Scientia Moralitas International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
ISSN 2472-5331 (Print) | ISSN 2472-5358 (Online) | Vol. 10, No. 1, 2025
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.16415598

# Moralizing Politics: Toward a Pentecostal Public Theology of Democratic Ethics in Romania

**Marcel Măcelaru**
Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, Romania,
marcel.macelaru@uav.ro

ABSTRACT: This article examines the ethical crisis in Romania's 2024–2025 presidential election, arguing that the problem is not the absence of ethics, but rather its ideological distortion and performative misuse. Moral language—once a means of civic deliberation—has been co-opted for political tribalism, emotional manipulation, and rhetorical spectacle. The article proposes that the renewal of public ethics requires more than critique: it demands theological reconstruction. Drawing on insights from Bonhoeffer, Hauerwas, Volf, Kuyper, and especially Pentecostal theology, the study articulates a vision for ethical reconstruction rooted in humility, discernment, and the common good. Pentecostal public theology—through its pneumatological imagination, liturgical practices, and eschatological hope—offers distinct resources for resisting moral absolutism and fostering prophetic, Spirit-led engagement in the public square. In contrast to performative moralism, this framework emphasizes ethical presence, communal repair, and justice-oriented love as pathways toward democratic renewal.

KEYWORDS: moral polarization, Romanian politics, performative ethics, ethical reconstruction, political theology, public witness, spirit-led discernment, Pentecostal public theology

## 1. Introduction – Setting the Stage

Contemporary Romanian political discourse reveals a growing entanglement of ethical vocabulary, ideological narratives, and strategic media performance. Rather than serving as a foundation for civic reasoning, moral language is increasingly mobilized to signal partisan identity and consolidate emotional allegiance. What once aimed to foster public reflection has become a tool for symbolic alignment. These linguistic strategies were more visible than ever during the 2024–2025 presidential campaign as political discourse became saturated with moral rhetoric and ethical terminology. Candidates across the ideological spectrum invoked terms like justice, dignity, truth, and family values with emotional urgency and symbolic intensity; and while such language may suggest that ethics stands at the center of Romanian public life, it also

raises a deeper concern: What kind of ethics is being performed—and to what end?

In response, this article argues that the problem with contemporary Romanian politics is not a lack of ethics, but rather the distortion and instrumentalization of moral discourse. Rather than fostering dialogue or civic reasoning, political actors increasingly use ethical language as a tool for affective mobilization, identity reinforcement, and ideological polarization. As Moffitt (2016) and Ylä-Anttila (2018) have shown, in populist contexts moral claims are frequently employed to generate emotional intensity and signal populist authenticity and cultural alignment, rather than to foster policy reasoning and institutional reform. Moral terms thus become signals of loyalty, not invitations to public deliberation.

What emerges in such a landscape is not the absence of values, but their rhetorical overuse and conceptual erosion. In Walzer's (2006) terms, the moral minimalism necessary for democratic pluralism is replaced by moral maximalism: each camp asserts its own comprehensive values as public absolutes. This form of "virtue signalling" (i.e. Westra, 2021, pp. 156-178; Rhodes, 2022, pp. 1-28) turns ethical terms into slogans devoid of institutional content and immune to debate. As a result, the public sphere is shaped less by civic argument and more by performative declarations of identity and moral superiority.

The study offered here engages this paradox: ethics is everywhere in Romanian politics, and yet it is rarely connected to civic responsibility, policy substance, or democratic reflection. Drawing on political theory, discourse analysis, and public theology, the article examines how this rhetorical moralization reshapes the democratic landscape. It explores the mechanisms of ethical signalling across the ideological spectrum, highlights the role of religious actors in amplifying symbolic moral claims, and assesses the consequences of turning political ethics into a performance of identity rather than an orientation toward justice and the common good.

Furthermore, I propose that addressing this challenge requires more than political theory and discourse analysis. It demands a constructive theological framework. Public theology—especially in its emerging Pentecostal expressions—offers vital resources for reimagining moral discourse in ways that are spiritually grounded, socially transformative, and democratically responsive (see, for instance, Yong, 2010; Swart & De Beer, 2014; Studebaker, 2016, pp. 107-198; Smith, 2017). The argument that follows, therefore, begins to trace this terrain, reconsidering the civic function of ethics and its potential contribution to democratic renewal.

This article is the first in a two-part series. While the present study offers a conceptual and theological framework for diagnosing and responding to the moralization of political discourse, a forthcoming companion article will

explore how Romanian evangelical communities navigate, or ought to navigate, this terrain—both contributing to and challenging the dynamics of ethical polarization during the 2024–2025 campaign. Together, the two studies seek to illuminate not only what is at stake when politics becomes saturated with moral symbolism, but what resources—intellectual, civic, and theological—might help us recover a more honest and accountable public ethic.

