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The Offensive of the New Religious Movements (NMR) and the Secularization Reversibility

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Abstract

This PhD thesis entitled *The Offensive of the New Religious Movements (N.M.R.) and the Secularization Reversibility* started from the premise that **dynamism, vitality and the expansive force of the new religious movements (including the Neo-protestant cults) represents a demonstration of the fact that secularization is not an irreversible phenomenon**, as opposed to the opinions of most researchers in the second half of the previous century. On the contrary, it represents just one of the elements that demonstrate that **the return of sacral in the public life at any time, if possible**.

This thesis bases its research on an impressive bibliography, mostly in Italian.

Chapter I, "*The Concept of secularization "reversibility" and the religious-cultural circumstances that imposed it*" deals with "the *voluptuous* survival of religious in a self-sufficient and immanentist culture", as it is the modern one. Therefore, we aimed at describing the physiognomy of the disintegrating society and we analyzed **the secularism as an indisputable apparent paradigm for lecturing the meaning of the modern life**.

Moreover, we also analyzed the unshattered collective psychic comfort in the pre-industrial era, in order to contrast it with the collective psychic vulnerability specific to the modern and postmodern times; this collective psychic vulnerability is just another way to tackle proselytism for the new religious movements; we have subsequently reached the conclusion that this collective psychic vulnerability, characteristic for the industrial era, is the result of expelling religion from the public space, this expulsion being specific to modernity.

The second subchapter of the first chapter, "*The pseudo-scientific thesis of secularization as an "irreversible" decline of religion*" focuses more rigorously on secularization, underlining the fact that it leads the world **under the terror of a furious and totalitarian rationalization**, then analyzing the ambiguities and reductionism of research in using the concept of "secularization". The furious and totalitarian rationalization determined a complete alienation of the collective emotive, which remained at the disposal of the new religious movements, the only one that could act at this existential level (except for traditional, official, historical churches that sometimes place themselves emphasis on the doctrinaire rationale part, contrary to interior feelings, mystic life and spiritual experience).

The third subchapter firmly introduces the discourse about „The New Religious Movements, an indication of the secularization reversibility?“ – the core research of our thesis. We firstly discussed Robert W. Wilson and his theory regarding the **pro-secularized secularization and the adepts of the secularization reversibility (or of the cyclic re-**

sacralization: Francis Westley, Steven Tipton, Dick Anthony, Thomas Robbins, Robert Beckford, Martine Levasseur and the correlation hypothesis between the religious propagation and the social shattering, Robert Wuthnow and the macro-sociologic panorama. The concept of „cyclic re-sacralization” is very important and relevant for our research, since it offers support for the hypothesis that throughout the history, there was always increase and decrease of the accent placed on religiosity by the society. The relevance of sacral for the society throughout history has not been uniform, monotone and without variations.

In annex, we meditated on the control limits of the New Religious Movements by the State in the European Union. We placed this research in an annex to this chapter, because it implies also a legal aspect. The European Union is polychromous from this point of view, some states being more permissive than others are with regard to the activity and proselytism of the new religious movements, while others, based on their legislation, are more restrictive. Italy and Greece, which are countries traditionally attached to a certain majority confession, are more firm in discouraging the action of these movements, while other countries, such as Holland, are more permissive.

In the second chapter entitled *“Secularization and “devoration” of the religious. The Anthropology’s temporary confiscation of Theology”* we have chosen to deal with „Homo religio-socio-logicus” – “product” and “producer” of secularization”, underlining that Religion is a “science of faith”, secularization accepting the survival of a strictly philosophic, rational interest towards religion, and the relationship with God representing the “vocation” of Religion. **Secularization represented a failed attempt to cut off the metaphysical depth of existence.** Postmodern and post-illuminist society returns to Religion, being interested more in its therapeutic potential at the psychical level and of the subconscious and the collective subconscious.

