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# PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS AND SOCIAL CRISES IN ROMANIA

Laurențiu D. TĂNASE<sup>1</sup>, Cezar DASCĂLU<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The relationship between social crises and religious cults<sup>3</sup> in Romania is a topic neglected by the specialized literature. In this paper, we propose a series of analyses regarding how social crises have influenced religious life in Romania and the mechanisms by which religious cults have played a role in solving or amplifying them. We will refer to the Romanian Orthodox Church, the majority religious denomination, and some of its positions on events/stages of these social phenomena between 1990 and 2023. This text does not propose a thorough examination of these relationships but attempts to sketch perspectives of analysis in response to the following research questions: *What do Romanians think about the Church's involvement in the life of society and implicitly in social crises? Why is it important to understand the position of religious actors on the evolution of social crises? How have religious denominations influenced the improvement/aggravation of some dimensions of social crises?* Official stances of Religious Cults during different social crises were examined, alongside instances of informal religious practices aimed at enhancing societal conditions. In Romania, religious cults have been essential partners of the State in reducing social crises, providing support through their rich infrastructure and human resources or their symbolic position in society. However, there have also been cases in which religious cults have generated conflictual social states and tension, producing or aggravating social crises.

Keywords: Romanian Orthodox Church, social crises, democratic transition, religious conflict, Church-State relations.

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<sup>3</sup> In Romania, it is common to refer to religious denominations as religious “cults,” acting primarily as a juridical term. Religious “cults” does not possess the same pejorative character in Romania that it may have in countries like the United States of America.

## Methodology

Considering the high degree of religiosity among Romanians (Evans, & Baronavski, 2018) (in 2018, Pew Research Center ranked Romania first among 34 European states), the census data after 1990, which highlighted a percentage of over 99 religious affiliations, and the level of trust in the Church (which between 1995-2014 consistently exceeded 80% and positioned the Orthodox Church as the most trusted public institution), our research findings hold significant relevance. They contribute to understanding the relationship between religious cults and social crises within the broader context of social crises in Romania.

Our research process involved a formal perspective of the positions of the Romanian Orthodox Church. We consulted the issues of the *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei* (information periodical of the Romanian Patriarchate) spanning from 1990 to 2023. Additionally, we assessed the situation of religious denominations in Romania by consulting the U.S. State Department Reports on Religious Freedom from 2000.

For the informal perspective, we used opinions gathered from 120 semi-structured interviews with Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests, pastors from neo-protestant denominations, and imams of Muslim worship, both in urban and rural areas, during 2015-2022. 96 interviewees were Orthodox priests (80 from rural areas and 16 from urban areas), and the rest belonged to other denominations. The central questions focused on the evolution of religious life in communities where worshippers worked, relationships with local authorities, remarkable projects/activities carried out in parishes, and religious assistance for disadvantaged people.

For an overview of theories regarding the role of religion in society (sociological perspectives on religion), we will refer to the book written by Emerson, M. O., Monahan, S. C., & Mirola, W. A. (2011). *Religion matters: What sociology teaches us about religion in our world*. Religion is present in society and the privacy of individuals; it is an integral part of the coordinates of their identity and influences the way they relate to everyday events, act, and give them meaning. The analyzed theories were structured in the text *Sociology: Understanding and Changing the Social World on three levels: functionalists, conflict theories, and symbolic interactionism*, as follows:

Table 1. Sociological perspectives on religion

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	„Religion serves several functions for society. These include (a) giving meaning and purpose to life, (b) reinforcing social unity and stability, (c) serving as an agent of social control of behavior, (d) promoting physical and psychological well-being, and (e) motivating people to work for positive social change.

Conflict theory	Religion reinforces and promotes social inequality and social conflict. It helps convince the poor to accept their lot in life, and it leads to hostility and violence motivated by religious differences.
Symbolic interactionism	This perspective focuses on the ways in which individuals interpret their religious experiences. It emphasizes that beliefs and practices are not sacred unless people regard them as such. Once they are regarded as sacred, they take on special significance and give meaning to people's lives".

*Source: University of Minnesota, 2010.*

In this text, we will refer to the first two frameworks, using the Romanian Orthodox Church as a case study.

### **Historical context**

After the 1989 Revolution, Romanian society was marked by a long period of social crises, with a tumultuous transition to democracy and an extensive effort to align with a capitalist economy. Romanians deeply felt the consequences of these processes in the context in which the coordinates of the society where they lived were radically altered. In fact, in the last 30 years, the elimination of the social state has been sought as a "priority objective" (Zamfir, 2013, 21) affecting the quality of fundamental social services (health, education, personal security, social assistance) and, implicitly, human dignity.

From the beginning of the transition, we could observe an explosion in the degree of impoverishment of the population, flanked by an inability of the State to counterbalance through a coherent and efficient social assistance program. The failed privatizations of large industrial platforms, the financial blockage, the "inflation tornado"/amputation of purchasing power, forced layoffs or early retirements, the failure of economic and political reforms, etc., are some of the pieces of a complicated mosaic of factors that generated intense social crises, materialized in general strikes, protest rallies, mineriades, confrontations and violence between the population and law enforcement. People took to the streets with a wide range of demands: from salary increases, better working conditions, creation of alternative jobs, stopping privatizations, and investments in infrastructure and up to compliance with point 8 of the Timișoara Proclamation or finding out the truth from the Revolution (demands of protesters in University Square in May-June 1990).

