

CHURCH - STATE RELATIONS IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA. REAL DEPRIVATIZATION OR THE WAY BACK TO BYZANTINE SYMPHONIA?

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Abstract

This paper starts from the belief that the realities of post-communist world, including the relations between Church and State, should benefit from an appropriate theoretical delineation, which is currently missing. This is more relevant if one bears in mind the relevance of Orthodox Church in Romania due to its high legitimacy among Romanian population, in a more general context described by an increasing relevance of religious issues, here being also included the European Union and the internal debates about its Christian roots, about the potential role of a catholic Poland or the eventuality of admitting a Muslim country within its borders.

Key words: secularization, deprivatization, Romanian Orthodox Church, Central and Eastern Europe, post-communism, Church – State relations

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Introduction

This paper starts from the belief that the realities of post-communist world, including the relations between Church and State, would benefit from an appropriate theoretical delineation that is currently missing. This is especially the case concerning the Orthodox Church of Romania, which enjoys high levels of legitimacy among the Romanian population. This is an increasingly relevant issue both within the country and the European Union, particularly as the latter debates its Christian roots, as well as the potential role of a Catholic Poland, and the eventuality of admitting a Muslim country within its borders

Beginning with the assumption that in every society religion is inherently an expression and reinforcement of social solidarity¹, it is essential to keep in mind the Durkheimian conception that religion serves as a marker for any community of believers, and indicates the sacred nature of both permanent social obligations and social practices to induce social cohesion². Moreover, an analysis of the relationship between the Church and the state should concede that such an analysis describes the historical outcome of the process of nation-building, in which a legitimized leadership attempts to consolidate their position.

The resurgence of religion in the contemporary world is a highly debated subject, and is constantly linked to its importance in the collapse of the Communist bloc.³ Generally, it is admitted that Churches emerged as powerful actors in the post-communist era, as they were highly legitimized by their suppression under communism. Yet this issue has become very controversial, as religion has turned from a private matter to a politically divisive issue.⁴ Studies on the role of religion in East Central Europe have looked at the role of Churches in the democratization process in terms of the institutional space they created and by their symbolic resources, yet in doing so often neglect the substantive content of religion, and limit their research to an “empty vessel” approach.⁵

The relationship between the State and Church is often addressed

1 Helen Watson and Jack Boag: *Ethnicity and Religion*, Cambridge: Queen's College, 50th Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs – Eliminating the Causes of War, 2000

2 Emile Durkheim: *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York: The Free Press, 1995, 26

3 Jeff Haynes: “Religion, secularization and politics: a postmodern conspectus”, in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 18, No 4, 1997, 714

4 Zsolt Enyedi: “Conclusion: Emerging Issues in the Study of Church – State Relations”, in J. Madeley and Zsolt Enyedi (eds): *Church and State in Contemporary Europe: The Chimera of Neutrality*, Taylor and Francis Group, 2005, 220

5 David Herbert: “Christianity, Democratization and Secularization in Central and Eastern Europe”, in *Religion, State and Society*, Vol 27, No 2/4, 1999, 281

within the dichotomy of Western and Eastern Christianity, since they prescribe different connections to nationality and ethnicity. Specifically, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which is the focus of this paper, is considered to relate to the Christian ecclesiastical identity of ethnic identity and secular power⁶. It is generally assumed that the Orthodox Church was not part of the process of modernization, but that it first become involved as an alternative existential project⁷. Additionally, while it is generally acknowledged that during communism the Orthodox was politically passive, through analyzing the case of the Romanian Orthodox Church this paper will argue that this particular institution has clear political objectives consistent with a process of post-communist deprivatization.

According to the last census, Romania is one of the most religious European states, with a level of 87,5% self-declared Christian Orthodox and a constant level of confidence in the Orthodox Church of around 80 percent⁸. Generally, it is acknowledged that the Romanian Orthodox Church has always had special connections with the state, even during communist times, in which, according to the principle of “economy” that presupposed the Church’s adaptability, the state subjected religious institutions⁹. This “economy principle” was subsumed under the Byzantine *symphonia* principle, which presupposed a close alliance between the emperor and the patriarch, with the potential to legitimize a different state of affairs.¹⁰

One may obviously wonder about the sources of the current religious revival in post-communist Eastern Europe. Is it a consequence of religious persecution during communism, or is it a component of the general process of the worldwide ‘return of religion’? Additionally, can we, as some authors assume, attribute a real role to the Church in promoting the social and economic rebirth in specific countries?¹¹

