

A Romanian Contribution to Contemporary Ecumenism

Father Ion Bria (1929-2002)

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Abstract

This article examines the contribution to ecumenical dialogue of Ion Bria, an important Romanian theological and ecumenical personality. The value of his approaches is demonstrated by the fact that many contemporary authors start their research from his ideas, such as the concept of the "liturgy after the liturgy," of which he was a significant proponent, and which are still relevant to ecumenical dialogue. At the time they were first proposed, they shifted ecumenical dialogue. Bria was also a good and careful observer of ecumenical and pan-Orthodox reality. He presented with objectivity the reality from his home space and made valuable comparisons between his spirituality and other confessional approaches, offering new topics of dialogue and creating bridges between churches.

Keywords

liturgy after the liturgy, Orthodoxy, communism, dialogue with Orthodox churches, missiology.

The year 2019 marks the 90th anniversary of the birth of Father Ion Bria, who is, as far as Romanian theology is concerned, one of the most important Orthodox thinkers after Father Dumitru Stăniloae. But he is also very important for contemporary missionary and ecumenical research. Bria's writings – more than 40 books and several hundred studies, articles, chronicles, and book reviews in various journals or books published around the world – are often referred to even today.¹ This demonstrates

¹ Moreover, between 14th and 17th of May 2009, in "Andrei Şaguna" Faculty of Orthodox Theology from Sibiu has been hold an international conference dedicated to his work and contribution to missionary theology. The lectures were later brought together in a book dedicated to the event. See: Nicolae Moşoiu (coord.), *The Relevance of Reverend Professor Ion Bria's Work for Contemporary Society and for the Life of the Church. New Directions in the Research of Church Doctrine, Mission, and Unity*, (Sibiu: Andreiana Press, 2010). Cf. Daniel Buda,

not only their value, but also their author's commitment to ecumenism and theological dialogue.

Born on 19 June 1929 in the village of Teleaga, in Prahova county, in southern Romania, Bria began theological studies in 1950 in Bucharest, after becoming acquainted with Orthodox spirituality between 1945 and 1948, when he would visit his sister, a nun in Zamfira monastery.² It was there that his ecumenical appetite began to develop, even though his BA thesis, dedicated to the infallibility of the church³ did not have many points of contact with ecumenism. Later on, his PhD thesis, dedicated to the dogmatic aspects of case of a union of the church,⁴ underlined his wish to understand more deeply ecumenical reality and the possible Orthodox contribution to its development. For this reason, between 1962 and 1963 he studied at St Augustine's College in Canterbury, an Anglican institute, and later, in 1966, at the theological faculty in Durham, in northern England. His Anglican experience was very important for him, as he would later note in an article published in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*:

One of the significant developments in my pilgrimage in mission was the semester I spent at St. Augustine's College in Canterbury, an Anglican institute for missiological studies. In 1961, at the World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly in New Delhi, the Romanian Orthodox Church became a full member of the WCC. The following year W. A. Visser 't Hooft, WCC general secretary, led a WCC delegation to Romania. He granted the Orthodox Church three scholarships for ecumenical studies. In the same year, due to the initiative of Metropolitan Justin of Iasi, Romania, later patriarch (1977–86), the church was involved in the preliminary work of preparing a pan-Orthodox synod. The church practiced an ecumenism on two fronts: ecumenical and pan-Orthodox. As a member of the ecumenical commission of the church, I was glad to affirm these openings. At New Delhi I translated the reports and later communicated them to my students.

"The relevance of Reverend Professor Ion Bria's work for contemporary society and for the life of the church," in *The Ecumenical Review*, 62: 4 (2010), 433-435.

² Ion Bria, "My pilgrimage in mission," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 26: 2 (2002), 74.

³ A summary of it will be published few years later in *Ortodoxia*, one of the most important theological journals. See: Ion Bria, "Infaibilitatea Bisericii [The infallibility of the Church]," in *Ortodoxia*, 12: 4 (1960), 494-504.

⁴ The conclusions of this thesis, defended in 1968 will be published in the next year in *Istina* journal from Paris. See: Ion Bria, "Orient et Occident," in *Istina*, 14: 2 (1969), 193-250. The entire thesis will be published as a special issue in *Studii Teologice (Theological Studies)*, the journal of Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate. Cf. Ion Bria, "Aspecte dogmatice ale unirii Bisericilor (teză de doctorat) (Dogmatic aspects of the union of churches (PhD. Thesis)," in *Studii Teologice*, 20 : 1 (1968), 3-170.

