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Desecularisation in Postcommunist Romania

Abstract   The paper gives an analysis of the process as a result of which postcommunist Romania has moved from being an officially atheist country to being one of the most religious countries in Europe. The process of desecularisation is analysed in three dimensions. On the macro-level, I outline the religious headway in the most important institutions of the Romanian society, on the meso-level I analyse the changes in the organizational structure of churches and in the denominational structure of the country, while on the individual level the changes occurring in individual religiosity. In the final part of the study I argue that within these dimensions desecularisation was realized to different extents, while "desecularisation from above" is not likely to achieve its goals in the long run.

Keywords   religion, Romania, desecularization, secularization

Presently, Romania is one of the most religious countries in Europe (Voicu 2007, Tomka 2005). However, this situation is relatively new, as twenty three years ago Romania was officially an atheist country, in which religion – at least officially – was considered the anachronistic, tolerated relic of the past. And although in reality the population of the country was probably quite religious back then as well, the social importance of religion was significantly lower than today – thus this leading position of the country at the beginning of the 21st century is the result of developments of the past 20 years. In my paper I attempt to review these developments by analysing the events that led to the present-day situation.

The expansion of religion in Romania is not an isolated case, as from the 1990s onwards several comprehensive studies report a religious revival as well as the rise in the social significance of religion (Casanova 1994, Berger 1998a). Based on Berger, the concept of desecularization is accepted to name the phenomenon, which should be understood as counter-secularisation, that is the expansion of religion in societies previously characterized by secularizing tendencies (Berger 1998b). In his detailed explanation of the concept, Karpov (2010) defines desecularisation as the opposite process of secularisation, and uses the same dimensions in outlining it as the ones applied by the theoreticians of secularization. Thus, one of the areas of desecularisation is represented by previously secularized institutions, in which religious norms gain new ground, both in the formal and informal sense. The process of desecularisation can be realised in the practice of religion and religious faith, leading to the revival and intensification of religious life, but also through the fact that religious practice moves from the private sphere to the public one in a more accentuated way. Desecularisation can also manifest itself in the character of cultural products (art, literature, philosophy, etc.), the contents of which have become more religious, and last but not least in the "substratum" of society, that is in its material culture (e.g., in the building of churches and parochial buildings, in the growth of the economic wealth of the churches, in the appearance of religious market products, etc.). These different areas of social life can become desecularised more or less independently from one another, and thus we can encounter very different cases of desecularisation in real life (Karpov 2010. 250). The areas in which desecularisation processes take place are mostly determined by the social actors they are the result of: while the simple religious actors achieve outcomes mostly in the field of religious practice and faith ("desecularisation from below"), the activist groups with greater social influence are capable of de-secularising the system of institutions and culture in the above sense as well ("desecularisation from above") (Karpov 2010. 251–255).

While I agree completely with the above outlined concept of desecularisation, in my analysis – which is not based on my own empirical research, but aims to be a synthesis of available empirical analyses – its application is difficult as it includes many dimensions that have not yet been investigated in Romania. Thus, preserving the logic of Karpov's conceptualisation, the desecularisation processes which have taken place in Romania are discussed below using the three dimensions of secularisation defined by Dobellaere. Dobellaere, in systematising the voluminous scholarly literature on secularisation, determines three "levels" of the phenomenon (Dobellaere 2002). According to him, secularisation means a diminishing commitment of the individuals towards the church, which he calls "individual secularisation". This therefore covers the increasing difference between the actual religious knowledge, attitudes and everyday behaviour of the believers and the expectations of the church related to these. The second level of secularization is institutional secularisation, which means the internal, organisational restructuration of the

churches and denominations, including the changes in the message and in the values represented by the organizations. As a third level of secularisation he identifies societal secularisation. This is the result of the functional differentiation of modern societies, and covers the phenomenon in which, due to gradual professionalization, certain sectors (sub-systems) of modern societies gain more and more autonomy, becoming independent in this process from religion. As a result of this level of secularisation, religion becomes an independent social sub-system, which in addition is being gradually transferred from the public sphere to the private sphere (Dobellaere 2002. 29–40). The cause of the differentiation of the sub-systems is rationalisation, as a result of which the actors of the sub-systems are regulated by instrumental control rather than moral control.