An overview of the first years after the Revolution reveals an old world in dissolution, which had to be replaced by a new, free, prosperous one. But the rapid disintegration of the old one has met the slow transition process, and the

dream of change and a “decent” life is shattered by mistrust, fear, and frustration. Romanians who had been employed in factories and were now entering the wave of layoffs noticed in amazement how the profession they knew was no longer sought after on the labor market, thus trying professional reconversions, most of the time without success. Some preferred severance pay and termination of employment while jobs were still being closed; others preferred early retirement when age permitted. Without the possibility of re-employment and with a skyrocketing cost of living in cities, many have been active participants in the phenomenon of internal migration in the urban-rural direction.

In the villages, the fall of communism led to the abolition of the Agricultural Production Cooperatives (CAP) and the reconstitution of the ownership/restitution of agricultural lands that the state had abusively taken over through the collectivization process. However, the appropriation of agricultural land also destroyed production infrastructure (e.g., irrigation systems) and the rapid transformation into an underperforming, subsistence agriculture. In Romanian villages, poverty is amplified, seconded by the decrease (to extinction) of some fundamental social services: medical assistance (by reducing the number of medical dispensaries, dental offices, and pharmacies), education (by the disappearance of local libraries, cultural homes and later, due to the decrease in the number of children, including kindergartens and schools).

Complementary to this process of degradation of various social constructs, we must recall the disappearance of the ideological framework that guided the life of Romanians for almost half a century. The communist regime had applied “generalized” censorship both in the societal space and on the floor of personal life. Food rationing is such a well-known and relevant example of the Communist Party’s deep interference in Romanians’ lives.

In this context, in a society overwhelmed by crisis, without a clear strategy of the State, the Church (Religious Denominations) has become a fulcrum, a space of stability. It has remained doctrinally constant, maintaining theological directions similar to those prior to 1990. The Church has kept at its core the same message, the same doctrinal perspective on man and life, in the context of successive changes during the communist period and the post-revolution transition.

Complementary to the theological message, the Church has constantly developed a program of provision (formal and informal) of fundamental social services (especially in rural areas) supporting and supplementing those provided by the State. Religious denominations have become the main partners of the State in implementing social assistance programs, offering an impressive infrastructure that extends all over Romania. They collaborate with the State in projects on public health, support and integration of disadvantaged people in communities, assistance and care of the elderly, prevention of addictions and crime, care and education of disadvantaged children, moral education, etc.

## The return of religion to the public space

The fall of the communist regime meant the religious cults in Romania had the chance to enjoy the religious freedom specific to democracy and to return to the public space; after 45 years in which the State strictly controlled them, their theological message was censored, and their relevance in the life of society was limited. Religion had become a private matter, being eliminated from schools, hospitals, or the army, antagonistic to the official atheist ideology that spread to all public institutions. We want to interpret this return to the public space from two perspectives:

- a. *as a right of Romanians to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and religious assistance, and*
- b. *as a common desideratum of religious denominations to return to the pre-1948 legal situation.*

Article 9 (“Freedom of thought, conscience and religion”) of the European Convention on Human Rights stipulates that *“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right shall include freedom to change religion or belief and freedom to manifest religion or belief individually or collectively, in public or in private, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”*

On this framework, we mention Article 29 of the Romanian Constitution, which highlights that “freedom of thought and opinion, as well as freedom of religious beliefs, may not be restricted in any way” (Art. 29.1) and that “religious cults are autonomous from the State and enjoy its support, including by facilitating **religious assistance** in the army, hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, and orphanages.”

The right to religious education was stipulated in Article 32 (7), “the State shall ensure the freedom of religious education, according to the specific requirements of each cult. In state schools, religious education shall be organized and guaranteed by law”. Article 32 (1) of Law 489/2006, which stipulates that “in state and private education, the teaching of religion is ensured by law to recognized religious denominations.”

Romanians’ right to religious assistance (in the army, hospitals, penitentiaries, etc.) and religious education are conditions and expressions of a functioning democracy. We mention that Western European states have been models of “good practice” in terms of respecting the principle of religious freedom. All support religious assistance in public institutions, and most of them have religious education at the common core.

The guarantee of these rights is also an integral part of the mechanism of respecting another fundamental right, the “right to identity,” stipulated in the Romanian Constitution in Art.6 (1) and which refers to persons belonging to national minorities and to “the preservation, development, and expression of their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and **religious identity.**”

The second perspective refers to the common desideratum of religious denominations to return to the legal situation before 1948. It was not only the Orthodox Church that sought institutional levers to return to the public square; Greek Catholic believers have called for the reactivation of the Greek Catholic Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and neo-Protestant denominations have expressed their desire to be partners of the State in the transition process.

