

Ritual Multiplication: on Lived Religion in Bucharest

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1. Ritual multiplication

Romania has seen a religious revival in the past two decades. Whereas elsewhere in Europe the process of secularization advances, post-communist Romania shows a reversal of the trend. What is particularly striking is the popularity of rituals,¹ newly emerged and revived ones that aim to assist people in achieving concrete goals. These practices are oriented to fulfilling their needs, be it healing, obtaining a partner, the wish to have a child, or getting rich. Ritual life is flourishing. Ever more religious rituals are performed. What is more, single ritual performances are rare. In Romania's current lived religion multiplication of one and the same ritual action is widespread. Why does a single ritual performance not suffice? And why do people resort to more than one ritual for one and the same purpose?

In this article we discuss the phenomenon of ritual multiplication, using the ritual practices we observed in the Romanian capital as our main example. These include veneration of saints and relics, the use of written prayers (*acatists*), and a 33-candle ritual. We define ritual multiplication as a burgeoning of rituals, increase in the number of rituals, as well as proliferation of a ritual action, that is, repetitive performance of a specific ritual. The increase in number, the accumulation of rituals (including repetition of an identical ritual), we argue, relates to the performers' ideas about ritual efficacy. Two aspects are observable in these practices. Firstly, multiplication serves to improve the channel of communication with the world beyond. Secondly, endurance and the sacrifice of time, effort and money required for the performance of these rituals involve a demonstration of faith that is believed to improve their efficacy. In other words, multiplication increases the chances of getting the message accompanying offerings and petitioning prayers across, and thus the possibility of divine grace or reciprocity.

Various scholars have associated multiplication with rituals of increase.² The phenomenon we want to draw attention to here, however, concerns the actual

¹ We use Stanley Tambiah's widely accepted definition of ritual: 'Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition).' S. TAMBIAH: *A performative approach to ritual* (Oxford 1979) 119.

² According to Arnold van Gennep, these rituals have been mainly seen as 'sympathetic rites of multiplication or fertility and as a means of coercing cosmic and terrestrial pow-

rites being multiplied. One can either have several things happening (at once or in succession) or the same thing happening more often. In the latter case the number of times appears to be significant.

Rituals are magical practices in which the personal goal one wants to achieve is all important. Catherine Bell speaks of ‘the power of ritualization’. She proposes ‘an alternative to the view that ritual is a functional mechanism or expressive medium in the service of social solidarity and control’. For Bell, ‘[a] focus on the activity itself as the framework in which to understand ritual activity illuminates the complex nature of power relations’.³ Ritual multiplication in our ethnographic example is indeed an activity geared less to social solidarity than to empowerment.

In the communist era people were dependent on the state. The post-communist period required a radical change of attitude, because they could no longer rely on the state. The new conditions created a general sense of insecurity. Several scholars have stressed the link between insecurity and religiosity. According to Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart ‘feelings of vulnerability to physical, societal, and personal risks are a key factor driving religiosity’.⁴ Phil Zuckerman also notes that there are ‘numerous sources of insecurity that can propel someone to seek comfort in religion’.⁵ Zuckerman seeks to demonstrate that societies, such as in Scandinavia, can be relatively irreligious when the general population has gained a sense of security.⁶ In present-day Romania this level of existential security has not been attained – quite the contrary, and this may partly explain the resort to religious practices.

These practices are performed to deal with problems in people’s lives. Meredith McGuire emphasizes the practical coherence of lived religion, that is, it is premised more on religious practices than beliefs: ‘It needs to make sense in one’s everyday life, and it needs to be effective, to ‘work’, in the sense of accomplishing some desired end’.⁷ The performers aim to achieve certain goals, counteracting the level of insecurity relating to these goals. Following Ann Taves, ritual multiplication may be conceived of as a path:

ers’. A. VAN GENNEP: *The rites of passage* (Chicago 1960) 88. Victor Turner refers to multiplication in relation to Ndembu increase rituals, see V. TURNER: *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure* (Aldine 1969) 66. The term ‘multiplication’ is also employed by Alfred Gell, albeit in the quite different context of traditional Polynesian religion and applied in chiefs’ tattoos to shield their sacredness. A. GELL: ‘Closure and multiplication: an essay on Polynesian cosmology and ritual’, in M. LAMBEK (ed.): *A reader in the anthropology of religion* (Malden, MA 2008²) 267-279.

³ C. BELL: *Ritual theory, ritual practice* (New York 1992) 197.

⁴ P. NORRIS & R. INGLEHART: *Sacred and secular: religion and politics worldwide* (Cambridge 2004) 4-5.

⁵ P. ZUCKERMAN: *Society without God: what the least religious nations can tell us about contentment* (New York 2008) 173.

⁶ ZUCKERMAN: *Society without God*.

⁷ M.B. MCGUIRE: *Lived religion: faith and practice in everyday life* (Oxford 2008) 15.

We can characterize the means of getting to the goal – the things people can do to get there – as practices. The distinctive feature of a path is the linkage between the practices and the goal; this linkage is constituted when people ascribe efficacy to practices relative to the goal.⁸

In the case of ritual multiplication, the multiplication of ritual performances has a bearing on the working of the ritual, as perceived and experienced, namely as a procedure to reach the intended goal. Ritual multiplication is thus best understood as a path in Taves's sense.

Before we deal with how devotees follow this path in Romania's capital, it is necessary to know more about restrictions in the communist era, the recent religious revival and the state of insecurity in one of the European Union's youngest member states.

2. Restrictions in the communist era

Under the communist regime (1946-1989) there was a partial interdict on religious practices. Religion was not completely banned, but it could not feature too prominently in the public domain. The autocephaly of the Orthodox Church, among other things, prevented it from becoming a force of resistance as the Catholic Church did in Poland. Despite some sporadic resistance, it was 'subverted by the communist regime' and brought under control.⁹ The church could not entirely avoid persecution but was able to avoid obliteration by accepting collaboration with the regime. Although considered retrograde, religious activities were still tolerated. Contrary to what happened in other communist countries (such as Russia, Albania and Bulgaria), the churches were not closed down and liturgical services were still performed in Romania, notwithstanding the fact that the church operated under difficult conditions.

From 1948 onwards a series of attacks were directed against the church. Undesirable or opposition members of the clergy were forced into early retirement or arrested on various charges.¹⁰ All religious associations were banned and outlawed. Religion was no longer taught in public schools and theological institutions were excluded from the state's educational system. Most ecclesiastic and monastic properties were confiscated.¹¹ The regime forbade the celebration of the main orthodox feasts and turned religious public holidays into secular rest

⁸ A. TAVES: *Religious experience reconsidered* (Princeton 2009) 47.

⁹ D. CHIROT: 'Social change in communist Romania', in *Social forces* 57/2 (1978) 457-499, p. 463.

¹⁰ See P. CARAVIA (ed.): *Biserica întemnițată. România 1944-1989* [The imprisoned church: Romania 1944-1989] (Bucharest 1998).

¹¹ M. PĂCURARIU: *Istoria bisericii ortodoxe române* [History of the Romanian Orthodox Church] (Galați 1996) 452.

days.¹² A special department in the secret police (*Securitatea*) was charged with observing the religious ceremonies and identifying persons opposed to the official ideology.¹³ So-called ‘inspectors of cults’ ascertained that religious activities were kept under control.¹⁴ Although liberty to manifest one’s religious faith was guaranteed by the constitution, state regulations enforced restrictions. In 1949, for instance, a special order was issued to the police (*Miliția*), forbidding all religious processions and restricting ritual services to the precincts of churches for the sake of maintaining public order.¹⁵

The regime sought to weaken the church’s role in society and limit public practice of religion. Bucharest, the capital of the republic, held up as a national example, generally experienced heavier restrictions, as any ceremonies held there occurred under the very eyes of the political leaders. Extreme measures started soon after 1977 when, in the context of the monumental transformation of Bucharest envisaged by Ceaușescu, 21 orthodox chapels, churches and monasteries were demolished, and seven others were removed from their original locations and surrounded by newly erected buildings, meant to keep them out of view.¹⁶

Although churches and priests were under continuous surveillance by the secret police, the population continued to manifest their faith in a more discreet way, mainly in the private sphere.¹⁷ To avoid public censure and demotion persons occupying prominent positions in schools, the army and other official institutions – all being members of the Communist Party – avoided being seen attending church. Nevertheless some continued to practice their religion in private. They had baptisms and religious marriages performed in their houses.