## 2. Rise of Moralized Politics: From Disagreement to Tribalism

If anything, the 2024–2025 Romanian presidential campaign confirmed that in the heat of political contests, language is never neutral. It is chosen, honed, and deployed with strategic intent: to persuade, to differentiate, and to mobilize. In such contexts, ethical language—normally used to ground civic deliberation—is increasingly instrumentalized to dramatize conflict, generate emotional intensity, and reinforce partisan identity. Such politicization of moral vocabulary marks a significant drift: from ethics as a foundation for civic reflection to ethics a strategy of symbolic domination. Politics thus gets turned into a battleground of moral tribalism, where ethical claims no longer invite reflection but demand allegiance.

What had been emerging in previous election cycles—namely, the politicization of moral vocabulary—was crystallized in the 2024–2025 campaign into a systematic mode of communication, whereby ethical language no longer served to deliberate or persuade, but to divide. Political actors across ideological camps appropriated moral terms not to seek consensus or articulate policy goals, but to dramatize conflict, incite emotion, and assert cultural superiority. Slogans invoking dignity, family, justice, or truth were no longer invitations to civic reasoning, but badges of tribal belonging. In such a context, moral claims function less as appeals to shared conscience and more as declarations of moral hierarchy—distinguishing insiders from enemies, the righteous from the corrupt, and the "truthful" from the mistaken.

This section traces the transformation of moral language into a performative tool of division, examining how its rhetorical deployment has replaced ethical inquiry with ideological allegiance. To understand how this shift unfolded, we begin by revisiting the conceptual boundaries between ethics, ideology, and communication—analyzing how Romanian campaign rhetoric has deliberately manipulated ethical categories, turning moral language into a weapon of identity and tribal allegiance.

Philosophically, ethics refers to a reflective and dialogical practice—one that engages competing goods and moral obligations with humility, openness, and a commitment to reasoned judgment. Ideology, by contrast, tends to fix meaning within closed systems of belief, reducing moral complexity to dichotomous certainties: good versus evil, us versus them (Brown, 2008, pp.

149-175; Müller, 2016, pp. 7-40). This is where the problem emerges: when moral discourse becomes ideologized, it ceases to serve public deliberation and instead becomes a performative marker of political loyalty.

Closely tied to this ideological drift is the erosion of public reason and communication. According to Rawls (2005, pp. 15-21) and Habermas (1996, pp. 287-328), public discourse in pluralist societies must be governed by principles of reciprocity and reason-giving. Moral convictions, especially when rooted in religious traditions, must be translated into terms accessible to others. Similarly, Paul Ricoeur (1992) has argued that ethical identity is forged through dialogical recognition of the other. To remain credible, then, moral discourse must be accountable to alterity, not merely expressive of the self.

In contrast to these ideals of dialogical reason, populist political discourse in Romania frequently exhibits moral absolutism. Ethical claims are framed as self-evident, unnegotiable, and theologically or culturally ordained. Political actors across the spectrum—nationalist, conservative, liberal, or progressive—employ moral language as a strategy of legitimation and symbolic control. Slogans like *Fără compromis cu răul!* (No compromise with evil!) or *România trebuie să-și recâștige demnitatea morală!* (Romania must regain its moral dignity!) are examples of such posture. These are not starting points for argument but declarations of moral closure.

Ethical terms like *cinste* (honesty), *demnitate* (dignity), and *adevăr* (truth) are employed as tools of emotional activation, intended to evoke moral trust and trigger identity-based responses (cf. Moffitt, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015). Yet, such appeals frequently bypass substantive policy debate. Nationalist candidates, for instance, invoke the triad *credință, familie, România* (faith, family, Romania) to conflate moral loyalty with patriotic belonging. Meanwhile, progressive candidates employ inclusive refrains such as *Respect pentru toți!* (Respect for all!), but without articulating concrete commitments to minority protection or social reform. In both cases, ethical language serves more to perform virtue than to pursue justice.

This trend was unmistakable during the 2024–2025 election cycle, as political debates turned into arenas where moral posturing eclipsed policy discussion. Slogans like *Apărăm familia românească!* (We defend the Romanian family!) and *Demnitate pentru toți!* (Dignity for all!) replaced detailed governance programs with declarations of virtue. Expressions like *valori tradiționale* (traditional values) and *moralitate națională* (national morality) were skillfully employed to perform credibility, signal sincerity, and convey moral authority. This dynamic cut across party lines. On the political right, invocations of "family values," "national dignity," and "Christian civilization" were especially prominent, often drawing from conservative Orthodox or evangelical vocabularies. Such terms evoked notions of Christian morality, the integrity of the traditional family, and an unaltered Romanian cultural identity.

