

CHAPTER 19

Religion–COVID-19 Interplay in Romania¹

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically influenced the whole of human society, from the least significant of its components to fundamental ones, such as religion. The present chapter aims to explore how this global event altered the religious landscape in Romania. The main goal is to investigate how religious institutions and individuals affected and were affected by the legal and social changes provoked by the pandemic. Considering the local historical, political, and cultural particularities, it observes how religious behaviour changed, at the group level as well as individually, following the imposition of pandemic restrictions; how public authorities succeeded (or not) in ensuring an acceptable level of (collective) religious freedom; how religious institutions succeeded (or not) in continuing to structure social life, from the personal context to the public or legal one; and how religious groups facilitated or hindered the adherence to public health measures and what public opinion was to their public actions. The Romanian case shows how important it is to have clear legislation as well as a structured dialogue among the main social actors in order to ensure

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that all rights and freedoms are exercised in a fair manner in a moment of maximum stress caused by a global medical issue.

Introduction

Officially, in Romania, the COVID-19 pandemic consisted of five epidemiological waves during a period of almost two years, between 16 March 2020, the date on which the state of emergency was established, and 8 March 2022, the last day of the state of alert (COVID-19 Official News 2023).

According to the legislation issued during the state of emergency and state of alert put in place to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, a series of fundamental rights and freedoms were restricted, among which were: free movement; the right to intimate, family, and private life; the inviolability of residence; the right to education; freedom of assembly; the right of private property; the right to strike; and labour social protections (Stănciulescu 2021).

These restrictions, along with express sanitary legislation regarding religious communities, inevitably affected religious freedom, especially the public expressions of religious beliefs, and the activity of the religious institutions. Therefore, a whole range of religious activities, during a period of two years, was partially or completely discontinued, including: physical participation at regular religious services; religious school courses; the organisation of and participation in pilgrimages; the organisation of weddings, baptisms, commemorations, and funerals; and the organisation of meetings, conferences, and symposia with a character or on religious themes.

During the state of emergency period, 16 March 2020–15 May 2020, successive measures were established to limit the freedom of movement and assembly of citizens, measures that also affected the religious life of believers. For example, religious services were officiated by religious leaders inside their places of worship without the participation of the faithful and were broadcast on media channels (TV, radio, online, etc.). Although the Romanian state did not order the closure of places of worship, some religious groups decided on their own initiative to close them temporarily. Muslims, for instance, adopted much stricter and broader measures than those required by the government: the Muftiate made it compulsory to present a green certificate for access to Muslim places of worship (Muftiate of the Muslim Cult in Romania

2021). Individual services (baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.) took place inside places of worship with the participation of a maximum of eight people. Special sanitary measures were also ordered that limited contact between worshippers, as well as between worshippers and objects (touching the icons, communion with the same spoon, etc.).

After 18 May 2020, religious manifestations of a collective nature (religious services, religious gatherings, etc.) were no longer included in the category of public gatherings and consequently the number of participants was no longer limited, the only condition being the observance of the general sanitary rules (i.e. social distancing, wearing of the mask) ordered by the public authorities.

The main topics taken up by researchers and by the press relating to religion during the pandemic included the limiting of access to religious services due to social distancing rules and observance/failure to comply with these rules by religious institutions/everyday believers; the support/opposition of religious institutions towards the vaccination campaign; the digitalisation of religion; granting the communion with single-use spoons; restricted access to pilgrimages; the relationship between state and church during the pandemic; the protest of religious groups against restrictions; the illness/death of some prominent religious personalities (especially if they had previously denied the existence of the virus or the need for the vaccine or green passes); and the popularisation of charity acts made by religious groups. An increase in the volume of religion-related news took place around the major religious holidays. For example, around the Easter holiday of 2020, the media coverage of events or debates of a religious nature was more intense and it was found that the church also had a significant role in terms of social sustainability in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Tudor, Benea, and Bratoşin 2021). Also, some media attention focused on the immediate or long-term consequences of a sociological, anthropological, or political nature, addressing topics such as whether the pandemic would lead to significant changes in the religiosity of the population or changes in the relationship between state and religious groups.