For example, the majority cult emphasized a series of aspirations from the first days after the Revolution, which was reiterated at a meeting between the members of the Permanent Synod and the President of Romania in mid-1990. The ROC called for regaining “the place and role it had in the life of Romanian society” and contributing “to the spiritual-moral rebirth of the new Romania.” It states that “to these are added other desiderata such as a. representation of the Church in the bodies for drafting the new Constitution of the country and laws concerning church life in its relations with society, as well as in the Parliament of the country; b) The reintroduction of religion in state schools; c. facilitating the pastoral and charitable activity of the Church – in orphanages, hospitals, retirement homes, military units, and penitentiaries; d. the re-establishment of military clergy and the Army Diocese, national observance of Sundays and major religious holidays; e) Rebuilding churches, historical and architectural monuments, abusively demolished by the atheist dictatorship, and granting spaces for building new churches; f. restitution to the Church of buildings abusively owned by the State by the atheist regime, with priority for newly established dioceses and theological schools, etc.” (Romanian Orthodox Church, 1990, 21)

The return of religion to the public space after 1990 was achieved without State censorship – and without the control of the “representative from the Cults” – but with his support, including at the level of partial remuneration of clerical staff. The increasing presence of religion in society entails positions of religious cults in relation to the main evolutions of social dynamics.

### **What do Romanians think about the Church’s involvement in the life of society and implicitly in social crises?**

To understand how Romanians relate to the Church’s involvement in the public space and solve its problems, we called for two opinion polls applied in the early 1990s and 2022 (about 30 years apart from each other). In the first European Values Study (EVS) survey in 1993, it was highlighted that Romanians disagree with the Church’s pronouncement on issues such as unemployment and government policy. Extrapolating, most of the population did not agree with the Church taking positions on the “hot” topics of transition: privatization, strikes, inflation, reforms, poverty, etc. Only 19% of Romanians would have agreed that the Church should opine on the Government’s decisions, *approve* them, *criticize*

them, or *propose suggestions*. After 30 years, we can observe a similar position revealed by the Barometer of Religious Life in Romania (2022), in the sense that 82.5% of Romanians believe that churches should deal only with religious issues, and 94.2% believe that they should deal more with helping the elderly and needy people. The view that the Church should not rule on public policy has been perpetuated for 30 years. Romanians want religious institutions to deal only with matters within the sphere of religion and not to interfere in matters beyond their competence. Interference in issues where intervention has not been legitimized by competence can have a significant negative influence on the evolution of events of social crises in the sense of their aggravation (e.g., some religious servants' position on vaccination in the Covid-19 pandemic).

Table 2. Should the church have authority to make decisions about

Consider it good or not for the church to rule on matters such as:	Yes	No	I don't know
Abortion	46	45	9
Marital infidelity	54	37	8
Unemployment	<b>31</b>	<b>60</b>	9
Social discrimination	54	36	10
Euthanasia	44	40	16
Homosexuality	46	42	12
Ecology and environmental issues	52	37	11
Government policy	<b>19</b>	<b>73</b>	8

Source: Voicu, 2001, p. 82; cf. EVS 1993.

Table 3. Involvement of the church/religion in

From your point of view. Churches/Religious denominations should:	Yes	No	I don't know
Deal only with religious matters	82,5	17,4	0,1
To be more concerned with helping the elderly and needy	94,2	5,5	0,3
To be more present in public life, education, culture, mass media	69	30,3	0,7
Be more critical of opinion leaders and politicians who speak out publicly against faith and religion	56,1	42,5	1,4

Source: Larics, December 2022.



Although the information provided by statistics suggests an attitude contrary to the Church's intervention in the hot topics of social crises, we can nevertheless recall some episodes in which religious institutions are requested.

The episode of anti-government demonstrations in April-June 1990, which resulted in miners coming to Bucharest and violent confrontations with protesters, is a context in which the involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church was requested. About this, Patriarch Teoctist appealed to the population and actors participating in this crisis, stating: "Sensitive to the growing calls to mediate in promoting the reduction of current social tensions and polarizations in our country, the Orthodox Church Romanian, with high consideration, we appeal to the Romanian Government to show understanding in seeking as soon as possible ways to enter into dialogue with those who are on hunger strike. We are convinced that such dialogue will benefit the good and unity of the entire nation." (Teoctist, 1990a, 10)

The function of mediation between the population and State institutions has become a recurring theme in the discourse of those who analyze the role of the Orthodox Church in society, often highlighting its passivity.

