

THE LANGUAGE OF THE CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THE CARPATO-DANUBIANO-PONTIC AREA (IN THE FIRST CENTURIES A.D.)

Theodor DAMIAN¹

Abstract: There are many controversies regarding the ethnic status, the place of dwelling and the language of the native population in the territory of Thraco-Geto-Dacian people, after the vanish of Roman Empire legions from there (end of the IIIrd century AD). At the same time, day-by-day new data and arguments come attesting that Thracian and Geto-Dacian territory was one of the first zone where the European Christianity got significant roots. Researcher, professor in History of Religions, priest and writer, Mr.Theodor Damian add to the issue some very interesting and useful arguments, supporting the idea that the explanation of the Romanians continuity and the preservation of their language can be demonstrated by a careful analyse of history of early Christian missionary activity in the first centuries of the New Era.

Key Words: Geto-Dacians; Thracians; Roman Empire; Gospel; missionary activity; Christian religion, translations, language of sermon.

There are so many mysteries with regard to our ancestors, the Geto-Dacian people, that the so called complete disappearance of their language in a very strange and unjustified manner almost doesn't surprise us. The explanations given for this phenomenon are mostly insufficient, scientifically unfounded and without logic. They are simple assertions, more or less artificial. Today is the time to look at this period of our history with interdisciplinary skills – which are becoming, day by day, more and more efficient. This is a necessary turning point for a more adequate and better understanding of the subject.

The purpose of this paper is not to exhaustively analyze the topic, but to reiterate, for those who are not yet convinced, a few historical and logical arguments and to encourage a critical examination of it in the light of the new research and publications.

The Church can contribute significantly to the clarification of the problem of our ancestors' language, because the Church – as an active player in history – carried out an intense pastoral, liturgical, theological and missionary activity among the Geto-Dacians. And if the theological activity (writings that had in view the interpretation of the fundamental teaching of faith with the purpose of crystallization of the Christian doctrine), the Divine liturgy and, especially, the pastoral and the Christian mission represent essential dimensions of the Church, and if the purpose of Christian mission is to convert and catechize large groups of

¹ Professor of Philosophy and Ethics, Metropolitan College of New York, USA.

people, these actions had to be carried out in the language of these people and not in a language they did not understand.

It is true that many of the Church Fathers were educated people who were fluent in several languages, especially in Greek and Latin. They wrote books in those languages, even if they did not represent the language of the local people. However, in such situations it is obvious that the Liturgy, the sermon and the mission could not been done but in the local idiom, spoken and understood by the respective local community, because we talk here about “mission” as a perseverant and systematic effort to efficiently spread the Christian ideas in the midst of a community.

Let’s look at the example of Saint Basil the Great, Saint Cyril of Alexandria, or Cyril of Jerusalem. They wrote, in Greek, books of complicated and profound theology that are difficult to understand even for the educated and sophisticated mind of the modern reader. But when they were talking to the people in the parishes where they were preaching, doing their catechetical instruction and missionary work, they must have done it in the local language of the respective countries, such as Egypt or Palestine, or other countries in Asia Minor. Were there Greek speakers in Jerusalem in the time of Saint Cyril’s mission? Of course. Nevertheless, what is absolutely sure, his listeners were speaking not Greek, but the local idiom. Were there people in Egypt fluent in Greek at the time when Saint Cyril was preaching in Alexandria? Of course, but the broad masses of people were speaking and understanding only the local language. (The Coptic language still in use in Egypt today in the Orthodox religious service and in the daily life of the Coptic Christians is a proof in this sense).

Besides the logical arguments there is also historical evidence regarding the preaching the Christian Gospel in the languages of the local communities. In one of his studies about the Thracian version of the Gospel, Bruce Metzger underlines that Saint Irenaeus of Lugdunum spoke and preached in the local Celtic language, just like Blessed Augustine in Hyppo preached in Punic, the local idiom.²

In 359 A.D. Saint John Chrysostom uttered a sermon to the Goths settled in Constantinople with the help of a translator. In that sermon he made a special mention regarding the use of local languages for the purpose of spreading the Christian faith:

“Where are, now, Plato, Pythagoras and all the other philosophers of Athens?! Just look! Where are the fishermen’s teachings and the teachings of the tent-makers?! They are not only in Judea, they are shining firmly, stronger than the sun, in barbarian languages also, as you did hear today! Scythians and Thracians, Sarmatians, Moors and Indians and even those living at the end of the world,

²Bruce M. Metzger, *New Testament Studies: Philological, Versional and Patristic*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1980, p. 165.

philosophise about the things mentioned here having them translated each in their mother tongue.”³

E.Lozovan, in *Dacia Sacra*, attests to the fact that the Bessi, a prominent Thracian tribe, uttered Christian prayers in their own language.⁴

If the Gospel was translated and preached in their language to some smaller ethnic groups than the Thracian and Geto-Dacian peoples (such as the Nubians, Sogdians, Georgians,⁵ etc.), we may assume that a nation like the Thracians, "the biggest in the world after that of the Indians" (according to Herodotus), strong and civilized (Thracia was "the mother country of poetry, music and religion"⁶), became a priority target of the Christian missionaries.

