

## REVIEW

Anca Șincan, *Of Middlemen and Intermediaries. State and Church in Communist Romania, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2025, 274 pp.*

*Of Middlemen and Intermediaries. State and Church in Communist Romania* is a rigorous and nuanced contribution to the recent historiography on the relationship between the Romanian communist state and religious denominations, with particular emphasis on the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC). The book stands out not only for its extensive documentation and analytical precision but also for its adoption of a solid theoretical framework, articulated around the concepts of caesaropapism, the “Byzantine symphony,” and functional cooperation.

The title itself suggests the interpretive lens proposed by the author: the relationship between state and church cannot be understood without considering the role played by a range of intermediary actors—inspectors, officials, clerics, and informal groups within the ROC—who interpreted, negotiated, and shaped state policies. The book offers a dynamic analysis, both bottom-up and top-down, of the mechanisms of control, adaptation, and religious survival within an atheist authoritarian regime.

One of the book’s central theses is that the ROC neither opted for total collaboration, nor for radical opposition—much less for complete withdrawal from society. Its strategy was one of compromise, partial collaboration, and selective resistance, tailored to the institutional and ideological context. At the same time, the author underscores that the ROC did not function as a monolithic bloc; on the contrary, the communist period was marked by internal fractures, factions, influence networks, and generational conflicts, contradicting the traditional view of the institution’s internal cohesion.

The book is structured into five chapters, preceded by a theoretical and methodological introduction. The opening chapter provides a comparative survey of European historiography on the state–church relationship during communism, highlighting the underdeveloped state of Romanian research compared to Western scholarship, where authors such as Olivier Gillet, Lavinia Stan, or Pedro Ramet have offered more sophisticated interpretations. A well-substantiated critique is made of Romanian historiography, often limited to the publication of documents without critical analysis, or without institutional and ideological contextualization.

A key starting point of the volume is the comparison with the Soviet Union. The author asks why the Soviet model—characterized by the near-total elimination of the Church from public life—was not replicated in Romania. The

proposed answer involves a series of structural and contextual factors, including the weakness of the Romanian Communist Party in the 1940s and 1950s, the lack of ideologically trained cadres, and an institutional legacy that allowed for the repurposing of interwar officials. Thus, the regime opted for a strategy of co-opting religious denominations into its political project, including through the recovery of elements from the interwar nationalist discourse.

The core chapters of the book examine in detail the Ministry of Religious Affairs, its leadership, the role of territorial inspectors for religious affairs, as well as key figures in the ROC such as Patriarch Justinian—portrayed variously in historiography as the "red patriarch" or as a pragmatic leader able to protect the institution under hostile conditions. The book delves into the influence network surrounding the patriarch, his conflict with Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan, the Greek-Catholic issue, and the rise of young clerics such as Justin Moisescu.

The author proposes a rereading of the institutional history of the ROC under communism as a history of resilience through adaptation. The reform of theological education, the reorganization of the patriarchal administration, and the maintenance of monastic life under strict surveillance are all presented as forms of negotiating religious autonomy within the constraints imposed by the state.

A particularly valuable chapter is dedicated to the territorial inspectors for religious affairs—officials who have been little studied until now, yet who were essential in implementing the state's religious policies. Initially recruited from among interwar civil servants, including former members of the Legionary Movement, they were gradually replaced with communist cadres. The book meticulously describes the selection, training, responsibilities, and oversight of these inspectors, as well as their interference in the activities of religious denominations. Of particular relevance are the protests or expressions of dissatisfaction voiced by clerics in response to such intrusions.

The final chapter offers an applied perspective on the process of building a church in 1980s Transylvania, illustrating the bureaucratic, political, and ideological tensions accompanying efforts to construct places of worship. This case study analyzes the relationships between the central administration of the Department of Religious Affairs, local inspectors, and diocesan administrations, outlining a system of mutual control between state and Church, in which the boundaries between collaboration, conformism, and opposition often became fluid.

In conclusion, *Of Middlemen and Intermediaries* is a fundamental work for understanding the Romanian model of state–church relations under communism. It avoids narrative clichés and adopts a complex perspective, in which the regime is not depicted merely as an oppressor, nor the Church solely as a victim or accomplice. Rather, the relationship is described as one of interdependence, negotiation, and moral ambiguity, in which the survival of

religion was made possible precisely by the flexibility of the strategies adopted by both sides.

This book addresses not only specialists in the history of communism or church history, but also anyone interested in how religious institutions can navigate authoritarian regimes through strategies of adaptation, negotiation, and the redefinition of their social role.

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