For example, an important episode in which the Romanian Orthodox Church was given the role of mediator between the State and a part of society in the context of a social crisis is the "Peace of Cozia." Miners led by Miron Cozma went on general strike in December 1998 after several mining holdings were to be closed and staff laid off. On January 4, 1999, approximately 15,000 miners of the National Coal Company in Jiu Valley protested against the mine closure program, and on January 18, 1999, Miron Cozma started the "March to the Capital." To get to Bucharest, the miners chose the route that transits Râmnicu Vâlcea; they were transported by 70 buses and over 200 cars. They overcame several barrages organized by the gendarmerie. On January 21, the bloody confrontation in Costești took place between 2,000 members of the intervention forces and the approximately 15,000 miners, which ended with the victory of the strikers. In this social crisis, President Emil Constantinescu institutes a conditional state of emergency and sends a message to the population: "In recent days and especially in the last 24 hours, the illegal manifestations of the Jiu Valley miners, led by Miron Cozma, have generated great violence and great dangers, not against a government or a political power, but against the entire nation. Law enforcement forces were attacked, the most basic norms of law were mocked, people wearing military clothes were beaten and humiliated, hostages were taken, and weapons and ammunition were stolen from the gendarme's troops (...) If miners' violence continues, Romania will face no future. That is why, following the CSAT (Supreme Council of National Defense - ed.) meeting tonight, we decided to establish a state of emergency throughout Romania under the following conditions: If, by today, January 22, at 2 p.m., the miners do not start returning to Jiu Valley, the state of emergency will enter into force starting at 2 p.m. If, during this time, they try to move in any other direction, the state of emergency will come into effect

immediately (...) I asked the government for permanent readiness to solve all economic and social problems; in the life of a nation, there are serious moments when we must call on the best in us. This is such a moment.” (Constantinescu, 1999, 3)

After the confrontations in Costesti, Prime Minister Radu Vasile resumes the dialogue with the miners and chooses “Cozia Orthodox Monastery as a place to negotiate with them precisely to reach an agreement that will lead to social peace” (*Renașterea Bănățeană*, 1999, 3). Press articles of the time highlighted the presence of clergy at these negotiations (Adameșteanu, 1999, 4), as well as the combatants’ assumption of religious behavior. The Church’s mediating position is explicitly mentioned by Bishop Ioan of Harghita and Covasna, one of those present at the talks between the two camps. It states: “I went to the Holy Monastery of Cozia with the olive branch in my hand, with an open soul, with the sincere desire to do everything in my power to bring peace between brothers (...) currently Bishop of Harghita and Covasna, I felt that, together with the other personalities from Romania’s governmental delegation, I can contribute to defusing the crisis that has arisen, that they can bring our brothers closer (...) The beginning of the negotiations was made through a prayer, which I said together with His Eminence Gherasim, Bishop of Ramnic, as well as in their conclusion. The space of Cozia Monastery, where negotiations between the government delegation and the leaders of the Jiu Valley miners took place, impressed sobriety to the discussions, the feeling of peace, the tranquility that must reign between brothers. My message, as a hierarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, was a sincere appeal to peace, lucidity, and understanding for the good of the Romanian people for the tranquility of the country. I want to tell you now that the almost 4 hours of negotiations were like a prayer for the good of the Romanian people, and it was fully felt that we were in a holy monastery, such as Cozia. I returned to my “post” in Harghita, with a reconciled soul that, together with the other representatives of the Romanian Government, I had made my modest contribution to the now Peace of Cozia.” (Chiper, 1999, 1-6)

Another social crisis that marked Romania after 1990 was the fire at Colectiv Club (Bucharest), where 64 people died (26 inside the building, one during transport to the hospital, and 33 hospitalized), and another 186 were injured. Fireworks in the concert hall ignited the sponge used for soundproofing, causing the worst accident since 1989, with more deaths than the aviation incident in Balotești, near Bucharest, in 1995.

The drama of the 2015 Colectiv fire generated massive protests across Romania, demanding the punishment of the culprits and the government’s resignation. Among the chants in the street – also picked up in the media – were some directed against the Romanian Orthodox Church. “We want hospitals, not cathedrals” was a slogan that resounded many times in those days. Moreover, the protesters asked, “Where is and what is the Church doing?” and especially “Where are the priests?” interrogations by which the religious institution was fined for “deficient

involvement” in the Colectiv crisis. However, it was not responsible or decision-maker. In the guilt-seeking equation, clergy have become a target for many protesters. It was vehemently demanded that the Church get involved in managing the crisis (not only symbolically), supporting bereaved families, helping the sick, and activating the institutional network in the country, especially in the diaspora.

Another example is the topic of restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. All Orthodox priests interviewed between 2020 and 2022 said members often asked them of their communities whether they should comply with government restrictions or accept the vaccine. Although the religious servants had no education or skills in the medical area, a significant part of the community requested their uninformed opinion, even though the official position of the ROC clearly stipulated that the population should comply with the directives of the medical staff.

### **Why is it important to understand the position of religious actors on the evolution of social crises?**

The most relevant aspect refers to the dual position of individuals who express a religious identity: *citizen of the State* and *member of a religious cult*. EVS statistics on belief in God place us first in Europe with 97.19% in 2017, and religious affiliation, according to censuses organized in the last 30 years, exceeds 99%.

