
SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CIVIL COMMITMENT AN ASPECT OF THE STATE–CHURCH RELATIONSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY ROMANIA

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(Received 3 June 2013)

Abstract

In this article we aim to approach the relationship between State and Church in a specific manner. We consider the population has some diffuse expectations from the Church, on the background of a questionable performance of the political power by its legitimate holders. Therefore, the population expects the Church to mitigate the negative consequences of political power's actions. Our analysis focuses on the area of social interaction and the key element is the concept of communitarian spirit. When ignoring the consequences of the political and administrative decisions upon the profile and the quality of the social relationships, the results cannot be but negative. In these conditions, the public responds to the inability of the political environment to offer a space and feeling of communion by supporting the construction of as many churches as possible. This is the manner they have chosen to express their hope for a space of congregation.

Keywords: social capital, state, church, relationship, community spirit

1. State and Church in the West and in Romania

The Church and the State are two institutions whose relationship is considered one of the most prolific subjects for scientific research, especially from a sociological point of view. Their interaction is firstly explained in terms of mutual benefits, but also in terms of the power they share. However, since the Age of Enlightenment, the State has been the one to take over the functions traditionally held by the Church. This process is known as secularization and has been widely analyzed [1]. The divine right to rule, belonging to the monarch, was permanently decided by the Church, the coronation ceremony being the most visible point of interaction between those holding the political power and the ones assuring the possession and exercise of power. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the number of nobles left in exile was doubled by the number of clerics. The establishment of the cult of the Reason goddess was the sign of rejection of the approach that gave more importance to the nobiliary title than to what people had to say. The absolutist regime could have not existed in

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the absence of the civil obedience, assured especially through the clerical structures. It is interesting to see how structures that in theory should not only be working closely together, but also have very well regulated connections in terms of transparency, cooperate in our region nowadays.

From an economic perspective and answering to the question how the Church does support the State when its purpose is to benefit from the population's resources, we find a model in which, on one side *the religious goods* respond to population's needs and therefore detain them to rise against politics – a Marxist idea – and on the other side, the population gives a greater confidence to the State if sees it assured by the Church [2].

The reference literature follows two types of approaches, i.e. how the politics influence religious behaviours and institutions and on the contrary, how the presence of religion determines the State actions. Independently of the direction of influence, we find a very high percentage of countries in the world where the involvement from one side into another is at least minimally present. For example, International Religious Freedom Reports, with data for 2001, 2003 and 2005, show that only 12 of the 196 countries included in the static analysis did not engage in religious matters [2, p. 5].

In this regard, we find several interaction models between the State and the Church. In the United States of America, since the First Amendment in 1791, there was clearly established the relation between the two institutions, so that the State does not regulate the official religion and at the same time it guarantees the full expression of religion. It was aimed – and succeeded – to build a separation wall between the State and the Church [3]. In Western Europe, the relationship between the two is characterized by some common features, such as the assurance of religion freedom, and the autonomy of the Church's institutions, where there are official Churches, providing direct financial aids or through tax breaks, or providing help in the cultural and social areas [4].

We identify in this case three types of Church–State relationships, respectively cooperation between the two, in which at least one of the Churches is declared Official Church of the State, the model of strict separation between the two, and the third model of the undetermined separation between State and Church, in other words based on mutual support. For the first model, Greece and The United Kingdom of Great Britain would be such examples (in the case of the Anglican Church, where the 'Church law is considered to be part of the English law'), or Sweden, Denmark and Finland where the Lutheran Church and the Orthodox one are declared Official State Churches.

In the second case, of the strict separation between State and Church, the example of France is relevant, as no religion benefits from a specific title, religions not being public institutions, but integrated in the area of private business; or the example of Holland where the Church is not mentioned as an independent institution.

The third model is based on cooperation between the two institutions, based on mutual support. For example, Germany assures a cooperation system when the purpose is common, but there is no official State Church recognized.

The same type of cooperation is shown in Austria, Luxembourg, Belgium, Italy, Spain and Portugal [5].

