

COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNION: A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL APPROACH OF RELIGIOUS SUBJECT IN A DIGITAL WORLD

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ABSTRACT. The *digital land* brings a new subject to debate about the most appropriate framework to guide religion expression in online settings to promote the Church tradition mission and to build a spiritual identity in a world of crisis. In the last months, there were many voices telling that Orthodox Church in Romania has a communication problem. In order to understand the process of communication of the Church in the digital era, we need to underlie this process in the psychology and sociology of communication theories. Therefore, our analysis is an attempt to better understand the challenges derived from the communication of religious subject in a context saturated by media influence over social iconology of the Church and over spiritual communion and identity. We discuss different perspectives on framing information, on the relation between the Church mission as public communicator and media agenda. Finally, we identify some positive aspects of re-thinking communication process in order to increase the Church capacity of building a powerful strategy for social messages and educating communities in the culture of Truth. Moreover, the success of moral communication means opening a dynamic pastoral program incorporating psycho-sociological aspects of communication.

Keywords: religious subject, communication, communion, cognitive processing of messages, Orthodox Church

In the process of synthetizing the communication-entertainment tension built in media system, Neil Postman begins by comparing the two literal roots of democratic communication: *The manifest-book – 1984* (George Orwell³) and

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³ The last edition in Romanian Language - George Orwell, *O mie nouă sute optezi şi patru* (Polirom, 2012), 345. Another book which can fundamentally contribute to a better understanding of George Orwell is *Despre adevăr* (Polirom, 2020), 196, with a preface of Teodor Baconschi with a relevant text: *George Orwell, un profet al post-adevărului* (pp. 5-12).

terrifying *New brave world* (Aldous Huxley⁴). Both have a common prophecy about the world we will live in. Postman conclude that Orwell insist we will be defeated by a force outside us, and Huxley explain that we don't need a Big Brother in order to sell our autonomy, our maturity and history. He thought that people will love oppression, adore technologies which cancel the human critical thinking ability. Regarding the public discourse, Postman wrote that: Orwell was afraid of the ones that will forbid the books. Huxley was afraid that there will be no reason to forbid them, because there will be no one to read them. Orwell was afraid about the ones that will deprive us of information. Huxley was afraid about the ones will give us so much information that we will be thrown in passivity and selfishness. Orwell was afraid that the truth will be hidden. Huxley was afraid the truth will be drowned in an ocean of irrelevance. Orwell was afraid we will become a captive culture. Huxley was afraid we will become a trivial culture, preoccupied about *feelings, orgy centrifugal bumble puppy- (...) Orwell was afraid we will be destroyed about what we hate. Huxley was afraid we will be destroyed about what we love.*"⁵. From this point of view, a psychosocial perspective on media and digital media exposure of religious subjects, may bring a valuable understanding of actual pastoral challenges derived from the specificity of communication in digital era. More, both media and religion are trying to build a bridge between interior and exterior worlds, addressing topics strongly connected with personal and cultural values and identity.

The *digital land* brings a new subject to debate about the most appropriate framework to guide religion expression in online settings on order to promote the Church tradition mission and to build a spiritual identity in a world of crisis. Recently, Hadden and Cowan proposed a model of analyzing religion in online which refers to all aspects which "invites the visitor to participate in the religious dimension of life via the Web; liturgy, prayer, ritual, meditation, and homiletics come together and function with the e-space itself acting as church, temple, synagogue, mosque, and grove"⁶.

In the last months, there were many voices telling that Orthodox Church in Romania has a communication problem. But how is that problem conceptualized or defined? In order to understand the process of communication of the Church in the digital era, we need to underlie this process in the psychology and sociology of communication theories.

⁴ Aldous Huxley, *Minunata lume nouă* (Polirom 2011). For his philosophical conception see the volume *Filosofia perenă* (Polirom, 2020) 422 p.

⁵ Neil Postman, *Distrația care ne omoară. Discursul public în epoca televizorului* (Anacronic, 2016), 13-14.

⁶ For more information see Hadden, Jeffrey K. and Douglas E. Cowan. 2000a. "The Promised Land or Electronic Chaos? Toward volume 21 (2002) no. 2 – 33, Understanding Religion on the Internet." In Hadden and Cowan 2000b: 3-21.