In Canterbury I met professors and students from all dioceses of the Anglican Church. The missiological literature section in the library was impressive. I was asked to write a contemporary profile of the Orthodox Church. I traveled to London, Oxford, Paris, and Geneva and discovered that the perception of Eastern Orthodoxy in the West was largely determined by the writings and influence of Russian Orthodox theologians and philosophers living in diaspora. In Geneva I enjoyed meeting the staff of the Bossey Institute.⁵

Bria's new duties as a deacon, from 1965 to 1969, and later as a priest, and as a lecturer Buzău theological seminary (1957–1961),⁶ the theological institute at Bucharest (from 1962, with some interruptions) and editor of the Press of Biblical Institute (1966–1968), did not stop his desire to understand ecumenical reality. His works focused on topics such as "synergy,"⁷ "work of grace,"⁸ dogmatic aspects of the Liturgy,⁹ "Baptism",¹⁰ "communion,"¹¹ "diakonia,"¹² and even other confessional spaces such as the Anglican.¹³ His appointment from 1 July 1973 at the World Council of Churches in Geneva as coordinator for Orthodox Missionary Studies in the Commission for Mission and Evangelization, where he remained until his retirement in June 1994, offered Bria the opportunity of getting to know the ecumenical reality *in situ* and to become a real artisan of peace and dialogue within the Christian arena.

⁵ Ion Bria, "My pilgrimage in mission," 75.

⁶ There will be the space where he will start to introduce missionary theology and ecumenism between the topics taught in Romanian Theological schools, as he confesses in an autobiographical text: "My appointment as professor of systematic theology at the Seminary of Buzau (1957-61) and then at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest (1962-73) was a great opportunity to introduce classes to missiology and ecumenism." Ion Bria, "My pilgrimage in mission," *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷ Ion Bria, "Sinergia în teologia ortodoxă [Synergy in Orthodox Theology]," in *Ortodoxia*, 8: 1 (1956), 9-43.

⁸ Ion Bria, "Simțirea tainică a prezenței harului după Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog [The intrinsic feeling of Grace presence according to Saint Symeon the New Theologian]," in *Studii Teologice*, 8: 7-8 (1956), 470-486.

⁹ Ion Bria, "Aspectul dogmatic al Sfintei Liturghii [Dogmatic aspect of Holy Liturgy]," in *Ortodoxia*, 11: 7-8 (1959), 417-427.

¹⁰ Ion Bria, "Harul Botezului în viața duhovnicească creștină [The grace of Baptism in Christian spiritual life]," in *Glasul Bisericii*, 19: 11-12 (1966), 931-944.

¹¹ Ion Bria, "Ecleziologia comuniunii [Ecclesiology of communion]," in *Studii Teologice*, 20: 9-10 (1968), 669-681.

¹² Developed in articles like: Ion Bria, "Slujirea creștină în lumea contemporană [Christian service in contemporary world]," in *Mitropolia Moldovei și Sucevei*, 45: 3-4 (1969), 145-154; Ion Bria, "Sensul activ al credinței creștine [The active sense of Christian faith]," in *Ortodoxia*, 21: 2 (1969), 216-240.

¹³ Ion Bria, "Actuala configurație geografică și confesională a confesiunii anglicane [Today's confessional and geographic configuration of Anglican Church]," in *Ortodoxia*, 15: 1 (1963), 128-140.

The ecumenical contribution of Ion Bria

As a part of the WCC mission staff, Bria participated in the most important world encounters dedicated to mission, as well as those of the ecumenical movement more generally. This offered him an opportunity to understand better the local realities of different churches, their theological backgrounds and to develop a multilateral approach. This also provided the context for the development of his rich publication work, covering doctrinal and missionary topics as well as church history, pastoral theology, and ethics and spirituality. A prolific writer, he published in journals such as *The Ecumenical Review* and the *International Review of Mission* in Geneva and many others, wrote notes on recent books, accounts of various meetings, as well as offering interesting approaches of comparative theology. It was also the space where he developed his ideas about topics such as “the liturgy after the liturgy,” provided an overview of various aspects of Christian reality, and proposed solutions to ecumenical questions.