¹² L.D. TANASE: *Pluralisation religieuse et société en Roumanie* (Bern 2008) 77-79. In March 1968 Patriarch Justinian requested Nicolae Ceaușescu in an unanswered letter to allow the celebration of Christmas, Easter and the Dormition of Saint Mary. See priest and patriarchal administrative vicar C. PĂRVU: *Patriarbul Justinian. Mărturie, fapte și adevăr* [Patriarch Justinian: testimonies, actions and truth] (Bucharest 2005) 108-110.

¹³ L. STAN & L. TURCESCU: *Religie și politică în România postcomunistă* [Religion and politics in post-communist Romania] (Bucharest 2010; 1st edition 2007, Oxford University Press) 62.

¹⁴ PĂCURARIU: *Istoria bisericii ortodoxe române* 452.

¹⁵ Order no. 72536 of 4 July 1949, according to C. PĂIUȘAN and R. CIUCEANU: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română sub regimul communist, 1945-1958* [The Romanian Orthodox Church under the communist regime, 1945-1958]. Volume 1 (Bucharest 2001) 149.

¹⁶ L. STOICA et al.: *Atlas-ghid. Istoria și arhitectura lăcașurilor de cult din București* [History and architecture of places of worship in Bucharest]. Volume 1 (Bucharest 1999) 78-81. For the destructions in Bucharest after 1977, also see D.C. GIURESCU: *The razing of Romania’s past* (New York 1989) and D. DANTA: ‘Ceaușescu’s Bucharest’, in *Geographical review* 83/2 (1993) 170-182, esp. 180-181.

¹⁷ Actual religious life – in spite of repression – under the communist regime awaits further study. Current practices might to some extent have their antecedents in that era and before.

The dominant atheist ideology made public religious practice a frowned upon activity, if not harmful to one's prospects in society.

There were a few exceptions to the invisibility of religious performances in public space, namely the funerals and enthronements of two patriarchs under communist rule (in 1948 and 1977)¹⁸ and the funeral of the dictator's father, Andruță Ceaușescu, which was broadcast on national TV and radio.¹⁹ In addition a limited number of churches were still built over the years.²⁰ The Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church attempted to demarcate the autonomy of the church and revive the Orthodox faith. In February 1950 it decided to locally canonize seven Romanian saints and to extend the official veneration of seven other saints (including Saint Paraskeva and Saint Dimitrie the New) to the entire Romanian Orthodox Church. The solemn proclamation of these decisions was intentionally delayed for five years until October 1955, when 70 years of autocephaly was celebrated.²¹

A similar action was taken later on at another decisive moment, namely the fall of the communist regime. In June 1992 the Holy Synod declared the second Sunday after the descent of the Holy Ghost 'the Sunday of the Romanian Saints'. At that point in time the first Romanian saints (canonized in 1950) were elevated to national sainthood. Forty local Romanian saints and martyrs were also canonized.²² The Synod thus paved the way for a number of ritual practices involving the veneration of saints and their relics that are currently flourishing in Bucharest.

3. Post-communist religious revival

The political changes in 1989 marked a turning point, heralding a religious revival. The old wielders of power did not disappear from the scene, but the end of the state ideology of communism opened the door to the re-entry of religion in the public space. The commemoration of the victims of the events in 1989 restored the position of the Orthodox Church in the public domain. Politicians posed in front of cameras with religious authorities. Their renewed association afforded them both visibility and legitimacy. While the church leaders hoped for state subsidies and new favorable laws, the politicians were expecting to gain public support. The politicians could demonstrate their repentance of past wrongs. And the Orthodox Church, having the majority of the population on its side, would be an important ally during elections.

¹⁸ See PÂRVU: *Patriarbul Justinian*.

¹⁹ STAN & TURCESCU: *Religie și politică în România postcomunistă* 65.

²⁰ According to the annual reports of the chancellery of the Holy Synod, cited by PÂRVU: *Patriarbul Justinian* 104-105.

²¹ PÂRVU: *Patriarbul Justinian* 198-206.

²² PÂRVU: *Patriarbul Justinian* 207-214.

The joint presence of clergy and politicians at public ceremonies was to become standard practice. A number of measures taken by post-communist governments strengthened the church's position.²³ The secretary of state for education reintroduced the teaching of religion in public schools, arguing it would contribute to the 'moral regeneration of the nation'. Religious icons replaced the previously compulsory portrait of Nicolae Ceaușescu in classrooms. Theological institutions became part of the state's educational system once more. (The Faculty of Theology in Bucharest, for instance, was reintegrated with the University of Bucharest.) The Orthodox Church's confiscated properties were restored. Priests regained the status of public employees and with it the right to be partially remunerated by the state. The main Orthodox feasts were once again celebrated publicly and declared national holidays.²⁴ Between 1990 and mid-2004 the number of churches increased by 14 percent.²⁵ In Bucharest new churches started to be built in the drab living quarters (dating from the communist era), surrounding the center, as well as at cemeteries, near hospitals, at airports, and on military terrains. In the public space of the city, a multitude of crosses were erected, ranging from highly visible cruciform monuments (dedicated to fallen heroes of the revolution) to more discreet roadside crosses at places where fatal traffic accidents or sudden deaths had occurred.²⁶

The available statistics give a further indication of the religious revival. In a 1993/94 survey, only two percent of Romanians claimed to have no religion.²⁷ The survey also revealed that 82 percent of the population was of the Orthodox creed.²⁸ In a decade their number increased by almost five percent (to 86.8 %, according to the population census of 2002).²⁹ The World Values Survey reports a steep increase in monthly church attendance in Romania: from 30 percent in 1993 to 48 percent in 2008.³⁰ Remarkably, the most spectacular in-

²³ STAN & TURCESCU: *Religie și politică în România postcomunistă* 291.

²⁴ Thus far seven religious holy days have become public holidays: two days during Easter, two days at Whitsuntide (descent of the Holy Ghost), one day on the Dormition of the Mother of God (15 August) and two days at Christmas (25 and 26 December).

²⁵ The State Secretariat charged with the Cults, cited by TANASE: *Pluralisation religieuse et société en Roumanie* 233-238.

²⁶ I. STAHL: 'Les croix de la ville de Bucarest. Problèmes de sociologie religieuse', in *Annales Universitatis Apulensis* (2010) 387-411.

²⁷ A. NEED & G. EVANS: 'Analysing patterns of religious participation in post-communist Eastern Europe', in *British journal of sociology* 52/2 (2001) 229-248, p. 237.

²⁸ And 11 percent, mostly of Hungarian origin, was Catholic. NEED & EVANS: 'Analysing patterns of religious participation' 235-236.

²⁹ D. BADEA (ed.): *Romania in figures 2010* (Bucharest 2010) 11.

³⁰ Cited in *Newsletter. Valorile românilor* [Newsletter. Romanians' values] no. 2, February 2009, published by the group for the study of social values, Institute for Research on Quality of Life, Romanian Academy, <http://www.iccv.ro/valori>. Also see the no. 1 issue, December 2008.

crease was among persons born in the 1940s who had been socialized under communist rule. Furthermore, between 1993 and 2008 urban church attendance went up from significantly lower to the same level as in rural areas. In 2005 Romania ranked third in Europe (just below Catholic Poland and Italy) in terms of church attendance, but regarding the question ‘How important is God in your life?’ the country (with a score of 9.2 on a scale of 10) occupied the first position.

Religious life has become increasingly manifest since 1989. After an initial spell of inertia it accelerated, especially from 2000 onwards. In Bucharest this certainly applies to actual religious ritual practices, whether officially sanctioned by the Orthodox Church or not. It must be noted that the population of the nation’s capital consists of an amalgam of people. Being an important cultural and trade center in South-East Europe, Bucharest has always attracted people from elsewhere. In the 20th century the influx of people accelerated with the introduction of industry after the Great War. Communism gave a new impulse to industrialization and people from all over the country migrated to the city to work in the factories.³¹ The new ideology required people of ‘healthy stock’ (members of the working class and peasants) and encouraged their ‘social mixing’ with others from various backgrounds. Consequently nowadays the predominantly Orthodox population accommodates a mixed and highly variable collection of religious practices that partly explains the present multiplication of rituals. Current practices might to some extent have their antecedents in the communist era and before. After over 40 years of communism and restrictions in the big cities, especially in Bucharest, people seem to revert to folk beliefs and practices of countrywide origin when reshaping their lived religion.

