RELIGIOUS ADVERTISING AND POLITICAL SYMBOLISM IN ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract:
The conquest of essential social areas by the advertising model of persuasive communication mirrors the major impact of advertising on contemporary society. One of the most important spheres affected by expansion of the advertising communication pattern is the political one. This paper focuses on the presence of religious symbolism in political advertising, particularly in the electoral campaigns. Thus, it proposes a theoretical analysis on the political use of religious symbols in electoral advertising and, starting from this background, several analytical insights of the 2014 Romanian presidential elections in order to determine the presence of the religious symbols as tools of political communication.

Symbolic advertising and political communication

Advertising is nowadays much more than the simple instrument for the transmission of information about the product in order to increase sales.[1] Advertising played an essential role in the transition to consumer society and become an integrant part of contemporary society. The social impact of advertising is reflected mainly in how advertising persuasive communication model penetrates the social processes. (Leiss, Kleine, Jhally, 1997, 389) Furthermore, advertising is one of the major sources of symbolic signification in contemporary society. Beside the symbolic content provided by the advertising messages, an important part in the increasing its cultural force is attributed to the way in which it embodies religious dimensions in its mechanisms. (Shefield, 2006, 107, Grad, 2014, 143)

The cultural and social force of contemporary advertising is better highlighted if we take into consideration its impact on four major spheres of contemporary life, as identified by Sut Jhally. Thus, alongside the impact of advertising on the construction of gender identity, Jhally considers that advertising affects the experience and the structure of children's play and also the spheres that were defined mostly by the perception and the experience of the auditory, such as music. An essential area that is affected

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by the influence of advertising is the electoral politics, mainly through the predisposition to detour the attention from the serious problems to the focus on symbolic and emotional aspects. (Askew, Wilks, 2002, 331) Hence, the similar form and even content of political advertising in comparison to product marketing campaign represents the ultimate confirmation of the conquest of the contemporary society by the advertising model of persuasive communication.

The integration of the advertising logic within the electoral campaign is often described as the "Americanization" of electoral campaigns and implies the presence of several traits, such as the prevalence of television among other mass media, the preference for image in comparison to issues, the "personalization in the presentation of political process" and the professionalization of the political actors in the development of media strategies. (Kaid, Bacha, 1995, 8)

The growing importance and the role of political advertising in electoral campaigns is a source of controversies. On the one hand, political advertising is presented as an important tool offered by a democratic system to political candidates and parties in order to better communicate with the voters. Political advertising offers several advantages such as the better control of the image of the candidate, it influences the undecided voters, it is adaptable to the context and to the factors that can intervene in the campaign; it can be measured and monitored according to polls and focus groups. (Kaid, Bacha, 1995, 186-8) Yet, the effect of electoral ads on the votes is difficult to determine because at that particular time very much is going on - speeches, debates, media coverage, event attacks by opposition, advertising - and it is difficult to measure the effect of a single factor. (Kaid, Bacha, 1995, 201)

On the other hand, the political advertising is blamed for transforming the politician into a product, for altering the political discourse and for distorting the reality through simplification. (Christians, 2001, 157)

The overlapping of political sphere and the marketing is sanctioned by Lucien Sfez. For Sfez, the symbolism is much more that the instrument of politics; it is the essence of politics. He considers that "the political belongs to the sphere of symbolism" (Sfez, 2000, 13) and that the symbolic images have the "double objective to induce ties with dispersed elements and to condense them in a point" (Sfez, 2000, 25). Thus, for Sfez the political is essentially symbolic and has the function to provide social cohesion and

order. But the emergence of mass communication "destroys the symbolism until it dispossesses it of any power (…) the political symbolism is thus very far from marketing." (Sfez, 2000, 26)

While acknowledging the symbolic charge inherent to advertising texts, and, even more, identifying advertising with the "last refuge of mythic, symbolic and ritualistic behaviors" (Frunză, 2014, 7), Sandu Frunză proposes a different perspective on the role of political advertising, as "a privileged carrier of memory, symbols and communication," a "special product that renders politics significant." (Frunză, 2014, 149).

It is in this framework of the postmodern society, where the "religious experience is one that is lived by contemporary man as a symbolic experience in which the daily and the familiar are elements that matter more than the irruption of the supernatural" (Frunză, 2014, 166) that the advertising texts become a vehicle for the manifestation of the sacred. This perspective on advertising permits the identification of the particularity of political advertising in comparison to the commercial one. As Sandu Frunză states, "the full forms of manifestation of the sacred suppose an intersubjectivity rapport to the entity incorporating the sacred, and this entity is present in the discourse of political advertising by involving politicians and political organization as subjects that create public well-being." (Frunză, 2014, 150)

