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RELIGION, ECUMENISM AND CULTURAL IDENTITY
A ROMANIAN CONTROVERSY OF MODERN PERIOD

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Abstract. *In the following study, the author discusses the status of religion as a cultural identity marker. The analysis of the difficulties related to the tension between the universal vocation cf religion and the localism of ethnicity is linked to a Romanian cultural debate of modern period.*

The concept of cultural identity

The concepts of „ethnic identity" and „cultural identity" are generally regarded as pointing to different matters[1]. My decision to employ them here as substitute concepts is based on two reasons. First, any ethnic group is, at the same time, a particular form of *culture* – which I take in anthropological terms, as „human behaviour based on norms". Second, the views on Romanian culture I intend to present later are all centred on an *ethnic* understanding of culture. However, if any ethnic group is a culture, vice versa is not always true. A culture is not always the result of a single ethnic group. There are multiethnic cultures, as well as ethnic cultures, each of them being a source for identity. One of the differences consists in the fact that a cultural identity (either ethnic or not) is provided with a larger extension and a smaller intention than an ethnic identity.

Besides ethnic identity, another form of cultural identity I discuss here is the national identity, which is closely related to the ethnic one. Their relationship is based on the very way of defining nation as an ethnos that came to sovereignty and self-governing. When talking of nation, I have in mind its meaning as shown above, leaving aside the most recent juridical

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[1] *See* Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives*, London, Pluto Press, 1993, p. 36.

way of understanding (extremely useful in cosmopolitan societies), which conceives it in terms of a contract (citizenship).

The notion of *cultural identity* is taken here with a sense that reconciles the three major theoretical standpoints of *primordialism, contextualism* and *constructionism*. Approaching things especially from a naturalist and organicist point of view, the primordialists consider ethnic identity in terms of feeling, as a primary natural given, thus *unquestionable*, related to an original human being's attachment to the values of his/her primary group. The relationships between the individual and the group are seen as an extension of the family relationships. The individuals, according to the primordialist stand, project and extend to their primary group a set of family emotions which allow them conceiving the extended group in terms of kinship. The image of nation itself as a big family produces a vocabulary that describes nation according to the family pattern. Thus one's country becomes a *patria*, a *fatherland* (*Vaterland*) or a *motherland*, while the others members of the nation become *brothers, enfants de la patrie, sons of the nation* and so forth. There are words that are equally used for *family* and *people/nation*, as the Romanian word *neam*.

Forged by Edward Shils in 1957, the term „primordialism" is related to a non-rational and non-intentional primary attachment which is experienced by the members of a group that are connected to the same historical and cultural landmarks: origins (the local mythology of descent), customs and territorial continuity. The primordialist discourse ascribes to the group a sense which is closer to *Gemeinschaft* than to *Gesellschaft*. The primordial attachment in its genuine form, beyond its potentiality of being politically manipulated, is a feature of homogenous human groups organized in isolated little communities. Ethnic identity is seen as a natural tendency which is rather instinctual than rational. According to Shils, the family attachment is provided with an important „relational quality" that cannot be called but *primordial*, owing to an ineffable significance assigned to blood relations[2]. The primordialist standpoint was further developed by Clifford Geertz in 1963[3], who added a number of other essential identity markers, as race, language, territory and religion.

Built as opposed to the primordialist standpoint outlined above, the contextualist turning point began with Frederick Barth[4]. For the first time,

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[2] Edward Shils, *Primordial personal, sacred and civil ties*, in: „British Journal of Sociology", no. 8, 1957, p. 142.

[3] Cliffond Geertz, *The integrative revolution: primordial sentiments and civil politics in the new states*, in: C. Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States*, New York, Free Press, 1963.

