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Sandu FRUNZĂ

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Political Communication and the Median Space of Religious Experience

Sandu FRUNZĂ¹

Abstract

The text proposes to uncover relevant mythical, ritualistic, religious aspects present in political communication. With modernity we note that in democratic societies symbolic communication recovers into a form of cultural and ideological pluralism the essential aspects of a legacy based on religious pluralism and plural symbolic expressions. The democratic human being of contemporary societies acts in public space in a manner in many ways similar to human conduct in traditional societies in the median space of religious experience. Secularization as a positive value of modernity does not eliminate the presence of the sacred from the modern political imaginary and from the symbolic communication manifested in the form of political communication.

Keywords: political communication; symbolic communication; myth; ritual; median space of religious experience; secularization; religious imaginary.

Introduction

Both in the totalitarian political systems and in democratic societies, political communication resorts to symbolic forms of representation, of language, of space architecture, of the ritualizing of behavior, or forms of mythologizing public personalities, social groups or social structures. The continuous symbolic adequacy of these imaginary constructions or symbolic manifestations is the result of a legacy that the human being brings to the public space of modernity. This adequacy remains significant even if the languages of modern communication place at our disposal new tools that seem to derive from traditional symbolic forms typical to the religious language and experience as it used to be lived by a traditional religious community.

¹ Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences Cluj, ROMANIA. Email: frunza@fspac.ro; sfrunza@yahoo.com

The complexity of the modern religious phenomenon

These symbolic constructions are in the modern world inheritors of the significant world seen through a symbolic consciousness of the world, of the symbolic logic in which the sacred functions, of the metamorphoses of religious imaginary and sacred manifestation in the consciousness of modern humans. Thus, what seems worth analyzing in this context is the way in which religion keeps its trace and power as an imprint in the symbolic dynamics of modernity. This dynamics may account also for the influence that religion has on the communication processes conceived as elements in the depth of the symbolic and ritualistic tapestry represented by the median space of religious experience. From the perspective of the analysis of median space in religious experience, religion may be viewed as “a conglomerate of ideas, cosmologies, faiths, institutions, hierarchies, elites and rites that vary in time and space, even when they refer to a ‘single’ religion” (Idel, 2007: 5).

Sense plurality is based on the plurality of symbolic creations. To understand them one needs complex, converging methods, as only one manner of approach never suffices. Considering the complexity of this phenomenon, Moshe Idel recommends that the religious phenomenon researcher give up in a pragmatic way a simplistic understanding of religion by a reductionist use of a single method. Religion as an object of research triggers always the need to converge several methods in order to reach a better solution when we explain the religious phenomenon (Idel, 2007: 6). Actually, Moshe Idel notes that “rarely does a researcher subscribe only to one of these methods. Except for the founders of each method, researchers, especially the exceptional ones, are less inclined to reduce such complex phenomena to one of their dimensions. A researcher should understand that a too rigorous adopting of only one method may lead to simplistic results. Important researchers rather tend to use more than one method, in variable proportions” (Idel, 2007: 10-11). A positive solution that Idel provides and I assume is to take “a general, ample approach called methodological eclecticism, that calls on various methodologies when it deals with varied aspects of religion” (Idel, 2007: 11) in order to attain an improved version of its interpretation. Both the general research of the problems raised by median space analysis, and the analysis of specific issues implied by its construction, need an approach to valorize this wide range of possibilities of understanding and interpreting provided by the methodological eclecticism.

Resulting from this perspective is an obvious fact, to the same extent that the complexity of religion calls for a complex multiple-angle approach, by practicing methodological eclecticism, we may say about communication and the communication phenomenon that they impose complex methodological stands, as proposed by methodological eclecticism. At the same time, an analysis of relations between media, religion and politics supposes a wider context that aims for “a

better understanding of the social, political and economic contexts of the post-communist societies, as well as of the media influence in the construction of a new social structure” (Abrudan, 2010: 250). From the view of symbolic communication, by valorizing in an original manner an entire tradition in Western interpretation, Ștefan Bratosin and Mihaela Alexandra Ionescu use a communication perspective to analyze relations between religion and politics (Bratosin, Ionescu, 2009: 3-18). Relevant in this sense may be the complex contemporary analyses of the relations between religion and ideology, of the way these relations impact the rapport of institutionalized religion and politics, and the way symbolic communication has benefic effects upon political communication. For a better understanding of the relation between the manifestation of the sacred as a paradigm of communication in the median space and symbolic communication in the median space of the symbolic communication experience that modernity cultivates, it may be useful to mention a few elements constitutive of the religious experience as an experience of the sacred.

