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The Icon of Romanian Identity Reflections on the Public Debate about Religious Symbols in Romanian Schools

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Abstract:

The paper analyzes the debate regarding the presence of icons in the public schools in Romania, initiated in November 2006, from the perspective of the Orthodox theological tradition. This perspective entails the historical problem of dialogical difficulties between the Eastern and Western Christian canon, materialized in the so-called “new iconoclasm” theory formulated by the pro-icons party. Starting from the implications of this historical problem, the paper claims that the debate exceeds the boundaries of the legal battle and political dispute, showcasing a classical pattern of conceptual divergences that transformed the dialogue between the initiators of the debate and the “new iconodules” into separate discursive monologues, stemming from two incompatible methods of argumentation. The theology of icons embodies a referential model for social structures that invalidates the separation of the public and private spheres, and is used in the context of this debate as the pretext of a universal ecclesiology meant to coagulate the “spiritual identity” of Romanians.

At the entrance of a public school from Reghin once a typical Saxon town in Mureş County, the pupils are encouraged every morning of the school year by the insightful words “Come forth to take light” (Veniţi să luaţi lumină). Reminiscent of the Orthodox ritual of Easter, the Revival (Învierea), these words, featured on a lovely bronze plaque, are part of a greater ambition of the general inspector of the Mureş County Inspectorate for Education to revive the religious sentiment of the younger generation that has been gradually compromised by the global pragmatism of modernity.

Prior to its public display, I had the opportunity to discuss this “cultural statement” with the initiator, who is a physics teacher by profession and who admitted that in his encounters with the pupils he always stresses the importance of divine intervention for scientific discovery. Notwithstanding the implications of this peculiar tendency to re-theologize science, at the time I bluntly pointed out that the invitation

was specific to Orthodox liturgy and might be seen as discriminatory by members of other recognized religions in the state. To this observation I received a most interesting response: the statement “Come forth to take light” has nothing to do with Orthodoxy or the supremacy of a certain religion, but with the reaffirmation of the significant role of faith, especially in the formative years of schoolchildren. A parallel argument, stemming from the debate regarding the presence of icons in public schools, struck me in the same way: “the icon does not suggest a religion (...) but the act of living in faith” (Drăgușin, 2007). While instruction is based on scientific knowledge and deals with the pragmatic formation of children, education also deals with their spiritual formation.

This response and the implicit distinction between *religion* and *faith* raised my interest in the role of the Orthodox Church or, more precisely – since in this case it was representative of a state institution that took the initiative – of Orthodoxy in shaping public spaces in Romania. I concluded, after examining several cases, that the most relevant episode to illustrate the thesis that (especially after 1989) “national identity” in Romania perfectly overlaps with a “spiritual identity” is the public debate regarding the presence of icons in schools. Thus, the main argument I sustain here is that in periods of social-political change and crises, the identity of a nation is expressed through a different type of solidarity in the representative community, a substitution which is symptomatic in the post-communist countries and which has been embodied in a particular discourse in the case of Romania through the theology of icons.

I label this substitution “spiritual identity” and will attempt to gradually arrive at a definition through analyzing several aspects of the public debate. At this point I propose the following circumstantial definition: the identification of a given community with a set of moral principles and values that coordinate the everyday life of its individual members, transposed in a given space without visibly separating the private life from the public sphere. Due to the nature of the social-political crises (in this case the transition from a political system to an entirely different one) the members of the community tend to lean on the most secure and long-standing unifying element, which is invariably related to faith.

Incidentally, this debate began in 2006, the same year when the new Law for Religious Cults¹ was approved by the Romanian Parliament, abrogating Decree no. 177/1948 regarding the general status of religious cults. Therefore it was the first official statement on the status of religions after the fall of communism. There was an ardent discussion on ramifications of this law and the inherent secularization processes which the Romanian public did not take lightly. For instance: the removal of the Lord's Prayer from the end of the national radio program, the mandatory or optional character of religious education, the removal of the theory of evolution from textbooks, and so on. These discussions apparently had as a unifying core the issue of the separation of church and state.

