

RELIGION BETWEEN CRADLE AND AZYLUM

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Abstract: *The purpose of this text is to emphasize some of the preliminary conclusions I've come to, during the process of data gathering and analysis in a recent ethnological field work which I took part in, in Bogați village, Argeș County. The main interest of our entire research group was to figure out what is the contemporary set of values that people have in this village – a village considered as representative for the contemporary axiological thinking of Romanian villagers. The kind of values in this set were political, esthetical, religious, and moral, altogether in their bonds, but here I am to focus only on the religious mentality emerging from them.*

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Motto: *„Concerning the Man, the main issue is this: is he referring to the eternity or not? This is the criterion of one's life, after all. If only one knew that the idea of eternity is essential, one would not bind himself to useless or less important things. [...] If one understands and feels like one's life here is already connected to the eternity, then one's desires and attitudes will change. After all, we are valuable by means of the essential, and if we haven't found our way to it, then our life is wasted.”¹*

(Carl Gustav Jung, *Amintiri, vise, reflecții*)

The purpose of this recent field research which my colleagues and I pursued in a Romanian village of Argeș County was to update sociological and ethnological information about a community which has been the object of such inquiries twice in the past. I'm referring to the vast one, encompassing large territories of our country, organized at the beginning of last century by Dimitrie Gusti, the founder of Romanian sociology school, and also to the more restricted one, led in the area in the '70s, by Professor Vasile V. Caramelea, together with a group of students and applying a UNESCO questionnaire.

So, our research is trying to revive a tradition, to compare and make useful again all the precious data gathered in such a long period and left aside, almost forgotten along the communist regime which initially rejected sociology as a “bourgeois and racialist” discipline².

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¹ Translations from Romanian versions by C. Matei.

² Cf. Geană, Gheorghită, (1996), “Școala monografică și antropologia. O relație inter-disciplinară și devenirea ei”, vol. *Școala Sociologică de la București. Tradiție și actualitate*, coord. Maria Larionescu, București, Metropol, pp. 211 –229.

While our inquiry had an ethnological nature with a historical recovering purpose, it had also the specific meaning of *knowing* for me, as the Romanian anthropologist Gh. Geană explained it like this:

“Knowing is a hypostasis of love. By «love» I understand the ineffable power which joins things. There is, indeed, a phase in the process of scientific knowledge which separates things: this is the analytical phase. But synthesis, i. e. the final phase, calls things to come together. This reminds me of a (more than amusing) definition of our science offered by Murdock (1965: 49): «Anthropology is the science of man – embracing woman». If paraphrase is allowed, I would say: «Anthropology is the knowing oneself embracing the others».”³

Given these empathetic coordinates, I’ll try now to confine here the complex results of our axiological approach only to the religious side of phenomena and values.

First, we have noticed that, for 95% of the villagers, *family* is viewed as very important in their hierarchy of values, that is: “F. I.” (“foarte important”, in Romanian). The closest percent to that is 94,5% of the villagers valuing *religion* as well as F. I., very important. This latter percentage is amazing for us, considering all the past decades of communism, which imposed the unique atheistic view on people, even by force, persecution and jail.

We have found also a surprising percentage of the villagers – that is 45% – declaring they would take the risk and sacrifice their lives for their belief in God, while 40% would do that for saving one’s life, and only 20% would risk their lives fighting for their country, and 17% for justice.

Finally, the percentage showed us that the religious education of the villagers came mainly from their family in which they have been brought up, and that proportion is 70%.

As the percentage shows, despite all the difficulties and perils which were present in our society in the second half of the 20th century, religion hasn’t disappeared from people’s souls and minds. Even if apparently it was forgotten, it seems that it certainly survived till today, and is always present in the spirituality of the people. Otherwise, we could not explain the high percentage of 94,5% people valuing it in their axiological scale, nowadays, just two decades after the atheistic period.

