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PROFESSOR VASILE GH. ISPIR (1886-1947)
– MISSIOLOGIST, PEDAGOGUE AND POLITICIAN

Doctoral thesis

SUMMARY

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KEYWORDS:

mission, pastorate, sectology, missionary strategy, ecumenism, the history of religions, church law

II. INTRODUCTION

Our thesis is part of the field of missionary theology, presenting the life and work of the first Romanian missionary, the university professor Vasile Gh. Ispir. Tracing his bio-bibliographical profile implies a multidisciplinary approach, targeting many other areas in which he was involved: sectology, ecumenism, pedagogy, history of religions, social theology, church law and politics.

The discipline of Missionary Studies theologically specifies the relationship between “text” and “context” therefore, by keeping its doctrinal background always the same, it finds new means of communicating faith for today's society. But in order to understand the present and prepare for the future, you need to know your past. In the Romanian society there was a great hiatus between two “worlds”: the one until the establishment of communism (1945) and the one after '89, having in the middle of this period an illusory bridge, built from the mystification of our entire national culture. The separation from the political communism, and especially the ideological one, has been very difficult for us, which caused the oblivion of the beautiful legacy of the golden period of the Romanian culture from the first part of the last century.

After the Romanian people regained their freedom, Father Ion Bria urged the young people to give serious attention to the works of the classical Romanian theologians: “There

are neither theological nor cultural reasons to forget the contributions of the authors and writers that were the precursors of the contemporary Romanian theology”¹. The scientific approach of the paper is due to the desire to reconsider the past, bringing to light the important personalities of the interwar period, erasing academically, and not sentimentally, the ideological stigma placed on some of the Romanian theologians of that time.

1. EXPLANATION OF THE TITLE

Like most intellectuals of his time, Professor Ispir had a variety of academic concerns, as the Romanian cultural fields were not yet fully formed and all did, in one way or another, pioneering work on several levels. His fundamental training was that of a missionary, after initially studying and preparing for the specialization of anthropologist and historian of religions at the University of Oxford. He studied with the founder of the history of religions in Germany, Eduard Lehman, but this field, as for the great ecumenist Nathan Söderblom, was only a preparatory step for the theological discipline of the moment: Missiology and ecumenism. Due to his activity, the department and the discipline of Missionary Studies took shape, having a proven academic value through the permanent contact with the major European university centers. Although the title does not specify it, he is an Orthodox missionary who has no doctrinal deviations, using the western scientific knowledge, but pouring Orthodox content into the patterns of the new discipline.

Also, the professor is called a pedagogue not only because he is a teacher and he masters the methodology of school teaching, but also because he has important writings in the field of education and he constantly returns to this topic throughout his activity. Through his work he contributes to the formation of the Orthodox pedagogy, which he demands with insistence, thus preparing the one who will complete this discipline in the interwar period: Fr. Mihai Bulacu.

He is also called a politician because he is active in the Liberal parties of that time (PNL and PNL - Georgist), even having a governmental function (Secretary General at the Ministry of Cults). Although he is a liberal politician of lesser importance, one can read his elevated and extremely balanced speeches for that time of excesses, permanently bringing the Christian message in the decision-making forums of the state. For these reasons we have entitled the research thesis: *"Professor Vasile Gh. Ispir (1886-1947) - missionary, pedagogue and politician"*.

¹ Fr. PhD prof. Ion BRIA, *Ortodoxia în Europa – Locul spiritualității române [Orthodoxy in Europe - The place of Romanian spirituality]*, Iași, Mitropoliei Moldovei și Bucovinei Publishing House, 1995, pp. 87-88.

2. THE MOTIVATION FOR CHOOSING THE THEME

The topic was proposed to me by Rev. Mihai Himcinschi, PhD Professor, as he wanted me to investigate more deeply into the beginnings of the missionary studies department in the Orthodox university theological education. This monographic work is original for the Romanian research, as since the death of the professor emeritus (1947) we have found only few elements that highlight his contribution. He is not only the creator of the Romanian Missiology, but also the creator of the Orthodox Missiology abroad. We consider him a very topical model that harmoniously combines the professionalism of the academic research and the actual missionary practice in society, both promoted with much apostolic enthusiasm and sacrifice offered to the Church, which shows Professor Ispir as the father of a probably unique missionary ethos in the life of our Church. Therefore, it is the legitimate desire to capitalize on our cultural heritage, to specify correctly and scientifically argued the role and the Romanian contribution to the development of the universal Orthodox theology.

3. RESEARCH PURPOSE AND METHODS

By writing this thesis we intend to make a large monograph covering the life, the theological work and the missionary activity of professor Ispir. This academic journey is not an end in itself, but it implies a missionary capitalization of the theological output of the Romanian missionary. In this respect, we will identify all his works, systematize them and critically evaluate them, extracting his main missionary directions. Recovering his cultural-missionary heritage does not mean closing it in a document meant for cabinet research, but rather identifying the missionary importance for today, in order to continuously update the missionary-pastoral strategy of our Church.

