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Some questions about the study of the Romanian religiosity*

Romanian religion and religiosity may be considered topics that rarely stir the interest of the members of the academic community, after rather long periods of time and on the occasion of certain events marked on the public agenda. An important indicator of this fact is represented by the difficulty of finding study programmes with these curricula besides institutes of theology. A starting point consisted in the debates on the integration of religion in the school curricula as a compulsory subject, the keeping of icons in classrooms or some Orthodox monastery misfortunes. The religious values of Romanians are cyclically evaluated within the European statistical research, but the specificity of Romanian religiosity as related to its own criteria has been only seldom found in the literature. Reading these has generated some questions about what the actual scientific study of religion and religiosity means starting from the Romanian context.

Some questions about the educational capital of research subjects

The first approach in my discourse is that of the research method which is being used. The difference between the qualitative and quantitative methods is frequently utilized in the sociological research courses. Generally speaking, their didactic presentation requires highlighting both of their positive and negative aspects. It is the researcher that must establish the appropriate method for achieving the purposes in view. At the same time, it is important for us not to forget the alternative which recommends that the deliberate use of a certain method to do science should be regarded with skepticism, starting from the argument that science is a creative and unforeseeable process which shouldn't follow a certain prescription for being (Godfrey-Smith, 2003: 18).

* The translation of the text from page 103.

As far as the quantitative methodology is concerned, it largely involves the use of Mathematics in the study of social phenomena. The positive effects of Statistics application especially are well-known: it contributes to making predictions and inductive reasoning, mathematic models of reality can be created, the empirical data can be analysed more easily, their ordering potential being useful in designing descriptive maps of a population (Vlăsceanu, 2008: 197).

In current research conducted by quantitative methodology (European Values Survey, World Values Survey) the concept of religiosity is analyzed by means of some standard indicators regarding the religious belief and practice: religious attitudes (the attitude towards death, the meaning of life, the importance of God, the evaluation of someone's own religiosity, the reflection on religion as source of energy, the evaluation of some deviant behaviour from the perspective of the Christian practice), the religious practice and affiliation (the belonging to or the changing of a certain denomination, the frequency of attending religious services, the frequency of praying, the participation in religious services at important moments in life), religious socialisation, religious beliefs (in God, in life after death, in the existence of soul, in Heaven, in Hell, in sin, telepathy, power of amulet, in resurrection, reincarnation and miracles) (Voicu, 2007: 39). This manner of operationalising the concept of religiosity allows reanalysing of transversal analyses with a highly comparative dimension. Also, it is known that using the survey as a method of collecting data about religiosity involves obtaining only some quite simple information (Rotariu, 2016: 205), but simultaneously, it permits seeing to what extent a certain characteristic is dispersed in a population (Rotariu, 2016: 201).

Some quantitative researches (that were produced by Soros Foundation in 2011 or STISOC 2010 project) were characterised by a higher specificity by including certain indicators in the analysis pattern. Some of them were: the gesture of imitating the cross symbol while passing by a church, weekly fast, abidance by religious holidays, object consecration, periodical confession, the presence of icons in the house, the financial individual contribution to the parochial budget. The people who pay more importance to religion in their lives are rather elder women, with low educational capital, living in rural areas (Popescu, 2011a). Also, a higher frequency of prayer is noticed in the case of women, of the people living in rural areas, of elders and of those with low educational capital (Popescu, 2011b).

In current sociological literature, qualitative methodology is very well represented by a laborious project which supposes using participant observation and interview (Bănică, 2014) in which the pilgrimage phenomenon has been studied. This is considered, on the one hand, to be a

total phenomenon due to the spectrum of occurrence, frequency, diversity, but on the other hand, the pilgrimage is “an occasion for socialisation” (Bănică, 2014: 323), “a simple and effective modality to improve the quality of life”, “the place in which the beliefs and folk practices find a productive field of expression, sometimes being at the limit of a rigorous theologian” (*ibidem*, 369). Though he has renounced designing a pilgrim’s typology (*ibidem*, 20), Mirel Bănică sketches the common people’s world, that belong mostly to the rural area, with prosaic interests, participating in day-to-day discussions, whose religious practices have a major folk dimension, with magic overtone, and who are motivated in attending pilgrimages rather by entirely mundane interests.

