

## Neofit Scriban-Unionist Patriot

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**Abstract:** Neofit Scriban was one of the most outstanding personalities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian clergy. Both as a priest and a teacher, he shared his knowledge and faith with everyone who wanted to listen to him. But his activity and work went beyond the Church walls. He was a patriot who strongly believed in the benefits of the union of the two Romanian Provinces. This is why he focused his energy in helping to accomplish this Romanians' ideal. He was an active member of the National Assembly and he fulfilled his task with enthusiasm and responsibility. His talent as an orator can be noticed in the speeches he wrote on different religious and political occasions. Appreciated by many people and contested by others, Neofit Scriban chose to live the last part of his life discretely and far from the tumults of the world, in his native village.

**Keywords:** union; patriot; teacher; priest

Neofit Scriban's<sup>1</sup> origins are in an old branch of a Transylvania family that later moved to Bucovina (Erbiceanu, 1986, p. 164). He was born in 1808<sup>2</sup>, in Burdujeni, Suceava and was baptized with the name of Nicolae. When he was nineteen years old, he went to Gorovei Monastery and shortly after, he was ordained as a monk by the monastery archimandrite Macarie Jora. From that moment on, young Nicolae would be called Neofit Scriban. In 1862, the metropolitan bishop Sofronie Miculescu offered him the archimandrite title (Erbiceanu, 1985, p. 102).

What made Neofit Scriban rise above his contemporaries and become one of the most outstanding Church servants of all times is his significant contribution to the

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<sup>1</sup> The Scriban family was originally from Transylvania, but they moved to Bucovina, where they stayed first in Cîmpulung and then in Burdujeni. The initial name of the family was Artimescu, the name of the priest Scriban's father, the treasurer Ioan Artimescu. The name Scriban was given to the bishop Filaret when he was a student at the Academy in Iași (at that time his name was Vasile Popescu) by the professor Vasile Fabian Bob, according to George P. Samureanu (a nephew of the Scribans, whose mother was Theoctist Scriban's sister), who got this piece of information from different sources. Later, the name Scriban was taken by Neofit and by Christofor Bogatu, the future bishop Theoctist. (Samureanu, 1890.)

<sup>2</sup> According to some people, the year of his birth was 1803 (A. Pumnul, I. Scriban).

troubles that took place between 1856 and 1859 and whose purpose was the Union of the Romanian Provinces.

The Crimean War ended with the Paris Peace Treaty signed on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1856, which mentioned some decisions concerning our country, as well: the Romanian Provinces would remain under the Ottoman Empire ruling, but with the guarantee of the seven big powers; the Organic Rules will be revised according to the Romanians' wishes. In order to do this, every province would call a National Assembly, called ad-hoc divan, with representatives from all social classes whose aim was to decide on their countries' structure. The desires of these divans were to be examined by the European Powers and their final result would be expressed in a Convention in Paris.

During the consultations of the ad-hoc divans, the Romanian Provinces would be ruled by a *caimacam*, who was a ruler's replacement (Moisescu, et alli, 1958, pp. 490-491) . As soon as they found out about the decisions of the Paris Treaty, the Romanian Provinces started preparations to elect the ad-hoc divan deputies. There was a favourable union attitude during all this time and people realized that the only way to step firmly towards political flourishing would be to have an only state which would become independent and strong.

Besides this, the idea of uniting our people in terms of origin, faith, customs and traditions was not new. The very Organic Rules contained an article about the necessity of uniting the two Romanian Provinces: Moldavia and Wallachia.

As expected, there were some powerful countries that opposed the Union, among which Turkey and Austria and they made everything they could to prevent the ad-hoc divans from expressing themselves freely. It was impossible to do anything in Wallachia, as the *caimacam* who had been appointed here, the former prince Alexandru Ghica, understood to do his job honestly, and, in addition, a Committee of the Big Powers had been sent to Bucharest to supervise the elections. But Moldavia was the scene of big injustices, as both the first *caimacam*, Toderița Balș, who died shortly after being appointed, and his successor, Nicolae Văgăreanu, were against the Union.