First, the sociology of communication establishes the theoretical framework underlying this statement⁷. Second, from a psychological point of view, we need to analyze the aim of media communication starting from cognitive processing theories investigating people's judgement of messages under conditions of uncertainty. This approach is emphasizing the importance of heuristics in interpreting the meaning of message and, consequently, the importance of message frame and reframe. For example, the way the information is presented and the number of exposures to the same information, can affect the way people respond emotionally to it.⁸

If we admit the interdisciplinarity of communication and information, the questions we can address is: Does the Church is having a real communication problem or there are only some impossible theoretical standards of communication imposed by media? Does the Church is having a communication problem, or it is exactly the opposite – it is defending communion and spiritual identity so easy altered in a digital world? In their study, Tilley and Zukowski, concluded that today's digitalization is frequently focused on individualism, relativism, human self-sufficiency, which alter social and religious communion. Therefore, the significance of theological presence in a digital world is strongly related to keeping the communion and identity.⁹

More, the digital content shapes all human experiences through a multimodal language and heuristic strategies. From narratives and non-verbal communication to images, symbolic representation, the digital space is a meaning-making system which can also influence people's religious experiences and the way they define their identity. This is the reason why the presence of the Church on the internet is vital in order to keep activated in people's mind and souls the Jesus Christ message.

In the line with psychological and sociological transformation of communication in media over last years, we can synthetize some important aspects in order to better analyze the Orthodox Church communication as a case study¹⁰: the pragmatic thinking publicly induced as the end of the transcendence, the criticism of logocentrism expressed by replacing the meaningful symbols with empty images, the development of the individualism and the autonomy in

⁷ Emmanuel Pedler, „*Tehnicile avansate de comunicare: niște instrumente fără mod de întrebuințare*”, în vol. *Sociologia comunicării* (Cartea Românească, 2001), 42-65.

⁸ Steven Sloman, „Two systems of reasoning, an update” in *Dual process theories of the social mind*, by Sherman, J., Gawronski, B., & Trope, Y. (Guilford Press, 2014), 69-79.

⁹ Tilley and Zukowski, „Narrative and communication theology in a postliterate culture,” *Catholic International*, 12(4) (November 2011) 5-11.

¹⁰ We use a part of the research of Daniel Bougnoux, *Introduction aux sciences de la communication*, (Paris: La Decouverte, 2001), 4-5, 7-11.

producing the media messages through many different means linked to the new technologies (3D printing, social-media etc), producing the truth more through communication means than by confronting to the *real truth*, the permanent technical assessment of the effects of communication, the excessive attention payed to ratings, social media rich as the principal indicator of validation of the content. This aspect is closely related to fake-news phenomenon (fake-news)¹¹.

Regarding the Church communication on the Internet in the first months of COVID19 pandemic, there was an increasing interest in connecting to religious content online, trying to find the Church community and communion, expressing emotional and spiritual needs, exploring religious information, attending online Liturgy. It seems that, despite the physical distance, the Church succeeded to create a safe space of communication and to turn the Internet into an important tool for its mission.

In the same time, the agenda of online and offline media was constantly oriented through presenting negative news, to build their success on negative emotions, to promote fake-news or exaggerate the negative news, knowing that fear is stronger than good, especially if people are disoriented and they are losing faith. Despite this manipulatory agenda, the Church had and has a clear and important mission in promoting the real Christian values. The main communication function of the religion is to conserve the Truth and contribute to a healthy cultural and spiritual identity, not to pay attention to all the hot topics of the press. If we analyze the value and purpose of communication from this point of view, the most important message of the Church remains The Liturgy and this institution proved in the time of COVID-19 pandemic that can transform the digital tools in useful means to promote its mission.

A false reception of Church communication during pandemic months, refers to its capacity to manipulate topics. Some are seen as topics only by what we used to call the hard core of press/media communication. To identify the issues born from such an approach, it is worth mentioning an author, Christophe Carre, who developed an entire theory of acceptable manipulation¹². Keeping in line with Dominique Chalvin's¹³ positive core of manipulation, Carre draws a line of positive and ethical decency in positive manipulation. Marked by humaneness, honesty and effectiveness, the theory expresses the need to preserve trust and to avoid the construction of reality as a personal construction. It should be

¹¹ The concept of media ecology was developed by Eric McLuhan (the son of Marshall McLuhan), but was publicly assumed by Neil Postman (24 of november 1968 to a conference of english teachers in Madison, Wisconsin) and developed in the last ten years.

