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# Changes in the Romanian Rural Communities. A Socio-Theological Perspective

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## Abstract:

*Sociological studies emphasize the influence of religion on human communities in general and on rural societies, in particular. In this paper, we intend to analyze the main aspects that determine modernization, rural religiosity, social changes in rural areas of Romania, highlighting the importance of the priest in these communities. Rural religiosity expresses the specific relation with the sacred. The village is "purposefully placed around the Church and cemetery, namely around God and the dead"- Lucian Blaga. Rural religiosity is concrete and practical, not theoretical speculation. In the second part of the paper we have defined the Church as a sanctuary and community of believers and we have presented its main features as Symbol of Faith- "one, holy and apostolic". We presented the Church's involvement in the life of rural community, especially through its local representative - the priest, pointing out that the religious institution interacts with people and supports them in their integration into social life. Over the decades, the Church, by its specific teachings, encouraged the people to love their fellow human beings, to belong to a group and to a society. The Church gives solutions to the social problems that have arisen in people's lives. The Church's involvement in the rural society tends to become normal, considering the fact that it was banned during the communist regime, but its visibility depends also on other institutions like the Mayor, local and central political government and so on.*

## Keywords:

*Rural community, social dynamics, spiritual life.*

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### **The context of rural modernization**

The most enduring form of community specific to the Romanian people is the village, which has its own laws emerging from natural, spiritual and economic strata. Any attempt to comprehend the issues regarding the lifestyle of rural people is objective as long as it aims at the laws relative to the ways of functioning of that lifestyle. Practically, if we don't have a research method (monography, observation, documentation, etc.), any theory about the traditional Romanian village is a simple subjective scenario. A research of the current village involves inevitably an encounter with various elements of the traditional rural socio-cultural background, and any such meeting causes a state of subjective excitement.

The modernization process of the Romanian society can be analyzed by four phases: 1866-1914; the period between the wars; the communist regime and the post-revolutionary period.

The first period begins with the "Small Union" and the conquest of Independence (1866-1914) and was characterized, according to the researchers, by a "step by step" evolution and a voluntary construction, but not planned in terms of objectives to be achieved in the socio-economic and political life.

During the interwar period a strategy for Romania's modernization has crystallized; the political doctrines were clearly defined, neo-liberalism and the interest of the peasantry were promoted, the industry was protected and encouraged; and the state involved actively in the economic life of the country.

During the communist regime, the unique party which led the Romanian state has developed the industry, created modern cities, many buildings were built especially for the workers who had to work in the urban industry, abolished almost in totality the peasant ownership of agricultural land, managed by the CAP's and IAS's, thus being founded the centralized economy.

In the post-revolutionary period, political pluralism reappears, the industry, agriculture and tourism collapsed, but the borders opened allowing for many Romanians to migrate, trade grew in particular with products from foreign markets, Romania initialises and successfully integrates in the European Union.

Although, generally rural communities are characterized by resistance to change, some features of the mentality and behavior are exposed to influences from novelty, this being called permeability towards modernization. Thus, in a study on local communities from Oas County it was concluded that the daily life confirms the thesis that first assimilated are the elements of urban life. "Although there was an extremely strong resistance to external influences, major changes in clothing and vocabulary can be observed, but less in interpersonal relations. Also, the external image of houses has undergone several changes than the interior "(Peter Iluț, apud. Traian Vedinaș, 2001, p. 150).

Rural modernization as a social phenomenon can be determined by analysing in a certain period of time the changes in rural occupations, modifications of the social stratification, development of rural property, rural swing between traditional and modern, types of organization of rural economy, etc.

### **Rural community, organization and social**

Rural sociology studies the rural as a specific society (different from urban society) and the village as a unit or a distinct community (different from the city or other social units), which requires an analysis of rural areas and activities (economic, cultural, political) and rural subdivisions (households and rural families, rural cultural institutions, agricultural enterprises) (Miftode, 1984:12).

"Descendingly classified, after extend and population, territorial units are: metropolis, city, village and hamlet, each with its own territory and a specific human resource, that produces and reproduces, in a dynamic development that emphasizes differences, activities inherited and acquired. "(Vedinaș, 2001:65).