However, I will show that the debates exceed this basic issue and bring forth a historical problem that can be traced to ecclesiological and doctrinal divergences between Western and Eastern Christianity, to use generic terms. Namely, I will argue that both sides in the "battle for icons" fell into the trap of deaf ears, since the very concept of religion is a modern construct borrowed in the Orthodox tradition of Byzantine/Greek origin. Furthermore, I will argue that Orthodoxy does not perceive the public space in the same way as it features in the Western canon; in fact, religion and public space are nearly foreign concepts in the Orthodox tradition. Religion is the acknowledgment of an existing system, of its legitimacy and justifiability. However, in Orthodoxy, legitimacy is rendered by tradition: the ecumenical councils, the Church Fathers, and synodal decisions. A word of Roman origin, *religio* does not have an equivalent in Greek and it is not a problem of personal choice (i.e. of faith), but a manifestation of family, tribal or state structures. Furthermore, it has been argued convincingly that throughout the theological debates between Western and Eastern Christianity, the problem was not represented by the several points on which agreement could not be reached, but the very manner of theologizing in the East (Pelikan, 2005, 206)², the logical flow of argumentation, opposed to the Western scholastic tradition. In this

¹ Law No. 489/2006, Published in the Official Gazette, Part I, no. 11/01.08.2006.

² "Nu cutare sau cutare idee teologică a grecilor era străină latinilor, ci chiar metoda lor de a face teologie." (It was not this or that theological idea of the Greeks that was foreign to the Latins, but their very manner of theologizing).

respect, the dialogue itself is carried on incorrectly or in accordance with incompatible systems of argumentation. It is the *transparence of this incompatibility* that I will search for in examining the above-mentioned episode.

The subject of icons best showcases this assertion. Let me point out, for the moment, that as an indispensable tool of Orthodox piety, icons are diffused in any social context where the individual believer seeks the presence of divinity. Icons are present in homes, workplaces, on the streets, in markets, public places and schools. The omnipresence of icons merely translates the omnipresence of divinity and implicitly of the Church. According to this reasoning, there is no distinction between a private and public sphere where religion is practiced, since faith is present with the individual believer in *any* space. Icons draw the border of a specific "faith-inhabited" region that surpasses geo-political structures and allows its citizens to recognize their spiritual belonging, to feel safe and protected outside the confines of the Church-building. In this context the "church" is understood primarily as the community of believers.

I will therefore take into consideration the civic debate regarding the removal of religious symbols (icons) from public schools on the basis of several documents and the position of the main actors in the debate, in order to demonstrate that while the doctrinal issue of ecclesiology was not explicitly stated in these documents, it transcends from the argumentation of the pro-icons party. Needless to say, the mere term "new iconoclasm" formulated by this party, especially the representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church, shows continuity with a tradition which is unlikely to be fully grasped by the opponents who give voice to principles of democracy, individual rights, and nondiscrimination – all concepts of the Western secular modern state. To contextualize the historical problem, I will focus on the theology of icons and various interpretations of its crucial role in the post-modern world. I find it is not coincidental that this debate reflects some of the concerns of the Church about the declining role of spirituality in the modern secularized social context.

Besides the different aspects of the public debate and the legal battle for icons, extensively publicized at the time, and until the present year, when the High Court reached an irrevocable decision representing the final victory of the iconodules, I believe that these documents can be

analyzed from a historical perspective and will give answers to pertinent questions regarding the so-called “spiritual identity” of Romanians which replaces “national identity” in its classical definition. It becomes even more relevant if we keep in mind that this debate is particular to Romania – it did not proliferate to the same extent in other Orthodox countries. Naturally, this is a consequence of the multi-confessional character of this country, especially the predominance of minority groups in the civic sector, a situation which does not appear in Bulgaria or Russia, for instance. While in these countries the problem of religious education in schools gained importance, no social segment contested the public display of icons. Needless to say, at the beginning of the debate, several voices in the pro-icon party condemned the anti-national (i.e. anti-Orthodox) position of the organizations that supported the removal of religious symbols from schools.

Examining the position of the main actors in this public debate, I am considering two basic working questions that underpin relevant aspects of the arguments viewed here:

1. What is the role of icons in the Orthodox tradition and how does this role contribute to the delimitation of a particular “spiritual identity” in geo-political terms? Since the icon transforms the designated public space into the private space of personal encounter with the divinity, it is relevant to give an explanation to why, according to the precepts of Orthodox tradition, the two spheres are not contradictory or mutually exclusive.
2. What is the role of icons in education? The first premise on answering this question is that “state neutrality” is not a relevant standpoint for an Orthodox community. The ambiguities in the Law of Religious Cults (Law no 489/2006) will reflect this premise.