The paper aims to identify and critically analyze the main Romanian missionary productions, because professor Ispir cannot be taken out of context, as he belongs to an extremely flourishing society from a cultural point of view, in which the missionary effervescence reaches its peak. Beyond the missionary principles, methods and programs identified in his work, we find an admirable spiritual state, characterized by an overflowing enthusiasm, mobilizing for others, an exceptional ecclesial-apostolic consciousness and an amazing balance between the missionary theory and practice. Although it is a scientific approach, the paper aims not only to revalue some missionary principles and norms that were successful at that time, but also to reconfigure a spiritual atmosphere that animated the Romanian Orthodox Church in the first half of the last century. The other areas in

which the teacher activated, even politics, an area that has its own assessment tool, are critically analyzed from the perspective of the Christian mission.

4. THE CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

Professor Ispir has a brief biography in older or newer dictionaries (Minerva, *Enciclopedia română [Romanian Encyclopedia]*, Cluj, Comitetul de Redacție al Enciclopediei române Minerva Publishing House, 1930; Mircea Păcurariu, *Dicționarul teologilor români [Dictionary of Romanian theologians]*, București, Enciclopedică Publishing House, 2002; Lucian Predescu, *Enciclopedia României Cugetarea. Material românesc: oameni și înfăptuiri. Ediție anastatică [Encyclopedia of Romania Thinking. Romanian material: people and works. Anastatic edition]*, București, Saeculum/Vestala Publishing House, 1999 etc.) or in the local newspapers that paid tribute to him on the occasion of various events (Redacția, „Profesorul V. G. Ispir” [*Professor V. G. Ispir*], in *Avântul*, year XI, no. 180, Piatra Neamț, 15 July 1939; Leon Mrejeriu, „Eri și azi. Contribuții la istoricul învățământului primar din județul Neamț. Revăzute și completate” [Yesterday and today. Contributions to the history of primary education in Neamț County. Revised and completed], in *Apostolul*, year VI, no. 7-9, Piatra Neamț, July-September 1940; Editorship, „Rememorări nemțene” [*Nemtean Reminiscences*], in *Apostolul*, year XVIII, no. 194, Piatra Neamț, December 2016 etc.). These biographies contain almost the same information and, only his file from the Security, with the natural skepticism with which we receive such a document, gives us new information about his life (ACNSAS file, Operating fund, file no. 69371, 16 sheets).

The studies in the theological journals dedicated to the theological education in Bucharest give us information regarding his academic activity (Editorship, „Consfătuirea particulară a profesorilor de la facultățile de teologie ortodoxă” [*The particular counsel of the professors from the faculties of Orthodox theology*], in *BOR*, year LIV, no. 1-2, January-February 1936; Petre Vintilescu, „Facultatea de Teologie din București în ultimii zece ani (iunie 1930-iunie 1940)” [*The Faculty of Theology in Bucharest for the last ten years*] (June 1930-June 1940), in *BOR*, year LVIII, nr. 5-6, 1940; Mircea Păcurariu, „Prezentarea biografică și bibliografică selectivă a profesorilor Facultății de Teologie și a Institutului Teologic Universitar din București de-a lungul existenței sale de o sută de ani” [*Selective biographical and bibliographic presentation of the professors of the Faculty of Theology and the University Theological Institute in Bucharest over its existence of one hundred years*], in *ST*, second series, year XXXIV, no. 1-2, 1982; Gheorghe I. Drăgulin,

„Teologi români de seamă din prima jumătate a veacului al XX-lea” [*Major Romanian theologians from the first half of the twentieth century*], in *ST*, second series, year XLIII, no. 4, July-August 1991 etc.).

The research regarding the Romanian participation in the international religious conferences provides us with other information about professor Ispir, but without insisting upon the fact that he is the first Romanian ecumenist and the most constant Romanian presence at these conferences (N. I. Șerbănescu, „Biserica Ortodoxă Română și mișcarea ecumenică” [*The Romanian Orthodox Church and the ecumenical movement*], in *Ortodoxia*, year XIV, no. 1-2, 1962; Viorel Ioniță, *Hotărârile întrunirilor panortodoxe din 1923 până la 2009. Spre Sfântul și Marele Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe* [*Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox assemblies from 1923 to 2009. Towards the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church*], București, Basilica a Patriarhiei Române Publishing House, 2013).

Father Ion Bria emphasizes his major role in the ecumenical movement, but also in the development of social Christianity in our country (Ion Bria, *Destinul Ortodoxiei* [*The destiny of Orthodoxy*], București, EIBMBOR, 1989; Idem, *Ortodoxia în Europa – Locul spiritualității române* [*Orthodoxy in Europe - The place of Romanian spirituality*], Iași, Mitropoliei Moldovei și Bucovinei Publishing House, 1995; Idem, *Tratat de Teologie Dogmatică și Ecumenică* [*Treaty of Dogmatic and Ecumenical Theology*], București, România Creștină, 1999).

Father P. I. David highlights the contribution of professor Ispir to the development of the Romanian sectology, often having the tendency to marginalize him within the framework of this field (P. I., David, „Catedra de Îndrumări Misionare la Facultatea de Teologie și Institutul Teologic din București” [*The Department of Missionary Studies at the Faculty of Theology and the Theological Institute in Bucharest*], in *ST*, second series, year XXXIII, no. 7, 1981; Idem, *Călăuză creștină. Sectologie. Pentru cunoașterea și apărarea dreptei credințe în fața prozelitismului sectant* [*Christian guide. Sectology. Knowing and defending the true faith against the sectarian proselytism*], Curtea de Argeș, Episcopiei Argeșului Publishing House, 1994).