Joining the two perspectives upon Romanian religiosity, that obtained through quantitative methodology and that obtained through qualitative methodology, it could be said that they are similar, their credibility originating in the same theoretical representation of social reality. But, going back to their conclusions, we can remark that the recognition of the high level of Romanian religiosity contrasts with the trivialisation and the lack of an elevated perspective upon it, a perspective imposed by the normative model of Christian religiosity they refer to. Religion is a constant feature of the Romanian society, but it is an attribute of those with a low educational and economic capital, of those who live in a traditional way (with an imperceptible pejorative hue), refusing the Modernity values, of those who have grown old. It is probably frustrating for a young inhabitant of an urban area, possessing a high educational and religious capital, to get to know the theoretical representations of the Romanian religious reality. Even though he exists in reality, he doesn’t find himself in these scientific frames. Consequently, why is there this theoretical representation of religiosity containing blanks, the same descriptive mapping using the same coordinates? The widely held attributes of investigated population are being emphasised, but are these the most relevant for defining religiosity? An ethic norm of scientific research (Babbie, 2010: 107) prescribes however that the real social actors should recognise themselves in what it is written about them.

A possible explanation of this contradiction is that being at the intersection between two concepts namely “evaluative ideas” belonging to Max Weber’s thinking and “Scientific Revolution”. Max Weber remarks that “the choice of the object of investigation and the extent and depth to which this investigation attempts to penetrate into the infinite causal web, are determined by the evaluative ideas which dominate the investigator and his age” (Weber, 1949: 84). In other words, the social researcher knows selectively the studied reality (it means that not all the aspects of social life have the same euristical value for him) and he knows it through a

personal interpretation pattern, the significance which he gives to a social phenomenon being determined by his own value ideas. As far as the concept of “Scientific Revolution” is regarded, it is one of the most powerful and resistant to change in the history of Western civilization (Stahl, Campbell, Petry and Diver, 2002: 38). Since it appeared in Herbert Butterfield’s book “The Origins of Modern Science” in 1948, its meaning has been analysed and debated intensively by the science historians and philosophers. It is essential for my argumentation that, as people living in the 21st century, our pattern of understanding science, religion and the relation between them is moulded culturally by the meaning of this last concept. Also, it is recognised that there are a similarity and a continuity between the way of doing science nowadays and the way in which science has been done since the moment the Scientific Revolution took place, precisely since 1550 until present (Weinberg, 2017: 158). The Scientific Revolution is the prime mover of the convulsion period in European history which has the idea of “new man” as an outcome. His status becomes higher through education, ultimately being freed of any magical-religious coercions, living in a world in which science becomes the guarantee of progress and, eventually, of happiness. Thus he becomes the advocate of free thinking, the rational critic of authority (Hazard, 2017). From this new man’s perspective, living in Modernity, education cannot coexist with religiosity on the individual level. Consequently, it is difficult to identify people with these two attributes at the highest standard in the social reality as, from the theoretical point of view, i.e. of the value ideas which conduct the research work, this association is not obvious.

Questions about subject-object knowledge relation

This relation is included into the extended topic of objectivity in social science, a topic which has generated debates since the very foundation of sociology as a science. The arguments put forward have been derived from the constant perspective similar to the objectivity specific to natural science. The Durkheimian tradition requires, on behalf of scientific objectivity, that social facts should be studied as though they were things, by focusing on the social dimension to the detriment of the individual one. In the Weberian tradition it is considered that it is the values involved in a social practice that must be understood, and not only its observation. In other words, objectivity is guaranteed through exactly the contact with the values without one’s adhering to those values as a researcher.

Schematically, within natural science, the relation between the subject and the object of knowledge can be drawn as an axis which connects the two poles. The process always occurs in

and through a linguistic community whose cognitive and conceptual resources are used on this purpose. The changing of the complexity and of the amplitude of this relation is specific to social science. Both the subject and the object of knowledge are involved in social relationships inside which ideas and significations regarding exactly the object of knowledge circulate, their own specific communities being even distinct due to these meanings (Sayer, 2010: 15-18). Because of them, in social sciences the object of knowledge can be “changed *intrinsically* by learning and adjusting to the subject’s understanding”, unlike the object of natural science which does not modify its particularities by associating a set of significations. There are two consequences of this fact: 1. the concept of “intrinsically meaningful” of the social phenomena is specific to the social science, this referring to the fact that “the ideas, beliefs, concepts and knowledge are held by people in society”; and 2. in social science it is operated with *concepts-dependent* on the meaningful context out of which they are extracted and subsequently elaborated (*ibidem*, 20).