Therefore, this society is convinced that **Religion has some balancing resources for the individual psychic and for the collective unconsciousness** insufficiently investigated by the researchers so far. This openness to the explicit or hidden potential of Religion has to be exploited by us, the clergymen: we must come out in the public space with a religious offer that would promptly satisfy the current needs: a religion with a balancing force, fulfilling and psychic reassuring. We have to lay emphasis on the spiritual, internal and mystic dimension of religion. The Orthodoxy works with an unseen, supernatural, therapeutic energy, the energy of the charisma, completely ignored by modernity. We live in an era where there is a great opening towards experiencing this energy.

The second subchapter brings into discussion **secularization as a “religious” act in origin, but anti-religious in result**, in the sense that it is religious because it wrongly, but religiously fervent, applied the divine commandment “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it!” Any divine, biblical precedence, taken out of the ecclesiastical context produces sideslips and generates collective alienation of the inner self. Only in the light of the Holy Spirit and in the ecclesiastical ambience could the biblical prescriptions be understood in their essence, avoiding the misinterpretation. Ecology, for which many new religious movements militate, does not constitute a premise of these movements. On the contrary, it has always been a pursuit of the traditional Churches. The persistent lack of focalization on it allowed for its loss in favor of the new religious movements, especially of the New Age.

Other two mutilating characteristics of secularization are subsequently accentuated: secularization as promoter of an autonomous culture and the transcendent horizon dissolution and the reductionist vision of secularization: Religion seen as a mere anthropomorphic cultural product. The third subchapter deals with **secularization from the point of view of its monopole over the social, institutional and historic order** and analyses other two significant aspects: the strictly phenomenological, empirical-descriptive perspective, on religion, promoted by secularization and the aggressive substitution of teocentrism with anthropomorphism through secularization. Nowadays, in the post-illuminist, slowly but firmly, the religion erodes this monopole conception over the social order and expresses its conviction that, only by participating at the construction of the social order, or by cooptation, harmony, peace and collective psychic comfort can be reached. This implicitly comes with an axiological recentration through teocentrism: placing God in the centre in existence, the only thing that can give meaning to the human existence. Truncating the transcendent level of mankind led to de-sensualization, to axiological confusion, to collective psychic discomfort and to a continuous vulnerability of the individuals and of the society at all the existential levels.

Then, we came to a different, yet very important conclusion for the religious world: **Secularization is the promoter of a hidden militantism, of an intolerance carved from the pathologic religious world:** it has its own „absolutisms”. The “absolutisms”, intolerances and limited/limiting visions must be exposed, because these are sources of collective anxiety and origins of destructuralization.

Secularization criticized the “absolutism” of religion, but with the purpose of replacing it, furtively, with others, all “generators of rottenness”. Only religion that deals with the celestial “Absolute”, with the firm values and an incorruptible axiological universe can

spread incorruptible concepts. We, then, metaphorically asserted that secularization “melts” in anthropology; but religion does not dissolve in “theology” and we concluded by warning that secularization represents an attempt of continuous passing-by man’s final destination. The ambition of never taking into consideration this eternal meaning-generating perspective is also an absolutism of modernity.

Next, we have chosen to deal with the postmodern response to secularization: New Age and its assertion of “religious at superlative”; this implies a new manner to live, “consume” and proclaim religion. We tried to present only those aspects of the New Age that are of interest to us from the perspective of the secularization phenomenon: **New Age, as a new, seductive manner of thinking which spread widely** (New Age –religion under the utilitarian terrorism and New Age and its “redeeming” message: healing the current world crisis in a new-ageist manner); New Age and the other religious movements: syncretic individualism; “Central theses” of New Age, the Christian perspective. The new “new man” (New religiosity, in a new cultural context; emphasis on “mystical experience”); New Age and the loss of credibility of the official churches (Gilles Kepel’s vision: a dynamics of re-Christian and re-Islamic perspective; astrologic certification of New Age); New Age and the paradigm mutation from contemporary science (New Age – a religion of the naive but structural optimism; New Age – a religion substituted to all others).

