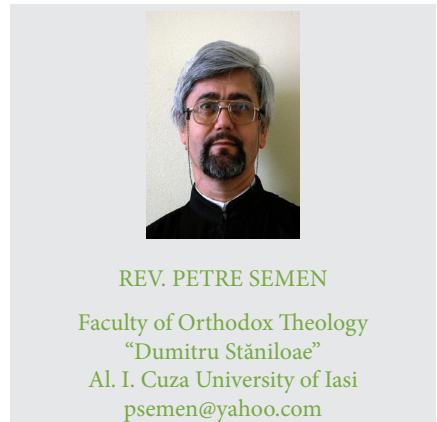# RELIGIOUS FAITH – A DETERMINING FACTOR
FOR NATIONAL UNITY IN THE DIASPORA

Abstract

In the traditional church language, the word 'diaspora' (meaning 'scattering') has a social and a judicial meaning. The term was borrowed into Romanian from Greek and refers to the dispersion and subsequent settling of Jews outside the borders of their motherland, from the time of the Babylonian exile to the Greek-Roman era. Thus, the word 'diaspora' (Dt 28:25; 30:4; Is 49:6), as used in the Septuagint, refers to the body of Jews scattered throughout the pagan world after the Babylonian Captivity. The theological motivation for their scattering, in the opinion of certain prophets, would be purification (Ez 22:15), a notion which appears to trouble many pious souls (Ps 45). Once atonement and purification have been completed, the return to the initial state will take place (Ez 36:24; Eccl 36:10). In this study, we will evaluate the concept of 'diaspora' and the implications it has in the biblical context that is mentioned and we will capture how these perspectives are found in the way the Orthodox Church reports to the Christian communities in the diaspora.

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Introduction

The word 'diaspora' occurs in the Greek version of the New Testament as well and is used by Saint Luke the Evangelist when referring to the Jews scattered among the Greeks and the other foreign peoples and to their arrival in Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost (Acts 2:9-12). Thus, upon the founding of the Christian Church, one is reminded of the Jews dispersed over various regions of the Roman Empire and beyond.

Some believe that, from Jerusalem to Babylon and Rome, there were over 143 locations where one or several synagogues were built, depending on the number of Jews who had settled there definitively (Mircea 1984, 236). The Bible mentions two types of diaspora: the Jewish one, scattered among peoples of religions and cultures different from their own, (Dt 28:25; 30:4; Is 49:6; Jer 41:17; 2 Mc 1, 27; Jas 1:1) and the Greek one (Jn 7:35; 1 Pt 1:1). Jewish tradition, based on the scriptural texts that recount the Exile (2 Kgs 25:27; Jer 29:22; Ez 33:21; Lam 1:2) employs the word 'galut' in alternation with 'gola' fairly frequently (2 Kgs 24:15-16; Jer 24:5; Est 2:6; 1 Chr 5:22).

The word 'gola', referring to the Jewish communities anywhere in the world outside the borders of 'Eretz Yisrael', regardless of the circumstances that led them there, became dominant as a synonym for the Greek 'diaspora' (dispersion, scattering). The first Jewish communities created by force, in northern Mesopotamia, are the work of Sargon II, after the fall of the Kingdom of Israel (722-721). The Jewish people would go through two more tragic episodes, in 596 and 586, when caravans of deportees from the kingdom of Judah were taken to Babylonia, where they would remain for about 70 years. Note that the Assyrians and the Babylonians used to partly or completely deport the peoples they defeated to reduce the national drive of their enemies and to colonise those of their territories where the population was very scarce due to numerous wars. It appears that this policy was initiated by Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria. Between 734 and 732, he conquered the cities of Abel-Beth-Maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hatzor, and Gilead and displaced their inhabitants into Assyria (acc. II Kings 15, 29). After the conquering of Samaria (722), Sargon II continued that same policy, deporting many Israelites (according to Assyrian inscriptions, circa 27,280 people) into Assyria and making them settle in Halah and Habor. He replaced the deported population with colonists from Babylonia, from the cities of Cuthah, Hamath, Ava, and Sepharvaim (2 Kgs 17:24-41) (Bidoz 1987, 341-2).