To the honour of the Moldavian Church, the union idea found in the metropolitan bishop of the time, Sofronie Miculescu, a warm supporter. At the beginning, the metropolitan bishop hesitated to express a strong opinion for the union, as he was afraid that it would lead to the submission of the Metropolitan Church in Iași to the one in Bucharest and that the presence of a foreign prince would jeopardize

orthodoxy. But after an encounter with the French consul in Iași, his fears disappeared entirely (Cojocariu, 1995, p. 49). By order of the metropolitan bishop Sofronie Miclescu, the archimandrite Neofit Scriban wrote the paper *The Union and the Non-union of the Provinces*, Iași, published by the publishing house Buciumul Roman, 1856, 27 pages, in semi-Cyrillic alphabet, with Teodor Codrescu`s foreword<sup>1</sup>.

The paper is divided into two chapters: I. *The Non-union of the Provinces*, where the anti-unionists` arguments were fought against, and II. *The Union of the Provinces*, where economical, political and administrative use resulting from the union of the two provinces were presented (Vitcu, 1979, p. 24). This text by the archimandrite Neofit Scriban led to discontents in the separatists` group and it was fought against by the dignitary Nicolae Istrati, the brother of the anti-unionist bishop Meletie Istrati from Huși, in the leaflet *About the day`s issue in Moldavia*, which appeared in Iași, in 1856. Nicolae Istrati`s leaflet was opposed to by many Moldavian patriots, among whom the archimandrite Neofit Scriban, who properly replied to it in his paper called *The Uses of the Union of the Romanian Provinces*, published by the publishing house Buciumul Roman, 1856, having 37 pages, in semi-Cyrillic alphabet<sup>2</sup>. This paper also has two parts: I. *The Inner Uses* (pp. 6-20), which shows that the union will bring economical prosperity and a better administrative organization, and II. *The Outer Uses* (pp. 20-37), which states the political importance of the two countries.

The consequence of these two leaflets for Neofit Scriban was the hatred of the anti-unionist party representatives and of the country rulers, who were the enemies of the Union, as well. The Austrain agent in Iași even asked the caimacam Teodor Balș (1856-1857) to expel the archimandrite Neofit Scriban because of these two texts.

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<sup>1</sup> The paper appeared in *Zimbrul (The Bison)*, Iași, year IV, no. 117, June 1856 and in *Steaua Dunării (The Danube Star)*, Iași, year II, no. 29, June 5<sup>th</sup> 1856. It is also reproduced in (Petrescu, Sturza, & Sturza, 1889, pg. 1-7) (and French translation, pp. 7-13).

<sup>2</sup> It was also published in *Zimbrul (The Bison)*, year IV, no. 142 and 143 on June 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> 1856. The treasurer D. Lascăr, in. op. cit, 1896, p. 36 states that these two works by Neofit were published in 10,000 copies and spread in all Moldavia by the students of the Socola Seminary during their summer holiday in 1856.

It was also the moment when the archimandrite Neofit Scriban published a poem called *At the Romanians` Union* in *Zimbrul (The Bison)* year IV, no. 140 on June 1<sup>st</sup> 1856, reproduced in *Poetical Essays*, pp. 53-55. The poem *The Slaves` Freedom in Moldavia*, in *Poetical Essays* pp. 39-42 belongs to that time, as well.

The new caimacam, Nicolae Vogoride (1857-1858), asked the metropolitan bishop not to put the Scriban brothers' names on the clergy's election lists for the ad-hoc Divan, pretending that the Ottoman Empire itself had required that (Păcurariu M. 1994, p.93). Since the metropolitan bishop was among the most ardent union supporters, the caimacam Nicolae Vogoride and the Turkish representative in the European Commission in Bucharest, set up by the Paris Treaty, asked the Church patriarch to discharge him from the metropolitan bishop chair. Things did not go so far, though, but the patriarch Chiril sent the metropolitan bishop Sofronie an offending letter, in which he vaguely complained about his behaviour and threatened him to take rough steps against him if he continued to stand for his opinions. The letter produced big indignation in the whole country. As a result, the archimandrite Neofit Scriban wrote, probably for the French consul Victor Place, a short note containing some evidence of the self-governing character of the Church in Moldavia.

