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Hanc, Ovidiu

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Secularism and the Church:

A Case Study on the Church in Romania



Ovidiu HANC, Ph.D.
Department of Theology
Emanuel University of Oradea
ROMANIA
ovidiu.hanc@emanuel.ro

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ABSTRACT

Today's society is an increasingly secular society. Secularisation implies the eradication of the religious dimension at both individual and social levels. Secularism, however, does not remain an abstract philosophical concept, but one which permeates the entire society. Society is not a morally abstract entity, therefore the conflict between secularism and the Church is inevitable. In this paper we will examine not only how this trend is seen in relation to the Christian Church in general, but also how this relationship takes place in the context of the Christian Church in Romania. Although most of the Romanian society is Orthodox, alongside other Christian churches recognized by the state from (at least nominally) a Christian society. The Romanian Christian Church covers almost the entire Romanian society (the percentage of people outside the Christian sphere is less than 1% of the country's population). In this context, the present research will focus primarily on how, historically speaking, secularization has generally occurred in Western society but also in Romanian society. Secularism is creeping subtly, gradually, and aggressively into Romanian society. Given that secularism is in essence about the removal of God from society and the dissolution of morality, secularism is implicitly one of the greatest challenges of the last three decades for the Romanian Church. In this context it should be stressed that the Christian Church in Romania has often lost ground in this war. Since the Church is the entity meant to provide the moral fibre of society, the war with secularism must be taken into consideration.

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I. INTRODUCTION

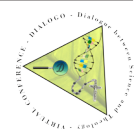
In recent centuries, our culture has undergone a gradual paradigm shift from theism, to deism, to, agnosticism, to atheism, and secularism. When we talk about secularism it is important to differentiate between secularism and secularisation. While secularism is the philosophical approach to the concept that religion is neutral and therefore does not need to have an impact on society, secularisation is the social phenomenon in which the set of religious values tends to be detached and removed from the reality of everyday life and social institutions. Secularism is rooted in materialism and defies spiritual reality. The results of secularism can be seen in society's transition from a ubiquitous faith in God to a society that gradually eliminates from its moral fibre any reminiscence of theistic Christian faith.

This paper examines the tension that exists between the secularising society and the Christian Church. The study examines how secularism is increasingly penetrating society, and as a case study will examine how the Church in Romania relates to secularism and secularization. According to the latest census in Romania in 2011 according to the National Institute of Statistics, 86.5% of the population is Orthodox, 4.6% Roman Catholic, 3.2% Reformed, 1.9% Pentecostal, 0.8% Greek Catholic, 0.6% Baptist, 0.4% Seventh-day Adventist, and the remaining 1.8% are of another religion. This survey shows that those who declared themselves atheists represent only a sample of 0.11% of the country's population. Since an overwhelming percentage of Romania's population is Christian, this study will analyse how the Christian Church as a whole relates to the phenomenon of secularisation. Secularisation is not only about agnostic, non-religious or atheistic society. Secularisation especially encompasses the life of the church, regardless of its denominational identity.

II. HISTORICAL INSIGHTS: FROM WESTERN CHRISTENDOM TO THE SECULAR WEST

Beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth century through the writings of John Locke (1632-1704), [1] Voltaire (1694-1778), [2] Thomas Paine (1737-1809), [3] et. al, secularism emerged to influence the world in a slow process of dethroning religion. Paul Ricoeur described Marx (1818-1883), Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Sigmund Freud (1859-1939) a trio of "masters of suspicion". [4] Although Ricoeur used the concept of the "school of suspicion" (*école du soupçon*) in reference to the hermeneutics of suspicion vis-à-vis literary interpretations, in terms of the influence of thinkers towards secularism we can speak in a broader framework of a *quartet* of masters of suspicion, taking Charles Darwin (1809-1882) into account as well. The 19th century was marked by suspicion on divine creation (see Darwin's theory of evolution), suspicion on religious identity (see Marx's theory of scientific socialism), suspicion on divine authority (see Nietzsche's philosophy of religion and the concept of superhuman/*Übermensch*), and suspicion on religious consciousness and morality (see Freud's theory on religion as an illusion/a form of neurosis). As a result of these highly influential currents of religious thought, secularism has pervaded and significantly influenced 20th century society.

