
YOUNG ROMANIANS' RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND REPRESENTATIONS REGARDING POLITICAL MATTERS AND GOVERNMENT

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Abstract

The topic of this text is the representation of beliefs, religious practices and political and governmental institutions in the life of Romanian youth. A considerable amount of them adhere to the cult of a single and personal God. They believe in the existence of saints, Heaven, hell and redemption. Young Romanians preserve a substantial religious conservatism, a fact illustrated by the desire expressed by most of them to have the right to abortion restricted.

Another conclusion resulting from the sociological research concerns the mistrust young Romanians show for companies and for political and governmental institutions. This feeling is accompanied by a very high level of aspiration, (sometimes) associated with the absence of professional skills, of the cult for well-done jobs, of self-sacrifice and of social responsibility. Young people also believe they have modest political efficacy, and resign themselves when faced with the all-powerful voting mechanism. Hence the relative character of the tendencies for social protest, an issue balanced off, however, by the great faith young people have in their own future.

Keywords: secularisation, tolerance, Christianity, Church, democracy

1. Introduction

Research in the area of social and human sciences is unanimous in underlining the importance of young people for the future of a community or of a country. This text focuses on young people's opinions and representations regarding religious life, political matters and government in present-day Romania. The specific features of this representation of religious life and of political matters and government are better and more convincingly underline in comparison with the situation in other European countries. Relative recently they have become the object of empirical sociological studies, some of which have been mentioned in this text.

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2. Religious beliefs and rituals specific to youth in present-day Romania

Classical and current sociological researches, both theoretical and empirical, show that modernisation has (also) brought along the phenomenon of secularisation. Thus, secularisation is very strong in the Centre, West and North of Europe. The United States of America and Eastern Europe do not flow the equation 'modernity = secularisation'. Instead, the two historical and symbolic spaces seem to confirm the thesis of 'multiple modernities' [1]. According to it, there are several types of 'modernity' in the societies of today. Some involve secularisation, some do not. Certain types of modernity are compatible with religion, others with spirituality. There are differences between the two. Mainly, "religiousness reflects a social and institutional character, as spirituality is closer linked to individual confidence and experience" [2]. The field of sociological research takes these differences into account. Thus, "the questions regarding spirituality (...) transcends any particular religion and can be used both with religious individuals and for non-religious ones" [2, p. 34]. We shall focus solely on the relationship between religion and modernity, and the questions and answers analysed concern religious life exclusively.

The thesis is also confirmed by the empirical sociological research concerning the religious life of Romanians and, in particular, of young people in Romania. According to an *Eurobarometer* poll carried out in 2010, Romania ranked third among the highest believing countries in the EU (behind Malta and Croatia). In 2017, Romania ranks sixth among the European countries with a majority Orthodox Christian population, with a percentage of 86%. It is behind the Republic of Moldova (92%), Greece (90%), Armenia (89%), Georgia (89%) and Serbia (88%) [Pew Research Center, *Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe. National and religious identities converge in a region once dominated by atheist regimes*, 10 May 2017, p. 20]. An overwhelming percentage of Romanians (93%) believe in the existence of God.

Population censuses also validate these findings. "According to the census of 2011, 86% of Romanians identify as Orthodox Christians, 0.1% state they are atheists or have no religion, and the rest belong to other religious denominations, mostly Christian as well" (*Census*, 2011). An INSCOP poll taken in 2015 reconfirms the situation described above. Thus, 83.9% of Romanians considered themselves to be religious, 10.3% declared they were not religious (meaning they did not practice religion, rather than rejected it) and only 1.1% were staunch atheists (declaring themselves as such). A percentage of 96.5% said they 'believed in God', 1.9% said they did not believe, and 1.6% did not know/did not respond (Sondaj *INSCOP-Research*, București, 2015).

The situation is somewhat similar among young Romanians, with the exception that atheism is better represented. Thus, 85% of young people consider themselves to be Orthodox Christian, 13% identify as being of another religion, while 2% state they have no religion or are atheists [3]. The CURS research yielded a higher percentage of atheistic youths (5%). Moreover, "one third of

them do not believe in God or reject other basic assumptions of the Orthodox Christian faith” [3, p. 9].

