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PHD THESIS ABSTRACT

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND SOCIO-
CULTURAL MORPHOLOGY IN
CONTEMPORARY EUROPE.
MISSIONARY PRINCIPLES

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

1. Argumentation of the topic under analysis
2. Relevance of the topic
3. Research methodology and sources
4. Structure of the thesis

CHAPTER I - RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND HUMAN RIGHTS: CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATIONS

- 1.1. Conceptualisation of religious freedom
- 1.2. Map of the historical articulation of religious freedom in the Western world
 - Religious freedom in the early Christian centuries
 - 1.2.1.1 Tertullian - the first Christian to problematise the right to religious freedom
 - 1.2.1.2 Lactantius' argument in favour of religious freedom
 - 1.2.1.3. Augustine: the translation of religious freedom into the contrast between "the city of God" and "the city of man"
 - New expressions of religious freedom in the medieval period
 - Religious freedom in modern Europe
 - 1.3. Codification of religious freedom in laws, conventions, declarations
 - Religious freedom in international normative acts
 - Religious freedom in Romania: legislative framework
 - Religious freedom - meanings in the West and the East
 - Religious freedom - a natural right
 - Human rights and religious freedom
 - Conclusions

CHAPTER II - RELIGIOUS FREEDOM UNDER SECULARISM. MISSIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 2.1. Religion and secularist ideology - a situation not at all favourable to religious freedom
 - 2.1.1. When the right not to be discriminated against prevails over the right to manifest religion in action
 - 2.1.2. Freedom of religion or freedom from religion?
 - 2.2. Secular intolerance - a project to annul the right to religious freedom
 - 2.2.1. Secularism as a vector of religious intolerance
 - 2.2.2. Distilling the two dimensions of secular intolerance
 - 2.2.3. Generating factors of religious intolerance
 - Secularisation
 - 2.2.3.2. Modernism and postmodernism
 - 2.2.3.3. Intensification of anti-religious sentiment
 - 2.3. Undermining of religious freedom by the Western secularist legal framework
 - 2.3.1. 'Pseudo-liberalism' and 'egalitarian absolutism' - expressions
 - 2.3.2. Integral pluralism - a possible architecture to guarantee religious freedom
 - 2.4 How concretely is religious freedom respected in the world?
 - 2.4.1. Measuring religious freedom according to Religion and State round 3 (RAS3) data

- 2.4.2. Dimensions of religious freedom
- 2.4.3. Religious freedom in Western liberal democracies
- 2.4.4. Interpretation of Religion and State round 3 (RAS3) data
- Conclusions

CHAPTER III - THE ANATOMY OF RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION AGAINST CHRISTIANS: A SERIOUS CENSORSHIP OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

- 3.1 A worrying statistic: the rise of anti-Christian attitudes
- 3.2. Religious hostilities according to Globally, Social Hostilities Related to Religion Decline in 2019
- 3.3. Defining religious persecution: a socio-theological approach
 - 3.3.1. Level one: persecution
 - 3.3.2. Level two: religious persecution
 - 3.3.3. Level three: religious persecution of Christians
- 3.3. Sources and motivations of religious persecution of Christians
- 3.4. Persecution as a violation of human rights norms

CHAPTER IV - CONDITIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. MISSIONARY INTERPRETATION

- 4.1. Legality of restricting religious freedom
- 4.2 Restrictions on the right to religious freedom
- 4.3. Human rights understanding of the limitation of religious freedom for public health reasons during the COVID-19 pandemic
- 4.4 Ways of introducing limitations on religious freedom
- 4.5. Level of restrictions introduced
- 4.6. Competing priorities: public health and religious freedom
 - The case of Romania
 - Conclusions

CHAPTER V - THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

- 5.1. Typologies of missionary approach in a multi-religious society
 - 5.1.1. Confrontation
 - 5.1.2. Competition
 - 5.1.3. Inter-religious dialogue
 - 5.1.4. Coexistence
- 5.2. The mission of the Church, religious freedom and the risk of proselytism
 - 5.2.1. The method of Christian mission is not proselytism
 - 5.2.2 Criticism of proselytising actions within Christian parameters by the World Council of Churches
 - 5.2.3 Missionary principles according to the document Christian witness in a multi-religious world: Recommendations for action
 - 5.2.4. Inter-religious initiative in the contemporary Christian mission agenda
- 5.3 Human rights and the mission of the Church from the perspective of Orthodox theology
 - 5.3.1. Freedom to express the Christian faith - a human right
 - 5.3.2. Theories of religious freedom: biblical-missionary foundations