The questions generate several working hypothesis. The idea of a “new iconoclasm” is a suggestive finding of the representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church, pointing to the continuity of a struggle to maintain the position of iconography in every aspect of social life. The icon is closely linked to revelation and through this struggle it became a mark of the victory of the spiritual realm over the political structure. It is the manifestation of the divine prototype and with its physical presence it delimitates the boundaries of a community that recognizes, in principle, only one type of authority – the political power (and all elements of state structure) is merely a hypostasis of this community.

Therefore, the symbol of faith is allowed to penetrate in any space belonging to this community. More than that, it is *required* to stamp the physical realm inhabited by the community. The secular or public space, as opposed to the designated religious space (temple or church) is a logical incongruence, since the entire region of the community is destined to receive this revelation.

At the same time, the icon is meant to educate the members of the community about various forms of the revealed divine prototype: saints, Jesus the Savior, the Mother of God, scenes from the Scripture, etc. According to the theology of icons, the knowledge from the biblical teachings can not be grasped without the force of visual revelation. It stands for a constant reminder of the value of this knowledge and the participation of each member of the community in the story of the revelation. As an epistemological tool, the icon is rendered a crucial role in education.

State religion, by definition, is the one religious tradition -represented by an officially recognized church- that is chosen by the leadership of a country to tend to spiritual matters. In accordance with the above-mentioned legal disposition, in present-day Romania there is no such privileged Church. But since the head of the state belongs to the community that follows the Orthodox tradition, the concept of a state religion is irrelevant. I pointed out above that in the Orthodox tradition belonging to the community that shares the revelation practically annuls political positions or the relevance of power structures. Formulating the legal framework was not an inherent necessity of the Romanian state; rather, it was imposed by external requirements and implicitly by the ideological need to separate the state from the church. The final decision of the High Court, although the mere conclusion of a legal battle, actually stands as recognition of the distinct perception of *state, public sphere* and *education* in accordance with the Orthodox tradition.

Through the mediation of these working hypotheses I want to describe the mechanisms of defense in the position of the pro-icons party. This line of interpretation is not, however, in resonance with theories of cultural reductionism, such as the incompatibility of Orthodoxy with modern Western conceptions of individual rights or its incapacity to

promote a cultural environment conducive to a market transition.³ I do not aim to formulate value judgments or to suggest that Orthodoxy is reluctant to change and thus stands in the way of progress. On the contrary, I intend to reveal a pattern through this example – namely, that the argumentative stance of Orthodoxy is not perceived correctly in the Western tradition and is interpreted in accordance with political principles that this argumentative stance invalidates. A selective analysis of the documents that synthesize the debate will illustrate this pattern.

The Role of Icons in the Orthodox Tradition: Philosophy, Theology, and Politics

Icons are perceived and presented in the framework of this debate not as objects of cult, but as an “Orthodox confession of faith” with a profound dogmatic character. They are models through which the dogmatic message is rendered in an accessible form. Inevitably, the conflict that arose in the Byzantine Empire in the 8th century is re-iterated in this context, serving as the historical precedent to render authority to the icons. Conceptualized as a guarantee of Christ’s incarnation, the Church holds that being against icons is the equivalent of denying Christ’s incarnation, suffering, and consequently the whole economy of salvation. Therefore, the icons have come to embody the fundamental dogma of Christianity. The supporters of icons in the debate point to the various moments in history when the role of this dogmatic tool was contested; the episode of Protestant Reformation, for instance, is seen as a repetition of iconoclast arguments and, in view of the political implications of these two historical moments (the iconoclast controversy and the Reformation), they are used as instances of the interference of the “lay power” in Church affairs. Not surprisingly, this type of intervention culminates with the abuses of the communist regime that practically formulated an atheistic program for the Church.

The actors in the pro-icon party pertinently observe that the cause of this “new iconoclasm” is the effort of post-communist Romania to adopt European standards in all fields of activity: political, social and

³Such as the theory formulated in Nedelchev, E.T.(2002), *Catholicism and Eastren Orthodoxy: cultural influences on the transition in Central and Eastern Europe*. PhD. Dissertation, University of Delaware, accession number 200214927. (Comparing Romania and Bulgaria to Hungary and Poland).

