

# THE WIDE RELIGIOSITY OF THE ROMANIAN STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** *The contemporary Western religiosity is marked by the effects of secularization. The results of a qualitative research having as subjects sociology students from Brasov indicate their explicit statements of belonging to Christianity and their acceptance of the effectiveness of pagan practices in evil eye treatment. Conjugation of these positionings requires a broader understanding of religiosity than in the case of dogmatic Christianity. The faith options for the students are tributary to the pre-Christian representation of the world, perennial in the Romanian cultural space.*

**Key words:** *religiosity, Christianity, pagan practices, students.*

## 1. Introduction

From sociology, approaching the contemporary religiousness associates references to secularisation and atheism, to the multiple facets of spirituality (from perennial occultism, to new spiritual movements), as well as to reinvigoration of Christianity. In researching them, the Weberian exigency for objectivity, inherent to any sociological approach, requires further dealing with some sensitivities. These are the sensitivities afferent to the entire field of the sociology of religion, and mainly target the research subjects' reticence to let themselves studied, in terms of their religious beliefs and behaviours, the control upon the interferences between the researchers' personal belief options and the research object, as well as the awareness of the Christian origin of the main concepts wielded by sociologists, in the concerned field.

Under the sign of these exigencies, this work highlights the dimensions of contemporary religiosity, as outlined in a few significant, recent theoretical stand-takings. This work discusses the adequacy of the theoretical model configured by these stand-takings, to the Romanian students' profile of religiosity. This attempt enhances the results of a qualitative research conducted at Transilvania University of Braşov, in October 2014.

## 2. Connotations of contemporary Western religiosity

### 2.1. Western process of secularisation

K. Dobbeleare (2011) regards secularisation as a process whereby the prevalent religions systems come to be functionally perceived as equally ranked subsystems to some others, whom they no longer dominate. Secularisation is supported by the

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development of functional rationality. Under its sign, reality unveils itself as calculable, predictable and controllable. The aforementioned author isolates two connotations of secularisation: loss of the religion's social power and, respectively, religious authority's loss of the control over personal religiousness through decline of the individual's piety. In this sense, secularisation is compatible with spirituality (there will be about the connotations of the term "spirituality", as follows), religious bricolage and religion "à la carte". Secularization does not necessarily involve the absence of religiosity. But these manifestations' afferent religiousness is non-dogmatic. The decision in terms of faith becomes private. The individualisation of religion is the result of society's functional differentiation, not of an explicitly anti-religious attitude, Dobbeleare believes. The two dimensions of secularisation – social and individual – mutually enhance themselves.

On the other hand, secularisation is considered one of the implications of postmodernism. R. Neuhaus presents the hostile reticence towards religion, manifested in law, education, public policies, as part of a larger hostility towards any cultural norm (Neuhaus, 1986). With a view to attaining modernity and freedom, the Europeans deemed they had to leave the sphere of influence of religion (Weigel, 2005) and Western Europe's Christian churches were on the wane (Roberts, 1998). In a Christophobic-turned Europe (Wenzel, 2011), society's functioning by non-religious principles, as well as the church's loss of its social influence are accompanied by the declared affiliation to a church, without faith in its teachings, "belonging without believing" as defined by Repstad (1996).

## **2.2. Contemporary Western atheism**

Secularisation gives strength to atheism. This is not a feature exclusive to contemporary Western culture. World societies have all their atheists. However, in the last two decades, the Westerners' rationalist-operational mode of relating to the world has gradually outlined their perspective, independently of faith. For the educated population of the West, the evolution towards losing one's faith is logically justified and predictable, as shown by J. Turner (apud Bainbridge, 2011).

Apart from the diachronic justification of atheism, to the pragmatic arguments brought by W. James in favour of religion's beneficial nature (as basis of morality, grounds for interactions and way to fulfil one's psychological needs) a number of counterarguments can be brought, as believed by Bainbridge (2011): religion legitimates, indirectly encouraging, hostilities, wars and massacres; religion exploits its adepts, endangering both these ones and the others; religion acts against behavioural social sciences, promoting fixed and unrealistic viewpoints, as regards human nature; religion discourages experimental attempts and career plans oriented towards really solving great problems. Human biology can be, in its turn, a source of justifying arguments for atheism (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987).