Religious freedom as a human right in official synodal and ecumenical documents

5.3.3.1 Report of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (31 August - 8 September 2022, Karlsruhe, Germany)

5.3.3.2 Human dignity, religious freedom and the Orthodox mission in the documents of the Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete (2016)

5.3.3.2.1. The mission of the Orthodox Church in today's world

5.3.3.2.2. The Orthodox Church's relations with the rest of the Christian world

5.3.3.2.3. Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church

5.4 The reception of religious freedom in the sphere of Christian pluralism: towards an ecumenical architecture

5.5 A model of missionary-pastoral prognosis

5.6. Confessing Christ in a pluralistic world - basic norms for effective mission

5.7 Harmonising international legislative directives with freedom of Christian mission: Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance

Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Literature

2. Webography

1. Argumentation of the topic analysed

The world is changing. Of course, the world did not change overnight. There has been a gradual, if sometimes rapid, movement in which society, almost as if in a chain reaction, has changed both in its outward forms and in its inward mentalities. Some of the most significant changes have been the consequences of technological and industrial progress, and their effects can be seen in both demographic and individual terms. We have gradually moved from oral and communal cultures to individualistic and literate cultures and to secondary oral cultures, which are pronouncedly individualistic even if immersed in social networks and virtual communities. Ease of transport, market economies and globalisation have given rise to a rapid increase in mass migration that has changed the demographics of almost the entire world. Postmodernity has created a generation that, on the one hand, is strongly drawn to issues of justice and equality, but on the other remains much more reluctant or unable to make permanent social commitments. On the flip side of globalisation, we find nationalism, or what has been called 'balkanisation', with its insistence on local culture and identities alone. Although globalisation has withdrawn the significance of the boundaries of the relationship between identity and otherness, new everyday conditions have imposed a structural rethinking of relations between people in the perspective of relatedness. In this equation, religious freedom plays a providential role as a legislative instrument to regulate and mitigate conflicts between religions. But not only that.

Individualism, market economics and a sense of rootlessness have often led to competitiveness and, ironically, to isolation/isolation even in the face of a globalised world. In the face of change and upheaval, there is a challenge to return to our roots. Urban morphology has altered people's relationships with creation, between people, between people and God and, indeed, each person's relationship with themselves. A discerning examination of the situation makes people and, in a very important and particular way, the Church return to and reaffirm their roots in order to change while remaining rooted in their essence. And as the Church does this, it looks at its essence, identity and deeper meaning in each mission. The Church was born for mission. Therein lies its identity and deeper meaning. And mission is rooted in the Holy Trinity, a God of community and relationship. This is a God of sending and receiving in the broadest and most inclusive model of hospitality. The Father sends the Son into the world, the

Son sends the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and then sends evangelists to the ends of the earth.

The changing geographical and demographic landscape of Christianity has created in the new century the imperative to rethink and reshape the discourse and practice of mission. Ecclesial communities, academia and missionary practitioners have been challenged to identify the challenges and opportunities brought about by the new configuration of the world in religious multiplicity. Thus, awareness and familiarity with religious diversity, in principle, requires a new way of perceiving the world as the context that shapes the new contours of Christian mission and Christianity itself as pluriform. The classical perception of Christianity as a Western religion - and, by implication, of mission as a Western agenda - is deconstructed by the breadth of Christianity in the Global South in a way that reflects the pluriformity of Christianity in the new century.

One fact is certain and undeniable: the new phenomenon of human networks - developed through migration, tourism and mobility - together with the most massive advance in information and technology ever witnessed in human history, is not only relocating the geography of Christianity but, moreover, changing the mode of Christianity's presence in the global world. Moreover, the collapse of national political boundaries and the rise of new economic powers preceded the recognition of the need to rethink a new practice of connecting religion and politics. Here, Christianity plays a crucial role in shaping the global discourse on religion and politics, especially in terms of the new power relationship between politics and religion with reference to religious freedom and human rights. This problematisation is of particular concern to us in this paper, indeed one of the most complicated equations there is, both in principle and in its concrete application. How do Church and State, religion and politics behave today? If we separate them too much and place them at opposite ends, religious freedom is as much lost as if they are too closely aligned. If religion and the state are too closely associated, this leads to a particular religious preference ruling the state and can be used to oppress others. Certainly, the instrumentalisation of religious freedom as an aggressive form of secular intolerance must be avoided. There is a paradox in Europe: the democratisation of society has brought with it, through secularisation, a new relationship between Church and State, between religion and politics. Political secularisation offers no advantage or preference to any religion, with the state acting as a neutral moderator allowing all religious or non-religious voices to express themselves

in the public sphere. This view has led to the understanding that Church and State should be separated, but does not necessarily imply hostility to religion.

