

**MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
WORKING PAPERS**



MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

Working Paper No. 67

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**ROMANIAN
ORTHODOXY
BETWEEN THE
URBAN AND THE
RURAL**

Halle / Saale 2004
ISSN 1615-4568

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Romanian Orthodoxy between the Urban and the Rural¹

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Abstract

In this paper I show the relevance of the urban/rural distinction for addressing the question of religious revival in contemporary Eastern Europe. My ethnographic account illustrates that only by emphasising differences between exposure to religious representations in urban and rural environments can we grasp some important recent changes in the way religion is practiced by different categories of individuals and communities, such as the creolisation of faith under the discourse of traditional religious belonging in Romanian urban milieu. My analysis of the exposure to religious representations is based primarily upon practices of religious socialisation/education during the socialist and postsocialist periods at the macro and micro level in southern Romania.

¹ I would like to thank Vesna Vucinic and Chris Hann for their useful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Research was conducted within the 'Religion and Civil Society' theme at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

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Introduction

The question of religious revival in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has been amply acknowledged but seldom seriously analysed. After the theories of ‘ideological vacuum’ launched by political scientists at the beginning of the 1990s and their concern with the creation of a ‘free religious marketplace’, many observers noticed the conservative religious choice of people in these regions, who continue to support massively the traditional church of the area, the *‘religion-patrimoine’*. Some social scientists conducting research in Eastern Europe emphasised the strong link between nationalism and religion as a potential explanation for this option (Gillet 1997, Capelle-Pogacean 1998). Others started quantifying the religiosity of the people in a comparative European framework (Tomka 2002). This sociological framework faces some difficulties when applied to the Orthodox area of Eastern Europe. Indeed Orthodox “believing and belonging” (Davie 2003) are not manifested in the same form as Catholic believing and belonging. Low church frequentation and mild anticlericalism: how could social scientists believe the high number of self-declared Orthodox when they do not display the usual signs of religiosity?

If macro-level observations lead to apparent paradoxes, then a differentiated study of religious representations on the micro-level opens the way for the subsequent creation of appropriate measurement tools. This is what I attempt to do in this paper by privileging one important difference, that between rural and urban exposure to religious representations and manifestations of faith. By ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ I understand not a strict geographical divide but more a cultural one; many ex-villagers emigrated to cities show features of ‘rural’ culture and many local rural elites show features of ‘urban’ culture, whether they come from towns or not. I define ‘religious representations’ as human artefacts carrying religious meaning. Religious representations include religious images, some of which are cult objects (icons, crosses), verbal practices (prayers, expressions mentioning sacred things) and nonverbal practices linked to religion (fasting, kneeling). Religious representations circulate within and outside of cult spaces, being transmitted by both clerical and lay people.

The analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in a small village in the Arges County and in the neighbouring city of Pitesti (in the Trivale quarter) in summer 2003 and on interviews conducted in Bucharest (city centre) in winter 2004.³ As well as on the social science literature on Romanian Orthodoxy, it is based on a survey of the religious and lay press, of official church websites and publications of religious organisations in 2003/2004.

³ I have conducted a dozen interviews in each of these sites, participated in liturgies on Sundays and in religious celebrations taking place both in public and private spaces.

Is a Religious Revival Taking Place in Orthodox Romania?

In the first part of this paper, I look at the relation between state and church(es) and at public manifestations of faith from the socialist to the postsocialist period in a change-continuity framework of analysis, relying mainly on the social sciences literature and the press.

Church-State Relations

At the beginning of the 1970s, Trevor Beeson, an Anglican priest commissioned to write on religion in Eastern Europe on the basis of diverse material gathered by the British Council of Churches, noticed the ambiguous situation of communist Romania, in which religion was enjoying a relative state of freedom, despite the ruthlessness of the regime (Beeson 1974: 300). These exceptional circumstances were explained historically by the religious convictions of one of the first communist leaders, Petru Groza (he had been a member of the Holy Synod between 1919 and 1927 and remained a devote Christian all his life). Petru Groza is the architect of church-state relations and his *Law of the Cults* of 1948 is still in place today (with some amendments). This law stipulated freedom of conscience and prohibited discrimination on religious grounds. Fourteen religious denominations were recognised and could practice freely, the clergy receiving salaries paid by the state. The great loser of the 1948 Law was the Uniate Church, the Catholic church of Eastern rite, separated in 1698 from the Orthodox Church to unite with Rome, for what we might call (pre)national reasons. A national church from 1923, this Church was forced in 1948 to join the Orthodox Church and communist prisons were filled with Uniate priests who resisted the merge. The Orthodox Church, which was not spared more than other churches by the wave of militant atheism dictated by Khrushchev at the end of the 1950s⁴, enjoyed during the more nationalist Ceausescu regime (1965-1989) a certain autonomy and the recognition of a national role. Elected in 1961 in the World Council of Churches, the Orthodox Church was appreciated for its balanced politics and ecumenical vocation (Beeson 1974). But it had to be silent in public matters and that was the price for its relative autonomy, within state and Securitate (the Romanian secret police) control. After 1989 the investigation of Securitate and state archives reveal the very delicate relation between ‘collaboration’ and ‘compromise’⁵ of the Orthodox Church with the socialist state (Gillet 1997), a relation still politically debated in the mass media today.

