
MEDIA AND RELIGION IN ROMANIA

THREE CONTEXTS AND A DISCUSSION

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Abstract

The paper analyses the relation between media and the Eastern Orthodox religion - the dominant religion in Romania. We will examine three contexts: (1) the existing sociological theories on religion and their relevance for understanding the Orthodox world today, (2) the religious media and (3) the secular media in Romania. The paper argues that the relationship between media and religion in the Eastern Orthodox world is difficult to explain using the nowadays theoretical framework of the sociology of religion. Therefore, we choose to use the 'religious publicization' hypothesis in our attempt to explain the increasing use of religious symbols and themes, in the Romanian public sphere.

Keywords: religious publicization, theory, media, Eastern Orthodoxy, Romania

1. Introduction

On 9th of April 2012, the Easter Sunday for Eastern Orthodoxy, a Pastoral letter addressed by H. H. Laurentiu, the Archbishop of Sibiu and Metropolitan of Ardeal (Romania), to the laity of his archdiocese caused considerable turmoil in the Romanian media..

The Archbishop drew public attention on the dishonesty, wickedness, envy, selfishness, and mistrust that were the evils of the Romanian society. Young people are nowadays educated by mass-media, while their parents are earning a living abroad, explained the Romanian Archbishop [IPS Laurentiu, *The Pastoral at the Holy Resurrection, of H.H. Laurentiu of Ardeal – The Joy of Holy Resurrection in Holy Liturgy*].

“The Christian family suffers, as well as society does, from a profound crisis, divorce and adultery becoming a fashion for everybody. And how can things be different, now, when the sin is the general aspect of the TV stations – televisions that are offered to us, but that we allow ourselves in watching them, too. Can we still lead a true Christian life if our minds are tainted by the lecherous images displayed in magazines, tabloids, and on television? Can the

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family still survive when the husband or the wife falls in love with TV idols and buys a separate TV set for the children's room?" commented the Archbishop in the Pastoral letter. His critical tone against the gulf between the family values and those depicted in the media was bitterly commented by television anchors or talk show hosts, who felt that media could not be blamed for all the problems in the Romanian society.

At a glance, we may understand that Romania media and the Orthodox Church are standing at on opposite poles. As a matter of fact, the relation between media and religion in many different cultural and religious contexts is not an easy one. However, the paper will show that between Romania media institutions and the Orthodox Church are not in state of cultural conflict, and their relations are not characterized by an open and strong expression of criticism as one might think when reading the above mentioned Pastoral letter.

Nevertheless, it is a common understanding that media and religion are distinct phenomena, embracing incompatible worldviews [1]. In this paper, we will try to overcome this dualism. Our purpose is to analyse how Romanian media and the Orthodox Church co-exist and to contribute with empirical data and theoretical interpretations to explaining the relationship between media and the Orthodox religion. Therefore, we will not analyse the content of the media products, but the theoretical inputs and the cultural facts, i.e. the contexts of this intricate relation: media-religion.

2. The first context: a theoretical approach

The relationship between media and religion has developed in the last twenty years as a growing and interesting field of study for the academia, as of result of the fact that it provides a fresh perspective on both areas and it contributes to theory-building in mass-communication [1, p. 1]. Recent studies have argued for understanding media and religion as evolving in a 'dialectic relationship' [2], rather than being in different spheres: "the emergence and persistence of religion is a condition of media age and media sphere goes beyond questions of structures and technologies of the media, although these issues are important parts of the whole picture. It also centres the institutions of the media and practices of mediation in larger trends in the evolution of religion." [2, p. 614]

Media and religion as a field of study could be included in the growing framework of the sociology of religion, which encompasses – nowadays – numerous conceptual developments, empirical findings and competing theories.

The first theory to be taken into consideration is the (neo) secularization thesis. Built on concepts and historical and social interpretations taken from Marx, Durkheim or Weber, the secularization theory argued the supremacy of science and rationalism in the face of religion and God. The decline of religion was considered to be universal and irreversible, according to authors such as Peter Berger, in the 70s [3].