In the light of Dobellaere's theory, in the following I consider the changes that have occurred in Romania in the relationship between religion and the main institutions of society, that is in the societal position of religion, as well as the processes on the level of religious organisations, and the way in which individual religiosity has been transformed.

Religious change at the societal level

One of the most common explanations of the change occurring in the societal status of religion in social modernisation is linked to the theory of social differentiation, according to which the sub-systems specialising in performing certain social tasks and "functions" become more and more self-reliant and more independent from other sub-systems, they start following their own instrumental rationality and take the more general moral considerations less into account (Pokol 1997). The independence of the individual sub-systems from religion can occur as an unexpected consequence of professionalization (latent societal secularisation), but also as the conscious effort for the laicisation of the given social sphere (manifest societal secularisation) (Dobellaere 2002). As it is known, in Eastern Europe the latter type of secularisation was dominant, and the reduction of the influence of the churches and religion over certain sub-systems occurred as the result of violent intervention on the behalf of the state. Such secularising intervention was for example the nationalisation of religious education, of the religious health and social institutions, or the banning of the economic activities of churches by confiscating their property. This aspect of the socialist transformation of society was not legitimate in the eyes of large groups of the population, thus the political motivation of societal secularisation between 1945 and 1989 was one of the reasons and prerequisites of the opposite, desecularisation processes after the regime change. As the result of the latter, religion and the churches have been re-gaining influence over the previously secularised institutions of society, and their influence seems to be growing steadily. The presence of the church in such institutions is often merely symbolic, which in itself is not a negligible phenomenon; however sometimes the intertwining of the religious and other sub-systems exceeds the symbolic level and religion comes to affect the functioning of the sub-system (Moise 2004; Andreescu, G.–Andreescu, L. 2009).

The process of desecularisation in question is perhaps the most spectacular in the case of the political sub-system. From the point of view of this relationship it is crucial, that orthodox theology mutually defines the Romanian nation and the church by each other, and that – accordingly – any attempt to separate the church and the state is interpreted as an attack against the church (Stănescu 1996). Its relations with any kind of political power are viewed by the Romanian Orthodox Church in the light of the "Byzantine Symphony", according to which the

proper arrangement is the close co-operation between the two. Even in the communist decades, this co-operation worked better than in the majority of socialist countries, as a result of which the suppression of denominations in Romania was less powerful than in the other countries of the communist bloc. The desecularisation of the political system after the regime change is especially striking on the symbolic level, as the presence of the leaders of the Orthodox Church sanctifies almost every political event. In addition to this symbolic presence, the church and state structures are intertwined in their institutions as well, through the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs. This institution, although part of the state apparatus, is virtually the representative of the Orthodox Church in the state apparatus by the fact that the ones occupying office positions are almost without exception church people with a degree in theology, and who try to enforce the interests of the Church rather than those of the state in their office.

In addition to the symbolic and institutional intertwining, the Orthodox Church also influences the functioning of the political sub-system. This is achieved on the one hand through the close relationship between the Orthodox Church and ethnic identity, as in every political decision with an ethnic dimension the influence of the Orthodox Church as an ethnic church is obvious. In addition to their role in the formation of ethnic politics, in the last twenty years denominations have frequently played a role in shaping public opinion in political issues not related to ethnicity as well. In this respect the role which can be considered even more important than influencing the voters' choice options, which the Orthodox Church gained through the development of policies and influence, is that in the public debates it has become the most important social partner at the expense of the institutions of civil society.