¹² Christophe Carre, *Arta manipulării elegante. Instrumente de persuasiune ale oamenilor onești* (Meteor Publishing, 2020), 76-98.

¹³ Chalvin Dominique, *Du bon usage de la manipulation* (Paris: ESF, 2011).

noted that in setting manipulation as communication vice next to the Church's name you can very easily identify the chameleon effect of data interpretation (see for instance the series of interpretations with regards to pilgrimages) after a negative effect was constructed by priming the news. Rolling some pieces of news up to the point of forcing their integration in breaking-news is easily identifiable by someone versed in the construction of communication through the mirroring technique, such that one of the voices is minimized. From a cognitive psychology perspective, this case is reflecting the use of availability heuristics by presenting many times the same information in order to increase its credibility¹⁴. The Church has the sacred obligation of avoiding those types of *agendas*. Deviating communication towards propaganda or ideology becomes one of the factors of the communicational teardown of its structures¹⁵. Concordance with the truth becomes thus fundamental as the honesty of the communicator may flow over any attempt to hyperbolize the topic. Another aspect of media communication of the religious topic is the scandalous stitching together of sums of money – many of course documented, very many willfully exacerbated – to any effort towards the spiritual image of the Church. The cheapness of the manipulation can be brought out with a series of commentaries and photographs realized during the consecration of the People's Salvation Cathedral, one of the most attacked institutions of the Church in media. Not even online transmission and the graphic transparency of every 'iota' of expense could disperse at least some of the shadow of the manipulation of the topic. To buttress against everything, they called corruption of the church system, the press/media put forth their purity as emitters. It is worth however to note a statement by Timothy Snyder. Analyzing tyranny throughout 20 Lessons of the 20th century – especially it means of communicating the political – he proposes as the 10th Lesson: "*Believe in truth. Giving up facts means giving up freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize those in power, because we have no basis to do so. If nothing is true, then everything is a show, the fattest wallet pays for the most blinding lights.*"¹⁶ To give in to the tyranny of information brought forth by fiat stems from the refusal to understand the difference between what you want to hear and what is really happening. It is an abandonment of reality to which take part, in full

¹⁴ The availability heuristic is defined by Tversky and Kahneman in 1974 deals with how people's estimates of the value of truth of an information or of the probability of an event are influenced by how easily those come to mind (how 'available' they are in one's memory). See Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman „Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases,” *Science*, vol. 185(4157) (September 1974) 1124–1131.

¹⁵ We use the term as employed by Edward L. Bernays, „Noua Propagandă” and „Noii propagandiști” in *Propaganda*, ed. a II-a (Suceava: Alexandria Publishing House, 2017), 71-95.

¹⁶ Timothy Snyder, *Despre tiranie. Douăzeci de lecții ale secolului XX*, (Editura TREI, 2018), 87.

knowledge, many of those who make feeding on the news the sole method of becoming informed about issues of social reality. Directing news about the Church solely towards financial matters encroaches on the truth by the obvious cultivation of evident hostility towards verifiable reality, including presenting untruths – machinations or lies – as truths. Sustained by a hefty and iconic campaign, anti-church news expands on social communication channels also through the self-regulation mechanisms through which journals, sites, or television channels bring to the spotlight a series of falsehoods and proposing them as truths.

Thus, we touch on one of the most interesting life aspects in social communication: the morality of news. Of course, it is marked by the value of the interchange between the journalist and the news consumer, which proves the prevalence of the human factor in a matter which would fancy itself purely technical but touches upon a series of problems that are metaphysical in nature: the morality of anonymity (news by source), the morality of interpersonal communication. For the latter it is sufficient to exemplify by a series of chunks of publicity slipped between news of Covid-19 deaths. The efforts of the Church to create its own media communication mechanism (Basilica, Doxologia, Trinitas Radio-TV, Renașterea radio or Reîntregirea) were amply criticized by specialists in communication. For a while the accusation of the risk of communicational ghettoing was thrown, when in fact it was precisely a matter of opening up Church communication to the social realm. In tense moments of reporting, the construction of such emitters saved information and the informal balance of a society directed, it would seem, towards the self-destruction of its spiritual character¹⁷. Of course, it is not media communication that is the only means of blocking religious subjects.