At the start of IVth century AD the native population of Thracia was not Romanized⁷ - says Bruce Metzger -, and Christianity advanced there in a remarkable manner, a fact specified by Heliodorus in a letter to Blessed Jerome who was at the time in Palestine.⁸

Although Morton Smith, a historian from Columbia University, advocates that in the VIth century AD the Gospels were already translated into the Thracian language,⁹ we consider that if for other, less known nations they were translated earlier, in the Thracian language, most probably, they were translated *at least three centuries earlier*, at the time when the first bishop of Tomis, Evangelicus, is mentioned (i.e. at the end of third century AD¹⁰), if not even earlier! On the other hand, if we trust the information that in the VIst century AD the four Gospels were already translated in Thracian, but that - unlike in other idioms where the Gospels were the first written literature¹¹ - in the Thracian language, like in Latin, there were written manuscripts before this time, we don't see any reason why the Gospel translation had to wait until the VIth century.

If the Thracian language is positioned beside Latin by Morton Smith, we consider in the same context that it may stay besides the Greek language as well. And if the Gospels were translated at the dawn of Christianity into these two, there is no reason for them not to be translated at the same time into Thracian. Also, if the translation of the Gospels generated a literary prospering of a

³*Ibidem*, pp. 159-160 (see Migne PG, 63, 499-501).

⁴E. Lozovan, "Dacia Sacra", in *History of Religions*, vol. 7, Nr. 3, February 1968, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill., p. 237.

⁵Bruce Metzger, *op. cit.*, p. 150 (note 4).

⁶*Ibidem*, p. 153.

⁷*Ibidem*, p. 156.

⁸*Ibidem*, p. 158.

⁹Morton Smith, *The Columbia History of the World*, Ed. by John A. Garraty and Peter Gay, New York, 1972, p. 247 (see Bruce Metzger, *op. cit.*, p. 150).

¹⁰Bruce Metzger, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

¹¹Morton Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

Christian nature, as Morton Smith writes,¹² and if we take for granted the hypothesis that the Gospels were translated into Thracian in the VIth century, how could the Thracian language disappear in the same century, as W.Tomaschek, P.P.Hasdeu and, later, I.I. Russu¹³ asserted, just at the same time when a full Christian literature was flourishing?!

Although too shy, Lozovan's conclusion that on the shores of Danube the Christian Church was neither of Latin style, nor Greek, and that the Christian doctrine was spread and practiced in local languages¹⁴, comes strongly to support the idea that the translation of the Gospels and of other Christian texts were done in Thracian even from the dawn of Christianity. It also supports the idea that the Thracian language did not disappear in the VIth century AD, but - on the contrary - due to the impulse given by the new Christian writings, lasted for a long time after it.

With this idea in mind, one must not forget the intrinsic psychological character of the Christian mission. The mission addresses the mind and the heart. The mind, for an understanding at an intellectual level -as much as this is possible - of the content of the evangelical preaching; the heart for the engagement of feeling in view of the application of the Christian teaching to the daily life. The emotional dimension is absolutely essential in this kind of context, as every religion targets the living, the creation of a *modus vivendi*; if not, it is reduced to a mere philosophy or to an ordinary system of thinking. This is valid especially for the Christian religion, because it is centered on and springs from the two kinds of love: for God and for the neighbour.

Holding in mind these considerations it is understandable why the evangelical mission must be done in the local tongue of people, even if - at another level - it was done also in a superposed language, a borrowed one, like the language imposed through cultural or military colonization. It is said that it does not matter what country you are in, no matter how many languages you speak, even when special circumstances determine you to speak currently in your daily life in a different language than your own (as in the case of immigration), when you pray, you pray in your mother tongue. Exceptions from the rule can be found, of course. The important fact is that religion targets the mind and the heart of the human being, and that the full and profound access to them is possible not through a foreign language, an imposed one, sometime even hated by natives, but through the mother tongue. It is known that the free Dacians (outside the borders of the Roman Empire) unceasingly attacked the Romans and that the Dacians from the

¹²*Ibidem*.

¹³E. Lozovan, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

¹⁴*Ibidem*, pp. 242-243.

occupied territories rebelled continuously against their oppressors.¹⁵ Consequently, the conclusion is that the Dacians hated the Romans and, implicitly, their language, except if both Dacians and Romans spoke approximately the same language.