All the contemporary missionaries rely their courses more or less on his valuable Missionary Studies Course (Fr. PhD. Gheorghe Petraru, *Misiologie ortodoxă* [*Orthodox Missiology*], vol. I, Iași, Panfilus Publishing House, 2002; Fr. PhD. David Pestroiu, *Suport de curs la disciplina Misiologie și Ecumenism* [*Course support in the discipline of Missiology and Ecumenism*], Faculty of Orthodox Theology „Justinian Patriarhul” from București; Fr. Phd. prof. Aurel Pavel, *Curs de Misiologie și Ecumenism* [*Course of*

Missiology and Ecumenism], Faculty of Orthodox Theology „Sf. Andrei Șaguna”, University „Lucian Blaga” from Sibiu, year IV, 2012-2013, for internal use; PhD. Tudor Cosmin Ciocan, *Curs de Misiologie și Ecumenism [Course of Missiology and Ecumenism]*, Faculty of Orthodox Theology „Sf. Apostol Andrei”, University „Ovidius” from Constanța, for internal use), Father Mihai Himcinschi being the one who cites a greater number of works belonging to him (Pr. prof. dr. Mihai Himcinschi, *Curs de Misiologie și Ecumenism [Course of Missiology and Ecumenism]*, years III and IV, Faculty of Orthodox Theology from Alba Iulia, for internal use). Also, the coursebooks and bibliographies of Homiletics and Catehetics always include references from the work of Vasile Ispir (Vasile Gordon, *Introducere în omiletică [Introduction to Homiletics]*, Universității din București Publishing House, 2001; Idem, *Introducere în catehetica ortodoxă, curs sintetic [Introduction to Orthodox catechetics, synthetic course]*, București, 2004; Idem (coord.), *Bibliografie catehetică și omiletică [Catechetical and homiletic bibliography]*, București, 2009).

It is worth mentioning the recent academic contribution of His Grace Macarie Drăgoi through the writings dedicated to the archbishop Söderblom, who comes with new information and documents regarding the Romanian missionary (Macarie Drăgoi (ed.), *Artisan of Christian Unity between North and East: Nathan Söderblom. His correspondence with Orthodox personalities (1896-1931)*, Stockholm, Felicitas Publishing House, 2015; Idem, „Dialogul dintre Biserica Ortodoxă Română și Biserica Suediei în contextul Conferinței ecumenice de la Stockholm din anul 1925. Contribuții documentare” [*The dialogue between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Church of Sweden in the context of the Stockholm Ecumenical Conference of 1925. Documentary contributions*], in *Autocefalie și comuniune. Biserica Ortodoxă Română în dialog și cooperare externă [Autocephaly and communion. The Romanian Orthodox Church in dialogue and external cooperation] (1885-2010)*, coord. Ion-Dragoș Vlădescu, București, Basilica Publishing House, 2010).

A first doctoral thesis dedicated to the Romanian missiology presents synthetically, but consistently, the main directions of Professor Ispir's missionary thinking (Fr. Florin Stan, *Cercetare și strategie misionar-pastorală în Biserica Ortodoxă Română contemporană [Research and pastoral-missionary strategy in the contemporary Romanian Orthodox Church]*, Cluj Napoca, 2013, published in 2019), followed by other theses that tangentially mention the theological contribution of the great professor (Fr. Valentin Lazăr, *Geostrategia Bisericii creștine, factor de stabilitate europeană [The geostrategy of the*

Christian Church, European stability factor], București, 2015; Fr. Cornel – Gheorghe Coprean, *Dezvoltarea teologiei misionare prin conferințele misionare internaționale și consultațiile misionare inter-ortodoxe [The development of the missionary theology through the international missionary conferences and inter-Orthodox missionary consultations]*, Cluj Napoca, 2016; Vlad Ioan Bondre, *Misiunea Bisericii și tinerii din societatea contemporană [The mission of the Church and the young people in the contemporary society]*, Alba Iulia, 2018.

A major interest in his work comes from specialists in the field of social-political sciences (Daniel Barbu, Alexandra Ionescu), who seek a philosophical-political capitalization of the social-Christian project „Solidaritatea” [*Solidarity*] (Daniel Barbu, „Subsidiaritate, democrație creștină și ortodoxie” [Subsidiarity, Christian democracy and Orthodoxy], in *Provincia*, no. 8-9, September 2000; Alexandra Ionescu, „Chipuri ale binelui comun. Două încercări etico-politice românești” [*Faces of the common good. Two Romanian ethical-political attempts*], in Miruna Tătaru – Cazaban (ed.), *Teologie și politică. De la Sfinții Părinți la Europa unită [Theology and politics. From Holy Fathers to united Europe]*, București, Anastasia Publishing House, 2004; Idem, „Une réflexion sociale-chrétienne roumaine – la revue «Solidaritatea»”, in Laurențiu Vlad (ed.), *Pouvoir et mentalités*, Bucharest, Edit. Babel, 1999).