⁴ In Romania roughly 6,000 priests were prosecuted, many monasteries were closed and around 2,000 monks and nuns under sixty years of age were sent to work in the collectives (Capelle-Pogacean 1998).

⁵ Dan Dungaciu (2004) supports the ‘compromise’ thesis, which is officially the one of the Orthodox Church itself; Radu Preda (1999) evokes the ‘daily resistance’ of the Orthodox Church in the socialist period and praises the patriarch Justinian, who, as a ‘realist’, found an equilibrium between surface compromise and the guarantee of church continuity.

What this non-conflictual state-church relationship meant in practice was that Romania had more open churches and practising priests per capita than any other Eastern Christian country in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union – but much less than the only Orthodox non-communist country of the region, Greece.⁶

Orthodox autocephalous Churches	Russian Orthodox Church in the USSR	Bulgarian Orthodox Church	Serbian Orthodox Church	Romanian Orthodox Church	Greek Orthodox Church
Number of faithful (approx.)	50 million (1986)	8 million (1980)	10 million (1987)	15-17 million (1983)	9.7 million (1986)
Churches (approx.)	6,500 churches (1986)	1,500 churches (1980)	3,000 churches (1987)	11,000 worship places (1983)	8,548 parishes, 20000 chapels
Priests (approx.)	6,000 priests (1986)	1,700 priests (1977)	2,100 priests and monks (1987)	9,200 priests (1980)	9,682 priests

Source: Ramet 1988: 91, 181-2, 205-6, 213, 248.

Today the Romanian Orthodox Church has 14,529 cult places (parishes, monasteries, chapels etc.) in which 12,173 priests and deacons serve, and 8,029 monks and nuns live. There are 11,063 university students in theology and 10,235 religion teachers teaching in public schools. The Church has five national magazines and publications and 49 with regional or local coverage (official figures from the Romanian Patriarchy and the Romanian Ministry of Cults). Construction was initiated or continues at more than one thousand churches.

The Romanian Orthodox Church is autocephalous since 1885 (following the recognition of Romania as a kingdom) and organised as a Patriarchate since 1925 (after the realisation of “Greater Romania”) under the title Romanian Patriarchate. It is conducted by an assembly composed of Church hierarchs, the Holy Synod, which decides on dogmatic, canonical and all other church matters. The Romanian Patriarchate is organised into five metropolitanates in the country and three metropolitanates abroad (official data from the Romanian Patriarchate).

⁶ The above figures should not be considered as more than estimates: the year in which the estimates took place differ from one country to the other and the cult places subsumed under the category ‘churches’ differ as well.

According to the 2002 census, 86.7 % of the total Romanian population declare themselves Orthodox. With almost twenty million believers, the Romanian Orthodox Church is the second largest Orthodox Church after the Russian Orthodox Church.

The relation between the Orthodox Church and the state is dictated by the tradition of ‘cesaro-papism’, the union between the spiritual and the temporal power, established de facto since Constantin the Great in the Byzantine Empire in the 4th century. Until the rule of Constantin, Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire; from his reign onwards the Christian religion was officially recognised and experienced an unprecedented freedom under the protection of the state. This tradition establishes that the Orthodox Church will make efforts to be officially considered the spiritual side of the governance: while the state works for the material well-being of citizens, the Church works for their spiritual well-being. Alan Scarfe carefully analysed the history of the relation between the Romanian Church and the socialist regime as a successful negotiation that led to the Orthodox Church being “one of the most flourishing examples of Eastern Orthodoxy in the twentieth century” (Scarfe 1988: 208). Looked at from this point of view, the cooperation between church and state is natural and desirable, it helps fostering the interests of the Christian citizen. The pressure that the Orthodox Church exercised on the post-1989 governments on different legal debates, such as on the acceptance of homosexuals or transsexuals (Ramet 1998) – policies vividly encouraged by the Council of Europe but rejected by the Orthodox Church – earned the Church a reputation of anti-Occidentalism and of being an obstacle in Romania’s way to European integration.⁷ Together with the accusation of collaboration with the socialist regime, the Orthodox Church’s ‘Eastern’ features determined Romanian pro-Occidental elites (the great majority of urban intellectuals) to give signs of anticlericalism, to manifest scepticism towards the increasingly displayed religiosity of the ‘masses’ and even to support Greek Catholicism.⁸ From the observation of incompatibilities between Church spiritual credo and modern political necessities (of which sexual tolerance is just an example), many writers looked retrospectively at the Orthodox Church as a permanent historical impediment to modernisation.⁹ The debate over the place of the Orthodox Church in relation to the state and the nation is ongoing and was reflected recently in the press by contradictory attitudes to the building of the *Catedrala Mantuirii Neamului*, literally the Cathedral of the Nation’s

⁷ See Gabriel Andreescu (n.d.) for a criticism of the Church from civil society representatives and Radu Preda (1999) for a defence of it.

⁸ Greek Catholicism is seen as a national yet (pro-) Occidental religion and as such was appealing to Romanian intellectuals in the 1990s, many Romanian social scientists also described it sympathetically; cf. Iordachi (1999), Dorondel (2002). The Greek Catholic Church, today the church of 1% Romanians (numbers decreased from 7.9% before the 1948 Law), is in conflict with the Orthodox Church over property and over the status of ‘national’ church.

⁹ See Daniel Barbu’s (2000) work on the ethics of Orthodoxy and the lack of spirit of capitalism.