The experience of the sacred and symbolic communication

When we bring religious experience into discussion, we may as well remember the polarity implying on the one hand the existence of a Sacred that is manifested and that we conceive in a transcendent manner, and on the other a special structure that makes possible the perception of the manifestation of the Sacred (Codoban, 1998: 27-45; Bobb, 2012: 553-559). All religions assert in a more or less explicit way the fact that the Sacred cannot be known in its essence. Even in Judaic thought or in Christian thought we note that God is conceived rather as super-existential, in the sense of being beyond any form of limited knowledge. Also in a version of rigorous dogmatic theology we note that knowledge of divinity is possible either through the paradoxical formulae of dogmatic explanation, or through forms of symbolic knowledge or negative knowledge. Additionally, there is a knowledge that supposes an initiation dimension with mystical traits, the apophysis or the limit religious experience expressed in metaphorical terms similar to those of a communion with god or becoming-like-god.

Starting from the theological experience of the sacred, in an article in which I try to bring to light the importance of the imaginary in the way Dumitru Stăniloae conceives religious experience (Frunză, 2001: 183-202), I point out to the fact that in one of his representative works, Stăniloae states that in theological knowledge we cannot be certain that what we know is accurate and we cannot be certain that we know something as it actually is (Stăniloae, 1993: 18). In fact, our only certainty is the way in which the Sacred is revealed by means of the imaginary and revelations. In general, in terms of religious experience, we suppose an act of revelation in which the Sacred is manifested (Eliade, 1992). The Sacred is always

manifested in cultural categories and in the manner the human being may perceive and understand these manifestations. We note that the Sacred is manifested according to the cognitive and experiential capacities of the individuals belonging to a specific community. In other words, the Divinity in great wisdom approaches the limited being, represented by the human being, in limited forms so as to be recognizable and communicable.

Thus, if we imagine religious experience in a schematic form, we may suppose that we have two poles, the Sacred and the possibility for the reception of the Sacred converging into a common point, that of the experience of an encounter engaging the transcendent and immanent, divinity and man. This intersection between human and the manifestation of the sacred creates a space of encounter that I have called a median space of religious experience (Frunzã, 1999: 17-30). What interests us here is the way in which this encounter materializes into symbolic constructions, imaginative constructions and symbolic action, and the way in which we may perceive various metamorphoses of the imaginary in the modern world's terms. From this perspective, religious experience becomes a structure that is relevant in view of the communication experience which it makes possible and subsequently maintains.

From the perspective of understanding religious experience as an experience of the sacred, we evidently have a source of signification at the level of the Sacred understood as a transcendent reality, we have a communication channel occasioned by the mythic, symbolic and ritualistic, and we have a receiver with a special structure of consciousness enabling perception, apprehension, processing and response in the expectation regime of the sacred. The understanding of religion is not possible without an acceptance that a cultural construct exists whose elements may be conceived in various ways, that should explain the way in which finite structures of human beings make possible grasping the unlimited, communicating the incommunicable and the incognizable, and formulating a response to the mediated address made by the transcendence to the finite and immanent human being. By responding to this address, the immanent being allows to be inundated by transcendence and become part of a relation of symbolic communication with the transcendence.

Thus, we may state that the transcendent sacred, although incognizable, makes its cognition possible in the act of an encounter in which the median space of religious experience becomes potentially a space of generalized communication. Therefore, religion proves to be a medium of lived experience, of creation and symbolic shaping, of ritualistic behavior, of self-identification strategies and through all these, an instrument of communication. All these elements are related also to the manifestation of the human being as a symbolic being, which indicates that a fundamental dimension of the human condition is the permanent openness to communication.