In the same area, we meet the young professors Cătălin Raiu and George Enache, theologians with multiple specializations (history, political sciences), who get to analyze the work of Vasile Ispir either through the bishop Bartolomeu Stănescu or through the socio-political context of the interwar period. (Cătălin Raiu, *Democrație și statolatricie. Creștinismul social la Bartolomeu Stănescu, Episcopul Râmnicului Noul Severin [Democracy and statolatry. Social Christianity at Bartolomeu Stănescu, Bishop of Râmnic Noul Severin]* (1975-1954), Universitatea București Publishing House, 2014; George Enache, „Problema «sectelor» în România. Din a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea până în 1948” (I) [The problem of "sects" in Romania. From the second half of the 19th century until 1948] (I), in *Analele Universității „Dunării de Jos” Galați*, 19 series, *Istorie [History]*, tom VI, 2007; Idem, „Biserică – societate – națiune - stat în România interbelică. I. Explorări în orizont liberal” [*Church - society - nation - state in inter-war Romania. I. Explorations in the liberal horizon*], in *RT*, nr. 2, 2010). An important approach to the importance of the magazine “Solidarity” is found in the publicist and the specialist in the sociology of religions, Mirel Bănică (*Biserica Ortodoxă Română, Stat și*

societate în anii '30 [Romanian Orthodox Church, State and Society in the 1930s], Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2007).

There is no extensive monographic work devoted to professor Ispir, nor recent studies that are entirely dedicated to him. The exception is the recent contribution of Fr. Prof. Radu Muresan who wrote a study to honor him (Fr. PhD. Assoc. Prof. Radu Mureșan, *Misiunea creștină în România Nouă. Omagiu Profesorului Vasile Ispir (1886-1947) [The Christian Mission in New Romania. Tribute to Professor Vasile Ispir]*, The Orthodox Archdiocese of Râmnic, the International Symposium of Missiology „Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Petre I. David”, 25-26 April 2018) and is working on a book about the first Romanian missionary.

5. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The work of Professor Ispir is numerous and varied, invoking a remarkable capacity for synthesis and concentration of the essential, which is why we do not claim to exhaustively treat the subject. In the absence of another monograph, our academic approach inevitably finds its limits. Furthermore, there is a historical distance of more than seven decades since his death, which determines a major difficulty in shaping the human face, the essential biographical moments or the composition of the family, as those who have known him directly are no longer alive today. His works are found in very rare copies even in large libraries, showing the difficulty of forming a broad perspective on his theological contribution. We still have "unarchived archives" that can hide essential biographical elements, and to which access is still restricted today. Also, we mostly use the digitized foreign bibliographic references.

Another limitation of the research is the voluntary omission, in agreement with the coordinator, of an important chapter in his activity: *The social-Christian activity of professor Vasile Ispir. The study circle and the "Solidarity" magazine*, which will be a further scientific concern, given the large volume of the current thesis.

III. SUMMARY

1. BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

In order to write the biography of Professor Vasile Ispir we tried to complete the biographical elements found in the publications of the time, but also in the new ones, since there is no consistent biography published, and the one included in the "Dictionary of

Romanian Theologians" of Father Mircea Păcurariu is far too brief. The file prepared by the Legionary and Communist Security proved very useful, which contains valuable information, which we had not found elsewhere, but also inaccuracies or even errors, which we have been able to clarify.

Vasile G. Ispir was born on December 18, 1886 in the town of Filioara-Târgu Neamț, from the parents Gheorghe Ispir, tradesman, and Elizabeth, housewife. As the trade was their only source of income, this large family had financial difficulties, especially after the children started attending city schools. The professor was never ashamed to admit his modest origin: "I know the deep pains that are in the lower layers of society, because it happened that through my origin, through my close contact with those layers, I know these dissatisfactions"².

He spent his childhood on the wonderful lands of Creangă, on the banks of the "beautifully running" Ozana, in the shadow of the walls so charged with the history of the Fortress of Neamț, but especially under the protection of the Neamț Monastery and of the other anachoretic dwellings, so present here which give a special and deep spiritual charge to the places of Neamț area. After graduating the Primary school no. 1 for boys from Târgu Neamț, he enrolled at the Theological Seminary in Roman, and shortly after he was transferred to the famous Theological Seminary "Veniamin Costachi" in Iași, which he graduated in 1906, having the highest average in a series of more generations.

He attended the courses of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest (1906-1910), where he became involved in various cultural-patriotic movements of the students from Bucharest, being elected the first president of the university center of Bucharest. With the material support of the "Church House", but also through the extraordinary sacrifice of his parents, the young Vasile attended specialization courses in Berlin (1910 - 1911), under the coordination of the Danish professor Eduard Lehmann, the founder of the History of Religions department in Berlin. He then followed three years of specialization (1911-1914) at the famous University of Oxford (Wycliffe Hall Theological College) under the guidance of professors Marriott and Landay, the studies here being rewarded in 1914 with the title of "Bachelor of science", for the specialization of researcher in ethnography and social anthropology. On this occasion, he supported his research thesis entitled: *The nature*

² Prof. V. G. ISPIR, *Organizarea învățământului industrial (discurs rostit în ședința Senatului de la 5 aprilie 1940) [The organization of the industrial education] (speech delivered at the Senate meeting on April 5, 1940)*, București, Monitorul Oficial și Imprimeriile Statului/Imprimeria Centrală, 1940, p. 24.

and development of the idea of God as held by the primitive peoples of Central Africa (Oxford, 1914).

