

***BETWEEN LOCAL ACTS OF FAITH AND CENTRAL NATIONALIST POLICIES:
BUILDING CHURCHES IN 1980S TRANSYLVANIA***

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The reemergence of institutional religion in the public life of the post-communist societies in Eastern, South Eastern and Central Europe was linked by various Western scholars in the field of religious studies to the failure of secularization as theory proving that modernization failed to push religion out from society. Yet, the persistence of Church as an institution, in the presumably atheist regimes communism tried to enforce, should be surprising. For the Church left rarely, and only forced, the public sphere during this period and preserved a public role either as an opposing institution to the party state or as an institution associated with/by the state.

My article regards the intricacies of the church-state relationship during communism when, by drawing the Romanian Orthodox Church into the public sphere by associating it to developing the state nationalist policy the state created a paradoxical yet modern “hybrid.” For although the state designed this association in terms of complete control over the Church one is not to think that the Church remained indifferent to this entry into the political public debate and lacked any initiative of its own on social, cultural and national policies.

I parallel several definitions of the Church: on the one hand the Church as an institution – regarding the policies of the hierarchical body, their compromise with the state and the way this impacted the life of the common parish and on the other hand the Church as the community of believers, the responses to the central policies, developing a relationship of their own with the state, with the local administrative body. It distinguishes between a “national” religion – a religion one is born into if the right ethnicity and denominations that draw out their believers base from other traditional denominations. A religion of the small community that is brought together by a specific religious message and that holds religion to have just this meaning.

The reemergence of institutional religion in the public life of the post-communist societies in Eastern, South Eastern and Central Europe was linked by various Western scholars to the failure of secularization as theory proving that modernization failed to push religion out from society. If secularization is directly associated with privatization of religion the argument presented can be accurate. Yet this starts from a false premise: that religion in its institutional form is “coming back” into the public sphere after being relegated from it during one time or the other by the communist state. Few researches start from the hypothesis that religion (in its institutional form) has not left the public sphere but in few exceptional cases, preserving a public role of either opposing the state as in the case presented by Casanova of the Polish Catholic Church (Casanova 1994) or as an institution associated with or by the state. (Ramet 1988, 1989).

My research regards the intricacies of the church-state relationship during communism in Romania. It regards a compromise of the communist state that induced a situation where institutions that came in direct contradiction with the communist atheist doctrine were not just functional, but in various cases they influenced the public sphere by imposing their own model and discourse on various matters – especially connected with the nationalist policy of the Romanian Communist Party. A paradoxical hybrid relationship was created, where the state allowed the functioning of the religious denominations and their controlled access in the public sphere to instrument them for its own policies. Thus religion that should have been at best sent to the private sphere if not relegated altogether was present in the public sphere in its institutional form.(Asad, 2003) This is followed on a comparison between two types of come back into the public sphere of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Neo-protestant denominations since they could be typical for the situation of the religious denominations in Romania.

What is then public religion and where is it located? Casanova takes up Jeff Weintraub four major ways in which the public private sphere is dichotomized: economic, republican-classic, public as a sphere of fluid and polymorphous sociability and the feminist one. Religion is found at three levels: individual, community and world. At the world level of which Casanova seems most interested, institutional religion is found in three positions: caesaro-papist model, theocratic model and segregationist model. Yet Casanova himself against a normative role of institutional religion finds one public emergence of religion, which is justified: the religion that is located at the civil society level and from this position it protects not only its own freedom of religion but all modern freedoms and rights... question[s] and contest[s] the absolute lawful autonomy of the secular spheres and their claims to be organized in accordance with principles of functional differentiation without regard to extraneous ethical or moral considerations...[and] protect[s] the traditional life-world from administrative or juridical state penetration.(Casanova, 1994)

Thus in accordance to Casanova's thesis – de-privatized religion is a phenomenon through which religion enters public sphere in the civil society and from that position contests and supervises the state and its action towards the citizens. There is though, another type of public religion, one that is not oppositional but rather complacent with the state and acting very much like an institution of the state propagating its discourse to the people, an *uncivil civil society* if one could look at it this way (Kopecky, Mudde, 2003).

