

The Potential of the Church in Contemporary Culture

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ABSTRACT: The Christian Church is going through an extremely critical period, highlighted, on the one hand, by the church members' lack of preoccupation for new spiritual ideals and, on the other hand, by the disinterest of those who do not belong to any religious spheres in any church proposal. The statistical situation of the Church must be analyzed responsibly and visionary. This approach can bring a last argument in favor of abandoning the project or, on the contrary, it can open the eyes of those in charge to new possibilities of introducing the Church among the options to be considered, in a society that lacks durable landmarks. The revival chances of the church will increase in direct proportion to its interest in an honest diagnosis and in an urgent return to normal functioning parameters by assuming its biblical mandate. This can be achieved by renewing its offers to the public, by increasing attractiveness from many points of view, and by changing the direction of its actions, from centripetal to centrifugal. Instead of continuing to promote an agenda against postmodernism, the church should be looking for ways and means to become relevant in the current cultural reality.

KEYWORDS: Postmodernism, society, church, spirituality, culture

Introduction

In this article, we intended to briefly analyze the general situation of the contemporary Christian Church, seen both through the eyes of its members and those of the general public, and described by statistical data and social realities that cannot be disputed. The current state of the Church will be just the starting point in trying to reaffirm the sustainability of a Project that God launched in order to save mankind, which has preserved the same profound needs regardless of the historical ideological changes it has been through. To the legitimate questions posed by any faithful person in charge of the future of the Church, we tried to provide a realistic answer, based on theological and social certainties. As for the message which the Church must present to a hopeless society, whose suffering is increased due to confessional alienation, that must take into account both reality and perspective.

The general situation of the Church in terms of public perception

When we talk about the Church, we usually refer to any local church that should be a source of inspiration and power for those looking for God, a place where the spiritual virtues "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23) are cultivated and fully lived. Actually, local churches in many parts of the world are going through difficult times, both in terms of image and influence. Many claim that the Christian Church is increasingly losing its influence, especially in the western part of the planet, where the last believers could soon attend the last religious service. Statistics, as well as academic studies, talk about an irrecoverable loss of the saving influence of the church. According to the World Values Survey (WVS n.d.), a study conducted at regular intervals at the World level since 1981, six sociological assessments have taken place so far: 1981-1984, 1989-1993, 1994-1999, 1999-2004, 2005-2008 and 2010-2014, to which we will also refer. Subjects from all continents participated in each of the steps of the study. We will refer to the European section of the last study, comprising 15 states that were considered relevant in terms of religiosity, spread over a very wide geographic area (from Russia to Spain), with a different economic level (from Armenia to Germany), having different religious mores (Poland - Roman Catholicism, Romania - Orthodoxy, Kazakhstan - Muslim), officially having declared secularism (Estonia) or a religious state (Turkey). In each of these countries, the questionnaire was applied to an average of 1,500 people, using field operators for face-to-face dialogues or telephone calls, the results being nationally representative. During the discussion, we will only use the significant data for the objective of our discussion (Yes /

No, For / Against), making no reference to the percentage of incomplete answers. In addition, we will only analyze the results from the countries which are declared Christian. In many European countries, the percentage of those who still declare their faith in God has dropped, even if a form of religiosity, with a changed meaning, is still preserved. According to the aforementioned study, in terms of the significance of religion, as a distinction between following religious norms and ceremonies or doing good to peers, respondents from countries which are mainly Christian provided the following perspective: 67.2% of respondents consider that religion is good for others (84.3% in Spain and 40.9% in Germany), 26.7% say that religion is to follow forms and religious ceremonies (53.5% in Germany and 7.7% in Slovenia) and 5.2% of respondents refused or did not know how to answer this question (World Values Survey 2014-2018).