Secularism and secularization are not a phenomenon specific to the last centuries, however, the trend of secularization has experienced a distinct upward trend in the 20th century. From this trend of secularisation we mention a few reference examples. In 1933 C. S. Lewis published his first work of prose-fiction, and the third writing after his conversion to Christianity called *The Pilgrim's Regress*. This paper reflects a mirror analysis of John Bunyan's seminal work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Lewis describes the tendency of modern society in



which Christianity is regressing as it merges into secularism, materialism and other philosophical or political movements. For Lewis, the whole of life is designed to be lived for God, which is why life has an inescapable religious dimension. Another leading figure in 20th century Christianity is Billy Graham. He is the most influential Christian preacher of the 20th century, and 61 times Gallup's Top 10 "Most Admired Man." Graham noted in his 1991 crusade that in New York during the last 30 years there has been a tragic exodus from the churches into materialism, secularism, and humanism.[5]

It is wrong to discuss the gradual advance of secularism without mentioning the various bankruptcies of the Church. The Church has often lost the battle with secularism by failing in terms of identity, integrity and intellectuality. In the last century biblical ecclesiology has often become a culturally defined ecclesiology, and in an attempt to become relevant, the Church has gradually moved towards its own irrelevance, the privatization of faith and the undermining of morality.

As for the battle at the academic level, Quentin Smith, an atheist philosopher, has argued that theistic believers tend to compartmentalize their theistic beliefs from their academic work, never assuming and arguing for theism in their academic work.[6] While secularism has been extremely incisive, the Church has been extremely non-combative about identity and calling.

Christian Smith edited a volume in 2003 in which he argued that secularization of the American public life over the past hundred and thirty years was an intentional achievement of cultural and intellectual elites.[7] Charles Taylor in his influential work interprets secularization not only in the context of the fading religious reality but also in the context of the rise of humanism.[8]

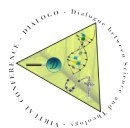
All sociological research indicates an

increase in religiously unaffiliated people such that 21st century American society is considered non-religious and post-Christian.[9] The paradox of this vector of secularism is that society increasingly tends to define itself as spiritual but not religious.[10] Research by the *Pew Research Center* (a secular research centre) indicates that the decline of Christianity in America is occurring at a rapid pace.[11] This is also documented by David Kinnaman in his book *You Lost Me*, a book that describes how more than half of the younger Christian generation is no longer actively involved in the Church. Caught in the tension of profound cultural change, Kinnaman correctly points out that "the spiritual narrative of our culture has shifted-slowly in places, quickly in others-toward secularism and away from the Bible and Christianity." [12] *Barna Research Group* showed that Generation Z (those born between 1999-2005) are the first "post-Christian" generation, while the number of atheists doubles within this generation.[13]

Regarding the situation in Romania, we can say from the available statistical data that the atheist population represents only 0.11% of the country's population and those who are without religion 0.10%. On the other hand, we must point out that although these two segments represent a very small percentage of the country's population, the percentages are increasing significantly (e.g. 0.04% atheists in 2002 vs. 0.11% in 2011). Secularism is not a phenomenon found exclusively in atheism. It manifests itself not only in deeply anti-Christian values, but also in a syncretism in which Christianity is intertwined with humanism, religious liberalism, agnosticism, scepticism, naturalism and similar philosophical trends.

III. THE MORAL DIMENSION AND SECULARISM: PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The Christian Church is the entity that provides the moral fibre in a society. This



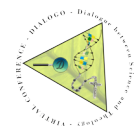
moral fibre spills over into the entire social spectrum: political, economic, educational, etc. The tension between religion and economics has given rise to two interpretive paradigms. Broadly, Karl Marx's paradigm argues that economics is the determining factor of society (religion and culture), while Max Weber argued in his work that religion/culture influences economics and politics.[14] The problem with Marx's theory that social existence determines human consciousness is that there is essentially no causality between materialism and morality, only interference. Economic activity cannot produce morality. Even if there is some a posteriori interference, if we analyse this causality a priori we can affirm with historical certainty that ethics determines economics. Historically, in the most significant period of scientific progress, mankind experienced the bloodiest century in human history. The horrific historical realities of the 20th century attest to the fact that scientific progress cannot change man. If we study the period of economic development after the world wars, we discover that human problems are not solved by economic divestment. Gregg Easterbrook's research in "The Progress Paradox" focuses on the reasons why people feel worse although their lives get better.[15] Scientific progress is the framework in which man has undergone significant transformations, but in reality man determines scientific, social, and economic progress, not vice versa.