However, research conducted in the last decades and evidence from the social research showed that faith and spirituality did not fade out in the contemporary world. On the contrary, “today there is the growing conviction that religious activity is increasing and this is because it is subject to identifiable social change and cultural transformation, notably personal choice, because of voluntarism, and emerging religious identities assembled from a bricolage of beliefs and practices and subject to numerous globalized forces.” [3, p. 4]

Two competing theories are shaping the contemporary field domain of the sociology of religion: the postmodernist perspective/approach and the rational choice theory of religious behaviour. The postmodernist perspective tries to explain and analyse the rise of new forms of religiosity, and the eclipse of traditional religions. It takes into account concepts like consumerism and personal identity and it relates to new technologies which might shape religion in different ways than expected or foreseen. Due to its syncretic nature, postmodern culture brings a ‘mix and match spirituality’, built upon beliefs and religious practices taken from different sources - some of them considered to be incompatible to each other a few decades ago [3].

The rational choice theory of religious behaviour is based on the assumption that people are motivated to get rewards and to avoid costs. Religion is a fact of life whose costs and benefits are closely analysed by believers: “it is now increasingly a matter of choice, fashion and style” [3, p. 57]. The theory uses concepts as ‘the spiritual marketplace’ or ‘supply-side religion’, comparing religious institutions to companies, which strive to attract membership by meeting the spiritual needs of ‘clients’ (seekers) [3].

The theory of rational choice is also subject to strong criticism, as it reduces religion to the status of a commodity of any kind, failing to understand the complexity of the act of believing. However, any cutting-edge theory in sociology of religion must take into account the social phenomena like the pre-eminence of consumerism over production or the increasing level of religiosity linked to non-traditional Churches or new spiritual movements.

The above mentioned theories are of great importance in understanding the relationship between media and religion, as they help us explain key issues like televangelism, online worship, e-praying or the emergence of religious blogs and religious television/radio outlets. For example, the multiplicity of religious blogs, websites, radios and televisions is an expression of a free spiritual marketplace.

However, these two theories are difficult to use when it comes to understanding the Eastern Orthodoxy relationship with media. Studies on the recent developments in the Eastern Orthodox Churches and communities have proved a strong determination to preserve the ‘unbroken tradition’ of this denomination: “Keeping the unbroken Tradition has been the conscious goal par excellence for the overwhelming majority of religious movements, authors, and activists of the Eastern Orthodoxy religiouscape” [4].

In discussing the media-religion relation in the Eastern Orthodox world, several facts have to be mentioned:

- (1) the forced secularization of the ex-Communist countries in Eastern Europe that led to an increased religiosity within the Orthodox communities after 1989,
- (2) the complementarity between State and Church in Orthodox countries,
- (3) the Orthodox national Patriarchates' contribution to the nation-building process in Eastern European countries,
- (4) Tradition ('Predanie', in Romanian and Russian) as a answer to all the challenges of (post)modernity ("a special ethos of Eastern Orthodoxy: a crucial stress upon the immutability of Tradition and a critical link with national identities") [4, p. 11].

In this particular context, it is difficult to use sociological theories developed in Catholic or (Neo) Protestant worlds in order to explain the recent developments in the Orthodox realm. One example is the supply-demand (the rational choice) theory, which was not substantiated by empirical data from post-communist countries in Eastern Europe [5]. We must also acknowledge a major challenge in interpreting the media-Eastern Orthodoxy relationship in the context of the current research on media and religion. Therefore, there is a need of an appropriate theoretical framework to analyse the media-religion interaction at the level of Orthodox societies.

3. The second context – religious journalism in Romania

The religious publications have a long history in Romania. The first one was 'Vestitorul Besericesc' ('The Church's Announcer'), published on 7th of January 1839, in Buzau, by Dionisie Romano, Bishop of Buzau [6]. Before 1839, almanacs with an eclectic content (including religious articles) were published in all the provinces inhabited by the Romanian population. One of the oldest almanacs known was published in 1733, by Petru Soanul, a deacon from Brasov [7]. Between 1839 and 1918, Orthodox priests or bishops edited religious publications, many of which had a short life and a low circulation.

However, the religious publications flourished after 1919, as a result of the general development of newspapers for large audiences. Many articles on religious themes were published in the interwar period when media (newspapers, magazines and radio) became affordable for the public. Press campaigns in favour or against the Orthodox institutions (especially against the political involvement of the Patriarch) were led in secular newspapers like 'Cuvantul' ('The Word') [8].