There are other deeds that the archimandrite Neofit Scriban did during the Union troubles. When the representatives of the seven Big Powers who formed the so-called European Commission in Bucharest-whose mission was to gather information about the Romanians' wishes-came to Moldavia, the Scriban brothers were leading the clergy and faithful people group that had come to welcome them<sup>1</sup>. Both brothers visited the representatives of the foreign powers that were favourable to the Union (Russia, France, Sardinia and Prussia), presenting them the wishes of the Moldavian unionists.

In the summer of 1857, the unionist committee in Iași charged the archimandrite Neofit Scriban to go to Bucharest to get in touch with the unionists in Wallachia. Together, they were supposed to establish the common steps to take so that the fight for the union could continue. At the same time, he had to get in touch with the members of the European Commission in order to ask for the Union and to let them know about the Moldavians' complaints against the caimacam Vogoride and his government<sup>2</sup>. In Bucharest, he got in touch with the baron of Talleyrand, the bishop Nifon and the unionist leaders from Wallachia. He addressed a letter to every

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<sup>1</sup> Here is Victor Place's description of the Scriban brothers, in a telegram addressed to the ruler Walewski on June 4<sup>th</sup> 1857: "Both of them are, obviously, the most important, the most capable and the most energetic representatives of the Moldavian clergy... the Turks and the Austrian understood long ago that the Scriban brothers prevent their politics from putting pressure and cheating and how big their influence will be in the divan, where the collective desire calls for them; that's why they will neglect nothing to dismiss them." *Ibidem*, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> His nephew Romulus joined him on this trip. They crossed the Milcov river at night so that the authorities could not catch them. Cf. (Erbiceanu, 1888, p. 321).

diocese bishop and the metropolitan bishop in which he urged them to support the Union. When still in Bucharest, he delivered a speech for the caimacam Alexandru Dimitrie Ghica` s birthday, who was a Union supporter (Păcurariu, 1994, p. 94).

His role was brought out when the ad-hoc divan election in Moldavia took place. It is known that there were two election rounds, the first being won by the anti-unionists due to arbitrary facts and the frauds committed by the caimacam Vogoride` s government. In this first election round, the archimandrite Neofit Scriban` s name was removed from the clergy election lists in Iași, for the reason that he was living outside the city, at Socola<sup>1</sup>. After this election round was cancelled, in the new elections that took place on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1857, the Iași clergy chose the archimandrite Neofit Scriban as its representative in the ad-hoc divan, with 136 out of 139 votes.

The divan started on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1857 and it was preceded by a Te-Deum held in the Church St. Nicolae in Iași. In front of all the deputies, the archimandrite Neofit Scriban delivered a special speech, in which he stressed the importance of the event (Scriban a, 1844, pp. 74-87). On 19<sup>th</sup> October 1857, Mihail Kogălniceanu` s proposal for the future country organization was voted enthusiastically. In the eighth reunion, on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1857, there was elected a nine member committee. Neofit Scriban was one of them and he was in charge with elaborating the issues which were to be discussed within the Divan. The committee wrote a fifteen proposal project, where the points V and VI dealt with church issues: V. The freedom of the cult in limiting privileges and VI. The creation of a central synod authority for the spiritual things of the Romanians` Church. In the tenth reunion, on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1857, the cult liberty issue was brought into discussion. The archimandrite Neofit took part in this discussions and he supported this wish of the Divan, but he insisted on offering cult liberty so that it could not offend the orthodox religion. The creation of a synod authority<sup>2</sup> with legislative and administrative attributions was equally required.

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<sup>1</sup> The archimandrite Neofit Scriban protested against this illegal deed and showed he was a member of the Iași clergy, as a seminary teacher, Metropolitan House archimandrite and censor of church books and religious speeches uttered in the metropolitan cathedral, and consequently he was unfairly considered a simple monk. The metropolitan bishop himself Sofronie, in a letter to the European Commission in Bucharest on June 18<sup>th</sup> 1857, protested against the removal of his name from the lists, and said, among other things: "it would be desirable for the church glory and for the well-being of our country to have as many people as the archimandrite Neofit Scriban" (Păcurariu, 1994, p. 95).

