In the spring of 1995 I was coordinating the academic research programme at what has now become the Emanuel University of Oradea. At the first scholarly colloquium which I organised in this role I had the providential opportunity to come to know the Revd Professor Stelian Tofana, of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Cluj, and since then we have maintained an especially close bond. This accounts for our decision to share the writing of a Romanian preface to the second edition of this work: *Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*. We are united both by a common interest in Eastern theology and spirituality, which each of us approaches from his own perspective, and by our firmly held personal conviction of the pressing need for theological and ecclesial dialogue between the different Christian traditions in our cultural context.

Over the years we have been involved together in many activities which have put flesh on the bones of these shared convictions. We have participated in academic conferences both within Romania (in Oradea, Cluj, Bucharest and elsewhere) and abroad (including Bossey, in Switzerland, and Durres in Albania) that have been organised both by Evangelicals and by the Orthodox; we have contributed to the resulting publications of their proceedings; we have joined in organising the promotion of books relevant to this dialogue; we have collaborated in spiritually-oriented training sessions for the staff of World Vision (an organisation I have been working for since December 1999); we have each sought to make more widely known within our own constituency the treasures of thought and spirituality to be found in the tradition of the other – and, last but not least, we have often enjoyed table fellowship in one another’s homes, which has provided occasions to celebrate what unites us in spite of the specific differences which define each of our ecclesial identities.

Alongside this we have dreamed together and made plans for the fostering of this dialogue and, as much as possible, its development into a permanent channel of exchange between the communities to which we belong. Some of these initiatives – may God have the glory – have been successful, the appearance of the first edition of this book being just one ready example among many that could be cited. Others, unfortunately, have met with lesser success. There are also many for which, very probably, the time is not yet ripe, one of these being the giving of formal institutional structure to an ongoing dialogue between the two ecclesial communities involving members of the Orthodox hierarchy on the one side and Evangelical leaders on the other.

THE PRESENT STATE OF ORTHODOX-EVANGELICAL DIALOGUE IN ROMANIA

Undoubtedly there is a certain price that has to be paid in connection with any open and sustained commitment to an Orthodox-Evangelical dialogue, and this is certainly so in the present context, which is not particularly favourable to friendly ecumenical relations between different church communities in Romania. As each of us has soon come to realise, due to the latent tensions between the two communities we risk being caught in the permanent cross-fire either of those who believe, entirely mistakenly on our view, that ecumenism in all its forms is dangerous and heretical and leads to compromise and syncretism, or of those who are simply sceptical as to the sincerity with which such an undertaking is embarked upon or the value of its eventual outcome. However we try our best to live in line with our convictions, paying the necessary price and as far as possible not responding in kind to the attacks directed against us, in the hope that – by God’s grace – the positive fruits of our efforts will persuade people of good will that this initiative is indeed valuable.

The first Romanian evangelical to engage in a serious theological way with such a dialogue with Orthodoxy was Paul Negrut, who was, in 1995, Rector of the Baptist Bible Institute in Oradea. Unfortunately his perspective was, and has remained, largely polemical. The effort has been continued by other Baptist theologians such as Emil Bartos, Silviu Rogobete and the present writer, and is being carried forward today, if not with the same intensity, by younger theologians in various Romanian evangelical communities both within Romania and abroad – Eugen Matei and Daniel Oprean among others. These efforts have produced both key studies for evangelical theology and academic gatherings of the highest standard. For example some of those theologians made well-received contributions to the theological conference organised from 20th to 23rd July 2006 dedicated to the *oeuvre* of Father Dumitru Staniloae, with their papers being included in the conference’s published proceedings.[[1]](#footnote-1) Some two months earlier, on May 30th 2006, there had taken place at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi the book launch of the Romanian translation of Ray Bakke’s *Biblical Word for an Urban World[[2]](#footnote-2)* (Bakke being an American Baptist theologian with a special interest in urban mission, and the publication being financially supported by the Church of Scotland). However such examples are more exceptional than typical of the relations between the two ecclesial communities.

To which we need to add the fact that evangelical theology has not enjoyed a comparable level of interest on the part of Romanian Orthodox theologians. The exceptions, such as Ion Bria, Stelian Tofana, Ioan Sauca and others, serve merely to highlight the disparity between the attitudes of the two theological communities. There are many occasions on which Orthodox theologians have been invited to teach Orthodox theology in Evangelical seminaries both in Romania and abroad, but I am not aware of examples of evangelical theologians being invited to teach subjects related to Evangelical theology in Romanian Orthodox seminaries, and unfortunately much the same situation pertains in the Orthodox diaspora.