Why is the religious topic socially communicable? The reasons are many. One of them is that demographic mathematics cannot be supplanted by manipulation. Or, a percentage of over 92% of the population which has an interest in faith, whichever that may be, provokes topics which are also fundamentally religious. Starting from 1971, in media culture, Bernard Voyenne warned that the right to information cannot rely on anything other than abiding by a positive and dynamic relationship between freedom and truth: they either save themselves together, or they lose themselves together; there is no freedom without truth and truth cannot be spread without freedom¹⁸. The Church must not publicly insist on preferential treatment in presenting news about its

¹⁷ Process intuited a long time ago by Mons. Justo Mullor Garcia in the work *La Nueva Cristiandad. Apuntes para una teología de nuestro tiempo* (Madrid: La Editorial Católica, MCMLXVI), 155-200- following the relationship between freedom and truth, with the risks of losing faith from the structure of communicated truth.

¹⁸ Bernard Voyenne, *Il diritto all'informazione* (Roma: Armando, 1971) 67.

activity but may insist on the idea that the producers of media products respect their own ethics, the human quality of their cultural investment in communication. Media man is not sacrosanct and cannot be a man of media if his work does not aim at mediating truth to the community. It is a simple rule, of communication logic, that of being critical with everything you communicate so as to communicate a truth that has no political and ideological alignment. Even people of the Church (bishops or priests, authorizing officers, project administrators or pastoral fund managers) and people who propose themselves as vectors of communication have the obligation to perform an effort of moral will: to inform so as to educate towards knowledge of the truth. If personal qualities are asked of the professionals of the Church, then media professionals cannot falsify a series of virtues connected to moral culture either. Morality is a freedom in the deepest sense of the content of freedom¹⁹. A noble and informed character, with a coherent literary and professional formation, with the moral gift of love and of giving in the service of communicating and mediating the truth gives meaning to professional responsibility²⁰. For the communicator theologian the problem is synthesized by Karl Rahner, one of the most influential theologians and catholic thinkers. He writes about one of the rarest forms of conscience: sincerity, the courage to decide in favor of truth. Sometimes in spite of the system in which you are integrated.²¹

A final aspect of our analysis is concerned with the way in which the technological revolution marks religiously reflective news. Well before the accusations of those at Cambridge Analytica – ironically, by those who for years on end used precisely the information retrieved by them –, any political party or civic pressure group or advocacy group used and uses extensive analyses of data from technology and different methods of micro-targeting voters or pressure targets. The Big Five personality model or the five-factor model (FFM) or the OCEAN model (openness-conscientiousness-extraversion-agreeableness-neuroticism) proposed by psychologists Lewis Goldberg, Naomi Takemoto-Chock, Andrew Comrey and John M. Digman was refined across time by many researchers specializing in communication. Often times, however, openness to new experiences always seems to be in opposition to conscientiousness, and the extroverted increases in agreeableness but decreases in neuroticism²². Such is the way in which the image of Christianity was created in general. The man who unites

¹⁹ Thomas Nagel, „Libertate. Moralitatea ca libertate” in *Perspectiva de nicăieri* (Ed. Vellant, 2009) 252-258.

²⁰ Pasquale Casillo, *La morale della Notizia. Notizia, giornalista e rettore a confronto negli strumenti della comunicazione sociale*, (Edizioni Paoline, 1974), 44-45.

²¹ Karl Rahner, *Le virtù dell'annuncio*, coll. Saggi scelti, (Edizioni San Paolo, 2013) 53.

²² More details in Hannah Fry, *Hello, World! Revoluția informatică și viitorul omenirii* (Corint Books, 2019) 62-67.