## **2.3. Contemporary connotations of spirituality**

The concept of "spirituality" is used in the sociology of religion, with two significations. Spirituality can be a superior form of piety (manifested through prayer and meditation) associated to monastic traditions. With this meaning, spirituality manifests within the traditional religious institutions, as a personalized aspect of traditional religion. The other significance of spirituality targets forms of religiosity beyond the traditional

religious institutions, particularly beyond Christianity (Hamberg, 2011). It is with this meaning, to wit “beyond church”, that the term “spirituality” will be used, in the following.

Contemporariness stands under the sign of contradictory tendencies: its secularization, which enhances atheism, is sometimes considered only apparent (Berry, 2004) and is doubled by a resurgence of spirituality: the decline of traditional religiosity is doubled by the revival of fundamentalist subcultures (Roberts, 1998) and by the re-emergence of new religious expressions (Wenzel, 2011). The fundamentalism is a reaction to the decline of the institutional and doctrinal authority (Lyon, 2000). Also against the background of secularisation, contemporary Westerners moved on, replacing the organized religion (with systematized beliefs and solid institutions) by a non-institutionalized spirituality – formally unstructured and not necessarily coherent, in philosophical terms (Langley, 1999). One’s own spiritual experience – the one which works, for each individual, is, in this context, more important than the dogma. The contemporaries do not reject the idea of a personal and constructive relation with God; yet, with a God who necessarily is friendly and malleable, as shown by S. Nolen (1999). The syncretism of contemporary religious practices is the outcome of the believer’s need for self-comfort. Religion is a set of items “à la carte” (Bibby, 1987).

According to McGuire, contemporary spirituality connotes holism, autonomy, eclectics, tolerance, activism, pragmatism, the appraisal of materiality, the unclear border between the sacred and the profane. Sometimes, its afferent practices are closer to magic than to religion (apud Hamberg, 2011). Heelas (2011) considers the terms of “spirituality” to be vague, obscure and ambiguous, insomuch as varied spiritual practices, such as: reiki, meditations, psychotherapy, reflexology, yoga, suppose simultaneously relating to two radically different authoritative sources. The spirituality of the latter is being catalogued by contemporary researchers as rather secular, oriented against consumer capitalism.

The similarity between its manifestations and the older popular religions, is obvious for some researchers. Under the concept of “spirituality”, a great number of beliefs, feelings and practices, which suppose the existence of the supernatural and the gain of benefits, without their being necessarily associated to an organized religious structure can be brought together, as deemed by Stark, Hamberg and Miller (apud Hamberg, 2011).

#### **2.4. European Neo-Paganism**

The return to ethnicity and religion is considered, by Lindquist (1997), a consequence of the Nation-State’s diminishing importance in Western culture. Within this current, the reinvigoration of European Paganism, is a response of protest to the new political configurations, to Europe’s direction of evolution, to globalisation, technocracy and to the environmental crisis - with the political positioning difficulties of Ecologism (Rățulea, 2015). The anxieties attributed by Z. Bauman (2000) to “liquid modernity” justify the revival and reconstruction of indigenous religions, as part of identity assertion. The phenomenon is a confirmation of the connection emphasized by Durkheim, between group religion and identity, with the specification that the divinities of these indigenous religions have been disrobed of their cosmological attributes, as shown by Rountree (2014). As a spiritual approach to recovering pre-Christian practices, Neo-Paganism operates with two different attitudes towards Christianity: the former – of its rejection, by virtue of its unnatural, discriminatory, as well as sexually and culturally repressive character; the latter – of its assumption, in a dual identity, Christian and Pagan alike.