For the purpose of this paper we will look at the Romanian Orthodox Church as a formal organization in the post-communist period, and specifically analyze its involvement in public debates around

6 Silviu Rogobete: “Morality and Tradition in Post-Communist Orthodox Lands: on the Universality of Human Rights, with Special Reference to Romania”, in *Religion, State and Society*, Vol 32, No 3, 2004, 285

7 Dan Dungaciu: *Alternative Modernities In Europe: Modernity, Religion and Secularization in South-Eastern Europe. The Romanian case*, Vilnius: CESNUR 2003 International Conference

8 Ibidem

9 S. Rogobete, op. cit., 287

10 Olivier Gillet: *Religie si nationalism. Ideologia bisericii ortodoxe romane sub regimul communist*, Bucuresti: Compania, 2001

11 Giovanni Barberini: “Introduction: Religious Freedom in the Process of Democratization of Central And Eastern European States”, in Ferrari and Durham (eds): op. cit., 11

the issue of State-Church relations. Before delving into this question we begin with a theoretical background based on secularization and deprivatization studies, which attempted to explain the resurgence of religion in the second half of the twentieth century.

Secularization, deprivatization and the relationship between Church and State

Secularization theories argue that a reduction in the social significance of religious institutions, actions, and consciousness, when it occurs simultaneously with a greater societalization process, is due to the fact that “religion [...] was the ideology of the community,¹² and that the fundamental difference between the two historical stages places the opposition between a community’s moral sense and society’s rational order¹³. Thus, going beyond the simplistic definition of secularism as the separation of religion from secular institutions, Asad explains that the essence of secularism as a political doctrine is the establishment of new concepts of “religion”, “ethics” and “politics.” This in turn changes the entire conceptual base of our world, and changes particular identities by introducing the idea of citizenship into the modern state.¹⁴ Ashis Nandy, on the other hand, refers to the split religion has suffered between faith and ideology. In defining ideology Nandy treats religion as instrumental at the subnational, national and cross-national level, and as a phenomenon that serves the purpose of legitimizing political and socio-economic acts. While it may appear so on the surface, these treatments of religion are in fact non-contradictory, and complement each other by more fully describing the present condition of religion.¹⁵

A large body of the literature has developed against these theories. Luckmann, for instance, distinguishes between institutional and non-institutional forms of religion, and criticizes secularization theory on the basis of the argument concerning invisible religion as the form in which religious beliefs coexist with a modern rational order.¹⁶ Moreover, Daniele Hervieu-Leger focuses on the new forms of religion that have

12 Jeff Haynes: “Religion, Secularization and Politics: A Postmodern Conspectus”, in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 18, No 4, 1997, 710

13 Bryan Wilson, “Secularization and its Discontents”, in B. Wilson: *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, 152 - 159

14 Talal Asad: *Formations of Modernity in Islam, Christianity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, 5

15 Ashis Nandy: “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance”, in Rajeev Bhargava (ed): *Secularism and Its Critics*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, 322

16 Thomas Luckmann: *Invisible Religion. The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, New York Macmillan, 1967, 221

emerged in modernity, such as political and utopian forms, new religious movements, and individualistic or psychological forms. Another type of critique comes from the American sociology of religion (Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, etc.), which assesses the existence of a positive relationship between modernity and the status of religion through the introduction of the concept of competition between religious denominations.¹⁷

Jose Casanova's book, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, begins by rethinking the relation between modernity and religion beyond the paradigm of secularization. As its central concern Casanova looks at the deprivatization of religions in the modern world, and argues that beginning in the 1980s religious institutions began competing against the primary secular spheres, as well as the state and market economy¹⁸. This new resurgence does not contradict the past compatibility of religion with secularization, and does not entirely reject the historical process of secularization. Rather, the new revival of religion means that the new impetus for religion to become involved in the modern world, and hence to establish borders between private and public, has a constitutive effect on the norms of modernity¹⁹.