In the same time, an important aspect based on results, concerns its relation with another value; although there have been serious changes, even “mutations” in the social behavior of our society, still religious beliefs have not ceased to bring psychic comfort and relief in times of trouble and that’s why they are trusted till today, almost as much as *family* is trusted. The main source of religious behavior is family. This value offers the most solid and persistent roots for education. Also, unlike other education, the one received inside the family is the most conservative, so the value of religious belief was transmitted, even if society and school have been secularized.

³ Gheorghiu Geană, (1999), “Enlarging the Classical Paradigm: Romanian Experience in Doing Anthropology at Home”, *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures*, vol. 8, no. 1, Hamburg, LIT, p. 75.

Now, trying to explain such percentage and conclusions, let me say they seem to confirm some general considerations about the role and trends of religious manifestations in our world today. Of course, ethnologists are not supposed to try to examine different religions by their authenticity in communication with the Divine, but they can examine the role each religion is playing in a community, and its psychological and social effects on human bonds and communication.

As the American author William Haviland emphasized in an anthropology textbook⁴, religion is continuously strengthening nowadays when facing the Western rationalism, thus revealing its powerful and dynamic force in society; so, maybe the anthropologists are not qualified to pass judgments on the metaphysical truth of any particular religion, but they can and should try to show why religion is always present in any community, and how each religion offers some “truths” about society, about Man, and his connection with the others.

One of these “truths” is that our world provides new anxieties as the scientific knowledge increases, raising new unanswered questions about human existence and metaphysical issues of life. The author says:

“After all, if there is hope for a better existence after death, than one may be more willing to put up with the difficulties of this life. Thus, religious beliefs serve to influence and perpetuate conceptions, if not actual relations, between different classes of people.”⁵

The actual boom of religion’s role in society seems to have social, psychological, and political causes, the phenomena involved in this being: alienation, individualism, loneliness, the ecological problem, the military global situation, lack of time and care, depression etc. All these are perceived as serious and objective threats, beyond a person’s possibility of changing them. So, in some people’s view, religion could bring them individually some encouragement, and the concrete ways of doing so are already debated and identified among anthropologists’ works.

In my opinion, since the social psychology reveals a lot of psychic disturbances among groups, populations, and entire societies, and since therapies for large groups of people have not been discovered and applied yet, then the benefits of religious beliefs reveal themselves as a chance to normality.

If we are to set these benefits, then we have to list the socio-psychological functions of religion, no matter its kind or its social spreading; we’ll easily discover that these issues are also benefits of religion’s social insertion:

- Providing a moral code, with rules, ideals, values and criteria for the distinction between right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, as regards human behavior;
- Giving life a sense and eliminating the absurd;
- Explaining the unknown; making the world understandable;
- Calming man’s psychic disturbances in times of trouble;
- Reducing man’s anxiety in the decision making process;

⁴ William Haviland, (1990), *Cultural Anthropology*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., pp. 357-358.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 358.

- Bringing in the hope that there is a supernatural aid and support for anyone who has a certain belief;
- Maintaining a social unity and bonds between people, which is good for their mental comfort;
- Contributing to improvement of one's education, learning and memory;
- Giving man a creed for his actions;
- Increasing solidarity and altruism among individuals;

We should not forget that all known cultures on the Globe, from any place, and in any period of time, include a form of religion or another, without exception. This omnipresence is obviously not by chance – as the historians of religion accept it (Eliade, Culianu, Ries etc). Thus, Mircea Eliade, being aware of the importance of this phenomenon for the study of any sociologist, psychologist, anthropologist, or theologian, wrote:

“The non-religious man of modern societies is still influenced and helped by the activity of his unconscious, without quite reaching a religious experience and a religious world vision. His unconscious offers him solutions for the difficulties of his existence, thus replacing the role of religion, because, first of all, religion provides man's integrity, before making the generator of values out of existence. In a sense, we almost can tell that, for the modern people who consider themselves non-religious, their true religion and mythology have been hidden in the depths of their unconscious – which means that the possibilities of reintegrating a religious experience lie deep down in such people.”⁶

Another Eliade's essential remark is that there's no significant gap in the religious life of humanity; its continuity and omnipresence can be perceived in a form or another, that could explain also the results of our questionnaire. Now it seems obvious that the communist ideology's goal of constructing “the new man”, having only laic morals and values, couldn't succeed in destroying the marks of religious belief in people. So the apparently decreasing role and manifestation of people's belief was only a sort of hiding, a social disguise for perennial values.