In this regard, the slogan *Apărăm familia românească!* (We defend the Romanian family!) is emblemating of how moral frames were mobilized to mark perceived cultural threats. On the center-left, discourses of "inclusion," "solidarity," and "justice for all" functioned in a similar symbolic register. Often framed through secular-progressive lenses, concepts like dignity, justice, and rights were abstracted from concrete policy proposals and strategically redeployed as identity markers. While different in content, these rhetorical strategies converged in form: both camps used moral terms to assert identity, dramatize virtue, and vilify opponents. In each case, the aim was not the cultivation of ethical deliberation, but the consolidation of in-group allegiance and dominance in the public sphere.

These strategies rely on what Laclau (2005, pp. 129-156) calls "floating signifiers"—terms whose political power lies in their semantic openness. Their symbolic resonance is high, but their meaning remains deliberately vague and adaptable. Within this rhetorical strategy, a term like "decency", for instance, may mean gender traditionalism in one speech and government transparency in another. Such moral vocabulary functions less as a policy principle and more as an emotional trigger than policy principle—a tendency further amplified by the logic of digital media. In such a climate, the ethical terrain becomes deeply polarized. Opposing political views are cast not merely as mistaken but as immoral. Public discourse splits into binaries: "truth" versus "lies," "dignity" versus "corruption," "our values" versus "their decadence." This Manichaean framing renders dialogue suspect and makes negotiation appear as betrayal.

Moreover, this reflects what Wendy Brown, in her analysis of tolerance, terms the "culturalization" of politics—a process by which value claims are transformed into symbolic assets rather than tools for public deliberation (Brown, 2008, pp. 19-20). In Romania, the implications of this shift are particularly acute, shaped by a post-communist legacy of moral disorientation, institutional fragility, and collective disillusionment (Tismăneanu, 1998; Verdery, 1996). In such a context, affective and intuitive appeals to morality often serve as compensatory forms of legitimacy. The vacuum left by weak institutions and public distrust is filled with political and religious actors who deploy ethical language not to foster discernment, but to assert identity and demand allegiance. As a result, moral performance eclipses ethical reasoning. What counts is not the substance of moral claims, but the affective resonance they create. Politicians posture as defenders of virtue while offering little policy depth. Citizens are invited not into deliberation, but into identification—cheering for moral champions who claim to speak the truth.

Admittedly, this dynamic is neither entirely new nor unique to Romania. It echoes what Moffitt (2016, pp. 120-121) terms the "spectacularization" of populist discourse, where moral urgency replaces institutional reform, and performance supplants substance. Already decades ago, Alasdair MacIntyre

(1985, pp. 6-35) diagnosed what he called "emotivism"— a cultural condition in which moral assertions are treated as expressions of personal preference or group allegiance, rather than as reasoned claims open to dispute. In such a context, ethical terms lose their grounding in shared practices and become vehicles for rhetorical power. Charles Taylor's account of "expressive individualism" further illuminates this phenomenon: when self-affirmation becomes the highest good, public ethics is reoriented around authenticity and recognition rather than accountability (Taylor, 2007, pp. 473-474). Moral language thus becomes a means of performing identity, and not of pursuing the common good. David Brooks captures this shift in cultural tone by distinguishing between "résumé virtues," which are skills and achievements performed for external recognition, and "eulogy virtues," which are the deep qualities of character that form the basis of a moral life (Brooks, 2013, pp. ix-x). Together, these thinkers reveal a broader transformation: from deliberative engagement to symbolic display, from shared judgment to strategic signaling. This shift is nothing short of a strategic deployment aimed at claiming moral status, provoking affective allegiance, and delegitimizing dissent.

This analytical focus leads to a deeper normative question: What is the rightful role of moral language in a democratic society? How might it be reclaimed as a tool for civic reasoning, pluralistic dialogue, and public accountability—rather than a catalyst for tribal division? Evidently, at the heart of this analysis lies a concern for the public function of moral language in democracy. As theorists like Habermas (1996, pp. 287-387) and Ricoeur (1992, pp. 169-298) emphasize, moral discourse in pluralist societies must be dialogical, reflective, and accountable to others—especially those who disagree. When public ethics becomes tribal, it loses its ability to mediate between personal convictions and institutional legitimacy. Instead of fostering deliberation, it exacerbates polarization. Yet, the retreat from democratic ethics into moralized identity politics is not inevitable (Brown, 2008). Reconstructing ethical discourse is both possible and necessary.

The next section of this study turns to the consequences of this moralization—how the politicization of ethical language reshapes not only public debate, but also social trust, institutional legitimacy, and theological responsibility.

## 3. Consequences of Moralized Politics – Social, Institutional, Theological

The moralization of Romania's 2024–2025 electoral discourse has generated consequences far beyond rhetorical style. What began as strategic ethical branding has hardened into a cultural logic with tangible institutional, social, and theological repercussions. At stake is not merely the language of politics but the very architecture of democratic participation and moral reasoning. This

section examines how moralized discourse—by converting ethics into symbolic combat—has narrowed the public sphere, undermined institutional trust, polarized civic culture, and distorted the theological imagination.