“The liturgy after the liturgy”

Bria is best known for developing the idea of “the liturgy after the liturgy.”¹⁴ Using a term related to worship rather than mission and other aspects of the church’s life in the Orthodox space,¹⁵ not only does he present the realities of the Orthodox space, but also proposes some future lines for dialogue. Pointing to the meaning of the term from the Protestant space, where the Greek word λειτουργία (leitourgia) is understood as “the work of the people” and used to define the entire activity of the church, Bria spoke about the need to understand the work of the church as liturgy.

The underlying concept goes back to Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos, who has noted that in 1963 he spoke of how “the Liturgy must be extended to everyday life. And all our life should be transfigured into a liturgy.”¹⁶ The concept was discussed up at an Orthodox consultation in

¹⁴ See for example his contribution to the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*: Ion Bria, “Liturgy after the Liturgy,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd ed., ed. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 705–706.

¹⁵ Cf. Ene Braniște, *Liturgica generală: cu noțiuni de artă bisericească, arhitectură și pictură creștină [General liturgics: with notions of Church art, architecture and Christian painting]*, ed. Nicolae D. Nicula, 3rd edition, (Bucharest: Basilica Press, 2015), 18. This aspect is very well seized also by some of his reviewers. For example, one of them shows that: “The word ‘liturgy’ as used by the Orthodox church usually describes the worship service, that is, what goes on inside a church building - prayers, songs and chants, recital of the creed, proclamation of the Word, the Eucharist. The complete spiritual life and labour of the Orthodox Church culminates in the Liturgy. It is not surprising, then, that the perception exists that the Orthodox churches are predominantly ‘liturgical’ churches, concentrating on ritual and hierarchy and neglecting theological research, especially that pertaining to the church’s mission.” J. C. van der Merwe, “Bria, Ion 1996 - The liturgy after the liturgy, mission and witness from an orthodox perspective,” in *HTS Teologiese Studies / HTS Theological Studies*, 53: 4 (1997), 1452.

¹⁶ Quoted in Pavel Aurel, “Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos’ Contribution to the Development of Orthodox Missionary Theology,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 6:1 (2015), 73; thus the WCC mission document *Together Towards life* (2013), when speaking of the term “Liturgy after the Liturgy,” states that

Etchmiadzin, Armenia, in September 1975 on “Confessing Christ through the Liturgical Life of the Church Today,” which stated in its conclusions that the “Liturgy must not be limited to the celebration in the church but has to be continued in the life of the faithful in all dimensions of life.”¹⁷ The term “liturgy after the liturgy” was then used at an Orthodox consultation at New Valamo, Finland, in September 1977, which described it as the “liturgical use of the material world, a transformation of human association in society into Koinonia.”¹⁸

In 1996, Bria published a book titled, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy. Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*.¹⁹ However, the essence of Bria’s thought can be found in a short article published almost 20 years earlier in 1978, reflecting on the Etchmiadzin meeting of 1975.²⁰ The consultation had raised the question, Bria writes, about the relationship between “liturgical spirituality”, the personal spiritual experience gained by a meaningful participation in the liturgy, and the witness to the Gospel in the world, witness which belongs to the very nature of the Church and is rooted in the advent of the Spirit at Pentecost. He notes that the consultation was not able to go deeply into the issue of liturgy in life, so participants were asked to provide comments after the consultation.²¹ Bria then refers to the comment received from Anastasios, in which Anastasios states:

The liturgy has to be continued in personal, everyday situations. Each of the faithful is called upon to continue a personal “liturgy” on the secret altar of his own heart, to realize a living proclamation of the good news “for the sake of the whole world” . . . Since the liturgy is the participation in the great Event of liberation from the demonic powers, then the continuation of liturgy in life means a continuous liberation from the powers of the evil that are working inside us, a continual re-orientation and openness to insights and efforts aimed at

“The term was originally coined by Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos and widely publicized by Ion Bria.” See Jooseop Keum, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes with a Practical Guide*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2013), 9.

¹⁷ See the report of the consultation in the *International Review of Mission* 64:256 (October 1975), 417–21.