The process of desecularisation is similarly spectacular in the case of educational institutions. The symbolic presence is strong in this case as well, as the events at the beginning and end of school years are rarely without ecclesiastic presence, religious symbols on the walls of educational institutions are often found – one of the public debates in the topic has been provoked exactly by the issue of icons (sacred images) in schools (Bakó–Horváth 2009). Establishing school chapels and college churches is no longer of a merely symbolic significance, as there is real religious activity going on in them, and as such they are the bastions of church(es) in the educational system. The most important interlocking of religious and educational institutions however has not been achieved by these, but by the introduction of religious instruction in schools, as the result of which church representatives with a degree in theology have become a constant presence in public schools. This presence influences the specific rationality of education, regarding the pedagogical principles on the one hand, and the principles of cognition on the other. Pedagogy is an independent science, with particular notions regarding education and training, as well as particular methods developed for these, from which the principles and methods of the churches may be more or less different (Moise 2004).[1] In addition to these particular pedagogical issues, the presence of the church influences the functioning of the school in the way that it spreads a world view and cognitive logic different from the scientific world view and the rational cognitive principles behind it that are propagated by education. This effort is well represented by the attempt to exclude the theory of evolution from the biology curriculum, as well as that of the philosophical concepts of God from the philosophy curriculum.[2] In these cases the autonomy

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[1] The differences between the pedagogical principles are well presented in an educational story written by Moise: in the story from the Orthodox religion textbook the little boy tries to destroy a swallow's nest, but due to God's intervention the ladder falls, and the little boy lies in bed all summer as punishment (Moise 2004).

[2] A comprehensive overview of this attempt to influence the curriculum can be found in the open letter addressed to the Ministry of National Education by the Solidarity for the freedom of conscience organisation.

and independence of these scientific fields are damaged as a result of the intervention of the religious sub-system. Besides the attempts to influence the contents of the curriculum, there is a similar influence upon the actually taught material as – especially in rural schools – due to administrative reasons the teachers of religion with a theological qualification are forced to teach other subjects as well (MOISE 2004, STAN–TURCESCU 2005, ANDREESCU et.al. 2007).

In addition to politics and education, a strong presence of the church has been established in the social and health care sector. In these the situation is similar to the above, except for the fact that the impact on the functioning of these institutions is presumably weaker, than in the case of political or educational institutions. The influence of the church upon the economic sphere seems also to be minor.

In the above we have mainly discussed the transformations of the relations between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the institutions of the state, as the societal status of religion is determined first and foremost by the religion of the Romanian majority. The situation of the Hungarian minority denominations is also worth an analysis. Taking into account the not purely religious social engagements of the Hungarian historical churches, it becomes obvious that – unlike the Orthodox Church – these primarily take place within the framework of civil society. This is consistent with the Western European models, where the emergence of religion from the private sphere (de-privatisation) and the strengthening of its social presence (revitalisation) also happen within the frameworks of civil society. By its presence in civil society, the public appearance of religion is realised without influencing the systemic operation of these societies (CASANOVA 1994).

With regard to the societal expansion of religion and churches, the question of the social legitimacy of the phenomenon can also be raised. In a nationally representative survey conducted in 2008 we formulated questions about the public perception of the political influence of priests. The answers revealed that the majority of the population does not agree with the influence of the church upon politics: influencing the opinions of the voters was rejected by 80% of the respondents, while 73.5% does not agree with the influencing of political decisions. We have not found any significant differences in these opinions of the different ethnical groups.[3]

TABLE 1 ❖ *The opinion of Romania's population on priests' political engagement*

	Fully Agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Does not agree	Does not know, no answer
Priests should not influence the way people vote	50.1.	28.9	9.3	5.4	6.2
Priests should not influence political decisions	48.9	24.6	12.1	7.7	6.7

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http://www.humanism.ro/articles.php?page=62&article=225

[3] The data are from the "Social cohesion and inter-ethnic climate in Romania 2008" research, which was carried out by the Interethnic Relationships Research Centre in October-November of 2008 for the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities.

Changes in the organisation of the church, modifications in the denominational structures and the nature of religiosity

I find particularly remarkable two aspects of the manifold processes of transformation in the mid-level of the Romanian religious context: the organisational growth of the large churches and the changes in the religious patterns within these.