One of the most damaging effects of moralized politics is the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions. As ethical vocabulary is redeployed to mark symbolic territory, institutions such as courts, electoral commissions, media outlets, and even educational systems are no longer perceived as independent arenas for negotiation or adjudication; that is, neutral guardians of the common good. Instead, they are interpreted as partisan actors, expected to take sides in a symbolic war of values. In this moralized landscape, legitimacy becomes conditional. A judicial ruling, a news article, or a curricular recommendation is not evaluated on its procedural merits and conceptual integrity, but on whether it aligns with one's moral tribe. This tribal logic erodes institutional trust and delegitimizes pluralism. As Jan-Werner Müller notes, populist actors often claim "exclusive moral representation" of "the people," thus presenting themselves as "sole moral representatives" of the nation (Müller, 2016, pp. 19-23), allowing them to discredit dissent and to cast institutional critique as betrayal, thereby delegitimizing opposition and portraying independent institutions as enemies of the moral order. This collapse of institutional neutrality is not simply political; it marks a deep crisis of ethical trust and governance. Over time, this distrust fosters two opposing tendencies: calls for authoritarian "clean hands" leadership or widespread political disengagement—both corrosive to democratic culture.

The instrumentalization of moral language also produces significant social costs, particularly in the domain of civic engagement. Emotional polarization, framed in stark dichotomies, such as "truth versus lies" or "dignity versus corruption," becomes a dominant mode of civic mobilization. Campaigns are increasingly orchestrated around emotionally charged symbols like "family," "national dignity," and "justice," that bypass ethical reasoning and appeal instead to grief, outrage, or fear. These emotions, while politically potent, often displace ethical reflection. The shift from rational persuasion to affective saturation fosters what we may call "ethical fatigue": citizens become overwhelmed by constant moral drama and disengage from public debate altogether, not because they reject ethics, but because they recognize the manipulative deployment of moral language. Such saturation with performative moralism desensitizes audiences, transforming civic participation into either passive affirmation or cynical withdrawal. The overuse of moral urgency in politics can depoliticize citizens: when every issue is framed as a moral crisis, few issues prompt thoughtful response.

This emotional saturation also undermines the possibility of public deliberation. Instead of grappling with policy complexity or negotiating diverse values, political discourse reduces questions of justice and governance to

emotional litmus tests of belonging. Furthermore, digital platforms accelerate this saturation. The logics of social media—amplifying virality, brevity, and outrage—rewards simplified moral narratives over complexity. As Bădescu & Burean (2008) show, digital political cultures increasingly favour moral signalling: expressions of virtue that function more as social positioning than as genuine ethical engagement (cf. Fuchs, 2017; see also Bădescu, Mocan, & Marian, 2003).

But perhaps the most corrosive consequence of moralized politics is the rise of populist validation and its consequence: a corrosive effect on theological discourse, especially within religious communities engaged in public life. While populist actors position themselves as guardians of "authentic morality," their opponents are portrayed not just as mistaken but as morally illegitimate. Such populist moral absolutism thrives in a binary moral universe, where there is no room for ambiguity and negotiation. And where absolute moral clarity is asserted, there is no room for discernment and repentance.

Moreover, populist leaders thrive in contexts where moral language is weaponized. They cast themselves as defenders of a virtuous people against corrupt elites, using religious and national symbols to create a sense of besieged moral identity. In Romania's recent electoral cycle, moralized populism often cloaked itself in religious symbolism. Political candidates portrayed themselves as defenders of "Christian values," "the moral nation," or "the real Romania," frequently invoking biblical language or conservative theological categories. Religious actors—particularly within Evangelical circles—were drawn into this dynamic, serving as validators of moral purity rather than prophetic witnesses to justice and truth. In such cases, faith was not articulated as a source of ethical wisdom but instrumentalized as a badge of political identity (Stan & Turcescu, 2007; Măcelaru, 2025, pp. 106-109). The result was a troubling use of "Christian" rhetoric as a marker of identity rather than a resource for justice. And as Miroslav Volf (2011) has warned, when religion is used to legitimize power rather than interrogate it, it forfeits its prophetic and ethical vocation.

Romanian Evangelical communities, in particular, have at times echoed this absolutism—publicly blessing political leaders as moral exemplars rather than critically evaluating their policies or conduct. Such a dynamic flattens ethical complexity and reduces theology to ideological branding. The prophetic and deliberative functions of theology are displaced by a triumphalist posture that sanctifies political allegiances. While this trend is not unique to Romania, its manifestation in a post-communist, religiously re-assertive context reveals a particularly sharp tension: between the church's prophetic vocation and its temptation to serve as the moral voice of populist nationalism. This dynamic also exposes an urgent need for theological renewal. The final section of this study turns to that task, proposing a Pentecostal public theology rooted not in

ideological conformity, but in Spirit-led discernment, ethical humility, and a renewed vision for public witness.