In reality a large proportion of Orthodox theologians continue to look condescendingly on Evangelical theology. This attitude might find some justification to the extent that it is directed at the theology produced by Romanian evangelicals, who made their appearance in our region only about 150 years ago and were represented during the first hundred of those years chiefly by people of modest education. By contrast, in that same period Romanian Orthodoxy already had a number of developed theological colleges, and they have been producing theological works ever since, sometimes of an impressive standard, as is the case with the work of the most important of Romanian theologians, Dumitru Staniloae, to whom we all look up with admiration, but also critically, as is always appropriate for the evaluation of any academic achievement.

For all that, the maintenance of this attitude of superiority towards Evangelicals on the part of Orthodox university teachers, can no longer be justified at the present day when there are over a hundred Romanian evangelicals holding doctorates in theology, some of them awarded by ranking Western theological schools. Certainly, this potential has yet to be tapped in the writing of works relevant to Romanian culture and spiritual concerns, and we hope that this will take place over the coming years. This Orthodox condescension towards Evangelical theology is even less justified if we take into consideration the evangelical theological works produced in other cultural environments – particularly in the Anglo-Saxon milieu – though it is true that these may be less relevant to the Romanian context, especially because Western theologians in general, be they Catholic or Protestant interact too little with Orthodox theology. It is possible that ignorance, sometimes wilful, accompanied by a low level of interest in the English language among Romanian Orthodox theologians, traditionally oriented as they are towards German or French schools, could be a further cause of this imbalance. We may hope, however, that our several efforts to make known the theology of the other tradition, each within his own constituency, will finally yield the results we seek.

We need, likewise, to recognise that the impact of this initiative on their attitude to the Orthodox world, and on a correct understanding of Orthodoxy, is very limited within the ranks of evangelical believers who, in discussions with each other, often continue to regard the Orthodox (and, in the same vein, Roman Catholics) as “non-Christians”. And things are not better when it comes to the general attitude of Orthodox believers towards Evangelicals, whom they regularly ‘appreciate’ by using such labels as “sectarians”, “heretics” and “schismatics”. In this regard not a lot has changed in the years since 1989.

An encouraging sign as to the possibility of establishing missionary and theological dialogue between the two ecclesial communities is to be found in the Lausanne Orthodox Initiative (LOI)[[3]](#footnote-3). This has resulted from meetings between Evangelicals and Orthodox at the Third Lausanne Congress, which took place in Cape Town in 2010, as part of the Lausanne Movement for World Evangelisation. Following this gathering the LOI working group, of which I have the honour to be a member, has already convened two larger Orthodox-Evangelical meetings, in 2013 and 2014, both of them hosted by the St Vlash Orthodox Academy in Durres, Albania. At these events theologians, missiologists and church leaders from both traditions have spent several days together in dialogue, exploring the possibility of missionary collaboration between our communities. A number of Romanian Orthodox and Romanian Evangelicals participated and put forward concrete suggestions, even if admittedly modest at the start, for how the Orthodox-Evangelical dialogue could be strengthened in Romania.

These considerations are, for us, evidence of the legitimacy of our enterprise and of its importance for the strengthening of Christian unity. In a world experiencing accelerating secularisation – a trend which will very soon start to impact in a major way on the Romanian scene – a neglect of the points of unity which exist between different Christian traditions on questions of doctrine and spiritual essentials in favour of a concentration on disputed points of secondary importance cannot but have negative consequences for Christian witness. Likewise, as long as Christians of different ecclesial traditions keep quibbling and undermining one another, the great issues of the world we live in at large, and of Romanian society in particular – the demographic and ecological crises, the upending of frameworks of value, the undermining of the family, the loss of moral compass which presently reigns in education, health care and public safety policy – all these remain unaddressed on the part of those who should be able to bring to the public debate, clearly, humbly and competently, the perspective of the Kingdom of God.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BOOK THREE VIEWS OF EASTERN ORTHODOXY AND *EVANGELICALISM*

There are already several works of good quality which treat the Orthodox-Evangelical dialogue, some of which exist in Romanian translation. Among these we might mention Donald Fairbairn’s *Eastern Orthodoxy Trough Western Eyes*[[4]](#footnote-4), which Bradley Nassif, the most eminent expert on the subject, considers to provide the best presentation of Orthodoxy for the western world, and Robert Letham’s book *Through Western Eyes. Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective*[[5]](#footnote-5). However the present book, whose Romanian introduction I write here together with Revd Professor Stelian Tofana, is quite unique.