Redemption. While the supporters of the Orthodox Church see in it the continuation of an interwar dream of asserting the newly freed Romanian people (from Austro-Hungarian and Russian domination in 1918 and from communism in 1989), the opponents (who are often Orthodox believers themselves, as they hurry to declare) consider it a megalomaniac enterprise, which will exclude and divide rather than unite the nation.

Public Manifestations of Faith

The idea of the renewal of faith and the condemnation of the communists' atheism was widespread in the aftermath of the 1989 revolution. Religious commitment appeared as a symbol of anti-communism and was as such of a militant nature. Politicians, media and publishing houses, all hurried to assert their rediscovered faith. More than a decade afterwards, one village priest looked back and remembered the turmoil in 1990-1991, more church attendance, especially from those who used to be party members and could not attend services previously; but that appears to have been a phenomenon that came and went smoothly. I do not conclude from his assertion that there was no revival of faith or that this died away soon after the revolution but that there are at least two different realities captured by the above assertions: the first refers to urban elites, the second to rural peasants. In between these two social classes the picture is even more diverse.

Given the socialist history of the Romanian Orthodox Church, it is not surprising that when investigating lay people's and priests' memories in my 2003 fieldwork in a small village in the south of Romania, the continuities from socialist to postsocialist times came to the fore. Rural people who used to work in the collective did not individually have much contact with the communist party and the communist ideology. Not being singled out or having 'nothing to lose' as they say in retrospect, they were left to practice their faith; although the 1950s and 1960s, when Soviet occupation and then Soviet allegiance was strong, are well remembered. From the end of the 1960s onwards, practicing Orthodoxy was not a dangerous endeavour in villages for most categories of rural inhabitants. Consequently the 1989 Revolution did not bring major changes. Neo-protestant conversion does not represent a real threat to the homogeneously devout Orthodox villages of southern Romania; mainly marginal people (Roma) have converted to Pentecostalism or Baptism. Religion classes have been introduced in schools but the results of public Christian education will be seen only when today's children become adults. Several priests expressed their hope in the new generation of Orthodox Christians, educated by them or by religion teachers in a much more sustained way. As for the great majority, they attend church for major religious celebrations, keep icons in their homes, confess once a year before Easter, fast as much as they can, depending on their

age and sex, respect all the celebrations linked to their deceased and think that ‘with faith’ they can be cured by holy herbs or holy water. This ritualistic understanding of religion is often criticised as lacking depth by Romanian intellectuals.¹⁰

In cities, however, the picture changed in a much more impressive way: the image of young people crossing themselves when seeing a church, of the large attendance of major Christian celebrations by people of all ages, the number of new churches built or under construction supported by community members and the pervasive presence of the Church and of religious signs from schools to television programmes, sets certainly a strong contrast to the socialist period. This increased religious involvement characterises urban people and rural educated people, who avoided performing religious activities and attending church before 1989 for fear of being spotted and denounced.¹¹ The term ‘revival’ of religion in the postsocialist period in Romania should better be restricted to the urban environment. But in the urban environment the ‘comeback’ of faith also brought a less traditional and more ‘faith-based’ religion, which could be considered a ‘renewal’ rather than a ‘revival’ of religious practices. I will develop this point later in this paper.

The urban/rural divide is not the only one to consider when inquiring into the reality of religious revival. Sociological inquiries differentiate religious participation according to such criteria as education, professional activity, age and sex. Research on religion in Eastern Europe being at its beginnings, such data is missing. In an interesting recent article, the sociologist Tomka (2002) draws generalisations in terms of country differences, but conflates the opinions of males, females, different age groups, and urban/rural residents¹². Conflating the results for generalising on whether or not there has been a religious revival obscures very important trends that have emerged after 1989, which deserve the attention of social scientists. I will argue that only by focusing on these differences it will be possible to grasp the significant move away from the traditional way of practicing Orthodoxy that emerged notably in the urban milieu, where socialism temporarily disrupted traditional practices. In developing this argument, I will first inquire into the stabilisation of religious representations by analysing the way Romanians were ‘socialised’ into religion. Several types of exposures to religious representations emerge, which render a more complex picture of religious belonging, irreducible to a change/continuity framework of analysis. Socialisation into

¹⁰ “I can still believe that an overwhelming emphasis on ritual and the mystical aspect of the religious life will continue to prevent religion from becoming a real agent of social and moral change” (Rogobete 2003: 23).

¹¹ This never went as far as preventing them from receiving the three main sacraments: baptisms, weddings and burials.

¹² He probably does not have the data that allows for these differentiations.

religion is certainly insufficient for doing more than suggesting some lines along which quantitative inquiries should be conducted, in order to allow for informed generalisations on religiosity.¹³

Religious Representations

How is religion manifested in everyday life? What are the religious representations that people encounter in their ‘day-to-day life’ in Romanian villages and cities?¹⁴ The village in which I conducted fieldwork is a ‘transformed’ village that had experienced abandonment and resettling in the past forty years, abandonment due to socialist policy and resettling due to postsocialist poverty.¹⁵ What type of religious representations could be found in a village where most inhabitants have double rural-urban identities and consequently double commitments? What representations are more susceptible to having an impact? Even if we presume that former urban workers, now villagers again, have never been fully transformed into urbanites, the urban culture provided and still provides them with an alternative, which makes the existence of a village religious community questionable. The observation of religious activities in the village and the neighbouring industrial town and semi-structured interviews with villagers (with and without urban experience) as well as of town-dwellers constitutes the material from which I draw my analysis.