[4] Frederik Barth, *Introduction*, in: Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, Bergen/London, Universätetsforlagt/ Allen & Unwin, 1969.

he conceived ethnicity in terms of a *conscious choice*. According to Barth, ethnic group is not seen anymore as a natural given, but as a circumstantial choice. In other words, ethnic groups are composed by individuals that strategically manipulate their identity by over-estimating or dissimulating it in accordance with social and political circumstances. In Barth's view, ethnic identity became a matter of assigning and self-assigning, the primordial solidarity being replaced with a circumstantial solidarization. The viewpoint was later assumed by Benedict Anderson's[5] and Ernest Gellner's[6] constructionist theories. According to Anderson, nation is an *imagined community* both in its limits and sovereignty. It is *imagined* because the community members will never come to meet all the fellow-members, yet an image of their communion persists in everyone's mind[7]. Unlike Anderson, who talks in terms of „imagination" and „creation", Gellner conceives nation in terms of „invention" and „forgery". Nationalists, he asserts, falsifies the past in order to build a national conscience as an object of manipulation for a political end. Like Barth, Gellner emphasised the instrumentalist aspect of collective identity. One of the strongest objections to Gellner's view belongs to Anthony Smith. Even though one could probably manufacture traditions to serve ethnic or class interests, these cultural innovations would survive only if they are made congruent to a highly valued past[8]. In order to be useful, the identity markers should be carefully selected from a definite cultural inventory to which the members relate with respect and affection. Otherwise, their chance to succeed is less then minor.

Beyond the controversies related to the „natural", „circumstantial" or „constructed" (either „imagined" or „invented") quality of collective identity, the three stands are not irreconcilable. Ethnic or nation loyalty is provided with normative and emotional features (*primordialism*); it equally entails a perception of the collective interest and aim that varies with the historical context (*contextualism*); it is continually built and rebuilt at a collective consciousness level (*constructionism*); it could be also constructed socially and manipulated by leaders for a political end (*instrumentalist constructionism*).

One of the difficulties of cultural identity concept is related to its intension: which are those values that members of an ethnic group recognize as essential for their sentiment of belonging? Which are the identity markers? Beyond the different opinions, various theories identified one or more

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[5] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1993 [1983].

[6] Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964.

[7] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, ed. cit., p. 6-7.

[8] Anthony D. Smith, *Towards a global culture?*, in: M. Featherstone (ed.), *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, London, Sage, 1990, p. 178.

cultural features that ensured the unity of the group: language, a shared history (the collective memoirs, the local pantheon), norms, customs, and patterns of behaviour, a shared sentiment of belonging to the same land, mythology of origins, religion, beliefs and rituals. Depending on the historical context, the *discursive level* of identity selects from the identity reservoir the markers that serve better the social, cultural and political objects of the moment.

Religion as identity provider

Among all identity markers, religion is the only one that totally engages the devoted individual, both physical and metaphysical. As a creator of order, religion is – more than language and other dimensions of culture – the one that regulates the synchronic and diachronic relationship between the individual and the others members of the community. Religious rituals and ceremonials maintain the spiritual *communion* of the living and the cultural *continuity* between dead (the ancestors) and living (the successors). The post-funeral rituals preserve the *memory of past* in its vivid immediate form. Even national ideologies that emphasise the role of „bloodshed" and „heroic sacrifice of ancestors" do nothing more than pointing to a cult of ancestors that religion due not only to the collective memory (history), but especially to the religious itself fed and developed. Community tradition and continuity is rituals, conservative in themselves. They build up the cohesion element that integrates individuals on a *horizontal* scale, as well as on a *vertical* one: the horizontal scale of the community and the vertical scale of a transcendent order that justifies the immanent one. For a *homo religiosus*, religion is the primary fundamental way of integration in the mundane and extramundane order. The others identity markers, all of them, serve rather partially the individual need for an identity projected in space and time. This is probably the reason why religious norms may seem more compelling than social and juridical, even if the last ones, when ignored, generate a more immediate and certain punitive scenario.

