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Rethinking Traditional Religion in the Postmodern Condition: There is any Axiological Validity of New Religiosity in the 21st Century?

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Abstract

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Transformation is one of the current social realities. Climates and conditions change, as well as the symbolic structures that accompany them. Religion, as a segment of society and contributing significantly to its configuration, is no exception to the dynamics of change, of transformation, of progress. Indeed, the new religious expressions, embedded in the new religious phenomenon that includes the New Religious Movements and New-Paganism, appear constantly and some of them claim to be the new religion, adequate to the 21st century. Ideologically, the new religiosity aims to revisit everything that has been previously thought about man. We are interested in ascertaining whether these new forms of religiosity are able to provide any meaning to man in his religious dimension, and identifying the socio-psychological implications in the social and ethical field.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary society is marked not only by the de-Christianization manifest through militant anti-Christian concepts, but especially by the misappropriation of the Christian understanding of the world, expressed in the ecclesial experience. Contemporary atheism is not aggressive, but insensitive to the idea of problem-solving and to the postulate of the existence of God, which becomes an absence, an ignored reality, without any existential implications. In this regard, Adrian Lemeni stated that “contemporary de-Christianization does not give birth to blatant rebels against God, but to docile and indifferent people in what the religious phenomenon is concerned” (Lemeni, 2005, pp. 135-136). Through secularization, the human condition is reduced to the existence in this world, there is nothing before or after the man who is expected to revel irrationally and passionately in everything that the consumer society offers, and consume without even being aware of that. We are proposed only a secular human condition, *in saeculum*, without God, without any eschatological expectations, without any life of the soul after death, without the resurrection brought about by the One who is Himself the Resurrection and the Life – Jesus Christ, the God-man. Secularization is, in fact, a phenomenon of laicization, desecration, of pagan emancipation from the authority of the Church, of refusal of God and His Eternal Law and moral ideology. This phenomenon took the form of the militant atheism under the past totalitarian regimes, and a creeping latent, non-conflictual, non-violent, hedonistic form in the democratic liberalism that generalizes the human institutions without any reference to the divine Absolute, in an exclusively historical-immanent horizon. As ideological nihilism thrives, the atheism informs the religious conduct, which paradoxically engenders the Neo-Paganism (York, 2005, p. 3; Strmiska, 2005, p. 2).

The international relevance of the topic of this study is that it provides a theological analysis of new-religious phenomenon of 21st century that has implications at social and psychologically level. In the current cultural program of postmodernism it is requested a reinterpretation of religion. Western European countries have experienced this reinterpretation of religion in public space, justifying or criticizing its effectiveness in general social component. Romania, a majority Orthodox country (86%), is in full process of reinterpretation and contestation of traditional Christian religion, emphasizing a anti-clerical and not ideological “atheism”. This type of theological analysis will allow the articulation of legitimate discourse for evaluation and formulation of measures in the perspective of reception the authentic Christian values.

The purpose of this brief study is to bring to the forefront the contest between “traditional” and “new” in the social interpretation of religion and the answer if the religious offer of new-paganism and New Religious Movements is one suitable for contemporary man or not. In this order, the concert objectives of my research are: (1) the analysis of New-Paganism’s validity as a reinterpretation of the sacred in this century, and (2) the definition of spirituality promoted by New Religious Movements as a way of assuming religion into private/public space.

2. New-Paganism as Epistemological Derivation in Redefining the Sacred

Many researchers thought that paganism was removed from the public sphere through the policy of spreading Christianity, specifically implemented by the Byzantine emperors. Ancient pagan religions yielded to Christianity, which gained the upper hand. This is the explanation, beyond any sociological interpretation. But nowadays, we witness a resurgence of paganism and of the esoteric as an experience of the religious.

In reference to this idea, in his very well-known book, *The 21st Century – will it be mystical or will it not exist at all?*, Jean Vernette points out that “the New-pagan theorists following Nietzsche and related to the new movements after him, radically raise the problem of allowing the Occidental man to resume the possession of a part of himself, of his veritable spirituality: the return to the ancestral gods who ruled before Christianity. Basically, the latter by separating the European nations from pagan religious traditions, has removed God from people’s lives, exiling Him beyond the world. However, the Occidental Paganism re-establishes the continuous relationship between God and the world as both God and the world are made of the same divine ingredient” (Vernette, 2003, p. 133).

Shockingly, Paganism is presented in a positive light by its adherents: Paganism is, indeed, a form of spirituality and mysticism, the only one that, refusing the idea of a unique and exclusive truth, can establish the spirit of religious tolerance. This is achieved by accepting the legitimate multiple ways to attain the sacred: a system which allows an infinite number of gods but also agrees with not only the plurality of religions, but especially with the plurality of morals, political systems and social conceptions about the world, whose gods are as many expressions sublimated. It also requires a complete rejection of Christianity.