Discussion of morality outside the spiritual framework is ultimately doomed to failure. Man cannot be good without God, as Greg Epstein, the president of the Harvard Chaplains Organization and Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University tries to argue. [16] Humanism, naturalism, atheism and any other philosophical approaches that dismiss or deny God will eventually lead to a moral utopia. Historically, secularism is not credited as a source of morality. William Lane Craig

pointed out that the existence of God is the sine qua non foundation for the existence of morality. His extremely convincing argument about the necessary link between morality and God starts with the following syllogism: (1.) *If God does not exist, there are no objective moral values* (2.) *Objective moral values exist.* (3.) *Therefore, God exists.*[17]

In terms of the moral dimension as a battleground between secularism and Christian values, the Church bears an ontological moral responsibility to be the spiritual stronghold that offers morality to society. The result of this must be seen in both the economic and social sides of the country. The lack of this evidence cannot be blamed only on the political elite, it must also be demanded of the Romanian Christian Church.

The war between spirituality and secularism is being waged on all levels of society. Secularism in Romania can be seen in concrete issues such as corruption, crime, plagiarism, bad legislation, poverty, etc. All these issues have an unavoidable moral framework. These moral issues with social implications are inevitably linked to the Romanian Christian Church. Although all the corruption and other issues mentioned above are mostly attributed to the political class, these issues are also indirectly related to social morality and the impact the Church should have on morality. An example of this truth is the following: when a person commits an illegal act, the responsibility for such an act comes not only from the legislative authority (the politician to legislate such acts), from the legal authorities (the police called to arrest the person in question), from the educational authorities (the school called to educate), but also from the spiritual authority - the Church called to assist in the spiritual transformation of man and provide a moral reference.



IV. SECULARISM AND RELIGION IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

All these examples from the Western world reflect how secularisation not only defines but also determines both the social dimension and the religious faith community. In this paper the research focuses on how secularism that is prevalent in the Western societies, affects the secular and religious society in Romania after the fall of communism.

The presence and role of religion in Romanian society diminishes with each decade. The analysis of the secularisation of Romanian society should not be approached in terms of the control of religion over social institutions but in terms of its influence on the life and values of Romanian society.

Historically, after the Second World War Romania had a communist leadership based on atheistic philosophy. The Communist Regime repressed religion and engaged in persecution of the Christian Church. The government was one of religious repression and ideological enforcement who tried to limit religious freedom and to stop the Christians from influencing society. The new 'religion' that was taught by the State was that of atheism and dialectical materialism. However, Romanian society was not shaped by this philosophy, and with the 1989 revolution, it became evident that despite the restriction of religious freedom, Romanian society had preserved its Christian identity. Christian religion is fundamental to the Romanian people.

A. Christian Belief and National Identity

According to Pew Research Centre, a large majority of Romanians view Christianity as a component of national identity.[18] The Laboratory for Analysis of Information Warfare and Strategic Communication (Laborator de Analiză Războiului Informațional și Comunicare

Strategică – LARICS), in partnership with the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs and the Institute of Political Science and International Relations of Romanian Academy (Institutul de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale „Ion I. C. Brătianu” al Academiei Române - ISPRI), conducted a survey in 2021 with the title: “Barometer of Religious Life, December 2021” research which revealed the following:

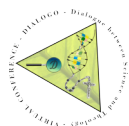
- 83% of Romanians consider themselves religious
- 53-54% of the public pray daily or almost daily
- 23% of subjects say they go to church weekly or more often.
- 89% of Romanians say that religion in no way hinders Romania’s membership in the EU and the Euro-Atlantic area.
- 90% of respondents believe in God
- 62% of respondents trust the Church[19]

Analysing these data we deduce that the Church has a significant influence at the societal level. At the same time, this research needs to be seen in a wider context. Trust in the Church is decreasing if we compare the data with other years or even with data from the last thirty years.

B. Family and Identity Issues

Romania is a conservative Christian country in which the traditional values are similar to other Orthodox-majority countries. These values are reflected in the definition of Christian marriage as the freely consented union between a man and a woman; the definition of man as created in the image and likeness of God; the definition of life as a sacred reality from conception. The practical, social and political implications of these values are obvious.

In 2018 there was a national referendum to redefine marriage as it is in the Article 48 of the Constitution. The family is defined in the Romanian Constitution as the union



between spouses, however, the term spouses is not defined. With the secularist trends of redefining gender identity and marriage, it has been proposed to change the article in the Constitution with the following definition: “The family is founded on the freely consented marriage between a man and a woman, on their equality and on the right and duty of parents to provide for the upbringing, education and training of their children.” Due to a particular political context, this referendum was highly politicised, so that the minimum 25% turnout required to validate the referendum was not met (the turnout was only 21%). The key interpretation of this vote has sparked many discussions in society, discussions that were held in the public space governed by the secular media and the highly divided political world. The media is generally recognised as a stronghold of secularism.[20] Any voice that supports Christian values is generally silenced or ignored by the secular media.