¹⁸ See the report of the consultation in “Report of an Inter-Orthodox Consultation ‘The Ecumenical Nature of Orthodox Witness’”, New Valamo, Finland, 20-24 September 1977 in *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism*, ed. Gennadios Limouris (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 66–69; <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century/member-churches/special-commission-on-participation-of-orthodox-churches/first-plenary-meeting-documents-december-1999/new-valamo-meeting>.

¹⁹ Ion Bria, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy: Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996).

²⁰ Ion Bria, “The Liturgy after the liturgy,” in *International Review of Mission*, 87: 265 (1) (1978), 86-90.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

liberating human persons from all demonic structures of injustice, exploitation, agony, loneliness, and at creating real communion of persons in love.²²

Bria continues by referring to other articles where the concept can be found,²³ and speaks about the complex meaning of “the Liturgy within the Liturgy.” This is both essential for the Church, and has to be understood in all its dimensions. Therefore the preparation for liturgy, according to Bria, takes place not only at the personal spiritual level, but also at the level of human, historical and natural realities.²⁴

Using his personal experience as well as the biblical foundations and the insights of the Church Fathers, Bria argues that “the mission of the Church rests upon the radiating and transforming power of the liturgy of the church,”²⁵ and corresponds both to the insights of contemporary theologians from his confessional space, such as Nikos A. Nissiotis,²⁶ as well as the ecumenical space, and offers an interesting approach to understand the life and mission of the Church and a common point of dialogue. He concludes by describing the “liturgy after the Liturgy” as being “an essential part of the witnessing life of the Church” with four characteristics:

1. An ongoing affirmation of true Christian identity, fullness and integrity that need constant renewal through Eucharistic communion;
2. Seeking a new witnessing space in each environment (family, society, office, factory, etc.,) through adopting new styles of mission, new ecclesiastical structures, and facing the “irruptions of the principalities and powers of this age”;
3. A liturgical life that nourishes Christian life not only in its private space, but also in its public and political realm;
4. Liturgy as meaning public and collective action and thus a sense in which the Christian is the creator of community.

²² Ibid., 86–87; this comment was included as an appendix to the report of the Etchmiadzin consultation, without, however, being directly attributed to Anastasios, see *International Review of Mission* 64:256 (October 1975), 420-21.

²³ Ion Bria, “Concerns and Challenges in Orthodox Ecclesiology Today”, in *Lutheran World*, 22: 3 (1976), 188-191.

²⁴ Ion Bria, “Liturgy after the Liturgy,” 87.

²⁵ Ion Bria, “Liturgy after the liturgy,” 88. See also Ion Bria, “Orthodoxy and mission,” in *International Review of Mission* 39: 352 (1) (2000), 49-59.

²⁶ N. A. Nissiotis, “The ecclesiological significance of interchurch Diakonia”, in *The Ecumenical Review*, 13: 2 (1961), 1; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “Nikos Nissiotis – an Orthodox Approach of the Mission,” in *Philotheos - International Journal for Philosophy and Theology*, 18: 1 (2018), 135-144; Emilio Castro, “Vital contributions of Nikos Nissiotis to the Ecumenical Movement,” *Nikos A. Nissiotis, Religion, Philosophy and Sport in Dialogue. In memoriam*, ed. Mihail P. Grigoris, (Athens: Thessaloniki University Press, 1994), 121.

Bria concludes by noting that through “liturgy after the Liturgy,” the church witnesses to the cosmic dimension of the salvation event and puts into practice its missionary vocation, daily and existentially.²⁷

The relevance of his presentation and wide application has been noted by Ana Langerak, the later director of the WCC programme unit for Churches in Mission, who quotes Bria’s statement that

“The church has to struggle for the fulfilment of that justice and freedom which was promised by God to all people and has constantly to give account of how the kingdom of heaven is or not within her. She has to ask herself if by the conservatism of its worship it may appear to support the violation of human rights inside or outside the Christian community.”