The Village and the Town

I know the village of Langesti for a long time. Since a part of my family originated from there, I had visited it often before and especially after 1989. I had always heard my family dismissing it as a “dead village”, as a village that had “lost its traditions”, because there was nobody left to carry them on. I thought, under the imaginary pressure of populist folklorist literature, that this village was an unfortunate exception. Later, when taking the usual more than three hours ride by train from Bucharest to Pitesti (only 110 km apart), I heard the peasants boarding the train with their sacks full of grain and livestock, describing their villages in similar terms. “Young people went away to town”; “they are not used to hard agricultural work anymore”; “there is nobody to work the land”, “what could they do in the countryside (*la tara*)?”, “They want a different life”. In less than forty years, the rural population of Romania decreased from 80% to 43,4% due to peasants being drawn into the

¹³ My working definition of religiosity is the respect for the manifestations of the sacred, be it of strictly Christian Orthodox nature or not.

¹⁴ The urban/rural population ratio is 56,6% to 43,4%.

¹⁵ The process of industrialisation set into motion by socialist policies resulted in the demographic erosion of the rural population, while the process of de-industrialisation and restructuring after 1989 generated unemployment and poverty, which were partially circumvented by a return to subsistence agriculture.

industrial workforce. Often the rural population who migrated to town saw migration as a positive status change (Capelle-Pogacean 1998: 124).

The villages of the Arges region, situated in southern Romania, north of Bucharest and south of the Carpathians, have seen the development of the industrial town of Pitesti at the end of the 1960s. In a few years this small town of 30,000 thousand inhabitants grew to over 130,000 and boasts 185,000 inhabitants today (2003). The automobile industry (the Romanian brand, Dacia, has recently received a boost through its acquisition by Renault), petrochemical industry, textile industry, production of home appliances have created huge employment opportunities. The workforce was drawn from the neighbouring villages – close to the town, these villages integrated into the new town without people having to move from their houses. People coming from further away abandoned their houses and moved into the newly built socialist blocks where they had all the facilities unavailable in the countryside (and this is still the case today), such as running water, indoor plumbing and gas. Behind remained just the older kin, or a locked house to be used during holidays. Even further away from the town were villages for which the industrialisation had no direct effect.

Langesti is representative of the middle range. Situated 22 km from the city of Pitesti on a national road, the village was too far to allow for daily commuting (only a few opted for this solution) and close enough to render the idea of moving to town acceptable to the elders. We find here a typical transformation of peasants into workers, which concerned especially the young people – who although married – were still living in their parents' house (*casa parinteasca*). When the new opportunity to move arose, the elders remained in the village, raising their pre-school grandchildren, who would move to town once they reached school age.

The year 1989 however signalled a change as the reform initiated by the postsocialist government entailed de-industrialisation, thus workforce restructuring. Left without jobs or on continuous 'technical unemployment', ex-villagers had to return to subsistence agriculture, further boosted by the land reform that entitled them to get back the land previously owned by their parents. As Langesti was in presocialist times a village of small and medium landholders, with no landlord and only one family owning 40 hectares of land, the restitution of land remained 'equitable' in the sense that it did not induce wealth discrepancies between its newly endowed residents. Everybody roughly got 2-3 hectares of land back and virtually nobody renounced this restitution.¹⁶ As land has to be worked and also became an important means of subsistence, many families 'retired' to their home village. The ideal situation is when one member of the family is able to keep his town job and the other (normally the

¹⁶ See Verdery (1996); Cartwright (2001) for an analysis of decollectivisation and land restitution.

woman) manages to get early retirement (a variant preferred to that of being fired due to restructuring and often supported by false medical certificates). Their children, usually in their early twenties, would thus be able to live in the town flat more comfortably.¹⁷ The town and the village are connected by private minibuses, which allow more extensive daily commuting (e.g. for high school children).

Today there are 418 inhabitants living in 292 households registered in the village, which is half than the household-inhabitant-ratio of a Romanian village. But these figures partially obscure the current reality, as during the warm season (from March to November) the village is repopulated by the town dwellers returning to subsistence agriculture, but who do not re-register in the village, some due to inertia, others as a form of rejection of the ‘peasant’ identity linked to village residence.¹⁸ New houses have been built, among them handsome two-storey villas unusual for the architecture of the region, but a symbol of success in business. Two small coffee shops were opened by resettled retired villagers (40-50 years old), which sell mainly bread, alcohol and sweets. The vast majority of the former urban workers live in old inherited houses, grow vegetables, keep poultry and pigs around the house and work only part of their 2-3 hectares of land, the other part being trusted to an association, the successor of the village collective farm, managed from the neighbouring village. This neighbouring village, Lunca Corbului, is head of a commune of 3600 inhabitants, settled in nine almost equal small villages. It houses the village council, from whom landowners get their state subsidies, and the weekly market. There is a small primary school with one integrative class¹⁹ and a poorly attended kindergarten in the village. When reaching school age, children leave their grandparents and join their parents in town, hoping to get a better education there. The village church now has a permanent priest, a young man ‘married’ into the village (i.e. the wife is from the village and he lives in his parents-in-law house). He came after a ten year period of having temporary priests, who replaced the ninety years old priest who had baptised, married and buried everybody in the village, from the 1930s until his death in 1986.