economic. They condemn the secularization of Western Europe, especially the tendency to remove all religious symbols from the public spaces, and recognize in the adoption of this secularization process the potential danger for the Orthodox tradition. However, a most relevant detail in this open counter-attack is the identification of the philosophical system followed in the petition submitted by Emil Moise in November 2006. Since the teacher adheres to the “Declaration of Principles” formulated by the “Solidarity for the Freedom of Conscience” association, a document which promotes the values of “secular humanism”, the defenders of icons sought to define this concept in their own terms. According to their programmatic document, the secular humanists are “skeptical towards the supernatural (...), reluctant toward traditional opinions on God and divinity (...)” and claim that “a moral life can be lead without the illusion of immortality and reincarnation”. In the interpretation of the pro-icon party, secular humanists like Emil Moise are identified with the iconoclasts, whose main target was to “destroy the Orthodox teaching, embodied and represented by icons” in order to replace it with a new philosophy.⁴

The issue of postmodern secularism and its politics of “removal and replacement” are symptomatic of and present in most of the defensive strategies of the Church in contemporary times, without being particular to Orthodoxy. What makes it singular in the case of Romanian Orthodoxy is this crucial and synthetic role played by iconography. The theology of icons presupposes a certain way of being in the world; it does not echo a simple manifestation of religious appurtenance. It is the “iconic way of life” (Damian, 2003, 7), based on a long doctrinal tradition. In private homes the icons bear a strong communitarian role and shift the center (i.e. the Church) to the periphery of private life. The existence of the believer gravitates around this center, the *ecclesia domestica* thus becoming a continuation of the designated liturgical space. This complementary report between center and periphery is a fundamental principle of Orthodox ecclesiology. While in the Christian tradition of the West the primacy of Rome entailed the existence of one center and subordinated local churches, the center in the Orthodox East

⁴ All materials related to the media coverage and the legal proceedings in the debate are available online in Romanian language (<http://www.salvati-icoanele.info/>). All translations into English language were made by the author, unless otherwise specified.

has always been diffused in the local units, starting with the ideal of the Pentarchy (Pelikan, 2005, 192-194).⁵

Returning to the role of icons, it is useful to note that the word "icon" itself suggests a type of communion. It is in strong relation to the word *eiko* which means "to make place", "to retreat", "to follow", "to allow" – meanings that entail communion, the presence of various members in one place; in other words, the icon is a means through which the faithful enter communion. Even though the object itself is not approached with the same gestures outside the church, through its mere presence it carries on the same communion, just like the *ecclesia domestica* carries on the reality of the church at home. The principles that Emil Moise evoked in his petition to the National Council for Combating Discrimination⁶, requesting the removal of icons from public schools, disregard this set of meanings and the role of icons as it is contoured by their theology. His argument follows two main directions:

- a) the display of religious symbols on the walls of public units of education is discriminatory toward agnostics or members of other confessions, creating a hostile and degrading atmosphere that affects the rights of children to personal dignity;
- b) the display of religious symbols on the walls of public units of education constitutes a violation of the fundamental right to equal chances, because by accepting the religious symbols – in this case of the Orthodox Christian religion – the public units of education implicitly assume the transmission of principles practiced and accepted by the same religion and which are degrading for women.

As we have seen, the theology of icons advocates two fundamental precepts: equality and uniformity: (a) equality – in the context of the economy of salvation; (b) uniformity – in the assertion of the presence of the sacred in every aspect of social life. From the point of view of the defenders of the icons there is no social, political, or gender distinction in their function. Let me point out, for the time being, that the arguments against the presence of icons in public schools have taken on an entirely distinct set of values which are incompatible with this theology, as they

⁵ The Pentarchy theory refers to the equal status of the patriarchates in Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem.

⁶ "Consiliul Național pentru Combaterea Discriminării", hereafter "CNCD".

materialize elements of the philosophy of secular humanism meant to contest the interference of the ecclesiastical order in the public sphere. However, the icons gained a role which surpasses the boundaries of a specific confession or cult, and implicitly exited the jurisdiction of the contested ecclesiastical order, according to the arguments of the defenders. In this context, the validity of the increased social role of icons is fundamental.

The Concept of “Public Space”

“Public sphere” is an ongoing theoretical project within the discourses on modernity. As such, it is almost exclusively dominated by interpretations from the Western academic field, stemming from Jürgen Habermas’ inquiry in the formation of bourgeois society (Habermas, 1989). It is a neutral area of social life, designated for discussions on the margin of societal and political issues. Any space between the “private spaces” and the “sphere of public authority” may enter this neutral category. According to Habermas, the public sphere is a creation of the 18th century and is promoted by the bourgeoisie. For several reasons this identification of public sphere and its physical counterpart, the “public space”, is problematic in the case of South-Eastern Europe. Eluding the classical reasons, I will focus on the nature of the Orthodox tradition and the entailed *modus vivendi*, as it was given shape in the Romanian context.