Mircea Vulcănescu, for example, was part of the monographic research teams composed by D. Gusti, but, although he used a positive method of investigation, he finally came to explore the village in a largely subjective manner (Vulcănescu, 1998:160).

The hamlet and the village are specific communities, being territorial units organized on a larger or smaller area, comprising a hearth (center) crossed by a main road, on which are strung linearly on both

sides, households and gardens. Around the hearth and the main road, secondary roads (ulite) are arranged, depending on the structure of the land, on the same linear structure of the settlements and gardens. In the center of the village there is the Church and town hall, post office, dispensary, house of culture, commercial units. A rural community has an agricultural land, meadows, common pasture and forest, often separated with boundary signs by the territories of neighboring rural communities with the same destination.

Several hamlets make up a small village and several villages form an administrative unit: the village (comuna). In the village designated as a central village you can find the local council, post office, medical clinic, veterinary clinic, police, CEC units, library, local organizations of political groups. Villages that do not have a center have in their heart the school, the Church and in most cases, a house of culture" (Vedinaș, 2001:65).

The villagers' life framework was related to church, town hall, school, pub, shop, but also by the crossroad from its center where they met and dance on Sundays or holidays.

The traditional village tends to preserve as pure as possible its specific elements, acquired and rooted in his long history. The destiny of the village was always fighting for survival, while the city's was fighting for renewal and transformation. We still speak of the inertia of the village and the dynamism of the city, of internal orientation regarding the rural communities and exterior orientation in case of the city (Miftode, 1978:25).

The village family represent the most stable group in the village. Its members formed a community based not only on blood relations, but also a community of work and "fate". To be able to function properly supposed respecting some relational constants between spouses, between parents and children, between siblings etc.

The household was the community's basis and the source of social identity. The stability of a family depended on the house it build. In almost all Romanian villages, the household consisted of: house, yard and orchard, all the family belongings being delimited in the area of residence. The house was the main building and included usually three rooms: the entrance hall, the "big house" - the cleanest and most decorated room and the cellar - a storage place for winter supplies. A

family household status was a criterion for prestige and recognition from the other villagers that nominated them with the title of "hardworking man".

The social division of labor in the village was small, so that each individual didn't depend on others only in a very limited extent. However, from a spiritual point of view, the dependence of the individual to the group was so large that everyone had to have the same beliefs, desires, ideas, ideals, feelings, behaviors, etc., just like everyone else and in any case not isolate himself to not receive the stigma of "crazy" or "funny".

The village community decided as a whole on how to use common utility spaces; when a decision was being taken with effects for the entire community by the ancient institution of the "Elders", it was not allowed to any member of the village not to comply.

The birth of a child was considered an occasion for joy. His baptism in the "ancient Christian law" and the fatality of the "gifts" given by the "Fates" (mythological female beings who determine the fate or future of a person) was in the mentality of pre-modern Romanians constitutive moments for his nature, status and prestige until his death. Although the idea of existential predetermination of individuals was not questioned - and therefore their status had to be accepted whether they like it or not – the most important figures of the traditional village did not remain passive, but always assumed the position of a disciple. Regardless of age, each and every one learned and re-learned the role specific to his status. Thus, the situation of a child was of apprenticeship in which he acquired knowledge, skills, and attitudes identical or very similar to those of the parents. As an adult, either or not conditioned by marriage, the individual reproduced what he knew from his parents, but still remained an apprentice, this time in relation to the village community. This explains why adults were so concerned with acquiring and utilising the axiological repertoire socially validated by the space that integrates them.

When man reaches a certain age, which implies a diminishing of physical strength, he enters into another stage, the one of the wise man, of the Christian teacher, becoming a role model for the rest of the Community, a kind of saint, close to the divinity, but also an apprentice of holiness.

Birth, marriage, death were assessed by traditional Romanian villagers as fatal moments of any normal existence. Being “given”, they represented the force of the destiny embedded in status and roles very similar to everyone from the community and the freedom they could allow themselves was just a local flexibility at the level of customs (not individual).

