

## SECULARISM IN REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA - POLITICS OF RELIGION OR RELIGIOUS POLITICS: WHERE DO WE DRAW THE BOUNDARIES?

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the relationship between church and state in the Republic of Moldova, and particularly on the increasingly-blurred boundaries between the two. Given the fact that the ruling party is Communist, it seems even more inconceivable that a "union" between state and church could even be possible. The research presented here answers what is behind this sudden alliance of state and church, and which party benefits from relationship. In answering this, this paper draws on secularism theory, particularly the reasons this theory offers for why we still have modern or modernizing states where the institutions of church and state are intermixed. The findings show that the alliance between state and church in Moldova was possible after the government lost the case at the European Court of Human Rights concerning the issue of recognizing and registering the Bessarabian Orthodox Church, which was in conflict with Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC). This event fostered an alliance between MOC and the ruling Communist party, and as a result the MOC became another tool in the political arsenal of the governing party used to win the support of the electorate by any possible means.

**Key words:** church-state relations, secularism, Bessarabian Metropolitanate, transition.

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## Introduction

In his famous quotation Marx called religion “ the opiate for the masses”. One could argue that religion in Republic of Moldova is falling under such a categorization, since the Christian Orthodox Church, of which 90% of the population belongs to<sup>1</sup>, has overwhelming authority over the religious life in the country. This comes as a consequence of the rich Christian tradition in this part of the world, where in a patriarchal society religion is meant to exert and maintain control over the population. After the fall of Communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union, religion has retaken its role within the society, namely, to help organize the spiritual life of believers and ensure their need to be in touch with the supernatural. However, religion and the institutions dealing with this are officially confined to act within constitutional limits, making Moldova a *de jure* secular state. Given that the ruling party in Moldova is Communist, it seems even more inconceivable that a "union" between state and church could even be possible. Here it is important to mention that by church I mean the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC), since there are two Orthodox denominations: the above-mentioned MOC and the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC). The former has, according to the State Service for Religions, 1,224 parishes while the BOC has 199 parishes<sup>2</sup>.

The research presented here answers what is behind this sudden alliance of state and church, and which party benefits from this relationship. For this purpose, I intend to build my argument on Jose Casanova’s “Public Religions in the Modern World”<sup>3</sup> and his analysis theory of secularization. Furthermore, I will use empirical information directly from Moldova to support my initial hypothesis that the alliance between state and church in Moldova was possible after the government lost the case at the European Court of Human Rights on the issue of recognizing the BOC. Since recognition of the BOC would provoke a “schism” within the Orthodox community in Moldova, and the MOC asked for privileged relations with the government and an alliance between the MOC and the Communist party was born. In return for the government’s support, the MOC became another tool in the political arsenal of the ruling party used to win the support of the electorate.

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1 International Religious Freedom Report 2005. Moldova. Available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51569.htm>

2 Ibidem

3 Casanova J.: Public Religions in the Modern World. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)

## Secularism and theory of secularization: where should religion find its place within society?

Secularism as a concept has its roots in the Christian tradition, specifically in the Latin word *saeculum*, which means century, age or world<sup>4</sup>. Casanova argues that in using the term secularization one often makes a distinction between two worlds when there are in fact three: “Spatially, there was “the other world” (heaven) and “this world” (earth), but “this world” was itself divided between the religious world (the church) and the secular world proper (*saeculum*)”<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, says Casanova, the premodern Western European Christendom was based on a double dualist system of classification: the dualism between “this world” and “the other world,” and the dualism within “this world”, between a “religious” and a “secular” sphere. Both dualisms are mediated by the “sacramental” nature of the church, which simultaneously belonging to the two worlds, is able to mediate sacramentally between the two<sup>6</sup>. Thus, secularization as a concept, in Casanova’s view, refers to “the actual historical process whereby this dualist system within ‘this world’ and the sacramental structures of mediation between this world and the other world progressively break down until the entire medieval system of classification disappears, to be replaced by new systems of spatial structuration of the spheres”<sup>7</sup>.