From the point of view of organisational changes the large churches have gone through a process of obvious growth. The end of the bans formulated by the communist regime was first followed by an increase in the number of the clergy, and together with the introduction of religious instruction in public schools a new body of individuals with a theological degree appeared, that of the teachers of religion. Their number reaches in order of magnitude that of priests, as according to the 2011 statistics of the Orthodox Church, in addition to the latter group of 14,231, the group of around 7,700 of the teachers of religion is active in education. [4] The growth of the clergy and that of the training of teachers of religion both have contributed to the growth of a third group of religious experts, that of teachers of theology. The expansion of the latter group was further strengthened by pairing theology with other university courses, as a result of which theological training became available in a much larger circle. The integration of theological education in state universities – which means that the financial burden of the cost of the training does not need to be borne by the churches – resulted in the facilitation of the rise in the number of both the students and the teachers. Thus the number of institutions providing theological education increased from three to fifteen in the first ten years after the regime change, and the number of the enrolled students exceeds ten thousand (Andreescu–Kacsó 2009). And finally there is a significant rise in the number of groups of monks, whose massive presence mainly characterizes the Orthodox Church: according to the aforementioned statistics in 2011 there were 8476 monks living in the country. Overall the number of people with a theological qualification has multiplied in the last twenty years. This organisational and personnel growth mainly characterises the Orthodox Church; however similar processes took place in the case of the other churches as well. The smallest increase occurred in churches with less significant resources for growth: the ones, which – due to the fact that they have less members and to their geographical dispersion – were not entitled to start groups within the system of religious education in schools, and in which there are no religious orders functioning.

In addition to the institutional growth within the church, another organisational change is the institutionalisation of church movements. Two types of such movements should be distinguished, the ones organised around visions, and the reform movements created with the purpose of changing the churches from within. Movements built around visions mainly characterise the Orthodox Church,[5] however we have knowledge of similar events in the Hungarian population of the country, the most important of them being the one organised around the Seuca visions

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[4] These data refer only to Orthodox priest and teachiers of religion. The source of the Romanian Orthodox Church Staff statistics: http://www.patriarhia.ro/_layouts/images/File/ADM_2011.pdf (accessed: 2014.02.05) The numbers of teachers of religion is mentioned in the following: http://www.noutati-ortodoxe.ro/b-raspunsul-patriarhiei-romane-la-ultimele-dezinformari-asur-b_l24744_p0.html (acessed: 2014.12.15)

[5] In his textbook "Misiologie și ecumensim" ['Missiology and Ecumenism'] David Pestroiu presents several movements organized around visions: Noul Ierusalim, Petrache Lupu de la Maglavit, Miscarea de la Vladimiresti (Pestroiu, 2010)

(Peti 2009). The common characteristic of these movements is that they are popular among the members of lower classes, and institutionalised movements are rarely developed from them. Churches treat them with reservation; any type of institutionalisation usually leads to excommunication and exclusion. The reform or revival movements are created with the purpose to renew worship and moral order within the church. These movements therefore signal the need for internal change, while their constant presence in the church may trigger the transformation of the dominant forms of piety. They are more organised than the ones built around visions, and thus their exclusion is more difficult, especially when members of the clergy are involved in them. Table 2 lists the most important reform movements of the three largest historical churches, without being exhaustive.

Table 2 ❖ *The renewal movements of the three largest churches in Romania*

Romanian Orthodox Church	Roman Catholic Church	Reformed Church
Oastea Domnului ['Army of the Lord'] Miscarea Rugul Aprins ['The Burning Bush Movement'] Miscarea Ortodoxa de Reinviere Monahala ['Monastic Orthodox Revival Movement']	Cursillo Focolare Hit és fény ['Faith and Light'] Karizmatikus Megújulás ['Charismatic Movement'] Ferences Világi Rend ['Secular Franciscan Order']	CE Szövetség ['CE Association'] Zimányi – mozgalom ['Zimányi – movement'] Miskolci Missziós Csoport ['Miskolc Missionary Group']

A part of these movements were established as far back as the beginning of the 20th century. Before communism, most of them were considered sects to be excluded by their churches, and the communist regime did not tolerate them because of their self-organised, civil nature. In order to eradicate them, secular power often used the help of priests working for the secret police as well, and as a result these movements survived until the regime change as underground movements, in conflict with their own churches. After the regime change the most important ones were reconciled with, and a more or less formal integration was achieved as well (Kiss 2003; Blaga 2009).