After a period of forced secularization, during the communist regime (1947-1989), the religious journalism steadily developed, encouraged by the ecclesiastic authorities. A cornerstone in this process is the founding in 1997 of the 'Trinitas' Cultural-Missionary Institute, by the Metropolitanate of Moldovia and Bukovina. At that time, it owned a publishing house, a radio station and a

TV station. The publishing house edited the national newspaper 'Ziarul Lumina' ('The Light') and other religious magazines and books [9].

Ten years later, in 2007, the Romanian Patriarchate founded the Basilica Press Centre – a religious media organization that includes: Radio Trinitas – a radio station, Trinitas TV – a TV station, 'Ziarul Lumina' ('The Light') a national newspaper, 'Lumina de Duminica' ('The Sunday Light') – a weekly magazine, 'Vestitorul Ortodoxiei' ('The Announcer of Orthodoxy') – a monthly magazine, Basilica – press agency and press office. In 2007, 50 other religious publications were issued on a regular basis, by the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitanates, Archdioceses or various dioceses [10].

The national newspaper 'The Light' is the only Christian daily in Romania. The first number was issued in 2005, and it has been published without any interruption until the present. It is a national publication that covers general subjects, including social, economical and cultural issues, avoiding political disputes. A major part of its editorial content focuses on the philanthropic and cultural actions of the Romanian ecclesiastic community. Of interest for the editorial team (which consists of professional journalists) is the life of ordinary people, not the spectacular side of reality [10]. Previous empirical research has showed that during religious holidays, the newspaper focuses on dogmatic and religious issues and does not cover any major political events [11]. The general tone is neutral and the information is accurate. Not a single attempt has been made to make proselytes. The tacit assumption is that the newspaper is read by people who are already Orthodox believers.

Founded in October 2007, Trinitas TV is the national television station of the Romanian Patriarchate, part of the Basilica Press Centre. Trinitas TV broadcasts 24/7 and it is available through cable and on the Internet, covering 90% of the Romanian territory. The programming strategy includes broadcasting live religious services, documentaries, interviews, features, news programmes and talk-shows on religious, cultural, educational and social themes. The live religious services are broadcasted from a church, not from a studio and are not meant to make proselytes or to make the viewers participate in any way (as in televangelism). Their purpose is to help very sick and old people to be a part of the religious ritual.

Since 2007, there has been a fervent editorial activity in the domain of religious journalism in Romania. Its general goal is to accurately reflect the life of the Romanian Orthodox community. It also focuses on building the Romanian cultural identity and on keeping alive the traditional values of Orthodoxy. Newspaper articles, radio and television programmes present the history of Romanian Orthodoxy, the main values of this denomination as well as the attitude of Church toward current social problems and cultural challenges.

4. The third context – religion in the secular media

Studies show that on a global level, there has been a substantial growth over the last decades in media reporting on religion [12]. In Romania, media

usually cover the religious festivities and holidays, most of the time criticising the public authorities' inability to properly organize the events. Pilgrimages - in which participants may have to endure bad weather conditions – are often presented in a critical manner by media, because of the inadequate organization process of these religious rituals [13].

One important aspect related to the secular media in Romania is the increasing coverage of religious or religious-related themes in consumer magazines, especially in mass-market women's magazines. Titles like 'Femeia de azi' ('Woman Today'), 'Libertatea pentru femei' ('Freedom. Women's Edition') or 'Click! pentru femei' ('Click! Women's Edition') run articles, in every issue, on topics related to Orthodox religion: fasting, pilgrimage, lives of saints, the history of important churches and monasteries, religious rituals, Easter and Christmas traditions etc. On the occasion of religious holidays, women's magazines offer as freebies (a professional term describing a small gift for every buyer of a magazine copy) objects of devotion: small icons on paper, prayer booklets or bracelets, previously blessed by a priest. Images of priests blessing the objects are displayed in the magazine, highlighting the importance of the objects and their relevance for the Orthodox believers.

These editorial and marketing strategies are audience-oriented. Consumer mass-market titles have a readership composed of women, over 35-40 years old. According to research on demographic variables related to religiosity, women display higher levels of religiosity than men. In many cultural contexts, women tend to make up 65-70 % of the churchgoers [3, p. 85]. Women who attend the religious services are likely to be older and to belong to middle-class or lower class.