The interpretation that is closest to the Western paradigm in the Romanian context is provided by H.-R. Patapievici in his book entitled *The Recent Man (Omul Recent, Humanitas 2001)*. The argumentation in this book successfully combines the philosophical discourse, the political essay, and the religious confession. At its core is the human condition, viewed in the form of a contemporary chronicle. It is significant in this context for describing the precepts of secular theology, which contours a “metaphysics of presence” derived from the Greek premise according to which “to be” invariably means “to be present”, and “to be present” means “to be visible” (Neamțu, 2008, 200). This logical stream is very useful in our interpretation of the role of icons in the public sphere.

In the countries of South-Eastern Europe, dominated by Eastern Christianity, the discussion about the public sphere is only now becoming paramount, as a consequence of the process of integration into European structures. Needless to say, it is yet another form of transposed discourse without a feasible theoretical basis. Particularly in

Romania, in the context of the newly acquired social and political role of the Orthodox Church, this discourse is halted by complex mechanisms of resistance. In the framework of the debate regarding icons and their penetration in various spaces of the public sphere, these mechanisms of resistance are transparent. Actually, the pro-icon party invoked precedents from Western countries in order to illustrate that the crises of icons, perceived as an effect of the interaction between religion and the challenges of modernity, is not a novelty in Europe. For example, the case of the "Birmingham Syllabus" from the 1980s in England, a reform program vehemently opposed by pressure groups that considered it a threat to the cultural heritage of Britain; or, more recently (in 2003), Italy was torn by the fervent discussion about the "issue of the crucifix".

But based on the significant role of icons in the Orthodox tradition, I am inclined to designate a particular meaning to the "icons crises", as this theology invalidates, in my view, the notion of "public space" or, more precisely, the distinction between the "private" and "public" space. Since the everyday life of the Orthodox believer is rallied around the presence of the icon, which is the "image of the invisible", the transcendence of divinity in reality, not as an attribute of religious fanaticism, but as a precondition of a spiritual identity, the separation of this private sentiment from the public encounter is impossible. The so-called ontology of Romanian spirituality⁷ is deeply rooted in a symbiotic relationship between land and people. Obsolete though it may seem this ontological interpretation has been influential in the discourse on the national identity of Romanians. It explains the persistence of the Romanian people in a designated space through its correspondence with a particular way of life. Furthermore, it entails a fundamental ambivalence that causes the main difficulties in defining national consciousness: by renouncing one component of the spiritual identity, the inhabitant of this space faces identity crises. The space component bears the quality of *har* (divine gift), an attribute which is difficult to translate in other languages. In principle, it means that the inhabited space, in all its manifestations (natural or constructed) is part of the spiritual identity, i.e. of Orthodoxy.

⁷ A theory developed by the Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae; see, for instance: (1992) *Reflexii despre spiritualitatea poporului român* (Reflections about the Spirituality of the Romanian nation), Editura Scrisul Românesc, Craiova.

Thus, separating “public spaces” from the “spiritual space” could result in the impoverishment of the individual, causing the identity crises. This way of reasoning is clearly visible in the statements of the representatives of the Orthodox Church in the framework of the debate. “The Church generates the nation”, claims priest Justin Pârvu in an interview to the publication *Lumea Credinței* (February 2007), further saying that “we do not make a distinction, as Christians, between Society, Family, State (...)”. He argues that the Romanian nation survived through the Church and “more precisely through the icon”, that “faith does not require other explanations; it is the mystery (*taina*) of this nation”. A basic argument of the defenders throughout the debate was that the icons were put on the walls of public schools by the pupils themselves, and this was the recognition of the ontological overlap between the private and the public sphere. Therefore, it was not a political step of the Church per se, but a choice of the individual believers who are aware of the necessity to express this “spiritual identity”.

Against these arguments, the opposing organizations invoked the “confessional neutrality” of public institutions, in accordance with the Constitution, the Law of Education, the Convention for Children’s Rights, etc. Interestingly enough, the pro-icon party does not rely on legislative sources, nor do they define the notion of a public (i.e. neutral) space with the aid of legal precepts or political theories. They consistently refer to abstract notions like “tradition”, “heritage”, “continuity”, and so forth, dismissing the concepts of “discrimination” or “legitimacy” as well as “state neutrality”. At several points the theory of *symphonia* also appears in the debate, reminiscent of the Byzantine state-church cooperation. However, the discourse of the Romanian Orthodox Church is not articulated, it does not constitute a corpus of systematic statements on the relationship between the secular and spiritual authority, and because of that- the arguments of the opponents are more convincing.