Bryan Wilson defines secularization as a process “by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness, lose their social significance”<sup>8</sup>. Wilson posits that secularization applies to a wide range of things, among which are the “sequestration by political powers of the property and facilities of religious agencies, the shift from religious to secular control of various of the erstwhile activities and functions of religion, the decline in the proportion of their time, energy, and resources which men devote to super-empirical concerns, the decay of religious institutions”<sup>9</sup>. A similar approach is held by Casanova, who identifies three separate moments in the theory of secularization<sup>11</sup>, defined as a theory of modern autonomous differentiation of the secular and religious spheres<sup>12</sup>. Casanova depicts these three moments as three theses of the theory of

4 Wilson B.: *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. (Chicago: University Press, 1992)

5 Casanova J. op. cit., p.12

6 Casanova J. op. cit., p.14

7 Casanova J. op. cit., p.15

8 Casanova J. op. cit. p.15

9 Wilson B. op. cit., p. 149

10 Ibidem

11 Wilson B. *op. cit.*, p.151

12 Casanova J. op. cit. p.19

secularization: the differentiation thesis, the decline-of-religion thesis, and the privatization thesis.

The differentiation thesis refers to a “process of functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres – primarily the state, the economy, and science – from the religious sphere and the concomitant differentiation and specialization of religion within its own newly found religious sphere”<sup>13</sup>. This thesis entails the central idea of the theory of secularization, which is understood as the conceptualization of societal modernization, and particularly explicates how “the religious” and “the secular” became autonomous spheres alongside the development of state structures, the concept of citizenship, the liberal economy, and of course, the development of science. The other two theses of Casanova’s theory of secularization refer to the presumed effects this process can have on religion: the decline-of-religion thesis postulates a continuing diminished role of religion within society, and the privatization thesis argues for the privatization of religion and possible marginalization of religion in the modern world<sup>14</sup>.

Ashis Nandy uses with a very simple definition of secularism that has two meanings for the Indian society where he has conducted his research. The one that interests us is the Western understanding of secularism, which Nandy defines as “secular trends in history and economics, or when one speaks about secularizing the state. Hence, secularism chalks out an area in public life where religion is not admitted”<sup>15</sup>. However, secularism comes as the end result of the process of rationalization of public life, and consequently, of its constitutive spheres. As an element of modernization, rationalization became the driving force for developing secularism. Weber spoke about the rationalization of religion leading to a Protestant ethic and paving the ground for capitalism,<sup>16</sup> while Wilson talks about rational precepts affecting the economic system, cultural sphere, and ultimately the political organization of social life<sup>17</sup>. Hence, religion is pushed further away from the public domain. As Charles Taylor posits, when referring to secularism as a separation between church and state, the latter “upholds no religion, pursues no religious goals,

13 Casanova J. op. cit. p.19

14 Casanova J. op. cit. p. 20

15 Nandy A.: “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious ‘Tolerance’” in Bhargava R.: *Secularism and its Critics*. (Oxford, New Dehli et al., 1998) p. 326

16 Weber M.: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. (London: Routledge, HarperCollins, 1992)

17 Wilson B. op. cit., p. 157

religiously-defined goods have no place in the catalogue of ends it promotes<sup>18</sup>.

Given the focus of this paper on the church-state relations as a central characteristic of secularism, Enyedi mentions that “church and state relationships are, as is the case with other national institutional structures, the products both of historical traditions and of conscious, rationally planned, and democratically legitimized statecraft<sup>19</sup>. In Europe, Enyedi further argues, despite secularization defined as institutional differentiation and the dismantling of religious monopolies, a common feature is state support for church institutions and the extension of privileges to one or more of such institutions<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, given the fact that after the fall of Communism, churches in Eastern Europe emerged as influential political players with considerable moral capital, they are, according to Enyedi, both perpetrators and victims of state discriminatory policies. As churches found themselves in a situation of how to build their relations with other political actors, and generally of how to adopt a new model of church-state relations, religion appeared to be a politically divisive factor<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, any aspect regulating the institutional relations between church and state had to be justified, given the transition to democracy and building of democratic institutions.