Returning to the country, he fulfills the obligatory military training, then tries to establish the department of “History, psychology and philosophy of religions” at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest, publishing the first coursebook of this discipline in the Romanian theology³.

Between 1916-1918 he was enrolled on the front as sub-lieutenant, then as a reserve lieutenant, knowing the shameful defeat of the Romanian army in the battles of Turtucaia and Dragoslavele. Here he lives a true spiritual revelation worthy of the “gallery of the great converts”, which marks his entire life, as he himself confesses: “All scientific powers disappeared during the tragic moments from Turtucaia. Only the religious force remained and it was the only support. It was the absolute unknown, but existing more real than reality; it was God”⁴.

In 1916, the professor married Ana from Bârsești-Putna, a locality where the legendary Tudora Vrâncioaia lived, the old woman who had hosted and fed the ruler Ștefan cel Mare during his wandering through the forests of Vrancea. Together they had a boy, Lactanțiu, who studied at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest.

Between 1918 - 1922 he is a teacher of religion and English at “Dimitrie Cantemir” Secondary School and "Mihai Viteazul", "Spiru Haret" and "Gheorghe Lazăr" high schools in Bucharest, and on July 11, 1919 he became the first doctor of the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest, supporting the thesis: “*The nature and the development of the idea of God in the society of the primitive peoples of Central Africa. An argument for proving the universality of faith in God*”, under the guidance of Fr. Prof. Ioan / Irineu Mihălcescu.

The year 1920 is particularly prolific for Vasile Ispir: he begins his political career in the National Liberal Party, he becomes an assistant professor at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest, teaching Apologetics, and initiates the Circle of social - Christian studies and the “Solidarity” magazine (1920-1930). On November 18, 1922, he became the first holder of the Missionary Studies Chair in the Orthodox Academic Theology. He was a university member for over two and a half decades (1920-1946) and in the last two years, as a crowning accomplishment of his academic career, he has held the dignity of dean of the

³ Idem, *Introducere în studiul religiunii comparate [Introduction to the study of comparative religion]*, București, Institutul de Editură și Arte Grafice „Flacăra”, 1915, 144 pp.

⁴ Idem, „Experiența religioasă în război” [*The religious experience during the war*], in *Aspecte din filosofia contemporană [Aspects of contemporary philosophy]*, series IV, București, „Studii Filosofice” Publishing House, 1919, pp. 189-190.

Faculty of Theology in Bucharest. His Security file brings us new details about the humiliations that the professor was subjected to during the legionary rule but also during the beginning period of the communist regime. On September 3, 1946, he was forced to withdraw for medical reasons, and on July 5, 1947, after a severe suffering, he passed away, being buried near the church of Radu Vodă Monastery.

His work is rich, including 25 books and brochures (over 1,400 pages, of which over a third is represented by the Missionary Studies Course), apart from his unpublished but only lithographed sectology courses; over 60 articles and pieces of news (over 500 pages), and some reviews and prefaces. To all these, we can add the articles mentioned by other authors, but we don't have complete bibliographic references. Then we mention the multitude of conferences held on different occasions, which the author has not published and which cannot be recovered.

2. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MISSIONARY STUDIES AND SECTOLOGY DEPARTMENT

Missiology is a relatively new theological discipline, which deals with the systematic study of the Christian mission. Although the Church has been a missionary institution since its foundation, as a scholarly and systematic discipline, missiology appeared later, in the second half of the 19th century, first in the Protestant world (Princeton - USA, 1836; Edinburg - Scotland, 1867; Halle - Germany, 1897) and Catholic (Münster - Germany, 1910), and then, due to Vasile Ispir, in the Orthodox world, too (Bucharest, 1922). There are two models for the development of the discipline: the European one, in which missiology benefits from all the other theological disciplines in the service of the Church; the American model, which conceives missiology as a discipline in itself, autonomous, parallel to theology and not connected with the Church.

After studying abroad, Professor Ispir understood the “calling of the time”, that is, the new religious-moral and social-national realities in which the Orthodox Church carried out its mission, especially after the birth of Greater Romania. Inspired by the Western theology and the Anglican missionary practice, he founded a new academic discipline dedicated to the spiritual reinvigoration of our people. He did not conceive a purely theoretical discipline, but one that had concrete applicability, that is why the courses taught by the professor went hand in hand with the seminars elaborated by the students, and the training in the classroom was constantly verified through practical activity. Especially after the establishment of the Association of the Orthodox Students, this principle of

harmonization between theory and practice worked at high levels, giving a deep and rapid development to the new discipline.

