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Romanian Nationalism: Politics and Religion, an Inseparable Bond?

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Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to examine the particular case of Romania, where religion and nationalism go hand in hand to the present day. Particularities related to Orthodoxy will be taken in view, together with historical circumstances. What is more, the way Romanians are, in the majority, religious, will be considered as a factor determining the strong connection of religion and nationalism, of religious and patriotic symbolism, of viewing war heroes as martyrs sacrificing themselves in a religious manner for the good of their country.

Keywords: political studies, symbols, war heroes, patriotism

1. Introduction

Are nationalism and religion intertwined? Or is nationalism secularized? We can find examples of both cases in the histories of nations.

The term religious nationalism can be defined as "the fusion of religious and national identities and goals." Moreover, the following aspect should be considered: "Rather than secular nationalism simply replacing religious identities and allegiances, religious and national identities coexist and even reinforce each other" (Grzymala-Busse, 2019).

The connection between nationalism and religion can even be visible, in some cases, such as Romania, the country where the author of the paper lives, even today.

Certain symbols can connect religion with the heroic fight for the country of soldiers during the war or of various heroes at times of revolutions. This is because "Religious nationalism relies on religious identities and myths to define the nation and its goals" (Grzymala-Busse, 2019).

As examples of Romania's religious nationalism, we can notice various symbols that are both patriotic and religious. The national hymn of Romania reminds of religious hymns, and refers to heroes fighting for the nation, and to the enemies also praying for them. The heroes fighting in wars for the country are considered in Romania as sacrificing themselves similarly to martyrs by fighting for the cause of their country with strong belief and bravery until the

end. One symbol honoring their devotion to the country is the Heroes' Cross, or, by its popular name, the Cross on Caraiman, a monument which stands on Caraiman Peak in the Bucegi Mountains, situated in the Sourthern Carpathians. According to Iftimiu (2018), readers are told that this cross "was built between 1926 and 1928 in the memory of the railway heroes who died on duty in World War I fighting against the armies of the Central Powers." Iftimiu (2018) wrote the article with the occasion of the "memorial service for the rest of the souls of Romania's national heroes at the Cross Memorial on Caraiman Peak" held by "His Grace Bishop Varlaam of Ploiesti" and who, on this occasion, claimed that this service "was a tribute paid with many sacrifices for the many sacrifices of the Romanian soldiers on the battlefields of the Reunification War." What is more, there was the recommendation uttered by DefMin Mihai Fifor on September 15 of the year 2018, when the article was written, that "Every Romanian must go at least once in a lifetime for retreat and to piously offer their gratitude to those who had fallen so that Romania may be a free country today" (Iftimiu, 2018). Even the time when the kingdoms of Romanians decided to unite, on January 24, 1859, a moment called the Little Union (between Moldavia and the Romanian County), we notice that it was both a union of territories and of the faith that united all the Romanian people. The bishop Melchisedec Ştefănescu urged the Romanians to form a cohesive group, like brothers, and to praise the Lord and to do their best for the blessing of their country.

We can notice the following particularity of Romanian culture: for this country, "religion has often intersected with nationalism and ethnic identity." The "Greek Catholicism and Orthodoxy" have played a role "in the formation of ethnic identity," while "the post-1989 redefinition of nation and ethnic identity" comes "as a result of domestic and external pressures." With respect to "Romania's minorities," they "have asked for a civic, not ethnic, understanding of the nation" (Stan & Turcescu, 2007, p. 41).

Regarding the connection between nationalism and religion, we can claim that "'nationalism has roots not in religious decline... but rather in moments of religious fervor and renewal' (Zubrzycki, 2006, p. 19; see also Calhoun, 1993; Gillis, 1994; Gorski, 2003; Marx, 2003)"

(Grzymala-Busse, 2019).

Regarding an understanding as to why in some countries there is a strong religious component to nationalism, we could refer to the way Orthodoxy, the "dominant religion in the Balkans," could be understood as leading to a specific way of comparing religion and politics. Thus, "Based on the concept of symphonia, which dates back to the Byzantine Empire, the Church claims that religious and political offices are equal and have similar responsibilities. Religious and political rulers have the mission to guide the people and the Church and state should collaborate harmoniously in fostering identity." (Leustean, 2018) Therefore, the role of the Church and of religion to maintain social cohesion can be seen in its association with the political organization of the state. Therefore, "Political leaders refer to the nationalist discourse of the Church in order to induce national cohesion." Yet, this holds true only for the Orthodox religion: "in the Catholic or Protestant world […] Churches are supranational or sub-national institutions" (Leustean, 2018).