What is often omitted is that of the nearly 4 million voters who cast their ballots, the percentage who were in favour of this change was 91.56%. The invalidation of the referendum because of the minimum percentage does not invalidate the almost unanimous percentage reflecting support for traditional family values.

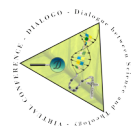
Another vital aspect that is debated in the Romanian is related to gender identity and other aspects of sexuality. These topics are only possible in the context of the secularisation of society. Until recently the question of who defines my identity was determined within the framework of Judeo-Christian values. Man is created by God as part male and part female (Gen. 1:27; 2:21-24), and this is reflected not only in personal identity but also in marriage. Secularism, however, promotes the idea that man defines his own identity, with the idea of the Creator completely removed from the equation. These tendencies were

inconceivable throughout history until the period when 20th century secularization gradually and aggressively promoted its values. According to Pew Research Center in 2015-2016, in Romania, the percentage of those perceiving homosexuality as morally wrong was 82%.[21] Militant secularism has proven extremely effective since these values are turned into indictments against Christians. From the point of view of the Christian church, they represent the deconstruction of truth and the decline of morality presented by Scripture (Rom. 1:32).

The Church in Romania is a defining voice at the national level. The countries of the Eastern European bloc are aligned with these fundamental Judeo-Christian values. It is important to note the gap between these values and those of Western European countries. For example: while most Western European countries are in favour of same-sex marriage, almost all Central and Eastern European countries take the opposite stance on the issue. The debate is extremely heated and has no points of reconciliation since the two perspectives represent views that are not different but divergent. The Christian Church in Romania is one of the voices speaking out against secularism, a voice that must not be silenced.

C. Trust Barometer: The Romanian Church

According to all surveys since the 1989 revolution, the top two institutions Romanians trust are the Army and the Church. Adrian Simion pointed out that after the end of communism the Church is the institution that came first in the collective mind of Romanians in terms of preferences and trust.[22] In 2003 trust in the Church was 90% (European Values Survey), in 2006 trust was 87% (INSOMAR survey), in 2013 it was 66% (CCSB survey). In 2021, according to the “Barometer of Religious Life”, sociological research conducted by the Institute of Political Science and International Relations



of the Romanian Academy “Ion I. C. Brătianu” and the Center for Sociological Research LARICS, trust in the Church is 62.4%. [23]

All these figures show a downward trend in trust in the Romanian Church. The causes are multiple and can only be briefly addressed in this study. These causes are both internal – related to the life of the church, but also external – related to the advance of secularism in society. As far as internal causes are concerned, we can list the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the Church with regard to religious leaders, simony, immorality of some clerics, sexual scandals, etc.

In analysing these issues, we must consider the dichotomy between the spiritual life and the religious life. Some of the issues that have led to a decline in trust in the Church in Romania have to do with the perception of the Church as an institution but also with a decline in religiosity. The study conducted by the LARICS Sociological Research Centre mentioned above also points out that 90.4% of Romanians consider themselves religious. This trend is somewhat similar to Western society which tends to become increasingly deinstitutionalized and individualized, while retaining a spiritual concern of the “Spiritual but not Religious” (SBNT) type: “I love Jesus, but not the Church”. [24] As far as external causes are concerned, in the context of secularism and progressivism (culture as authority over Scripture), the tendency of distrust in religion is growing in this so called “post-Christian” society.

There are many reasons why people turn away from the Church. The literature shows that these reasons differ greatly from one experience to another in their interaction with issues of faith, Church or believers: the problem of reconciling the love of God with the problem of evil or suffering; the problem of reconciling faith and science; the problem of witness and injustice in the history of Christianity; the problem of hypocrisy of

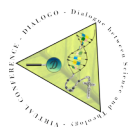
Christians; the problem of unpleasant personal experiences with a Christian; etc. The only way for the Church in Romania to regain its dwindling trust is to live according to the Christian values it proclaims. The Church has never become more irrelevant to society than when, in trying to adapt to the surrounding culture, it has lost its own relevance.

V. SECULARISM AND THE CHURCH: BIBLICAL ASPECTS

Secularism is present in the Old Testament period. For example in the period of the Judges, the Jewish people turned away from the Law of God, and the result is a period of almost 400 years in which individualism, materialism, syncretism were the realities – a time when everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judg. 21:25). In the monarchical period, secularism is prevalent in Jewish society through apostasy and experiences an upward trend that eventually leads to divine punishment through Babylonian bondage (e.g. 1 Kings 15:12-13; 16:13; 26; Jer. 10:2; Ezek. 16:1-63; 20:32).