I assumed a distinction between a *pre-discursive identity*, that is, identity as it is experienced by an ethnic group at a sentimental level, and a *discursive identity*, meaning identity as it is conceived by national leaders at a more intellectual level. The former consists merely in a more or less conscious feeling of belonging, whilst the latter is related to the intellectual efforts of nation-building. We can also talk of a *meta-discursive* level of identity, developed at a theoretical level and resulted in the three standpoints discussed before: primordialism, contextualism and constructionism. It is

only at the second level that identity becomes a *problem*. Traditional communities are not systematically interested in answer questions like „who we are". They usually experience a cultural homogeneity that allow them to see identity as *given*. Things are different in the society area, where the conscious of common origins is weakened and the culture is heterogeneous.

Despite the prominent role of religion in shaping a collective pre-discursive identity, its relationship to the discursive identity becomes a delicate one when a religiously heterogeneous population (but homogeneous in many other respects) which pass through a difficult historical period is determined to build a collective consciousness in order to acquire independency and a decent place on the world map. It was the case of 1848 Transylvanian culture. The intellectuals allowed only those cultural borrowing that could serve the main cause of creating a national conscience. For instance, when George Barițiu introduced the concept of *national character* (most likely borrowed from Herder, whose writings were constantly translated and cited in Barițiu's journals), he didn't preserve the *entire* meaning of Herder's *Nationalcharacter*. According to Herder, *national character* implies a cultural specificity based on *language*, *religion* and *institutions*. As a result of Barițiu's cultural translation of the term, religion and institutions were left outside of the picture. The inaccurate rendering had probably a theoretical reason, as well as a cultural one. However, most relevant in the present context is the last one. On the one hand, Transylvanian institutions of that time were other than Romanian and the Church itself – divided as it was in Orthodox and Greek Catholic – couldn't become a strong element of cultural unity. On the other hand, it was precisely the shaping of a national Romanian consciousness that made up the most important goal of the revolutionary program. The image of a religion that wasn't able to provide unity for Transylvanian people was one of the motives that lay in the background of Barițiu's belief according to which „there are as many religions as there are human souls in the world"[9].

Although he received education at a piarist institution, being a son of a Greek Catholic priest, Barițiu sacrificed the religious element for a historical circumstantial end he considered as crucial for the survival of Romanian people: the nation-building. It is not without significance that Barițiu didn't question the religious truth (either universal or particular). He confined himself to define a national character he considered efficient for the Romanian nation-building – as *any* national-building is a contextual undertaking.

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[9] George Barițiu, *Adevărul* [*The Truth*], in: *Viața și ideile lui George Barițiu. Studiu și antologie* [*Life and Ideas of George Barițiu. Study and Anthology*], Introduction, anthology and notes by R. Pantazi, Bucharest, Scientific Publishing House, 1964, p. 75. Barițiu's essay was initially published in: „Foaie pentru minte, inimă și literatură" [„Journal for Mind, Soul and Literature"], I, no. 19, 1838, p. 145-150; no. 20, 1838, p. 153-157.

Given the circumstances, making use of religion would have been counter-productive. Therefore, the non-religious feature of Transylvanian writings of 1948 has an important political and social background. That was the reason the intellectuals resorted to other identity markers, particularly to language and origins.

If the religious unity wasn't an efficient ingredient for nation-making, national identity became itself a *religion*. In a French writing of 1850, in which Bălcescu stressed the national character of Romanian revolution, he forged a term that went beyond the declared intentions of the revolutionary movement: *Pan-Romanianism*. Pan-Romanianism, as Bălcescu understood it, was not a mere local agent of salvation. Its glorious mission was, in fact, *the salvation of the neighbouring peoples*. According to Bălcescu, „Hungarianism and Mahometism", which are „heterogeneous elements in Eastern Europe", should appeal to Pan-Romanianism for their survival and salvation[10]. On the one hand, the revolutionist felt he was chosen to save the Romanian nation. On the other hand, the Romanian nation itself was given an evangelical mission in what concerned other nations. The claim was religiously grounded by invoking a divine election: „God was with us" – noted Mircea Eliade, who briefly investigated the ideas of the period[11]. The visionary messianism of 1848 Romanian thinkers was a feature of their lives, as well as their works.