In order to give the Missionary Studies Department, the necessary scientific authority, the professor wrote an impressive missiology manual (551 pages), extremely well received in the Romanian and foreign academic world. Professor Teodor M. Popescu stated on this occasion: “Prof. Ispir has managed, in a few years, to draw - perhaps definitively - the limits of his science, to specify its problems, to predict its goals, to give it specific material, to adapt it to the situation and our missionary needs and to put it at the service of the theological students, the priesthood and the Church. It was a worthy masterpiece especially because it was believed to be a public necessity”⁵.

When analyzing Vasile Ispir’s activity, we identify two distinct disciplines that evolved over time: Missiology and Sectology. The latter was a practical application of the notions regarding the sectarian phenomenon, taught in Missionary Studies, to which were added the missionary strategies and the analysis of the different situations encountered by the students working within the missionary associations. His sectological contribution is given both by his activity as general secretary at the Ministry of Cults (the elaboration of the status of cults in Romania), and especially by the writings and the mission meant to counterwork the sectarian proselytism. He outlines the important lines of an anti-sectarian strategy program (the so-called “confessional map” of Romania), which should be applied in Romania.

3. MISSION AND PASTORATION. MISSIONARY INITIATIVES

In this chapter, we try to identify some fundamental principles of Vasile Ispir's work. “The mission is the reflection of the spiritual life”⁶ is the masterly definition which solves forever the false antagonism between the mission and the pastorate. The two directions of the Church's activity: *ad intra* - the pastorate and *ad extra* – the mission, are not antagonistic or disjunctive, they are complementary and potentiate each other. The mission is not an artificial, forced and exaggerated action of the Church which needs unconditional apologies, but it is the most natural, normal and legitimate attribute of the

⁵ Teodor M. POPESCU, „Dr. Vasile Gh. Ispir, Curs de îndrumări misionare. Pentru folosirea studenților în teologie, preoților parohi și misionarilor eparhiali [Dr. Vasile Gh. Ispir, Missionary Studies course. For the use of students in theology, parish priests and eparchial missionaries], București, România Mare Printing House, 1930, 551 pp.”, in *ST*, year I, no. 1-3, 1930, pp. 127-128.

⁶ Dr. Vasile Gh. ISPIR, *Misiunea actuală a Bisericii Ortodoxe răsăritene (Misiunea externă a Bisericii noastre)* [The present mission of the Eastern Orthodox Church (The external mission of our Church)], București, 1938, p. 3.

Church of Christ. The mission is the fundamental attribute of the Church, and the first and true missionary of the Church is Lord Jesus Christ, the Father's Apostle. By its very nature, the Church is missionary or apostolic, as defined by the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Symbol of Faith, and this essential feature becomes “the life principle of the church and it is as old as the church.”⁷. Consequently, the mission is not a private activity of some religious personalities or associations, but an ecclesial work, with a supreme, clear and precise purpose: the edification of the Church. Not only the clergy but also the whole Church must be committed to this work, so that the crystallization of the ecclesial consciousness of the Orthodox laity could become the sine-qua-non condition of the spiritual rebirth of our people.

We identify two missionary necessities, namely the duty to save the European Christian culture, undergoing a wide process of secularization, especially after the French Revolution, and the beginning of a missionary offensive of the re-evangelization of today's society. The third decade of the twentieth century brought unique, unexpected opportunities for the Romanian people in its external assertion (Romania had become a big, powerful, stable and economically prosperous state), which had to be religiously capitalized. The Romanian Orthodox Church was to perform an external mission, because it had become the largest Orthodox Church in the world. This imperative became Professor Ispir's motto: “In today's situation from the Balkans, when Russia is brought to a standstill, God has reserved for Romania the dominant role in the spiritual leadership of these lands”⁸.

In order to show the equity of the professor's theology, we have treated together, as in a mirror, the two aspects of the activity of the Church. The demands of his pastoral theology are, unfortunately, less known today. By reinvigorating the parish and raising the prestige of the servants of the Holy Altar, the spiritual revival of the nation is ensured: “Strengthening the parish means the rebirth of Greater Romania ... *because the life of the Church is in the parish*”⁹. The liberation of the Church from the delusions of politics and other secular temptations leads to the rediscovery of the priestly vocation of the

⁷ Cp. *Wetzer und Welte's Kirchenlexicon* II, Auflage Freiburg 1893. Article Mission, p. 1582, VIII, Band, apud Dr. Vasile Gh. ISPIR, *Îndrumarea misionară a Bisericii Ortodoxe [Missionary Studies of the Orthodox Church]*, București, România Nouă Printing House, 1922, p. 7.

⁸ Dr. Vasile George ISPIR, *Raport asupra Congresului pentru stabilirea prieteniei dintre popoare prin mijlocirea bisericilor – ținut la Copenhaga între 6-11 august 1922 [Report on the Congress for establishing friendship between peoples through the intercession of churches - held in Copenhagen between 6-11 August 1922]*, in Holy Synode Arhives, file no. 158, part III, s. 14 (typed text).

⁹ Idem, „Misiunea creștină în România Nouă” [*The Christian Mission in New Romania*], in *ST*, year IV, no. 1, 1933, p. 89.

Romanians, to the formation of devout shepherds, who are capable of guiding and spiritually nourishing the speaking herd.

