

Between churches and shopping malls

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In the summer of 2005, in a small convent in Eastern Romania, a young nun suffering from schizophrenia died in agony due to the "treatment" imposed by the convent priest, helped by a few other naïve and credulous nuns. Being convinced that the schizophrenic nun was actually possessed by the devil, they submitted her to incredible exorcism practices, tying her hands and feet and depriving her of food and water. The news story about this dreadful death went on the first pages of the Romanian press and was re-broadcast by some international news agencies, which analysed the ambiguous position the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) adopted towards this tragic situation. On this occasion, the Romanian press revealed the fact that in other religious establishments as well, in churches or monasteries, exorcism practices carried out by priests or monks were tolerated in spite of the fact that they were not officially accepted. Some journalist went further in their analysis and tried to give an answer to the countless dilemmas concerning the role and the dominating position of the ROC in the Romanian post-communist society. I should like to present my own conclusions in the matter and show some examples of the ways some artistic or activist positions have reflected this situation.

Opinion polls show that the institutions the Romanian citizens trust the most are the Church and the military, the Parliament and the rest of the fundamental institutions of democracy being at the bottom of this classification of credibility. Certainly, there are many possible explanations for this fact, from the traditionalist and conservative character of the Romanian society, insufficiently modernised and urbanised, to the weak development of civic spirit and of individualism, to the "ideological void" left by the demise of the communist dictatorship, "filled" by the "new religious belief" of the '90-s, to the conservative position of the post-communist intellectual elites and of the opinion leaders, to the historic "marriage" between the post-communist political powers and the Church, with benefits for both sides – more votes for the former and financial support as well as growing influence in society for the latter. Unlike the Catholic Church, where authority is exercised from the Vatican, the Romanian Orthodox Church has been autocephalous for over a hundred years, the close relationship with the lay power represented by the modern Romanian State thus providing it with the opportunity to have an extremely influential position in the Romanian society. This is the explanation for the elimination of the Greek-Catholic Church of the Transylvanian Romanians by the communist authorities in the late 1940-s, and its integration into the ROC, thus cancelling its independence from the Romanian communist State and repressing its outspoken opposition to the installation of the communist regime in Romania. In the recent post-communist period, even if officially the ROC has not opposed the modernisation and emancipation of the Romanian society with the purpose of assimilating the European values of individualism and respect for difference, in the innermost strata of the Church hierarchy there is an opposing reaction, promoted expressly and implicitly in publications, in public statements and even in regular religious services.

In the 1990-s in Romania we have witnessed a resurrection of the Orthodox spirit and religious values, on the ground vacated by the disappearance of the dominant communist values. Through the participation of groups of priests officiating together at overly festive political events and through the proliferation of the construction of churches, many of a dubious architectural and aesthetic quality, we have witnessed the colonisation of the public sphere by the religious symbols and religious attitudes often associated with the anti-

European Romanian nationalism. The autochtonist and ethnocentric values are supported by the greater part of the Romanian population, irrespective of degree of education. The absence of the three emancipating revolutions that have defined the European spirit, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, is now showing its marks. According to Romanian historian Lucian Boia, if in the communist era it was extremely difficult to publicly affirm one's religiosity, nowadays the situation is somewhat similar, but in the opposite direction: to publicly affirm one's atheism means to become the subject of public contempt. To belong to a sexual minority is a "sin", harshly chastised by the Church. To take part in a public event organised by the gay and lesbian community means almost certainly to expose oneself to physical aggression from "religious fundamentalists" organised in associations and foundations endorsed by the ROC.

Historical personalities of mythical stature have become Christian heroes, being sanctified by the Church in the '90-s. The post-communist political powers, in their desire to legitimise themselves before the nation, have supported these actions with funds and media exposure. For instance, a few years ago, the Government allotted substantial funds to Romanian playhouses for the purpose of staging theatre plays connected to the personality of the 15th-century Moldavian ruler Ștefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great), freshly sanctified by the ROC. This resulted in shows of poor artistic quality, with expensive scenery and costumes, seen in the theatre world as being the same with the old obligation that needed to be fulfilled for the "Party and State leadership".

