

# A CONTENTIOUS THEME

## RELATIONS BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND

## SOCIOLOGY

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### **Abstract**

This article is aiming to approach the theme of the meeting between two distinct disciplines, Sociology and Theology, on epistemological grounds, in terms of method and result communication. The selected case is the religious pilgrimage, in the version of the Christian Orthodox cult – less known and studied across the Western academic world, but not less relevant, in our opinion, for the idea of mutual ‘accommodation’ between Theology and Sociology of religions, in modernity.

*Keywords:* pilgrimage, epistemological, popular religion, memory, Orthodox

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### **1. The state of fact**

One question often pops up within the Socio-anthropology of religion: what happens when two distinct disciplines (i.e. Theology and Sociology) meet on the ground of Epistemology, in terms of method and result communication, with regard to a given topic (in our case, the study of pilgrimages), and what are the consequences of such a meeting? We granted special attention to the phenomenon of pilgrimage, an essential component of religious anthropology, that has crossed cultures and centuries. Pilgrimage nowadays has found new forms of expression, adapted to the ritual modernity. The society of the pilgrimage is one of the ephemeral and the extraordinary, in which the contaminating sacredness is profoundly articulated, together with the holiday and a kind of liberty pushed beyond the common time, so that it can only be captured on the spot, in location.

Across the Western academic world, both Theology, as an academic discipline, and the Sociology of religions have lived through a difficult period of internal reformulations, of hesitation turned into new directions of study, and new approaches of the studied phenomena. For example, Francois Isambert, a French sociologist mostly focused on the study of popular religiosity [1], did not hesitate stating – at the end of the 1980s – that the discipline called ‘the sociology of religions’ is an ‘endangered species’, because of the rarefaction of

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effective religious practice across France and the Catholic and Protestant Western world. Time has proven him wrong. Moreover, the Sociology of religions has gained new momentum with its entrance in the new millennium. Where are we now, in Romania? Is there an independent discipline called ‘the sociology of religions’, able to function autonomously in Romania? Can we speak about a ‘competition’ between Sociology and Theology in the field of the sciences of religion, with the latter (Theology) enjoying the tradition and support of an institution like the Orthodox Church?

## **2. The pilgrimage: epistemic and methodological challenges**

The Sociology of religions has tried a quantitative analysis of the phenomenon, somewhat in opposition with the Anthropology of religions that has mainly focused on material culture and the corporality of the pilgrim’s gesture [2]. On the other hand, Political economy brings into discussion the economic dimension of the pilgrimage, but loses sight of the symbolic nature of trades operated within. Finally, cultural studies increasingly tend to regard pilgrimage as a form of spiritual journey, typical for the search of an individual sense of existence, a specific trend of the late modernity that we currently live [3]. Gilles Deleuze used to say that the first degree of any form of knowledge is the ensemble of inadequate ideas. Pilgrimage is, in its turn, a meeting point for all intellectual, psychological, media induced and moral confusion. So how does this ‘state of confusion’ have an impact on the explanation and understanding of this phenomenon?

Choosing a vocabulary able to describe ‘the ontological density’ of pilgrimage as a phenomenon is yet another major challenge. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, religion is a phenomenon ‘of great resilience to translation’, as translating both the religious language and the practical results of research is a real challenge for the academic community, the theological circles and mass-media, with the latter displaying a huge appetite for such topics. Since any pilgrimage into (and from) the Orthodox world is a sum of successive facts and events of an extraordinary density, another challenge for the field observer is to transform the looking into language [4], inasmuch as pilgrimage means condensed emotion. The phenomenon places itself along the interpretation line traced at the beginning of the 1990s by British sociology (Grace Davie) [5], predicting this evolution of the contemporary religious fact towards emotional dramatization and public religions.

*The resilience to publication*, or the ethical dimension of the anthropological research is, on one hand, a constitutive dimension of the ‘ego’ of anthropology as a profession, cultivated by all the classics in this field, and on the other hand, a major problem with any research that is sensitive for the whole society. Socio-anthropology should be “reflexive, interpretative and experimental” in order to reach beyond the tensions that inevitably occur between the studied topics, the “public culture” of religion and the technique to communicate the results [6].