Therefore, women's magazines tend to include religious articles in their content with the clear goal of meeting the expectations of the readers. However, beside the marketing aspect of this situation, there is another thing that worth mentioning in the context of media-religion relation: the secular media put into circulation religious symbols and discourses. By doing so, they contribute to the public significance of religion.

5. Discussion

We have previously examined three contexts related to the Eastern Orthodox religion. The first context referred to the existing sociological theories on religion and their relevance for understanding the Orthodox world today. A major gap was identified between the theories that are substantiated in Western (read Catholic and Protestant) realities, and the recent developments in Eastern Europe related to an increase in religiosity after a period of forced secularization.

The relationship between media and religion in the Orthodox realm is also difficult to explain using the contemporary theoretical framework of the sociology of religion. Moreover, as the two other contexts revealed, there is a fervent activity in the fields of both religious media and secular journalism. The public discourse is influenced by the increasing use of religious symbols and

themes, present at the same time in media and in politics. Is this situation influenced by the fact that all the Eastern Orthodox countries (except Greece) are post-communist states, in which the religious media emerged as a consequence of freedom of speech? Is the emergence of new media technologies a possible explanation? Why does a religion so attached to the idea of tradition start using media in an active way?

We will try to answer these questions using an updated theoretical framework, taken from the field of cultural studies: the ‘religious publicization’ hypothesis [14]. The publicization hypothesis acknowledges the rapid development of media technologies, the liberalization of media economy and the emergence of a transnational media sphere and the difficulty of explaining the relationship between media and religion using the existing sociological theories of religion (i.e. neo-secularization and rational choice). The key question is: “Why has religion ‘gone public’ in the last decades?” [14, p. 629].

According to David E.J. Herbert, one of the scholars that support the above mentioned hypothesis, the publicization process refers “to the public presence of religious symbols and discourses and does not necessarily imply that these become more influential, but rather more visible, present and hence available for mobilization, contestation and criticism in the public sphere and among various micro-publics, by both religious and non-religious actors” [14, p. 627].

The emergence of religious symbols and discourses in the public sphere contradicts the neo-secularization theory and the rational choice theory. The public presence of religion is not a consequence of the free spiritual marketplace driven by the demand-supply mechanism, as the supporters of rational choice theory argued. Several conditions permit the publicization of religion: the development of media technologies, the liberalization of media economies, religious groups with access to resources able to sustain the participation in media markets, the situation in which political participation is limited (and religious media become a channel for political protest) or when secularism is disrupted by societal transformations (as the mass migration) [14, p. 645].

The increasing use by the Romanian Orthodox Church of mediated communication (a newspaper, a television station, a radio station and numerous religious magazines) can be explained through the publicization hypothesis, as we are able to observe the presence of three previously mentioned conditions (media technologies are available and affordable in the liberalized and quasi-deregulated Romanian media market). The religious media outlets developed under the patronage of the Romanian Orthodox Church, or by the Romanian Orthodox Church are not intended to make proselytes by offering alternative information in a possible spiritual media market. Their tacit assumption is that their readers, listeners or viewers are already Orthodox believers. Their goals are to provide accurate information on the Romanian Orthodox Church, to provide religious, cultural, social information for the general audience and to represent an alternative to the tabloidization of the Romanian media. Simply put: they do not sell information to the ‘seekers’, but offer information to the believers.

On the other hand, the secular media – especially specialized media such as women’s magazines – also provide a religious or religious-related content to their audience, on a regular basis (regular columns or features), in growing quantities. The offering of objects of devotion to all the readers at Easter or Christmas time is a practice that is linked to the commercial side of magazine publishing, but also to the process of the increasing public significance of religion in Romanian society (similar practices have also been accounted for in different religious contexts [14, p. 638]). Overall, insights from the secular media support the hypothesis of the religious publicization, too.

6. Conclusion

In the present paper, we looked for a broader discussion of the ways religion interacts with media, beyond the traditional oppositional framework media-religion and the neo-secularization and the rational choice theories. Instead, we have made use of the religious publicization hypothesis which, we argue, could be a solid basis for explaining media-religion relation in the Eastern orthodox realm.

The intricate relationship between media and religion in the Orthodox world could be included in the area of Eastern Orthodoxy negotiation with globalization. Studies on Eastern Orthodoxy mention the dialectic of globalization, which is not a negative reaction in the face of (post) modernity, but a painstaking process of continuous negotiation.

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