This conglomeration of practices is being transformed in current urban folk religion. It is best described as ‘a special form of creation’,³² which is not only a collective creative process but sometimes also has a tendency to exaggeration. A case in point is the touching of the priest’s vestments, a rather common practice, evolving into the more extreme ‘removal of the vestments’ over those in need.³³ Another such practice is the protective use of *mir* (small objects impregnated with holy oil), evolving into the more extreme burning and inhaling of these.³⁴ Apparently people feel a need to do more, to overemphasize, as is evident in the numerous cases of ritual multiplication.

Ritual innovations, entailing dynamism of tradition, are indicative of how urban religion in Bucharest is begotten and sustained. In sections 5 and 6 we

³¹ See L. CHELCEA: *Bucureștiul postindustrial. Memorie, dezinindustrializare și regenerare urbană* [Postindustrial Bucharest: memory, deindustrialization and urban regeneration] (Iași 2008); and DANTA: ‘Ceausescu’s Bucharest’.

³² R. JAKOBSON & P. BOGATYREV: ‘Die Folklore als eine besondere Form des Schaffens’, in W. THIJSSEN et al. (red.): *Donum Natalicum Schrijnen* (Nijmegen 1929) 900-913. Reprinted in R. JAKOBSON: *Selected writings* 4 (The Hague 1966) 1-15.

³³ See section 6 on *acatists* and burning of candles.

³⁴ See section 5 on veneration of saints and relics.

discuss four examples of ritual multiplication, emerging after 1989, that we see as ‘paths’ in Taves’s sense, taken by believers in pursuit of concrete goals. (We do not claim, however, that this applies to all believers and their acts of devotion.) The clergy accommodated and introduced cults in response to the need for miracles in a hopeless life. Simultaneously, by addressing a plethora of needs differing from person to person these ritual practices were more individualistically oriented.³⁵

In the mid-1990s the first moves towards religious innovation were made. Priests began to find ways to cover their costs, earning money by attracting new believers and the sale of religious articles, including candles, and by providing services as ritual specialists. Since 1989, as Laurentiu Tănase has shown, new religious denominations have gained a following in Romania.³⁶ These entered the religious market and, although not significant in number yet, they might have spurred on the majority church to step up its religious marketing.

The present Patriarchate makes efficient and effective use of modern mass media to reach (potential) adherents of Orthodoxy.³⁷ These media inform the public about religious events and even make their readers, listeners and viewers witness them. The media attention draws greater numbers of people to religious rituals. It also instigates competition, the more so because these happenings are transmitted via a television channel (multiplying the rituals in the process, as even televised ones are supposed to be efficacious). The proliferation of rituals goes hand in hand with ‘specialization’ of various Bucharest churches. Especially since 2000 a number of them have created a kind of brand in their ritual practices that are said to help solve particular problems, mostly concerning health or of a financial or emotional nature.

Since the enthronement of Patriarch Daniel in 2007 the church’s presence in public space has grown considerably. Old practices, forbidden under communism, have been revived and new ones initiated in the main Romanian cities, but also abroad in Romanian emigrant communities. In Bucharest the patriarch

³⁵ See also D. HERVIEU-LEGER: *Le Pèlerin et le converti. La religion en mouvement* (Paris 2006).

³⁶ TANASE: *Pluralisation religieuse et société en Roumanie*.

³⁷ On 27 October 2007, less than a month after the election of Patriarch Daniel and during the celebration of Saint Dimitrie the New, the patron saint of Bucharest, Basilica Press Centre was inaugurated. It was designed to include five divisions: a radio station (*Radio Trinitas*), a TV station (*Trinitas TV*), three newspapers (the daily newspaper *Ziarul Lumina*, the weekly publication *Lumina de duminică*, and the monthly magazine *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei*), a news agency (*Basilica*) and a Press and Public Relations Bureau. The new institution’s headquarters were located in the patriarchal palace. This action was envisaged by Patriarch Daniel ever since his time as metropolitan of Moldavia and Bukovina. At his initiative Radio Trinitas started to transmit in Iași as far back as 1998, and the two newspapers *Ziarul Lumina* (The Light Newspaper) and *Lumina de Duminică* (The Sunday Light) appeared, also in Iași, a few years later in 2005. BASILICA PRESS CENTER: *The Romanian patriarchate: mission, organization, activities* (Bucharest 2009) 25-37.

himself set the example, attending as many events as possible and surrounding himself with local hierarchs and foreign guests. Local priests took part in the celebrations, impressing the audience with their number and attire. The eye-catching vestments of the clergy, in bright colors and with glittering ornaments, enhanced their visibility. In communist times priests often wore civil attire in public in order not to be recognized as religious specialists. The public celebration of religious feasts, including Epiphany and Easter, and massive religious processions in public spaces are part of the religious revival.

Palm Sunday processions have been taking place again in the cities of Iași (since 1990), Bucharest (since 1998), and Sibiu and Timișoara (since 2010). Since 2009 at Easter the new light from the Holy Grave in Jerusalem is brought over and given out to people celebrating the resurrection in the midnight service at the Patriarchate in Bucharest. On the aforementioned Sunday a new procession has been held from 2007 onwards at the Icons Church (*Biserica Icoanei*) in Bucharest. In 2010 over 80 priests, led by the patriarch himself, headed the procession around a public garden near the church that has a miraculous icon. For the occasion a second icon, well-known for its miracles, was brought from the Ghighiu monastery in Prahova County. Both the local and the 'visiting' icon were exhibited to allow the several thousand people present at the ceremony to pray to them. In the evening both icons were carried around with full pomp until after sunset, when torches and candles were lighted. Military personnel in gala uniform joined the clergy, adding glamour to the festivity. The event was organized and financed jointly by the Arch episcopate of Bucharest and local civil authorities.

The revival of religion in Romania has much to do with a general sense of insecurity amongst the population. Religious rituals are believed to help people obtain solutions to problems that are not or no longer addressed by agencies of the state.

4. Insecurity and religion

We have already mentioned that in communist times people became dependent on the state. After the fall of communism socio-economic conditions changed radically.

The transition to a capitalist market economy, beginning in the early 1990s, was a difficult one for the population, who not only had to adjust to a whole new way of life but also had to carry the cost of a bad and corrupt government. The dream of quick and easy profits drove many people to lose their savings through investment in so-called 'mutual aid funds', pyramid schemes like *Caritas* that collapsed in a couple of years.³⁸ Many gullible people invested in these

³⁸ K. VERDERY: 'Faith, hope, and caritas in the land of the pyramids: Romania, 1990 to 1994', in *Comparative studies in society and history* 37/2 (1995) 625-669.

schemes, from which only a happy few at the top profited. Another bitter experience for many was to learn that banks could go bankrupt. Blindly trusting the state or private banking system, thought to be fail-safe, they lost their savings. In 1999/2000, because of mismanagement and corruption, six major banks – including the seemingly trustworthy Bank of Religions – went bankrupt. Since at that time accounts were not fully guaranteed, clients only managed to recover a minimal amount of money.

People had to get used to the new situation, especially the introduction of a new economic system, including the privatization of hitherto communal property and redundant workers being retrenched. Democracy, too, still had to take root. In 1989 Ion Iliescu, a former associate of Dictator Ceaușescu, came to power. As the first elected president in 1990, he violently repressed peaceful protests against his regime, but Iliescu was nevertheless re-elected twice, in 1992 and 2000, for a four-year term. With regard to the actions of politicians the proverbial man in the street had little say, probably also because no real alternatives were available in the newly established democratic elections and people's lack of experience of dealing with anything other than a totalitarian regime. To get what they wanted they relied on informal networks and bribes had become a normal part of everyday life. This also pervaded the political system.

The majority's hopes of prosperity evaporated when after a decade of a neo-liberal free market economy the situation had worsened. Furthermore, the services and support previously provided by the state had deteriorated. In addition, after years of delay, a long list of unpopular economic and social measures finally had to be taken. Among these privatization brought massive dismissals that aroused a general feeling of insecurity. The defective justice system, as repeatedly pointed out by the European Union, made people realize that justice could not be done and that they did not have anybody to turn to. To this day properties nationalized by force under communism have not all been returned to their legitimate owners. Thieves were rarely caught, let alone punished. The 2008 a general economic crisis resulted in bankruptcies of many private companies. Furthermore, to deal with the crisis, the government decided to cut the salaries of its employees by 25 percent. In these circumstances many Orthodox people turned to the only one who could still give them constant support, bringing them comfort in an unjust world – God himself. Increased insecurity went hand in hand with greater appeal of religion.