A second tension between religion and discursive identity is related to the contrast between the universalist vocation of the first by comparison to the localist calling of the second.

Orthodoxism and the recovery of religion for cultural identity

The 1848 view on national identity, a standpoint centred on language and history, was later criticized on different bases. One of the critical standpoints belonged to interwar intellectuals that built their discourse around Eastern Orthodoxy. At that time, the political constitution of Romanian nation was already a historical fact. Given the recently achieved union, the cultural medium became more relaxed; therefore, the intellectuals directed their attention to other possible sources of cultural identity. One of them was religion.

From a theological standpoint, Nichifor Crainic criticized the borrowed modernity of the 1848 thinkers. He rejected the image of individual as the

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[10] Nicolae Bălcescu, *Mersul revoluţiei în istoria românilor* [*The course of Revolution in the Romanian History*], in: *Opere complete* [*Complete Works*], II, edition by Lucian Predescu, Bucharest, Cugetarea Georgescu Delafras, 1944, p. 217.

[11] Mircea Eliade, *Despre Eminescu şi Hasdeu* [*On Eminescu and Hasdeu*], edition and Foreword by Mircea Handoca, Iaşi, Junimea Publishing House, 1987, p. 61.

only judge of values, an ideology that deny the possibility of a „higher" existence. The modernity paradigm conceived man as the measure of all things. But this overrated icon of man is nothing but an illusion, Crainic claimed. For, „in faith, God, and not man, is the measure of things"[12]. Man as a measure of things is the „principle of anarchy" that decentred the modern culture, drove it away from a superior spiritual axis and kept it captive in the „visible world". The objections brought by Crainic with respect to modernity were not substantially different by the anti-modernist stands of the time. Guénon, Berdyaev, Evola a.o. expressed a similar critique and a resembling remedy: the retrieving of the transcendent, the only one that helps man to recover his divine nature.

From such a standpoint, the view on cultural identity was entirely changed. As the union of the Romanian provinces was already accomplished, the interwar intellectuals were less interested to search the national pantheon for those features bearing the unifying qualities able to build a collective consciousness. This task was already fulfilled by the revolutionary thinkers of 1848. The goal was changed into defining and finalizing the Romanianism. In the context of the new demands, the intellectuals tried new identity patterns and markers. One of the possible solutions was seen in asserting a close relationship between *Eastern Orthodoxy* and *national identity*. Assuming the task of redefining Romanian „essences", the intellectuals of the time laid the basis of a new identity discourse. According to them, the Romanian fundamental core (the Romanianism, equivalent to Romanianity) is consubstantial with Orthodoxy. In November 1938, Sextil Puşcariu, cited by the orthodoxist thinker Dumitru Stăniloae, gave a conference in which he stressed Orthodoxy and Latinity as the two essential features that provide Romanian people with uniqueness: „Our Orthodoxy is nowadays the most certain criterion of differentiation, as we are *the only Latin people of Eastern Orthodox belief* in the entire world. This blessed union of Latin blood and Eastern noble soul provides us with that configuration of major original qualities which elevate the value of our race"[13]. Given Latinity and Orthodoxy as the main identity providers, Crainic made his choice in favour of the second, which he considered the supervisor of all other values. The Latinity argument had been almost exhausted by the 19th century discourse. Its precise duty had been to raise Romanian culture to the level of European cultures in what concerned the distinguished pedigree. It functioned as a blazon at a time when the Romanian intellectuals were „eager to *challenge* Europe rather than *imitate* it", as Mircea Eliade said[14]. Crainic didn't dismiss the Latinity

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[12] Nichifor Crainic, *Nostalgia paradisului* [*The Nostalgia of Heaven*], Bucharest, Cugetarea–Georgescu Delafras, 1940, p. 113.