At this point I will note that the lack of eloquence in the position of Orthodoxy toward the “public sphere” is mainly due to a lack of viable working concepts. Much like in the case of *religio*, in this debate the pro-icon party borrows the notions of their opponents. Since ontological arguments are at stake here, I think a pertinent question is whether the Orthodox tradition is at all able to produce a useful interpretation for

“public spaces”, especially since the *church* itself is understood not as an institution, but as the communion of individuals.

The Role of Icons in Education: Transforming Public Schools into Private Spaces

The icons crises became the subject of the Pastoral Liturgy of the Orthodox Church, celebrated at the beginning of the Easter fast, on February 21, 2007. “The presence of icons in schools exceeds the role of an intuitive didactical instrument to be used in religious education, as they are sacred and sanctifying images that offer divine authority in the intellectual and spiritual formation of the young generation.” Indeed, the opponents acknowledged the validity of using icons during classes of religious education. But as it can be seen in the above-quoted liturgy, the representatives of the Orthodox Church do not assign a solely educational purpose to the icons. They are meant to aid the individual believer in understanding the mystery of faith and, at the same time, they reflect the existence, struggles, and problems of the individual believer (Damian, 2003, 190-194). The initial strategy of defense for visual representations of sacred themes in Byzantium was based on their utility as didactical instruments; they were “books for the illiterate” (Pelikan, 2005, 121). Yet their primary role, as John of Damascus defined it, was that of a “mirror and a figurative symbol, matching the limits of our human nature.”

Pausing for a moment on the response of the physics teacher and Inspectorate official I mentioned at the beginning, I observe that in the matter of the insertion of diverse forms of religious symbolism in schools a relevant distinction is made between *instruction* and *education*. While the former refers to acquired knowledge, useful for pragmatic, biological survival, the latter encompasses the spiritual development of the children; it is meant to contribute to the “survival of the soul”. Admittedly, in this case the object is the appropriation of moral values that are propagated by religion; hence the weight of icons, which incorporate the simple, visible, touchable essence of ethical knowledge. In the distinction between *instruction* and *education*, we perceive a loophole that justifies the use of religious symbols in schools.

Returning to the legal arguments, the initiators of the debate, focusing on the official formulation of the “public sphere project” through laws, stressed the “confessional neutrality of public institutions of education” as an “absolutely necessary condition for the creation of a non-

discriminative school environment and the assurance of a tolerant atmosphere, with a minimal risk of an emergence of ideological and religious tensions".⁸ The signing organizations invoked article 29 from the Constitution of Romania, regarding the interference of the state in individual thinking, opinions, and religious belief. What these organizations did not take into account when using legal arguments was the initial lack of interference of the state in this problem. Ironically, they provoked an official statement from the Ministry of Education and the judicial system. The position of both was one of support for the claims of the pro-icon party.

The legislation is as ambiguous about the report between state and church as is the position of the Orthodox Church on the public sphere. In principle, the schools belong to the sphere of public authority, i.e. the state. They are financed and administered by the state. Therefore, any activity carried out on their premises should be a problem of state administration, through the Ministry of Education. However, according to the Law of Religious Cults, the state does not have a say in the administration of religious congregations. These ambiguities and contradictions raise significant issues, and not only for the legal system. In the context of this debate, the most problematic aspect is that of "state religion."

Paragraph (2), Article 7 from the Law of Religious Cults (Chapter 2, Section 1 - "The Relationship between State and Cults") is a fascinating example of legal ambiguity: "the Romanian state recognizes the important role of the Romanian Orthodox Church, as well as of the other churches and cults recognized throughout Romania's national history and by the Romanian society." A few lines below, Article 9, paragraph (1) reads: "In Romania there is no state religion; the state is neutral toward any religious belief or atheistic ideology".

I pointed out the ambiguity visible in the first quote, as the article clearly implies a privileged position for the Romanian Orthodox Church, mentioning the recognition of its role alongside "other cults." Even though the law stresses the lack of a "state religion," this positive

⁸ Scrisoare deschisă către CNCD de susținere a necesității retragerii simbolurilor religioase din instituțiile publice de învățământ (Open letter to the CNCD, for the support of the necessity to remove religious symbols from the institutions of public education), November 13, 2006.

marginalization presupposes that the Romanian Orthodox Church is the dominant religion in the state. Had it not been a law passed by the Parliament, this statement would qualify as a simple acknowledgment of a *status quo*: namely, that the Romanian Orthodox Church is the church of the majority. Since the law excludes the existence of a state religion, let us analyze what it means that Orthodoxy is the religion of the state.