Directly interested in the defence of religious freedom, religious groups were the main institutions that organised seminars or conferences (online) or edited articles, studies, etc. on this topic. For example, the Romanian Academy and various specialists in religious freedom featured prominently in these debates. Also, in April 2021 the

Romanian Patriarchate organised a debate on the topic of religious freedom during the pandemic, which was broadcast online (Covaci 2021; Marcu 2021).

Setting the Context

With a religious affiliation of 99.8 per cent (Census 2011; INS 2013 – the results of the 2021 census have been contested by some stakeholders and scientists and are rarely mentioned and used in studies), Romania is one of the most religious countries in Europe (Pew Research Center 2018; State Secretariat for Religious Affairs 2023) and the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC), with a membership rate of 86.45 per cent (Census 2011), is the majority religious group. For this reason, during the COVID-19 crisis, the ROC has been one of the constant presences in the media and public discourse.

The regime between the state and religious groups, governed by the Romanian Constitution (1991, revised in 2023 – CDep 2003) and Law no. 489/2006 on religious freedom and the general regime of religious groups (CDep 2006), is one of cooperation and recognition.

The Romanian system of interaction between the state and religious groups follows the logic of recognition. Depending on the legal form, the number of persons that a religious group comprises, and the length of time since the establishment of the religious group, persons living in Romania may associate to exercise their religious faith in three categories of organisations: *religions* (or, to give an exact translation, religious cults), *religious associations*, and *religious groups*. Religions and religious associations have legal personality and can receive public subsidies. Religions benefit from tax incentives and may receive, upon request and in proportion to the number of their affiliates, public funds for the salary of clerical and non-clerical staff, as well as for the operation, repair, and construction of religious establishments. Religious associations only benefit from tax relief related to their religious activity.

At this moment, Romania recognises 18 religions, 44 religious associations, and over 850 other associations and foundations that also develop religious activities (State Secretariat for Religious Affairs 2023).

The law on religious freedom (489/2006) states that public authorities guarantee respect for the autonomy of the religious groups and

assume the necessity of cooperation with all various religious groups, recognising their spiritual, educational, charitable, cultural, and social partnership role, as well as the status of factors of social peace (Article 7.1). Religious groups are equal before the law and public authorities, and the state does not promote or favour the granting of privileges or the creation of discrimination against any religious group, which makes the Romanian state neutral from a religious point of view. Over time, this neutrality has been interpreted in the sense that the state is equidistant from religious groups, but not indifferent. The Romanian state declares itself neutral but not secular. In the interpretation of a former secretary of state for religious affairs, Victor Opaschi (Lehaci 2015), it did not assume secularism, becoming an opponent of religion or an indifferent witness of religious life.

As in other European states such as Austria and Belgium, where by tradition the majority of the population belong to a certain religious group (there, Catholicism), the relationship between the state and religious groups in Romania is marked by the historical and legal tradition of the presence of a majority church, the ROC being considered the crucial pillar of the nation's founding (Conovici 2012), but also of the existence of substantial religious minorities (State Secretariat for Religious Affairs 2018).

According to Article 9.1 of Law no. 489/2006, on religious freedom and the general regime of religious groups, 'in Romania there is no state religion; the state is neutral towards any religious belief or atheistic ideology'. At the same time, however, Article 7.2 says that 'the Romanian state recognises the important role of the ROC and other recognised churches in the national history of Romania and in the life of Romanian society'. Although there is no state church, owing to its dominant position and especially its historical and cultural connection with the Romanian state the ROC is considered to be the 'default Church of the nation' (Barbu 2016). Thus, Romania belongs in a European context where the historic/traditional religious groups have retained their implicit advantage over newer arrived religions (Margiotta-Broglio, Mirabelli, and Onida 2000).

Precisely because of the influence and the historical ascendent that the majority religious group has in relation to the state authorities, the custom was created of minority religious groups collaborating with it and following its steps. Thus, at the initiative of religious groups, a Consultative Council of Religions (composed of 14 recognised

religions) was established in 2011, an informal body for consultation and dialogue of religious groups on issues of common interest. The major objectives of this council are to promote tolerance, interreligious and interconfessional dialogue, and civil rights and liberties, as well as the adoption of common positions and attitudes towards important societal issues (Ziarul Lumina 2011). The existence of such a council proved useful during the pandemic, because the religious groups were able to express together their dissatisfaction with some measures of the state and, at the same time, they were able to transmit a powerful, collective message to the population announcing their compliance with the public sanitary measures (Adevărul 2020).