On the one hand there was a demand for efficacious religious practices, on the other hand, for reasons of its own, the Orthodox Church catered for this demand. In 2000 free competition among priests was introduced. Before that parish priests had to confine themselves to people living within the boundaries of their parish. In time they realized that charismatic priests were 'stealing their living subjects' as well as 'their dead ones'. Priests and parishes entered into competition. People from the suburbs working in the center of Bucharest could not be banned from going to the churches there. Against a backdrop of eco-

conomic crises and other setbacks, the creation of a new demand – a religious one – and that of a new so-called ‘religious market’ went hand in hand. The economic crisis from 2008 onwards only intensified the process. Insecurity seems to have been at the root of the religious revival, although some argued that it was a matter of supply rather than demand.

Norris and Inglehart review the theories favoring one or the other explanation with regard to post-communist Eastern Europe, including Romania.³⁹ They found that, contrary to the ‘supply-side religious markets theory’, the ‘more homogeneous religious cultures and institutions’ proved to be less secular. They were thus more religious than the heterogeneous ones (with greater religious pluralism), counter to what the theory predicts.⁴⁰ Norris and Inglehart, however, found confirmation of ‘the theory of secularization and existential security’: people in countries ‘with higher standards of living, longevity, and education, also regarded religion as less important than the public’s living in poorer and less secure states in the region. Similar patterns were evident for the belief in God’.⁴¹ The combined effect of socio-economic conditions of insecurity and relative lack of human development sufficed to explain the higher levels of religiosity in countries like Romania, according to Norris and Inglehart.⁴² They conclude that ‘in poorer and less developed post-Communist countries (...) religion remains a vital force in people’s lives’.⁴³

Existential insecurity was evident among a considerable part of the population in post-communist Romania. In 1992 42 percent of the economically active population of Bucharest was employed in industry. In 2002 the proportion had decreased to a mere 22 percent. The industrial decline was more pronounced in Bucharest than in other regions of the country.⁴⁴ Huge inflation, some 300 percent in 1993,⁴⁵ eroded people’s means of existence. Not only the economic crises but also the failings of the state’s judicial and medical systems and the decline of the system of social security contributed to the general sense of insecurity. This created the demand that gave rise to a religious revival.

At the same time, to enable priests to sustain themselves the church started offering various ritual practices supposed to help people to solve their problems. Miraculous icons, relics of saints, and requests in the form of written prayers are part of this new or renewed repertoire. The present patriarch is overseeing the proliferation of candle-consuming cults, of which he is a main

³⁹ See chapter 5: ‘A religious revival in post-Communist Europe?’, in NORRIS & INGLEHART: *Sacred and secular* 111-132.

⁴⁰ NORRIS & INGLEHART: *Sacred and secular* 127.

⁴¹ NORRIS & INGLEHART: *Sacred and secular* 127.

⁴² NORRIS & INGLEHART: *Sacred and secular* 127.

⁴³ NORRIS & INGLEHART: *Sacred and secular* 131.

⁴⁴ L. CHELCEA: *Bucureștii postindustrial. Memorie, deșindustrializare și regenerare urbană*, [Postindustrial Bucharest: memory, deindustrialization and urban regeneration] (Iași 2008) 244.

⁴⁵ VERDERY: ‘Faith, hope, and caritas in the land of the pyramids’ 625-669.

supplier. Furthermore, he is playing an important role in marketing the Orthodox Church. He uses modern communication media and has invigorated religious life with a number of initiatives, such as the introduction of newly imported relics that rapidly became objects of veneration. The new religious market, in which the Orthodox Church has the biggest stake, thrives on the aforementioned general sense of insecurity.

To flesh out our account we now discuss a number of concrete examples of ritual multiplication: ritual performances entailing pilgrims' veneration of saints and relics, rituals entailing devotees' petitionary prayers, and a 33-candle ritual.

5. Veneration of saints and relics

Of the five kinds of prayer – adoration, confession, petition, praise and thanksgiving – petition or supplication features most prominently in folk religion and is most common.⁴⁶ We will discuss this kind of prayer, the *acatist*, which in actual practice is a thanksgiving turning into a petition in the second section. In some respects pilgrimage follows the same underlying logic as the practices associated with written prayer. The present patriarch makes this clear: 'Pilgrims are offering money or other material gifts to the churches at pilgrimage destinations, as a sign that they are receiving in exchange spiritual gifts, blessings for their life and activity'.⁴⁷ Interestingly, in addressing people's most pressing needs, especially in times of despair, the ritual performances also appear to require a kind of intensification to tap the spiritual power or increase the chances of doing so,⁴⁸ for which ritual multiplication is practiced in present-day Bucharest as an appropriate mechanism.

Multiplication of ritual performances can be witnessed in veneration of relics of saints. While the cult of local relics is escalating, new relics are brought into the country, mainly from Greece. A few of them are offerings, gifts or donations, while other relics are only 'visiting' on special occasions.

In the Orthodox tradition relics are defined as

the imperishable bodies of God's saints, the remains of their bodies or their bones, through which God has shown and continue to show His almightiness, by the accomplishment of the witnessed miracles performed in his and his saints' laudatory, *for the sake of helping Christians in their spiritual and bodily troubles*, for strengthening them in the truth and the salvation brought by the Orthodox faith [our emphasis].⁴⁹ (= our translation)

⁴⁶ C. PANATI: *Sacred origins of profound things* (New York 1996) 4-8.

⁴⁷ DANIEL, PATRIARCH OF THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: *Travelling with God: the meaning and usefulness of pilgrimage* (Bucharest 2008) 14-15.

⁴⁸ See J. VAN BAAL: 'Sacrifice and gift', in *Numen* 23/3 (1976) 161-178.

⁴⁹ D. RADU: *Îndrumări misionare* [Missionary guidance] (Bucharest 1986) 847.

From this definition one infers that the *raison d'être* of the relics is to accomplish miracles (God's continuous work through his saints), and thus to help people in need. Hence one can easily understand why people (including long-distance pilgrims) visit those relics in Bucharest in large numbers and are prepared to queue for more than twelve hours. The presence of relics gives them hope, and they are often seen as a last resort. The saints stand out as accessible intermediaries between people and God. Proper ritual practices involving saints and their relics would be most likely to 'work', to be effective, and ritual multiplication makes sense as a means to safeguard their efficacy. The devotees show their perseverance and endurance. That is to say, they make a sacrifice in order to demonstrate their faith in God and his mercy; one demonstrates one's faith by repeating the ritual that often not only entails physical endurance but also an offering of time, money and energy.

The last three months of the Romanian Orthodox calendar are highly charged. Apart from Christmas, the feasts of at least six major saints are celebrated in this period.⁵⁰ Another two minor saints, who gained tremendously in popularity in recent years, Saint Nectarios (*Nectarie*) and Saint Mina, have to be added. The rise of their cults is attributable to the fact that they respond mainly to major problems confronting people nowadays. The feasts of the two saints take place around the same time (only two days apart) and at nearby locations (only one kilometer separates them).

Saint Nectarios is a good example of the increasing relic veneration in Bucharest. Although relics of this contemporary saint of Greek origin have only recently been brought into Romania,⁵¹ and his name was added to the national Orthodox calendar as late as in 2003, the cult is spreading rapidly. Today fourteen monasteries and churches in Romania and two additional churches belonging to Romanian communities abroad (in Coslada, Madrid, Spain, and in Charlotte, North Carolina, U.S.A.) contain his relics and many other churches have chosen him as their patron saint. This growing popularity is readily explained by the fact that Saint Nectarios, who suffered from and eventually died of cancer, is known particularly as the healer of this life-threatening disease.⁵² Romania

⁵⁰ Saint Parascheva on 14 October, the Great Martyr Dimitrie (the Mir Springer) on 26 October, Saint Dimitrie the New (protector of Bucharest) on 27 October, the archangels Michael and Gabriel on 8 November, Saint Andrew (patron saint of Romania) on 30 November, and Saint Nicholas on 6 December.

⁵¹ For further information on Saint Nectarios, see Monk TEOCLIT from Dionisiat: *Sfântul Nectarie din Egina, făcătorul de minuni. Viața și opera, 1846-1920* [Saint Nectarios from Aegina, the wonder maker. His life and his work, 1846-1920] (Bucharest 2008; translated from the 1979 Greek edition).