In fact, we could also notice results in our research that the religious values were closely related to the other political, esthetical, and moral ones, but especially to the moral ones. For instance, let's see the answers to the following matters.

The question no. 38 contained couples of opposed assertions like this:

- a) “There are always clear distinctions between right and wrong”;
- b) “There are not clear distinctions between right and wrong, the differences are made by circumstances”;
- c) ”If a man and a woman love each other, they don't need to be married in order to live together”;
- d) “A man and a woman living together without being married, commit a sin”;

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Sacrul și profanul*, p. 198.

- e) “A family without children is not complete”;
- f) “A family doesn’t need children to be a happy family”.

The villagers answered in the following percentages:

- for assertion **a** – 55%, for assertion **b** – 37,5%;
- for **c** – 37,5%, for **d** – 57,5%;
- for **e** – 55%, for **f** – 17,5%.

The other percentages left were answers of the category NS / NR (nu știu / nu răspund), that is: I don’t know / I prefer not to answer.

So, another conclusion, judging by all the results, is that moral values are rooted in the religious ones. The villagers answered to questions regarding family, their community, society, country, and even European Union by a religious criterion such as sin, and from a deontological moral point of view. The examples showing this are many in our questionnaire; I have chosen here only a few, but relevant enough, as I believe.

In my opinion, the foundation which religion and belief provide to a society’s ethics could not be replaced or destroyed. And, if in some historical periods and in some communities such replacement was attempted, there can only be for the degradation or destruction of that community. Religion, no matter its specific, has its role and it can only be replaced by another religion, but not extinguished from a people’s mind and soul. In fact, my guess is that, trying to eliminate it from people’s minds, the effect would be only the sanctification of something profane instead. And the historical example of that is given by French Revolution which, although it was intended as an atheistic emancipation of people, it only replaced the idea of Divine by the ideal of Reason, transforming human reason into a deity. Following the same pattern, the process of secularization which the communist regime tried to impress on people had as a result the “sanctification” of the utopian “New Man”, of his human powers and actions, of his success in transforming the nature and mastering the world.

Finally, another preliminary conclusion to our research aims at revealing the significant potential of social mobilization which the religious beliefs have. Of course, there are many factors that make them vary in intensity; but the percentage of 45% people declaring they would sacrifice even their lives in fighting for their belief, for their God – this is significant. Generally, religion induces a great force of commitment, depending on the circumstances how it can be translated into facts. In the case of our studied community, at least hypothetically, this power of commitment is high, compared to the one of patriotism, for example. This issue, together with others, could give us some signs regarding the distrust of people in authorities and institutions, other than Orthodox Church. Only family and the church are invested with real trust. Not even the school seems trustful enough anymore, as the villagers answer.

So, thinking about all these, we can not neglect the impact of religious phenomenon on our social life, from little groups to the entire contemporary humanity, no matter what religious orientation we embrace. In order to make realistic predictions, these signs should be considered as well.

Now, until some scientific predictions will be provided, let's think a little about the one made by Victor Kernbach, as he wrote many years ago:

*“And we must not forget that, especially religion, along with its embedded myths and rituals, has been the cradle of culture, it is now its shelter against bad weather, and it might very plausibly become, someday, its asylum.”*⁷

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⁷ Victor Kernbach, (1995), *Mit, mitogeneză mitosferă*, București, Ed. Casa Școalelor, p. 224.