The percentages notwithstanding, the atheism of many young people is a declarative, superficial one, based on lack of knowledge and the absence of a profound religious education. A true atheist is an individual who buys and reads religious literature every day, who has a metaphysical sensibility and religious knowledge. Based on these, such individuals formulate counterarguments to the great religious ideas and assumptions. For example, they may oppose to the scholastic arguments concerning ‘the existence of God’ another series of arguments concerning ‘the inexistence of God’. For the author of this text, the archetypal atheist can be found in the writings of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky. Obviously, empirical studies on the sociology of religions do not analyse atheism from this perspective.

Most young people in Romania (over 80%) declare to be of Orthodox Christian confession. For some of them, this membership is merely formal, assumed by virtue of family tradition. In reality, many young people are not familiar enough with the basic data of Christianity, not with the differences between the Orthodox Christians and other denominations [4].

One major change in the religious life of young people occurs once they turn 19. Having come of age, they distance themselves from their parents’ lifestyle. They also come to assume a considerable part of the basic data of *secularisation*. For example, *religious certainties* turn into *uncertainties*. Thus, when asked ‘Do Heaven and Hell exist?’, 67.5% of the respondents aged 15-19 ‘strongly believe’ they do. When asked the same question, the percentage of respondents aged 20-24 who ‘strongly believe’ drops significantly to 60.3%. To the question ‘Did God create the world?’, 77.6% of young people aged 15-19 answer they ‘strongly believe’ it. Only 70.8% of young people aged 20-24 ‘strongly believe’ in the existence of a Creator. Finally, when asked ‘Is God the source of rules and moral duties?’, 66% of young people aged 15 to 19 ‘strongly believe’ it. For the same question, the percentage of young people aged 20-24 who ‘strongly believe’ drops to 62.3% [3, p. 115].

To conclude, advance in age brings with it the *privatisation of religion*. Religious life tends to become, for some of the young people, a ‘private affair’, a practice held in the privacy of the family space, without social echoes. This is how we explain the fact that 60% of them state that they do observe religious feasts and pray, but they do not go to church or to confession and they do not fast. Over time, the phenomenon of *religion privatisation* becomes decreasingly intense among young people. Part of them return to the social practice of Christian rituals after reaching the age of 30.

Sociology research undertaken in the field also demonstrates the existence of a *strong background of religious and spiritual conservatism* among Romanian youth. It is reflected in the opinions regarding family, sexuality, childbirth, abortion, etc. specific to the questioned youth. “Abortion is an issue with a high potential of importance for the future, despite the fact that nowadays this topic is seldom discussed in politics. Over 50% of young people would agree to a change

the current abortion laws in the direction of restricting current rights. Almost 20% of them want abortion to be completely forbidden by law, while 37% of them would like to see abortion allowed only in situations of serious emergency (i.e. when the mother's life is in danger). Only 36% of young people believe abortion should continue to be allowed in the current form of the legislation – which is indeed one of the most permissive in the European Union.” [3, p. 121] It is significant that “more than half of the young population desire the restriction of abortion rights in Romania” [3, p. 9].

All these options expressed by young Romanians prove the fact that they have an increasing interest in the life of society. Those who are believers show an interest in social issues (as well) and particularly in the manner in which the Church reacts to these issues – family, sexuality, abortion, charity and philanthropic practices being just some of them. Starting from the young people's increasing interest in the responses given by the Church to the issues in society, we arrive at the issue of the youth's active participation in social life as a whole. As the population grow older, the involvement of young people in the politics and government of their community is increasingly brought into discussion. And we know that in this respect the situation in Europe and in Romania is truly critical.

3. Representations of political and governmental institutions in the life of young Romanians

Aside from the religious crisis that seems to affect many young individuals, sociological studies are unanimous in finding that, in Western Europe, as well as in the East, we see a profound *crisis* in terms of the youth's involvement in political life. Obviously, this is also the case in today's Romania.

Currently we also have in Romania a *substantial mistrust for the democratic political and governmental institutions on the side of young people*. Young Romanians' opinions concerning “the situation of democracy in Romania is quite divided. Around 45% of young people are unhappy or very unhappy with it, and only 18% are very happy or happy with it; one-third of them are neither happy, nor unhappy.” [3, p. 147]

One explanation for the lack of trust in Romanian institutions also pertains to the specifics of their *expectation social structure*. In general, young people have a very *high level of aspiration* [F. Iosip, *Cei mai mulți tineri români, cu vârste până în 21 de ani, visează la un job într-o multinațională sau vor să devină antreprenori*, http://adevarul.ro/news/societate/studiu-cei-mai-tineri-romani-varste-21-ani-viseaza-job-intr-o-multinationala-vor-devina-antreprenori-1_5979e6f15ab6550cb88968c5/index.pdf]. When they graduate from college or finish their training, the young have very high expectations from both society and their future employers. Four out of ten young people aged below 21 would like to work in a multinational. Why? For the *money, social stability* and genuine *opportunities for promotion* provided by such organisations. One young person out of five dreams of opening his/her own business and become his/her own boss. Only 12% of them are willing to work in the public sector [CRSmedia.ro, Ernst & Young,

Tendențe și realități CSR în România, București, 2013]. The reason for these reservations concerning the public, state-owned, sector is the unwillingness to accept possible risks, such as *political compromise* and *corruption*.