### 2.5. Evolution trends in contemporary religiosity

W.C. Roof (2011) signals the capacity of religion to ensure the continuity between generations. Socially produced and sustained, it always reflects change and continuity alike. Highlighting a decrease in spirituality, from agrarian to industrial and, respectively, post-industrial societies, Norris and Inglehart (2004) are convinced of the continuing process of secularisation, in Europe, in the next few years. Hamberg (2011) emphasizes the importance held by the connotations of the terms, in studying secularisation and in assessing its level: if, by religion, there is understood only the church-administered religion, then one can speak of a religion on the wane, throughout Europe and if the secularization is the decline of spirituality, as membership in traditional Christianity, then the European countries are in full secularisation process; instead, if religion means more than traditional church-oriented religion, also associating other forms of religiosity, then there is not about a decline of religion, but about the replacement of its traditional forms with spirituality phenomena. In this way, if religion represents any system of beliefs and practices associated to the existence of some supra-natural (Stark & Iannaccone, apud Hamberg, 2011), the secularisation in Europe is no longer evident. While a part of the researchers assimilate the decline of the official religion, in the church, to the decline of religion, in general, other researchers tackle the relation of organized religion with other forms of spirituality, as a zero-sum game: unorganized religions or spiritual movements beyond church rise in importance, against the background of the ever less important organized religion (Hamberg, 2011).

On the other hand, Davie (2002) emphasizes the persistence of the traditional religious beliefs and sensitivities, against the background of the secularisation process, in the form of the “vicarial religion”: the contemporary Westerner resorts to the religious capital, in his/her crucial moments. The secularisation process is reversible, as believed by Dobbeleare (2011). Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe’s former Communist countries are the proof of this assertion: in all of them, the importance of religion has been on the increase, as an instrument in the approach towards the reconstruction of their geo-political identity, after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Lambert (2003) signals a reduction in the secularisation rhythm and a reinvigoration of Christianity, concomitantly with the development of the “believing without belonging”, over the last few years. This reinvigoration is perceivable especially in youths. Christianity “à la carte”, the uncertainty of the beliefs and the relativism are features of late modernity’s religiosity. Still prevailing, these features are on the wane in the young population, the decline operating as a “de-secularisation indicator”, as believed by Hamberg (2011). Here, we might speak of a recessivity relation, wherein the more widely spread secularizing tendency should be opposed by the de-secularisation tendency, manifested in youths and being on the increase.

### 3. Religiosity of Braşov sociology students

In early academic year 2014-2015, I asked the 3rd-year students, in the specialisation Sociology, at Transilvania University of Braşov, to answer in writing, anonymously, a few questions referring to church, religion and religiosity. The solicitation was part of the internal protocol for preparing the Sociology of Religion course and seminars. I used the answers as social documents and I processed them by theoretical coding (open, selective and axial) with a view to highlighting the students’ positioning towards as regards the aforementioned features and tendencies of contemporary religiosity.

First of all, the students were asked to choose one of the following declarative variants, as well as to motivate their choice: 1. "I know that (Christian) God exists and I have no doubt, in this regard."; 2. "I sometimes doubt God's existence."; 3. "I don't believe in (Christian) God; yet, I believe there is a great power/ energy, to whom the world's existence and functioning is due."; 4. "I believe neither in God, nor in the existence of a supernatural power/ energy." These variants reproduce, in a simplified manner (by reducing the number of options) the questions referring to God, in the Americans' General Social Survey. Then, the students had to answer two further questions, referring to the relation of their confessional church and its priests/ pastors with the congregation. The last answer we solicited from the students referred to the question on what was evil eye and how it could be treated.

I processed 25 series of answers (conventional labelled from A to Z), coming from students of Orthodox confession, eight males and 13 females. I have noticed the attainment of the theoretical saturation, in the case of the argumentations for their options of faith.

The respondents belong to the Christian confession, which is the largest represented in Romania. The respondents are students in sociology. Sociology, as a discipline of the socio-humanities, is in the middle area of the possible disciplinary *Weltanschauung*-s; it is midway between exact sciences, on one hand, and humanities, on the other hand. Eventually, the respondents are students of Transilvania University of Braşov – a university which collects its candidates from a multi-regional intersection basin: South-Eastern Transilvania, South-Western Moldova, North-Eastern Muntenia. All these specifications render the submitted qualitative research, a source of pertinent information, interrogations and hypotheses, for a future more extensive research upon all Romanian students' religiosity.