The encounter receives different connotations once modernity brings a change of paradigm by replacing religious man with profane man. So as to understand the latter's mode of being we have to mention that to Mircea Eliade "profane man cannot help preserving some vestiges of the behavior of religious man, though they are emptied of religious meaning. Do what he will, he is an inheritor." We thus note that "the majority of the 'irreligious' still behaves religiously, even though they are not aware of the fact" and at the same time "still retains a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals" (Eliade, 1992: 190). One of the forms by which the remnants of an archaic mythology are still present in the life of secular humanity in modernity is the symbolic and initiatory narrative that we find in literary creation and film. These quite up-to-date features of Mircea Eliade's works have been emphasized by Mihaela Paraschivescu while investigating his literary creations and even the philosophy practiced by Eliade as a literary genre in a permanent dialog with the essential motifs of his oeuvre. Thus I note as significant to any concern with the reception of Mircea Eliade's works and to the influence of his works in the contemporary context the valorization of the historian and philosopher of religions' conviction that literature is the privileged site for the sacred to camouflage in the cultural life of contemporary man. Next to literature, film proves to be increasingly the repository of such a legacy. Mihaela Paraschivescu has succeeded to show the value of this fund deriving from the dialectic of the sacred and the profane that explains Mircea Eliade's hermeneutics, and that is used by all the exegesis of his works. She contributes a balanced explanation of the significance of the ideological element at the intersection of biography and scholarly work, and philosophical and ideological seduction (Paraschivescu, 2011).

From the pluralist analysis of the median space of religious experience we may conclude that culture, religion, ideology may be regarded as systems of symbols implying a certain view of reality. They create in typical ways the symbolic forms through which the members of a community communicate, structure their convictions, guide their actions and integrate them into the cultural, social or political order (Geertz, 1973). This way, symbol reveals once again its quality as communication structure that guides us to the presence of the sacred, even when we encounter it in postures that seem to be far from any influence of religion or of any model of the sacred.

The metamorphoses of knowledge, communication and the sacred in contemporary experience may be found in Jacques-Alain Miller's straightforward statement: "God never responds; Google always responds on the spot" (Miller, 2009: 103). In this way, knowledge is separated from access to meaning, and communication from access to significance. This instrumented communication may serve to inform but it never is efficient as communication. The use of myth and ritual in the political language has the purpose, among others, to recover significance and facilitate and make effective communication.

Symbolic communication and the lay public space

Secularization is a phenomenon that intervenes as a historical given in the European civilization and as a positive value of modernity. Moreover, in the present context of global cultural relations we find that religion as a cultural phenomenon highlights the value of secularization as a central element of Western civilization. The analysis of religion as a global phenomenon points to the fact that secularization targets the Christian communities and the theological mentality of the West, while the communities outside Western Europe do not experience this phenomenon with the same intensity. Thus, in the rapport to extra-Western civilizations, the natural attitude is not to impose the value of secularization through the ideology of secularism, but rather through the inter-religious dialog, the cultural dialog and the trans-cultural dialog. In this respect, the discourse of social sciences and of the humanities, especially of philosophy, ethics and politics is essential in the positioning of global relations on principles that suppose assimilating lay values, while eliminating the premise that between a lay attitude and religiosity there are unbreakable axiological borders.

In such a context one may use for a starting point the phenomenon emphasized by Gianni Vattimo to represent the positive significance of secularization as a positive fact within Christianity. Thus, “secularization as a positive fact means that the dismantling of sacred structures in Christian societies, the transition to an ethics of autonomy, to a lay state, to a less rigid literality in the interpretation of dogmas and precepts, should not be understood as an ignorance of and farewell to Christianity, but rather as a full accomplishment of its truth” (Vattimo, 2005: 38). Extrapolating, we may say that a positive significance of secularization to any religious community is the elimination of the rigid forms of faiths, opinions, interpretations and religious practices, and the fact that it leaves room to a pluralist vision on the significance of faith and of its materialization in institutional relations and in the public space, and contributes to a more nuanced, pluralist participation to the truth of religion. Moreover, without taking a relativist stance, we should accept that in the context of global relations we can only talk about religion in the sense of democratic relations implying the right to recognition and the access to truth of each religion, religious and ideological pluralism, respect for alterity and acceptance of alternative options. We cannot ignore the fact that for each community the experiences of its symbolical system are under the sign of authenticity and that this authenticity should be recognized by those participating in a dialog of global relations development.