In an attempt to clarify some of these questions, we shall refer to two landmark works, i.e. David Martin, *Sociology and Theology* [7] and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason* [8].

### **3. David Martin's point of view**

The British sociologist formulates the idea that both Sociology and Theology are in close connection with the *condition* of the contemporary religious person, but the reference frameworks differ. The answers provided by the two disciplines for the challenges of certain common topics are not always compatible – and this is the first source of tension between them. These answers pertain to different discursive universes, but sociologists and theologians do not make enough efforts to ‘listen’ to each other, in order to discuss about the results of their work together. A supplementary observation: there are no ‘professional theologians’ in the Orthodox world who could establish the connection with the secular world. Rare exceptions to this rule are Christos Yannaras in Greece or the late academician and theologian Dumitru Popescu in Romania.

There are also significant differences of method between the two sciences, and this lack of homogeneity, in its turn, makes for a difficult tracing of these disciplines *frontiers*. In terms of the pilgrimage phenomenon, we can only wonder what would be a theologian's approach. First and foremost, they would have a detailed study on the history of the phenomenon, the spiritual interpretation of the waiting line, the concept of ‘sacrifice’ and personal abandon, the material forms that popular piety can assume or the spiritual significance of the relics etc. On the other hand, a sociologist might consider the shaping of the waiting line, the micro-social system it generates, the power relationships established during the pilgrimage, its tourist and commercial dimension, the economic rationality of the phenomenon etc. These are arguments enough to demonstrate the existing distance.

### **4. John Milbank**

The British theologian John Milbank first signals the uniqueness of Theology as a *method of knowledge*, proposing a hermeneutics of modernity that is immune to the rhetoric of continuous exculpation, typical for Catholicism nowadays, especially in terms of certain still sensitive issues related to the memory of this institution, such as the Inquisition. He acknowledges that Theology should be in connection with the Social sciences, but not in competition with them, as Theology is first and foremost ‘a state of spirit’. Our contemporary world makes for a big tacit refusal of the universal categories of the religious experience. The main challenge of my research ground (the pilgrimage waiting line) is connected to this final aspect brought into discussion. More exactly, how can one introduce the religious experience in that pure state that can be found there, the thrilling contact with sacredness as represented by the saints' relics and

the chest containing them, to a world that rejects both the idea of ‘religious faith’, and the one of religious transcendent, by reducing it – at best – to psychology or spiritual aspects that can be psychoanalyzed [9]? The limits of sociology, according to John Milbank, are perhaps best summarized in the following statement: for a sociologist, the *Eucharist* represents “a function of religion expressed into bringing together disparate elements of the Christian community”. For a theologian, these are the body and the blood of Christ. The functional explanations of a positive science like Sociology, says Milbank, are actually radical re-writings of the studied phenomena. This statement is actually verified for pilgrimages as well, since these are perceived in radically different ways, depending on the researchers’ positioning and appertaining.

## 5. Two ways of thinking: *the sociological mind vs. the theological mind*

David Martin proposes two way of thinking for the study of tensions occurring between Theology and Sociology, as a possible means of mutual enrichment. We have tried to adapt his reasoning to the case of pilgrimages. The sociologist should speak about pilgrimage as a ‘whole’, studying its interactions with the political and administrative power, the law enforcement units or the binomial of ‘popular religion/official religion’ (of the Church structures, to be more accurate). In their turn, anthropologists can study its functioning, the corporality of the pilgrim, the implementation of ‘gender studies’ notions on pilgrimages etc.

However, the theologian shall have to speak in the name of *things as a whole* – everything involving – on a metaphysical level – concepts such as ‘redemption’, ‘personal sacrifice’, sin, expiation by waiting etc. Theology does not deconstruct, says Milbank; on the contrary, it states *the sublime* of social connections between people, an idea that is getting close to the concept of *communitas*, the universal specific of pilgrimage, as theorized and developed by American anthropologist Victor Turner [10], in connection with perceiving the whole society as a system based on structures bond together by liminality.