Faithful to the principles of an image based-culture, the image creator industries (Balaban, 2009, 52) rearranged the area of electoral political communications around the "image" of the politician which has to be delivered to the consumer. The image represents the decisive factor in influencing the electorate. "The candidate image, which is the sum of the *perceived* personal and professional characteristics of the candidate, is what really is running in an election campaign." (Leiss, Kleine, Jhally, 1997, 402). Eventually, the main goal of political advertising is "to define your candidate and to define your opponents - to convey both positive and negative information and to evoke both positive and negative feelings in viewers and prospective voters." (Kaid, Bacha, 1995, 186)

The fact that the political advertising constructs its message around the person of the candidate differentiates it from the commercial advertising, the presence of the interpersonal dimension implying "an ethical

engagement and a symbolic mark that add special value to the promoted product." (Frunză, 2014, 150)

The process of outlining the candidate's image implies eventually the creation of a hero, be it ordinary or extraordinary, since heroes act as "agents of the socialization of the souls" (Girardet, 1997, 74). The finality of the mythical imagery, as described by Girardet, as "function of psychic restructuring and at the same time of social reinsertion" can be interpreted as common to political advertising, for the reason that the product it delivers to the public, brings the opportunity for the people to "share the same emotions, the same fervor, the same hope." (Girardet, 1997, 74)

The personal dimension of the advertising process is mirrored by the fact that the image of the candidate consists in "all of the subjective impressions voters have about the candidate" and implies the comparison both to the other candidates and to an ideal candidate. (Leiss, Kleine, Jhally, 1997, 400)

Friedenberg identifies three major determinants of the building process of the ideal candidate. Frist, it is the credibility, which is the result of the presence of some qualities, such as ability, character, energy. A second factor concerns the interpersonal attraction, the candidate's charisma. The third major element is the "homophily" and it is defined by Friedenberg as "having a common ancestry" and regards the similarities concerning the personality, social class, educational background, or beliefs that the voters consider that they share with the candidate. (Leiss, Kleine, Jhally, 1997, 400)

Relevant for the analysis of the "common ancestry" factor is the presence of the religious symbolism in the electoral communication. For instance, Bernard F. Donalhue investigates the use of religious symbols in the 1972 presidential campaign and demonstrates that the two candidates relied on different religious symbol clusters - McGovern's upon the Judeo-Christian biblical religion while, Nixon upon the symbols of the American civil religion. The author identifies two elements essential for the construction of the image of a candidate which makes even clearer the presence of a functional relationship between the religious symbols and their utilization in political communication: the need of the candidate to be identified as moral and the need of the people to relate their social existence to a transcendental value. (Donalhue, 1975, 63)

Consequently, issues such as "the legitimation of authority and authority-persons within the society, the issues of change (chaos), and the particular

political and religious identities of the people" (Donalhue, 1975, 63) demands the politico-religious symbolization and renders it unavoidable for political advertising.

The advertising construction of the candidate's image, relating both with an ideal candidate and the opponent candidate, presumes the religious symbolization which "can reinforce the voters' identity or nonidentity with a particular candidate in the context of the existing political and religious climate (…) as they appear to impart a transcendent a value to the candidate's political formulae." (Donalhue, 1975, 64)

Religious symbols and the 2014 Romanian presidential election

The relation between religion and politics in Romanian context has a special dynamics. This particular relation is the result of both the historical factors - such as the powerful presence of the church in the political area in the pre-communist period and the conditions specific for the communist regime - and mainly of the large number of Orthodox Christians and of the high level of trust Romanians have in the church institution.

Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu distinguish within the sphere of the interaction between religion and political parties and elections several areas that are closely related and that imply a constant negotiation between the religious and the political actors.

First, there is the direct involvement of priests and prelates in parties and their nomination as candidates. This practice was, after a period of controversies generated by the allowed participation of priests in political parties, suspended by the ban of their involvement in politics.

A second level is the support offered by the religious leaders to certain candidates, in exchange for favors offered to that religious group. Here too, despite the official position of the Orthodox Church which condemns this type of practice, many cases of priests which support political candidates are reported during the electoral campaigns.

The third level of the overlapping of religion and politics is represented by the use of religious symbols in the electoral communication. (Stan, Turcescu, 2007, 121)

While, after the revolution from 1989, the politicians didn't seem acknowledge the importance of religion in the process of attracting voters, the situation started to change with the 1996 elections when the religion factor was introduced in the political discourse. The most representative moment in this respect is the famous question addressed by Emil Constantinescu to Ion Iliescu: "Do you believe in God, Mr. Iliescu?". From this moment on, religion became an important, yet controversial and much criticized, electoral instrument. The visits to the Orthodox churches, the attendances to religious services, and the presence of the religious Christian Orthodox symbols on the electoral tools became always present elements of the electoral campaigns. The possible explanations for this evolution could be the recent development of media, the increase of electoral competition, and the diversification of electoral tools in attracting electoral capital. (Iancu, Balaban, 2009, 160)

The participation of Romanian politicians at religious events as it is mirrored by media is analyzed by Ioana Iancu and Delia Balaban in an article that proves that "the political personalities are increasingly trying to get electoral advantages by showing that they respect religious values." Nevertheless, the authors underlie that "the written media seems to be frequently skeptical on the credibility of politicians' behavior." (Iancu, Balaban, 2009, 164)

Another important source for the investigation of the intensive utilization of the religious symbolism in the political communication is the Romanian presidential elections from 2014.

