

Radio Free Europe's research on religion and state power in Communist Romania

This is a preliminary account of my most relevant findings regarding Radio Free Europe's interest and perspective employed in collecting, analyzing, and broadcasting information on religious phenomena related but not confined to Romania. At the beginning of my research period I was interested both in **discovering the motivation** behind Radio Free Europe's preoccupied attention devoted to monitoring various aspects mingled together as belonging to "religion" and **unveiling its peculiar cognitive lens** which simultaneously describes and creates reality. In other words, what makes religion a poignant contender for RFE analysts' attention, which are the preferred topics of inquiry and with what means are they covered? What are the assumptions behind RFE's support of the Churches and how do they interfere with Cold War politics? At this stage of the research I can provide only partial answers based on a careful and imaginative reading of a limited number of documents.

The perspective on the situation of religion in the Communist countries is filtered by two factors which act as structuring principles, organizing experience and information according to their own logic. One is **the perception of political struggles** at all levels, local, national, international, which contaminates all accounts on religious life during the whole duration of the Communist regime. The other is **belief**, which I define as conviction and confidence in the existence of a spiritual universe, accessible or not to human beings, implying the presence of a calling and aspiration of humans towards God.

Early Western standpoints on what is happening to "religion" in the Soviet-dominated countries describe a systematic struggle to suppress all forms of religion by physically exterminating its bearers and by corrupting and redirecting what remains. This vision owes much to the totalitarian view of communism and relies on the virulent writings against religion by

Lenin and Stalin and on statistical data about the existing number of believers, as compared to a similar estimation of their number in the situation that the Communists would never come to power:

“It is clear that the struggle against religion, and the systematic attempt to eliminate religion in every form, are inherent in Leninism-Stalinism. In their effort to build a new type of servile society and what they call a new culture, the Stalinists realize that religion is one of the main obstacles - if not the main obstacle – to the realization of their plans, because religion provides today, as it did always in the past, the fundamental principles and basic values on which societies rest. The Stalinists are aware that, historically, cultures and civilizations have been identified mainly through the prevailing religion or the prevailing attitude towards religion. They know that as long as there exist in their Empire, convinced Christians, Moslems and Jews, they will have failed to create a completely communist society, since the chief mark of communism, in its contemporary interpretation, is the denial of religion and the stress on materialistic atheism.”¹

The paper estimates that the number of Orthodox believers in the “Stalinist Empire” if there were no revolution would have been 170 million as compared to 45-50 million actually existing, but mere physical extermination cannot provide the explanation for such a drastic comedown, if the statistics are to be taken at their face value. It also describes the whole range of coercive measures taken against the faithful and the institutional structures of the Churches:

1. Fear and economic pressure
2. Isolation of the clergy
3. “Suppression of a part of the church and establishment of Stalinist control over what remains of it through the use of few pro-Stalinist elements to be found among the clergy” (Ibid: p. 12).

Although the Communist ideology expressly refuted any kind of religious belief, it may be argued that the quest for power and the desire to control were the main drives behind this ruthless war against “religion”, more than any systematic attempt to replace the belief in God by that in Communism or a certain political leader. Therefore, the particularity of repression against religious people tends to fade away and becomes integrated in the general punitive measures taken against any “undesirable” social group of the old order. The Romanian case illustrates particularly well the rise and decay of Marxist ideology as a producer of legitimacy, but the

¹ HU OSA 300-60-1. Box 518. Religion General. 1948-1958. North Atlantic Council Atlantic series no. 65, unspecified date.

alliance with the Church and its subservience to the state falls within a historical pattern which makes its excesses and contradictions even more visible.

The first principle which refers to the **invasion of the political** in all spheres of life, at the same time is acting as an organizing and structuring principle which defines the kind of information worthy of attention. It also creates topics of inquiry for RFE reporters and editors, whose favorite themes include the following:

- The imprisonment of priests
- Inter-Church politics and gossip
- The role of Churches in international relations (e.g. – The Russian Orthodox Church as an instrument of expansion of the Soviet power in the Middle East)
- Churches as propaganda means of the Communist regimes
- The subservience of Romanian Orthodox Church's hierarchy to the state
- Atheist propaganda versus religious indoctrination
- Church attendance as reader of religious experience and political tolerance towards religion

But how are to be captured and depicted such elusive phenomena as those belonging to “religion”? What are the means and methods of gathering, analyzing and how do political struggles and belief interfere in these processes?

Inventing categories and objects of thought

- **Religious mysticism** – borrowed from official Communist representations of religion; taken for granted
- **Red priests** – new category; own invention; refers to anyone suspected of offering support to the regime, it applies to hierarchies of the Churches, but also to ordinary clergymen whose attitude is friendly or submissive to political demands
- Dichotomous thinking – the “real” versus the “official” Church – believers’ representation

- The outcome of the process is the making of the believers as an oppressed group

One of the interests of RFE analysts was to document the persecution of religious people and expose the atheist propaganda being carried out through the educational system and media, although their perspective on the phenomenon seems to be fairly schematic and oftentimes lacking a coherent and solid notion of religion and an adequate conceptual apparatus that would allow them to make more effective statements on what is being reported from the field. The preoccupation to understand the official dogma of the Communist dogma on certain subjects sometimes lead to unconsciously borrowing its dead ends and employing them in their own evaluation of the information received. Below are two excerpts from the archive - the first one is an account of how Communists view Christianity, extracted from an interview with two schoolgirls of 13 and 15 years old who emigrated to Greece in 1952:

“The history of Christianity is briefly dealt with. The students are taught that Christianity started as a revolution which created new social trends during the first years of its existence. Christianity, it is admitted, was the first to introduce the idea of equality among men, and to exalt the humble. These ideas, as it is asserted, form the basis of Communism. But the value of this revolution was lost when the element of self-sacrifice, which Christians elevated to the status of a dogma, entered into it. Self-sacrifice created the two principles, which Communism holds incompatible with any revolutionary movement: mysticism and idealism. When Jesus offered himself up in sacrifice, he did a great harm to the new revolution, which, as a result, afterwards soon degenerated.