Romanian culture is based on text. Writers have a dominant position, which ensures their visibility and access to resources. Contemporary visual artists are practically unknown and their projects are almost "invisible" in the public space or in the media. I should like to comment on a few projects that are critical of the position occupied by the ROC in the Romanian society, precisely in order to make them known to a broader audience that may not be familiar with these issues. Initiated in Cluj in 2002, the Mind Bomb project, through its campaign of socially and politically-themed posters, has autonomised the public space with the aim of developing the civic consciousness of citizens. For the initiators of this project, art is used as a means for social change by challenging the issues the Romanian society faces in the process of normalisation: from corruption, protection of the environment, illegal adoptions, to the various faces of nationalism. In the poster "Casa Domnului nu e acasă / So many houses for God, so few houses for people" (1), a frame specific to Byzantine icons surrounds a childish drawing of a city district full of churches in construction, in front of which are sleeping, under the open sky, homeless children. The message is extremely direct and explicit and refers to the lack of involvement of the Orthodox Church in the social problems of the community, being busy and preoccupied with building its own worship places in order to increase its influence and power.

Bucharest artist Vlad Nancă took part in the Mind Bomb project with a poster depicting the enormous People's Palace (in Romanian, "Casa Poporului", literally "The People's House") built by Ceaușescu in Bucharest, with Byzantine-style domes drawn on top of it. The artist was in fact reacting to the intention to build in the Romanian capital the Cathedral of the Nation, a megalomaniac edifice designed in the spirit of the palace whose construction had been initiated by the communist dictator. The greater part of the Romanian political class has affirmed its support for this undertaking, the building project being also the officially declared priority of the Minister of Culture from Bucharest. Indeed, the fact that he is the leader of an institution called the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs is symptomatic.

Dan Acostioaei ironically interprets the Byzantine imagery, characterised by stylised drawing and excessive decoration and, in order to attract attention to the omnipresence of religious

images in institutions and in the public space, he integrates it into the "urban semiotic". In 2004 he produced a series of lightboxes, similar to those used for signage in banks, train stations or on the street, in order to help people find their way. The lightboxes displayed stylised drawings imported from religious icons in order to "guide" the "pilgrim passer-bys" towards the worship places in the surrounding area. Dan Acostioaei lives and works in Iași, a city located in Moldavia, a region where the influence of the Church is extremely strong.

The work of the artist Ciprian Mureșan, "Sfârșitul planului cincinal / The end of the Five Year Plan", portrays Teoctist, the Head of the Romanian Orthodox Church, struck by a meteorite, in a manner similar to Maurizio Cattelan's "The Ninth Hour". The ironic meditation and the appropriationist style are known coordinates of Mureșan's work. The title of the creation makes a reference to the destiny of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarch, who has been holding on to his office since the communist period, apart for the first few days following Ceaușescu's fall in December 1989, when he retired briefly. By extension, Mureșan's work also challenges the compromises made by the ROC in the relation with the communist regime, at a time when there is increasing talk about the collaboration of some Church hierarchs with the former political police (the "Securitate").

These artistic projects, together with the critical public statements made by some intellectuals, create the impression that critical spirit is increasingly present in the public sphere. I personally would like it to be so, but I notice that the predominant orientation of the Romanian cultural elites is towards a right-wing thinking, traditionalist and conservative. A real Romanian intellectual left wing of European type, progressive, has not yet taken shape, even if personal and even institutional initiatives do exist. Paradoxically, it is still the market forces that will change people's way of life. Implicitly, the weight of the official religion will decrease in the public sphere, maybe also because people will have a better material life, will be more tolerant and will possess more than the illusion of a better afterlife. In the summer of 2006, the Romanian national television channel launched the "Great Romanians" project, importing a format also used by other European national television channels. The debate generated by this television show, joined by personalities from the academic world, by journalists and also by common citizens, lead to the election through the TV viewers' votes of Ștefan cel Mare, whom we mentioned earlier, as "The Greatest Romanian of All Times". The documentary dedicated to his personality, made by professionals working in advertising and the media, created a different image of the ruler, one more appealing for the young urban audience, with a specific media culture and doing their shopping in the newly-born shopping malls. To me, that documentary, shot in the configuration of a tourist advertising spot, appeared to at least have the quality of dismantling the mythical structure of the character and of mitigating the "reading" of his achievements in an exclusively religious and nationalist mode. I hope for this young audience, emancipated and sophisticated, which needs to be attracted towards contemporary art as well, to form in the future the critical mass needed in order to change traditional mentalities...

Notes:

(1) - Paraphrase of "Casa de copii nu-i acasa"/ "Children's homes (orphanages) are not a home at all", the slogan of a campaign against child abandonment and institutionalisation.