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TWO PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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Review of Cristina Gavriluță, *The Everyday Sacred. Symbols, Rituals, Mythologies*, (Saarbrücken, Germany: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013).

Review of Nicu Gavriluță, *Sociologia religiilor. Credințe, ritualuri, ideologii (The sociology of religions. Beliefs, rituals, ideologies)*, (Iași: Polirom, 2013).

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Octavia Domide The Sacred in Today's World

Researching the presence of the sacred in the everyday world seems to be a risky undertaking, fallen into desuetude. We have become accustomed for the recent approaches of social reality to operate in worldly terms. Phenomena are explained and interpreted by relaying chiefly on a cause-effect approach. However, this perspective is not completely satisfactory for those who wish to perceive other meanings in the world surrounding us.

From this point of view, Cristina Gavriluță's work, *The Everyday Sacred. Symbols, Rituals, Mythologies*, provides enough grounds for being placed in the category of those approaches that attempt to go beyond conventional interpretations and explanations. The title of the book informs the reader from the start that the topics presented will be analysed in terms of sign, symbol, the presence of the sacred in everyday life.

A professor at the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Cristina Gavriluță has already got her readers accustomed (as, for instance in *The Sacred and the Californisation of Culture* or in *A Socio-anthropology of Divinatory Phenomena*)¹ to a socio-anthropological reading of the issues of ecumenism, tolerance, of the social representations of work, money and body, of certain religious practices and rituals (some of them questionable, such as Satanism) still alive in the Romanian space.

The book, printed in English by Lap Lambert Academic Publishing in Saarbrücken, Germany, consists of several texts. Some of them had already been released in earlier versions, and published by prestigious Romanian scientific journals ("Culianu, Romanian Orthodoxy and the Sin against Capitalism", "Interconfessional communication and ecumenism", "Social Images and Representations of Labour", "Social Sciences, Religion and (Post)modernity"), while others were published for the first time as part of this book: "Tolerance, Intolerance and Religious Fanaticism", "Satanism – the Expression of Existential Confusion", "The Icon – an Imago Mundi".

As stated in the beginning, *The Everyday Sacred. Symbols, Rituals, Mythologies* is a complex analysis of classic themes (alchemy, body, icon), as well as of contemporary ones (tolerance, capitalism, the myth of globalisation). The central element of each text is the symbol and the meanings it generates in various social contexts. The author analyses the manner in which all these elements are converted into collective attitudes, behaviours, images and representations.

The book has an especially comprehensive structure, the four chapters being organised into subchapters, divided in their turn in such a way as to reflect the diversity of the perspectives from which the topic is approached.

The issues of religion, ecumenism and tolerance in the context of globalisation bring back into discussion the issues of alterity, as well as that of the cultures and civilisations belonging to various areas: "In the face of contemporary challenges when globalization rules over economy, politics, even religion and almost everything else, ecumenism brings a new message. It is both a model of coexistence and a model of communication among denominations. This universalism preached by the ecumenical movement actually suggests a new attitude towards the Other, be those denominational and religious differences."²

The decayed forms of religion are analysed by the author in the recent manifestations of Satanist groups and in their ideology. Socio-anthropological explanations take the reader to the conclusion that such manifestations, beyond their (ab)normality, are the expression of existential confusion.

The second chapter discusses the issues of capitalism and the chances it has at evolving in the Romanian space. Taking as a starting point Max Weber's famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*³ the author aims to uncover the profound elements of orthodoxy that could support the development of the spirit of capitalism in Romania. The image and the social representation of money in the Romanian space come to support the idea that beyond the current ideologies and business practices there may exist a number of prime data, images, representations, symbols, which have their origin in religious life and doctrine.

Therefore, the presence in the book of religious symbols and motives is not accidental. They can also be found in the life of the believer, in work, money, social images, technology and progress. The phenomena caused by globalisation are merely new formulas through which the sacred is veiled in the lay world⁴ "trying to penetrate the mysteries of the world, to demystify it, the contemporary man simply managed to create other myths (the myth of globalization, for example)".⁵ Starting from the writings of Eliade⁶ and Culianu⁷ the author shows how old myths are replaced by new ones and how old religious symbols and myths are re-activated in our everyday activities, in science and in the new technologies.

The final part of the book consists of an epistemological debate. In a manner consistent with the rest of her work, the author tactfully expresses her own epistemic options. Rejecting the evolutionist paradigm, Cristina Gavriluță prefers the visions of Th. Kuhn, P. Feyrabend and of those who followed in their footsteps. By embracing a hermeneutic perspective stemming from the thought of Eliade and Culianu, the author presents her concern for a qualitative research effort. "Story-telling or how to escape time", "Observation and the challenges of alterity" are two of the titles that underline the importance of such methods of researching the various manifestations of The Other. This is another argument in

support of the socio-anthropological approach either of exotic themes and topics or of very topical ones.

The various embodiments of alterity and the challenges posed by today's world analysed by Cristina Gavriluță in her book *The Everyday Sacred. Symbols, Rituals, Mythologies* make this volume not just very interesting, but also very useful. At the same time, the book is an invitation to take a look beyond the visible and immediate manifestations of everyday life.