The Causes of the Dispersion

As far as the causes of the Jews' dispersion among the Gentiles are concerned, even though most historians and Bible experts have directly associated the word 'diaspora' or 'scattering' and the moment of the forced departure into the Babylonian Exile (which involved three stages), the biblical context suggests that economic motivations preceded political and military ones. During the young monarchy consolidated by King David and carried on by his son, Solomon, Israelites were sent to various regions

they controlled in Asia and Africa, where they started colonies that kept in contact with the city of Jerusalem and that, in time, acquired the status of permanent residence (Sanders 1991, 855; Walls 1995, 340). The first economically motivated diaspora was established in Damascus and is mentioned in 1 Kings 20:34 (3 Kgs, according to the Septuagint), where it is recounted that the Syrian King Ben-Hadad proposed to King Ahab of Israel to reopen the market in the city of Damascus. After the weakening of the kingdom and the military defeats during the reign of Rehoboam and Jeroboam (cca. 918 BC), when Pharaoh Shishak of Egypt invaded the Kingdom of Judah (1 Kgs 14:25-28; 2 Chr 12:1-12), the Jewish diaspora of Egypt grew considerably. Furthermore, we are told that during the time of Prophet Jeremiah's mission as well, there was a fairly large diaspora in Egypt (Jer 42:15-18), subsequently increased by those who fled the country for fear of a Chaldean invasion.

It appears that the diaspora in Egypt came second in terms of size and socio-cultural importance. That is why Prophet Jeremiah felt morally compelled to also send a message to his fellow Jews settled in large numbers in Migdol, Tahpanhes, Memphis and Pathros (ch. 44:1). Moreover, Jewish historian and philosopher Philo (20 BC – 40 AD) informs us that, in Alexandria, Egypt, alone there was a Jewish diaspora consisting of about one million inhabitants, who accounted for an eighth of the country's population (*In Flaccum* 6, 8) and occupied two of the city's five neighbourhoods (Walls 1995, 855). However, the largest Jewish diaspora was generated by the occupation of the Holy Land by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, who, following the policies of the time, deported a very large portion of the population, particularly the country's intellectual and political elites (2 Kgs 15:29; 17:6; 24:14; 25:11). The deportation and the transition from the status of the internationally acknowledged national state to that of exile were carried out via approximately four stages: 605 (Dn 1:1); 597 (2 Kgs 24:10-17); 586 (2 Kgs 24:2; Jer 40:14); 582 (Jer 52:30) (Schultz 2001, 314-5).

It is known that, after Judaea and Israel, respectively, it is in Babylonia that the largest Jewish communities were found and it is also there that the outstanding exegetes of the Torah (Amoraim) were active, while the Babylonian Talmud was unanimously acknowledged as an interpretation of the Mishna (Schultz 2001, 314-5). History testifies to the Jewish people's vast capacity to adapt to a completely foreign, even hostile, culture and civilisation, especially when they had the benefit of spiritual leaders capable of raising their countrymen's morale. The case of Prophet Jeremiah is well known to Bible scholars. He can serve as a role model for Christians as well, when it comes to praying

for the authorities (ch. 29) and it is probably he who inspired the Apostle Paul, too, when the latter wrote to Christians to submit to the authorities, as it was God who allowed them to rule. Knowing that a return from exile was inconceivable at the time, Jeremiah wrote to his contemporaries in Babylon: 'Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit! Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters, that you may be increased there, and not diminished. Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it, for in its peace you will have peace!' (ch. 29:4-7).

The Downsides of Diaspora Life: The Acculturation Phenomenon

Practical experience of life among foreigners has shown that, in the lands of deportation, many exiles can, *nolens volens*, sooner or later, completely lose their national and religious identity. At least, that is the fate of nearly all nationalities uprooted from their native lands. As previously stressed, the practice of deporting conquered populations was very popular in Antiquity, which is why there were numerous communities of different nationalities and religions on the vast Assyro-Babylonian territories. In most cases, being far away from home, from the places of worship built by their forefathers, and being placed as newcomers in a completely different cultural context, produced major mutations on all levels. Moreover, let us not forget that aliens, who speak a different language and have other cultural customs and traditions, are much more difficult to assimilate with natives and less likely to merge with them.

The same can hardly be said of the Hebrew communities established in Babylon, even though, later on, during a certain period of the Roman Empire, they were unable to integrate into the culture and civilisation imposed by the empire (Acts 16:21; 19:34). Often enough, despite being tolerated by the Roman power, due to their moral intransigence and monotheistic religion, combined with their lack of participation in pagan religious celebrations and rituals, their refrainment from any public or private activity during the Sabbath, as well as their refusal to perform military service, some saw them as suspicious, or even inconvenient. Thanks to the mission of certain exile prophets, part of the pagan world gained access to the monotheistic faith, while, thanks to the diaspora in general, the Jewish population was faced with the Egyptian, Hittite,

Sumerian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman cultures and civilisations and, implicitly, with their religions, but has the great merit of not becoming diluted within them. Those who accepted the Mosaic faith and law – and this is also true for those joining the Christian faith– were compelled to break away from their religious past and, often enough, from their own culture, too, while, by accepting the new faith, the prospects of the new culture were opened to them, a culture that was grafted onto their old one, giving rise to interculturality, the focal point of which was the Synagogue for the Jews and, subsequently, the Church for Christians (Basarab 2005, 41).