<sup>2</sup> The archimandrite Neofit had prepared a long speech for the Divan, in which he required the monastery estate returning and improving the clergy position. Nevertheless, he never held this speech so that he would not cause discontent. It was reproduced in (Scriban a, 1844, pp. 226-242).

In December, there were discussions within the clergy committee. Five of its members: the bishops Ghenadie Șendrea and Filaret Scriban, the archimandrites Neofit Scriban and Melchisedec Ștefănescu and the treasurer Dimitrie Matcaș wrote and then presented a twelve point project regarding the future organization of the Church in Moldavia. After long debates about the fourteen points presented by the clergy deputies, in the reunion XXXI on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1857 the Assembly voted unanimously a fifteen point program regarding the Church (Păcurariu, 1994, p. 95).

Neofit Scriban joined the other members of the Divan in voting some proposals meant to re-organize the Provinces, such as: equality for everybody in front of the law, elimination of privileges, respect for housing and individual freedom, army organization, separation of executive and legislative powers, foreigners` submission to the laws of the country, trade agreements with other countries, compulsory and free education, etc. He supported some of the suggested amendments. We can mention here Mihail Kogălniceanu` s amendment to reject the senate institution and to create a legislative assembly. Neofit Scriban was the only one who supported this idea.

In the endless talks about the relationships between landowners and statute labour peasants, the archimandrite Neofit, together with the bishop Ghenadie Șendrea and the treasurer Dimitri Matcaș voted for the villager deputies` proposal, who asked for abolishing landowners` privileges as well as other things aiming at improving their condition.

When the Divan had been dissolved, in 1858, new election preparations started for the country legislative Assembly, which was meant to elect the new prince. On 29<sup>th</sup> August 1858, the archimandrite Scriban held a speech in front of the electors in Iași and advised them to choose worthy representatives who would fight for the union of the two countries (Scriban b, 1844, pp. 85-95). When the Legislative Assembly started its activity, on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1858, there was a Te-Deum at the Church St. Nicolae. The archimandrite Neofit Scriban delivered a short speech in front of the audience and urged them to elect a prince that would be worthy to follow Steven the Great (Scriban a, 1844, pp. 247-248).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> we mention here that, during this time, the archimandrite Neofit Scriban had several speeches at the funerals of some unionist party representatives and they all reflected his patriotism. Examples of such speeches are: Cuvânt la înmormântarea vornicului Dimitrie Ralet (Speech at the funerals of the court clerk Dimitrie Ralet), in *Steaua Dunării/The Danube Star*, year III, no. 78, November 14<sup>th</sup> 1858;

When Alexandru Ioan Cuza was elected Moldavia's prince, he wrote an article called "Greetings to Romania on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1859", in which he praised the big event. In a short presentation, these were the archimandrite Neofit Scriban's merits and contributions to accomplishing the Union on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1859.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1862 he was appointed Argeş deputy bishop when the bishop Clement of Argeş died. (The Argeş and Muscel Diocese- a New Way, 2000, pp. 13-15)

He died on Tuesday, 9<sup>th</sup> October 1884 and he was buried on 11<sup>th</sup> October in the fore-nave of the family church, next to his brother Filaret. At the ending of this speech, which is meant to be a gratitude and appreciation tribute, we believe we could create a clear icon of this bright personality of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Moldavian clergy.

Neofit Scriban continues to be one of the most enlightened bishops of our Church; as every significant activity which happened then benefited from his direct contribution. Priest at the Three Hierarchs Church and preacher at the Metropolitan Church, teacher at the national schools in Fălticeni and Neamţ Monastery, at the School The Three Hierarchs and at the Socola Seminary, Argeş deputy bishop, Neofit Scriban lent his personality, erudition, patriotism and faith everywhere he went.

Nevertheless, his contemporaries' ingratitude took into account neither these aspects of his activity nor his contribution to the Union or to the canonic grounds of the Church and forced him to withdraw to the Burdujeni of his childhood, where he lived lonely and forgotten until the end of his life.

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