Nonetheless, problems do exist regarding how religious denominations function in post-Communist societies. While the potential for conflict is higher in multi-confessional societies, in mono-confessional ones there is possibility for severe clashes between clerical and anti-clerical forces (Catholicism), and the development of inner pluralism within the ruling church (Orthodoxy)<sup>22</sup>. This is particularly the case of Moldova, where a split inside the Orthodox Church took place.

Recent history shows that while the Orthodox Church is politically passive, a symbiosis with sympathetic governments cannot be ruled out. As Enyedi contends, churches can have different strategies of building their relationship with the state. The rule, however, is that the states are expected to be religiously neutral and churches are expected to be politically impartial<sup>23</sup>. Notwithstanding this concept of neutrality,

18 Taylor Ch.: “Modes of Secularism” in Bhargava R.: *Secularism and its Critics*. (Oxford, New Delhi et al., 1998), p. 35

19 Enyedi Z.: “Conclusion: Emerging Issues in the Study of Church – State Relations”, in Madeley J., Enyedi Z (eds): *Church and State in Contemporary Europe: The Chimera of Neutrality*. (Taylor and Francis Group, 2005), p. 219

20 Ibidem

21 Enyedi Z. op.cit., p. 221

22 Enyedi Z. op.cit., p. 222

23 Enyedi Z. op.cit., p. 227

churches have different alliance options. For example, established churches can ally with the secular state against marginal churches for various reasons (as is the case with Moldova). They can ally themselves with other marginal churches against the state in the form of a religious crusade, or they can fight both peripheral churches and the state in order to defend orthodoxy<sup>24</sup>. Given all of these choices, a rational strategy for churches is to seek privileged relations with government rather than trying to compete with it. This rent-seeking behavior may entail particular costs as churches may find themselves constrained by a having to enact certain public policies in exchange for their support<sup>25</sup>.

At this point, however, by drawing on the research done by Enyedi one can identify seven components of church-state relations<sup>26</sup>: 1) privileges attached to state recognition; 2) the threshold of state recognition; 3) financial subsidies; 4) discrimination; 5) the general attitude of the state towards religion; 6) church autonomy; 7) and church influence over education<sup>27</sup>. Applying this pattern of relations to a particular country, one can discover whether or not a church is dependent on the state in relation to the facilities it enjoys (tax exemptions, subsidies, financial assistance). In the following section, I will concentrate on the church-state relations in Moldova and explain the alliance between MOC and the ruling party that became obvious after 2002.

### **Politics of religion or religious politics in the context of church-state relations in Republic of Moldova: where do we draw the boundaries?**

Since gaining independence, Church-state relations in the Republic of Moldova have been regulated by the 1994 Constitution, which provides for fundamental human rights, including religious freedom<sup>28</sup>. Article 31, under the title of Freedom of Conscience of the Constitution reads: “The freedom of religious worship is guaranteed and religious bodies are free to organize themselves according to their own statutes under the rule of law” provided that “In their mutual relationships religious cults do not use, express or incite to hatred or enmity” and further that “Religious cults are autonomous vis-à-vis the State and shall

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24 Enyedi Z. *op.cit.*, p. 228

25 *Ibidem*

26 *Ibidem*

27 Enyedi Z. *op.cit.*, p. 225

28 Turcescu L., Stan L.: “Church-state conflict in Moldova: the Bessarabian Metropolitanate” in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2003, p. 452

enjoy the latter's support, including religious assistance in the army, in hospitals, prisons, homes for the elderly and orphanages"<sup>29</sup>.

The predominant religion of Moldova is Christian Orthodox. From a total population of 3.9 million inhabitants, including Transnistria, more than 90% nominally belong to one of two Orthodox denominations. According to the State Service for Religions (SSR), the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC) has 1,224 parishes while the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC) has 199<sup>30</sup>. These statistics are important in order to understand church-state relations in the country, and to understand why the MOC, represented by the Metropolitanate of Chisinau and All Moldova, has been favored by government.