The analyses on the most popular reform movements of the three largest churches, the Oastea Domnului ['The Army of the Lord'], the Catholic Charismatic Movement and the CE Association, have pointed out several common characteristics within these. All three movements are organised as integrated systems of small groups, as multi-centre horizontal networks consisting of local small communities. Regarding their teaching – compared to their churches – they are characterised by a greater ethical rigour on the one hand, on the other the members play a more active role in the shaping of individual religious world views than what is usual in the large churches; nevertheless this happens with a frequent emphasizing of doctrinal unity with the church. From the point of view of religious practices the importance of personal repentance, the evangelization ambitions, the high emotional loads of community events, the high importance of music and song, as well as the relative laxity of physical discipline can be highlighted. As there is no common root of these movements, the similarities in the movements operating within the framework of the different churches probably indicate a more general shift in religious needs, regardless of denomination. Such common features are the practice of religion in small communities, the religious egalitarianism within these small communities, the high degree of individual freedom and spontaneity in the experiencing of religion, as well as the appreciation of emotions. The unusual success of the Pentecostal Church featuring many of the above also supports our interpretation, as the membership of this church has increased by 64 percent in the period following the regime change (from 220,000 to 362,000).

Apart from the spectacular growth of the Pentecostal Church, the denominational structure of the country after the regime change is characterised by a high degree of stability, the smaller changes are partly explained by the fact that many Hungarians have emigrated (the decrease in the percentage of Roman Catholics, Reformed and Unitarians) or by the aging membership (the decrease in the percentage of the Israelites). Concerning the changes in the membership of the different denominations, the slowing growth of evangelical churches is conspicuous, especially in the past ten years, as well as the minimal success of the newer "sects" and new religious movements: the category of "other denominations" increased from 0.4 percent to only 0.6 percent in twenty years. Knowing that half of this, 49,820 people belong to Jehovah's Witnesses, 15,514 to the Romanian Lutheran Church, and 14,385 to the Serbian Orthodox Church, the remaining "other denominations" make up only 0.2 percent of the denominational structure.[6] Although the exact composition of this is not known, according to our knowledge it is largely made up of evangelical communities, while the presence of new religious movements that have made a great stir in the Western countries in the past 50 years seems insignificant. However, it is essential to mention in relation to the latter that most of them do not expect an exclusive membership from their followers, that is they do not expect them to give up their previous religious affiliations, and the options to connect offered are not the usual (for example they offer participation at courses rather than membership), so the number of followers is almost impossible to grasp from the statistical point of view.
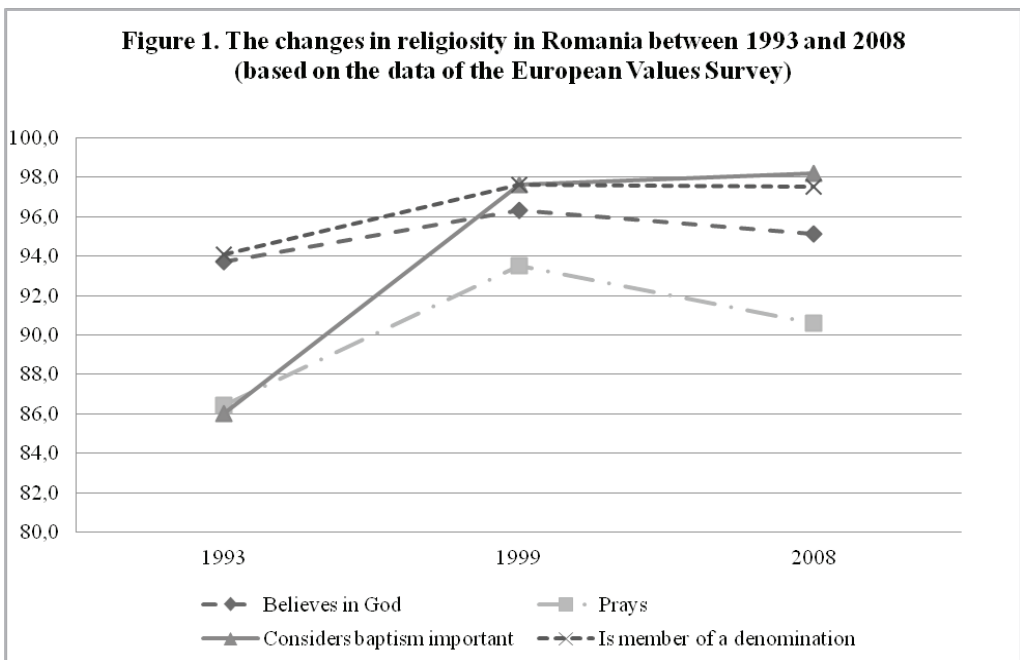
Table 2 ❖ *Romania's denominational structure according to census data, as well as the changes in the membership of the denominations between 1992 and 2011.*