## 5. Pentecostal Public Theology and the Reconstruction of Ethics

Considering the ethical distortions that marked Romania's 2024–2025 electoral campaign—rhetorical saturation, moral tribalism, and institutional distrust—there is an urgent need not only for critique but for theological reconstruction. I propose that Pentecostal Public Theology, with its distinctive emphasis on the Spirit's ongoing work in the world, offers vital resources for the renewal of ethical discourse. While its concerns mostly align with broader theological traditions, Pentecostal theology contributes uniquely through pneumatological depth, embodied spirituality, and an eschatological imagination—all crucial for ethical discernment in a polarized public square. This section develops such a vision in three movements: it begins with general theological commitments, advances through the lens of public theology, and culminates in a Pentecostal vision for ethical reconstruction.

At its core, Christian theology affirms that ethics is not merely a matter of utility, performance, or identity signaling. Rather, it is a response to the reality of God—grounded in divine justice, mercy, and love. When moral language is stripped of this theological depth and reduced to rhetorical ornamentation, it loses its formative power. Central ethical concepts such as *dignity*, *justice*, and *truth* must be reclaimed as theological convictions, not ideological slogans. Their meaning arises not from political expediency but from sustained reflection on God's character and the human vocation to love God and neighbor (cf. Bretherton, 2019; Chaplin, 2021).

This theological grounding becomes especially vital in the face of the growing instrumentalization of ethics in public discourse. When public morality becomes a performance, it erodes the conditions necessary for ethical deliberation: humility, mutual recognition, and the courage to inhabit moral complexity. From a theological perspective, this trend risks distorting the very purpose of ethics in democratic life. Concepts like justice or truth are not rhetorical tools to provoke outrage or secure tribal loyalty—they are theological markers of God's will for creation. To strip them of their theological content and weaponize them for emotional persuasion is to desacralize their meaning and diminish their civic potential. Christian theology offers a deeper foundation. Ethics is not a tool for tribal loyalty but a reflection of divine intentions for human flourishing (Măcelaru, 2014, pp. 233-236; cf. Mocan, 2018, pp. 15-29).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's (1962) vision of *Verantwortungsethik*—ethics of responsibility—offers a powerful corrective to these distortions. He insists that ethics must be shaped by a triangulation of accountability before God,

solidarity with the vulnerable, and concrete discernment within community. Bonhoeffer challenges the seduction of ideological purity, reminding Christians that moral truth is not found in slogans, but in the costly and often ambiguous work of judgment. His ethic is not performative but incarnational—rooted in the willingness to make decisions under the cross, in concrete historical contexts, and for the sake of the neighbor. This reveals ethics as a morally serious and non-manipulative public witness.

Stanley Hauerwas (1981, pp. 89-229) extends this critique by warning against the subordination of Christian ethics to nationalistic or partisan ends. He insists that the church's primary moral task is not control of the public square but the formation of communities that embody countercultural virtues such as peace, humility, and hospitality. Christins are not called to conquer the public square, but to humanize it. Christian ethics, therefore, is not instrumental or strategic. Rather, it is ecclesial and formational, shaped through worship and community practices that resist the antagonisms and simplifications of political moralization.

Miroslav Volf (2011, pp. 119-138) deepens this insight by warning against the theological validation of political power. When theological discourse merely affirms existing political loyalties, it loses its prophetic and ethical vocation. For Volf, authentic Christian ethics must hold together conviction and generosity: it must remain faithful to Christian truth while cultivating a dialogical posture toward a pluralistic society. This balance—between integrity and openness—requires a theological imagination capable of both confessing and translating moral commitments into shared civic reasoning.

This emphasis on moral translation is complemented by Kuyper's institutional vision. Abraham Kuyper (1998, pp. 461-490) offers a vital insight through his doctrine of "sphere sovereignty." He argued that all spheres of society—family, church, state, education, economy—fall under Christ's lordship but must maintain their distinct responsibilities. This vision resists both ecclesial withdrawal and moral domination, providing theological justification for institutional plurality and public integrity. Kuyper's framework suggests that Christian engagement in politics should not seek to impose control, but to contribute differentiated service to the common good (cf. Mocan, 2020, pp. 121-130).

Together, these theological voices offer a compelling scaffold for retrieving theology as a public ethical resource. They call the church to move beyond the performance of moral superiority and toward practices of moral responsibility, ecclesial formation, civic accountability, and compassionate presence. In doing so, theology reclaims its public vocation: not to dominate or withdraw, but to help shape a moral culture rooted in humility, justice, and the shared dignity of all people.