*Tabel 4. Religiosity in Postcommunist Romania*

	1990	1999	2008	2017
Belief in God (%)	94	96	98	97
Belief in God personally (%)	36	37	36	32
The belief that there is some kind of spirit or life force (%)	43	46	46	51
Belief in hell (%)	43	71	81	70
Belief in heaven (%)	57	75	84	75
Belief in sin (%)	77	91	94	
Belief in life after death (%)	58	68	74	69
The importance of God in personal life (%)	72	85	85	86
Religion is important or very important (%)	75	79	87	82
People who have moments of prayer, contemplation, meditation (%)	86	94	90	
People who declare themselves religious (%)	74	85	82	85
Attendance at religious services at least once a week (%)	19	25	29	30

People who believe there is only one true religion (%)			36	36
People who attended religious services (except weddings, funerals or baptisms) at least once a week when they were 12 years of age (%)		46	45	

Source: *atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu cf. EVS 1990, 1999, 2008, 2017.*

Secondly, the Church has been credited by the population with the highest degree of trust among public institutions for approximately 20 years – from 1995 to 2014. On this list are listed: Army, Presidency, Parliament, Government, Political Parties, Police, City Hall, and Firefighters (the presence of the latter category varies depending on the surveyor). During this period, the difference between the top two places was also 22.5% in favor of the Church in 2003; Values fluctuated from 83 percent in 1996 to 88.5 percent in 2001 (the highest level), dropping below 80 percent since 2012.

Respondents expressed confidence in the message proposed by religious denominations and appreciated their stability. In the context in which a low level of plausibility characterized state institutions, and Romanians felt betrayed by political decision-makers, they turned their trust to the Church. For example, Parliament received the trust of only 9% of Romanians in 2000 and 7.75% in 2010. During the same period, the Church enjoyed the support of 85.5% in 2000 and 83.45% of the population in 2010.

Trust in the Church also implies trust in the values/messages/positions it promotes, and adherence to the proposed values should theoretically materialize in a specific behavior of adherents.

Table 5. Trust in the Church (1996-2012)

An	Church	Army	Parliament
1996	83	76	23
1997	83	81.2	34.5
1998	85.5	71.5	19.5
1999	85.5	70.5	15
2000	85.5	70	9
2001	88.5	74	34.5
2002	88	77	28
2003	86.5	64	16.5
2004	88	69	23
2005	88	70	16
2006	85	65	14

2007	84	58	18
2008	85	76	24
2009	87.16	68.1	20.51
2010	83.45	65.7	7.75
2011	81.9	63.5	11.4
2012	80	67.5	8.2

Source: *Bocancea, 2013, p. 281.*

Thirdly, religious institutions were among the few social bodies in Romania in constant evolution, an observable direction in the development of infrastructure (through the construction of churches, religious, educational institutions, medical and social assistance, etc.) and of the human resources involved (community members, clerical and non-clerical staff, volunteers, etc.). Except for the Armenian Church, the Evangelical Church, and the Mosaic Cult, all religious denominations have built places of worship since 1989. For example, the Orthodox Church Romanian has declared in the 2011 census 16,307,004 adherents (86.45% of the population), the total number of churches in 2015 was 16,403 (a percentage of 59.90 of the total places of worship in Romania), of which 3,191 were built after 1989 (out of a total of 8,413), and 1,078 were still under construction (State Secretariat for Religious Denominations, 2022). In the context of transition and succession of social crises, 3,191 buildings (without annexes) completed and another 1,078 uncompleted represent an impressive figure, with relevant implications at symbolic, economic, and social levels (see National Cathedral). Regarding the number of believers assigned to a place of worship, the average for all recognized religious denominations is 294 people. In the case of the ROC, it has the most believers assigned to a church (994), a considerable difference also compared to the Roman Catholic Church (534) or the Reformed Church in Romania (444), the denominations on the 2nd and 3rd places in the hierarchy of the number of believers. Thus, the construction of places of worship was the expression of a need within religious communities, which were able to find internal resources to support projects but also to seek external support, including putting pressure on political decision-makers.

Fourthly, religious denominations have an important institutional network covering the whole of Romania. In the context in which most villages have no cultural institutions, schools or kindergartens, dispensaries, police stations, or other work points of some institutions, the Church remains the only public place where people meet and which the State uses to disseminate information to the population, run programs, etc. (e.g., most priests interviewed in rural areas highlight the formal role they had in developing social assistance projects, or medical coordinated by public institutions).

Fifth, churches constitute a powerful diplomacy structure with relevant influences on political actors and societal relations. We mention here the statement of academician Răzvan Teodorescu regarding the visit of Pope John Paul II to Romania. He pointed out – in a debate organized in 2011 by the Center for Studies and Documentation, “Society, Law, Religion” – that the diplomatic involvement of religious actors was significant in Romania’s EU and NATO accession process. The visit of the Sovereign Pontiff was seen as a guarantee of the openness of Romanian society to European values.