She continues:

Professor Bria’s concluding remarks go beyond the personal witness of individual believers who live out their faith in the context of the former socialist countries. He also applies the concept of “the liturgy after the liturgy” to the situation of the Orthodox church itself the church needs to engage in the task of re-christianizing Christians, and to support its members who confess their hope in Christ in the face of opposition and oppression, as vital aspects of its evangelistic witness.²⁸

Bria’s relationship to Orthodox theologians

Of course, Bria’s relationship with his home theology is seen also in his relationship with contemporary theologians from his own country. Therefore, it must be mentioned that one of Bria’s important contribution to ecumenical was presenting the ideas of Fr Dumitru Stăniloae, the most important Romanian contemporary theologian, to an international audience. Not only did Bria dedicate anniversary texts to Stăniloae²⁹ linking his theology to other important contemporary and past voices,³⁰ but also invited him to take part in ecumenical activities, and to present his ideas in

²⁷ Ion Bria, “Liturgy after the Liturgy,” 89–9.

²⁸ Ana Langerak, “A personal tribute to the International Review of Mission,” 192.

²⁹ Ion Bria, “Hommage au Père Dumitru Staniloae pour son soixante-quinzième anniversaire,” in *Contacts*, 27: 105 (1) (1979), 64-74.

³⁰ “Dumitru Stăniloae not only genuinely renewed the traditional way of thinking based on the authority of the Church Fathers, but raised several points fundamentally significant for theological discourse of today. His approach differs from those who present Orthodoxy in the form of a theological introduction or synthesis for the purpose of communication with the western churches (Sergius Boulgakov, Vladimir Lossky, Nicholas Zernov, John Meyendorff, Olivier Clement, Timothy Ware), in that he explores inductively all the basic issues of Orthodox doctrine in a personal and invigorating spirit.” *Ibid.*, 74.

WCC publications,³¹ underlining the strong relationship existing between Stăniloae's thought and his life. Thus, Bria wrote of Stăniloae:

Finally, it must be said that Staniloae's theology is the best expression of his personality. One cannot detach, in his case, the vision from the style of life. He is a man of extreme tenderness, courtesy and sensitivity in family, society and faculty. His soft and fatherly face emanates a fundamental simplicity and sympathy, a healing calm and serenity which overcome any hardness of heart and aggressive distance. It is this charismatic mystery of his person, his "ikon", which led many students, scholars and friends to become his disciples.³²

Bria's capacity of understanding Stăniloae's profound thought, his contribution to the Trinitarian theology, anthropology,³³ as well as the way how he understands the relationship between ethics and spirituality in an original system of thinking,³⁴ are well emphasized inside the articles published in different journals from the ecumenical space.

Dialogue between the Orthodox churches and the WCC

As well as presenting Stăniloae's thought to an ecumenical audience, Bria was intimately involved in the dialogue between the Orthodox churches and the WCC, attending the main meetings dealing with the role of the church, where he spoke about the main problems of the dialogue or highlighted the main contributions from the dialogue to the ecumenical arena.

He offered an interesting overview of the history of Orthodoxy in the ecumenical arena³⁵ and of its contributions to developing dialogue, noting the contribution of Orthodoxy in avoiding the

³¹ Cf. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Witness Through 'Holiness' of Life", *Martyria-Mission: the 58 Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today*, ed. Ion Bria, (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1980), 45-51.

³² Ion Bria, "Hommage au Père Dumitru Staniloae pour son soixante-quinzième anniversaire," 69.

³³ Also underlined by theologians by Nissiotis who, starting from his ideas developed an interesting approach of this problematic. Cf. Panagiotis Nellas, *Omul - animal îndumnezeit: perspectivă pentru o antropologie ortodoxă [Man – deified animal: perspectives for a theological anthropology]*, (Sibiu: Deisis Press, 2009).

³⁴ "Spirituality has an important ethical dimension. Staniloae opposes the excessive privatization of piety which he sees reflected in Christian existentialism in the West. He insists on the ethical implication of Christian piety and on the quality of personal relationships as a mode of existence. *Theosis* means for him the transfiguration of our style of life, and implies concern for one another, mutual sharing, dialogue and openness. Responsibility, the sense of belonging, is at the heart of Orthodox ethics. The continuing invocation of the name of Jesus, the so-called "prayer of Jesus", is incompatible with closing the door on neighbours. Theology and spirituality cannot be separated from a clear and sharp witness to Christ in society and in the world." Ion Bria, "The creative vision of D. Stăniloae: an introduction to his theological thought," in *The Ecumenical Review*, 33: 1 (1981), 56.