At the same time, discussions of deprivatization imply a specific approach to the secularization thesis. Casanova contends that there are three general understandings of secularization: religious decline, differentiation and privatization. Secularization as a modern historical process undermined the medieval system by rejecting the Church as a sacramental institution that existed as a mediator between "this world and the other world". It simultaneously implied the destruction of the dual nature of this world by emancipating the secular sphere from the religious one, the latter itself becoming differentiated and specialized in its own sphere (a thesis still valid in Casanova's view).²⁰

Along with the decline of religion thesis, Casanova sees the privatization of religion as a consequence of secularization. Privatization, elaborated predominantly by Luckmann and associated with the de-politicization of religion, bases its theory on claims that religion has become more subjective, and that it is externally determined by the process of differentiation²¹. Consequently, modernity is characterized by "invisible religions" bound to "self expression" and "self realization" in

17 Detlef Pollack and Gert Pickel, *The Vitality of Religion – Church Integration and Politics in Eastern and Western Europe in Comparison*, Franckfurt Institute for Transformation Studies Working Paper, 13 / 2000, 1

18 Jose Casanova: *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, 5

19 *Ibidem*, 6

20 *Ibidem*, 19

21 *Ibidem*, 215

the private sphere, which is a world where the church is the physical place for finding God, and the collective manifestations of faith have exhausted their relevance.²²

The deprivatization of religion that Casanova describes goes hand in hand with the denunciation of the private-public distinction in both liberal and civil republican theories. Since religion is a category that transcends both private and public, Casanova's theory integrates the individual into the intersubjective world. In contrast to the two above-mentioned theories, both of which reject the possibility of public religion or its coexistence with liberal freedoms, Casanova uses a new model that includes the state, political society and civil society, and where the concept of public religion is compatible with secular freedoms. Consequently, deprivatization "introduces intersubjective norms into the private sphere and morality into the public sphere of state".²³ From another point of view, Aquinas also considered religion to be public, and argued that on the basis of the public goods religion provides it has also political implications, such as the public good of attaining religious truth or worshipping God.²⁴

Casanova's tripartite model is further elaborated by developing a typology of public religions divided into three stages. First, there may be churches established at the state level. Second, there are different religious movements and groups that oppose the restrictions imposed by secularization, and also more diffused religious interventions at the level of civil society. This second type involves a transitional category whereby religion ceases to be state-oriented and becomes more society-oriented in its attempt to resist secularist pressures.²⁵

Haynes addressing the process of secularization in terms of concrete Church-State relations, and considers five main types of secularization: constitutional, policy-related, institutional (religious groups and movements lose their importance), agenda-related (connected to the lack of religious content of public agenda) and ideological, referring to basic values and belief systems.²⁶

The challenge, therefore, is to explain the deprivatization of religion in post-communist states as a traditional reaction to processes of secularization and universalization, and to explain the role religion plays in society, since "religions force modern societies to reflect publicly upon

22 T. Luckmann: *op. cit.*, 1967

23 J. Casanova, *op. cit.*, 216 - 217

24 Paul J. Weithman: "Rawlsian Liberalism and Privatization of Religion. Three Theological Objections Considered", in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 22: 1, 1994, 5

25 J. Casanova, *op. cit.*, 219

26 J. Haynes, *op. cit.*, 713

their normative structures”, while at the same time being forced to adapt themselves.²⁷ In this case, greater emphasis is placed on civil society as the *deus ex machina* for transcending the boundaries of modernity.²⁸

Weber has addressed the issue of secular and ecclesiastical power relations by identifying three different types of polities. The first one, the theocratic, illustrates a pre-eminent ecclesiastical power, whereas in the second category, within a hierocratic society a secular power is dominant but depends on religious legitimacy. The third category, the caesaropapist, subordinates the religion to the state.²⁹

Addressing the issue of State-Church relations in the context of the emergence of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s, Miller concedes that the region is characterized by a great diversity in religion’s status, the intensity of oppression under communism, and the role religion played in each country’s the democratic revolutions. Despite the lack of uniformity, the general process consists of the Church’s auto-inclusion in the national revival and quest for privileges as the guardians of morality and identity, often advanced in opposition to Western materialism, globalism and consumerism.³⁰

Romanian Orthodox Church in Post-Communism: Religious Freedoms or State Privileges?