Modernity, beyond any experience of secularization, cannot ignore the presence of the sacred, even though in camouflaged forms, or in what we might deem to be degraded forms (Paraschivescu, 2010: 59-68). A whole literature coming from sociology, anthropology or political science may be summoned to illustrate the way in which political mythologies recover to a great extent the essential

elements of symbolic communication. We have to accept that such communication keeps a series of elements typical to archaic behavior and outlook even if we also accept that the time of the grand narratives has passed, that exemplary gestures have lost their grandeur, that the time of labor totally seizes the existence of modern man and denies his or her access to a time of celebration in the presence of transcendental beings (Eliade, 1991). One of the assumptions we may use in this sense is the experience of contemporary man revealing that “our contemporary imaginary, especially that of publicity, is largely populated with fundamental images, archetypes proving the survival of an ancestral collective memory” (Dăncu, 1999: 193). In this case we should accept (beyond controversies regarding the possibility that such collective memory exists, which triggers the existence of a collective unconscious) that we need such a cultural construct as a kind of axiomatic system helping us explain the presence of a symbolism we associate with archaic thought in the life of contemporary man. Another assumption may be to accept that one finds oneself more or less aware at the interference of immanence and transcendence, and builds oneself permanently according to the imaginary provided by the median space of one’s symbolic experience. In both cases we note that the presence of symbols –either in the view of a legacy of deep structures, or of a constant symbolic creation by using material that belongs to contemporary humanity because it belongs to humanity of all times – impacts interpersonal communication, audience-targeting communication, publicity communication or mass-media communication. In its depth, it reveals in fact a presence of the sacred and predisposes to an exposal of the sacred. This presence accompanies political communication that benefits from the ideological context as well as from the resources of political PR and political publicity.

Political communication and the ritualizing of public space

To show that politics is associated to the sacred given the fact that both religion and politics pertain to human condition, Murray Edelman states that to the same extent “as religion, love and art, politics is a subject that people cannot abandon: either in conduct, or in discussions, or in historical writings” (Edelman, 1999: 11). Therefore, it is this existential load that may be deemed responsible for modern humans’ openness to symbolic creation, to personal experience of new forms of religiosity, to participation in rituals and celebrations in the public space.

The presence of the religious in the public space is not so much about the solutions we propose for public policies or political decisions. It is about the personal dimension that one brings to public space as a way to discover oneself in the rapport to the others, to know and recognize each other, to posit one’s value in relationship to the other, to impregnate the relations created in the public space with one’s own biography. In this sense we may say that “the human being creates

political symbols and they support and develop or pervert the human being” (Edelman, 1999: 11). Besides this individual effort, there is an institutional challenge that involves rethinking the relation between religion and ethics (Loue, 2010: 113-120; Zanc, Lupu, Mureșan, 2010: 121-132), between religion and identity crisis (Boari, 2009: 82), between religion and social justice (Maina, 2011: 3-25) or concerns with the elimination of any forms of vulnerability or discrimination (Cace, Cace, Nicolaescu, 2011: 28-45; Revesz, Perju-Dumbravă, 2012: 42-49). There is also an exercise outside human creativity in rapport to the presence of the sacred in public space. In this respect, Murray Edelman points to the importance of ritual and myth as symbolic forms influencing behaviors and political institutions. Myth and ritual feed each other in political action and in political communication. Thus, we note that “ritual is the mobile activity that symbolically involves participants in a joint enterprise, bringing common interests to their attention in a manner that cannot be ignored. By this it promotes conformity and evokes the satisfaction and joy at conformity” (Edelman, 1999: 24).

Bearing special significance are political rites that take place as public manifestations whose goal is to attract and persuade the public. Among these manifestations the most important appear to be the rituals related to electoral campaigns and public debates. In these, the political discourse, the political leader and the settings have special importance. Each is supposed to recreate in the common consciousness of participants to the political show the empathy with the present candidates and with their messages. They become characters that have to play in a new story taking place at the same time in the daily space and in a space of symbolic structure conceived so as to “clearly show that it is hosting a special show, not an ordinary occurrence. The setting is constructed in such a way so as to elicit detachment from the daily routine and to denote a special or heroic quality of the present events” (Edelman, 1999: 96). Myth and ritual occasion an escape from the daily time and space and penetration to a time that seems to be that of a cosmos deeply impregnated with elements betraying the presence of the sacred.