	1992	2002	2011	Change between 1992 and 2011 (%)
Eastern Orthodox	86.8	86.8	86.5	-17.7
Roman Catholic	5.1	4.7	4.6	-25.1
Greek-Catholic	1.0	0.9	0.8	-32.6
Reformed	3.5	3.2	3.2	-25.1
Pentecostal	1.0	1.5	1.9	64.1
Baptist	0.5	0.6	0.6	3.1
Seventh-day Adventist	0.3	0.4	0.4	4.4
Unitarian	0.3	0.3	0.3	-24.8
Muslim	0.2	0.3	0.3	15.0
Evangelical Christian	0.2	0.2	0.2	-14.9
Old Believers or Old Rite Christians	0.1	0.2	0.2	15.7
Lutheran Synod Presbyterian	0.1	0.1	0.1	-5.0
Lutheran (Augsburg Confession)	0.2	0.1	0.0	-86.2
Israelite	0.0	0.0	0.0	-63.6
Other denomination	0.4	0.5	0.6	25.0
Non-religious and atheist	0.2	0.1	0.2	14.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	-

[6] All the numerical data regarding the denominations are based on census data. Source: http://www.recensamantromania.ro/

Changes in individual religiosity

Besides the changes outlined above regarding the social presence of churches and their systemic roles, there has been an increase in religiosity in the individual aspects as well. Despite all their shortcomings, the most frequently and periodically repeated surveys used to measure personal religiosity allow the tracking of the intensity of religiosity over time. To this end, they differentiate several dimensions of religiosity, for example the practical aspect of religion consisting of actions, the (cognitive) dimension of faiths and knowledge, the dimension of experience and the organisational dimension. In the period following the regime change an increase can be detected in all of these. The following figure shows several indicators of the cognitive, practical and organisational dimensions of religiosity in three different points in time: in 1993, 1999, and 2008. There has been an increase in every one of these indicators. The increase was more significant between 1993 and 1999, followed by stagnation: between 1999 and 2008 the values remain roughly the same.

Figure 1. The changes in religiosity in Romania between 1993 and 2008 (based on the data of the European Values Survey)

The international comparative studies draw attention to several other additional explanatory factors of this high degree of religiosity. These show that in Europe the economic situation of the countries, the level of education, as well as religious pluralism determine the level of religiosity: the richer the country, the more it is characterized by religious plurality, the higher the level of education of the people, the less religious the population of that particular country is. In the case of Romania all three indicators determine a higher degree of religiosity (Voicu 2007).