George Barna (Barna and Hatch 2001, 181-185) states that despite the apparent interest in spirituality, irregular attendance by former regular church attendees, church tourism (moving from one church to another), and the multiplication of megachurches actually prove that church attendance has dropped. According to the World Values Survey (WVS) 2010-2014, attendance at the European level of worship shows the following: 3.2% confirm church attendance more than once a week (4.9% in Georgia and 1.1% in Estonia), 11.6% say they go to the church once a week (46% in Poland and 2.8% in Estonia), 10.8% respond that they go to church once a month (22.2% in Armenia and 3.6% in Estonia), 27.9% respond that they attend the church only on holidays (40.8% in Belarus and 13.2% in Spain), 6.9% say they go to church once a year (Estonia 16% and Spain 2.2%), 10.4 say they visit the church less than once a year (17.8% in Romania and 3.7% in Cyprus), and 28% respond that they never go to church (53.3% in Spain and 5.2% in Romania). Adding up the number of those who say they go to church once a month, once a week, or even more often, we have a total of 25.6%, and by adding up the number of those going to church only for big religious holidays once a year, less than once a year or never, we will have a total of 84% (World Values Survey 2014-2018).

Therefore, the difficulties that the Church is facing cannot be denied (Trueheart 1997), no matter who reports them (pastors or lay members) and no matter what part of the religious segment they come from (historical, Protestant or Neo-Protestant churches). Churches are losing ground at a worrying rate, particularly among the faithful categories of the religious population, and some seem to have no future. As for those who leave the churches, despite the fact that they seem to have lost their faith, they claim that this is a way to preserve it, as they were told that "taking the Church too seriously may damage spiritual health." The World Values Survey (WVS) 2010-2014 also responds to the question about the personal perception of respondents' religiosity. Of all the answers, 64.1% are considered religious persons (97.1% in Georgia and 30.9% in Estonia), 27.4 are not religious persons (55.9% in Estonia and 6.6% in Poland, 15.2%), 5.0% responded that they considered themselves atheists (13.4% in Slovenia and 0.2% in Georgia), while 3.5% did not know how to answer this question. (World Values Survey 2014 – 2018). Of course, we cannot talk about the Church as if we were looking at a sales company, because the gospel does not have to be sold. However, if people are no longer interested in what the Church has to offer, the latter cannot justify its existence. Nowadays, people confronted with chaos and confusion, are looking for the meaning of their life. Of course, the formulations of Modernism are despised because of their lack of applicability, although it cannot be said that something more consistent has taken their place. To sum up, Modernism is characterized by trust in the ability of reason and scientific discoveries to solve the problems of humanity. From a philosophical point of view, Modernism expresses itself primarily through rationalism (which questions the experience, focusing on existence) and empiricism (which affirms the conditioning of thought by experience). In fact, even this form of analyzing and selecting the most general laws of the development of nature, thinking, and society is also a trace of Modernism. The Church still operates with premises about life that were developed by Modernism. Nevertheless, the Church can once again activate its growth potential by helping those who are in search of their true identity and the unique meaning of life, by providing them with a living community of faith.