### **Examples of official positions of the ROC in favor of improving some dimensions of social crises**

In the context of the Revolution of 1989 and the immediate aftermath, the Romanian Orthodox Church took two major decisions regarding this crisis: the first was to condemn communism and show its support to the National Salvation Front, and the second was to demand “that committees be formed immediately within each parish and monastery to help bereaved families, caring for the wounded, visiting them in hospitals and homes, sheltering the homeless, donating blood, providing food and clothing to those in need.” (Teoctist, 1989, 1)

On February 12, 1990, at the Holy Synod meeting, it was announced that the ROC network of parishes raised 128 million lei at the “Liberty Fund-1989” to “help bereaved families, the wounded and all those who suffered as a result of the Revolution of December 1989.” The amount raised is consistent, equivalent to approximately 42,000 average salaries at the level of the last year of the communist regime.

Another theme related to the social crisis in Romania in the 90s is that of institutionalized orphans and those with disabilities. Patriarch Teoctist appealed to the population to hold them accountable and ask for concrete support for these vulnerable categories. The press release published in September 1990 stated that: “In the soul of every Christian in Romania, the message of the duty to take care of the children of this country. Among the still bleeding wounds that we inherited from the trying years of the atheist and communist dictatorship is the worrying condition of sick, handicapped, orphaned, and abandoned children immediately after birth, or those who died before they saw the light of day through the sin of killing babies. When we think that all these innocent beings bear within them the image of God (...) we realize how outrageous is the sin of indifference to children who remain victims of all kinds of suffering and disease. Given this painful situation in Romania, which is severely tested, especially with economic problems, the Orthodox Church Romanian participates as much as possible in the action of helping the country’s children and thanks all churches and organizations that have provided aid so far” (Teoctist, 1990b, 1).

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From this press release, we want to highlight the expression “participate as much as possible in the relief action,” which veiled the lack of material resources of the ROC, an aspect also revealed by statistical data.

If the first appeal aimed to raise awareness among Romanians, the 1992 appeal was a direct call for believers to step up and help care for these children. The situation was urgent, with the children in desperate need of shelter, food, clothing, and integration into loving families. Patriarch Teoctist’s words underscored the gravity of the situation: “In recent times, our society, hard tried by deprivation and suffering, is also confronted with the painful situation of the so-called “street children”, who either were abandoned by their parents or left their homes themselves for various reasons. As the pain caused by this wound affects the entire Romanian people and each of us is responsible for healing, we appeal to all the sons and daughters of our church: priests, believers, and members of Christian organizations and establishments to shelter themselves and to persuade others to welcome such children into their families” (Teoctist, 1992, 1). These two examples provide an overview of how the ROC influences some dimensions of social crises. On the one hand, we can highlight *the declarative aspect* (mirrored in communiqués, positions, appeals to the population or state institutions), and on the other hand, we can refer to *the quantifiable consequences* of the first approach. The communiqué of the Holy Synod of December 1989 also raised a significant sum of money to help those directly affected by the events of the Revolution. The call for support for “street children” generated a movement within the Romanian Orthodox Church, having as representative priest Nicolae Tanase from Valea Plopului, who built an entire complex (houses, kindergarten, school) to receive abandoned children (about 400 in 2000) and abused women. Moreover, he managed to convince several families in the community to receive abandoned children and provide them with shelter and care.

Another example of ROC involvement is the attempt to calm tensions in the public space. In the context of the protests in University Square in April-June 1990, the Orthodox Church issued a communiqué calling on the Government to “show understanding in seeking as soon as possible ways to enter into dialogue with those on hunger strike.” Later, after the violent intervention of the miners, the Romanian Patriarchate resumed its message calling for dialogue, condemning the failure to resolve the conflict (Romanian Patriarchate. Office of Press and Communications, 1990, 6). From a theological perspective, the Herald of Orthodoxy conveys the following conclusion: „No act of violence can be justified Christianly except by an aberration of the mind. No act of cruelty can be tolerated by Christian teaching” (Zuzu, 1990, 8).

As mentioned earlier, in the context of the Church’s return to the public space, statistical data from the early ‘90s showed that the ecclesial institution does not have significant stable resources, but using the network of parishes it can collect goods, food, materials, etc. from believers and intervene – if necessary – in crises. The ROC report for 1991 showed that “the social assistance of the Church

materialized in: aid in the affected areas (Moldova and Banat), 34 million lei and 200,000 tons of cereals and construction materials. 408 priests were actually employed in permanent social activity, as follows: 236 in hospitals, 50 in nursing homes, 80 in orphanages, 33 in prisons” (*Vestitorul Ortodoxiei*, 1992, 2). The upward trend is observed with each annual report, and the focus shifts from declarative to sustainable interventions and projects, which have transformed the Romanian Orthodox Church into the most important partner of the state at the level of providing social services. In 2022, 199,140 beneficiaries of 767 institutions and social services, which the ROC owns, received assistance (Dumitrașcu, 2022). In these activities, 16,721 people/14,586 volunteers (2020) and 19,853 people/18,092 volunteers (2021) were involved in the Covid-19 Pandemic crisis – according to the Reports of the National Church Council.

### **Examples of informal mechanisms of religious life in favor of improving some dimensions of social crises**

Analyzing the semi-structured interviews with Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests, pastors from neo-protestant denominations, and imams of the Muslim cult, both in urban and rural areas (2015-2022), we notice a series of common elements regarding the relationship between religious actors and social crises in Romania over the last 30 years.