Building on this robust theological foundation, public theology emerges as the practice of translating Christian convictions into moral frameworks that can engage a pluralistic society. Its aim is not to win culture wars or assert religious control, but to foster the common good through dialogical, accountable, and justice-oriented reasoning. Public theology reimagines the public square—not as a battlefield of tribal ideologies, but as a space of shared moral inquiry. It resists the reduction of theology to a weapon of identity and instead calls faith communities to adopt postures of:

- Ethical humility: recognizing that no single tradition holds a monopoly on truth;
- Dialogical accountability: offering moral claims in language others can reasonably engage;
- Theological self-critique: cultivating the courage to examine one's complicity in injustice or partisanship.

In contexts like Romania, where moral language is often hijacked by populist discourse, public theology provides a needed counter-imaginary. It resists ideological mimicry and invites churches to become agents of ethical repair—supporting institutions as gifts of common grace (cf. Romans 13), cultivating civic virtue, and embodying practices of justice and mercy.

More than critique, public theology is a constructive theological contribution to democratic life. It seeks to recover ethics not as a performance, but as a form of public discernment. It equips faith communities to offer not declarations of moral superiority, but a credible moral presence—rooted in Scripture, formed in community, and oriented toward the flourishing of all. Especially in moments of ideological fragmentation, public theology serves as a moral compass, navigating between dogmatism and relativism, and pointing toward integrity, humility, and hope.

The contribution of public theology outlined above can be further deepened by the Pentecostal vision of public life. In politically polarized contexts such as Romania, Pentecostalism offers distinctive resources for the reconstruction of public ethics. Rooted in the eschatological tension between the "already" and the "not yet," Pentecostal ethics resists the absolutization of political ideologies and affirms the Spirit's ongoing, disruptive work in history. This vision disciplines political allegiance, reminding the Church that no regime, party, or platform can claim ultimate authority. As Amos Yong (2010) emphasizes, the Spirit does not sanctify existing power structures but unsettles injustice and summons communities into discernment and renewal. Thus, Pentecostal public theology is not merely reactive but visionary. It reimagines ethical life as Spirit-shaped faithfulness, animated by pneuma—the breath of God. Rather than reducing moral discourse to ideological slogans, it emphasizes embodied presence and communal discernment. Ethics, in this

framework, is dialogical and prophetic, marked by humility, hospitality, and attentiveness to marginalized voices (Macchia, 2006, pp. 257–282).

Such a theological posture is especially urgent in Romania, where religious language during the 2024–2025 campaign was co-opted for partisan ends. Pentecostal theology can offer a counter-imaginary rooted in openness, Spirit-led critique, and eschatological hope. What sets Pentecostal public theology apart is its integration of worship practices into moral formation. Ethics is not only thought or debated but enacted through:

- Testimony, which frames transformation as grace, not partisan loyalty;
- Healing, which enacts restored dignity and inclusion, symbolizing societal repair;
- Discernment, through practices like prophecy, prayer, and fasting, which resist ideological certainty;
- Worship, which shapes moral imagination through lament, joy, repentance, and hope.

As James K.A. Smith (2009) argues, these are "pedagogies of desire" that reorient hearts and affections toward compassion and justice. Through these practices Pentecostals position themselves between promise and fulfillment. The Pentecostal eschatological imagination anticipates a Kingdom defined by righteousness, peace, and joy (Romans 14:17). Its ultimate fulfilment is in the eschatological time; however, as Amos Yong (2010, pp. 347-358; cf. Smith, 2017) argues, in the here and now the Church receives a foretaste of divine restoration and justice, which ought to prompt continual repentance rather than triumphalism. This vision energizes ethical engagement while guarding against moral absolutism.

Spirit-baptized communities are also called to active participation in the renewal of public life. Pentecostal theology affirms that prophetic witness is the vocation of all believers—not just theological elites. This witness includes naming injustice, practicing radical hospitality, and embodying alternative social visions grounded in the Spirit (Bretherton, 2019; Yong, 2008). It entails a posture of:

- Discernment over absolutism (cf. 1 John 4:1);
- Hospitality over purity;
- Truth-telling over ideology;
- Love of neighbor over moral superiority.

When theology fails to confront ideological capture, it no longer serves democratic ethics but instead betrays its prophetic calling. Yet, the Spirit's disruptive presence in history demands ongoing ethical discernment (Yong, 2010; Studebaker, 2016). Pentecostal ethics, therefore, is not performative virtue-signaling but a transformational ethic rooted in justice-oriented love (Cavanaugh, 2011).

Furthermore, the local Pentecostal congregation becomes a site of ethical repair—a community marked by the:

- Confession of failure;
- Hospitality to difference;
- Pursuit of justice as sacred vocation.