As a means of organization, religion and nationalism are both based on hierarchical relationships, or on the protection as well as control by those in a position of authority of the masses, of the population. As a result, "Examples of persistent coexistence of religious and secular nationalisms abound. Religious doctrine and religious conflict can justify the exclusionary nationalism that allows elites to build both powerful states and compliant subjects (Marx, 2003)" (Grzymala-Busse, 2019).

Similarly, we notice the same connection between the beginnings of American nationalism and Protestantism (Grzymala-Busse, 2015; Haselby, 2015; Kurth, 2007; McKenna, 2007; Morone, 2003; Grzymala-Busse, 2019). Protestantism also contributed to being central to the British identity and nationalist feelings, as well as to "its intolerance of Catholicism as foreign and corrupt (Colley, 1992)" (Grzymala-Busse, 2019).

Other examples where national identities and religion overlap can be found in the following countries: "Friedland (2001) has also contended that the national identities of Iran, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Palestine are all 'suffused with religious narrative and myth, symbolism and ritual' (p.

129)" (Grzymala-Busse, 2019).

What is the purpose of these parallels? We could understand them as follows: "in the short term, such borrowing allows political authorities to benefit from religious legitimacy—and further intertwines religious and national projects without necessarily reinforcing either" (Grzymala-Busse, 2019).

According to Leustean (2018), "With the emergence of Balkan nation-states, Romania offers one of the most fascinating examples of how Orthodoxy has been engaged in political design." This can be explained as follows: "The Romanian Orthodox Church promoted the idea of an indissoluble relation to nationality, while an ethnic version of the nation was given territorial expression through the Church before the establishment of the Romanian state." To illustrate this, we should consider the following: "If, under Ottoman rule, Orthodoxy was a religious identity, with the arrival of the Romanian state it became the basis for shaping the new national identity."

The question would be, why does religion still holds such a great importance as to be seen as inseparable from the feeling of patriotism and from the national identity?

2. Materials and Methods

One of the main reasons for this state of affairs could be related to the fact that a large majority of the Romanian population are religious. Thus, we should take into consideration that "Christianity is the largest faith, with roughly 81.9% of the population identifying as Romanian Christians" (Evason, 2019).

Relatively recent polls show that, compared to other countries and populations in Europe, Romanians are very religious, to the point that "they attend worship services at least monthly." This has been documented by "A 2018 poll by the Pew Research Forum." Therefore, Romanians' lives find religion an important value and practice, to the point where "Atheism or agnosticism is very uncommon." Rural areas are spaces where "Religion devotion is especially strong." Moreover, "Religious devotion" is also "visible in much of public life. For example, government and public events often begin with a religious service" (Evason, 2019).

The strong connection between the Romanian people and religion is proved by the fact that,

after the Communist regime made them to practice religion in private, and no longer in public, as far as politics and national feeling were concerned, they returned to their faith and to the Church after the end of Communism: "In post-1989 Romania, as in most of Europe, religion has played a growing and increasingly conflictive role in the society. The deliberately orchestrated absence of any religious elements during the communist times sparked a powerful return of the Church after the fall of Ceausescu's regime" (Irimie, 2014, p. 47).

We could, therefore, conclude that religious faith and values connected to it are deeply ingrained in the Romanians' psychology.

Since the religious hierarchy and understanding of relationships is familiar to the majority of the Romanian population, it is understandable that the political organization of the state should borrow from these shared values and practices. It could be assumed that the Romanians wished to feel protected through the religious personalities and heroes. Therefore, the political leaders and rulers found a correspondent of these in the war heroes, which were perceived as martyrs giving up their lives for the faith in their country, in their patriotic feelings, and in the belief that their death could save the other members of the nation, and that, through their sacrifice, the nation would continue. What is more, since the figure of authority is also seen as a protective figure in religion, e.g., God can be understood as a parental figure, which is both a leader and a protector, ensuring that everything goes on well for the best of the subject or of the child, then a corresponding figure could be found in the political leadership of the state. The personality ruling the state is supposed to fill a similar role, namely that of ruling for the good of the entire nation, to ensure that everything goes on well, that all the rules are created in order for the country to be well and prosperous, and so on.