The town of Pitesti has not been deserted either: a proof is the emergence of quarters of villas that surround the quarters of apartment blocks. In fact, the nostalgia of the countryside is felt in the new architecture of most Romanian towns. Everybody wants to live ‘on the ground’ and have a little courtyard. Thus despite the fact that the county has lost population

¹⁷ Most flats in Pitesti have only two rooms: one bedroom and one living room, which is considered insufficient for a couple with 2-3 children in their twenties.

¹⁸ As much as peasants are represented in positive folk images, they are also represented in derogatory ones (e.g. ‘don’t eat with your fingers like a peasant’). Thus many former workers, especially women, do not wish to be identified with peasants anymore and prefer to think of themselves as urbanites.

¹⁹ Children from all grades learn together in the same class.

and the population has been impoverished during the last 14 years, new houses sprang like mushrooms both in cities and in the countryside.²⁰ All these new quarters needed worship places. In just one of the quarters of Pitesti – in Trivale – two churches have been built, two private chapels (the cemetery chapel and the barracks chapel) were opened to the public in the last 14 years and another church is under construction. Before 1989, people living in this quarter were crowding into the only active church of the Trivale monastery for major celebrations. The construction of villas and churches testifies for a certain engagement in the town, despite its weakened position as employer (as all industrial towns, Pitesti has been also affected by the closure of factories and workforce restructuring).

Religion at Home

Religious representations in the village start at home, with the icons that are placed in every room. Icons are crucial sacred items for Orthodox believers; they are the visual and material incarnation of their faith (Raduca 1998). The main icons hang on the eastern wall (sunrise) as ‘patrons’ of the house or of the couple²¹, while the smaller ones are on shelves or tables. These icons were usually not displayed in the town flats, but were never taken away from rural houses. Retired village teachers told me, however, that, afraid to prejudice their careers, they would not display the icons during the socialist period, just as they would also not go to the church, except when absolutely necessary (e.g. for celebrations devoted to the deceased). Peasants ‘had nothing to lose’ so they could keep their icons on the wall or go to the church even in the 1950s and 1960s, when the anti-religious campaign of the socialist state was at its peak. When I asked the present middle-aged generation whether they were allowed to go to church in their childhood, many recalled the protests coming from their school teachers: that on Holy Thursday (*Joia Mare*) before Easter, teachers received instructions to keep their pupils in classrooms in order to prevent them from attending the evening liturgy. The rural intellectuals, often also party members, were expected to implement the party prerogatives in villages and my interviews with the children of teachers and of peasants/workers revealed differences in the way they had been socialised. Rural intellectuals (a category that includes teachers, doctors, engineers, etc.) generally banned religious symbols from their own houses, which were prone to being visited by higher party members, while they could not exercise the same power on their kin’s houses, which, due to their proximity, were often visited by their children.²² Thus even children coming from non-religious families had certain exposure to

²⁰ As hinted at above, socialist flats were overcrowded; there was need for more housing.

²¹ It is usual to present an icon of the saint that one wishes as patron at one’s wedding, to be blessed during the ceremony.

²² Young couples often settled in the same village or at least commune from where one of the partners came from (ideally the man).

religious objects and practices. As one of my informants, 48 years old, put it: “As a child, I was very upset that my mother did not let me go to church with the other children, because this was isolating me from the others, so I went as often as I could escape from her supervision”. Her mother, a retired school teacher and very devout since 1989, defended herself by evoking not fear, but logic: “I could not tell children one thing at home and another in class”. The wife of another school teacher, a peasant, would transmit her religion to her children, saying that her husband did not interfere in what she called ‘her affairs’. As Tamara Dragadze (1993) has termed it, the ‘domestication of religion’ was the necessary condition for the survival of religion during the socialist period. I am mostly concerned in this paper with domestic religion as being the precondition of the public re-appearance of religion in the public sphere after 1989, the place where religious representations survived and were able to have a role in the socialisation of children.

Alongside icons, crosses and other religious material culture, the transmission of religious representations is realised through everyday communication: sayings, gestures, recounted dreams, verbal references to the divinity, food habits (fasting). Even if those were self-censored during the socialist period, they did not disappear. One former party member recounts the pleasure and comfort he had when during a party meeting in the 1960s a thunder surprised the local party secretary so much that he quickly crossed himself in fear. This example comforted my informant because it proved that despite the anti-religious discourse of the communist party, a party member could be, finally “a human like all the others” (*om ca toti oamenii*), and thus, naturally, a man living in fear of God (*om cu frica lui Dumnezeu*). Crossing, spitting (to keep away the devil) and references to God occur when people fail to master their natural and human environment, either physically or cognitively. These are means of referring the responsibility and authority to a higher sacred instance, to God, considered the ultimate judge. An old woman insisted that her surgical intervention succeeded not so much because of the ‘brave’ doctor’s competence or her ‘dear’ grandchild’s financial and emotional support, but ultimately because of God’s will to keep her alive. A forty year old peasant tempered her anger against some supposedly malevolent neighbours by reassuring herself that ‘God will judge them’. Moreover, crossing oneself before travel and hanging icons inside the car will put one’s life in the hands of God.²³

²³ A traveler will notice immediately that no bus or minibus in Romania lacks icons. One observer recounted his astonishment (and probably anxiety) at the view of a minibus driver who was driving out of a town while still finishing his cup of coffee. All of a sudden, the driver started a difficult juggling to pass his cup from the right to the left hand while continuing to drive, only to liberate his right hand in order to cross himself when passing a church.