In Romania, the State-Church relation has already tradition, based on a specific Byzantine model, in which the Emperor was also the leader of the Church. Once the Empire fell, the dynamic between the two came close to an interdependency model [6]. However, in our country the influence of the Church was constantly growing since the emergence of the Modern state until 1945, being a very active element in the political arena. In the communist period the political power tried to discharge the influence of the Church in the political and social area. Nevertheless, there was cooperation between the two, the State benefiting from religion's influence upon population. Thus, the Church found ways of surviving in an atheist political system [7]. There are well-known the cases when members of the clergy collaborated with the Security, leading to a very complex image of the relation Communist State–Church in Romania. If we only look over the border in the Moldavian Republic, we shall notice that even if in Romania religious expression was specifically shaped by the totalitarian regime, the communist political regime could have reacted more brutal than it had. However, if we observe what happened at the top level of the Church in the years to follow the establishment of the communist regime, we notice the major dangers the Church had to cope with.

The post-communist period brings a change in the manifestation and dynamic between Church and State. After 1989, religion is the one that contributes to 'filling in the ideological void left by Marxism Leninism' and the Church starts to engage in 'building the Eastern Europe's democracy'. This is not a particular case for Romania, the same situation being present in Russia, Poland and Bulgaria. Religion is the one to legitimate the political power, to support the political parties to attract voters, religious symbols becoming a common feature of post-revolutionary election campaigns [8].

We find in literature the reference to four key players who want to impose their view in this regard, respectively *The Orthodox Church* – its main argument is that the majority of the population is Orthodox, *the political factor*, *the religious minorities* – which enjoy the protection of western democracies to defend their religious freedom and the *civil society*, who wishes to be a dialog partner in this area. Therefore, on one hand the Orthodox Church claimed its right to be called the National Church; on the other hand the representatives of civil society supported the idea of a total separation between Church and State, thus assuring the independency and autonomy from one to another [8]. However, in 2006 the political influence in the religion area became obvious when the *Law regarding the freedom of religion and the general status of religions* was adopted, replacing the communist law from 1948.

The Law of religions recognizes the "important role of the Romanian Orthodox Church and of the other Churches and religions recognized in the national history of Romania and in the life of the Romanian society", these having the role of social partners and "factors of the social peace" (7th article). On request, the State can provide support to the recognized religions through

financial contributions; also, a religion is recognized by the State by a Government decision (17th article), in Romania being officially recognized a number of 18 religions [9].

The law enactment generated public disputes. In a report of the State Department of the United States of America [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2009. Report Romania*, October 26 2009, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127332.htm>] the Romanian Government being accused of discriminating between the officially recognized religions and those which are not recognized, by creating obstacles in the process of accreditation, the number of officially accredited religions being very small. The report also stated that the financial support is not assigned in a transparent manner. Without minimizing the critiques or the effects of the law upon the State–Church relation, it worth mentioning that Romania is the last country from the former Soviet bloc to change the communist legal framework in this regard, respectively the Decree no.177 from 1948 regarding the general regime of religions [8].

2. Capitalizing trust

In the complex context of the responsibilities assumed by the Church and of the prerogatives of the State in our country, we aim to focus on a specific aspect of the relational dynamics between the two. Therefore, given the questionable performance of politics and the implicit negative consequences, we find in people's minds diffuse expectations for the Church to mitigate the negative consequences, through its direct or indirect influence. A relevant indicator is the high trust of population in Church, linked with a significantly low percentage of trust in politics. However, on the background of a Romanian cultural model which offers a high value to religion, the Church provides its own solutions to problems of public interest. Relevant examples are the ones concerning abortion, homosexual behaviour, or the attempt to introduce religion as a compulsory subject in secondary education [10].

On one side, according to the 2007 Public Opinion Barometer [11], the trust of population in the Church was translated in the answers to the question *how much do you trust your Church* in percentages like 39% for *quite much*, or 45% for *very much*. On the other side, the trust in the Presidency (17%), in the Government (28%), in the Parliament (32%), or Justice (29%) show a high imbalance between politics and religion, with a significant advantage for the last one [11]. In 2013, an Inscop Research survey registered approximately 67% of respondents with high or very high trust in the Church [<http://www.agerpres.ro/media/index.php/social/item/190978-Sondaj-Majoritatea-romanilor-are-incredere-in-biserica-si-doreste-predarea-reliei-inscoli.html>], the other public institutions having percentages of trust such as 63% - the Army, 48% - the Romanian Intelligence Service, 47% - the Police, 45% - the Mayor's office, 40% - the Government, 38% - the European Parliament, 33% - the Romanian Parliament, and 30% - the Presidency.