The main authorised institution in Romania that protects religious freedom and facilitates the dialogue between religious groups and the state is the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs, a specialised institution of the central public administration subordinated to the government. During the pandemic, this institution had a decisive role in the development of religious life because it was the most important body through which religions collaborated, dialogued, and negotiated with the state.

Legal Aspects

According to the Romanian legislation in force, any person has the right to manifest their religious faith according to their own convictions. Article 29 of the Romanian Constitution states that ‘freedom of conscience is guaranteed’. At the same time, freedom of thought and opinions, as well as freedom of religious beliefs, ‘cannot be restricted in any way’. However, under certain conditions, religious freedom can be limited. According to the provisions of Article 53 of the Romanian Constitution, the constraint of a fundamental freedom can only be done by law if it pursues a legitimate goal and if it is necessary, proportional, adequate, and non-discriminatory (Noață 2022; Stănescu-Sas 2020; Vedinas and Godeanu 2023).

Invoking Article 53 of the Romanian Constitution and Article 9.2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, regarding the limits of the restriction of certain rights and freedoms (Article 20 of the Romanian Constitution ensures the priority of more favourable international treaties regarding human rights over national legislation), the Romanian state supported the legality of Law no. 55/15 May 2020 Regarding

Some Measures to Prevent and Combat the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic, by which it ordered measures that limited the exercise of certain rights and freedoms, including the right to manifest religious freedom. The measures were of a temporary nature, being available only for the period of the state of emergency or the state of alert.

Also of a temporary nature was the order of the Minister of Health no. 570/2020. Alongside regulations on the burial of corpses confirmed with the new coronavirus, burial/cremation was to be carried out as soon as possible with sealed coffins, and the bodies of people who died of COVID-19 would be autopsied and sanitised, but no cosmetic manoeuvres were to be performed on them and they were not to be dressed before they were sealed. Such provisions were detrimental to human dignity and to the right to religious assistance, as the law did not allow the possibility of providing religious assistance to COVID-19 patients or respecting religious rules regarding funerals. Thus, religious groups approached the authorities to amend the law. On the subject of human dignity, it should be mentioned that during the pandemic Romania activated Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which allows derogations and limitations of the rights provided elsewhere in the covenant (Bulgaru and Bena 2020; Stănescu-Sas 2020).

Thus, on 9 April 2021, after 13 months, a new order was issued to change the specific protocol on the deaths of patients infected with COVID-19, as well as access to hospitals for clergy. According to the new regulations, a family/legal representative could provide the deceased's clothing and the coffin in which the deceased was going to be placed, and burial/cremation could be carried out with the sealed coffin, in the same burial conditions imposed on deceased persons for other reasons, respecting the will of the deceased's family and the rituals of the religion to which the deceased belonged. Also, in the case of patients infected with COVID-19 who showed severe symptoms of the disease, patients could receive, upon request, religious assistance during hospitalisation, depending on the specifics of the religion to which they belonged and with the consent of the attending physician. From this perspective, even for a short period of time, religious groups had to adapt funeral rites, most often to shorten them, in order to comply with government restrictions (Brudiu 2021).

At the level of the collective understanding, the state was considered solely responsible for the restrictions on rights (LARICS 2020),

especially violations of religious rights (Axânte 2021). The most active critics in this regard were religious leaders, who, in more or less veiled terms, argued that the anti-pandemic measures violated religious rights and that they were not proportionate to the *de facto* situation (Tănase 2020, 2021).