It was not rare for some leaders of the Roman Empire, spurred by political and military authorities, to issue decrees such as the one of 139 B.C., banishing the Jews from the Eternal City, which occurred during the rule of Claudius (41-54, cf. Acts 18:2) (*Împrăștiere* 1996, 182). For the sons of Israel, exile was associated with shame (Dt. 28, 37), as it implied losing the country and, more importantly, their precious sanctuary, which is why returning home was the enduring dream of each generation, hence the expression: 'If I forget you, o, Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill' (Ps 137:5). Despite all the shortcomings of life in exile, the upside of living in the diaspora was and still is that the members of the community share a more solid spiritual cohesion and national unity than back home. It is unanimously acknowledged that a providential role in maintaining national unity and religious faith was played by the Torah (instruction, teaching, law), which, after the destruction of the sanctuary, began polarising around it first the religious elite, led by the prophets appointed by God for the very purpose of watching over the unaltered preservation of the faith of their forefathers, as well as the sons of Israel everywhere. Outside the country's borders, the temple was substituted successfully by synagogues, which became places for social and religious gatherings, as well as for meeting with prophets.

Whenever a community lacked a synagogue, the prophet's home was the ideal place for reading and commenting on the Law. That is what Ezekiel tells us: 'And it came to pass in the sixth year since the enslavement of King Jehoiachin, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, that the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there.' (ch. 8:1; 14:1). Thus, if, at the peak of its glory, the temple was the one to polarise all religious activity around it, during the time of dispersion among foreigners, it was successfully substituted by the synagogue and the Torah. This was the case not only for the communities in Mesopotamia but also for the Greek-Roman period, when a large number of Jews created strong communities

in the great urban centres in Syria, Egypt or Asia Minor (in over 100 cities), for political or commercial reasons.

After the annexations carried out by Alexander the Great (4th century B.C.) and the implementation of the administrative system initiated by him and continued by his successors, the Seleucids and Ptolemies, the Jews were able to move easily from one area to another, as they were free to conduct various businesses and travel to Jerusalem, thus keeping in contact with those back home. The Jewish diaspora in Egypt played a substantial role, once they had learned Greek, and a major contribution to the propagation of Jewish culture in Egypt was the translation of the Bible into Greek, which was a genuine missionary action as well when it comes to the dissemination of monotheism among pagans. The writings of Philo and others undoubtedly reveal that the Jews were also engaged in missionary apologetics aimed at Greek culture and that there existed codices of instructions for converts from the pagan world (Walls 1995, 341).

It appears that, despite having acquired and promoting Hellenistic culture, they enjoyed a semi-independent status, in the sense that, as in Rome, the main communities possessed their system of government, the so-called council of elders (gerusia), with its official representatives and with the obligation to maintain good relations with the local authorities (*Împrăștiere* 1996, 191). It is believed that the same council was tasked with faithfully maintaining relations with the motherland by paying their dues to the Temple and by communicating with believers back home through pilgrimages to Jerusalem occasioned by major feasts (Acts 2:5; 8:27; 28:31) or commercial travels. Thus, although they lived far from home, the law of their forefathers was the strongest glue that held together their national identity (Phil 3:5-8).

From a Christian perspective, the translation of the Old Testament was not merely a cultural event, but a missionary one as well, to the benefit of the sympathisers of Jewish culture open to the monotheistic faith, as it paved the way for the Gospel (see Acts 8:27-40). Thus, through the Septuagint, the Jewish diaspora fulfilled a missionary role among the pagans that came into contact with them either directly or by listening to their message when attending synagogue services out of mere curiosity.

Religious historians can confirm that most of the world's religions have their diaspora, so this is not something specific to Judaism or Christianity, except that, as Hans Küng stressed, the exceptional capacity of the Jewish religion to adapt to any part of the world, aware of God's protective omnipresence, is remarkable. Even though the

Torah is no longer read in the Temple, but in the synagogue, even though the altar has been substituted by God's words conveyed through prophets and the performer of the sacrifice has been replaced by a rabbi, the Jewish diaspora has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that religious – and, implicitly, ethnic – unity can be preserved even in the absence of a central religious or political authority (Küng 2005, 167), but only provided that the confessed religion is taken seriously, as, wherever secularisation seeps in, no religion can claim to remain intact. Thus, religion played an overwhelming role in the preservation of an unaltered national identity in the diaspora and the book of Esther is telling proof of that, as God does not hide from His people, for, wherever His people are, God will be there as well, as Isaiah says: 'But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, o, Jacob, and He who formed you, o, Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour."' (ch. 43:1-3). In conclusion, even though much humiliation is endured in exile, given the assurance that God accompanies his people into exile, its burden is perceptively diminished (Wigoder 2006, 245).