The trust in the Church depends on indicators such as the personal resources and the living environment, so the ones that tend to have more confidence in the Church are the elderly women, with a poor education, and living in a rural area, as well as people who are great consumers of media [11]. Our own answers to the question *why Romanians are among the most religious Europeans*, are based on reasons such as poor religious diversity - a monopoly of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and the low share of population with higher education, which reveals a human capital which is not valued [10]. However, the Church is the one which "takes over the capital of trust lost by the institutions involved in government", "offers continuity and stability (...) being the tradition keeper", and at the same time responds to a "high social vulnerability" [10, p. 138]. Another point of view supports the idea of a contradictory behaviour of the Romanian population. Thus, although Romanians do not trust the political elite and its actions and show instead their trust towards Church, they would not want to see it involved in politics [O. Voicu, *Implicarea bisericii în politică (The involvement of Church in Politics)*, Soros Foundation Romania, September 2011, http://soros.ro/ro/program_articol.php?articol=305].

On one hand there is the underperforming State, which expresses itself faultily. The effects of corruption, the absence of public politics necessary for development, the lack of transparency in the process of decision making, the overlapping of the development cycles upon the elective ones have all profound consequences upon the entire population. On the other hand, there is the powerful institution of the Church, which survived – though not without compromises – a repressive political regime and which enjoys the majority capital of trust from the population. Therefore it is natural for *the many* to expect from religion and the Church 'to come with something' which would mitigate the negative effects of the underperforming political power.

3. Social capital and civil commitment

Further on, the analysis aims to customize the State–Church relationship through the central concept of communitarian spirit. Even if the expectations towards Church many times aim to material benefits, the main interests fall into another category. What we are mainly interested in the aspects which refer to the need to be together, the need for community, to have convincing elements for the sense of belonging to an 'us' whose dimensions are difficult to see. However, aspects as: the excessive density of population in the neighbourhoods of the cities, especially the big ones; the inability to choose where to live, among people with similar background, given that the only selection criteria is the financial one; the fluctuation of people living in our proximity, mainly due to the fact that many apartments are not inhabited by their owners, but they are rented and re-rented for short periods of times; the transformations of the different fundamental social structures such as family; as well as other phenomena of this type lead to poor social capital. It is enough to mention here the percentage of

those meeting weekly with their friends, in the European context Romania being in the interval with the lowest percentage, respectively under 40% [12].

The community as specific social structure is absent or poorly functioning, especially in the large urban areas, where housing in overpopulated neighbourhoods and where the blocks of flats are the no escape reality. The preservation and the perpetuation of urban habitat type implemented by the communists, with the purpose of preventing the emergence of communitarian spirit (the main condition for the capacity of collective reaction) makes the society unable to remake its social networks which would ensure a proper functioning of the society, close to the people's expectations.

The community's functions have a crucial meaning in social life, in the coherence of its functioning. Communities support individuals, people find within communities everything they need to develop. Communities offer the possibility of expression, helping to shape a proper meaning of life. Also, people identify themselves through community. Nevertheless, the most important function is the expression of some specific forms of informal social control. Together with the family, the school, and in general within the interaction with the others, the community crucially contributes to the socialization process by supporting a functional area which cannot be fulfilled by any other social structure. In its absence, everyone's area of freedom increases over the limits of coherence for collective action, with inevitable consequences upon the functioning of the whole society.

How could we then sketch a theoretical approach able to particularly explain the relation between the Church and the State, through the concept of communitarian spirit? Our analysis takes into account the link between the variable concerning the type of residential area (village, town, city, county capital), the variable given by the religious factor, and respectively the intensity of the communitarian spirit.

We imagine in this triad two types of relations, with the common element given by the type of residency, linked on one hand with the expression of communitarian spirit, and on the other hand with the influence of the religious aspect. Therefore, between the two it is an inverse variation, the communitarian spirit being more powerful as the residential area is smaller. The same type of relation could be observed between the types of residential area and the expression of trust in the Church. Thus, the smaller the first one, the greater is the confidence towards the institution of the Church. Taking into account the same type of variation, we put forward the hypothesis that the presence of the communitarian spirit is correlated with the trust in Church.

The first relationship is explained by the fact that the low density of population in the rural areas, as well as the specific type of traditional community assure a certain continuity on the expression of communitarian spirit, with all the facets we mentioned above (efficient informal social control, high capacity of collective reaction). However, with the expansion of the urban environment and with the increase of rural-urban migration flows, there is an increase of population in the cities. Neither this increase, nor its spatial

distribution is controlled, in order to keep a type of living environment favourable for the community development.