The above considerations lead to the idea that objectivity in social science results from the overlapping of the signification sets of the two poles of the knowledge process. More specifically, it means the invariability of the intrinsic signification of social phenomena by the interferences of the inwardness specific to knowledge subject’s community. Returning to the religious phenomenon, the social actor assigns an absolute meaning to its own religiosity, both on the individual dimension of beliefs and practices, and on the social-institutional dimension. Is this character relativised in the knowledge process of the religious phenomenon?

I consider the answer to be affirmative and it has to be related again to the cultural science researcher’s value ideas. A researcher who honestly declares his detachment from the religious values considers religiosity to be a social construct that emerged sometime over the course of the social development of the human race because of some lacks or aspirations of it (Baechler, 1997: 479-481). There have been identified the functions of religious institution in society and on the individual level, and the different religious organisation types, but the act of knowledge cannot cover the entire area of connotations. Rudolph Otto has circumscribed two distinct categories of the religious: the rational domain which can be classified using cognitive tools and the “irrational” domain which is outside the understanding possibilities (Otto, 1992: 79). From the perspective of the believer it is exactly the second domain that determines the absolute character of the religious phenomenon. The problem arises when the knowledge subject denies the existence of the irrational domain, not lending credit and substance to it. In this context, the sphere of intrinsic signification of the religious phenomenon cannot be completely discovered, the objective character of knowledge being disturbed. His independence from the religious values

determines the religious phenomenon researcher to be selective as related to what religiosity means, and so the relation with his own study object is perturbed by this very selectivity. Where the social actor perceives the Absolute, the scientist sees an imagination result, an expression of weaknesses of any kind or of the creative energies specific to the human being. To what extent such an actor finds himself in the output of the scientific activity of the religious reality? It has been a question without answer until now, but we infer that in this case the signification areas which the two poles of the knowledge process assign to religiosity do not overlap.

I consider that a proper relation to one's own study object is that in which one "sees" it, one "knows" that it exists in reality, one lends credit and substance to it. The knowledge process in natural science implies this visibility of the object of study (Mlodinow, 2016). Galilei literally saw the planets with his telescope, but he did complicated calculations for determining the moon landscape about which he "had known" that it was there. Copernic established the sun centered universe because he had known that there had to exist a method which should allow the replacement of the complex adjustments for maintaining the Earth in the centre of the Universe. Newton discovered Mathematical analysis knowing that there had to exist some indivisible particles of space and time. Mendeleev designed The Periodic System of Elements leaving blanks inside it because he had known that other elements whose weight he had predicted would be discovered. Also, Marie Curie gave "the right to existence" to the radioactive substances named after her.

In the same vein, I also think that the subject's attitude to the object of his knowledge is also important. Humility in a social relationship is synonymous with the valorisation of the other above one's own valorisation. I dare to transfer this feature into the knowledge relation. It supposes and imposes on the scientist the granting of an absolute value to the significations which he decodes by referring to his own ones assigned to a social phenomenon. In the process of knowing religiosity, one feels the confidence with which the scientist asserts the results of his knowledge, the conviction that no other interpretation is possible. He is the omniscient narrator who creates within a realistic paradigm, playing the Demiurge in relation to his characters. Along with humility, Lucian Blaga completes the nuances necessary for the subject-object relation of the knowledge of religiosity: "I do not kill / with the mind, the mysteries I encounter."

All these are arguments for the idea that the scientific study of religion and religiosity should undergo a paradigm change in the way in which Thomas Kuhn defined it. I consider that the problems which I raised – the subjectivity of objectivity in the study of religiosity and the inconsistent theoretical representation as related to religious reality – cannot be solved within the

current paradigm based on the cognitive principles of Modernity. This allows religiosity to be considered “a simple faith of people who try from all their hearts, sometimes with major risks, to serve what *they* (author’s underline) believe that divinity and its expression forms are” (Bănică, 2014: 9). Maybe inside another paradigm, the conclusions of a researcher who affirms his adhesion to the religious values, succeeding in this way to “see” his study object in its integrality, can be freed from the suspicion of subjectivity in scientific activity.

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