The present study seeks to investigate the relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the post-1989, democratic Romanian state. This study describes the challenging grounds on which the relations between the Orthodox Church, inheritor of a Byzantine tradition and prone to nationalist inclinations, and the politically immature yet decisively democratic and liberal Romanian society and state, are taking place. The emphasis of the research is on the issue of religious nationalism and the ideological influences that totalitarian regimes like Marxist Communism and Nazism exert on churches and theologians. In a comparative analysis, this study seeks lessons that can be learned from the Germany of the Third Reich, a context where the nationalist revival led to the emergence of the Nazi regime.

Two important findings result from this comparison, namely the pervasive nature of nationalism to generate totalitarian ideologies based on the link between religious identity and ethnicity, and the need for a theology of resistance that can offer a foundation for strengthening the church against nationalist extremism. These two aspects preoccupy the remainder of this study, where Romanian Orthodox nationalism is examined first from a Byzantine caesaropapist perspective, then in relation to the wider European nationalist awakenings between the French Revolution and its Bolshevik counterpart and finally within its own compounds vis-à-vis the Romanian nationalist awakening which coincided with the constitution of the Romanian Orthodox autocephaly.

Twentieth-century Romania is described next, and attention is given to the peculiar Fascist-Orthodox ideological synthesis surrounding the church’s involvement with the Iron Guard movement. Later, when the Orthodox Church becomes an organ of the Communist regime this is viewed as a consequence of its nationalist inclinations espoused much earlier, although it is during this period that a climax is reached in its Marxist-Orthodox theological symbiosis. Supported and perpetuated by patriarchs and theologians alike, and left unchallenged by a weak anti-Communist resistance movement from within the church, this theological failure prompts a dialogue between Romania’s foremost theologian, Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, and Swiss Reformed Karl Barth. Here it is argued that Barth’s theology of resistance is based on a dialectical approach that offers a solid basis for churches’ unambiguous rejection of ethnic nationalism. In a critical dialogue between Barth and Stăniloae, this point is developed by emphasizing how a renewed theology offers not just a platform for maintaining a critical distance from the state but also an affirmative support for democracy, making the Orthodox Church in Romania a partner in the positive transformation of the society.