The first aspect concerns the perspective in which we understand the Church as a factor of social cohesion. In rural areas, the transition meant the disappearance of the CAP, the re-ownership and destruction of the common agricultural infrastructure (irrigation system, storage halls, stables, etc.), and the diminution (to the point of extinction) of some fundamental social services. All these are elements of a complex equation of rapid impoverishment of the population, which focused mainly on subsistence agriculture. The church remained - in many villages - the only meeting place of the whole community, united at Sunday liturgical services, or at religious events of a family (baptism, wedding, funeral). She was also the primary beneficiary of community projects. In addition to the 3,000 Orthodox churches built after 1990, most of those already built before 1989 have been restored by the community. During the acute social crises at the beginning of the transition, believers mobilized to restore a building that was owned by the community, with which they identified and which united them.

Another dimension that emerges is the significant role of religious traditions in supporting vulnerable community members. Although religious denominations have a doctrinal direction applicable to all communities, the elements of local tradition can still be defining. For example, issues related to the traditions of the Orthodox funeral service may vary in different areas of the country, but they all have as a fundamental element the concept of solidarity with the poor and the



redistribution of goods. Thus, a priest from Neamț County pointed out that in the community where he works, the custom of offering poor people by the family of the deceased furniture objects for the complete equipment of a room or kitchen is established. All the priests interviewed spoke about the redistribution of part of the goods belonging to the deceased person to poor members of the community as an element of religious tradition. Thus, religious traditions become informal mechanisms of social assistance, complementary to institutionally developed programs.

In the context of social crises, the construction of churches or their repair from the money raised by the community (at the beginning of the '90s, the State support for these projects was significantly lower than after the 2000s) was a way to boost the local workforce and production. Hiring people to work on the site, buying building materials, paying taxes to employees purchasing goods, etc., were relevant to local economies. For larger churches, such as the National Cathedral, the impact was strong: brick, iron, and concrete purchased from local suppliers to paintings and mosaics created by Romanian artists meant critical financial resources in the crisis of the 2010s that returned to the internal economic flow.

The impact of social crises could also be improved by receiving external aid through the network of religious denominations. Neo-Protestant communities in Romania benefited from the financial support and expertise of the “mother churches,” an aspect observed immediately after the 1989 Revolution, when humanitarian convoys under the aegis of religious institutions abroad brought food, clothes, and medicine. From interviews with neo-protestant worshippers, we also highlight the relevance of external aid for opening local businesses (capital for opening and functioning, “know-how,” access to external clients, etc.).

### **Examples of situations in which religious denominations cause or aggravate social crises**

During the 33 years following the 1989 Revolution, religious denominations were mainly involved in alleviating social crises and promoting social peace. But despite this social approach, there have also been situations in which religious cults, for various reasons, have been the protagonists of provoking or aggravating already existing ones, dormant for a long time. Even if there are not many conflicting aspects between representatives of religious denominations in Romania, they have disturbed the natural course of contemporary Romanian society by their gravity and by the emotional charge generated. We bring to attention only two examples concerning the relationship between religious denominations: a) generating social crises and b) the position of religious actors (in this case, the Romanian Orthodox Church) in the equation of ongoing crises.

From the beginning of the transition, religious life was dominated by effervescence; the re-establishment of the Greek-Catholic Church, the increase in activity and proselytism of neo-protestant denominations, the lack of censorship and control exercised by the State as the regulator of relations between cults were factors that stimulated a market in which the ROC had over 86% of the mass of believers and was considered a pillar in the nation's equation. The most important conflicts that caused relevant crises in local communities were those concerning the restitution by the ROC of churches and properties that the State transferred to its patrimony after their confiscation from the Greek Catholic Church in December 1948. All *International Reports on Religious Freedom* in Romania issued by the U.S. Department of State - since 2001 - highlight the conflict between the two denominations and highlight the difficulties that the Greek Catholic Church has in regaining property owned before the abusive decision to disband.

The restitution mechanism was stipulated in Decree Law No. 126 of April 24, 1990, which states that the legal situation of properties that belonged to the United Church with Rome will be established by a joint commission, "taking into account the wishes of believers in communities that own these assets." Tensions and violent confrontations between Orthodox and Greek Catholics occurred in the first days of January 1990, when groups of believers of the United Church with Rome tried to occupy by force some Orthodox churches, a situation to which the Holy Synod of the ROC "expressed its desire to settle any dispute peacefully and legally" (Romanian Orthodox Church, 1990, 6-7).