conscientiousness with communicational neuroticism cannot be trusted compared to the man who is open to the new, who is agreeable and extroverted in whom it would seem is stored the entire model of the future. When we say this, we say it having analyzed the news, either written or presented by the news outlets of big television channels, but also having analyzed the tonality in which these news are set on tapestry. Germany, over the same time interval, had a genuine policy of discouraging generalized neurotic fear mongering. Also, it is worth following the news blocks in Brazil between March-June 2020 with an increased traffic of religious information but also with adopting an aggressive editorial policy with regards to death and disease. It is the closest to the Romanian model of communication in times of pandemic. One of the biggest media offensives against the Church has as topic, for many years now, the idea that the Church has the tendency to cultivate fear among the faithful. Or, today, in September/October 2020, we are witnessing an increase in content to do with fear and fear mongering which have determined a series of behavioral changes²³. Part of the pathological reactions to social communication concludes in major psychological problems such depression and phobia. The answer of the psyche to informational pressure is virtually always unexpected. All this time, the Church tried to balance the information and combat the induced fear by bringing hope and calm. The catechetical and homiletic effort – at their roots pastoral forms of communicating mediated truth to the Church servants, either ordained persons or laymen – can balance in a relaxed fashion the recently increased social tension²⁴. The model proposed by the Church is recognized by specialists as being the creation of a context favoring information gathering based on two laws-Celine Alvarez²⁵ consigns as the first fundamental law of transmission that the human being cannot learn if he is not motivated. The second law regards the fundamental importance given to positive social dependencies. Human beings need to feel positively connected to others to complete their uniqueness and the universal human potential whose keeper each of us is. A good communicator is he who has understood the importance of human relationships in the process of education and learning, in the process of mediating truth which positively educates the societal.

²³ How important does in this context appear the work of Zygmunt Baumann, *Il demone della paura* (Editori Laterza, la Repubblica, 2014)136. For details regarding behavior see Dr. Mary Alken, *The Cyber Effect. Psihologia comportamentului uman în mediul online* (Ed. Niculescu, 2019) 399.

²⁴ See Pr. Constantin Necula, *Laicii și Biserica 2.0* in *Creștinismul Ortodox în veacul XXI – schițe pentru un portret* (coord. Marius VASILEANU), (București: Lumea Credinței 2020), 115-127.

²⁵ Celine Alvarez, „Crearea unui context favorabil Transmitterii,” în vol. *Transmiterea. Despre ce ne aducem unii altora* (Editura Spandugino, 2018) 61-86. For your analysis, 64-66.

What solutions can the Church propose to benefit from a correct public presentation of religious topics? We insist on this target: religious topics. Not topics related to the Church, in the strictest sense of the concept. First of all, the Church must propose an analysis of the two syndromes which have been trying its communicators for many years: the syndrome of the Prophet Jonah and the syndrome of Daniel in the lion pit. The first denotes a falsely prophetic sufficiency of the Church which has in her midst people who believe that the truth they espouse is more important than God's love. Arrogance certainly does not give credence to the prophet. It is the case of Jonah who insists on destroying Nineveh so that he should not make a fool of himself. The Lord gives him the lesson of the bush in the desert, which provides shading, and which dries up. The difference between God's effort and man's usage of His work is outlined by the different meanings of repentance, as means of mediating God's mercy. At the opposite pole, Daniel's lesson. Fearful to a point, in the midst of his trials he discovers the power of God's care. He'd befriended the lion sent to attack him in the pit in which he'd been thrown after being accused by the king's advisors. He escaped through God's mercy²⁶. A good communicator of the Church does not forget God's demeanor, does not force insincere answers, befriends "lions" easier than he befriends the political environment where he has to preach, with no deviation, God's commandments, His will. He has, encoded in the genes of theological communication, the truth according to which dogma does not sit not above love (St. Nectarie)²⁷. The applicability of this principle in communicating with traditional and digital media products, presupposes a careful modelling of attitude in favor of communicating without affecting communion.

If we admit that when we talk of a contemporary crisis we are in fact talking of a crisis of man as such²⁸ then we understand that the mediation of truth in the plan of social communication is not just a matter of technique or of institutional model, but a matter of cultivating the knowledge and charisma necessary to balance current tension – informal and formal by developing programs which incorporates both theological and psycho-sociological aspects of communication. For the theological the message is the same. Our Lord Jesus Christ says it clearly. *For without Me ye can do nothing!* (John 15:5). To learn that in communication *we must decrease so that He may increase* (John 3:30) remains the most important point of moral equilibrium that we can propose in a digital era which is such in need of communion and transcendence.

²⁶ See vol. *Când animalele vorbesc cu sfinții. Sinaxar al sfinților care au iubit animalele și care au fost iubiți de acestea* (Editura Renașterea, 2014) 43-52.

²⁷ The practical application of this pastoral paradigm can be followed in the life of Saint John of Shanghai in vol. lui Bernard Le Caro, *Sfântul Ioan de Shanghai (1896-1966) și vremea sa*, (Editura Renașterea, 2015), chapter *La Shanghai*, pp. 45-82.

²⁸ Ernest Bernea, *Criza lumii moderne*, (Predania, 2011), 44-46.

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