⁵² This is explicitly mentioned in the *Acatist of Saint Nectarios*, a prayer dedicated to the saint and read during the celebration of his feast: 'Grace and heavenly gifts rises from your Holy Relics. Many sufferings are healed and weak ones straighten. Therefore, together with them we now call out the following: Joy to thee, tub of healings. / Joy to thee, unbinder of sufferings. / Joy to thee, the One who quickly comes in to help. (...)

has the highest rate of mortality due to cancer in Europe. Furthermore, the country's medical system is about to collapse. Consequently ritual practices addressing Saint Nectarios are often considered an important option to obtain healing. The 'new' 20th century saint can be designated a 'modern' saint responding to the needs of his time.

From another perspective the spread of saint's relics is a response to his own will. According to legend, twenty years after his death, a woman who was deploring the disintegration of his bodily remains had an apparition of Saint Nectarios. The saint told her that he had specifically asked God to allow his body to decompose (in contrast to the corpses of saints remaining intact). In this way his bones could be distributed with greater ease all over Greece, but also worldwide, in order to bring comfort to believers in need.⁵³ By giving up his body as such and letting it be taken to pieces Nectarios allowed the multiplication of his healing powers and, implicitly, of miracles due to these. Through every fragment of his relics, God's work through him is multiplied. In this sense, by means of the distributed relics, saints are being multiplied, as well as their good works.

In 2001 the Prince Radu Monastery (*Mănăstirea Radu Vodă*) in Bucharest received a piece of the relics of Saint Nectarios. The following year he became the second protector of the monastery, after the Holy Trinity. The precious gift from Greece was put in a silver, gold-plated coffin and placed under a carved wooden canopy on the right side in the church. Under the thick, opaque floor around the canopy lay thousands of folded notes, slipped in by believers. These are acatists (*acatiste*), prayers or requests, addressed to the saint.

On Tuesday, 9 November 2010 the court of Prince Radu Monastery bustled with people since early morning. Although a working day, thousands of people had come to celebrate Saint Nectarios the healer and to address their most ardent wishes to him. The dense queue waiting to reach his exhibited relics measured up to 200 meters; it started at the entrance gates, stretched downhill and continued all the way up to the baldachin specially installed outside, right next to the church, where the relics of the saint were displayed. Within three hours the queue had almost doubled in length. More than 3000 persons, mainly from the city, were queuing up, among them a few rural women, nuns and monks, and many young people, sometimes accompanied by children. Their tired, pale faces suggested there were many sick people present that day. A man in a wheelchair was carrying a sizable icon of Saint Nectarios in his lap.

Using a very broad definition, the Romanian Orthodox Church considers all persons present that day to be pilgrims.⁵⁴ In the same view, the pilgrimage to

/ Joy to thee, cause of the terrible cancer, so many of which you have healed. / Joy to thee, because to the demons you threw the tear-bringing wound. (...) / Joy to thee, Father Nectarios!' (= Our translation.)

⁵³ TEOCLIT: *Sfântul Nectarie din Egina, făcătorul de minuni* 163.

⁵⁴ 'Pilgrims are people who wish to visit and revere the biblical holy places, the tombs of martyrs, the relics of the saints, the wonder-working icons or places where humble

Saint Nectarios' relics, like any other pilgrimage for that matter, should be motivated by the desire to intensify one's belief in and love for God, one's prayers and spiritual life, but also by the need to express one's gratitude to God to repent of one's sins. As a final motivation is mentioned 'a strong desire to receive God's help in order to succeed in an important undertaking or to be cured of a physical or spiritual affliction'.⁵⁵ Even if less important in the eyes of the church, this last point – the 'path' that is offered by the related ritual to achieve these ends – seems to be a first priority to the believers. Their concrete problems are their primary motivation, a fact confirmed by discussions we had with various people, but also by the analysis of a large number of *acatists* in our possession.⁵⁶ Confronted with problems that threaten their own lives or those of significant others, people often take refuge in religion as a last resort.



Illustration 1: People gathered around the baldachin that shelters the relics of Saint Nectarios at Prince Radu Monastery, Bucharest. [Photo: Irina Stahl]

The time spent queuing, seems to have a religious as well as a social dimension. In religious terms people make a sacrifice, showing their faith, and praying for a possible return of divine grace. While waiting to arrive at the saint's relics, people talked to each other. They shared their problems and sorrows, but they also

spiritual fathers live.' These are words of DANIEL: *Travelling with God: the meaning and the usefulness of pilgrimage* 3.

⁵⁵ DANIEL: *Travelling with God* 4-5.

⁵⁶ We plan a further publication on this collection of *acatists*. For a discussion of *acatists*, also see section 6.

gave each other hope by relating miracles they had either witnessed personally or had heard about. Even if the relics were displayed throughout the year, praying to them on the very day of the saint's feast has a special meaning. The number of believers praying on that day, at the same time, seems to reinforce the efficacy of the ritual.

After a few hours of waiting, people finally reached the baldachin hosting the precious relics. The time spent under the baldachin could be divided into three distinct moments. Just after entering the believers put their *acatist*, carefully folded round a couple of banknotes, into a specially designed box situated on the right hand side of the reliquary. Next they stood in front of the relics, the climax of their waiting. Touching the covered relic with their hands, foreheads and/or lips while repeatedly crossing themselves they silently addressed their prayers to the saint. Some had brought various objects with them (such as shawls, handkerchiefs, undershirts, small baby cushions, icons, flowers and even photographs of their dear ones) that they passed over the relics, touching the coffin. Finally, on the left hand side of the reliquary, a monk was anointing people, giving them small pieces of *mir* (in this case small cones made out of paper, containing a tiny piece of cotton sprinkled with holy oil),⁵⁷ on their way out.



Illustration 2: Young child lifted up by her mother in order to touch the holy relics.
[Photo: Irina Stahl]

⁵⁷ In actual speech the meaning of the word *mir*, initially referring to the holy oil, seems to be extended to small objects impregnated with it.

The same ritual was performed inside the church, right next to the canopy under which the box with Saint Nectarios's relics is usually placed. Instead of the holy relics an icon was now exhibited, surrounded by flowers. Next to it an oil lamp was burning. Using that oil, a monk was anointing a few people who were waiting in the queue. Now and then he would draw some of the oil with a big syringe and fill the small plastic receptacles people were presenting. Inquiring from a few persons about the use of this oil, we found out that not only were healing properties attributed to it, but that it could also be used simply for protection. To do so it had to be smeared on the skin, especially on the sick or sore part of the body, or on the forehead.

Since early times ritual anointment has been part of the cult of the saints. According to the New Testament everything that comes into direct contact with the saints (or their relics), but also into indirect contact (e.g. the oil taken from the lamps burning in front of icons), is considered to bring support to believers as proof of God's grace transmitted through his saints.⁵⁸ The oil used in this ritual is neither blessed in a special formula nor in a prayer, but

its character as a holy element as well as its supernatural power or its beneficial property are granted by its relation to a holy object, meaning that this kind of oil comes into touch, or is to be found in the proximity of, is intended for or is of some use for the religiously venerated places or things.⁵⁹ (= our translation)

In the cases described above this quality is conferred on the oil by its proximity to the relics, to the icon of the saint and to the place in the church that the relics usually occupy during the rest of the year (under the canopy), as well as by the fact that it was used in a lamp burning for Saint Nectarios.

The believers expanded the principle applied to the holy oil to other objects they had brought with them. By touching the relics with them, or simply passing them over, the objects acquired the same characteristics as the relics, protecting and healing the ones who would touch them later on. We asked a 50-year-old woman, who stepped out from under the baldachin with a big bag she had just brushed against the relics, what we should do in order to help a sick person recover thanks to the saint. She advised us to bring an undershirt, touch

⁵⁸ P. VINTILESCU: *Liturghierul explicat* [The explained missal] (Bucharest 1972) 351.

⁵⁹ VINTILESCU: *Liturghierul explicat* 355. There are also other kinds of holy oil that can be used in the anointment ritual: there is the oil from the Holy Cross in Jerusalem (meaning oil kept in vases that have been touched with the holy item), oil from holy places (mainly taken from the candle burning at the Saint Grave or some other place in Israel identified with Jesus) and oil taken from lamps burning in the crypts of saints or martyrs, or which trickles from their relics or graves – the so-called 'oil of the saints and martyrs'. These special oils, as well as oil from the lamps burning next to relics or icons, are not to be confused with the Great Holy Mir (carefully prepared according to a secret formula once a year and used only on special occasions, such as baptisms) nor with the oil blessed during special services performed by the priests (such as extreme unction – *Taina Sfântului Maslu*). *IBIDEM* 354-355.

the relic with it, and let the patient wear it against her bare skin until it got dirty. 'It doesn't have any effect once it has been washed', she added.