The Christians new-found mysticism was at once seized upon and used by the ruling clerical class a weapon with which to exploit them. And this exploitation by the Church Militant reached its peak with the papacy. Roller’s text is very vehement on the subject of the Roman Catholic Church, and cites it as the root of all the evils, which beset human society today.”²

The second one contains has two parts: the first is an excerpt from the body of the document and the second an evaluation comment. The Information Item is reporting two events: the arrest of two elderly men who came to pray and witness the miracle of a divine apparition in a church in Colentina and the tragic story of a family whose daughter entered in a conflict with her mother because of Communist indoctrination concerning religion – the mother was arrested, the father killed his daughter and committed suicide. The phenomenon under scrutiny – in this case, the

² HU OSA 300-60-1. Box 518. Religion General. 1948-1958. Item no. 10335/52, p. 13.

divine apparitions – is seen as an “escape route” from the “difficulties of life under Communism”. It shows how **belief**, the second structuring principle that I identified, actively organizes experience and produces accounts of other people’s beliefs and worldviews:

“Because of the rigors of everyday life under Communism, the Rumanian people are more susceptible to religious mysticism than ever in their history. In recent months there have been a number of reports of miraculous appearances of the Virgin and various saints in churches. Recently a supernatural phenomenon of this nature was reported at the church of St. Demetrius of Colentina, in Bucharest, and **the faithful started flocking** to the church to pray.

Evaluation Comment: The churches have not been officially closed in RPR; neither was anyone strictly prohibited to frequent it. On the contrary, in 1951, the Communist Government permitted many churches to reopen as a propaganda method to convince the people that Communism is not anti-religious. But efforts are being made to transform religion into a propaganda means. Religious mysticism in Rumania was reported on many occasions. In many parts of the country, Art and Culture sections established temporary exhibitions to fight the people’s mysticism. Pictures and texts explaining phenomenons (sic!) of the nature were made available to the public. See “Universul”, 13 April 1952.

The two mentioned incidents are completely lacking in pertinent details and, therefore, are considered to be BELOW STANDARD.³

“Religious mysticism” is taken for granted as referring to an unproblematic thing in the world, and the analysts’ belief or lack of it might have contributed to objectifying their position concerning the reported event. There is no attempt to take distance from the official Communist representation of religion although the choice of language used to describe the situation shows reprobation of both the believers’ behavior and the state’s interferences. What is even more interesting is that the report was discarded for reasons dealing with internal rules of evaluation (accuracy, lack of details etc) and not because of its obvious conceptual bias which implied the use of Marxist explanations of religious phenomena. This vision closely resembles contemporary social scientific and cognitivist perspectives on religion as projections of the mind of distressed people.

The reasons for pursuing this topic comes from the perceived position of Churches as the only organized bodies capable of opposing the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe through

³ HU OSA 300-60-1. Box 518. Religion General. 1948-1958. Item no. 8781/52.

their organizational structures and by the propagation of “the only rival ideology to communism”⁴. Therefore, it is thought that their very existence is a challenge to the communists and a locus of concentration of “resistance”. There are differences and fluctuations of interest in RFE’s standpoints on religion in the Communist countries during the whole period and between the research and the broadcasting departments. The late 70’s and early 80’s witness a new effort in supporting religious cults in Romania by exposing the transgressions of fundamental human rights which have contributed even to the release of prominent clergymen who have been abandoned by the Church’s hierarchy. If the 50’s and 60’s produced laboriously gathered information on the distortions and corruptions of religion by the power of the state, during the 80’s RFE’s activity is positively oriented towards rescuing or at least making known the cases of people suffering for their faith, although the general perspective continues to be critical towards both the repressive apparatus of the state and the “Red” hierarchy of the Churches viewed as obedient stooges of the communists.

During the two months of research at the OSA I studied the documents contained by the Romanian Unit – 300-60-1, Boxes 518-532, taking about 12 000 photos and reading about 10% of them, which I used for the preparation of the oral presentation and of the current report. I also looked for relevant documents concerning dissidence abroad, political prisoners, propaganda and letters related to the protest movements of the 70’s and 80’s in HU OSA 300-60-1, Boxes 129-131, Boxes 430-431, 467-468 and HU OSA 300-60-3, Boxes 12-18. I want to thank all my colleagues and staff of the OSA for their support and friendly working environment and especially to Ioana Macrea-Toma for help and the wonderful conversations we had regarding this particularly strenuous topic.

^{4 4} HU OSA 300-60-1. Box 518. Religion General. 1959-1969. Iron Curtain News and Features. 1962.