The Metropolitanate of Chisinau and All Moldova was organized by the Moscow Synod in January 1991 and was registered with the Russian Ministry of Justice. On 7 February, 1993, it was recognized by the Moldovan government, thus asserting the government's control over religious matters in Moldova<sup>31</sup>. Therefore, being subordinated to the Russian Patriarchate, the MOC remained under the control of Moscow. The issue with the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia emerged when Bishop of Balti Petru Paduraru was driven out due to his pro-Romanian stance. In September 1992, Bishop Petru and his followers announced the establishment of the autonomous Bessarabian Metropolitanate, and asked Romanian Patriarch Teoctist to recognize it as another eparchy of the Romanian Orthodox Church<sup>32</sup>. Patriarch Teoctist, without consultation with the Russian Orthodox Church, officially recognized the reactivated inter-war "Autonomous Bessarabian Metropolitanate" with a seat in Chisinau. It was received under the Romanian Orthodox Church's jurisdiction in December 1992, and in 1995 Petru was appointed as its metropolitan<sup>33</sup>. The Metropolitanate claims to have received recognition from all Orthodox Patriarchates but the Moscow Patriarchate.

After this, the Metropolitanate began to seek political recognition from governmental authorities in order to comply with the country's legislation. This recognition was denied by several governments on the grounds that recognizing another Orthodox church would provoke conflicts within the Orthodox community. As a result, the issue became politicized, especially given Moldovan dependence on Russia and the

29 Constitution of the Republic of Moldova. Available in English at <http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/moldova3.pdf>

30 International Religious Freedom Report 2005. Moldova. Available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51569.htm>

31 Turcescu L., Stan L. op.cit., p.455

32 Ibidem

33 Ibidem

alleged suppositions of Romania's claim over the territory of independent Moldova.

The problem intensified when the Party of Communists came to power in Moldova. The party harbored anti-Romanian tendencies, and the the Bessarabian Metropolitanate brought the issue to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Starting in 2001, when the case was registered at the ECHR, the problem with the recognition of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate became a political issue and a source of drastically worsening relations between Moldova and Romania. Eventually the ECHR ruled in favor of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate and ordered the Moldovan government to recognize it within three months. After an appeal submitted by Moldovan government, the Court warned that the refusal to comply with the decision by 31 July 2002 would lead to country's exclusion from the Council of Europe<sup>34</sup>. The government complied with the decision, and on 30 July 2002, a day before the deadline, it registered the Bessarabian Metropolitanate.

The staunchest opposition to the Bessarabian Metropolitanate's registration came from the Moldovan Orthodox Community. The Metropolitanate of Chisinau repeatedly denounced the Bessarabian Metropolitanate as a "schismatic" group whose very name ignored the constitutionally stipulated name of the republic<sup>35</sup>. Following the pattern of church-state relations when a dominant church is seeking privileged relations with the state, the Metropolitanate of Chisinau asked the sympathetic Communist government to sign a Concordat. Inspired by those already existing in Georgia and Greece, they asked that the Metropolitanate be given a formal privileged relationship with the government, all Orthodox property be granted to the Metropolitanate, Sundays and Orthodox holidays be recognized as national celebration days when shops are closed, religious education be made compulsory in schools, and the establishment of religious organizations be allowed only in those communities where the faithful represent one-third of the population<sup>36</sup>. In response to this the government accepted only the first proposal, saying that all the others contradicted Moldovan and international law, and particularly emphasized that public education had to remain secular and religious instruction optional. Nonetheless, the Metropolitanate of Chisinau established an "alliance" with the government against the Bessarabian Metropolitanate, and successfully persuaded the state to transfer the property of Bessarabian Metropolitanate under its ownership.