Returning to the social documents produced as a consequence of the request addressed to the students, I will submit below, the results of the processing of their answers regarding their belief orientations and regarding the evil eye. Their opinions about Romanian Orthodox Church and Orthodox priests will be the object of a distinct analysis.

In terms of the faith in God, of the variants proposed for acceptance and argumentation, the most frequently chosen was variant no. 1. "I know that (Christian) God exists and I have no doubt, in this regard." With all due reserve regarding the numeric representativity of the research group - research already declared qualitative and with exploratory potential, I will mention 15 options thereto, at considerable distance from the variant "I sometimes doubt God's existence"- six options, and "I don't believe in (Christian) God; yet, I believe there is a great power/ energy, to whom the world's existence and functioning is due"- four options. None of the respondents opted for the last of the variants (of atheism).

### **3.1. Why "I know that (Christian) God exists and I have no doubt, in this regard."**

The answers afferent to this variant coagulate round God's representation as a parent, almighty and good. God is the Creator: "We, people, could not have appeared out of the blue." (B); "God exists, as He made the world and He made us." (D); "What beautiful creations God has made!" (K).

God is generous. His generosity manifests in the bestowal of graces – "I have probably received, by the mystery of Baptism, a special grace (gift, talent) which, I dare say, could only have come from God." (D); "A Creator exists and He proves this, by leaving a few

of us with higher powers than most people... the saints.” (J), and in organisational terms – “By religion, he attempted to impose a minimal discipline, with a view to controlling human nature, which is directed towards anarchy.” (J); “He makes me have a final purpose, for the entire period spent on Earth.” (V).

Furthermore, God listens (and fulfils) prayers (manifold, of a great diversity): “Most of my prayers have been answered; those unanswered (or unfulfilled) have been owed to my sins.” (N); “God has always been by my side, either Himself, or the angels He sent, when I encountered hardships, at high-school graduation exams or in other situations.” (U); “Many times when, for instance, I am in pains and I pray to God, I feel the pain decreasing... and, gradually, disappearing.” (V), the respondents confess.

The intrusion of the supernatural in the natural and personal is physically perceptible: “various wonders” (D), “some personal experiences” (S) took place, “there have been some occurrences and events” (Y).

Religious behaviour is a part of family traditions, of the feeling of “home”: “I have gone to Church, ever since I was a little child; and I have liked it.” (H); “I chose to believe in God, due to the other parent, to my grandparents, to the religion teachers.” (N); “I have been educated by my parents/grandparents to go to Church; to know that, every time I am in sorrow, I should appeal to Him.” (X), the respondents confess.

Students also supplied arguments of the authority type: “Modern proofs revealed by science greatly coincide with the older ones, revealed by the ministers of faith.” (J); “There are too many data, books, events, showing us that God exists” (V).

At last, another category of arguments represent reproductions or paraphrases of some consecrated formulations: “The devil’s greatest achievement is to make us believe he does not exist.” (S); “I have nothing to lose” (N); “If you believe and He does not exist, you will have not lost anything; yet, if He exists and you do not believe, you will have lost everything” (Y). A single respondent manifests his reticence, as regards the research subject: “I refuse to ask myself some questions, on God’s existence, as small doubts appear along with them.” (I), he shows.

### 3.2. Why “I sometimes doubt God’s existence.”

Doubts mainly originate in the deviation from the model of the almighty and good parent. With a view to defending this option, the category of arguments with the richest representation dwells upon the unfair suffering that God seems to tolerate: “Babies have sometimes diseases such as leukaemia, which is not correct.” (A); “As regards young people, how could they err so much, as to be punished by incurable diseases or even death, which happens ever more frequently?” (L); “The region of Moldova is known as a religious region... yet, how many times haven’t floods destroyed the elderly people’s houses?!” (L).

Another category includes direct formulations of the personal reticence (regarding the intrusion of the supernatural in the natural and personal): “I find it hard to believe.” (C), “I sometimes believe that things have evolved by themselves.” (M), even “I haven’t received any proof yet.” (Q), the respondents claim.

Somebody associates a ufologic hypothesis, expression of a not explicitly assumed atheism, to doubt: “I believe that this divinity, whom we call God is, in fact, a being from another galaxy, who created us in his image and likeness; who, unlike us, has a more advanced technology and who has left us, as hamsters in a cage.” (C).