All this takes place in a context in which the interest in spirituality is increasing (Trueheart 1997), as shown by the abundance of literature published to meet this need. In the annual report released by the American Publicists Association (AAP) for 2016, it was emphasized that religious, spiritual or inspirational literature was among the best-selling, with an increase of 6.9% to 1.13 billion between 2015 and 2016 (American Publicists Association 2016). The concern for spirituality is proved also by the significant sums of money that people invest in seeking solutions to their soul issues. In the report that Nielsen BookScan presented, it is stated that Christian literature recorded a strong increase in sales of 8.9% between 2009 and 2014, especially in the books for young and non-fiction books, as an important part of the Christian books market. (Nielsen BookScan 2015). Another way to show interest for spirituality is the fact that for the Christian population the value of religion mainly resides in making life in this world meaningful. According to the same World Values Survey (WVS) 2010-2014, respondents also voiced their views on the significance of religion: to make sense in the life ever after or to give meaning to life now. 67.7% believe that religion has to fulfill life on earth (83.3% in Ucraina and 54.8% in Slovenia), 22.9% think the meaning of religion is obvious after death (28.6% in Cyprus and 11.1% in Slovenia), 1.1% believe that religion is meaningless both now and after we die, and a significant number 8.0% did not answer this question. (World Values Survey 2014-2018). Finally, people belonging to different spheres of professional activities made appeals in favor of a return to responsible spirituality. In 1992, after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, then European Commission President Jacques Delors stressed that "It is an emergency to revive Europe's soul." The term responsible spirituality has been used to make a difference from what is now being promoted in society, a conglomerate of hermetic notions and exotic tastes, a spirit-feeding simulation, "having only a form of godliness but denying its power." (2 Timothy 3:5) "We should discuss about the management of expectations, which means many things: it means a return to religion, to the spiritual things the world seems to have forgotten. There is an abundance of things in this life - other than the acquisition of material goods ..." (Hotnews 2018).

Many have separated from the religious orientation that has accompanied them a good part of their lives. Therefore, church statistics seem deplorable, especially among traditional churches. According to the World Values Survey (WVS) 2010-2014, in terms of how they relate to the Church and organized religion, 84.2% respondents from major Christian states say that they are not members of any church, 9.6% that they are inactive members, and only 5.9% consider themselves active members. The highest percentage of non-members comes from Armenia (97.3%), Russia (93.2%), followed by Ukraine (88.1%). The highest percentage of inactive members is in Germany (34.2% %) followed by Slovenia (12.5%) and Cyprus (10.6%), while the percentage of highest active members come from Poland (15.2%) and Germany (14.1% (10.7%). (World Values Survey 2014-2018). The decrease in the number of believers among Christians is actually increased by the alarming inability to effectively and persuasively reach other categories of the population, or at least to keep in the church the practicing believers' children and young people. The reduction in the number of active worshipers affects the finances of the religious organizations, which invariably leads, on the one hand, to the impossibility of recruiting new ecclesiastical ministers and, on the other hand, to the rental of worship spaces for profane activities or even to the demolition of these buildings. Due to the worshipers' lack of interest and as a direct consequence of the financial crises, churches cross the border of exclusive destinations and take on a wide range of other destinations: cultural centers, social meeting places (libraries, restaurants, hotels) or residential establishments. For example, the Catalayud Monastery in Spain (17th century) was turned into a museum, (Environment of Calatayud 2019), the Malmaison Church in Glasgow is presented as the place "where you can sleep in a converted church" (Air France 2019), and St. Mary's Church in Dublin operates as a bar, restaurant and night club (The Church 2019). As Bruinsma (2009, 4) said, "institutionalized Christianity does not render a very encouraging picture. In many parts of the Western world, the church has become visibly marginalized. Its voice in society no longer directs; its moral contribution to national discourse is no longer a significant factor. "Tomlinson seeks an answer to his dilemma when he compares the unprecedented interest in spirituality and the

"incredibly unpopular" Church. (Tomlinson 1995, 141-143). His answer is that the Church exaggeratedly systematizes its teaching as an "all you need to know from A to Z about death and eternity", which is rooted in the New Testament, but which was never presented or imposed as such at that time. "In the postmodern world, people see in the Church even more than what they see and reject in the surrounding world: hierarchy, bureaucracy, and struggle for power." (Tomlinson 1995, 141-143). On the same question about Church irrelevancy, Raines (1961, 14) offers a similar perspective, stating that one of the Church's mistakes is that it no longer aims to change culture, but it allows itself to be changed by culture, as it is concerned about its growth; that it has become people's rather than God's spokesperson, adapting itself to the environment like a chameleon, instead of challenging culture (Raines 1961, 15), to the point that the world has almost completely lost interest in what the Church has to say. "The world believes that the Church has already been domesticated and can be kept busy cultivating its own garden" (Raines 1961, 17).