This book presents three possible perspectives on the relationship between the two ecclesial traditions: 1) **compatibility** – the position taken by Bradley Nassif (and we will return to a discussion of the lack of an evangelical advocate of this position); 2) **incompatibility** – the position taken by Michael Horton on the Evangelical side and by Vladimir Berzonsky on the Orthodox side and 3) **partial compatibility** – the position taken by George Hancock-Ștefan for the Evangelicals and Edward Rommen for the Orthodox. In fact these three positions are not quite so clearly distinct as might appear at first sight. We have to reckon in fact with a range of assessments, with Nassif at the optimistic end of the spectrum and Horton and Berzonsky at the pessimistic end, in terms of their evaluation of the degree of possible compatibility between the two traditions.

The distinctive feature of this book relates to the concept of the series of titles, appearing under the impress of Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, of which it forms a part. Each volume addresses one of a diverse series of theologically disputed issues and does so by presenting a range of positions, with each position being succinctly advanced by a representative, after which the advocates of each of the other positions represented in the book make a response to the writer, who, at the end, offers a final word of comment to those responses.

We are offered, in other words, a veritable model of theological and ecclesial dialogue in which the arguments are handled robustly, yet politely and constructively in the service of truth and the Kingdom of God. Each author, in writing, draws to the maximum on the expertise and practical experience they have garnered in a lifetime of interaction with believers, ministers, communities, schools and the theological writings of the other tradition. They do not strike sombre or high notes to an equal degree, but the sincerity and dedication with which they undertake the exercise are shared equally by all.

Those who know how toxic interconfessional relations in Romania have been during this period of history will not be surprised to find that it was precisely this feature of *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism* (first published by Zondervan in 2004 under the general editorship of Jim Stamoolis) which motivated me to take the initiative of seeing the book published in its Romanian translation.

It was printed with the generous and professional support of the publishers Casa Cartii, of Oradea, under the competent and enthusiastic direction of Vasile Gabrian, and appeared in 2009 under the imprint of the Adoramus publishing house in Iasi with the Romanian title *Ortodoxie si evanghelism. Trei perspective[[6]](#footnote-6)*. Casa Cartii are now publishing this second, revised, edition of the book. We were pleased that the print run of the first edition, launched in May 2009 at the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, sold out within a few months – an indication of the interest in and need for such a work on the Romanian publishing scene. That ecumenical occasion was honoured by the participation of one of the main initiators and authors of the project, Dr Bradley Nassif, professor at North Park University, Chicago.

To this second edition, in which we have endeavoured to correct a number of errors which crept into the earlier one, we have added a Romanian introduction written – in accordance with the model explained above – by an Orthodox and an Evangelical. We offer it to our readers – be they Orthodox, Evangelical, of a different confession, or of none – as an example of constructive interaction of the type that we would like to become possible in Romania also, once we have overcome the inter-ecclesial limitations and pathologies that we have inherited from the none-too-distant past.

I close this introduction with a single regret. At the time when we began to discuss the possibility of the appearance of a second Romanian edition, I tried – through the good offices of the general editor, Jim Stamoolis – to persuade Zondervan of the need to rectify, at least in the Romanian edition and, hopefully, also in any future edition in English, one of the weaknesses of the first edition – the absence from the project of an Evangelical advocate of the compatibility position. I even offered to write this text myself, and then to interact with the other contributing authors, following the accepted pattern.

Sadly, on account of practical complications connected with obtaining responses from the other authors, my proposal was declined. This being so, this second edition will not, as I had hoped, contain an evangelical advocacy of the view that there can be compatibility between Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism, but only an introduction to the new edition, contributed in two parts – one Evangelical and the other Orthodox. Through these we attempt to locate the discussion in a specifically Romanian context and to alert the Romanian reader to possible obstacles to its reception, but also to set before him the possible benefits of participating in this journey, with its potential for the spiritual enrichment of both parties – a goal for which we also humbly seek the help of God’s grace.

(English translation by Stuart & Dorothy Elford.)

1. Streza, L. and G.F.Anghelescu (eds) *Dumitru Staniloae (1903-1993)* *Teologie romaneasca de dimensiune* *europeana*, Sibiu: Schiller, 2008 [A Romanian Theology of European Significance]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bakke, Ray, *O perspectiva biblica asupra misiunii urbane*, trad. Ligia Manastireanu, Iasi: Adoramus, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See http://www.loimission.net/. This site also give an extensive list of resources that reflect the Orthodox-Evangelical dialogue – http://www.loimission.net/resources. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fairbairn, Donald, *Ortodoxia rasariteana din perspectiva occidentala,* Arad: Multimedia, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Letham, Robert, *Sub privirea Apusului. O perspectiva reformata asupra ortodoxiei rasaritene,* Oradea: Faclia, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism. Three perspectives*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)