Chapter III, suggestively entitled “*The sociologic autopsy of secularization in the international bibliographic and interpretative panorama: the “undecipherable” constellation of theoretical models derived from secularization*” brings into discussion the attitudes of some distinctive sociologists of religion and their visions regarding secularization: Emil Durkheim and secularization as a form of religious refuge in subtle structures; Karl Marx and the approach of “therapy” secularization against economic alienation; Max Weber and perishable “construction” of reality; R. Girard and the final victim-sacrifice mechanism Sabino Acquaviva and the disjunction “secularization” – “desacralization”; Peter Berger and the temporary disbelief of religiosity; Bryan R. Wilson and the immanent “soteriologic” function of religion; Thomas Luckmann and the invisible religion; J. A. Beckford and the undecipherable constellation of theoretical models derived from secularization; R. Bellah and the “planetary ecumenism”; “Top” secularization and sublimation of religious: psychological religiosity and the trans-religious future.

Chapter IV, “*Faith subjectivity*” – *variant in the religious aspect of the postmodern phenomenon of universal relativization*” analyses the public concept of “uniform faith/religion” existent in the secularized world and the sociological theoretical models of the

phenomenon called “religion” (namely the utopist-charismatic vision on religion and the new type of religiosity, based on life purpose, not on religious truth). From a pastoral-missionary point of view, this switch of interest is not anti-religious, but only a phase of man’s return to God: **a search for the meaning of life leads the one who is interested, inevitably, to discover the eschatological purpose of existence**, if man’s research and pursuit are sincere and profound.

Further on, we analyze the loss of legitimacy and plausibility of the ecclesiastical institution and the option for psychological, individual religiosity in the secularized space and the confessional’s crisis in postmodern public space. The pastoral-missionary conclusion is that, at their turn, the traditional churches do not have to militate for rigid, inflexible confessionalism, because this could hardly be attractive for believers and cannot be considered as a social link. It will be, however, breakable. The intelligent missionary strategy is to make believers become aware that **religion constitutes an element that offers firm identity in a world of dissolutions and precarious affiliations**. This is done not by balancing it with other identities, but by internal motivation. The effect will be the increase of public plausibility of the ecclesiastical institution and not its dilution.

We have described very briefly the Italian world and the hegemony of the “Catholic culture” in this world. It is about a paradigm in which religion is structurally interwoven with a nation formed relatively late, a fact that created a specific monolithic unity.

In the final part of the chapter, we underlined the disappearance of the traditional forms of actually living and embracing faith and the fact that the traditional Church is (still) the beneficiary of consistent public consideration, despite the erosion of credibility determined by secularization. At the same time, we offered two pastoral solutions: 1). the golden pastoral strategy: **interior differentiation in community vs. homogeneity**; 2). the Parish as the “forte” resource of community integration and attenuation of faith subjective tendencies

Chapter V takes over the idea proposed by the missiologist and ecumenist Ion Bria, which considers the New Religious Movements (NMR) an attempt to revitalize the religion, failed in the triviality of the religious in general. This hypothesis demonstrated its truth at the end of modernity. Certain extremist sects compromised, at the end of modernity, the idea of “religion” in general, derived from the collective mental.

This chapter analyses the New Religious Movements as direct spiritual experience, through meditative techniques and as an expression of self-search, experiment and checking. Many new religious movements have become very attractive since the basic idea is lay

emphasis on the interior feelings, on the emotional experiences, on the individual's feelings and not on the doctrine or intellectual reflection. **The hyper-rationalist extremism brought along another type of extremism, hyper-emotional and sentimentalized.** To an excess the answer was another excess. Extremism created extremism. The Church has the exquisite task of promoting balance between sense and sensibility, between mind and heart, between psychic and spirit, between intellectual life and spiritual life, and it does this by proposing to us all the hesychasm way embodied in urbanity.

Then we consider it necessary to propose a **terminological classification: “churches” or “sects”** and a classification ignored in Romania: sects, gnosis and “psy” groups. The next subchapters analyses the reasons why the New Religious Movements are so attractive, simultaneously realizing a theological evaluation of the new religious movements: these are authentic brotherly communities that lay emphasis on faith internal dimension discovery. However, we have to state the fact that these represent a disputed and ambiguous search for God, constitute depersonalizing and exclusivist communities and practice an authoritarian and exciting figure of a founder.