Will the Church disappear?

The current religious reality convincingly speaks about the almost insurmountable difficulties that organized Christianity has to deal with. However, the fact that the concerted efforts of the Church fail to make up for its image deficit, should not lead to hasty conclusions that would permanently erase the purpose of the Church from the mind and heart of the public. This statement should not be read only as a confession of faith, as it has its own reasons. In many countries of the world, Christianity is definitely not drifting, on the contrary, it is even developing at the level of some religious groups (Mulder, Ramos, Marty 2018). Even though the impact of Christianity is disproportionate when it comes to geographic areas, evangelical Christianity is developing spectacularly in the southern hemisphere of the globe (South America, Africa, Asia) (Granberg – Michaelson 2018).

However, if the Church neglects the clear signs of danger, it isolates itself and becomes a "prisoner of the past" (Hill 1999, 11) which still functions by virtue of an inertia provided by the modernist generation, used to putting on a feast of celebration to disguise sad facts and to claiming superiority through obsolete teachings, irrelevant to the present.

Moreover, the process of migration from the developing world to the Western one has provided a great deal of oxygen to the Western Church, which for considerable periods of time "had increased" its decrease (Christianity Today 2003). Sociologists report that the migration process virtually intensifies religious experiences, no matter what their form is (Christianity Today 2018). The prosperity of certain Christian areas in North America and Europe is fueled by the evolution of global migration. Migration is influenced by a range of political, economic, social, religious or environmental factors, either in the country of origin (impulse factors) or in the country of destination (attraction factors). Practically speaking, the relatively higher level of earnings and, implicitly, living standards have a motivating role for migration decisions. The migration process (be it legal or illegal) offers the Church multiple perspectives of development by challenging the comfort zone of host Christians. If the trend continues, even the configuration of church worshippers might change. Migration can reinvigorate the local churches in the destination countries by infusing a differently defined population from a cultural point of view and by finding solutions to their stringent needs for ministry (Eurostat 2019). The way in which the 'migrants' emergencies are addressed can also change the parameters of the expression of Christian love both inside and outside the community. Christian missionary can also be reanimated through the possibilities of presenting Jesus to the population that has gone through the immigration process. A Christian friend who accompanies an emigrant in the process of adaptation gives the latter a chance to discover a healthy motivation behind the act of charity and help. Besides the influence of a Christian friend, other factors that appeal to the emigrant in the process of integration are the Bible and the integrating role played by the local Christian church (Washington Post 2015).

3. Does the Church still have a message?

The question is all the more inconvenient, as we are aware of the many facets of postmodern thinking (Rotaru 2006, 251-256). Postmodernists could not care less about religion in an organized form, while also being concerned with spirituality. Postmodernist thinking encourages the general population to create their own religious "costumes" based on their own truths that they have selected according to strictly individual criteria. What used to be accepted as a non-negotiable truth in terms of the theological foundation (The Truth), the prescribed form of worship, and the common moral standards, has now dissipated to the level of unilateral choices, based on individualism and personalized truth.

Believers are encouraged by the contextual reality to opt for Church offers, based on criteria that appeal to attractiveness, convenience, emotiveness, uniqueness, peculiarity, or plurality of offers. At the same time, many local churches try to engage responsibly in up-to-date responses given to postmodern contemporaries, admitting that this approach does not necessarily affect the basic teachings of the religious group, but on the contrary, it could improve its attractiveness. One of the premises of these churches is that since the doctrine of the church is very little known, new initiatives could address those who have been deprived of any prior contact with religious groups.