Consequently, in the pre-modern Romanian village, the individuals received or inherited naturally their roles, which they played them precisely in order to maintain the social normality; the natural consequence of these acts of obedience was the reproduction of the socio-cultural structures and community functions.

Still, some components of traditional rural life are missing: the border, the jitar (the watchman of the crops), the witness chair, the seat of judgement, the oath, the myth, the magic, the joke. The type of rural community we refer to formed a very stable social system and because of this stability, it has dominated the history our area from the formation of the Romanian people to the beginning of the modern era (Dumitru Stan, 2001, p. 75).

### **The Church in Romanian rural society**

The pre-modern rural community presented either in the form of an extended family in which individuals were united by kinship, or as a group of families related to the same spacial and cultural horizon. The differentiating elements of the relations in the village, others than those practiced in family could have been the source of animosity between individuals and the rest of the villagers or between families and the village community. To avoid degeneration, the community imposed institutionalized structures: moral principles, forms of education, Church, "village gossip" (public opinion), etc.. Of these, the Church had a decisive role because it had authority, a clear status, and precise rules of operation and was indispensable to the existence of human beings. Moreover, it filled the structural gaps when other institutions were absent. For example, if an individual did not have a family, he could remain in the sphere of social normality through what the church gave him: advice, material support, community integration.

An obvious example for the role of the church was the formal education of children.

The school was a rare institution in traditional Romanian village. The teacher's role has been played most often by the priest. Lacking necessary means to conduct education, despite the efforts of priests, the traditional rural population was almost totally illiterate. If school education was insignificant as a percentage of the traditional village, then informal education acted as a compensatory element so that the functional imperative of social order was obtained. (Stan, 2001:175).

After more than four and a half decades the Church was forced by the former regime to carry out its activity especially in places of worship; after the Revolution in 1989, the Church has engaged in a sustained effort of reintegration into Romanian society, thus returning to its natural tradition of two millennia. This process had as a result the introduction of religion in schools, the reappearance of theology faculties in universities and theological seminaries in the public education network, the reintroduction of priests in mental asylums, orphanages or hospitals, prisons or the army (DEX, 1998:458 ).

Dynamic - the totality of changes (quantitative) that occur in a population (DEX, 1998:980).

Life - synthesis of biological, physical, chemical and mechanical processes that characterises organisms; the fact of being alive, the status of being alive. Way, manner, set of moral and material or environmental conditions in which the existence of a being or a community manifests, the totality of acts committed by anyone during his existence. The time between someone's birth and death (of a society), the string of events happened during this time (DEX, 1998:830).

Social - created by the society, specific to society, which is linked to people's lives in society, their relations in society or to society, that which implies the human society. Specific to a certain type of society; linked by the membership to a particular social category in a particular social group.

The religious institutions passes and will always pass through all three stages: life, social life and the dynamics of social life. Currently social life evolves in parallel with these institutions but at some point they will intertwine and complete each other. Before 1989, the Romanian society lived and acted according to certain rules dictated by

the communist regime. The population was used to be led, to be dictated what to do, to have no worries about social life (home, work, school for children etc). During this period, religion was in the shadow of the communist regime. People did not need God or the Church, because the state fulfilled all their basic needs. The goods were common (belonged to the state), and "selfish impulses" like the one to be different were immediately stopped. After 1989, a much desired democratic regime began, but with it also social problems. No one assures you employment for an indefinite period, a house ... and gradually emerged million of unemployed, thousands of families without homes, thousands of abandoned children etc. The Church helped them, but only for a short period of time. What is expected of religious institutions? (Popescu, 1993:30)

Are we confronting human desires? Compassion and philanthropy? Jesus Christ has taught us to be merciful and love our neighbor as ourselves, but it is not enough in today's society where we find several "layers" of social categories. It is sad that the social class of the poor is increasing constantly. They were used in the communist system that someone took care of their needs, to offer solutions and ideas. Many of them fail to adapt to the new system and the consequence is that one family from five receives aid from the state: e.g. minimum wage, unemployment benefits, supplementary allowance. These people fail to raise questions how to overcome this situation, to find new solutions and a chance to recover financially and morally, preferring to receive help from the state or religious institutions then to find other sources of income.