The ensuring of the good of the entire community can find its correspondence in the cultural dimensions theory developed by Hofstede (2010), namely in the collectivism and feminine dimension. The collectivist dimension ensures that all actions are taken by keeping in mind the good of the entire group, in this case of the entire nation. Unlike the individualist cultural dimension, which has in mind the interest of the individual, the collectivist dimension also ensure cohesion among

individuals. We could claim that religious faith, as well as understanding of the world, leads to a strengthening of the collectivist dimension. Feminine cultures are oriented towards welfare, and cooperation, while masculine cultures are oriented towards personal achievement and competition.

For Romanian culture members, we could claim that religion functions as a means of establishing a common background of values and ensuring that the society remains cohesive and its members feel that they have in common values and purposes. In this way, the politicians can address them as a cohesive group, as it would be difficult to think of every Romanian society member with distinctive beliefs and values, as can be prompted by the era of individualism.

We could, therefore, claim that other countries can have a high sense of nationalism, but not in connection to religion. However, they could share the same values and be cohesive at the level of the collectivist and feminine cultural dimensions, which focus on the good and on the welfare of the community.

There was, however, a time when religion was no longer considered popular in relation to the ruling state and the population. However, even if it was not public, in private anyone could remain faithful: "During communist rule, religion was officially viewed as a personal matter, and belief or membership in a religious organisation was considered to be incompatible with loyalty to the Communist Party." The strong connection between the mindset of Romanians and religious belief is obvious in the following: "after the collapse of the regime, it became evident that much of the Romanian population had continued to be devoted to their faith in private" (Evason, 2019).

The patriotic feeling could be compared to a religious feeling, in that it promotes caring for other people as well, since the nation is composed of people with similar values, ideals, and goals.

3. Results

We could claim that religious feeling and political organization are strongly interrelated due to the need of Romanians to feel close to one another. The feeling of closeness and cohesion is experienced from the point of view of religious values and faith. These values are transferred to their understanding of the state, of the nationalist and patriotic feelings. At the same

time, the patriotic feeling is reinforced by relying on the parallels with religious feelings. Caring about the entire nation and about the other members of Romanian culture can be created in parallel with and by analogy with the religious feelings, where the believers are urged to care about the other human beings and be nice to them.

4. Discussion

We could understand the parallels with religious feelings for patriotic feelings as means of maintaining the population interested in relating to the feeling of nationhood. Since these are the common values of the Romanian people, and the majority of them are religious, the political leaders try to draw on common interests and understanding of the world in order to maintain them together and ensure the feeling of them being united as a people of a country.

At the same time, we could see the use of symbols of patriotism a parallel with religious symbols. In the case of Romania, the hero is sacrificing himself for the good of the community, both in religious culture and in national, patriotic culture. The religious martyrs and the war heroes look very much alike for Romanian culture. At the same time, some saints can be understood as the protectors of the nation, and of helping the nation keep together and go on.

For instance, St Andrew was named the patron saint of the area of Dobroudja in Romania, in 1994. In 2012, St Andrew's Day became a public holiday. At the same time, St Andrew's relationship with Romania dates as far back as the first century AD, when this saint Christianized the Romanian territory.

If we go back in history, we can notice how other cultures have used religious symbols to legitimize the political power of the leaders. For instance, in Shakespeare's play *Richard II*, we can see how the king is considered to be God's correspondent on Earth. The king is also understood as being chosen, or anointed by God. In ancient Chinese culture, the emperor was considered the son of the sky, in a religious understanding of the term. The sacred dimensions of the political leaders, kings or emperors, in the past cultures, could be related to their protective, not only authoritative functions. This symbolism could help the people trust them and feel protected by their presence. After all, the leaders would be supposed to

guide the people and take the best decisions in their interest.

5. Conclusions

The Romanians remain, in the large majority, religious, and we can see how they make a transfer of these values to their understanding of the idea of nationalism and of patriotic feeling.

In order to gain the trust of the people, the religious values and symbolism are still being used and appreciated in the world of politics.

At the same time, this makes the people regard political leaders as being able to fulfill all of their dreams, and they see them as being all-powerful. This ends up with them feeling disappointed in them, and feeling that the political leaders have not fulfilled their promises. The religious mindset can make them feel similarly as to their presence as children in relation to their parental figures. They see them as being capable of solving everything, when, in fact, a more realistic outlook on the world shows that there are various circumstances which can hinder in successfully pursuing a certain goal.

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