Thus Romania, as the result of a complex process, has become one of the most religious countries in Europe, but the question is how long this religious flare is going to exist. On the different levels of the analysis regarding the expected changes in the societal significance of religion contradictory predictions can be made. On the level of individual religiosity the explanations

Figure 2. Indicators of religiosity in relation to age
(percentage, by age group, EVS 2008)
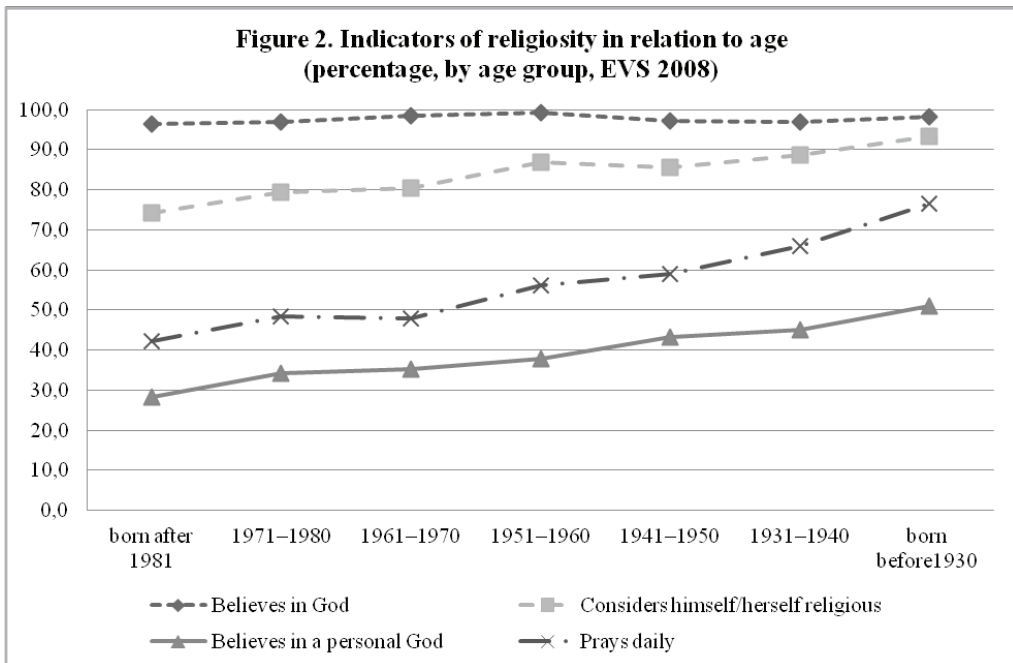
used by international comparative studies predict a temporary nature to the religious flare, as a possible economic boost and the expected growth in the education of the population will induce a decrease in religiosity in the light of these. A similar effect on personal religiosity is to be expected from the slow increase in religious plurality, which is also facilitated by international mass migration, which makes facing religious otherness inevitable even if the background of the migrants does not become pluralised from the religious point of view. Based on the systemic and organisational changes presented in the first part of our analysis however, in these scenes of religious revival the persistence of religion is more likely, as the increased systemic presence of the churches and their position of power can hardly be reduced. For the manifold multiplied group of religious experts it is also an existential necessity to preserve the current position of power, and knowing that we are talking about probably the most effective opinion-forming group, it is not likely that there will be any attempt on behalf of the political class to limit the political power and influence of these groups.

It is possible that in the future in Romania, besides a highly de-secularised system of institutions and the presence of an enlarged group of religious experts, the slow decline of personal religiosity can be expected. This can be inferred not only from the above described system of interconnections between welfare, education, religious plurality and religiosity, but also from the fact that the religiosity of the growing generation seems not to be greatly influenced by the now stronger religious socialization through religious instruction in schools. As shown in Figure 3 above, the religiosity of the successive generations presents a continuous decrease regarding most indicators, and this linear decrease is not broken by the fact that the generation born after 1981 received full religious instruction in schools. These data thus indicate that in spite of the systemic spread of churches, in the case of individual religiosity the continuation of the trend of secularisation is to be expected in the long run. ✳

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