I have insisted previously on the fact that every child growing up in rural areas was to some degree exposed to religious representations. Nonetheless the exclusion of these representations from the public sphere during the socialist period (especially from school, where teachers were explicitly under pressure to prevent their spread), lessened the degree to which they could have an impact on the *habitus* of people. This conclusion stems from the comparison of linguistic and bodily expressions of people socialised during an overtly religious-friendly state system (where religion is taught in schools), as the presocialist and the postsocialist Romanian states are, with the speech and gestures of people brought up during the socialist period. The formative period seems to be essential here. Older generations, to which the mentioned party secretary belonged, were brought up in a religious environment, which, even if subsequently repressed, left bodily gestures behind. For the younger generation, brought up under socialism, the religiosity of their family was the sole determinant of their religious education. Thus it is important to remember the case of families of teachers, doctors and party members, who were under strong pressure to display atheist behaviour. Also that some religious practices were discontinued when families migrated to towns – many informants who were taken young from their villages and brought to work into town leaving their extended families behind, confessed that they hardly knew any prayers or had any icons in their town flats before 1989. The religious and (more generally) cultural discontinuity of the urban migrants' life, generally expressed as 'de-rootedness', is often evoked by Romanian sociologists in mass media as being the cause of negative behaviour and a cause of the lack of values. I will only retain here that people returning to the village after twenty or thirty years of living in the town generally have and reproduce more heterogeneous religious representations than those who lived in the village all their lives.

Lastly, fasting is a well respected Orthodox practice – often better acknowledged as a rule to be respected than actually practiced, because of its concrete difficulties. Fasting for the Orthodox Church means a vegan diet, prohibiting all animal products: milk, cheese, eggs, and meat. The old, the sick, the pregnant or breastfeeding mother and the child are easily excused from fasting. The old who respect fasting rules would generally tell the young that they could breach the rule because they do not have that many sins. There are four main periods of fasting during the year: Christmas fast (from the 15th of November till Christmas), Lent (seven weeks preceding Easter), Saints Peter and Paul's fast (several weeks preceding the 29th of June, the dates vary depending on Easter date) and St. Mary's fast (two weeks preceding the Assumption). Wednesdays and especially Fridays all through the year are also observed as fast days. Fasting is a matter of individual and often family choice (one eats what the female housekeeper cooks) and works very much by the power of the example. If one

person fasts in the family, the others will be encouraged to do the same and inversely, one breaching the rule reduces the responsibility of the others as well. For example, in town many women told me they were fasting because at work their colleagues were fasting. People often have to give up because, as one more cynical male informant put it, “one fasts either when one is too poor to afford eating ‘sweet’²⁴, or when one is rich enough to afford good quality fast food; not us, in the middle”. After 1989 increasing numbers of people respect this Orthodox tradition, which is facilitated in towns by the sale of special products in almost all restaurants or shops, from bakeries to supermarkets. One could even say that fasting has primarily made its ‘come back’ after 1989 among town inhabitants rather than among their village counterparts, who are more engaged in physical activities that require well fed workers.

Community Celebrations and the Rural/Urban Ambivalence

The Durkheimian approach to religion as a form of fostering community ties or to community worship through religious public celebration is an appropriate framework when analysing the annual Christian celebrations in the village of Langesti. Indeed, villagers themselves, especially those brought up during the socialist period, tend to define these celebrations as ‘traditional’ rather than ‘religious’ events. The major Christian Orthodox holy days (*sarbatori*) are the ten *praznice imparatesti*, linked to Jesus’s life, the four holy days linked to Mary (who is called God’s Mother, *Maica Domnului*, by the Romanian Orthodox) and the saint’s day of the most important saints. To indicate which saint days are holy days, people purchase annual Orthodox calendars and display them on their home or office wall; and these calendars mark with a red cross the important Christian Days. These holy days are all days of rest, though only a few are recognised as holidays by the Romanian state. In villages today, self-employment allows the holy days and the Sundays to be observed, as it used to be in pre-socialist times. *Praznicele* are an occasion for setting the table and inviting over kin and neighbours. The most important of them, Christmas and Easter, are accompanied by attending church services, and preceded by fasting and confession.

I will present here one of these celebrations, the celebration of the *hram*²⁵ (an easy translation would be the ‘name’) of the church in Langesti, which is the Assumption, on August 15th. On this day the liturgy is followed by *pomana* (plural: *pomeni*). Most important for fostering community ties, *pomana* is a food exchange, which takes place in the churchyard

²⁴ ‘Sweet’ (*dulce*) as opposed to ‘dry’ (*sec*) is the term used to designate ordinary rich food from food allowed during the fasting period.