Here are relevant the two reconstruction models followed in Europe after the Second World War. The common point is the post-war reconstruction, especially in the area of damaged housing. In this regard, the options were quite opposite in result, in the West being followed for example the model where the surroundings were adapted to assure the necessary conditions for congregation and implicitly, the living in *communion* and *in community*. We refer to the example of France, which applied Le Corbusier concept – *the modulor* – linking the housing space dimensions with the human needs, in order to build the necessary space for living together. However, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, the reconstruction meant the importation of the Russian model toward all the satellite countries, the model of 8 square meters for each person, independently of their needs. They tried – and in some way succeeded – to standardize the housing and living conditions, to control the private life of individuals and implicitly their social networking with others, in order to avoid congregation, communion and ultimately the emergency of collective reaction capacity.

The soviet model we imported in the 20th century would not have such a great meaning if its consequences would not still be present, mainly the absence of communitarian spirit and of the necessary and compulsory space for its emergence.

The questions which arise now aim to clarify the relevance of religious beliefs in the communitarian background. How much could the Church bring people together? How real is the religious communion in Romania? We refer to the Orthodoxy, nevertheless. We do not intend to discuss these issues in this study, but we say that the existence of religious space is only a necessary but not sufficient condition for religious communion. There are a lot of mechanisms which should properly function so that the religious closeness increases the degree in which people assume a common identity.

We are interested here in the idea of the multidimensionality of the mutual support between the State and the Church, trying to highlight a less visible aspect. The most obvious one is linked to the transformation of religious capital into electoral capital. What happens during election campaigns is already well known. Moreover, as a religion is financially supported by the State, is implicit its support of the political power. Although at present the holders of political power are only laic recognized, it is not to be neglected the supplementary recognition given through a religious pathway. Even if in the West the main waves of critiques towards unwanted political decisions come from the big urban areas, in Romania these forms of critique are practically absent. The atomization of individuals, the absence of communitarian spirit, the reflex of finding individual solutions to problems which are in fact common and so on make the ingredients necessary for collective reaction to be absent. The high homogeneity of population in the rural areas, the existence of communitarian spirit – although in diminished forms compared to the traditional rural areas – would theoretically

make the population from those zones to be more reactive against the unfavourable political decisions. We also know that this does not happen, the political and administrative control being more powerful in the rural areas. Of course there are collective reactions in such areas, but they appear in close connection with local problems. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the hypothesis which says that the absence of population's negative reactions towards the holders of the political power is caused by the high influence of the religious aspect in the rural areas.

The lack of collective reactions as a chronic effect of the absence of communitarian spirit is thus obvious when we take into consideration the worsening economic situation from the last years. On the background of prolonged economic crisis, with austerity measures involving cutting wages, lowering the living standards, an increased unemployment rate, in Europe and particularly in Greece, Great Britain and France there have been great street movements and protests [13; *Q&A: French strikes over pension reform*, BBC Online, published on November, 10, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11573091>]. However, in Romania the same type of austerity measures, perhaps even harsher, generated only simulations of protests [C. Horvat, *Ziua I a marilor proteste – disperare la pensionare, amorteală și frică la bugetari*, published on May, 31, 2010, http://www.cotidianul.ro/Ziua_I_a_marilor_proteste_-_disperare_la_pensionari_amorteala_si_frica_la_bugetari-115991/; *Presă străină: Români nu s-au înghesuit la grevă*, published online on June, 1, 2010, [http://www.zaire.com/stiri/greva-generală/presa-straină-romanii-nu-s-au-inghesuit-la-greva-generală-1019126](http://www.ziare.com/stiri/greva-generală/presa-straină-romanii-nu-s-au-inghesuit-la-greva-generală-1019126)].

It is relevant in this regard the support and the confidence given by population to the Church, mainly in the rural areas. Studies show that the practice of praying, going to church and the financial contribution are indicators with high values in the rural [14]. In percentages, 70% from the ones living in the rural areas declare the practice of praying as an everyday activity, with higher percentages occurring among women (70% women compared to 53% men), respectively among the elderly (80% of those aged 60 and over) and the ones with a lower level of education. As for going to church, more than half of Romanians go at least once a month, and approximately a third at least once a week. Also, this activity is more frequent in the rural areas, in the case of women and elderly people. It is interesting the percentage of those financially contributing to the church they belong to – this being a normal practice for at least third quarters of Romanians. The Orthodox ones contribute financially in proportion of 70%, mainly the elderly persons. We highlight here the greater percentages in the rural areas. The rural populations and the older ones give financial support "in a manner significantly statistically higher than those living in the urban areas and the younger" [14, p. 3]. The conclusion of the study is that "Orthodox people are less willing to financially contribute in order to support their community's church. The Orthodox Romanians, who represent the population majority, are religious more in the visible practices and less in the

internalized ones and also have a lower responsibility compared to other confessions” [14, p. 4].