In the context of the debate regarding the presence of icons in public schools, the state eventually proved to be a supporter of the pro-icon party and implicitly of Orthodoxy. Suffice it to say that in December 2006 the Education Committee in the Chamber of Deputies firmly rejected the recommendation of the CNCD to elaborate a set of rules regarding the presence of religious symbols in schools or their removal. Moreover, personalities of public standing from various fields indirectly defended the position of the Orthodox Church and of Orthodoxy as the religion of the state. For instance, historian and academician Dan Berindei pointed out that “the icon is a symbol of Orthodoxy and we are a country in which the majority is the Orthodox.” Virgil Căndeia sees the story as part of a “longer list of negative reactions to traditional education and the Church,” further stating that there is a “certainty of mediocre people (...) according to which an anti-religious attitude is a sign of intellectual elevation.”

Supporting the Church and its values is not, however, seen as a political act. As I pointed out above, the moral role of spiritual education yet again invalidates political principles. As academician Florin Constantiniu stated, defending the icons, “in a time when confusion and the reversal of values are overwhelming, the Christian principles about loving thy neighbor and doing good deeds are a cure, perhaps the only remedy.” He goes on to link Christianity, in the manner of Dumitru Stăniloae’s ontological argument, to the birth of the Romanian nation. Finally, historian Alex Mihai Stoenescu reiterates the cultural significance of the icon, which embodies a historical reality – the fundamental role of Christianity in the birth of the Romanian nation.

Therefore, while Orthodoxy is not a state religion, it is the religion systematically supported by state officials, members of the Romanian Academy, historians, writers, and public figures. This transforms it into the religion of the state, a function stemming from majority coverage, but also (a significant detail) from the apostolic tradition that Orthodoxy

upholds (i.e. as the defender of Christianity). In all of these statements, the Orthodox tradition is simply equated with Christianity, regardless of its confessional forms. This assertion is further justified by the fact that it was not the other churches recognized by the state that took a stand against icons, but the “secular humanists.” Thus the conflict is finally interpreted as a continuous struggle between a religion protected by the Romanian state (i.e. Christianity) and the secularizing tendencies of the Western world.

In my view, the final decision of the High Court (June 11/2008,) admitting the contestation of the Ministry of Education against the recommendation of the CNCD, is an acknowledgment of the fact that in Romania the public school is a private space, by leaving the issue of icons in schools to the competence of teachers, parents, and children- in other words to the competence of local communities. This idea gained support from the pro-icon voices in the debate. In an article from *Dilema Veche* entitled “Take the icons down?”, Teodor Bakonsky identifies two distinct thesis in the icon crisis: “one that claims that the school is a public space, non-confessional, neutral, and devoid of any spiritual aspirations” and another claiming that “the presence of icons (...) in schools generates a welcome state of piety” (Bakonsky, 2006). He points out that the children can chose to be atheists, while parents may prevent them from attending religious education. The voices expressing the position of the Romanian Orthodox Church have repeated the same prerogatives of parents and children to “keep (the icons) there, where they belong” (PS Vincentiu Ploieşteanu), because the “education of children, beginning in the family, continued in schools and in society, reflects (...) the condition of a country, of a nation” (Patriarch Teoctist of Romania).

Based on the declarations and official positions presented so far, we may assume that in Romania the schools are viewed as private spaces where the propagation of faith is a necessary condition for the proper education of children. The presence of icons on the walls is seen as a confession of faith on behalf of the younger generation. According to the classifications that John of Damascus formulated for *situations of change*, one of the first opponents of Martin Luther claimed that there were five groups of Christians: “the Greeks, Russians, Bohemians, Arabs, and the congregation led by Peter”; only under the “leadership of Peter (and his successors) does the distinction between Bohemian, Greek, Latin or

other nations disappear” (Pelikan, 2005, 281).⁹ At the time, this argument served as a justification for the papal primacy; in the Orthodox tradition, the taxonomies proposed by John of Damascus would be leveled by the unifying force of the “one, true, and apostolic church”. This latter set of attributes stand at the core of the Christian confession; seeing that the Orthodox Church does not acknowledge a universal confession of faith (like the Catholic or Protestant confessions), the diffusion of icons best illustrates the attributes.