The collapse of communism has given the Romanian Orthodox Church a new opportunity to become active in influencing public affairs and to be perceived as a source of moral strength, both of which are reflected in the high trust the Church receives from all Romanian public institutions. In the communist period, despite the acknowledged connections between the Church and the communist rulers that established a specific *modus vivendi*³¹, the social significance of religion associated with communist political repression and modernization undertaken after World War Two decreased, which undermined the weight of religious traditions and practices³². During the communist period the Romanian Orthodox Church identified itself with the ethnogenesis of the Romanian people and the process of nation

27 J. Casanova, op. cit., 228

28 Chris Hann: “Problems with the (De)Privatisation of religion”, in *Anthropology Today*, Vol 16, No. 6, 2000, 16

29 J. Haynes, op. cit., 710

30 R. Miller, op. cit., 7

31 Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu: “The Romanian Orthodox Church and Post-Communist Democratization”, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 52, No 8, 2000, 1468

32 Deteff Polack: “Modifications in the Religious Field of Central and Eastern Europe”, in *European Societies*, 3 (2): 2001, 137

formation³³, and was used to legitimize communist rule. In addition to this, Gillet has termed this coexistence as a “Caesaro-pope” model between secular and temporal powers, which is supported by the new theoretical developments inside the Church—for example, the “social apostolate” model that reconciled Marxist-Leninist ideas with Christian Orthodox theology.³⁴

According to the legal framework of the 1991 Constitution, religions are free to organize “in accordance with their own statutes” and to offer assistance to state institutions such as hospitals, prisons, the army, etc. At the same time, the state maintains a monopoly on recognizing new denominations, and the Orthodox Church has not gained the privileges it enjoyed prior to the communist period. This lack of being granted special status was the reason for the 1994 Church declaration when it proclaimed itself the National Church, although this declaration was not recognized by state authorities.³⁵

Therefore, changes in the State-Church relationship after 1989 cannot be understood without taking into consideration the end of political repression and the ideological vacuum that existed after the fall of communism. The deprivatization of the Orthodox Church after communism changed the status of the church, as the religious solutions it offered dealt with different problems, and the post-communist environment spawned political struggles that were associated with the Church’s position.

In the context of the significant increase in expressed religiousness in almost all of Eastern Europe after 1989³⁶, the major claims of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the post-communist period were associated with the pressures of acquiring a special status for the Church in the Constitution, mainly: reservation of seats in the upper Parliamentary Chamber for the clergy, mandatory religious education, preservation of the legislation against homosexuals and abortion, and the refusal to return properties to Greek Catholics³⁷.

Concerning the first claim, after the rejection of the senatorial seats proposal, the high clergy switched to unsuccessful calls for priest’s political involvement as electoral advisers for individuals’ choices between different candidates. This problem can be appropriately analyzed

33 Romanita Iordache: “Church and State in Romania”, in Silvio Ferrari and W. Cole Durham (eds.): *Law and Religion in Post-Communist Europe*, Leuven: Peeters, 2003, 239

34 L. Stan and L. Turcescu: *op. cit.*, 1469

35 Alina Mungiu Pippidi: “The Ruler and The Patriarch: The Romanian Eastern Orthodox Church in Transition”, in *East European Constitutional Review*, Spring 1998, 86

36 D. Polack, *op. cit.*, 144

37 Z. Enyedi, *op. cit.*, 224

in light of the Orthodox Church's lack of authority. During the Synod's meetings throughout the 1990s, the involvement of priests in politics and in entering elections for public office was repeatedly forbidden. The Synod's request for the political neutrality of the clergy was the subject of intense criticisms from within, revealing the picture of a highly divided institution.³⁸

Regarding the reinstatement of religious education in pre-university schools and the Church's expressed desire for introducing religious values in textbooks, the 1995 Law on Education only instituted compulsory classes at an elementary level and optional religious classes at high school level, which would be organized by the fifteen legally recognized churches. Moreover, a more intense debate was caused by legislation concerning homosexuality and abortion, and the law's old form was strongly endorsed by the majority of the Romanian population in the first part of the 1990s. On this specific issue, all religious denominations strongly opposed this within a general climate of intolerance.³⁹

Therefore, the relations between Church and State are considered to have several main dimensions: privileges attached to state recognition; threshold of state recognition; financial subsidies; discrimination; the general attitude of the state towards religion; church autonomy; and the church's influence over education.⁴⁰ In the case of Romania, all these dimensions illustrate a privileged position of the Orthodox Church frequently used against other denominations. Analyses speak in terms "equal partnerships" between this particular Church and the Romanian government, or speak of the tradeoff between additional legitimacy and the state's consolidation of the way religious beliefs and symbols are visible in financial assistance, media privileges or educational facilities.⁴¹