Coming back to the relation between the type of residential area, the influence of the religious aspect and the intensity of communitarian spirit, we notice that the communitarian spirit is present in villages, while it practically disappeared in the large urban areas. Also, in small rural localities, it is obvious the influence of religion, an influence decreasing as we come closer to the big cities. We said above we could understand the high level of trust of the population in the Church in close relation with a low level of trust in the political structures and by their diffuse expectancy towards the Church to mitigate the negative political decisions’ consequences.

Further in our analysis, we show that the smaller a locality is, the greater is the attention given by the local holders of political power to the social impact of their decisions. The bigger the locality, the lower is the interest for the same issue. In the big cities, the public policies ignore the utmost relevance of development strategies adapted upon the type of urban habitat, the relation between the type of habitat and the features of social relationships being completely ignored. Thus, the process of bringing people together is seriously damaged. In these conditions, the function of religious belief could be very important for the support of communitarian spirit.

The relational dynamic between the State and the Church at a micro level is revealed from our point of view when analyzing the financial support given by the population as well as by the State for the construction of churches. It is a lively debate in this period, and not only about the State financially supporting more the construction of churches than the constructions of schools. In a campaign of the Secular Humanist Association from Romanian, they insisted upon the fact that in Romania there are 18.300 churches and only 4.700 general schools. Thus, in August 2010 someone could say that for 15 years ”every two days a new church was opened”, while 21.000 units of education were dissolved, because of the defective budget of the Ministry of Education [Campanie Asociația Secular Umanistă din România (Campaign of the Secular Umanist Association from Romanian), <http://www.asur.ro/campanii/in-plata-domnului>]. However, the growth pace of the two is far too disproportionate, for every new school built after 1989, another new 5 churches being raised [*Câte biserici și câte școli sunt în România: După Revoluție, s-au construit cinci biserici pentru fiecare școală nouă*, 19 Aprili 2013, [193](http://www.mediafax.ro/social/cate-biserici-si-cate-scoli-sunt-in-romania-dupa-revolutie-s-au-construit-cinci-biserici-pentru-fiecare-scoala-noua-10765748]. Nevertheless, the school population has decreased and statistically, the number of education units decreased due to the merger of several other units (only between 2008 and 2011, the number of school decreased with a number of 1017, respectively by 12,4% [The National Institute of Statistics, <i>România în cifre 2012. Breviar statistic (Romania in numbers 2012. Statistical Summary)</i>]). In any case the disproportion is not explainable. However, we do not know many initiatives in which the population supports the construction of a new school in the same manner they</p></div><div data-bbox=)

support the construction of a church. From a functional and at the same time sociological point of view, we could say the problem is not the large number of churches that have been built, but the small number of schools that have been built and re-built.

From our analysis is relevant to take into account the density of churches' number not linked necessarily to the number of inhabitants of a locality, but linked to the population density from an area or another. This is why we ask ourselves in which way the existence of a number of churches in an area with 50.000 people, for example, can have a positive impact upon the manner in which the inhabitants of that area interact. Obviously the answer is negative.

I shortly present here the results of an observation I have been making for many years. I usually participate at the Easter church service in different randomly selected churches in rural and in urban areas. As a general conclusion I consider that there is an inappropriate manner of expression during the service, as the attention is focused on creating a personal connection with the priest, not with the others, in a communitarian way. There is no sense of communion, that draining the major expression of the ritual. Of course that being together and involved in the same ritual means more than not being there. However it pales in comparison to what the ritual would signify if the people assumed a sense of belonging. It becomes obvious the interest only towards a direct interaction with the priest, the latter one considering the situation as normal. In this situation it is ignored everything that comes with the profound interiorization of religion.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the existence of churches could be beneficial in order to mitigate the negative impact of different decisions and political and administrative actions upon the quality of social relations. If we analyze from this perspective, it is understandable the State's decision to support the Church, to partially finance the construction of churches and so on. It is an indirect form through which the State assumes its own administrative incapacity, rewarding an institution which if not fully mitigates the negative consequences, at least maintains the hope.

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