Such communities resist partisan co-optation and practice a cruciform ethic grounded not in cultural dominance but in Spirit-led compassion. Pentecostal theology emphasizes that ethics is not merely cognitive or abstract; it is embodied. The Spirit in Acts formed communities that crossed boundaries of culture, language, and class. Similarly, in contemporary contexts, a Spirit-led ecclesiology calls the Church to prophetic resistance and communal discernment.

Finally, liturgical life is central to this moral formation. As noted above, worship practices—prayer, song, testimony, and healing—serve as schools of ethical imagination, shaping the instincts necessary for faithful public engagement. These embodied traditions remind us that ethical transformation is not ideological but incarnational. In a political culture dominated by polarization and performance, Pentecostal public theology invites faithful improvisation: a spiritual discipline that forms courageous, discerning citizens through daily practices of lament, justice-seeking, and hope. It does not erase doctrinal conviction but expresses it prophetically and dialogically, with accountability to pluralistic democracy. In this light, Pentecostal public theology, in Romania and beyond, ought to be more than a critique of moralized politics. It should emerge as a Spirit-empowered movement of ethical transformation, returning to the public square not with claims of moral supremacy, but with redemptive possibility.

## 6. Conclusion

This article has argued that the problem in Romanian political life is not the absence of ethics, but its distortion. Moral language, far from disappearing, has become ubiquitous—embedded in speeches, slogans, media cycles, and campaign aesthetics throughout the 2024–2025 electoral season. Yet this proliferation has not fostered ethical responsibility or democratic reasoning. Instead, moral discourse has been weaponized for ideological posturing, tribal affirmation, and emotional manipulation.

Terms such as justice, truth, dignity, and family values have become boundary markers of moral loyalty rather than sites of civic dialogue. Ethical discourse, stripped of its deliberative and theological depth, has been reduced to a performative script that deepens polarization, erodes institutional trust, and leaves citizens fatigued by symbolic combat. In this landscape, ethics becomes spectacle—substituting moral substance with moral display.

The solution, however, is not the removal of moral discourse from public life, but its renewal. Ethics must again become a shared vocabulary of democratic responsibility, not a tool of tribal allegiance. This article has therefore proposed four interdependent principles for moral reconstruction: responsibility, humility, pluralism, and the pursuit of the common good. These principles resist moral maximalism while affirming the need for ethical clarity rooted in justice, dignity, and civic solidarity.

Yet this reconstruction cannot rest on political strategy alone. As argued throughout, Pentecostal public theology offers vital resources for reimagining moral engagement as both civic and spiritual. Its pneumatological vision enables ethical discernment beyond ideological binaries, while its liturgical and communal practices form a counter-narrative to performative politics. Pentecostal theology invites public life to be shaped not by triumphalist certainties, but by Spirit-led humility, prophetic witness, and compassion.

In this spirit, Pentecostal public theology can serve Romanian democracy by modeling an alternative posture: resisting both moral relativism and ideological absolutism; proclaiming conviction without sacrificing dialogue; embodying ethical transformation rather than signaling virtue. It reminds us that the public square does not need louder voices, but deeper communities—rooted in love, shaped by worship, and committed to justice.

Reclaiming ethics in public life is not a nostalgic return to civility, nor a dismissal of moral urgency. It is a generational task—political, theological, and civic—requiring courage, imagination, and institutional reform. This article has laid the conceptual foundation for that task. Its companion study will turn to the role of Romanian evangelical communities in this renewal, exploring how confessional ethics can resist distortion and offer redemptive engagement in a fractured political culture. In the end, the hope animating this project is not only political—it is theological: that ethics, formed by the Spirit and tested in public, might once again become a common language for justice, mercy, and the dignity of all.

## References

Bădescu, Gabriel & Burean, Toma. (2008). Internet Use and Youth Political Participation: A Three-Country Study. In Maria Diaconescu (Ed.), *Teenagers' Actions and Interactions Online* (pp. 131–147). Cluj University Press.

Bădescu, Gabriel, Mocan, Rodica, & Marian, Cosmin. (2003). The Democratizing Potential of the Use of the Internet by Political Parties in Romania. In Rachel Gibson & Paul Nixon (Eds.), *Net Gain? Political Parties and the Internet* (pp. 161–175). Routledge

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. (1962). *Ethics*. The Macmillan Company.

Bretherton, Luke. (2019). *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy*. Eerdmans.

Brooks, David. 2013. *The Road to Character.* Alan Lane.

Brown, Wendy. (2008). *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton University Press.

Cavanaugh, William T. (2011). *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*. Eerdmans.

Chaplin, Jonathan. (2021). *Faith in Democracy: Framing a Politics of Deep Diversity*. SCM Press.