A particular case of ritual multiplication is photographs substituted for the presence of the persons depicted. From the point of view of the believers touching the relics with the photograph of a person is equivalent to that person actually being there.

Various things were done with the small *mir* packages distributed next to the relics. Asking people around us how they would use them, we were told that some kept them at home, while others preferred to carry them with them in their purses or wallets. Yet others resorted to more unusual practices like burning them and inhaling the smoke. The same was done with the flowers and the basil distributed on the occasion, which had previously been passed over the relics. Whereas some people said they keep them in the house, others informed us that they burnt them when dried out to inhale the smoke (reminiscent of devout people digesting a secondary relic, such as a scrap of a saint's habit).

Besides holy oil, people at the feast of Saint Nectarios were collecting holy water. A big blue plastic cask full of this water (*aghiazmă*) stood in the front yard of the church. One after another people were filling the plastic bottles they had brought from home with the special liquid running out through a tap. At one point one of the female employees of the place showed up with a long hose and started to refill the cask. 'She is multiplying it', a woman near us explained, assuring us that the water would still be efficacious.

Loudspeakers were transmitting the religious office celebrated inside the church. People outside were listening silently, sometimes bowing towards the church's walls, especially in the eastern area where the altar stands, or simply kneeling next to them. These actions might also be seen as a form of ritual multiplication, extending the reception of grace to the outdoor precincts of the church by means of touch, hearing and bodily posture.

Similar practices occurred on the feast of Saint Mina,⁶⁰ another increasingly popular local saint. The saint and great martyr Mina is especially known as the protector of people who have suffered material loss and is invoked in cases of financial loss (e.g. bankruptcies, thefts and frauds), loss of objects or lost causes (e.g. lawsuits). In Bucharest Saint Mina is particularly celebrated in the church that nowadays bears his name, Saint Mina-Vergu. Dating back to the 18th century, the church burned down completely during the great fire of 1847. In 1874, after its reconstruction, pieces from the relics of Saint Mina together with a miraculous icon of the saint were given to the church. While the relics were

⁶⁰ Being an early saint, information about the life and death of Saint Mina is vaguer than in the case of Saint Nectarios. Born in Egypt in the 3rd century, the future Saint Mina was at first, according to the holy texts, a Roman soldier. Refusing to deny his belief in God, he was tortured and finally beheaded in the early 4th century. His remains were brought to Alexandria, where a church was built over them. Since then many miracles have been recorded.

brought from Mount Athos and/or Egypt,⁶¹ the icon came from a nearby monastery, also burned down in the 1847 fire in the city.

On 11 November 2010 thousands of people were lined up, waiting to arrive in front of Saint Mina's relics exhibited under a baldachin at the front of the church.⁶² They had already been taken out the day before, when the celebrations started and the auditory had been blessed with the presence of the patriarch. In his speech the head of the Romanian Orthodox Church had mentioned the existing accord between Saint Mina and Saint Nectarios, saints who 'complete each other because, while Saint Nectarios is better known as a healer, Saint Mina (...) is a saint of great help for people who have suffered loss, to whom an injustice has been done, or who find themselves in desperate situations'. 'God is working through his saints and he works differently through each and every saint', the Patriarch added.⁶³ In order to illustrate the related powers of Saint Mina, he cited a few examples from the *acatist* of the saint, saying:

Joy to thee, light of the one suffering loss (...) / Joy to thee, hand revealing the plunder (...) / Joy to thee, finder of lost things / Joy to thee, who brings them back as they were / Joy to thee, the praise of citizens honest in their deeds / Joy to thee, the joy of traders of goodwill (...) / Joy to thee, the comfort of every oppressed and miserable soul / Joy to thee, our quick defender in sorrow / Joy to thee, long suffering Saint Mina! (= our translation).

By one o'clock the dense spiral queue around Saint Mina Church was almost a kilometer long. Over 5000 persons were present. Some waited for nearly six hours before reaching the holy relics. The pilgrims came from all over the country. Among them were people who had been robbed, who had lost their property in what they saw as unfair lawsuits, who had lost their savings in Caritas (one of the pyramidal schemes in the 1990s), who had lent money without getting it back, businessmen and merchants in financial distress, and persons who simply came to pray for their health or the well-being of their families and friends. Gendarmerie was standing by, maintaining the order. The human line was separated from the street by metal fencing. In the overcrowded churchyard gendarmes were loudly ordering people around, doubling the volume of the litany transmitted through loudspeakers. It was forbidden to come too close to the baldachin or to step over the line. Tension was in the air. People were nervous, impatient and did not show the same attitude towards each other as at Saint Nectarios's celebration.

⁶¹ The information we have traced so far is not very clear on this aspect.

⁶² The baldachin is meant to symbolize the grave of the saint.

⁶³ S. DASCĂLU: 'Hramul Bisericii "Sfântul Mina-Vergu"' [The celebration of the patron saint of the church of Saint Mina-Vergu], in *Ziarul Lumina*, Friday, 12 November 2010, no. 264 (1766), 6th year, Bucharest, p. 2.



Illustration 3: Pilgrims queuing to touch the relics of Saint Mina. [Photo: Irina Stahl]

Next to the pilgrims waiting for Saint Mina's blessing, religious merchants from all over the country had installed their tables and displayed their merchandise. Dedicated to Saint Mina, protector of 'traders of goodwill', this celebration seemed to be a good business opportunity for them. There were twice as many as two days earlier at Saint Nectarios's feast, which a few of them had also attended. For over 200 meters on both sides of the small street next to the church closed in for the occasion, lay and religious people were selling flowers and basil, icons, *mir* from various holy places, rosaries, religious publications, candles, holy water receptacles, protective medallions and bracelets of all kinds and shapes, trinkets (e.g. protective car key rings with Bible verses to keep away thieves), honey (made and sold by nuns from Vâlcea County), and many other things. Made in Greece, or even in China, most items were presented as handmade and of local origin.

The churchyard was full of people. Not everyone had been able to queue for several hours to get a chance to touch the relics, so those who had not were trying to get as close to the relics as possible. Some of them were waiting for the service to end in order to be allowed by the gendarmes to step inside the church, where they could at least touch the miraculous icon of the saint. Meanwhile they were listening to the transmitted service, every now and then throwing envious glances at the ones at the front of the queue, who had almost

reached the baldachin. The rituals performed by people standing in the queue closely resembled those we witnessed two days before at Saint Nectarios's feast.

The only significant addition was the fact that, before stepping under the baldachin, people first stretched to touch the big icon of Saint Mina hanging right above their heads. They were touching it with their bare hands, but also with objects they had brought with them: flowers and basil bouquets, handkerchiefs, caps, cloths, photographs, (house or car) keys, handbags, portfolios and *acatists*. Children were lifted up in order to reach the icon. After handing their *acatists* to the priest sitting next to the reliquary, they crossed themselves, touching and kissing the silver and golden carved lid. The objects they had with them were now put into contact with the saint for a second time, being passed over his relics or touching them.



Illustration 4: The baldachin under which the relics of Saint Mina are exhibited. A woman is stretching to touch the icon of the saint with some personal belongings. Next to her another woman holds out several garments to touch the icon and the relics. A police officer stands in front to maintain order and protect the holy objects. [Photo: Irina Stahl]

The double contact was supposed to reinforce their protective and healing powers. After receiving the holy ointment and the *mir*, they stepped down. Persons at the back sometimes asked those ahead of them in the queue to do them a favor by passing objects over the icon and the relics of the saint on their behalf. As far as we could see there were no refusals.

An old woman next to us kept asking passersby for sprig of blessed basil. She felt too sick, suffering from diabetes, to queue for hours, she explained. The basil was meant for her eight-year-old grandson, who was ‘such a good boy’, she assured us. She always brought him something back from her regular ‘visit’ to the local saints: a sprig of basil, flowers and *mir*. He was always very glad to receive them, waiting impatiently at home. Proud of his treasures, he kept them in a special plastic bag in his school satchel to show to his friends. He was probably waiting for her return that very moment. The old woman had come all the way from the eastern part of the city to see the saint; she would not miss it for the world, especially after he had been so kind to her in the past. In 2001, when she had serious health problems and had to have an operation, the saint helped her recover, giving her back the strength she had lost. Since then she has come back regularly every year. This year she prayed specially for her grandsons: for the little boy to behave well and get good marks at school, and for her other grandson, who was working in Spain; it was time for him to find himself a companion, maybe Saint Mina would bring him a nice girl. She soon left us to get some holy water. The supply she had at home was almost finished and she needed some more for her morning ritual: three mouthfuls of holy water, right after washing. That kept her in good health.