The public/private dichotomy in characterizing religion has been used to differentiate between a religion of the group and a personal, individual religion, a religion for social

cohesion in which one is born into and one responding to a community's need to interiorize a religious message and finally a religion that is associated with the world of politics (no matter the rapport of the two forces) and one that is not.

In this case this paper uses all three type of theoretical dichotomizing for a comparison between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Neo-protestant denominations in the country. One can thus differentiate between a "national" religion – a religion one is born into if the right ethnicity and denominations that draw out their believers base from other traditional denominations. A religion of the small community that is brought together by a specific religious message and that holds religion to have just this meaning. In what regards the state policy towards religion one can distinguish between the state wanting to create a religion of the individual and the family as opposed to one of the community. And finally one can distinguish in the position the Orthodox Church has towards the communist state and the one held by the Neo-protestant denominations, a difference between one denomination associated to the state and one trying to separate itself from the state as much as possible.

For the communists acceding to power in Romania after the Second World War religion was a paradox. On the one hand, following the soviet example it had to be at least relegated to the level of the family if not banished altogether. On the other hand for the weak communist elite that had to enforce upon the population a different world view structured around a new regime, institutional religion, and especially the Romanian Orthodox Church had to be cultivated properly, associated with and used as an institution that offered legitimacy institution. (Vasile, 2005) Until the communists' full access to power the church kept much of the public functions it possessed. Parallel the communists took various steps to minimize the public role the Orthodox Church had in the Romanian society. One of the most intriguing was making the existence of four Neo-protestant Churches legal, thus sanctioning the Religious Denominations Law that restricted their free access on the religion market of the country especially during the Second World War period. Equality in the face of the law and inrapport with the state weakened the status of *primus inter pares* of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the relationship with the state. Whether this action of the state responded to a policy designed to weaken the role of the "traditional" churches, or it was the communists way of reward their prison fellows (various Neo-protestant believers shared the prison cells with communist elite during the war) (Tănase, 2005), or whether the Neo-protestant denominations where closer to the type of institutional religion the communists envisioned – small segregated communities, focused on the individual, without tradition and weakened because

of it – the state succeeds in offering a choice in the religion market, that pushed religion from a now completely state dominated public sphere.

After the communist access to power the need for a public, sanctifying the role of the state and giving legitimacy to the communist regime, institutional religion seemed to be pointless, as seen in various state policy documents. Yet the complete banish of religion was not attempted much because of the weakness of the new regime. Religion was privatized by denying its entrance in public sphere, segregating it to the family and the community, denying it of its role it had until then – opinion formative, nation building, community cohesion – these were no longer required from institutional religion in the public sphere. Association with the state should cease and if, for a complete relegation the state is not prepared, a complete segregation of religion should be in place.

The state decided for a solution that would push the church out of the public sphere (of the educational system, of the social activities it ran that far, of the association with the state) in hope that religion relegated to the private sphere of the family and the small community would causally lead to a drop in the number of believers. The state would address its citizens directly without the church legitimizing its discourse.

Several events triggered the need for the state to bring the church back into a public space controlled by its authority. There was first of all a concentration of the opposition to the regime inside the religious institutions. The failure of the solution for the Greek Catholic problem and the concentration of a strong oppositional group inside the society forced the state to reassess the problem of institutional religion. But the most important problem of the state authorities was their failure to reach its citizens and to need an intermediary, one that would be invested with more leverage over the population it spiritually administered – the church. It is around early 1950s when the state controlled the return of the church in the public sphere as a transmitter of the party state discourse and as a legitimizing institution.

Thus the church is forced to adopt the topics of state discourse. Help pass the constitution, help with the nationalization of land and property, with developing the anti-Western and pro-Russian policies. Yet this meant a compromise for the state as well, for although severely controlled by the authorities of the state, the public sphere was subject to various transformations due to the impact of the church policies (especially the nationalist discourse used in the 1960s also by the state to round up national communism) in the public sphere. If for the initial period the religious denominations managed but their mere survival, later on they developed mechanisms of negotiation with the regime that allowed them to intervene in various issues connected to human rights, national canon and so forth.