In a document of the Holy Synod of the ROC, it is pointed out that: "*The Orthodox Church Romanian appeals to her hierarchs, clergy and faithful that all negotiations with representatives of the Greek-Catholic Cult to be organized and recognized, in compliance with the laws in force, be conducted peacefully, in a brotherly and Romanian spirit, of Romanian dignity and humanity, aware of the value of true freedom and democracy in Romania, which must lead to the preservation and strengthening of Romanian unity and spirituality.*" (Patriarchal Lieutenant and National Church Council, 1990, 17-23)

To "stem interconfessional tension and hatred, preserving peace and unity among Romanians," the ROC asks the Government not to intervene in the conflict, leaving believers to choose which cult the church will belong to, as they are "their only owners who have the right to decide" (Romanian Patriarchate, 1990, 7). („The Romanian state cannot dispose of what does not belong to it and that it does not have the right to solve problems without consulting and taking into account the opinion of those interested.") (The Professorial Council of the Faculty of Theology Bucharest, 1997, 3)

In the context of the legislative frameworks, the complex patrimonial dispute between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Greek-Catholic Church intensified after the mid-1990s, with several lawsuits pending before Romanian and international courts between the two denominations. The U.S. State

Department highlighted in its reports the existence of physical and verbal conflicts between believers, limiting access to religious assistance and restricting freedom of expression of religion, discrimination and harassment of Greek Catholics, blocking access to the local cemetery, significant tensions in local communities, lawsuits before national and international courts, etc. (U.S. Department of State, 2001-2022)

These social crises escalated after dialogue between the Greek Catholic and Orthodox Churches came to a standstill in 2004, and disputes over church property grew in number and intensity. The 2009 report noted that “tensions continued in at least 21 localities where the Orthodox Church refused to comply with court orders ordering restitution or where the Greek Catholic Church initiated lawsuits for restitution.” In an open letter addressed to the President of Romania by the civic group ACUM, (Budescu, 2019), it was highlighted that “90% of the churches and assets belonging to the Greek Catholic Church confiscated during the communist regime have not been returned” (U.S. Department of State, 2019), thus this source of tension remaining active. However, the US State Department emphasized in its 2009 report that there are regions where the patrimonial dispute has been resolved and relations between the two denominations are amicable. It was mentioned that „relations between the Greek Catholic Church and the Orthodox Archdiocese of Timișoara were cooperative, the latter returning to the Greek Catholic Church almost all assets in the period after the revolution. Also, the Orthodox Dioceses of Caransebes and Oradea continued to have similar positive dialogues with the Greek Catholic Church regarding the restitution of some churches” (U.S. Department of State, 2009).

The topic of restitution of churches that belonged to the United Church with Rome was also a relevant point in the country report drawn up by the European Commission regarding Romania’s evolution in the EU accession process.

A second example refers to the negative implications of some opinion formers within the Romanian Orthodox Church in the context of the crisis caused by the Covid 19 pandemic. Although at the level of official positions, the Orthodox Church was Romanian explicitly supportive of the directions proposed by state institutions, at the local level, several bishops and priests challenged the decisions of the public authorities, aggravating the already existing state of tension and confusion. **All priests interviewed between 2020 and 2022 stressed that they were often asked by believers to opine on compliance with health measures imposed by state institutions or whether to accept or refuse vaccination.** Although priests were forbidden to express personal positions on matters beyond their competence, the U.S. State Department report highlighted the case of Bishop Ambrose of Giurgiu, who, in a sermon, virulently criticized the vaccination campaign and suggested the faithful not to “rush to get vaccinated.” Police have opened a criminal investigation for spreading “dangerous misinformation.”

In the same register are placed religious services who officiated religious services without observing sanitary measures and who could be a risk factor in the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

## **Conclusions**

The way religious cults have influenced social crises in Romania is a topic neglected by the specialized literature in the context in which it is very difficult to quantify “how much” and “how” religious institutions could intervene in the improvement/worsening of the values of specific indicators. For example, in the case of the social crisis in Romania in the ‘90s, generated by the change of the totalitarian communist regime, it is easier to track whether religious cults interacted with the political actors of the moment and influenced certain decisions with an impact on its evolution than to observe whether religious institutions had any imprint on poverty, unemployment or investments.

Thus, this text aims to provide a series of perspectives of analysis (attention being especially paid to the case of the Romanian Orthodox Church) that highlight both the influence of religious denominations on the improvement and the imprint of religious denominations on the aggravation of social crises. Romanians are among the most religious Europeans, with statistics highlighting high levels of practice and faith. Moreover, religious denominations are active in society, providing social assistance services (ROC being the most important private provider) and medical or education complementary to those offered by State institutions. The return of religion to the public space in the early ‘90s was regarded as a common desideratum of religious actors but also as a right of Romanians to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and religious assistance. Although public trust in the Church has been about 85% for more than 14 years, Romanians have not credited her in polls and for intervening in the “hot” transition topics, thus leaving politicians responsible for applying specific strategies. However, religious denominations have been active in the public process of diminishing social crises, both informally (local communities) and through institutional programs to promote pluralism and social peace. In the list of examples of informal mechanisms of religious life in favor of improving some dimensions of social crises, we referred to the perspective in which we understand the Church as an important factor of social cohesion, to the role in supporting vulnerable members of the community or to the internal/external network.

The fact that religious cults can also contribute to conflicting social states is a result of the principles of freedom of conscience and religious expression, as well as the interreligious competition inherent in democratic religious pluralism.

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