On the other hand, the preference for working in multinationals can be explained through *the type of education* received by Romanian young people in the years that came after the Revolution of 1989. Sociologist Alfred Bulai is convinced that the young have internalised as a fact of life the mentality according to which “money is the only thing that counts. Hence the drop in concern for the idea of work and the perceived value of work.” [C. Badea, *România, țara în care tinerii sunt învățați de iubească banii câștigați repede. Interviu cu sociologul Alfred Bulai*, 23 September 2017, www.ziare.com] This is accompanied by the absence of *a cult of commitment, punctuality and social responsibility*. This important change of mentality is also reflected in everyday language, states the sociologist. Thus, “before 1990, when one meant to say that something was valuable, one would use the colloquialism ‘Meserie!’ (author’s note: literally ‘trade, craft’ in Romanian, but having as English equivalent the colloquialism ‘neat’ – ‘wonderful, terrific’). Nowadays the similar colloquialism is ‘Marfă!’ (author’s note: literally ‘merchandise’ in Romanian, but having as English equivalent also the colloquialism ‘neat’).” [C. Badea, *România, țara în care tinerii sunt învățați de iubească banii câștigați repede. Interviu cu sociologul Alfred Bulai*] ‘Meserie’ made one think about the cult of perfection in work and the aspiration to join a professional elite. This used to be a sought-after status, valued in society. On the contrary, the term ‘marfă’ has today a profound commercial and pecuniary connotation. Those who use it – young and old alike – admire what is being sold and generates a large and immediate profit, without any special efforts. Large and immediate profits are sought without the young people being willing to “offer anything in return” [5, p. 59]. Some of them “are not at all willing to do any additional work, all of them hunt for regular work hours and a company car” [5, p. 64].

In the current Romanian social space, mistrust for companies and the political and governmental institutions is based on the belief held by Romanian citizens aged between 15 and 29 that their vote cannot change any of Romania’s circumstances. Why is this? One possible answer comes from the *low political efficacy* of young individuals in a democratic society. The literature mentions that political efficacy is of two types: *internal* and *external*. “The internal one starts straight from the citizen and designates the citizen’s direct action in his/her interaction with the state. Practically, this represents the faith that, through his/her actions, be it voting or any other legal means, a citizen can influence the political process. The external efficacy is related to the citizen’s expectations that the state institutions will react or will interact significantly with him/her.” [3, p. 140]

The modest internal political efficacy can also be explained through the low participation of young people in the elections for the Parliament and the Presidency of Romania. It is also conditioned by the low external political efficacy perceived by a great part of Romanian youth.

Another possible explanation would be *the resignation felt by young people when facing the voting mechanism*. The majority of them believe that the political Leviathan cannot be defeated. The idea is backed up, among others, by the results of a sociological study carried out in the UK. “A 2013 study carried out by the *London School of Economics* and dedicated to the support of democracy from the part of European Union young people asserts that the main obstacle in the way of a more intense participation of youth in political matters is the lack of faith that their vote or their action can make a difference.” [3, p. 129]

The common social representation in Romania nowadays is *young people have a modest involvement in political matters*. They do not vote and they do not manifest a constant interest in what is going on in politics and in government. Thus, 49% of young people are very little or not at all interested in politics [3, p. 130]. One explanation could be the lack of a “participative political culture” in their parents [3, p.134]. And the parents cannot pass on to their children something they do not have themselves.

There are, however, situations that periodically invalidate this stereotype. One of them was *the parliamentary election of November 2014*. At the time, the percentage of young people turning out to vote (in the second round) was of 58%, a record in Romania in the past 27 years (Sondaj IRES, București, 2014). The census of 2011 points out that “young people aged 15-29 represent 18.8% of the resident population of Romania...” [3, p. 6].

