brothers at Păuliș, in 1922, together with the brochure *The Bible Truth*, describing the way to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Gheorghe Bradin sent a letter at the address on the brochure and received a response and several brochures from Pavel Budeanu, born in Arad and, at the time, leader of the Romanian Pentecostals in USA.<sup>18</sup> Pavel Budeanu had translated from English in Romanian, the *Confession of Faith*, printing it in USA with the title "Declaration of the true fundament, sanctioned by the General Council of the congregations of God", covering 14 pages.<sup>19</sup> Bradin read the brochures and decided to leave the Baptist Church. On September 10, 1922, he opened in his house the first Pentecostal House of Prayer in Romania.<sup>20</sup> A substantial part of the Baptist community would follow him shortly afterwards. Thus, by the end of the year, the community of Pentecostal believers in Păuliș reached the number of 30 members and had a choir too.<sup>21</sup>

In 1923, a second Pentecostal community is organized at Cuvin, in the house of Vasile Semenașcu. Pavel Budeanu stayed in contact with the Pentecostals in Romania and, in 1924, when he came in visit, organized the first baptism in the waters of the Mureș River, baptizing 16 individuals.<sup>22</sup> The Bishop Grigore Comșa declared in 1925 that "this sect, being discovered in time, was stopped by the Minster of the Cults and, therefore, it was impossible for it to spread outside Cuvin and Păuliș." Following these interventions, Gheorghe Bradin in Păuliș and Ilie Gavril in Șoimoș had been arrested and tried by the Martial Court in Sibiu, then in Timișoara, where they were released.<sup>23</sup> The Pentecostal Church in Păuliș was lead in 1925 by Gheorghe Bradin, its founder, and Dimitrie Stoiu.<sup>24</sup> In 1926, other four Pentecostal congregations were founded in Arad county: Măderat, Pâncota, Șoimoș and Arad-Micălaca.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusions

The last part of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century registered an exodus of emigrants from Transilvania and Banat to the U.S.A. Monthly, statistics shown that thousands of citizens emigrate towards the American continent. In 3rd June 1907 the newspaper "Our country" stated that "last week alone 4.049 individuals left our country"<sup>26</sup>. Several weeks later, the same periodical would state that "last week, 2667 individuals left our country, to go to America"<sup>27</sup> and on the week 7–14 October another 2627 people<sup>28</sup>.

Not even after the Great Union, the situation from Transilvania and Banat improved. It was said that the "population of the mountains, impoverished and exploited by all, tried to leave its home and emigrate to America"<sup>29</sup>. The Minister of Interior of the time, Octavian Goga, noted that "but the Romanian from Transilvania, the emigrant, has a particular psychology. He does not go there to be displaced definitively and become an American citizen"<sup>30</sup>. Most of these emigrants returned to Transilvania, and once returned to the country they brought with them the new neo-protestant beliefs that they knew and embraced abroad. That's how many of the emigrants who left with the orthodox belief in their souls would come back baptized in neo-protestant confessions.

This emigration process would be braked after 1924, and we find this in the same speech of Octavian Goga "we will not encourage an emigration process, that is why the past, as well as the new government have stopped the emigrations, no more passports for America are being granted. Under our government this exodus of the people from Ardeal has stopped ..." <sup>31</sup>.

Some of those who had migrated came in contact with new beliefs and these beliefs have been shared afterwards with those back home. That led to the emergence of the Pentecostal denomination among the orthodox and Baptist believers. Other had migrated forced by the circumstances, as in the case of the German colonists from Russia and Ukraine, and brought with them to Romania, the Baptist faith, spreading it among the Orthodox Romanians.

Therefore, we can see that the population migration phenomenon has implications that can radically alter the balance existing at some given time among certain denominations. This often leads to conflicts and unrest within the community, until the new beliefs succeed to make room for themselves among the historical churches.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term of “separatists” comes from the attitude of these reformed believers toward the protestant church integrated in the state structures. The separatist movement meant the separation of some Christians from the protestant reformers who, by separating from Catholicism, had caused the Catholic Rome Empire to shake; still they didn’t dissociate themselves from the political powers of those times and only replaced the Catholic Empire with other smaller empires of Protestant exclusiveness.

<sup>2</sup> Ioan Georgescu, *Coloniile germane din Dobrogea în Analele Dobrogei*, anul VII, (Cernăuți: 1926), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> The Mennonites are a Protestant religious confession originating in Friesland, Netherlands, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Mennonites branched from the Anabaptist movement whose members insisted on being baptized again and didn’t recognize the infant baptism. In 1536, a former Frisian pastor, Menno Simons (1496–1561), became Anabaptist and gathered the Anabaptist followers in Northern Europe, in congregations that took his name. The new movement was strongly supported by the Netherlands and Switzerland, where the Mennonites become the target of Catholic persecutions. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, many of them were forced to leave their houses and left to USA, settling mainly in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Middle West. In 2006, the Mennonite denomination numbered 1.5 million members, most of them living in Canada, the Democratic Republic of Congo and USA.