Professor Ispir's theology would have remained a simple academic endeavor without the practical aspect of his activity. His initiatives of missionary-social integration of the Orthodox laity (Solidarity, The Biblical Institute, The Romanian Orthodox Brotherhood, etc.) prove that. Through the "The Missionary Association of the Theological Students", he transformed the young people into missionaries even during their faculty studies. The chapter ends with the presentation of the beautiful dream of the young Ispir, born and raised in the shadow of the old anachoretic dwellings from the Neamț region: the revival of the Romanian monasticism.

4. MISSIONARY-ECUMENICAL ACTIVITY

There has always been a thirst for Christian unity, but at the beginning of the twentieth century, amid the deterioration of the relations between European peoples, the efforts to conciliate Christian confessions intensified. The main ecumenical movements started almost simultaneously in the Protestant world, to which the Orthodox also joined, are the following: The Movement of Practical Christianity on Life and Work ("Life and Work"), The Movement for Faith and Order ("Faith and Order"), "World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches", "Young Men's Christian Association" - (YMCA) and "The International Missionary Council" (IMC).

Professor Ispir was the most constant and active Romanian delegate at the religious meetings of these international associations for more than two decades (1922-1943). There are more than 30 congresses and conferences the professor attended, along with other Romanian delegates, being himself the organizer of three regional conferences of the "World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches" - the Balkan section, held in Romania: Sinaia (1924), Bucharest (1933) and Râmnicu Vâlcea (1936). As a representative of the Romanian Government at the first conferences of the alliance (Copenhagen - 1922, Novisad - 1923, Oxford - 1924), he defended Romania's prestige against the unfounded accusations of the Hungarian revisionism regarding the acknowledgment of the status of the ethnic and religious minorities in our country.

The "Practical Christianity" Congress from Stockholm had a major impact on the Christian world. It was organized by Archbishop Nathan Söderblom from Uppsala and it was meant to be, in an extremely enthusiastic and naive way, a modern "reiteration" of the event that took place 1600 years ago. The meeting impressed due to the number of

delegates and the percentage of representation of the Christian world (680 Protestant and Orthodox delegates, representing 37 countries from four continents: Europe, Asia, Africa and America), as well as the solemnity of the moment, but only social issues were discussed, as from the beginning, the delegates had agreed to avoid any doctrinal issue.

The representation of the Romanian Orthodoxy at the “Movement for the unity of faith and organization” (“Faith and Order”) was more sporadic (at the first meeting in Lausanne - 1927 a delegation of the Metropolitan Church of Ardeal was present as an observer, and the Romanian delegation couldn't attend the second conference which was held in Edinburgh - 1937), but at the meeting from Oxford - 1937, professors Șerban Ionescu and Vasile Ispir opposed the alliance's claim to regulate doctrinal issues.

The special invitation to participate in the Missionary Congress from Jerusalem (March 24 - April 8, 1928), organized by The International Missionary Council (IMC), represents the official recognition of the prestige of the Romanian professor among the greatest Christian missionaries of the world at that time. At this congress, Vasile Ispir had the status of expert in the Christian mission, along with John Mott, William Cash, Dr. Atkinson etc. As a recognition of this international reputation he was invited to become a member of the preparation commission of the first congress of the Orthodox theologians (Athens, 1936), where he led the communications session in which the Russian theologian Georges Florovski officially announced the return of the Orthodox theology to the spirit of the Holy Fathers tradition.

5. MODERN MISSIONARY WAYS: PRESS, RADIO AND OTHER FAITH PROMOTION STRUCTURES

This chapter shows us the innovative spirit of Professor Ispir in promoting the Gospel. Magazines, radio, missionary associations and popular athenaeums are some of the modern means of spreading faith in society.

During the period of time when he was deprived of teaching Missiology (1938-1942), the professor gave an extracurricular continuity, as well as academic and profound, to the Christian mission by establishing the Orthodox – Missionary Association (“AMO”), the Missionary Institute, and the “Christian Mission” magazine which was used in order to popularize them. All these initiatives reveal the old teacher being tireless and enthusiastic as in his youth, who gathers his friends and apprentices to give birth to yet another

beautiful missionary project. Now he states more forcefully: “The mission is the mirror of the religious life of an epoch, of a country, it is the reflection of the spiritual life”¹⁰.

Another exceptional initiative is the establishment of the Romanian Society of Orthodox Theology (SRTO), which was meant to promote the great creations of synthesis of the Romanian theology, but also to prepare the second congress of the Orthodox theologians expected to take place in Bucharest in 1947 or 1948. Both of them did not find their fulfillment due to the establishment of the communist regime in Romania.

In order to spread the Orthodox faith among the people he established two magazines: “Solidarity” (1920-1929) and “The Christian Mission” (1939-1940) and wrote a lot of articles in the religious, cultural and political publications of the time. Moreover, he states: “With regard to the press in the modern era, there can be no talk of missionary expansion without it. The maintenance of a clear religious conscience - of Christian ideology - cannot be done without the press, because a church, which does not have its own press, is absent from the public opinion, especially in the contemporary era”¹¹.