Other fields of activity considered themselves discriminated against in comparison with religions, in the sense that the state made the most exemptions from restrictions in favour of religious groups, or that the law was not fully applied when religious groups had violated the restrictions. Also, at the level of the collective mentality, the ROC, the largest religious group, benefited from (positive) discriminatory treatment, to the detriment of the other religious groups. Such suspicions were occasioned by the exemptions from restrictions granted on major holidays or by the protocol concluded between the ROC and the Ministry of Interior as a result of which the Holy Light of 2020 Easter was distributed to believers by police officers (Basilica 2020b), although there was a suspicion that the COVID-19 restrictions imposed before the Easter holidays had as a direct target the ROC and religious freedom in general (Zidaru 2020b).

Regarding responsibility for the violation of religious rights, the state did not consider itself guilty because religious freedom, as a right exercised in one's conscience, cannot be restricted – the important distinction here being between *forum internum* and *forum externum* (Voiculescu and Berna 2020). However, while the public manifestation of religious freedom may be temporarily subject to exceptional measures for the defence of national security, order, health protection, etc., this kind of measure is included in the national legislation.

Concerning court decisions, although there were a few attempts to overturn the anti-pandemic measures in court, in part or in full, the general situation has remained the same. From the perspective of religious freedom, it is worth noting the attempt to overturn the restrictive measures applied to pilgrimages. The Bucharest Court of Appeal overturned the decision that allowed participation in religious holidays only for people who lived in the locality where they took place (AGERPRES 2020). The restrictions imposed by Decision 47/2020 of the National Committee for Emergency Situations, which prohibited the participation in pilgrimages by believers outside the locality, were cancelled by the Bucharest Court of Appeal. But the court decision could not take effect, as the provision was also included in a valid

government decision that had not been challenged in court. The decision of the Bucharest Court of Appeal was not final and was appealed, but it still highlighted the lack of clear legislation regarding the limits of religious freedom. Likewise, Romania registered a single complaint at the European Court of Human Rights on the subject of violation of religious freedom in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: ‘one-off refusal, on COVID-19 grounds, of permission for prisoner to attend church services outside prison which subsequently offered online access to religious support’ (ECHR 2022). The unanimous conclusion of the court, in the *Constantin-Lucian Spînu v. Romania – 29443/20* case, was that there had been no violation.

Sociological Aspects

During the pandemic, the number of believers present at the religious services decreased, this trend being visible in the following years. According to the Religious Life Barometer, participation in religious services in 2021–2022 declined to 26 per cent, compared to 36 per cent in 2020 (LARICS 2020, 2021, 2022). According to the same surveys, the percentage of those who prayed daily dropped from 68 per cent in 2020 to 53 per cent in 2021–2022. Only the percentage of those who believed in God remained constant (at 90 per cent) over the three years.

To the same extent, although pilgrimages were not banned, the number of participants was significantly lower than in pre-pandemic years. Because of the alarming increase in the number of infection cases, a measure to limit the participation of believers in religious pilgrimages was implemented, allowing access only to people who lived in the locality where the pilgrimage took place. Given the restrictions and limitations of this period, these measures were interpreted as illegal and anti-religious reactions (Roman 2021; Zidaru 2020a).

Many religious groups made their religious services available through radio, television, and online streaming (Borza, Căzan, and Cosma 2023). Some believers even used prayer apps. Also, religious organisations’ institutional communication, both internal and external, took place exclusively online. During the state of alert, the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs directed that all communication should be done only through electronic mail. The pandemic also affected religious classes in schools, with the teaching process moving to digital forms.

One of the consequences of social distancing was the reduction of door-to-door missionaries, although the priests of the ROC continued to make traditional pastoral visits around Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter. Another consequence was the decrease in the revenue of religious groups, which led to a decrease in the income of their employees. For many religious groups during the pandemic, the only source of income was funding from the Romanian state. In this context, the contested state salary of religious groups' staff proved beneficial.

According to UNICEF, the social category most exposed by the suspension of religious activities was older persons, the age category most often present in places of worship (UNICEF Romania 2020). Other vulnerable groups that suffered, not necessarily from a religious perspective, were homeless, low-income, or single persons. Care centres and social canteens run by religious groups and serving some of these categories were closed during the pandemic.