³⁵ Ion Bria, "The Eastern Orthodox in the ecumenical movement," in *The Ecumenical Review*, 38: 2 (1986), 216-227.

transformation of the ecumenical movement in the direction of a pan-Protestant confederation,³⁶ or underlining the role of unity for the future of ecumenism.³⁷ He did not avoid speaking about the poor experience of Orthodox Churches in previous dialogue, or underlining the diversity and lack of uniformity among Orthodox churches in different situations, underlining that conciliarity is the basis for future dialogue:

There are Orthodox churches which have different external ecumenical priorities and local experiences. In some countries, the history of the local church is less affected by the ecumenical movement. In some places, an introverted mentality prevails and the ecumenical agenda is presented as being in conflict with their own concerns. There is sometimes a factual contradiction between the general declaration about a united Orthodox witness and the concrete and specific contribution of different local churches.

In spite of that, the Orthodox churches are willing to enter a new phase of their ecumenical experience. One of the urgent needs is to manifest a true and full conciliar life at the local level. For the local church is the beginning and the end of the universal church. "All in each place" is a starting principle of the ecumenical movement.³⁸

As an Orthodox priest, Bria was interested in understanding his confessional realities and in presenting them to others, presenting accounts of various important events that influenced Orthodox life. For example, one is dedicated to the first conference that was planned to prepare the Great Pan-Orthodox Council, which took place at the the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate from Chambésy, in November 1976.³⁹ This article is important not only for the description of the event, but also because of some of Bria's prophetic approaches. Bria then

³⁶ "On the other hand, the presence of the Orthodox Church in the World Council of Churches has not only prevented the Council from simply becoming a Pan-Protestant federation, but has had an impact on its life and theological development. Orthodoxy has demonstrated a wider dimension of theological problematics beyond the Western Churches' polarization between pre- and post-Reformation. Moreover, it has created a new ecumenical situation within which the WCC is called to act responsibly." Ion Bria, "Ecclesial unity in the ecumenical movement: theology and expectations," in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 26: 4 (1981), 315.

³⁷ "The ecumenical problem for Orthodoxy is not the unity of the Church, which is given and preserved essentially by God in the historical Orthodox communion. The ecumenical problem for us is the problem of the disunity of Christendom and the necessity of the recovery of the biblical-patristic synthesis of faith which is constituted of the one Church. For Orthodoxy, theology and worship do not express the thought and life of one particular denomination, but of the Church of Christ." Ibid., 318.

³⁸ Ion Bria, "The Eastern Orthodox in the ecumenical movement," 226-227.

³⁹ Ion Bria, "L' espoir du Grand Synode orthodoxe," in *Revue théologique de Louvain*, 8: 1 (1977), 51-54.

presented the 10 points of dialogue proposed for the debate,⁴⁰ anticipating the fact that some would be changed and also proposing new important aspects for debate.

Bria's Orthodox background influenced his approach to ecumenism.,⁴¹ In his books or the articles, he referred to the "martyria", understood as witnessing to the truth and defining its identity in a climate of love and respect for the others. As he noted in an autobiographical article:

During my work with the WCC (1973–94), I moved to various departments of the council, trying to elaborate the specificity of Orthodox *martyria* and to incorporate it and its contribution into the ecumenical movement. Through a series of seminars, consultations, studies, and visits, and with the participation of all Orthodox churches, faculties, and centres, it was possible to agree on several basic affirmations that constitute today the Orthodox contribution to an ecumenical missiology.⁴²

This commitment to witnessing to Christ in truth and love guided Bria in his work of presenting the landmarks of his Church theology, underlining the relevance of love in understanding the faith, the universality of the message of Gospel⁴³ or the role of women.⁴⁴ Later, when after the fall of

⁴⁰ For a history of this event and of the pre-conciliar meetings and their relevance, see also: Viorel Ioniță, *Hotărârile întrunirilor panortodoxe din 1923 până în 2009 – spre Sfântul și Marele Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe [The decisions of the pan-Orthodox meetings from 1923 to 2009 – towards the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church]*, (Bucharest: Basilica Press, 2013); Patrick Viscuso, *Quest for reform of the Orthodox Church. The 1923 Pan-Orthodox Congress. An Analysis and Translation of its Acts and decisions*, (Berkeley Inter Orthodox Press, 2006); Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Eastern Orthodox Churches and Ecumenism according to the Holy Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete (2016)," in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 74: 4 (2018), 1-5; Viorel Ioniță, *Sfântul și Marele Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe – documente pregătitoare [Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church – preliminary documents]*, (Bucharest: Basilica, 2016).