Even though the interest in studying the concept of church has oscillated throughout history, the common denominator of theologians is that dialogues about the Church must not exceed the limits imposed by the descriptions of the Old and New Testaments, which are considered the norm. Thus, in the context of the Old Testament, the Jewish prophets and the people's leaders, who had come back from the Babylonian exile (Rotaru 2015a, 188-193; 2015b, 194-199), foresaw the future as a cessation of the current reality and its replacement with the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ convinced His contemporaries and followers that the Kingdom of God had already started with Him. Furthermore, the New Testament reveals an eschatological meaning of the Kingdom of God, which is fundamentally different from the Jewish description - an age of peace and perfection that succeeds the appearance of the Messiah and even coexists with the still unrenewed present through the incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian Church is mandated to stand at the confluence of these two perspectives and to speak in favour of the saving miracle of God to all creation by moving towards the Kingdom of God. The Church is a means created and made available by God to direct the attention of lost people to the saving solution that comes from Him alone. Christ cared for the Church to be organized and, for this end, it endowed people with special administration and ministry abilities. Since the main objective of the Church was to introduce God to a drifting world, the Church received adequate training and means adapted to this mission. "From the beginning, it was God's plan to reflect His plentiful fullness to the world, through His church. The members of the Church, those who have been called out of darkness to His marvellous light, must reflect His glory. The Church is the depository of the riches of the grace of Christ and it will ultimately be the means through which the final and total manifestation of the love of God will be displayed (White 2014, 9). "The Church is not an end in itself, but is the instrument that God invented and decided to use, so that lost earthlings might have the opportunity to meet a sample of His future kingdom, offering first, from now on, the guarantee of protection and salvation." The Church is the fortress of God, His city of escape, sustained by Him in a rebellious world" (White 2014, 11). The Church was given the universal mandate to be "a channel of light for the world" (White 2014, 111). In its mission, the Church is not to be engaged in actions of guerrilla against the world, but it is to address the world in such a way that mankind is treated with kindness and richly blessed. That is why one of the images Jesus Christ used to describe the mission of the Church - the light of the world - also conveys the honor of representing Him and the duty to follow His example.

The Church is the sample of the new creation that God is both willing and able to accomplish, through people who voluntarily enter His sphere of influence. George Ladd (1974, 105) asserts that the church is created by the Kingdom of God, is a witness of this Kingdom, an instrument of the Kingdom, and the custodian of this Kingdom. In other words, the Church is called to embody the

future reality in the midst of a reality, which remains unchanged for the time being. Thus, the Church is a visible society of the people of God who is called to act as the presence of the future, the eschatological community in the world, which will be renewed through Christ (Webber 1978, 47). The Church must seek to be the company of those called to promote a radical obedience to the will of God and who are seeking to detach themselves from the fallen humanity (Fackre 1978, 171 – 172). If the Church loses sight of or deletes from its priority list its great mission of ministry and salvation it loses its "taste." "But if the salt loses its savor, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (Matthew 5:13).

At the same time, according to Webber (1978, 60-61), the Church must admit to being "simul justus et peccator" ("righteous and sinful at the same time"), which is not to be understood as a process of getting used to helplessness, but as an endeavor to make the Church on earth as similar as possible to the model initiated by God. Nevertheless, since the Church naturally suffers because of the influences of the context, the Reformers, for example, fought for an ideal of the church manifested through the "ecclesia reformata semper reformanda", a thesis of the Protestant Reformation that wants to convey the conviction of the Reformers that the Church needs to be constantly analysed, to maintain the purity of teaching and life, in light of the Scripture.

Conclusions

Even if some of those born in the second half of the twentieth century would have found it easier to leave the Church rather than stick to it, we should not forget that "however weak and flawed it might seem, the Church - in a special sense - is the only object to which God gives His supreme attention. It is the stage where His grace is displayed, where He is pleased to discover His power of transformation of hearts" (White 2014, 12). The Church must become "a suitable tool used to reflect a type of spirituality, which is relevant to the contemporary world" (Drane 2012, 34), accepting that everything takes place in God's world and that He wants to use the Church as the speaking tube through which people are invited to take Him seriously. Since the Bible is not a textbook of church activities, but a map indicating the path the seeker has to follow, it has saving potential.

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