Another category of arguments, logically suitable rather to the third option (the one below), has in view the unnecessary character of the divine's personification (specific to Christianity): "There is something, a force that probably changes us for the better; not necessarily a person or a spirit." (A).

### 3.3. Why "I don't believe in (Christian) God; yet, I believe there is a great power/energy, to whom the world's existence and functioning is due."

The defenders of these variants rather advanced specifications, than actual arguments: "Religion is acquired at birth, it is decided by parents; faith is acquired throughout one's life." (E); "There is a power, a spiritual consciousness, perhaps even our inner Self." (E); "I believe in God's existence; yet I do not consider Him a person,.... but rather a spirit, a conscience permeating all that is, even an object" (F); "There is a unique energy in the Universe, an energy whom I myself, as an individual, I am not separated from and whom is experienced by my very subjectivity." (G), somebody shows. The only arguments brought in favour of this variant are contradictions of the Biblical Genesis: "This world is something that grows and blooms; something that has developed and not something that was assembled, piece by piece." (G); "Matter and life must have come into being, otherwise than in the 7 days" (O).

### 3.4. Student's representations on the evil eye

A single student declared "I don't believe in evil eye!" (Y) and all of the respondents (including said student) provided a wide range of explanations, as to what it is, how it can be prevented or how it can be treated. In this way, the evil eye is a bodily reaction to the others' wonder, admiration or envy; an energy theft; an "energy dysfunction in the organism" (Y), a general malaise. It results from the action of a "force of the evil" (I), "an evil force" (D). It is "a destruction of the protective aura surrounding everyone" (K) or "a calcium deficiency" (E), which elderly people see as sorcery. It is provoked by "those persons who, when babies, were weaned and afterwards given suck again" (B), by "the persons with very light coloured or very profound eyes" (M), or by a strong emotion.

The evil eye can be prevented by making children wear red thread bracelets, or anything red, or some "clothes inside out" (B) and by "touching one's heels before leaving home" (D). Unless treated with incantations, one can die. It is treated with "a prayer and matches over a glass of water, by uttering some incantations, with coals unlit in water" (C) whereof the sufferer drinks three times, before being thrown on a "young tree or a white dog" (D); and, not least, as regards the frequency of the mentioning, with the prayer *Our Father*. Almost two thirds of the respondents indicate the prayer as remedy for the evil eye. Somebody even says: "Only if you say the prayer *Our Father*, that malaise will pass." (I). This is not the only expression of the mixture between the spirituality registers. "It is treated with prayers, you must say *Our Father* six-seven times, while making the sign of the cross with the lit matches, whom you put afterwards in a cup of water." (U) somebody says. Or: "Evil eye is a superstition to be treated with prayer, confession, fasting" (R), or "by old woman's cure and the prayer *Our Father*" (X). Several respondents referred to their own personal experience: "Every time, this procedure has immediately worked its effects upon me" (C); "Mom whispers *Our Father*, while making the sign of the cross, upon my forehead." (P); "Dad usually says *Our Father*." (T). "To be honest, the malaise will pass every time." (X).

Some respondents tried explanations closer to the operational rationality: “Rituals have a placebo effect” (H); “The persons who do not believe in evil eye, do not have such problems.” (Q); “The thoughts are those that influence our state.” (T); “The one who administers the treatment restores, by his care and love, the person’s energy.” (J).

### 3.5. Data interpretation: an old kind of religiosity

Hence, for the respondents, the most readily available of the faith options seems to be the Christian one. The God at its core is a good and almighty parent, generous and ready to answer, meet, and fulfil the prayers addressed to Him. The deviation from this model is the main source of the faith-related doubts.

However, in addition to its canonical power of bringing the demands of the faithful to God, the students attribute to the prayer *Our Father*, some magical powers, similar to those of charm or incantation. The Supreme Prayer is considered an energy-recovery means. Its use is not targeted on the personified evil. The evil eye is not considered an effect of his intervention. The Evil Eye is an energy theft. The use of the prayer in order to cure it, shows that, for the students, the Christian-faith option allows great dogmatic liberties. It is compatible with the belief in the existence of an energy that rules the world and can be magically manipulated. The answers to the question about the evil eye emphasize that this energist representation of the world doubles the Christian faith assumptions, being much more widespread than explicitly declared.