Larisa Bianca Pîrjol

A sociology of magical-religious beliefs and rituals

The religious phenomenon has caught the attention of many researchers from domains other than theology; philosophers, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, as well as researchers in the field of exact sciences have explored this subject matter. This can only add to the importance of religion in both personal and social life.

The volume *Sociologia religiilor. Credințe, ritualuri, ideologii* (*The sociology of religions. Beliefs, rituals, ideologies*) - authored by the sociologist, anthropologist and professor Nicu Gavriluță, is one such work concerning the religious phenomenon. The book is written in a clear and objective manner, drawing, among others, a map of the present day great religions. It helps the less initiated reader to understand in an accurate and (sometimes) detailed manner the multitude of manifestations the classical and present-day religious phenomenon.

A hotly contested and debated topic, religion as a whole gives individuals the opportunity to believe in "something" or "somebody". The choice as to whether to believe or not, as well as the orientation of each individual's beliefs are solely up to the latter. Ideally, one should espouse one belief or another based on one's own, interior desire, instead of based on constraint, pressures or pragmatism.

It is worth noting that the author wrote this book in memory of his friend Basile, a "much too young traveller to the otherworld". It is likely that mention of a very close friend (who has left this world) suggests that this friend now possesses the truth about all the topics included in the book - or at least about some of them.

The book comes as a natural extension of the author's professional concerns. To clarify, Nicu Gavriluță is dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences at the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, programme director for the Academic Society for the Study of Religions and Ideologies (SACRI) and the president of the Society of Romanian Sociologists. Over two decades of scientific work and writings, Nicu Gavriluță has been constantly and genuinely concerned with the study and the socio-anthropological research of the religious

phenomenon. Worth mentioning are the titles published by the author: *Magical and religious mentalities and rituals. Studies and essays in the sociology of the sacred*, *Culianu, mind games and multidimensional worlds*, *The social imaginary of the Romanian transition times. Symbols, fantasies, representations*, *The fractals and the social time*, *The hermeneutics of religious symbolism. Studies and essays*, *Eastern religious movements*, *A socio-anthropological perspective on the globalisation of yoga practices*, *Romania in the bardo state. Newspaper articles and cultural dialogues*, *Social and cultural anthropology*, *The sociology of sport. Theories, methods, applications*, *The mother of fools is always pregnant. The sociology of day-to-day pathologies*.⁸

As the author himself confirms, nowadays in Romania there are very few works by Romanian authors regarding the sociology of religions. Thus, the book comes as an important and very necessary bridge over a gap in high-quality literature concerning the sociology of religions.

The volume consists of 26 chapters, each developing a different topic. The religious phenomenon is presented in a succinct and clear manner, starting from classical sociological theories. Further on, the author presents the manner in which religious experience and representations are viewed from the point of view of the great religions of the present day. The second part of the book approaches newer and bolder topics, less often discussed in terms of religious history and sociology in Romania: the Church of Scientology and the New Age movement, the Free Masons and the Knights Templar, shamanism and magic, Satanism and alchemy. The book concludes with a competent analysis of classical themes for the sociology of religions: the relationship between Church and state and religious (in)tolerance, religious fundamentalism and the phenomenon of secularisation. The author is especially commendable for analysing religious fundamentalism in an original manner, applying to it the theory of multidimensional complexity (the so-called binary fractal method) provided by Ioan Petru Culianu in the books he published after 1986.⁹

In a time when everything is done quickly, on the go, religion as a scientific subject matter continues to gravitate around the assumption that the supernatural exists. The uncertainty involved in understanding religion as a result of studying it with the tools of science is underlined by Nicu Gavriluță by quoting Émile Poulat. According to the latter, religion is "a strange object, with an uncertain status – mobile and controversial –, which constantly eludes us, the same as art, love, ego and consciousness".¹⁰ The more we feel we understand more, the deeper the lack of understanding becomes.¹¹

The subtitle of the book points to the existence of a multitude of beliefs, rituals and ideologies that have manifested themselves throughout time. Their common basis is the identification of humans as beings whose destiny is imprinted with a profoundly religious way of viewing the world and everything around them. A certain unity at group, community and society level can also be identified, and it is present irrespective of the

specific of the religious belief. This unity stems from the very assumption of the existence of an unseen world (the sacred), as well as from "the nostalgia of origins" identified by Mircea Eliade.

The chief intention of Nicu Gavriluță's new book is to make the reader aware of the existence of multiple ways of finding direction in social life, all pertaining to religious experience. The choice of ideas, precepts and sociological theories discussed in the book is not made in order to influence the reader, and the topics are not given as models to be followed or rejected. The author merely analyses, in an objective, clear and concise manner, the social reality of religious life. Every belief in the world is described as both an individual and collective effort for spiritual fulfilment.¹²

For the inquisitive reader, all these are extremely interesting topics. As humans living in groups, communities and societies, we cannot ignore the religious beliefs, rituals and ideologies surrounding us. If we are introduced to the scientific, authentic knowledge of the great religions of today and of other New Religious Movements, then, after reading this important book, we shall feel we have a better knowledge of the self in relation to other religious beliefs, sacred rituals and magical-religious symbols.¹³

To conclude, I heartily recommend professor Nicu Gavriluță's new book to all those who are interested in the science of religions and especially to those readers who wish to discover and learn more about the sociology of religions.