In the final part of the chapter, we propose **key visions regarding the New Religious Movements:** the philosopher Jacob Needleman and the “return to mystics”, the interpretative line: Richard Bergeron, Harold Wilson, Ion Bria; Richard Bergeron and the “incompatibility” of the New Religious Movements with Christianity; Harold Wilson: the Neo-Oriental Cults – preparing for Christianity? In order to understand the complex system of the New Religious Movements it is necessary to make a distinction between them, noting that a certain group separated from the new movements is represented by the Neo-protestant groups, which are not exactly recent as the “psy” groups, the gnosis and the orientation movements New Age.

Chapter VI analyses, on the one hand, the consequences and effects of the New Religious Movements on the perception of the religious in post-modern culture: secularization, post-Illuminism and achievement of existential purpose from an Orthodox perspective. This is accomplished by focusing on globalization as a favoring reality for the New Religious Movements' extension (radical mutations in relating the man to its religion, tradition and current historical conditions; multiculturalism – a subtle invitation to multiconfessionalism and religious pulverization), on **the economic totalitarianism: form of pressure for changing the confession** (“*Homo economicus*” and the hyper-competition as a way of life. Logic dominance in the contemporary public space war. Competitiveness ideology and its transfer in the religious plan. The death of love), on the New Religious Movements as a preface to total de-Christianity (Worldwide human being – the agent of “the

end of history”. Radiography of the postmodern mutant man; consumer man vs. consumed man – consumption in religion; on existential derivations of man and religious derivations.

Consumption religion is, on the other hand, analyzed in this chapter (informational society development - the new “model” for conscience is television; nihilism, nihilist culture: arrival point of postmodern mutation of man; the “post-human” future, hyper-information and history end), the chapter culminating with a reparatory solution: living with God in the Orthodox divine cult (from Jerusalem to Emaus or **the Orthodox Liturgy, scale between anthropology and charismatology**; pastoral “Diagnostic” of postmodern society regarding the religious service; participation degrees of Christians to the divine service and their understanding (1); participation (2); celebration (3); ecclesiastical community, liturgical service and communitarian dimension of the “relationship” with God; the ritualization: man’s recognition of the supreme sense that fulfils the existence and the liturgical-communitarian celebration and the constitutive-ontological dimension of faith itself).

The last chapter entitled “*Secularization challenges towards missiology and Orthodox theology: transfiguration from within*” considers that secularization and its “**spearhead**” is **represented by eroding the absolute superiority attitude of Christianity towards the other religions**. Thus, secularization in the Christian space led to the ideology breakdown of “dying paganism”, demonstrating a surprising vitality of the new religious movements (including those of non-Christian inspiration).

Taking into consideration this situation, the Orthodoxy is interpellated by **the recovery urgency of all the valuable elements outside its borders**, including those belonging to the new religious movements. Moreover, the Orthodoxy has to proclaim all the time the fact that it defines itself as the moment of “maximal intensity” of God’s revelation, thus being vulnerable when facing the invasion of new religious movements that pretend to preach the truth.

In this chapter, we confront then the secularizing thesis of religion and confession equivalence and its consequences: **annihilating any missionary dynamism and imposing indifferent mentalities**. It asserts that the true Christianity means the conscious proclamation of Christ, not “anonymity” (K. Rahner) and the fact that there is a gradability of Church affiliation. The inter-religious dialog recognized as a consecrated expression form of mission in a secularized society. We should not forget that the Orthodoxy is able to transcend the secularized culture for an internal transfiguration; that is why **exclusivism represents the fundamentalist background**. They claim that redemption exclusively comes from the self-confession, a thesis which is present in almost all the confessions.

Contrary to this, many researchers consider inclusivism as an alternation between ecclesiology and Christology. It is certain that only by accepting teocentrism, namely by **lecturing the reality of the religious plurality from God's perspective, we can draw a correct conclusion** regarding the postmodern religious phenomenon. Only the Trinitarian model offers the chance to escape the blind angle of exclusivism.

This abstract is only an expository presentation of the PhD thesis content, entitled *The Offensive of the New Religious Movements (N.M.R.) and the Secularization Reversibility*, corroborated with conclusive ideas.

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