²⁵ All churches are dedicated to a saint or to a Holy Day (e.g. the entry of Mary in the Church) and have a sacred day, usually the saint day, when the *hram* is celebrated.

three times a year, on the *hram* and on two other occasions, which seemed to me not particularly linked to the *hram*, but had the characteristic of being evenly dispersed throughout the year. After celebrating the liturgy, at noon, the priest comes out of the church and blesses the food brought by two or three members of each family in baskets and laid down on the long tables in the churchyard. Once the blessing and communal prayer ends, everybody crosses themselves saying “Amen” and then one family member, usually the oldest female in the family, invites people from other families to sit down and share their food. The other members are invited by other families. After looking around for finding one’s place, everybody sits on long flat benches and helps oneself to food, whether from their own or from other’s share. The priest (or priests, because on such an important occasion as the *hram*, several priests from neighbouring villages help perform the liturgy, which is a proof of the importance of the celebration) honours the table of one of the families, often a family closely tied to the village church through one of its members. It takes one or two days to prepare food for the *pomana*, it takes one or two hours to lay on the table (women attend to the food preparations rather than attending the liturgy), but food is consumed and then packed rather quickly (half an hour). The short duration of the *pomana* makes it appear as the conclusion of the religious celebration and diminishes its importance in face of the religious part. In reality the efforts of the community are all directed towards the *pomana*, which is far better attended than the liturgy. *Pomana* is also a situation where families need to perform well in front of the other families, not so much in terms of competition (though there is competition over the honour to have the priest or other important local personalities at one’s table), but a place where one should not lose face. The choice of food presented is very important for the women, while who to invite for food sharing and whom to eat with appears more important for men. *Pomana* would deserve a study also as an important socialising site. One should take into account the fact that there are few other sites for socialising today in the village; there is no well attended pub, on regular Sundays the church is not a meeting point, attendance being quite low, and people do not work together, as everybody has his own small plot. Christian celebrations remain the major integrative institutions for the community; no wonder so many issues are at stake in the temporary relation established through food sharing on these occasions. People from other villages also attend (within the commune there are many kin relations), which is a sign of prestige. Not all churches celebrate their *hram* on the same day, and this allows people to go to the village where the celebration is more important. A comparison I was able to make with a *hram* celebration in the neighbouring village of Lunca Corbului, which was less affected by migration in the socialist period, revealed that *pomana* in this place was even better attended, especially by outsiders, lasted longer, the food relations

were much more important and subsequently much more debated. In Langesti, old people recount with pleasure what impressive *pomeni* were organised before the war. They did not necessarily take place in the churchyard, but could have been organised in the neighbourhood, where the priest would inevitably be invited to come and lead the celebration.

If we conclude that *pomana* is less attended and less important in Langesti today than it used to be in the pre-war times, one could still not so easily explain this as a “loss of tradition”. All the *pomeni* are respected, but the double urban-rural commitment of many villagers diminishes the importance of this community ritual of integration. Indeed many of the semi-rural families would not present food in the village and would justify this with the fact that they do so in town. Although this is often true, it does not mean that these families are better integrated in their city communities than in their village community. *Pomana* in town is completely different in character and more akin to an act of charity.²⁶ Due to the fact that in cities only a few churches were built within the residential quarters during the socialist period, no “communities of faith” were created around churches, a fact much deplored today by Orthodox priests – and often used to encourage the building of new churches (Popescu 1998: 62). As a result, *pomana* does not serve the integration of a (non-existent) community; instead it is carried on an individual, anonymous basis. Especially those who had a recent death in the family, a sick family member or who are more devote, would cook and present food to the poor, old or children, occasionally and anonymously met on church premises. In recent years however, as many villagers returned and started re-integrating themselves in the village, they would also join in the revived tradition and participate in sharing food on these occasions. The power of the example is very important here and females would largely debate with their kin and neighbours on how traditional, sophisticated or expensive their food contributions to the *pomana* should be.

The Town and its New Religiosity

Though each church has its own ‘community’ in the sense that Pitesti inhabitants will often refer to ‘the church on which we depend’²⁷, these are not the same type of communities as those formed around the village church.²⁸ The great number of people ‘depending’ on one church would diminish the importance of everybody’s contribution and responsibility with

²⁶ The Orthodox doctrine says that *pomana* is an act of charity and it also says that as such it is not compulsory (Raduca 1998). In Romanian expressions, *pomana* equates with being ‘for free’. To give something *de pomana* is to give something for free, but also to give something without expecting any return.

²⁷ Notice the „we“, which includes the neighbourhood.

²⁸ Daniele Hervieu Leger uses the term “*civilisation paroissiale*” (1993: 191-195) to refer to the villages centered on the church in 19th century France. While Romanian novels evoke a similar centrality of the church in pre-war Romania, with the priest, the teacher and the mayor as the important figures in the village, this is not what I found today. The importance of the priest will depend on his personality and/or long involvement with the church and not on his structural position.

regard to his/her church. However many will contribute with money for the building of new churches closer to their house. Urban inhabitants do not feel compelled to attend the liturgy in ‘the church on which they depend’ and would frequently jump from one church to another, often on the same day, light candles in all of them and then move on, under the cover of their anonymity or of the crowdedness of the church. Former workers returning to their village life will often avoid going to church in the village where one is singled out immediately, but prefer to go to church in town, whenever they return to their flats. They expressed this by invoking a certain ‘shame’ – shame that they would not know all the gestures of the ritual and the old women would notice. A young woman from the village who worked as the janitor in the church expressed the same concern. I would also argue that having to attend the whole liturgy in village as opposed to the possibility of attending only parts of it in town also plays a significant role. Orthodox liturgies last three hours, during which one stands, kneels, stands, and kneels again; a ritual which is physically tiring and requires a certain level of religious commitment, which not everyone has. Town churches make it possible for one to enter the church, pray, light the indispensable candles for the dead and the living which are located outside the church, and leave. Religion in towns is lived more on the individual and less on the community level.