[13] Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ortodoxie şi românism* [*Orthodoxy and Romanianism*], Sibiu, Tipografia Arhidiecezană, 1939, p. 121-122, emphasis added.

[14] Mircea Eliade, *Despre Eminescu şi Hasdeu* [*On Eminescu and Hasdeu*], ed. cit., p. 61.

of Romanian language as a fact. His objections pointed out that the debates around it most often turned Romanian culture into a „satellite" of Western cultures, especially of French culture[15]. Latinity enslaved the „Romanian soul" to Western civilization.

Therefore, he shifted the accent towards the new identity provider, i.e., *Eastern Orthodoxy*, which had been practically overlooked by the Romanian 19th intellectuals. Their views on Romanian people were *incomplete* if not totally mistaken: „They went thoroughly into the *ethnic* character of this people, ignoring its *religious* character"[16]. „The generous 1848 thinkers – as he had written earlier – brought from the West the vision of a westernized Romania. They *felt* patriotic, but they didn't *think* in a Romanian way"[17]. I showed above the partial reason of this omission. However, the motive was much more complicated than that. Besides the social and political circumstances I mentioned, there were rationalist, individualist and romantic patterns that partly influenced the 1848 Romanian thinking. As for Crainic, „Romanianism" was above all *Orthodoxy*. In this regard, his view was close to Radu Dragnea[18] and Dumitru Stăniloae, but different from Constantin Rădulescu-Motru and Lucian Blaga, whom he criticized for not adding Orthodox religion on the Romanian specificity list.

Pointing to Orthodox religion as the core of Romanian ethnic identity, Crainic's discourse shifted from a *horizontal* scale to a *vertical* one. He dismissed any horizontal mundane reality (as modernity, rationality, individual, and progress), grounding the Romanian soul on vertical supramundane laws (as the principle of *theantropy*). The Romanian ethnic identity could not be founded on a human invention. The real foundation was to be searched in the divine itself. Crainic's arguments, as well as the orthodoxist ones in general, brought again the Orthodox religion, as a main ingredient for ethnicity, at the core of the cultural discourse. The orthodoxists' mission was to prove that the Orthodox tradition was logically consistent with the other ingredients of Romanian ethnotype. Moreover, they needed to prove that the Orthodox tradition was the main constituent of ethnicity, the determining one. In a writing of 1936, Crainic confessed: „We see the substance of this [Orthodox] Church as blended everywhere with the ethnic substance"[19]. He thus decided that

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[15] N. Crainic, *Ortodoxie și etnocrație* [*Orthodoxy and Ethnocracy*], Bucharest, Cugetarea, 1936, p. 233-239.

[16] Nichifor Crainic, *Puncte cardinale în haos* [*Cardinal Points in Chaos*], Bucharest, Cugetarea 1936, p. 115; emphasis added.

[17] Nichifor Crainic, *Politică și ortodoxie* [*Politics and Orthodoxy*], in: „Gândirea" [„Thinking"], III, no. 5, 1923, p. 79; emphasis added.

[18] Replying to Comarnescu's poll on *New Spirituality*, published in 1928, in: „Tiparnița Literară" – I, numbers 1 & 2 – Dragnea considered the New Spirituality as having orthodoxy as its substance.

[19] N. Crainic, *Puncte cardinale în haos* [*Cardinal Points in Chaos*], ed. cit., p. 125.