Multiplied contacts with the saints and God are established through ritual actions involving relics, icons, *mir*, holy water and so forth, which might seem insignificant but are standard practices perceived to channel divine power. Modern media have become part of this ritualization. We noticed, for instance, many people photographing the baldachin on their mobile phones. Next to us a young woman accompanied by her mother was filming. She told us she was doing it so her grandmother, who was too weak to come, could also enjoy the sight of the relics. A bit further away Trinitas TV station was transmitting the event to the rest of the world.

Minor rituals when performed repeatedly are also supposed to be efficacious. On our way out, next to the porch, a 55-year-old woman was buying 40 *leis*’ worth of candles.⁶⁴ She was happy to find, as someone had told her, that if she read out the *acatist* of Saint Mina every day for 40 days in a row, making one wish and putting one *leu* aside for the church after every prayer, her wishes would come true. Trusting it will work, she had already decided to give that money to the church by buying candles with it.

⁶⁴ The *leu* (literally ‘lion’) is the Romanian currency.

Acatists play an important role in the ‘path’ followed by devotees, enabling them to set their goals, the ends to which the multiplication of rituals is seen as the means. In the next section we discuss *acatists* in lived religion in Bucharest.

6. *Acatists* and burning of candles

Two main meanings are attributed to the word *acatist*. In orthodox liturgical practice, *acatist* refers to a hymn of gratitude dedicated to God, the mother of God or various saints.⁶⁵ The first and also the most famous *acatist* is the one dedicated to the mother of God (also called *Acatist* of the Annunciation) dating back to the 7th century, the only one recognized by the Greek Orthodox tradition. In the Romanian and Slavic traditions, however, other *acatists* were created later on, taking the first one as a model. These are highly elaborate poems by theologians, who through well-chosen words and telling metaphors manage to express the essence of the one who is praised.

The second meaning given to this word relates to a practice commonly performed by Orthodox believers, consisting in writing down requests to God, the mother of God and/or specific saints on a piece of paper. Handed over to the priest, these notes are read out aloud in church on certain days (one, seven, 40 or more), accompanied by a specific prayer.

What is interesting is the way in which the two meanings of the word have in time shifted from thanksgiving to petitioning. Thus while believers are supposed to start this particular prayer by thanking, nowadays they are mostly focused on what they want to get or accomplish. Their requests concern concrete goals (such as recovering from a sickness, meeting a partner, having children or getting a lucrative job) and not the more abstract goals supposed to contribute to the salvation of their souls, as the church recommends.

Writing down an *acatist* today equals ‘making a wish’, to use the words of a female employee from the Saint George the New Church (*Biserica Sfântul Gheorghe cel Nou*). She told us to ‘write it down on a piece of paper and give it to Father’, pointing to the priest who was standing next to the altar. In front of him a dozen people were queuing, holding the paper with their *acatist* in their hands, carefully folded round two ten *lei* banknotes. This sum was meant to reward the priest, who had to read aloud the ‘wish-requests’ handed to him for 40 days in a row. But this was not sufficient, we were told. In order to persuade God to fulfill one’s wish one also had to buy a bundle of 33 candles from the church store and light them on a special tray with sand, which was handed to the person in question. The 33 candles, symbolizing the age of Jesus at the time of his crucifixion, had to be lined up in the shape of a cross: 16 on the horizontal and

⁶⁵ In Greek, *akatistos* is composed by adding the privative prefix *a-* to the verb *katiston*, meaning sitting down; so the word *akatistos* indicates that one should not sit down while listening to the prayer.

17 on the vertical axis; in the middle an extra, tall candle had to be added.⁶⁶ Every Friday for seven weeks in a row one was supposed to come to church and repeat this ritual. Thus we witnessed, on a January evening in 2011, the endurance shown by approximately 20 people kneeling on the bare floor on the open porch of that church. They sat in front of their tray of candles, fully exposed to the icy wind that kept blowing out their lighted candles. Some were using their bodies as a shield, bowing over the candles; others used cushions or pieces of cardboard. Most of them were women, but a few male companions were also to be seen. Huddled closely together next to the church wall, they did not seem to be bothered by the proximity. Holding their little prayer books in one hand, they kept murmuring their prayer in low voices while the candles were burning. From time to time they interrupted themselves and stood up. Each time they crossed themselves repeatedly.

The prayer one is supposed to say while the candles are burning is a simple one. It was given to us on a piece of paper, along with the 33 candles. It says:

Have mercy on us, Lord / Have mercy on us who raise to you / this prayer, in memory of / the 33 years spent / on earth by the Saviour. / May my sorrows vanish / by burning these candles. / Thus may you, Lord Jesus, Son of God / fulfill my prayer / Amen. (= our translation).

In the first week this prayer should be accompanied by the *acatist* (prayer) of Saint George; the second week by the *acatist* of Saint Nicholas; the third week by the *acatist* of Saint Paraskeva; the fourth week by the *acatist* of the Saints Brâncoveanu; the fifth week by the *acatist* of the Guardian Angel; the sixth week by the *acatist* of the Cover of the Mother of God; and finally, the seventh week, by the *acatist* of repentance of our Saviour Jesus Christ. The saints invoked are closely related to the church: Saint George and Saint Paraschiva are patron saints and their icons (including a miraculous one) are to be found inside the edifice. Saint Nicholas is particularly venerated, because his right hand has been preciously guarded here since the end of the 16th century.⁶⁷ Constantin Brâncoveanu, former prince of Valachia, his four sons and his private secretary were killed by the Turks in 1714. In 1992 they were all sanctified by the Romanian church and declared martyrs. The relics of the prince lie in one of the tombs in the church.

⁶⁶ The number 33 features in other rituals as well, such as the one conducted in Jerusalem on the Saturday before Easter when, after the descent of the light, the local patriarch steps out of the holy grave carrying two bunches of 33 lightened candles in his hands. Again the number refers to Jesus' age at the time of his crucifixion.

⁶⁷ On 6 December every year another important pilgrimage is made to Saint George the New Church in Bucharest, where thousands of people from all over the country gather to celebrate Saint Nicholas's day and touch the reliquary containing his right hand. We are preparing an article on this pilgrimage.



Illustration 5 & 6: Young woman preparing for her 33-candle ritual (left) and young woman at the end of the 33-candle ritual, holding a cushion to keep the candles from being blown out by the strong wind. [Photo: Irina Stahl]

The church of Saint George the New is located literally in the center of the city; right next to the church a monument marks the ‘zero kilometer’, the starting point of all measurements between Bucharest and other towns. Every Friday from 6 a.m. until 8 p.m., dozens of people hurry over to hand in their *acatists* and burn their candles. They perform the ritual meticulously week after week, because only in this way God’s mercy might come over them and their wishes be fulfilled.

Not far away from Saint George Church, on the far side of one of the main boulevards of the city, is another church highly frequented by people in need. One of the oldest churches in town, it is called the Old Court Church or the Princely Church, but it is most commonly known as Saint Anthony’s Church (*Biserica Sfântul Anton*). For a long time there was confusion between Saint Anthony the Great (*Antonie cel Mare*), especially venerated here, and Anthony of Padua (*Anton de Padova*), the Catholic saint not acknowledged by the Orthodox Church. Visiting the church in January 2011, we were soon to discover that the name was not the only resemblance between the two saints.

People praying at the relics of Saint Anthony of Padua have in recent years taken to leaving a card with their wishes on or next to the reliquary. In the church of Saint Anthony the Great in Bucharest a similar ritual is performed. People from all over the city come here every Tuesday to pray at the miraculous icon of the saint known to be ‘quick to help’ and to leave an *acatist* with their wishes behind. This ritual is performed here, as well as in other churches in Bucharest, but what makes this place special is the over proportioned veneration, as we were able to witness in person.