## 6. Appeal to transcendence

John Milbank reminds us that, because of Emile’s Durkheim’s heritage in thinking, the appeal to transcendence is currently evicted, suspended from the explanations of the social phenomena. Religion is losing its integrative function to the advantage of the social aspect that, in its turn, achieves the status of an epistemological star, as this has now become the transcendent element. So ever since 1900, religion has been perceived as ‘a rival on moral basis’, like Durkheim noted in her capital work, *Sociology and Philosophy* [11]. The secular world of human sciences has become, according to Milbank, a tacit refusal of the universal categories of religious experiences, with Theology being somewhat ‘patronized’ by the Western academic world, and considered as having ‘frustrated imaginative powers’.

The role of *memory* in the study of a religious phenomenon is essential, according to John Milbank. The sociology of memory reminds us – by means of its representative Maurice Halbwachs – that religion has the *long term memory* that is not the same with the memory of ordinary religious phenomena, as it does not suffer from the same space and time limitations [12]. The worshipping of saints is a classic example of ‘long term memory’, as Theology is better positioned to approach that from the memory point of view; the ritual of perpetuating the memory of saints, regulated by the church for their celebration, can be an example.

## **7. The social context of Theology**

David Martin starts from the following observations: it often happens for the theological and sociological description of a religious phenomenon to be identical. How can one explain this? In terms of pilgrimage, for example, this would mean the description of the pilgrim’s body and the impact of the long waiting on it. What sociological categories could help theologians identify a religious phenomenon? With the pilgrimage, these would be the gender categories, the ‘feminization’ of the pilgrimage, defined as the overrepresentation of women in the waiting line – which is obvious. Finally, which would be the basic conditions that would enable a dialogue of the two disciplines? David Martin suggests that a phenomenon should first be ‘clarified’ from a theological point of view and only then studied, which further complicates the situation in the case of Orthodox pilgrimages, as they suffer from a large dose of ambiguity with regard to the ‘theologization’ of the popular religion or the interpretation of the pietist drifts for which the Church has avoided any concrete explanations until now.

## **8. A matter of the essence: the issue of knowledge dissemination. The theological and the sociological way**

David Martin makes the following observation: many theologians are placed in the position to make sociological, ethnological or anthropological observations of an individual manner; often on a self-taught basis, they collect and compile data without the help of a sociologist (from this point of view, John Milbank even uses the phrase *epistemological imperialism of Human sciences!*), which is the reason why many theologians avoid the publication of their individual researches. The warning signal launched by David Martin with regard to the dissemination of knowledge tends to connect the cause to its effect, i.e. is considering the trend of contemporary mass-media – under the pressure of the need to understand fundamentalist phenomena – to transform the results of the most serious sociological studies on ‘horizontal Christianity’ in society into a sort of pop sociology that is even further detached from Theology.

The study of the forms of religiosity displayed by ‘ordinary people’ (occasional practitioners, we might say, in the Romanian case) continues to be rather ignored by contemporary theologians, with sociologists being more concerned with this topic. The risk in this case: a type of mass-media that might trigger the extreme and excessive ‘emotionalization’ of the religious phenomena, of the trivia encountered in religion – as we all know it is happening in the case of pilgrimages.

## 9. Conclusion

Conflicts shall keep occurring (and being *abrasive*, in the words of David Martin) between theologians and sociologists, just like the battle for the priority of ‘voices’ within the public academic environment. However, an interdisciplinary and creative relation between the two disciplines would be welcome in order to ensure the progress of conjugated knowledge upon what we generically call ‘the religious person’. Finally, John Milbank does not hesitate to state that the study of both Theology and Sociology of religions provides its practitioner with a paradoxical state of ‘wellness’, which is beneficial both for science and for the individual researcher.

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