Many traditions that accompanied the religious rituals on baptisms, weddings, and burials (Lazăr 2020) were interrupted or dramatically changed and are unlikely to be resumed to the same extent even though the pandemic has now ended. For example, the organisation of a commemorative meal after funerals was widespread; due to the pandemic, this habit has been disrupted or replaced by the provision of food packages. Also, due to pandemic restrictions, many young people have given up religious marriage, preferring only secular marriage. The same is true of baptisms. According to the National Institute of Statistics (INS 2020), 2020 recorded the lowest number of marriages since 1946. Compared to 2019, there were 35 per cent fewer marriages in 2020. Further, data provided by the ROC (Arhiepiscopia Bucureștilor 2020; Basilica 2021a), the largest religious group, show that in the Archdiocese of Bucharest alone, the most densely populated administrative unit of the ROC, there were 70 per cent fewer religious marriages in 2020 than in 2019. According to the same data, the number of baptisms fell by 17 per cent.

Although one possible explanation is that religious marriage – which in Romania is conditional on civil marriage – was easier to postpone than civil marriage (and consequently less important), so the motivation was not necessarily a religious one. The impact of the pandemic on religious marriages is still being felt, as evidenced by the fact that their numbers in the post-pandemic years have not yet returned to 2019 levels.

An interesting controversy that took place concerned the use of shared spoons for communion. Health authorities proposed the use of disposable spoons for communion, to prevent the spread of the virus. After a short derogation – imposed by public authorities – the ROC argued that the question of Holy Communion belonged exclusively to the church and that the communion of the faithful would continue, according to the liturgical tradition, from a single holy chalice and a single holy spoon (Basilica 2020a).

Although the single-use communion spoon controversy was interesting in its own right, it must be viewed within the broader context of the interaction between religion and science/medicine, a key question being whether religious groups helped to stop or to spread the pandemic. The second lens through which this controversy may be viewed is the relationship between church and state.

In this regard, from an institutional public communication point of view, all religious groups supported public institutions in their responses to the pandemic. For example, they urged the faithful to respect the state-imposed restrictions. The religious groups reacted quickly and through their own provisions accommodated the religious needs of the faithful to the realities imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, from the beginning of the pandemic, religious groups participated in supporting vulnerable people alongside the central and local authorities, giving an example of collaboration in this critical period (Drăguț, Nastacă, and Simion 2023). The aid consisted, in addition to permanent religious assistance, in donations of medical equipment and financial support, spotlighting religion's role in responding to a large-scale crisis (Gheorghită and Bădescu 2021).

Because of its conservative doctrine, the (unjustified) presumption was made that the Orthodox Church would react much less quickly and effectively than other churches in Western Europe to the demands of the anti-COVID-19 fight. Being a 'tactile and sensual religion' (Carroll, Lackenby, and Gorbanenko 2022), Orthodox rituals had the potential to increase COVID-19 transmission events, perhaps more than within other religious traditions. Instead, the ROC followed the recommended measures and advised all believers and clerics to take appropriate precautions. In addition, through the media channels of the church, governmental advice was reiterated alongside traditional religious guidance. This shows that religious groups in Romania adhered to the state's anti-COVID-19 strategy.

More specifically, prominent religious leaders collaborated successfully with the state in its efforts to communicate with the population about the pandemic (Dascălu 2020). For example, the ROC got involved in the vaccination campaign, although not all bishops were equally engaged: some also spoke out against the vaccination (Dascălu, Flammer, et al. 2021). Also, the church disseminated informative materials about vaccination in the dioceses, through a brochure entitled 'Vaccination against COVID-19 in Romania. Free. Volunteer. Safe'. The announcement was made by the Patriarch of Romania himself (Basilica 2021b). Moreover, in November 2021, the patriarch publicly announced that he had been vaccinated and advised believers to follow doctors' guidance (Digi24 2021). Through press releases or interviews, other leaders of minority religious groups also announced their intention to vaccinate as well as contributing to the state's efforts to boost the vaccination campaign. Notable here were the interventions of the Catholic Archbishop of Bucharest, who announced that he would follow the example of Pope Francis and get vaccinated, as well as the announcement of the Mufti of the Muslim Cult of Romania, who was among the first religious leaders to get vaccinated.