This increased religious individualism is a sign of a different type of religiosity in the city, one that does not celebrate the community, but faith itself. While many critics of the religious ‘revival’ in Romania talk about ‘social conformism’, referring to rural manifestations of faith and to ‘fashion’ referring to their urban counterparts, this increased individualism testifies rather to a more personal and more responsible relation to God, which is not necessarily mediated by the community, or the priest.²⁹ This understanding of Orthodoxy as a personal relation to God that could take place anywhere, independent of Church settings, is certainly not new. From the 1930s onwards, many Romanian writers, some from their Parisian exile (i.e. Eliade, Cioran) promoted a uniquely spiritual relation to the divinity (or were rhetorically against, but still in a personal dialogue with it, as in the case of Cioran). After 1989, this personal relation to God was rendered more accessible and popularised through mass media by Christian intellectuals. One devout worker with an elementary school education explained to me the spiritual superiority of Orthodoxy. She confessed that before 1989, she knew no prayer, having been displaced at the age of sixteen at the death of her parents from her village and drawn into the workforce away from her home. Now she saw the liturgy as a “deep

²⁹ Many urban dwellers show signs of anticlericalism and are not faithful to a particular church because none of the priests they know satisfied their spiritual needs, especially during confession. In Bucharest, educated women will go in individual pilgrimages to monasteries to find a confessor (*duhovnic*) who would be more open-minded and able to give thoughtful advice.

personal communion with Jesus Christ's suffering", considered the three hours standing "the least we can do for Jesus who suffered for us" and consequently dismissed Catholic mass, during which people mainly sit on benches, for "it looks like coffee time, they would just need the coffee and the cigarette". This woman was getting her knowledge of the spiritual from Church publications sold on church premises, from the religious rubric that can be found in most journals and from the TV programmes in which priests were invited. Elena Gheorghiu's study (2003) of the impact of mass media on Romanian youth's conversion shows that a significant number of them have been converted exclusively by mass media.

Many others are less conformist in their choice of reading materials and look for spirituality in the numerous publications on divinity, translations of American writers, which, though of Christian origins, will have no clear denominational identity and are certainly not Orthodox. These books foster a different type of spirituality, but for one to notice it, they should first know what Orthodoxy is. Most people however ignore the doctrine of Orthodoxy and have been essentially socialised into its rituals. Lacking formal religious education and relying mainly on familial transmission of faith (if any), the quest for the spiritual that was intensified after 1989 by both nationalist ideology and a disorientation caused by economic problems, indiscriminately considered every available option. Nationalist ideology and the understanding of Orthodoxy as a personal relation to God made people keep their discovered spirituality under the name of Orthodoxy. Do Orthodox priests reject believers who under the name of Orthodoxy mix New Age, Buddhism and the like? Their new awareness of the existence of competitors might prevent them from being too critical. In Langesti's neighbouring village, the priest will explain that people should not be scared off the church by too harsh punishments for their sins. "If I had to keep to the letter of the book, nobody would be allowed to enter the church". This 'realism' is much appreciated by believers. One of them, an urban dweller with higher education interested in healing practices, appreciated that 'there are open-minded Orthodox priests and monks', who would join in teaching reflexology, magnetism etc. Health is a topic that interests everybody and people would accept every healing technique, indifferent to the religion that it originated from, if it cures. To reconcile this with Orthodoxy, one just needs to pray and 'have faith' at the same time. This technique of reconciliation of Orthodoxy with other religions is not new: the same principle is applied to reconcile Orthodoxy with sorcery, both by lay people and by priests.³⁰

It would be too early to speak about syncretism in the present case, because one could not recognise patterns, but only individual *bricolage* between different available meanings of

³⁰ In his study of religion and sorcery in Greece, Charles Stewart (1991) also shows how the two are intermingled.

God. They are the result of the impact of other religious representations present in the urban milieu through books and healers, and facilitated by the lack of community that leaves space to the person in quest of spirituality to try different paths. Orthodoxy has the advantage of being vague enough for people who lacked intensive socialisation into religion, especially during their childhood, to allow for these new approaches to be labelled 'Orthodox'. Here an analysis that takes into account age, gender and educational differences would help link the various degrees of exposure to religious representations in their lives to the directions taken by their present spiritual inclinations.³¹

Conclusion

In this paper I showed that different religious representations and community involvements in rural and urban areas produce different forms of religiosity. To cast the conclusion in the terms used by the sociologist Grace Davie (2003), it could be said that while the countryside is still characterised by traditional forms of believing and belonging, the villagers who experienced town life and have double urban and rural commitments are half way between traditional belonging and individual believing, and most urban dwellers moved towards individual believing.³² These different trends within Orthodoxy are hidden by census-type questions, but would be worth quantifying and developing in more detailed studies that would take into account age, gender, education, socio-economic status and perhaps regional differences.

³¹ An interesting study that takes into account the exposure to religious representations, their acknowledged impact and resulting personal 'doctrine' was completed by Gheorghiu (2003) on particularly religious Romanian youth from different Christian denominations.

³² They experience also a form of religious belonging, but this is indirectly realised through national belonging.

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