This is the program of RGSEC/GRECE Group (Research Group and Studies for European Civilization): “We believe that nations should develop using the thinking schemes they have made themselves. Judaism is certainly perfect for Jews, as Islam is for Arabians. But Europe is not made to be Christian” (GRECE, 1977, p. 198). It must return to its inner roots which are Indo-European, and not Judeo-Christian: “The era of the Christian West was not an era of greatness because it was Christian, but primarily because it was occidental” (GRECE, 1977, p. 199).

That leads to the interest in resuscitating Norman, Celtic and Germanic, Druidic and Endemism religions. New-pagan groups have already been formed in France and United States, being sometimes associated with archaic religious practices (sorcery, witchcraft, Satanism) or with the search of natural roots (ecological communities) and with the inferiority (the meditation techniques of Oriental religions).

Paganism slowly starts to become a social phenomenon. Media popularization of Halloween, the Shaman's Day, the Celtic New Year modern-version celebration, simply aims to replace *All Saints’* feast from the Christian calendar. We also witness an increasing interest in contemporary tribal religions, *shamanism*, *voodoo*, or the myths related to the North American natives’ holidays. All these “primary forms of religious concern” are an anarchic tangle which merges depersonalized practices, as in case of totalitarian states, the rational as Gnostic esotericism, the pathological as the aliens’ cult, the para-scientific as parapsychology, and the para-religious as spiritualism. Taken together, they represent

forms of pseudo-religious manifestations which are supported by credulity rather than faith. They are in full development, leading to the flowering of esoteric literature, which, in France, grows six times faster than other publications, bringing to the market around a million of copies annually.

Therefore, at present Pagans believe that Paganism is called to become the religion of the 21st century, through a fair statement of its rights and legitimacy. For example, Jean Markale strongly asserts his opinion that paganism has never died; while the victorious Christianity thought it could eliminate it, paganism survived as a substrate, or parallel thinking, always ready to resurface in the subconscious. Paganism is not perceived as the absence of God, or the absence of the ritual. On the contrary, starting from the idea that the sacred no longer belongs to Christianity, it is the solemn affirmation of transcendence. Europe is more Pagan than ever, while it still searches for its roots which are not the Judeo-Christian ones. The dictatorship of Christian ideology could not stifle the ancient values, but only pushed them in the darkness of the subconscious. Once the dictatorship is removed, it is normal that all these values reappear, more powerful than ever (Markale, 1980, p. 67).

3. The New Religious Movements - a profile of spiritual interpretation

During the lifespan of a religion, changes are dictated by the perceptions of the religious in the cultural pattern of the society. The mutations of the society, and the scientific progress largely dictate if a religion is still of interest to the robot-like people of the everyday mechanism as it is happening now in the economically developed Western countries. For these reasons, the *New Religious Movements* can emerge due to the crisis in culture and tradition (Flere & Kirbis, 2009), because of the feeling of inability and inadaptability to the old methods, or from the coordination of the social factors through the vector of the scientific progress.

It is equally possible at any time that a new “revelation” is confirmed starting from the demand of topical social factors of today's man, or that an old paradigm infiltrates the horizon of a new generation which carries with it the fresh vibration of immediate relevance because today's society confines itself to the *here and now*.

The texts that have given birth to the New Religious Movements can be countless, but in general, it is accepted that a new religious movement appears when the old models are powerless, and are no longer of interest to the people belonging to a religious tradition. Thus the only way they can be attracted by religiosity is to leave the old religious landmarks behind and to become pioneers, to take risks in trying new exotic experiences, and seek for meaning. No rules govern this process: sometimes it is just a matter of highly subtle religious sensitivity, appreciation or disappointment with a religion, an objective plan, and personal commitment to subjectively experiencing a religion. The context in which *New Religious Movements* appear and proliferate, is marked by secularization, globalization and inter-cultural relations in economically strong countries (Kakelic, 2006). Nowadays a new definition of traditional religion, is imposed by a mechanized society. The technologically saturated West has removed the religious dimension of life from public life. The technological and consumerist society sets up benchmarks for our religiosity. In the public domain, religion is dragged from the private sector, even some thinkers and philosophers - such as Gianni Vattimo, John D. Caputo etc. – suggest this change of perspective imperatively (Caputo & Vattimo, 2008).

Thus, we are speaking of a “postmodernist” de-institutionalized Christianity, according to the equations: “God - *yes*, the Church - *no!*” Or “*Yes* to God, but *no* to Christ” (Achimescu, 2008, p. 4). It is more than obvious that today's man is affected by a tragic crisis of religious identity. Moral relativism, the nihilistic and atheistic paradigms, the religious pluralism are daily realities that define the everyday social life. New alternatives, religious surrogates, pseudo-religiosity based on atheism are proposed and all are fuelled mainly by the spectacular Eastern religions and mysticism.