Another important aspect of his thinking is the missionary fruition of the new Romanian radio. The lay professor proves to be a skillful preacher of the gospel from the new Hertzian pulpit, which he does not hesitate to use although the Orthodox Church has always had that considerable note of traditionalism in receiving the new conquests of technology. His homiletic activity on the radio includes 14 sermons, which are no longer preserved as a phonic testimony, but which we are glad to discover, as a typed document and signed by the author, in the archive of the Romanian Radio Society. There is one exception we find in the use of this modern means of propaganda: Holy Liturgy cannot be transmitted on the radio. The missionary readings, the songs and the sermons meant to be transmitted by the Hertzian waves have a missionary value, but the Eucharistic sacrifice is something too real, too alive, too high and too deep to be sacrificed to interests, even missionary ones. The Liturgy cannot be transmitted, it cannot be listened to, it cannot be admired, it can only be lived in a very precise ecclesial framework.

¹⁰ Idem, „Misiune și Teologie” [Mission and Theology], in *Misiunea Creștină* [Christian Mission], year I, no. 3, April 1939, p. 2.

¹¹ Idem, *Curs de Îndrumări misionare, pentru folosirea studenților în Teologie, preoților parohi și misionarilor eparhiali*, București [Missionary Studies Course, for the use of students in Theology, parish priests and eparchial missionaries, Bucharest], edited by Alex. Th. Doicescu, 1930, p. 316.

6. PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITY

Chapter VI presents his pedagogical activity, based on the principles of Christian education and having multiple British influences. Professor Ispir understood the urgent need of the Romanian society to come into contact with a healthy civilization such as the Anglo-Saxon one, deeply infused with the evangelical spirit, which would have brought multiple benefits on many levels (industrial revolution, democracy and parliamentary system, pastorate and the mission of the Church, teaching religion at all levels of education etc.), counterbalancing, at the same time, the influence of secularism that came from France.

The young Moldavian was fascinated by the teacher-student relationship in English education, rediscovering in it another form of the spiritual fatherhood / sonship from the Eastern Orthodox spirituality. He was always in the middle of the students as a teacher, in the university administration (member in the disciplinary committees, administrator of dormitories and student canteens) and also in the extracurricular activities together with the young people (setting up countless missionary associations), showing that education means mutual growth and permanent exchange of gifts and not an authoritarian teaching.

Although his work cannot be circumscribed in the strict field of school pedagogy, he achieves many of the principles of this discipline coming from other fields: missiology or political discourse. These writings, together with the strictly pedagogical ones (the school textbooks and the “Principles of Christian Education”), make the author a true professional of the Romanian Christian education from the interwar period. In his works we find a fundamental element, almost completely neglected today: religious education is not an end in itself, “Christian education is missionary”, and the ultimate purpose of both mission and Christian education is “to build the Church of Jesus Christ”¹² on earth.

Although his attempt to establish the Romanian department of the History of Religions has failed, Professor Ispir's handbook on this discipline and the articles on the religion of primitive peoples in Central Africa have their own pioneering value. An actual theme is the role of academic theology within the University, defined by Ispir as a strategic missionary outpost for students.

¹² Idem, „Principiile educației creștine, II” [*The principles of Christian education*], in *BOR*, year LXIV, 1946, no. 4-6, p. 172.

7. STATE OFFICER AND POLITICIAN. LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

The last chapter is dedicated to a field less common for theology works, namely the political activity of the university professor as a state dignitary, parliamentarian and local councilor. As Secretary General of the Ministry of Cults (1922-1926), Ispir managed, together with the minister of Cults, the preparation of a legislative framework regarding: the unification of the leading structures of the Romanian Orthodox Church after the realization of Greater Romania and the establishment of the Romanian Patriarchate (1925), the relationship between the State and the Church, the wealth of the Church, the salary classification of the priests and their retirement, the new law of the cults (1928) and the attitude towards the invasion of the Neo-Protestant sects in the country, etc. An important role is played by the legislative proposals regarding the Statute of the organization and functioning of the Romanian Orthodox Church (1925), in which the red thread of his thinking is represented by the participation of all the living forces in the leadership of the Church, based on Şaguna's status.

We find the beginnings of his political activity, as it was natural, during the student period, fighting for the Romanian cause before the Great Union, under the influence of Nicolae Iorga, the great titan of the Romanian culture. He worked as a second-level politician for a decade in the National Liberal Party (1920-1930), then committed himself to the project of young liberal intellectuals led by the historian Gheorghe Brătianu to establish a new political formation, favorable to the restoration of the Royal House of Romania. The two political speeches he held in the Parliament's plenary while he was deputy of Alba (1931-1932), namely "The speech to the response to the message of the Throne" and "The reform of the university education" - are still preserved today and they reveal the professor's vision regarding the development of the Romanian nation, starting from the religious and moral foundation.

The conflict with the legionary leader Corneliu Zelea-Codreanu on the issue of introducing the death penalty reveals to us the Orthodox politician and theologian, who inflicts, whenever he has the opportunity, the violent practices of reforming the nation, used by many political actors of that time, including legionaries. In the last part of his political involvement we find Professor Ispir supporting, together with our great cultural personalities, the utopian project of the nation restoration, initiated by King Carol II, which actually represented the beginning of the autocratic regimes in Romania.

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