There were also critical voices from within or close to the church, but these were perceived by the mass media and the public as marginal (Tănase 2021). There were theologians who questioned the compatibility between transmitting religious services on the internet and church doctrine (Fodorean 2020; Ojică 2020; Tocia 2020), doctors who considered that science had terrorised religion (Astărăstoae 2020), and bishops who personally opposed vaccination (Archbishop Teodosie of Tomis, Constanța, and Bishop Ambrozie of Giurgiu). None of these voices engaged any level of institution and did not garner significant support among the population. Further, on a personal level, other hierarchs also expressed their dissatisfaction with the perceived 'dictatorial' way in which the authorities imposed the restrictions. During 2020, the Patriarch of Romania, the Metropolitan of Moldova and Bucovina, and other hierarchs, took a position in their sermons (a pastoral and not institutional attitude) against the lack of communication and the imposition of measures without dialogue and consultation (Tănase 2020, 2021). During the state of emergency and during the first three days of the state of alert (15–18 May 2020), decisions regarding the conduct of religious life were taken only based on the recommendations of the World Health Organization and the National

Institute of Public Health, with no consultation with the representatives of religious groups.

A second perceived fault of the public authorities was that they arguably breached the position of neutrality and intervened in the liturgical practices central to the church's identity, namely the imposition of disposable spoons for communion (INSP 2020). Thus, in order to ensure that religious groups did not harm public health (Article 5.1 of Law 489/2006), the state did not respect the principles of the autonomy of religious groups (Article 8.1 of Law 489/2006) and cooperation between the state and religious groups (Article 9.3 of Law 489/2006). Regardless of its ethical implications, the government's approach to the liturgical practices of the ROC led to some discontent, but the church leadership did not change course or challenge the state (Vanca 2020): 'Still, they did not express themselves openly and aggressively to compromise or break the collaborative relationship between the State and the Church' (Tănase 2021, 571). This approach was likely due to the political instability at the time. During the pandemic there were three governments, two of which were minority governments, composed of or supported by parties with opposing or even different views from those of the church.

By establishing a dialogue platform at the level of the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs, in which the members of the Consultative Council of Religions were included, the tension between the state and religious authorities dissipated. A clear sign of this was the meeting between the president of the country and the patriarch of the ROC. On the occasion of his seventieth birthday, the patriarch received from the president of Romania an important decoration – the Star of Romania, publicly congratulating him for balance and wisdom (Tănase 2021, 572).

Through this dialogue between religious groups and public authorities, religious groups were given the opportunity to contribute to public debate, and thus to establish themselves as important actors in the public sphere. In this context, it is worth mentioning that, owing to state restrictions, religious services moved outside church buildings, making religious rituals more accessible and closer to the public space, especially in large cities. This approach seemed to be favourable to the ROC, as indicated by increases in levels of confidence in it between 2019 and 2020, from 54.5 to 71.2 per cent (HotNews 2019; LARICS 2020). Moreover, for some religious actors and scholars, the pandemic

was also perceived as a sign of spiritual rebirth, a moment of reflection and theological debate, and thus an opportunity to reconsider the place of religion in contemporary modern society (Crețu 2020; Kaminis 2022).

A common topic in debates about the interaction of the COVID-19 pandemic and religion is secularisation, the major question being whether or not the pandemic was a gauge for secularisation (Obadia 2022). In other words, did the pandemic accelerate or reverse the secularisation process? Globally, both trends have been encountered (Pew Research Center 2021). But what do the data say about Romania?

Immediately after the 1989 revolution, following almost 50 years of atheist communism, Romania experienced a short-term explosion of religiosity (Gillet 1997). From that point on, going down the path of modernity and modernisation, thus falling within the terms of classical theories of secularisation from Weber to Norris and Inglehart (2004), Romania went through several cycles of secularisation (Bănică 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic might have been the trigger of a new one.

The pandemic, especially in its intensity but also in its duration, may be the inflection point through which a new 'world disenchantment' (Weber) may take place and through which the chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger 2000) may be weakened.