Orthodox belief and „Romanian soul" were equivalent. Crainic's proof was drawn out from history. Unlike other peoples, especially the Russian one, that *had been* Christianized relatively late as a result of its leader's decision, Romanian people *was born* Christian. The Christian religion acted the main part in the Romanian ethnogenesis. According to Crainic, „We cannot but hypothetically distinguish the Romanian essence from the Christian essence, since the historical facts [...] pictured them together, as an undivided organic mixture of Romanianism and Christian religion"[20]. In this way, the prime reality that Romanian culture opposed to Western secularization and to modern individualism and rationalism was the *Orthodox tradition*. Nothing else could integrate in a superior way the other ethnicity markers. The Orthodox tradition was seen as the only reality able to ground a new spirituality. „Spirituality", a concept that generated at that time debates and disagreements, was provided with a double nature, according to Crainic: *human*, as well as *divine*. The New Romanian Spirituality became thus theandrical and could be assigned not only to individuals, but to nations as well[21]. On this base, the relationship with divinity (including the problem of salvation) ceased to be a strictly individual affair and became a matter of collective concern[22].

Roughly speaking, one of the most important problems concerning the relationship between religion and ethnic identity is related to the distinct natures of the two. Ethnic specificity is a local determined complex, while religion is based on universal principles. Considering religion as the essence of ethnic identity, to what extent could the local reality be successfully conciliated to the ecumenical one? Crainic solved the problem by resorting to an organicist idea of nationhood as a *natural unity*. Therefore, each nation has its own place in the larger reality of Christian Church, without losing its „natural" difference. Universal in its spirit, Christian Church „embodies" itself in every different nation, without identifying it to any of them. Accordingly, „There are as many [Christian] Churches as there are [Christian] nations in the world, each of them being a local fragment of the cosmic ecumenical Church"[23].

The orthodoxist stand developed as a response to all those theories that presented religion and identity as irreconcilable. As for instance, in the same historical period Constantin Rădulescu-Motru wrote that „Romanianism and orthodoxism couldn't be merged without mutual harm, since their natures are entirely different"[24]. From the orthodoxist standpoint, the synthesis between

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[20] N. Crainic, *Puncte cardinale în haos* [*Cardinal Points in Chaos*], ed. cit., p. 192.

[21] N. Crainic, *Ortodoxie și etnocrație* [*Orthodoxy and Ethnocracy*], ed. cit., p. 115-117.

[22] The idea could be also identified in Nikolai Berdyaev's *The End of Our Time* (*Un nou Ev Mediu*, Introductory study by Sandu Frunză, Craiova, Omniscop Publishing House, 1995, p. 60).

[23] N. Crainic, *Ortodoxie și etnocrație* [*Orthodoxy and Ethnocracy*], ed. cit., p. 63.

[24] C. Rădulescu-Motru, *Românismul. Catehismul unei noi spiritualități* [*Romanianism. The Catechism of a New Spirituality*], Bucharest, Foundation for Literature and Art „King Carol the

Orthodoxy and Romanianism is achievable owing to their *primordial unity*. As the Orthodox belief was the main agent in the Romanian ethnogenesis, it could be naturally identified in the ethnic substance of Romanian people.

Finally, there is another difficulty with respect to the relationship between ecumenism and ethnical identity. Subordinating local cultures to a general rule might be seen as a threat to local identities. The problem is not much different from the more recent „dilemmas" of globalization. The solutions are though different in what concerns the *nature* of the unifying principle. As for the orthodoxist stand discussed earlier, the principle involved is neither a human construct (as rationality, human rights and so forth), nor a social fact (as the globalization of market), but the divinity itself. In contrast with things like market and consumption, the Christian universal spirit is not an agent of standardization, according to Crainic. It is provided with the real quality of „modulating" itself in accordance with local particularities, a fact that results in a unique specific configuration. However, the latter does not *exhaust* the Christian spirit. In short, the orthodoxist stand suggested a view that conceived religion not as a mere constituent of ethnicity. The former was seen, at the same time, as the spiritual ground, the main ingredient and the destiny of the latter.

Second", 1936, p. 98. The same statement was criticized by Stăniloae in his *Ortodoxie și românism* [*Orthodoxy and Romanianism*].