Although the presence of religion in the election campaign was reported in all the areas mentioned above, we will focus our analysis only on the electoral use of religious symbols.

The aspect that makes this presidential campaign very relevant for the investigation of the subject of the use of religious symbols in politics is the difference of religion and ethnicity between the two main candidates. The fact that one of the candidates is Christian Orthodox while the other is Lutheran made religion a main "battlefield of the electoral campaign." (Mistreanu, 2015)

The official inauguration of this specific battlefield was marked by Victor Ponta's statement made during the speech announcing the presidential candidacy: "I do not believe that a candidate for president of Romania has

a problem if he is not orthodox, or ethnic Romanian, but do not want to be accused by anyone that I am Romanian or Orthodox in my country". This affirmation makes indirectly reference to the main opponent, Klaus Johannis. However, such claims can have the opposite result, especially in the context of the Germans enjoying a good image among Romanians.

This case of abusive religious symbolization of electoral communication was condemned by the media and the civil society. Sandu Frunză remarks "the importance of the symbolic dimension and of the way in which ethics is affected by it" in the framework of political communication. Disregarding the importance of the term ethics in this equation can have high costs. For instance, he draws the attention on the biblical symbolism used in the process of electoral communication and mentions Victor Ponta's visit at Sâmbăta de Sus Monastery, where during the discussion with a person that was ill and who asked for his help, "he chooses to portray himself as a healer who alienates the suffering of those who are ill (…)Victor Ponta doesn't go as far as to tell the sick person "take up thy bed and walk!", but he promises him, in a fatherly way, that his suffering will be lessened by his involvement as a Prime Minister." (Frunză, 2015, 248). Frunză considers that this type of strategy contributed, next to "the messianic expectations that Klaus Iohannis has generated" (Frunză, 2015, 245) at the results of the elections.

Even if Klaus Johannis rejected religion as a campaign theme in response to Ponta's statements, elements related to religious symbolism, beyond the Christian values and principles inherent to a Christian Democratic Party, can be identified in his case too.

The campaign poster presents Johannis surrounded by an aura and adopting a position similar to the one in which Jesus is represented in some icons. With regard to the political vocabulary of Johannis, we can remark "certain theologically oriented terms" (Donalhue, 1975, 52), such as trust, faith, believe – "the time of those who believe has come", "mutual trust", "the normal Romania begins with trust," etc. - which contribute to shaping the image of a savior hero.

The symbol of the savior is unavoidable in political communication, especially during the electoral campaigns. But, "any process of "heroification" implies the existence of a relation of adequacy between the personality of the virtual savior and the needs of the society at a certain moment of its history." (Girardet, 1997, 63). Thus, in a society like the

Romanian one, religion cannot be ignored in the process of building the image of the candidate, and this aspect is reflected by the extensive inclusion of the religious symbols in the political advertising texts.

If we refer at the Romanian presidential campaign from 2014, we remark the outlining the images of different types of redeemer. Victor Ponta is presented as the savior who comes from the soil of a Christian Orthodox Romania, while the main contra-candidate, Klaus Johannis appears as the different type of rescuer ("a different kind of president"), counting, in this case on the candidate's German nationality, because of the positive image the Germans have in Romania.

The symbol of the redeemer is exploited in the electoral discourse of other candidates. Monica Macovei, for example, is presented as a justice hero, who can defeat the evil system. - "If all those who believe in me, will vote for me in the first round, we will defeat. David defeated Goliath too," - while Călin Popescu Tăriceanu is the hero who can bring back the lost paradise, represented in this case by the period 2004-2008.

The use of religious symbols in Romanian political advertising communication is a topic that addresses challenges to different research areas – political and social analyses or approaching coming from the field of communication studies -, especially due to the unique relation between religion and politics characteristic for the Romanian context.

The specificity of political advertising, that differentiates it from the commercial advertising, comes from the fact that it operates in a larger degree and in a profoundly different manner, with persons, whether we refer to the candidate's person or the voter's person. Thus, in constructing the candidate's image, the advertising has to resort to religious symbolism in order to be able to efficiently address to the people. Consequently, even though religious symbols are not a decisive factor in determining voters' choices, they represent a card played by Romanian politicians with no exceptions. Yet, as Sandu Frunză remarks, the way in which the integration of the religious symbolism in the communication strategy affects ethics is an aspect which strongly marks the result of the campaign.

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