Survival through adaptation and adoption

The type of reform, the type of institutional religion that was advocated during the initial stages of the communist regime kept certain elements of the regulations the preceding regime used in dealing with the religious denominations. Parallel with these elements inherited from the previous regime much of the Soviet agenda in dealing with religion and religious denominations surfaced in the legislation. However it is a Soviet agenda that was redesigned in the early 1940s and implemented a co-option/ associationist model in dealing with institutional religion (Şincan, 2008). On the other hand the Orthodox Church made the compromise to survive – adopted the language of the age, secularism, withdrawal from public and was called back because it was still needed (made itself needed), the Neo-protestants redrew in the private sphere and did not want to come back – came in the public sphere as opposition to the regime: the islands of contesting the regime. State wanted both in the public sphere – a public sphere that it controlled and for its own use.

Strategies of survival

The orthodox versus the Neo-protestant

Out of public sphere, not completely – the hierarchy remains	Out of public sphere, completely
Overcentralization – high hierarchy controls all	Complete decentralization
Compliance with requests	Pretended compliance with request
Negotiation – you need us, we are too powerful - needs to remain in the public sphere	Negotiation – little you need us against the traditional religious communities, - needs to redraw from it – a religion for the very small communities, hidden in prayer houses, believer houses, everyone can be a pastor...

Explanations for this behavior of the state and both the Orthodox Church and the Neo-Protestant denominations run from different perception of the relation between state and church in the orthodox case and in the Neo-protestant case. While the Orthodox Church was an advocate of symphonia and even if in this case that particular principle is non-applicable,

remains of its structured their position – there is a conformism in being drawn into the public sphere by the state – associated, the Neo-Protestants were supporters of a separation of state and church since because their lack of tradition and small number they could never benefit from an association, more so, until this period the traditional churches because of their connection to the state or to specific ethnic populations in the state component had access in denying the Neo-protestant access to a liberalized religious market – fear of competition – thus they advocate religious freedom and state church separation.

Strategies of state control

State against orthodox and Neo-protestants

Making religious denominations at least in theory – equal in front of the law	Allowing these denominations to exist legally
Economic – state paid salaries, no self sufficiency	State legitimates the pastors and the communities
Force	Force
Negotiation (economic, reactionaries)	Negotiation (legitimation, opposition, disobedience)
Blackmail (past)	Blackmail (present)

An example of how the state controlled the Neo-Protestants is the way in which they have regulated the proselyte activity in the first years of Romanian communism, instrumented by the state in various policy documents. The granting of legal status for the four Neo Protestant denominations can be seen as a way in which the state tried to control the rest of the religious denominations, especially the Romanian Orthodox Church. By allowing the legal functioning of the four denominations for the first time in 1948 the state administration retained a permanent element of blackmail for the traditional/ historic denominations and forced them to constantly approach the state to mediate conflict instances that arose from the missionary activity of the Neo Protestant Denominations.¹

¹ Bishop Valerian of Oradea applied in 1953 for the Ministry approval to introduce into the yearly pastoral guide of specific ways to fight the Neo Protestant proselyte activity. The note of the ministry specialists reads: “motives for positive reply to the Bishop’s request are the following: in his bishopric one can note a steady number of believers that change their Orthodox affiliation to a Neo Protestant

From the end of 1948 the activity of supervision was intensified. Targeted denominations: the Roman Catholic and the four Neo Protestant Denominations. Most of the cases where these denominations posed problems to the state administration have to do with proselitism in its multiple forms.

The supervision of possible proselyte activities of the Neo Protestant denominations was one of the main tasks of an inspector for religious denominations. The situation was different with regards to the Neo Protestant communities though. The activity of these denominations was centered on proselytism. While in the early stages of the new regime the number of adherents to these denominations was insignificant, this being among the reasons the four denominations received legal status and were authorized to function in a short period of time they became one of the most disconcerting problem the ministry and the local inspector dealt with. Their volatility,² the lack of a clear center that one might actually appeal to in case of problems with the communities in territory, a center that could be constraint to solution the problem as the hierarchical center of the other denominations were, or even infiltrated by agents or collaborators with the regime made the surveillance activity extremely thorough but rarely coherent. The local reality presented the Neo Protestant *problem* as one of the most stringent one involving most of the inspector's time. Proselyte activity as described by the documents was frowned upon not just by the state employees but also but the other religious communities.