Secularism is the tendency of the individual or society to remove God from daily life. In the Epistle to the Church in Rome the apostle Paul highlights that the justice of God is upon those who suppress the truth in ungodliness and unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). In Romans 12:2 Paul exhorts the Church not to be conformed to the image of this age. The term used in the Greek text is αἰὼν (*aiōn*) – the term has the meaning of eternity, age (time period) but also world, universe or world system. The term used in the Vulgate translation is *saeculum* (century): ‘et nolite conformari huic saeculo’.

The reason behind the rise of secularism is due not only to its aggressive advance, but also with the moral and spiritual failure of the Church. The two issues are closely linked. Since the beginning, the Christian Church



has been under spiritual attack from both outside (Ephesians 6:11-12) and inside (Acts 20:29).

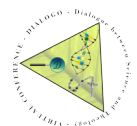
In Paul's exhortation about responsibility for the Church, he warns Timothy about how people will live contrary to Christian values (2 Tim. 3:1-5). Secular society that departs from an objective moral framework will inevitably end up with realities like those Paul describes (2 Tim. 3:1-5). In Pauline theology, these things define the pagan world as a secular world and are totally opposed to Christian values (Gal. 1:4; Eph. 2:2; 6:12; Titus 2:12; Col. 3:5, etc.). The Apostle John warned Christians in his first epistle not to love the world or the things in the world that are passing away (1 John 2:15-17). In Revelation, the messages to the Church often deal with how secularism has penetrated the Church in various forms. For example in Thyatira secular culture was assimilated into the church (Rev. 2:20), while in Sardis the church was assimilated into secular culture (Rev. 3:2-4).

The secular attack on Christianity is not easy to counter. Christianity today is labelled as bigoted, homophobic, hating, arrogant, intolerant etc. for the simple fact that Christian values are in open opposition to secular values. In reality Christianity is the most persecuted religious community in the world. This is nothing new, since from the very beginning Christianity has faced strong opposition. Because of Christian values that contrasted with Greco-Roman immorality, Christians have been portrayed as haters of humanity. Tacitus noted that the false accusation against Christians regarding the cause of the great fire in Rome during Nero's reign, was not in fact so much of crime of firing the city, but of hatred against mankind (Tac. Ann. 15.44).

CONCLUSION

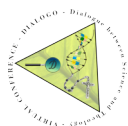
The battle for secularism today is fought over issues such as marriage, gender identity, racism, abortion, euthanasia, paedophilia, transhumanism and others. In the context of these disputes, secularism is used as a weapon against Judeo-Christian values and against the Church. These values are fundamental Biblical values, yet Christians are accused of intolerance, hate speech, bigotry, racism and discrimination. However, secularism commits all the "sins" it accuses the Christian Church of committing. Secularism is intolerant of Judeo-Christian values, it shuts down the right to opinion through ostracism and "cancel-culture" and ignores the whole of Christian history which has defined the value of the human being and fought against discrimination. Christianity is neither anti-social, anti-intellectual nor anti-rational. The Christian Church offers a viable solution that has proven effective over the centuries. Christianity is the cradle of modern civilisation, while secularism is the reverse of this approach. In the midst of secular expansion, the 20th century is recognised as the bloodiest century in history. When man becomes the measure of all things and turns away from God, the Church and the values revealed in Scripture, there is no longer any sufficient moral foundation left for this world.

From a Christian perspective, without Christ, our values fall into disrepute. The denial of Christ comes with the loss of fundamental values. The values of European society today are inverted values in contrast to Judeo-Christian values. To be European today often means to promote values that are the opposite of the values of the Christian Church. Yet the history of Europe not only bears the imprint of Christianity but is essentially defined by Christian history. That is why the values, and the voice of the Church must be heard in the din of secularism today.



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Dr. Ovidiu Hanc was born in Arad, Romania in October 1977. He studied theology and has a B.Th. from Emanuel University of Oradea (2001); an MTh (2005) and PhD (2014) from Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland.

He is lecturer in New Testament Theology at Emanuel University of Oradea and pastor of Dragostea [Love] Baptist Church of Arad. He currently serves as Vice President of Education at Arad Baptist Association and as Director of "Ethics and Society" Research Centre at Emanuel University of Oradea.

Dr. Hanc is a member of the Theologians Network and Academic Network of the European Leadership Forum.

BIOGRAPHY