Notes:

¹ Cristina Gavriluță, *Sacrul și californizarea culturii* (The sacred and the californisation of culture), (Bucharest: Paideia, 2008), Cristina Gavriluță, *Socio-antropologia fenomenelor divinatorii* (A socio-anthropology of divinatory phenomena), (Bucharest: Paideia, 2009), or Cristina Gavriluță, Mihaela Frunză, "Four Anthropological and Religious Arguments in Favour of the Organ Donation", *European Journal of Science and Theology*, Vol. 8 Issue 3 (2012): 47-56.

² Cristina Gavriluță, *The Everyday Sacred. Symbols, Rituals, Mythologies*, (Saarbrücken, Germany: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013), 9.

³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Romanian translation by Ihor Lemnij, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1993).

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Sacrul și profanul*, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992). See also Mihaela Paraschivescu, "'We the People' and God. Religion and the Political Discourse in the United States of America", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 11, issue 33 (Winter 2012): 21-38; Sandu Frunză, "Political Communication and the Median Space of Religious Experience", *Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială*, vol. 39 (2012): 176-186.

⁵ Cristina Gavriluță, *The Everyday Sacred. Symbols, Rituals, Mythologies*, 184.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Nostalgia originilor*, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994).

⁷ Ioan Petru Culianu, *Eros și magie în Renaștere. 1484*, (Bucharest: Nemira, 1994).

⁸ Nicu Gavriluță, *Mentalități și ritualuri magico-religioase. Studii și eseuri de sociologie a sacrului (Magical and religious mentalities and rituals. Studies and essays in the sociology of the sacred)*, (Iași: Polirom, 1998), Nicu Gavriluță, *Culianu, jocurile minții și lumile multidimensionale (Culianu, mind games and multidimensional worlds)*, (Iași: Polirom, 2000), Nicu Gavriluță, *Imaginarul social al tranziției românești. Simboluri, fantasmе, reprezentări (The social imaginary of the Romanian transition times. Symbols, fantasies, representations)*, (Cluj: Dacia, 2001), Nicu Gavriluță, *Fractalii și timpul social (The fractals and the social time)*, (Cluj: Dacia, 2003), Nicu Gavriluță, *Hermeneutica simbolismului religios. Studii și eseuri (The hermeneutics of religious symbolism. Studies and essays)*, (Iași: Axis, 2003), Nicu Gavriluță, *Mișcări religioase orientale. O perspectivă socio-antropologică asupra globalizării practicilor yoga (Eastern religious movements, A socio-anthropological perspective on the globalisation of yoga practices)*, (Iași: Axis, 2006), Nicu Gavriluță, *România în starea Bardo. Publicistică și dialoguri culturale (Romania in the bardo state. Newspaper articles and cultural dialogues)*, (Cluj: Protopress, 2006), Nicu Gavriluță, *Antropologie socială și culturală (Social and cultural anthropology)*, (Iași: Polirom, 2009), Nicu Gavriluță, *Sociologia sportului. Teorii, metode, aplicații (The sociology of sport. Theories, methods, applications)* (co-author), (Iași: Polirom, 2010), Nicu Gavriluță, *Mama proștilor e mereu gravidă. Sociologia patologiilor cotidiene (The mother of fools is always pregnant. The sociology of day-to-day pathologies)*, (Iași: Institutul European, 2010).

⁹ Nicu Gavriluță, *Culianu, jocurile minții și lumile multidimensionale (Culianu, mind games and multidimensional worlds)*, (Iași: Polirom, 2000).

¹⁰ Nicu Gavriluță, *Sociologia religiilor. Credințe, ritualuri, ideologii (The sociology of religions. Beliefs, rituals, ideologies)*, (Iași: Polirom, 2013), 20.

¹¹ Ioan Hosu, "The empire of communication: body, image and relation", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 11, issue 31 (2012): 198-205; Mladen Turk, "Naturalistic Foundations of the Idea of the Holy: Darwinian Roots of Rudolf Otto's Theology", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 12 issue 35 (2013): 248-263

¹² Nicu Gavriluță, "Religious fundamentalism – a fractal in Hilbert Space" in Daniela Dunca, Cornelia Gășpărel (editors), *Knowledge and Action within the Knowledge Based Society. Social and Political Philosophy, Ethics, Psychology and Educational Sciences* (Iași: Editura Institutul European, 2012), 49-57. See also Ioan Hosu, Sandu Frunză, „Religious Affiliation and Social Action in the Public Space”, *Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială*, vol. 43 (2013): 240-254.

¹³ See also Nicu Gavriluță, "Science and Religion in the New Age Mentality", *European Journal of Science and Theology*, Vol. 8 Issue 3 (2012): 65-71.