The confession of faith implies unity; in this case, the icon illustrates the unity of Christians transposing the private sentiment of faith into a space where the confession is made. This synthesis is, in my opinion, the basic element in the defense strategy for icons. If the school is a means to continue the moral upbringing of children, it necessarily becomes their private domain, enhanced by the unifying force of confession. For the religious cults following the Western tradition, this interpretation seems odd, at the very least; we must keep in mind that the educational system in the West, initially controlled by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, formed a well-organized structure (especially due to the influence of the Jesuits) and the schools were sooner and more efficiently secularized. The secularization of educational institutions in Romania is not feasible in the near future, due to the growing influence of the Orthodox tradition in each sector of society, stemming from the ongoing crises. While the formal requirements of the European educational system will of course be respected, the religion of the state will not renounce its dominion on education.

Interpretations

Unlike most countries from the former Eastern bloc, Romanian religiosity has acquired surprising public manifestations in contemporary times. The most striking manifestation is the interest of the younger generation in the Christian tradition. It has been shown that “theological intelligence” plays a crucial role in the public debates from Romania. But, as I argued above, this theological intelligence is devoid of eloquence, of a systematic logical articulation. Since the Orthodox tradition resisted the temptation to formulate a confession, the iconography received an imponderable weight. The debate analyzed here illustrated this unbalanced shift from the power of words to that of

⁹ The opponent was Augustin von Alfeld in (1520) “The Papal Seat”, Leipzig.

images. Perhaps it would be a useful exercise to investigate why images came to encompass such a powerful message in the contemporary Romanian version of iconography.

Let me synthesize the meaning of the answers given to the proposed working questions by saying that a preliminary evaluation of the icon-message in the Orthodox tradition shows that the dilemma of Hellenism in front of the precepts of Christianity is yet to be solved. Scholarios's philosophy and theology expressed the continuous conflict in the Orthodox tradition between *faith and knowledge*, a conflict temporarily solved in the West by Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. But faith and knowledge coagulated here in the mysterious solution of the imagistic revelation. In the debate, as I have shown, the unifying role of iconography is labeled by the "new iconoclasts" as a dividing force. The origin of this contestation is in the capacity of a systematized verbal discourse to separate faith from knowledge, while the Orthodox tradition insists on holding these two together, especially in the educational sphere. A failure of knowledge to incorporate faith, the guarantor of social cohesion, would result in the crises of an undefined identity.

This type of communitarian identity can be labeled as "spiritual." It derives from the primary element evoked by citizens of Romania for describing their position in the larger European sphere, namely the Christian Orthodox component, as it clearly appears from the public debate on icons. The cause of the preponderance of this element is the social-political crises, causally inherent to the resistance to a new order which does not reverberate with the identity of a nation at a given time. The virtues of Orthodox tradition are long-standing and reliable, "apostolic" and unifying, without claiming changes. For this reason, the community renounces the national identity based on a shared language, state structure, and geo-political unit, investing in the solid foundation of faith.

Therefore, we can define *spiritual identity* using the symbolism of iconography, through which Romanians now cling to a durable visibility in the European tradition. The metaphysics of presence, standing at the core of secular theology, here transformed into an image of political activism, renders the persistence of this community in the history of Europe a crucial role. *Spiritual identity is the discursive form of this continuous presence* and it can not be de-constructed by means of political

discourse, as the incompatible argumentative stances in the debate have illustrated. It is, in a nutshell, *the expression of a solidarity, based on tradition and a particular way of life (iconic), the unifying cord of which is the language of faith and the visible image of living in faith (the icon).*

I related this spiritual identity to the various conceptions on public spaces. If we return for a moment to the “metaphysics of presence” which implies visibility, the need to delimitate spaces with iconographic images, as a sign of presence, would perhaps be more understandable. The unanimous voices from the Romanian public opinion defending the presence of icons should not be regarded, in my view, as mere mechanisms of resistance, but perhaps should be given some credibility. Without this visible presence, a significant part of the identity is silenced, and the public sphere project in the territories where the Eastern Christian tradition prevailed might face serious problems in this context.

The educational role of icons is by far the most exciting aspect in this debate, especially due to a newly-found discourse on the confession of faith. This is a fortunate opportunity for the Romanian Orthodox Church to articulate, on the basis of the theology of icons, an eloquent discourse on spiritual identity. Without an articulated discourse, the criticism of Orthodoxy as a mechanism of resistance building on irrational and reductive positions toward progress and the public sphere is well justified.

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