We visited Saint Anthony’s Church on 18 January 2011, a cold evening. What immediately struck us was the constant bustle around the church. People were hurrying, almost rushing over, eager to ‘finish their business’ and return to their homes after a hard day’s work. In front of the church young men and women were silently writing notes on the kerbstones, the stairs or the old capitals in the yard. Further along people were lighting candles for the dead and the living.

Others were queuing at an icon of Saint Anthony, a smaller copy of the miraculous one kept inside the church next to the altar. Once in front, they addressed the saint in their prayers in low voices; some touched the icon with their hands, others pressed their foreheads against it, yet others kissed it. A few rubbed handkerchiefs, scarves or other personal items against the icon, thus transforming them into protective objects; others touched the icon with flowers that they walked away with. We saw a woman take off her wedding ring and pressing it against the icon. Many young people were in the queue, probably because Saint Anthony the Great is also known as the protector of couples, helping people to find a partner or solve love problems.

Inside the church was crowded with people, making it almost impossible to advance. Three priests standing in three different corners were reading out



acatists. Each was holding a thick bundle of notes in his hands, reading them out one by one in a mumbling, monotonous voice. People were gathered around them like grapes in a cluster, holding on to the priest's *epitrachelion* (Rom. *epitrabil*, from the Gr. *epitrabilion*). This part of the vestment – the main habit of a priest, without which no church service is possible – symbolizes his commitment to God but also the grace that descends on him from above while officiating.⁶⁸ Touching it, believers put themselves in contact with the deity, thus increasing the chances of their prayers and demands being heard.

Illustration 7: People holding the *epitrachelion* of the priest while he is reading out their *acatists*. [Photo: Eric Venbrux]

⁶⁸ Each time the priest puts on this headdress he is supposed to say the following words (Psalm 133, 2): 'Blessed is God, the one who pours his grace over his priests, as the myrrh poured over the head drips through the beard, the beard of Aaron, down to the collar of his robe'. GENADIE, ancient Bishop of Argeș: *Liturgica, sau explicația Serviciului divin* [The liturgy or explanation of the divine service] (Bucharest 1877) 15-16; I.V. RAICULESCU: *Biserica, obiectele sfinte din ea și veșmintele bisericăsești* [The church, the holy objects in it and the sacerdotal attire] (Bucharest 1903) 72-73; VINTILESCU: *Liturgierul explicativ* 104-106; I.M. STOIAN: *Dicționar religioz* [Religious dictionary] (Bucharest 1994) 98; N. GOGOL: *Beschouwingen over de goddelijke liturgie* [Reflections on divine liturgy] (Diksmuide 2011) 14.

Touching the liturgical vestments is a common practice among Orthodox believers. Its origins are to be found in a story in *Holy Scripture* (Mark 5, 21-34), in which a woman is healed merely by touching Jesus' garment. It often happens that during the liturgical service, when the priest is coming from the altar people reach out and touch his garments with their hand; they then rub this hand over their faces in a gesture resembling washing the face with water, or they simply lay the hand on the top of their heads. The purpose is to put themselves in contact with, to get in touch with holiness, or, as a young woman put it, 'to get light'.

This kind of practice can assume more extreme forms, for instance a person in need (usually a sick person) may ask the priest to walk over him or take his liturgical vestments off over him. The church, however, regards these as superstitions to be discouraged and approves none of these forms.⁶⁹ The only occasions when the priestly vestments should be in direct contact with the believer are during confession and during the prayer said forty days after a woman has given birth. On these occasions the *epitrachelion* is laid over the head of the believer, kneeling in front of the priest.

As in the case of the 33-candle ritual described above, bringing *acatists* to Saint Anthony's Church has to be repeated. The written requests are supposed to be brought every Tuesday for nine weeks in a row. In the tenth week the supplicants should demonstrate their gratitude by bringing alms (*milostenie*) to the church. These mainly consist of bread, oil, fruit, corn flour, sugar, wine or anything else, according to the person's means.

In an interview with a woman's magazine a few years ago the vicar of Saint Anthony's said he did not know the origin of this Tuesday ritual that, according to him, was already performed in the 1970s when he was transferred to his present church from another parish in town. Over the years he seems to have made it one of the main tasks of the church he shepherded along with his liturgical duties, and he intending passing it on to his successor. Here, at Saint Anthony's, the Old Court, every day is Tuesday', he said to the reporter.⁷⁰

In the two rituals described above, the ones performed in Saint George's Church and in Saint Anthony's Church, multiplication is meant to show the endurance the performers are capable of in order to prove their faith. Thus the practitioners might bring upon themselves the divine grace and, ultimately, the fulfillment of their wishes.

⁶⁹ See the article by priest R-G. TOPALĂ: 'Este corect ca preotul să dezbrace veșmintele peste credincioși?' [Is it right for a priest to take off his attire over the believers?], in *Ziarul Lumina*, Bucharest, Thursday 17 March 2011, no. 63 (1867), VIIth year, p.7.

⁷⁰ S. PREDA: 'Zi de marți la Sfântul Anton' [Tuesday at Saint Anthony's], in *Formula As*, Bucharest, no. 603, 2004, <http://www.formula-as.ro/2004/603/spiritualitate-39/zi-de-marti-la-sfantul-anton-4781>.

7. Conclusion

In Bucharest lived religion is most fervently expressed in ritual practices performed to achieve concrete goals. As we have seen in the examples of ritual multiplication, people multiply their means in order to achieve concrete goals (they follow a 'path'), even if the church would like them to concentrate on higher, more spiritual aims. In the process touch has special meaning: there is direct contact (touching relics) and indirect contact (anointing the skin with holy oil from the lamp burning for the saint, wearing clothes that have been in contact with the relics, etc.). There are people who go to 'visit' the saints as if they are visiting their friends; they are *les habitués* of the saints. They pray for all the members of their family and for friends, and they bring things from the church for them (e.g. flowers, basil and holy water); they are the suppliers. They usually have time to spend on such activities and are often elderly, retired people. In *acatists* one can pray not only for the resolution of one's own problems but also on behalf of other people (e.g. mothers or grandmothers presenting *acatists* for their daughters or granddaughters to get married). The congregation of participants itself can be seen as a multiplication of a shared ritual practice such as prayer, broadening the channel of communication with the divine and increasing the chances of efficacy.

Concerning the practices, their sacredness is infinite, therefore it can be multiplied. Holy water can be multiplied, holy oil as well, and above all relics can be multiplied. In the process they do not lose their powers, as the part stands for the whole. The saints (and martyrs) are particular cases of multiplication: (1) their relics are multiplied; (2) the protective and healing powers transmitted by relics are multiplied through indirect contact with other objects (oil, clothing, handkerchiefs, etc.). We have also seen that in lived religion to believers and ritual performers in Bucharest quantity remains important. It relates closely to the sacrifice one has to make to get something (e.g. the number of times one has to present *acatists*, the number of hours one has to stand in a queue, the number of relics one has to touch). By multiplying their actions votaries expect to increase their chances of getting what they ask for. According to this logic numbers are important: repetition always involve a magic or sacred number such as three, seven or nine. Ritual multiplication, in addition, can be seen as a strategy of intensification.

People resort to ritual multiplication in a context of insecurity. Frequently it is a last resort providing a means to an end, a 'path' people follow to solve problems and fulfill pressing needs. The existential insecurity in Bucharest after 1989 led not only to a religious revival but more particularly to a flourishing of ritual practices. It was, as we have shown, a matter of reviving old practices (at least in the public domain) and newly emerging rituals. A remarkable aspect is the phenomenon of ritual multiplication on which lived religion in Bucharest today thrives.

The way in which Romanian Orthodoxy should cope with capitalism has been discussed in Romanian literature since the end of the 19th century.⁷¹ After World War II, rather than embracing capitalism, Romania was subjected to almost half a century of communist rule. Today, more than twenty years after the communist regime was toppled, Orthodoxy is stronger than ever, yet Romania has still not achieved a capitalist way of life but is stuck in a transitional phase. Under these conditions rituals belonging to lived religion became a way for people to cope with uncertainty and insecurity brought into their lives by this transition. The shock of dealing with these new factors was even more difficult to endure than communism when people could rely on the state for a number of things. Nowadays, when life is not treating them well, they have to put their hope elsewhere. The religious rituals in vogue at least offer them a way of doing something; they are practices which they believe will influence their fate. Ritual multiplication in particular counteracts insecurity, and therefore occupies a prominent place in lived religion in Romania today.

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⁷¹ M. GHEORGHE: *Religie și schimbare socială în România* [Religion and social change in Romania] (Iași 2004) 69-84.