The success of this unprecedented mobilisation of young Romanians in November 2014 has something to do not only with the cynicism and the defiant attitude of a certain political structure, but also with the effective communication between young people in the country and abroad. The young who were abroad at the time kept in touch among themselves and with their families in Romania using the newest and fastest communication tools. Their preferences in terms of communication are no longer television, radio and the printed press. They resort much more easily to the *new media*: Internet, Facebook, text messages, and the new social networks. These are the new embodiments of *(post)modern magic*. “All these fulfil now the ancient dream of respectable magic: to defeat space and time, to make possible the ubiquitousness of the human person, to communicate rapidly across great distances...” [6]

Starting from the existing political realities, “almost two-thirds of the interviewed youth believe that things are going in the wrong direction in Romania” [3, p. 8]. Why? Among others, because, with the passing of time, the major problems of the Romanian society persist. In order of importance, the first three would be *corruption*, *poverty* and *the lack of jobs*. Over time, as they advance in age, the interest of young people for politics increases. It is directly proportional with the frequency of discussions among young people on the topic of Romanian politics. Moreover, once they start a family, young men become aware of the importance of political and governmental institutions. As a result, they become increasingly more interested in politics. On the other hand, women – inclining more towards *cooperation* than towards *competition* – tend to stay, in their majority, away from political issues.

The persistence of the major problems in Romania (corruption, poverty, the lack of jobs, etc.) also justifies the openness towards social forms of *protest*. Empirical research confirms that in the life of the investigated young people there is “a certain propensity for protest” [3, p. 9]. In time, this “certain propensity” becomes a firmly assumed social and political attitude. Ultimately, the contestation dimension of the *establishment* is a given in the condition of youth.

A significant episode in this respect is the protest related to the application of the infamous *Ordonanța 13*. Statistically, teenagers – the 15 to 19 age group – tend to challenge the *establishment*, the traditional values and their parents’ lifestyle. They are mid-way between childhood and adulthood “often trying to follow the adult’s models, but being treated as children from a legal point of view” [7]. Over time, the elements that close the generation gap become stronger, the differences fade off, and the rebellious spirit dies out. The young take on all the responsibilities of mature individuals.

At the moment, the lack of interest for Romanian politics (be it classical or current) is balanced by *the great faith young Romanians have in the future*. The future is represented in a positive vein, sometimes having an almost soteriological value. Ultimately, when interpreting the phenomenon, we see that some of the young people imagine the future as some sort of terrestrial Paradise. We believe that at play is a modern, strongly secularised version of the Old Testament Paradise myth. The young wish to obtain in the future personal fulfilment, their desired life. They also happen to be Romanian’s main concern: “one third of Romanians focus on the welfare of their children and family” when they think about the future [Studiu IRES *Percepții publice asupra viitorului*, 8-12 June 2017]. Therefore, the young trust the future the most, but the older generations are not far behind them. The latter represent the future first and foremost as the success of their children.

4. Conclusions

Recent sociological research concerning the assumption of religion and the representations of the political and governmental institutions in the life of young Romanians has yielded several interesting and suggestive conclusions. Thus, religious life in today’s Romania is not undergoing a profound secularisation; it experiences instead the presence of a ‘multiple/alternative modernity’ that becomes compatible with the predominantly Orthodox Christian beliefs and rituals. In the latter, the young appear to adhere to the cult of a unique and personal God, the creator of this world and the source of public morality, expressing belief in saints, Heaven, hell and redemption.

The atheism of young Romanians is affected by relativism and ignorance, as proven by many researches in the sociology of religions. Youth is also the age during which the first religious certainties acquired through family education become, for a brief time, uncertainties. *Secularisation* is more readily adopted on a background of adolescence and youth, but then fades away, being accompanied by the *deprivatisation of religion*. On a deeper psychosocial level, young

Romanians also preserve a substantial religious conservatism, a fact which is illustrated by the desire of their majority to have the right to abortion restricted.

Another conclusion drawn by the sociological research regarding the images and representations of Romanian youth concerns the *mistrust* they show for companies and for political and governmental institutions. This mistrust is accompanied by a *very high level of aspiration* among some of the young, sometimes associated with the absence of professional skills, of the cult for well-done jobs, of self-sacrifice and of social responsibility. The young people also believe they have modest *political efficacy* and *resign themselves* when faced with the all-powerful voting mechanism. Hence the *relative* character of the tendencies for social protest, an issue balanced off, however, by the *great faith* young people have in their own future. These are some of the more relevant issues regarding religious practices and the representation of the political and governmental institutions in the life of Romanian youth.

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