⁴¹ See, for example: Ion Bria, Philippe Chanson, Jacques Gadille, Marc Spindler (eds.), *Dictionnaire œcuménique de missiologie. Cent mots pour mission*, (Paris: Cerf, 2001); Ion Bria, *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă – A-Z [Dictionary of Orthodox Theology – A-Z]*, (Bucharest: Press of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of Romanian Orthodox Church, 1981).

⁴² Ion Bria, "My pilgrimage in mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 26: 2 (2002), 76.

⁴³ "At the Vespers on Easter Day the Orthodox read the gospel in the original and as many other languages as possible. This is not only to remind us of the universality of the gospel and to reveal that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of peace and reconciliation. It is also to send the faithful as witnesses of the resurrection into the world proclaiming, "In him was life, and the life was the light of people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). This is the apostolic journey of the church, which follows in the footsteps of the apostles who met personally the risen Christ (John 26:16-17), like St Thomas who touched him saying, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). It is to follow the disciples who met the risen Christ in celebrating the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:35). It is also to follow in the steps of the women: Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James and Salome, who went to the tomb to look for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified (Mark 16:1-7), and who are sent back by the angel of the Lord to tell Jesus' disciples, "He has been raised from the dead" (Matt. 28:1-10)." Ion Bria, "Dynamics of resurrection in the church's tradition and mission," in *International Review of Mission*, 98: 365 (2) (2003), 261.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 261-262. There, for sure, one of the most important Orthodox voices that will speak about the role of the women in the Orthodox space will be Eliasbeth Behr-Sigel. She will also use some of his ideas in developing

communism there were new challenges facing ecumenical dialogue, Bria was not afraid of addressing them. Therefore, in an article published in 1999, he described the situation of Romania at that time, speaking about challenges coming from the proselytising attitude of Pentecostals or about the patrimonial and theological issues raised by the complicated relationships with the Greek-Catholic Church in Transylvania.⁴⁵ At the moment of his death he was working on the outcomes of the WCC's 1998 assembly in Harare,⁴⁶ focusing on the withdrawal of some Orthodox communities.⁴⁷

Conclusion

As this presentation has attempted to demonstrate, Fr Ion Bria was possessed of a vocation committed to ecumenism. Through topics like "martyria", "liturgy after the liturgy," accounts and presentation of debates and theological events, or by presenting the life and work of personalities like Father Dumitru Stăniloae, Bria contributed to a better understanding of the Orthodox realities and Orthodox contribution to ecumenism and missiology and offered new topics of debate. By presenting delicate aspects or even challenges of inter-confessional life from the former communist countries after 1989, he provided a mirror for the WCC that helped it to develop new aspects of his work or to future dialogue. Dedicated up to his death to the confession of Christ in love and respect for the others but also interested in deepening ecumenical realities, he was certainly one of the most important Orthodox voices from the ecumenical space. Together with Nikos A. Nissiotis, Daniel Ciobotea, the future Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Archbishop Kallistos Ware and others, he was one of the important Orthodox thinkers that not only helped in promoting an understanding of Orthodoxy, but created bridges and possibilities of ecumenical dialogue and acting together in a climate of life and diversity.

her own theology. See: Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publication, 2000).

⁴⁵ Ion Bria, "Evangelism, Proselytism, and Religious Freedom in Romania: An Orthodox Point of View," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 36: 1-2, 170-171. Cf. Antonie Plămădeală, *Uniatismul: metoda de unire din trecut și căutarea actuală a deplinei comuniuni: documentul de la Balamand: text și comentariu* [*The uniatism: method of union from the past and actual seeking for the fulfilled communion: Balamand document – text and commentary*], (Sibiu: Press of the Orthodox Archdiocese, 1993), for a detailed presentation of this topic and its Pan-Christian understanding.

⁴⁶ Cf. Diane C. Kessler (ed.), *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publication, 1999), 160-61.

⁴⁷ The text has been published two years later in *Ecumenical Review*. See: Ion Bria, "Widening the ecclesiological basis of the ecumenical fellowship," in *The Ecumenical Review*, 56: 2 (2004), 199-210.