The Christian Diaspora

Although facing roughly the same issues that the diaspora of any religion does, the beginnings of the Christian diaspora are somewhat different from all the others, in that, based on the commandment of the Founder of the Church to teach the Gospel to all the nations (Mt 28:19-20), the mission had to expand. It, therefore, means that, by definition, the vocation of the Church is that of spreading out instead of remaining stationed within a certain land, language, or ethnicity. To some extent, Church missionaries imitated the modus operandi of revealed religion, in the sense that people understood early on that the Christian message had to be disseminated among nations. It would not be wrong to say that this missionary work is biblically founded on the First Testament. Let us not forget that a significant portion of the prophets' message was also intended for the peoples neighbouring the Holy Land (Is 14; 15; 16; 17; 19; 20; 23; 34; 47; Jer 46; 47; 48; 51; Ez 25; 26; 27; 28; 29; 30; 31; 32; 35; 38; 39; Dn 11; Am 1; 2; Ob 1; Jon 3; Na 3; Zep 2) and that, implicitly, they were familiarised with the Bible. The first testimonies about the Christian diaspora are found in the Epistle of Saint James, which tells us that it was included among the twelve tribes scattered all over the

world (ch. 1:1), probably the world of the Roman Empire that the Apostle Peter refers to as well when speaking about the 'scattering' of Christians in the lands of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pt 1:1). Hans Küng even finds a certain similarity between the Church and the synagogue, in that they both had their spiritual points of reference: for the Jews, the era of the rabbis, from the 1st to the 7th/8th century, overlaps with the era of the Church Fathers; thus, while the former left a defining mark on the structure of Orthodox Judaism, the latter definitively influenced the structure of Orthodox Christianity. Küng further suggests another similarity when stating that, since Judaism mostly exists dissipated among the Gentiles and is therefore no longer a national religion (2005, 164), one cannot speak very clearly of an exclusively national Church either.

We have looked at the circumstances of the birth of the Jewish diaspora and it is fit to stress that they were somewhat similar to those of the Christian diaspora. They proliferated in places, thanks to the work of missionaries, through mass migration, for political and military reasons that caused territorial changes and, last, but not least, through expansion. It is known that long history, but especially in the last 20 years, for political and economic reasons, many Christians from ex-communist countries left and settled abroad and, implicitly, outside the ecclesiastic circumscription they belonged to; thus, they began to be known as *the Christians of the diaspora*, while all of them together formed the Christian diaspora. The Christian Orthodox diaspora in general and the Romanian one in particular maintain good relations with their mother Churches and conduct their religious life according to canonical ordinances. The religious and moral connection that communities maintain among themselves is the expression of the Church's catholic spirit and living life in Christ (Stan 1963, 3-5). After the fall of the totalitarian regimes in Europe, major demographic mutations occurred, including in Romania. For various reasons, the Romanian diaspora grew larger and more diverse, expanding into various areas of Europe and beyond, although not so much due to conversions as due to people leaving their native country and, implicitly, their mother Church.

It is already known that a great challenge facing Romanian Orthodox Christianity is the issue of integration. We are concerned with the integration of people who were brutally removed from their family and national environment, but especially with that of large groups forced to abandon their own country for various reasons, such as political persecutions, armed conflicts, economic crises, natural disasters, etc.

It is widespread knowledge that, once borders were opened after 1989, the diaspora in manifold countries in the world increased substantially and numerous families suffered due to both temporary separations, caused by the search for employment, and their inability to adapt. The issue of integration is especially significant for those who gave up their citizenship in exchange for another. Their whole life will be marked by the difficulty to integrate into a community with a different culture and religion and different traditions. It is extremely difficult for the first generation uprooted from their native land, because, once inside the adoptive country, the main handicap that arises has to do with communication, followed by another related to culture and religion. The children of the diaspora do not have an easy time either. Out in society and at school they will speak the language of their host country, while at home they will find it increasingly difficult to speak their language, so that, in time, they will forget it completely. As for the third generation, it may lose its national or even religious identity definitively. This will therefore be the main tough problem aside from the economic one, especially for recently integrated families. If the Church is not persistently involved in the spiritual life of enclave communities by providing religious assistance in the way they were used to in their native country, sooner or later, they will accept the faith and customs of the locals to feel fully integrated (Semen 2008, 171-2).

Conclusions

According to the tradition already established through the resolutions of ecumenical councils, the mother Church has exclusive jurisdiction rights over its diaspora and, after obtaining autocephaly, under the rights that arise from that, each autocephalous Church is canonically entitled to jurisdiction over its diaspora, yet it has not only the right but especially the duty to provide religious assistance to its children everywhere. Thus, the calling of the Church is that of teaching the Christians that belong to it that unity of faith can be an effective antidote against dispersion and the loss of one's own identity.

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