In today's society, mercy and philanthropy are secondary, if not disappeared entirely. The main reasons that led to the marginalization of mercy and philanthropy should be sought both in European philosophy and Christian theology. One of the philosophers who invoked a sense of mercy and love as an argument against Christianity was the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. He went so far that accused Christianity of being a religion good for slaves, because they preached mercy and love. The ideal man consists in the will to power and domination, not mercy and forgiveness, and because mercy is based on love of God, Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God. Unfortunately, these theories did not remain without practical results. It might sound

unbelievable but the theory of "superman" has developed the communist and fascist ideologies, which, ignoring mercy and love, tried to change the world through hate, terror and violence, causing unimaginable suffering and horrors. A century ago, Nietzsche imagined a man who is not a "superman", but a dehumanized man who never wanted to know of mercy, forgiveness and love.

But also the Christian theology contributed in one way or another to the marginalization of mercy and philanthropy because it advanced a conception of God which proved to be quite different from the biblical image of Divinity. Unlike the biblical view that portrays God, especially in the New Testament, as a God of mercy, a significant part of the Christian theology conceived God as totally separate of the world and locked in a splendid inaccessible transcendence, that's why, because of this deistic conception, many Christians began to consider themselves as above the poor and not manifest mercy, but contempt. In other words, when someone asks something of the rich, the rich may commit the anti-natural crime that, based on differences in wealth, there are natural differences between them and the poor. The beggar and the poor are not man, is often heard (Popescu, 1998:67). However, these live with the rest of us and we can not ignore them. Society is made up of individuals, groups of individuals. Each group is dynamic.

The Church offered the possibility for individuals and groups to contribute to the development of social life in a specific way: encouraging the human being and supporting the development of their personality. Each individual as a person needs other people and through them God. Each feels the power of another person's request and the need to request to another, this is what underlines the value of one to another, but also the power that that one has from the other. Without the response from another's request one can not be truly human. But I live others not as the ones for which I am responsible, but also as the ones who support me in existence, not only by their response to my requests, but also by the importance given to me by their requests. And they, in turn, live with me as I am necessary to them, as in a double role. I am brought into existence through others, others care for me during my childhood, others help me afterwards and when I help them I find a purpose and joy in my existence and I grow spiritually. I help them and they help me, they even help me by making me to help them and I help

them when they help me. And we help each other not only by deeds, but by word. They give me the spiritual content of life, encourage me when I'm down, they comfort me in sorrow, they show me mercy in my pain, they offer me joy and increase it by participating at it. But they find joy in this also. The other is my strength, my support and this is what I am for others. There is a mysterious connection between man and man (Stăniloae, 1993:69).

### **Conclusions**

The values and norms, which express the forms and realities of social life, are ideal standards of behavior, individual obligations for each member of the society, reason why socialization in a particular culture means mainly the internalization of values considered as mediators between culture and action. Unlike values, which are not directly related to behavior, social norms include rules of behavior more or less mandatory, according to which individuals orient their actions or social groups.

After the promulgation of the laws regarding the land, the situation of Romanian villages changed. The traditional values of the Romanian village entered into a process of dissolution by modifying the mentality of the peasant and losing the traditional culture, the acceptance of modernity being made through non-values like the urban kitsch. Many villages across the Romanian territory "have modernized without urbanization and without integrating in an authentic way the tradition of the village. The modernization as it is now can be considered a historical failure, and the national institutions, specialized in this area have a duty to urbanize the rural parts of Romania by integrating into modernity that part of tradition we haven't lost "(Vedinaș, 1996:12).

Man lives among other men, as I said, by certain norms and values, and needs the presence of others, social relations ... For Aristotle man is a "social animal". The organization and functioning of any society, including the rural, the consistency and cohesion of its fundamental structures and institutions depends essentially on the consensus and conformity of the individuals and social groups that compose it to its ethical, legal and cultural model. This model, consisting

of a articulated and hierarchical set of values, norms, rules and duties ensures the stability and continuity of society, its progress or immobility.

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