The dispute over the communion spoon shows an accelerated advance of modernity and rationalisation of Romanian society, in the sense that scientific and technical reason rejects magical-religious explanations, and what was once considered healing-protective is now potentially dangerous-contaminating. In this particular case, for the state especially, the religious explanation and its significance for a part of the population was excluded. On the other hand, for a religious person the communion spoon is sacredness itself (Bănică 2022). Moreover, what was previously only thought about and debated has now been decided and even accepted by the church. It seemed as if the church had lost control over communion (even for only a few days), thus becoming a subsystem amid other subsystems and subject to the secular world (Dobbelaere 2011).

The pandemic has revealed the secularisation of the church itself. From its simplest definition it follows that the church is a divine-human institution, so its main field of activity is the transcendent, or the mediation of the human–God relationship. During the pandemic, the church was asked for its social services and not religious services,

thus conveying the image of a charity NGO. More than that, during the pandemic, the church entered completely into the logic of social (secular), using all means of PR to please both ‘believers’ and ‘non-believers’, in order to keep or regain its share of influence or at least image in the public sphere.

Although the 99.8 religious affiliation percentage (Census 2011) is an impressive figure, it masks growing levels of disaffiliation, especially among young people (Voicu 2020). According to the last census (2021), nearly 2.7 million Romanians – around 14 per cent of the total population – did not declare their religious affiliation (Romanians also refused in large numbers to declare their ethnicity and mother tongue), compared to just 6 per cent in 2011. This figure did not statistically affect the membership rate of any religious group or the religiosity of the population because, according to Romanian law, they are measured only by the number of people who completed the religious affiliation form, so the 2.7 million persons who did not do so were excluded from the calculation. The high level of non-response could be explained by a lack of trust in state institutions or perhaps alienation from religious institutions.

The population census was supposed to take place in 2021 but was postponed because of the pandemic, and took place instead between February and July 2022. So, the results of the census bear the imprint of almost the entire pandemic experience. Statistics show a decrease in membership as well as involvement (attending services etc.), a decline in religious events in the family (i.e. religious marriages, baptisms) and an erosion of traditions around religious holidays, pilgrimages, etc., all of which have likely contributed to the breaking of the chain of memory and making people more amnesic about their religious past (Hervieu-Leger 2000). These trends also seem to go against the existential security thesis of Norris and Inglehart (2004). Overall, after almost three years of the pandemic, there has been no religious revival, such as occurred around the time of the ending of communism.

Conclusion

In terms of scale and duration, the COVID-19 pandemic was the biggest test for Romania and its citizens since 1989. The pandemic was a massive stress test (Meng 2020) and an ‘opportunity’ to X-ray in real time the entire Romanian institutional apparatus. Inevitably, the

religious spectrum was also subjected to this test: the way the public administration performed or underperformed to defend religious freedom (Raiu 2022), the way religious organisations defended or promoted their religious doctrine, and the way believers manifested their faith/attachment to religious values/institutions. The pandemic only accentuated the upward trend of secularisation that was already present. The figures on religious life in Romania from the last census (Census 2021) show a general decline in terms of religious affiliation. The surveys during the pandemic also show a decrease in religious service attendance and less observance of religious traditions.

Faced with the pandemic, the Romanian state did not have adequate legislation relating to religious freedom. In addition to the lack of legislation, there was also a degree of illiteracy regarding religious life (Raiu 2021). This aspect was most visible when the authorities refused to dialogue with religious groups, especially at the beginning of the pandemic (Dascălu 2020; Dascălu, Flammer, et al. 2021; Dascălu, Geambasu, et al. 2021).

Two factors could help account for this. One possible explanation was the lack of a regulated means of dialogue between the state and religious groups, which was established after the creation of the dialogue platform at the level of the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs. An insufficiently developed legislative system is a second possible explanation. For historical reasons (i.e. the legacy of communism), Romania did not develop a political culture oriented towards respect for religious freedom, with political structures born from or related to religion (Raiu 2022; Schiop 2022).

Even so, religious groups, especially the ROC, proved to be important institutional partners in the management of the pandemic, managing to win the trust of both the population and the state. At the same time, while Romania did not have any previous legislation regarding the regulation of religious life in the event of a pandemic, afterwards several institutions of the Romanian state developed regulations on the management of emergency situations generated by epidemics and their associated risks (Health Ministry 2023) but without making reference to religion, going against trends in other national contexts (Handel 2022).

Notes

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