34 Turcescu L., Stan L. *op.cit.*, p.461

35 Turcescu L., Stan L. *op.cit.*, p.462

36 Turcescu L., Stan L. *op.cit.*, p.462

In return for this, the government asked for “loyalty”, whereby the Metropolitanate would support the Party of Communists in the 2003 elections. The Church’s support is extremely important given the fact that church as an institution enjoys the biggest support from the population, estimated at 77% in December 2005<sup>37</sup>. Furthermore, the government started to interfere in religious matters, something it was not supposed to do. The examples range from financing the publication of a new text of the Bible in Chisinau (an edition whose publication had to be consulted with the Patriarchate of Bucharest) and on the first page inscribing the name of Moldovan Prime-minister Vasile Tarlev<sup>38</sup>; turning the act of bringing the Holy Light from Jerusalem on Easter night into a political-propagandistic show<sup>39</sup>; and generally, President Voronin’s recent patronage over religious affairs in the country that has bypassed his constitutional and moral attributions<sup>40</sup>.

Obviously, the government continued to discriminate against the Bessarabian Metropolitanate even after its formal registration, and encroached upon the principle of government neutrality by favoring the Metropolitanate of Chisinau. Thus, we have a truly amazing scenario where a Communist party is enacting and promoting religious politics, while at the same time being engaged in a process that could be termed the “politics of religion” that did not end with the official recognition and registration of BOC. In a state without democratic experience, and with the process of secularization and modernization underway, it is difficult to expect a clear separation of church from the state. For reasons analyzed above, they both need each other, and thus boundaries are being blurred between Casanova’s “this world” and “other world”, and in the former, between the “religious world” and the “secular world”.

The question, then, is how can we distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and what is the role of the church today? Is it to play political games and fight for influence over believers, or to perform its sacred duty of bringing together religious people and linking them with God? With such developments, especially in countries that experienced Communism, the

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37 Barometer of Public Opinion, December 2005. Institute for Public Policies, Chisinau. Available at

[http://www.ipp.md/files/Barometru/2005/comunicat\\_presaBOP\\_decembrie\\_05.doc](http://www.ipp.md/files/Barometru/2005/comunicat_presaBOP_decembrie_05.doc)

38 Tanase C.: “Fariseii” (eng. Hypocrites) in *Timpul*, Friday, 30 April 2004, No. 125. Available at <http://www.timpul.md/Article.asp?idIssue=26&idRubric=472&idArticle=1176>

39 Hadirca N.: “Lumina Sfinta s-a adus cu fala, dar cu putini crestini” (eng. The Holly Light was brought with pride, but with few Christians) in *Timpul*, Friday 6 May 2005, No. 221. Available at <http://www.timpul.md/Article.asp?idIssue=119&idRubric=1643&idArticle=4379>

40 Tanase C. “Cine-i Mitropolitul principal al RM?” (eng. Who’s the main metropolitan of Republic of Moldova?) in *Timpul* Tuesday, 1 November 2005. Available at <http://www.timpul.md/Article.asp?idIssue=188&idRubric=2302&idArticle=5927>

revival of religion is a private matter, and the privatization of religion and individuation of religious practice<sup>41</sup> is dragging people away from the church. The church still enjoys much of society's support, but it is obviously withering away as the young generation becoming more and more irreligious.

## Conclusion

The paper approaches the issue of secularization in Republic of Moldova with a special focus on church-state relations. The theory of secularization developed by Casanova contends that a clear separation of religion from other public spheres, and especially from politics, is a process of historical development and institutional differentiation, as well as a process of social modernization. This process of social modernization is not finished in the Republic of Moldova, where the secular and religious often come together, and where the religious and public sphere are not fully separated. Hence, problems and religious conflicts have arisen and lead to the politicization of the matter, to the point of involvement of international democratic institutions.

Overall, the church still maintains its authority within society--something that has been demonstrated by opinion polls--but religion has become more and more of a private matter and has announced a process of religious privatization. This process, which still is in its incipient phase in Moldova, has clearly acquired pace and speed. With the church being involved in political affairs, people start losing their trust in an institution that is supposed to devote itself to sacred things and to ensure that believers can freely exercise their spiritual needs. As a result, the secularization in societies like Moldova is an unfinished process, and unconceivable developments, like the example of church's alliance with a Communist government, can be expected in the future.

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41 Dobbelaere K.: "Church Involvement and Secularization: Making Sense of the European Case" in Barker E., Beckford J., Dobbelaere K. (eds.): *Secularization, Rationalism and Sectarianism*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 23

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