<sup>4</sup> Ioan Georgescu, *Coloniile germane din Dobrogea în Analele Dobrogei*, anul VII (Cernăuți: 1926), p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Frank H. Woyke, *Heritage and Ministry of the American Baptist Conference*, (Oakbrook Terrace: Conference Press, 1979), 20–22.

<sup>6</sup> Born in Germany, on January 26, 1800, Johan Onken grew up in England and, afterwards, in Scotland. In 1823, he returned to Germany and founded the Sunday School Society, in Hamburg. In 1834, he became a Baptist. With financial support from the American Baptist Missionary Organization, he established Baptist groups in Germany and Denmark. Through his efforts and travels, churches were established also in Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Netherlands, Poland and Russia. He died in Zurich, Switzerland, on January 2, 1884.

<sup>7</sup> Alexa Popovici, *Istoria baptiștilor din România 1856–1989*, (Oradea: Făclia, 2007), 90–102.

<sup>8</sup> Frank H. Wolke, *Heritage*. op.cit., 309.

<sup>9</sup> Ioan Georgescu, *Coloniile germane*. . . op.cit., 27–28.

<sup>10</sup> Constantin Cuciuc, *Religii care au fost interzise în România*, București: Editura Gnosis, 1996), 66.

<sup>11</sup> Trandafir Șandru, *Biserica pentecostală în istoria creștinismului*, (București, Editura Biserica lui Dumnezeu Pentecostală din România, 1982), p. 130. According to the author, such a baptism took place in 1921, in Curciu, where lived Zigler Suzana, the believer returned from USA.

<sup>12</sup> Modoran Gheorghe, *Originea și evoluția Bisericii Pentecostale din România în perioada interbelică și antonesciană* în *Theorēma*, (Cernica: Editura Institutului Teologic Adventist, 2012), vol. 7, nr. 1, p. 110.

<sup>13</sup> According to the Dictionary of the Romanian Theologians, Grigore Comșa (or Gheorghe Comșa) was born on May 13, 1889, in Comana de Sus, Făgăraș (Brașov County), died on May 25, 1935, Arad. He attended the Lyceum in Făgăraș (1900–1908), the Theological Institute in Sibiu (1908–1911), the School of Law, University of Budapest (1911–1915), from which he received also his Doctor's degree. In parallel, he studied theology at the Catholic College of Theology in Budapest; afterwards he received his MA degree (1921), then the Doctor's degree (1925) at the College of Theology in Bucharest. He serves as deacon in Sibiu (1915), editor at "Telegraful Român" (1918), sub-director and general sub-director at the Ministry of Cults and Arts in Bucharest (1920–1925), at the same time—deacon at Amza Church, deputy in the first Parliament of the Unified Romania (1920). On May 3, 1925, he was elected Bishop of Arad, tonsured at Sinaia, receiving his monastic name of Grigorie, ordained as bishop on June 14, installed on July 12, 1925. He was honorary member of the Romania Academy (1934), of the Society of the Romanian Writers and of the Syndicate of the Journalists in Banat, member of the Astra Central Committee. Esteemed oratory and missionary bishop, he was a fervent defender of the Orthodox faith against the religious proselytism; he founded a number of theological collections (The Library of the Orthodox priest, The Library of the Orthodox believer). He coordinated the activity of the Theological Academy in Arad, of the Official Bulletin "The Church and the School" and the whole church life in the diocese. He published over 75 works (sermons, anti-sectarian brochures etc.)

<sup>14</sup> Gheorghe Comșa, *Călăuza cunoașterii și combaterii sectelor*, (Cernica: Tipografia Bisericească, 1925), 74.

<sup>15</sup> ANIC, MCA fond Direcția de Studii, dosar nr.4 din 1947, 42.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, dosar 95/1960, 1–18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–18.

<sup>19</sup> Gheorghe Comșa, *Călăuza cunoașterii și combaterii sectelor*, (Cernica: Tipografia Bisericească, 1925), 75.

<sup>20</sup> ANIC, MCA fond Direcția de Studii, dosar 95/1947, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Trandafir Șandru, *Biserica Penticostală...*, op.cit., 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ioan Ceuță, *Mișcarea penticostală în evenimente și relatări ale secolului XX*, (București: Lumina Evangheliei, 2002), 147.

<sup>23</sup> Trandafir Șandru, *Trezirea...*, op.cit., 89.

<sup>24</sup> Gheorghe Comșa, *Călăuza...*, op. Cit., 75.

<sup>25</sup> Modoran Gheorghe, *Originea și evoluția...*, op.cit., 112.

<sup>26</sup> Țara noastră, anul I, nr. 23, (Sibiu: 1907), 388.

<sup>27</sup> Țara noastră, anul I, nr. 26, (Sibiu: 1907), 436.

<sup>28</sup> Țara noastră, anul I, nr. 42, (Sibiu: 1907), 692.

<sup>29</sup> Țara noastră, anul IV, nr. 29, (Cluj: 1923), 924.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*