Fuchs, Christian. (2014). *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. Sage Publications.

Habermas, Jürgen. (1996). *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. The MIT Press.

Hauerwas, Stanley. (1981). *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. University of Notre Dame Press.

Kuyper, Abraham. (1998). Sphere Sovereignty. In James D. Bratt (Ed.), *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Anthology* (pp. 461–490). Eerdmans.

Laclau, Ernesto. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. Verso.

Macchia, Frank D. (2006). *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology*. Zondervan.

Măcelaru, Marcel. (2016). Bunăstarea umană – o perspectivă biblică. In Corneliu Constantineanu, Mihai Handaric, Iosif Riviș-Tipei, & Mircea Demean-Dumulesc (Eds.), *Poporul lui Dumnezeu și societatea* (pp. 13–19). Editura Universității Aurel Vlaicu din Arad.

Măcelaru, Marcel. (2019). Bunăstarea umană și binele comun. In C. Constantineanu, M. Măcelaru, & I. Riviș-Tipei (Eds.), *Pentru binele comun: Realități și perspective ale colaborării dintre ONG-uri, comunități creștine și autoritățile locale* (pp. 31–40). Editura Universității Aurel Vlaicu din Arad.

Măcelaru, Marcel. (2025). Etica evanghelicilor români: parametri, provocări, perspective. In Dănuț Mănăstireanu & Dănuț-Vasile Jemna (Eds.), *Omul evanghelic, încotro? O nouă explorare a comunităților protestante românești* (pp. 67–113). Polirom.

Măcelaru, Marcel. (2014). Human Flourishing – A Theological Perspective. In Georgeta Rață & Patricia Runcan (Eds.), *Happiness Through Education* (pp. 233–236). Puterea de a fi altfel 1. Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.

Măcelaru, Marcel. (2017). Truth, Justice, Uprightness: Human Flourishing in Prophetic Perspective. In Robert Petkovšek & Bojan Žalec (Eds.), *Truth and Compassion: Lessons from the Past and Premonitions of the Future* (pp. 49–56). Theologie Ost–West: Europäische Perspektiven 20. LIT Verlag.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1985. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2nd ed.). Duckworth.

Mocan, Beneamin. (2018). Hristos ca Domn al întregii realități, binele comun și viața bună. In C. Constantineanu, M. Măcelaru, & I. Riviș-Tipei (Eds.), *Pentru binele comun: Realități și perspective ale colaborării dintre ONG-uri, comunități creștine și autoritățile locale* (pp. 15–29). Editura Universității Aurel Vlaicu din Arad.

Mocan, Beneamin. (2020). Nici cultural și nici modernist, ci confesional: O descriere a creștinismului authentic în viziunea lui Abraham Kuyper. In Alina Pădurean, Adela Drăucean, & Simona Stoia (Eds.), *Current Trends and Challenges in Social Sciences* (pp. 121–130). Editura Universității Aurel Vlaicu din Arad.

Moffitt, Benjamin. (2016). *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford University Press.

Müller, Jan-Werner. (2016). *What Is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.

O'Donovan, Oliver. (2005). *The Ways of Judgment*. Eerdmans.

Papacharissi, Zizi. (2015). *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Rawls, John. (2005). *Political Liberalism*. Columbia University Press.

Rhodes, Carl. (2022). *Woke Capitalism: How Corporate Morality Is Sabotaging Democracy*. Bristol University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. (1992). *Oneself as Another*. The University of Chicago Press.

Smith, James K.A. (2017). *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*. Baker Academic.

Smith, James K.A. (2009). *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Baker Academic.

Stan, Lavinia & Turcescu, Lucian. (2007). *Religion and Politics in Post-Communist Romania*. Religion and Global Politics Series. Oxford University Press.

Studebaker, Steven M. (2016). *A Pentecostal Political Theology for American Renewal: Spirit of the Kingdoms, Citizens of the Cities*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Swart, Ignatius & De Beer, Stephan. (2014). Doing Urban Public Theology in South Africa: Introducing a New Agenda. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70(3). http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2811

Taylor, Charles. (2007). *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press.

Tismăneanu, Vladimir. (1998). *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe*. Princeton University Press.

Verdery, Katherine. (1996). *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton University Press.

Volf, Miroslav. (2011). *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*. Brazos Press.

Walzer, Michael. (2006). *Politics and Passion: Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism*. Yale University Press.

Westra, Evan. (2021). Virtue Signaling and Moral Progress. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 49(2), 156–178.

Ylä-Anttila, Tuukka. (2018). Populist Knowledge: 'Post-truth' Repertoires of Contesting Epistemic Authorities. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 5(4), 356–388.

Yong, Amos. (2008). *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, And the Neighbour*. Orbis Books.

Yong, Amos. (2010). *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology*. Eerdmans Publishing Company.