Another characteristic phenomenon of the Neo-Protestant denomination is proselytism, practiced arduously by the Pentecostals and leading to inter confessional tension and strife. Thus, in the last period of time, in Oradea region, their number increased with up to 1100 members, four new communities being founded without asking for the approval of the Ministry as the Law for Religious Denominations specifies. Similar cases of proselyte activity were pointed out also in the regions of Timișoara, Bacău, Cluj and

denomination. This process is not a spontaneous one but is due to the organized and dynamic proselyte activities of the Neo Protestants. Their proselyte activity uses harsh critics to the Orthodox Church [...] insinuating that the Orthodox priests have become communists, that they have sold themselves to the present state that belongs to Satan and receive payment for this.” The ministry specialist agrees that the Orthodox priests have to know/ be taught how to protect themselves. DepartamentulCulte, Directia de Studii: Caracterizarea lui Valerian (Describing Bishop Valerian's activity), file number 85, volume 2 a, 1953, p. 40, Arhivele Secretariatului de Stat pentruCulte, Bucharest, Romania.

² One could encounter communities that migrated from village to village, their pastors served more than one community and one community could be formed out of believers from more than one village. These being only some of the examples of situations met often on the field work by local inspectors for religious denominations.

Bucharest where they [the Pentecostals] organized gatherings with the believers from several villages and towns...³

Verifying and supervising the activity of these four denominations by the inspectors was eased by the collaboration received from the denominations that were losing believers to the Neo Protestants.⁴ In many cases these denominations when trying to *protect* their believers from the influence of the proselyte activity of the Neo Protestants with the help of the state legislation regarding religious denominations and profited from the strict rules against proselyte activities to counteract losing believers.

The lack of a clear centralization and of an accepted hierarchical center in the Neo Protestant denominations left the community with less protection at the local level facing the authority of the inspector than for example the Orthodox community who with a direct link to the ministry/ department for religious denominations through their respective local/ central hierarch can denounce the authoritarian behavior of the inspector. On the other hand by being more diffuse and not respecting a strict hierarchical chain the policies of the state not only took longer but were more difficult to implement.

The Church as a mediator for state discourse

The use of institutional religion – bringing back religion into a state controlled public sphere. Two different reactions from the two churches – in the case of the Orthodox Church (at least at the level of the hierarchy) this bringing back into the scene is accepted – with various exceptions and negotiations whereas in the case of the Neo-protestants its acceptance is only simulated. At a central level the state is able to impose its demand, only the quasi complete decentralization of these denominations made this control of the state redundant.

The Neo-protestant churches become islands of opposition – the entrance of the Neo-protestants in the public sphere in a different way – by opposing the state.

Compromise and instrumentation – the entrance of the Orthodox Church into the public sphere responding to the demands of the state

³Departamentul Culte, Direcția Studii: Note informative cu privire la manifestările și atitudinea unor credincioși și deservenți – Culte Neoprotestante, (Informants reports on the attitude and behaviour of believers and pastors – Neo Protestant denominations), file 95, vol. 13/a, 1953, p. 2, Arhivele Secretariatului de Stat pentru Culte, București, România.

⁴Departamentul Culte, Direcția de Studii: Caracterizarea lui Valerian (Describing Bishop Valerian's activity), file number 85, volume 2 a, 1953, p. 40, Arhivele Secretariatului de Stat pentru Culte, Bucharest, Romania

By entering in this complicated relationship with the communist regime the Orthodox Church was not only subjecting itself to compromising its value system, administrative integrity and its ritual services it also manages to bring forth new topics of discourse in the public sphere, imposing an agenda (the association between nation and church (orthodox)), and at least at the level of justificatory discourse safeguarding religious life in the country.

The state controls the denominations allowing and in various cases when needed, forcing their return in the public sphere as actors in support of communist policies. Both in the case of acceptance of the association with the state and in the case of denial the churches penetrate and influence the discourse in the public sphere as much as it was possible in a “public” sphere of a totalitarian regime, controlled by the state authority and mainly encompassing state discourse and central political, social and economic authority.

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