The adequacy of the students’ answers to the theoretical model of contemporary religiosity, is partial. Atheism is not, as far as they are concerned, a popular option; students don’t seem to lack religious commitment. Nor is faithless affiliation, an obvious feature of the students’ religiosity; whereas affiliationless faith is rather a secondary option or/ and not explicitly assumed. The private nature of faith is highlighted only in the context of the argumentative enhancement of the personal experiences.

Instead, Christianity’s identity and continuity-between-generations dimensions are perceived and emphasized. Its acceptance is non-dogmatic, one’s own spiritual experience being more important than the dogma, and not necessarily logically consistent. The Christianity confessed by students has a strong vicarial nature. It may be considered religion “à la carte”; as far as the students are concerned, God is just friendly and good.

The Christian-faith option is often accompanied by a dimension of spirituality, in the sense of crediting the acquirement of benefits, to the supernatural. This dimension, non-institutionalized, enhances the magical valences in the students’ faith, it operates with different authority sources (not necessarily logically compatible) and it blurs the border between the sacred and the profane. And this openness towards spirituality of the students’ religiosity, beyond the borders of dogmatic Christianity, is in line with the contemporary Western model. This openness is likewise characterized by the closeness to popular religion and paganism.

Nevertheless, unlike what happens in the West, this closeness does not have, in the students’ case, a recuperative nature, I consider. It is not about a programmatic recrudescence of paganism, due to the decline of Christianity. Nor is it about the contemporary resumption, under a Christian label, of some older pagan manifestations. The healing practices by incantation of the evil eye are pre-Christian. They are not recent acquisitions in the students’ religiosity. They belong to the traditional faith of their parents and grand-parents. These practices suppose that particular kind of representing



the world wherein each of its constituent parts interacts with the others, making up an extensive, comprehensive, all-encompassing network. This representation is close both to the one of Eastern spirituality, as outlined by F. Capra (1995), and to the one of a Europe prior to the Reformation, in I. P. Culianu's acceptance (1994). It is withal close to the concept of "implicate or enfolded order" at the core of the description which, coming from quantum physics, D. Bohm (1995) makes of the world.

In the Romanian cultural space, Christianity had been intertwined from the very beginnings with this type of representation of the world. The preservation in the cultural tradition of some ancestral practices – already extinct at the Greeks, in the Homeric period, according to M. Eliade (1991), and the cosmic Christianity implied by L. Blaga (2011) are the consequences of this intertwining. The use of the prayer Our Father as an (efficient) incantation against the evil eye, is the expression of one's admitting the coexistence of Christianity and pre-Christian religion.

In this context, the secularization process unveils different connotations from the Western ones. The perennality of the pre-Christian representations gives superficiality to secularization, in spite of the political commands of the communist regime. Consistently, the religious feelings and experiences assumed by students are expressions of religious continuity, rather than of de-secularization. In line with observations on the relevance of research, I propose the following hypothesis: The faith options of the contemporary Romanian students are tributary to the pre-Christian representation of the world, perennial in the Romanian cultural space. This representation, with its similarities both to magic and to quantum physics, allows students to easily operate with an enlarged religiosity, while deeming themselves Christian. Natural and old in the Romanian space, this religiosity is at the core of the contemporary Western trend.

#### 4. Conclusions

The answers of the sociology students in Braşov punctuate many of the features of contemporary religiosity. Shaped around a God with the attributes of a good, generous and helpful father, the religion confessed by students is „a la carte”, its main attributes being vicarial. The main faith option for the students is the Christian one. Nevertheless, the powers which students attribute to God, liken their faith to magic, to the ancient popular, pagan religions.

The students want to believe, having experienced the efficacy of the act of faith. Opting for an enlarged variant of religiosity, they place themselves in the Western spiritual trend. Yet not following it, as I hastily believed beforehand (Sorea, 2015), but finding themselves therein, with their own tradition (descending from their parents and grandparents).

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