The *New Religious Movements* are the vehicles of a new spirituality. The magnitude of faith and practice demonstrated in the *New Religious Movements* across Western Europe and America is huge. The economic and cultural exchanges taking place since the mid-20th century have dramatically intensified the presence of Asian religions elements (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism) in the West. The result is a revival of indigenous spirituality centred around the worship of deities and, with this interest, a renewed connection to nature, to the universe through Shamanism. Other movements such as Scientology or Ufology claim to unite religion and science and use empirical methods to keep the faith and the spiritual cosmology. *New-Age* combines these elements in a very innovative form which seems to demonstrate a continuous permutation (Jones, 2012, p. 15).

The *New Religious Movements* satisfy the modern human tendency toward the religious eclecticism. A brief overview of the New Religious Movements in the socio-religious landscape of today's western society reveals an indisputable fact: a marked preference for eclecticism among those who accept the free version of traditional religions, i.e. freely interpret their teachings disregarding the canon of the official doctrine. It is no longer uncommon in today's society to find people who study Kabbalah, but also participate in church services, or practice yoga, while maintaining their practice of the daily prayer (Achimescu, 2012, p. 33). Further examples could be offered; suffice it to say that this move toward eclecticism and privatization of religion has been discussed by theologians and sociologists since 1950. Thus, T. Luckmann calls this form of spirituality “invisible religion” (Luckmann, 1967, p. 34) and A. Bharati refers to the so-called syndrome “aloha-amigo” which he describes as “pathological eclecticism” (Bharati, 1976, p. 11). In order to outline this new reality of religion, R. Bellah coined the term “sheilaism” (Bellah, 1985, p. 77) meaning that religion is essentially a private matter to be built idiosyncratically. When such privatization of religion is combined with eclecticism, „making your own religion” becomes an expression of the freedom of religious option, meaning that everyone has the right to express their preference for a particular set of religious beliefs and practices, combined in a mixture of heterogeneous elements, which are open to every person. According to some people, the possibility “to make their own religion” was valued under the term “spirituality” as distinct from religion (Jones, 2012, p. 16). Others define the eclectic religious mixture of elements as pathological since, according to most traditions, one must deeply penetrate into the substrate of a religious tradition, *i.e.* engage experiential wisdom and reality to achieve its perfection.

We notice the ambiguity and equally the mixture of the elements of Christian spirituality with the Indian one (specifically in Hinduism and Buddhism) and the occult one, in promoting practices about the spiritual perfection of man, an “immediate salvation” and even a “self -salvation”. Also, we can see that the majority of new religious movements, which are the subject of our research, propose a

new anthropology, namely a mixture between Christianity, Hinduism and personal opinions. Thus man is no longer a creature of God, but is devalued as a person, being restored at other valued levels.

Moreover, the New Religious Movements propose a new configuration of the divine, differing from Christian theology: God is not the Ultimate Reality and Person, the Creator, a transcendent Entity located in an unalterable otherness of nature of man and the universe, but an impersonal and undifferentiated pan-cosmystic “unity”, with absolutely nothing distinct from creation, as it is proposed by the New-Age movement.

4. Conclusions

New-Paganism, together with New Religious Movements, poses one of the biggest challenges for the Christianity of the 3rd millennium, just as it happened at the beginning of the 1st millennium. What differs is only the new socio-religious context. This reinvention of traditional religion in the form of New-Paganism and New Religious Movements raises the question of its applicability from the social and ethical point of view. The individualism and the caste system promoted by the New-Paganism and New Religious Movements impinge upon social and community values. The dependence on the religious leader abolishes the disciple’s social freedom of expression. His life becomes exclusively framed within a group and its rules, and this is why there have often been cases of maladjustment when some followers left the group. From the ethical standpoint, New-Paganism and the New Religious Movements bring this aspect to the fore.

On the other hand, the new interpretation of theology and anthropology is the characteristic of the spirituality proposed by the New Religious Movements, and it is strongly infused with elements of Oriental spirituality. Unless we take into account these mutations in theology and anthropology, we will not succeed in understanding the “new” spirituality and implicitly, the alleged perfection of man’s spiritual fulfilment. Basically, the New Religious Movements operate with a different terminology: terms such as “evolution”, “transformation”, “training”, “awareness”, etc., which define a subjective exercise without any reference to God.

In conclusion, my intention in this study was to evaluate critically and realistically the new-paganism and new-religious phenomenon in social field. A theological analysis is more than necessary for understanding the mutations from today's society, because it can provide an objective framework of the religion’s validity in public space and, equally, a better understanding of otherness and freedom in expressing own religious values.

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