It is useful to consider that, if the Gospel was translated into the native tongues of the peoples in the Roman Empire, all the more the Liturgy and the sermon were performed in the same local idioms. It is illogical to think that, if the Gospel was translated into a local language, the priest would preach and speak to the same people in another language. In addition, Lozovan affirms clearly that Thracian was a liturgical language.¹⁶

Another way to look at the same matter is the following: if some people, especially those who defend the Latinist theory, claim that through preaching in Greek or in Latin in Dacia the local language was replaced, because this preaching was done to other nations as well, including to some in the Roman Empire, all of these nations would be speaking today one of those two languages: Greek or Latin. This is, evidently, infirmed by reality.

If in a nation there is a practice of using another language at the same time with the mother tongue, it does not necessarily lead to the replacement of the mother tongue. This phenomenon is so true that it is applied today in other missions, such as those by Protestant churches in Africa or in Asia. The American Bible Society (with headquarters in New York), even today translates the Holy Scripture into tribal languages and dialects, even for countries where English or French are spoken extensively at the administrative, academic, and commercial levels.

It has to be mentioned here that even in the case when the Christian mission targets the elite of a nation and the call is made in another language than the local one when this local language is not known by the missionary, the goal is to obtain finally, through the Christianization of the elite, a future Christianization of the masses: this has happened for example with the Slavs. Or, consider, as Prof. Ion Rotaru indicates, the case of Niceta of Remesiana who preached south and north of the Danube and went until the heart of the Western Carpathian Mountains. He wrote easily in Latin, but spoke and preached in Old Romanian.¹⁷

The erudite theology professor Ioan Coman¹⁸ and, more recently, Mihai Diaconescu¹⁹ conclude that, keeping in mind the structure, profoundness and

¹⁵Mihail Diaconescu, *Historia Literaturii Dacoromâne*, Ed. Alcor Edimpex, București, 1999, pp. 23-38.

¹⁶*Ibidem*, p. 211.

¹⁷Ioan Rotaru, "Latinitate și Europeanism", în *Cugetarea Europeană*, An I, Nr. 1, dec. 2001, București, p. 7.

¹⁸Ioan G. Coman, *Scriitori Bisericești din Epoca Străromână*, Ed. Institutului Biblic, București, 1979, pp. 7-29; 44-54.

¹⁹Mihail Diaconescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 64, 76, 789.

powerful personality of the Dacian people and remembering their advanced culture attested by contemporary historians, the Dacian language was not assimilated by other idioms it came in contact with. On the contrary, it assimilated them, like later, the Romanian language coming in contact with the Greek language and Slavonic idioms did not stop to exist but, while assimilating influences from both languages, continued to exist until today.

The argument of the language is fundamentally connected with the argument of continuity, and vice-versa. There are cases when some minorities were denationalized by the interdiction to use their mother tongue and by the imposition of the language of the colonists, like in some areas of current Hungary or Poland, where the local Vlach - or Wallach - population became Hungarian or Polish. Consequently, if the Romanian ancestors in and around the Carpathian Mountains had lost their language, we would not be Romanians or Daco-Romanians today. And vice-versa: where a language is being preserved, the nation and the nationality is preserved, as in some small enclaves where minority populations preserved their mother tongue and through that, their ethnic identity.

Using the argument in reverse, if we, Romanians, continued to be a Romanian nation and are not Romans, even though partially colonized by them, this is due to the preservation of the mother tongue of the Geto-Dacians until today. By the same token, there are distinct nations like the Greeks or the Jews that were under Roman colonization for a longer time than the Dacians (Daco-Romanians) and yet they did not lose their mother tongue. The continuity of the language led to the ethnic continuity and survival.

The natural conclusion of these considerations is that if the Geto-Dacians were Christianized at a level so high that in the IVth century they produced hundreds of martyrs in the persecutions against Christians and gave to the Church famous theologians like Saint Cassian, Gherman and Dionysius Exiguus and were already well organized in dioceses with bishops well known in the ecumenical world of the time (Theotim of Tomis, for example), if all of these facts prove a solid rooting of the Christian religion in the conscience, mind and heart of our ancestors, it means, beyond the theological writings produced in Greek or Latin, that the basic Christian mission was not done in a language strange and odd to the heart of the people, but in their mother tongue. And once the religion penetrated through the language into the heart and conscience of the people, as long as the faith and the worship continue to exist, as they are its supreme values, the language continues to exist as well. And if the Romanian language lasted from then until today, that means it is the language that the Daco-Romanians spoke before Christianization and, implicitly, before the partial colonization of Dacia by the Romans, even if the language, as it is natural, went through different influences and slight changes.

Has the Geto-Dacian language vanished?

No. It existed, it lasted and it is!