It is worth mentioning Calude Riviere’s views on ritual as a communication system that makes possible transmitting messages according to a well-defined, standardized and largely predictable rhetoric which engages participants in a ceremonious, festive or ludic communication, and urges them to behave as if they were members of the same community (Riviere, 2000). This standardization explains why the effectiveness of debates and electoral messages is based especially on the fact that “a great majority of these debates and electoral speeches consists in an exchange of clichés between people who share the same convictions” (Edelman, 1999: 25). Symbols are as a rule the symbols of a community and integrate and make responsible the individual in his/her community (Meslin, 1993). Using symbols in the political language is important from the point of view of the increase in the level of trust. Communication through symbols

considers, among others, the fact that “if there is deep shared confidence in symbols, each individual becomes more an instrument of common interest than a cognitive and empirical manipulator of reality” (Edelman, 1999: 97).

The ritualizing of public space and especially of political action during electoral campaigns is possible also due to the fact the campaign period functions like a different time as compared to the time between campaigns. It is the time when part of the rules is suspended. Thus it is the time when the interdiction of electoral publicity is raised. During this period of time, with a certain ethical tolerance, all symbolical weapons of war may be used as the campaign period is similar to the time when, in mythical thought, the transition from the old world to a new one takes place, a time of chaos preceding a new cosmos. Typical of the electoral campaign period as a well-marked period within an electoral cycle, is rather the state of exception and the privileged state of war. During this privileged time of political fight, the elements of the sacred, including those of symbolic violence, regain legitimacy in the form of symbolic communication related to the fight for power and power overtaking, with deep significance in the mythical-religious imaginary and in that of the ritualistic fights upon power investiture. David Kertzer speaks of a ritualistic construction of political reality in which “ritual constitutes an important means of influencing the ideas that people have about political events, political strategies, the political system and the political leaders. By ritual people have an idea on what they think an adequate political institution should be, about the ideal qualities of a political leader, and the extent to which the world they live in corresponds to these norms. The understanding of the political is mediated by symbols, while ritual as a potent form of symbolic representation is a valuable tool in the construction of a political reality” (Kertzer, 2002: 91).

Conclusions

Participation in ritualistic activities connected to the campaigns gives individuals constituting the public the energy necessary to increase their empathy and capacity to participate in the symbols of the political group they are part of, they like or simply choose to follow for the moment. Such participation in an emotionally fascinating act, David Kertzer views as the most powerful form of persuasion. This happens because “message communication through dramatized ritual is much more effective than verbal information” (Kertzer, 2002: 44). In this sense, the statement that what matters in such situations is the show with public more than the political platform proves to be accurate. In electoral campaigns ritualistic forms are used because ritual is powerful as it “creates an emotional state that makes message undisputable, being presented as inherent in reality. It provides an image of the world emotionally so convincing that debate is not even considered” (Kertzer, 2002: 116).

To a growing extent, the role played in traditional mentality by the median space of religious experience as a privileged site of encounter between transcendence and immanence is taken by the mass-media. We do not consider investing with transcendence the instruments and framework of the media, but rather note that in the secular communication-based society, a privileged repository of symbolic resources is the media reality. It thus seems meaningful Edelman's assumption that "Politics is show told by mass-media and watched live by parts of the public" (Edelman, 1999: 183). In this respect television is the closest framework for a direct encounter and for the possibility of direct evaluation (Coman, 2010: 45-53). Sitting in front of a TV set, however, has the disadvantage of eliminating a large part of the emotional tension produced by participation in the symbolic production of the political show. It is the same type of passivity that we feel when we watch a religious service on television, although it is a live transmission. What is missing is the emotion of participation, even if the initiation mystery may be the same. To an even greater extent is cultivated the illusion of participation by social media networks that provide the possibility to make gestures perceivable as direct involvement and to transfer from virtual space to action in real political life; participation in the democratic construction is more visible, and the play between the real and the virtual involves a dialectic of camouflage and revelation that has many similarities to the dialectic of the sacred and the profane.

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