This viewpoint is similar to a hierarchical type of relation between Church and State, and in agreement with the argument that one of the functions of religion is the legitimization of "actors, actions and institutions."⁴² This is also in line with the idea that the Church is an essential depository of myths within a society, which in the Romanian context has made the role of the Orthodox Church the foundation for, and endorsement of, cultural identity.⁴³ The same idea is part of

38 L. Stan and L. Turcescu: "Pulpits, Ballots and Party Cards: Religion and Elections in Romania", in *Religion, State and Society*, Vol 33, No. 4, December 2005, 357

39 L. Stan and L. Turcescu, *The Romanian Orthodox...*, 1476-1480

40 Z. Enyedi, 225

41 L. Stan and L. Turcescu, *The Romanian Orthodox...*, 1472

42 Jonathan Fox: "The Effects of Religion on Domestic Conflict", in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol 10, No 4, Winter 1998, 43

43 A.M. Pippidi, *op. cit.*, 91

Arjomand's argument that the differentiation of religion and politics introduces a normative dualism, one which takes place in the case of all world religions, and which plays a major part in religious legitimization of political power⁴⁴.

Particularly beginning with the 1996 Romanian elections, religious symbols were increasingly used and accepted as legitimate, and as a part of a more general process of shaping political platforms according to the needs of specific religious communities. Electoral campaign strategies with clear religious connotations included visits to Orthodox churches, participation in religious service, the negative or positive use of religious figures in electoral propaganda, Bible quotations, and in many instances, the promise of donations for Churches.⁴⁵

Furthermore, another indicator of the new post-communist identity of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which may be labeled according to Casanova as an alteration in the publicity rather than a shift from private to public, is the emphasis on the connection between Orthodoxy and Romanianism, and on a Romanian identity in face of secularization and globalization that includes references to national historical heroes. The focus on national symbols is an attempt to relegitimize the Orthodox Church in a new context, and culminated in the project of a National Salvation Cathedral--an issue with contentious effects for the State-Church relationship, but which has shown the mobilization potential of the Church clergy.⁴⁶

Another issue that has the potential to affect inter-denominational cooperation is state financing for places of worship, and the unbalanced intervention of state agencies in favor of the Orthodox Church. These funds are being offered to recognized religions, thus imposing a hierarchy not just on recognized and unrecognized religions, but on the dominant religion and all others, which falls in line with a state corporatist perspective that enforces a top-down perspective in public affairs and in relation with the society at large.⁴⁷

44 Said Amir Arjomand: "Religion and the Diversity of Normative Orders", in S.A. Arjomand (ed): *The Political Dimensions of Religion*, New York, 1993, 47

45 L. Stan and L. Turcescu: *Pulpits...*, 358

46 L. Stan and L. Turcescu, *The Romanian Orthodox...*, 1472

47 About 2000 new worship places were built in Romania by the Orthodox Church between 1990-2004, and 1000 orthodox worship places are in the process of being finalized. Aurelian Muntean, *Problems of Inter-denominational Cooperation in Romania in the Post-Communist Period*, CEU, 2005, 6

Conclusion

The options faced by the Church in the post-communist context envisaged by both the caesaro-papist model and the contrasting civil-society approach include appealing simultaneously to public means and social acts on the one hand, and to private devoutness on the other. Although the Romanian Orthodox Church could hardly be considered part of the civil society given its links to public authorities, the above description refers to the deprivatization of religion in a new post-communist context, which is justified by the fact that in various public debates the Orthodox Church has proven to be an authoritative actor that maintains the allegiance of a significant part of the population, and possesses power to influence public policy.⁴⁸

Following Casanova's argument, the choice between privatization and deprivatization is neither an absolute or linear development, but an historical option engendered by specific historic conditions.⁴⁹ Moreover, deprivatization has not only presumed taking sides against secularization from an antimodern position, but has comprised specific critiques addressed to particular aspects of modernity, especially bearing in mind the frequent lack of involvement of the Church in decision making processes at the state level.

48 Robert F. Miller, *Church-State Relations and Civil Society in Former Communist Countries*, Paper presented at the conference *Civil Society, Religion and Global Governance: Paradigms of Power and Persuasion*, Canberra, 2005

49 J. Casanova, *op. cit.*, 221

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