But what happens when one goes too far with the ideologization of secularism in the political form of secularism? Is religious freedom still respected in a society where the polity adopts what we might call secular intolerance or radical secularism? As an expression of secularism, secular intolerance seeks to exclude religion not only from the public domain but also from various private spheres. It is based on the indifference, rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations, based on the belief that religion should not have a visible influence on society, especially on education and politics. The aim is to achieve freedom from religion rather than freedom for religion as a human right. In other words, the public space must be neutral and free from any religious influence.

In contemporary times, with the dynamisation of communication and the mobility of people from and to different geographical spaces, there is a growing urgency for multi-faith approaches to issues of common social, cultural, religious interest. This interest is accompanied by a proliferation of different international interfaith initiatives, which are gaining a certain attractiveness. In this context, there is a call for these initiatives to be accompanied by appropriate responses from religious communities. Increasingly, faith communities are being urged to support interfaith initiatives that address social issues of common concern.

At the same time, in many parts of the world, intolerance and conflict between religious and ethnic communities is on the rise, and in several countries violence is justified in the name of religion. The need for religious leaders and their representatives to promote cooperation between different religions has never been greater.

The many interfaith initiatives vary in scale, impact and actors involved. Often the main interest of these efforts is to promote and stimulate debate and exchange of ideas, to facilitate recognition of shared values and to encourage respect and tolerance of diversity. However, some initiatives seem mainly to contribute to the "marketing of religions" and to highlight rather ephemeral and superficial events, where image seems to matter more than content.

In this context, the Christian mission is re-entering the daily multi-faith scene. It is not that it is absent, but the new conditions of a fluid society, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, impose new dimensions, new strategies of approach, new typologies of making the Gospel accessible. In the world of the 21st century, in which a concrete legislative

level of religious freedom has been reached, the Church is called upon to once again become a relevant voice against atheistic secularism, a voice that militates for the re-humanisation of man, unfortunately de-substantialised and superficialised by global consumerism and neo-Marxist ideologies.

Aiming to add new insights and reflections, the PhD thesis aims to address analytically and contextually the contribution of religious freedom as a facilitator of Christian mission. The topic covers the equation involving three factors: human rights - religious freedom - mission of the Church. The Christian's right to carry out mission in other non-Christian and secularised Christian spaces derives from the right to freedom of expression and belonging to a religious culture. This right is included in the 1948 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Missionary activity is nothing less than freedom of expression in speech and action. Just as political parties, non-governmental associations, economic agents and the media in a country make their views visible, so too does the Church through the act of mission. Religious freedom remains not only a framework for expressing religious choice and belonging in the mission of the Church, but also a goal of Christian mission. The socio-political situation obliges the Church to rethink its mission in the light of these new contemporary challenges.

2. Relevance of the theme

On the basis of the research we have undertaken, we believe that multilateral analyses of religious freedom in the context of Christian mission are relevant for several reasons. Firstly, the current situation in Europe needs to be clarified in the sense that in the name of so-called democracy, Christianity is still censored in the public sphere through political secularism. Religious freedom, which is a human right enshrined in most international documents, is being annihilated. Secondly, the persecution of Christians in various parts of the world is in full swing. And thirdly, the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has confronted us with a reality in which religious freedom is widely debated.

D. B. Barett and T.M. Johnson stated in 2001 that nearly 70 million Christians have been killed for their faith since the founding of the Christian Church. Even more remarkable than this statistic is the fact that the vast majority of them - almost 65% -

were martyred in the 20th century. While the historical forces behind these deaths are changing, the trend, unfortunately, has not, because, according to the NGO Open Doors, 360 million Christians are today heavily persecuted and discriminated against, i.e. 1 in 7 Christians in the world, 1 in 5 Christians are persecuted in Africa and 2 in 5 Christians are persecuted in Asia.

The organisation's report - "World Watch List 2023" - published in January 2023, states that data recorded from 1993 to 2023 revealed the extent and severity of persecution against Christians. Over the past 30 years, the number of countries where Christians suffer high and extreme levels of persecution has almost doubled to 76 countries. In the top 50 countries mentioned in the report alone, 312 million Christians face very high or extreme levels of censorship of their freedom to express and live their Christian faith. Thus, violence against Christians in sub-Saharan Africa has reached new heights over the years. Jihadists are still destabilising countries in West and Central Africa, and whole countries are at risk of collapsing into extremist violence. 26 countries in sub-Saharan Africa face high levels of persecution; half of them have violence scores in the "extremely high" range. The jihadist movement, which seeks to spread Sharia across the continent, has forced Christians to constantly move from their homes to relocation camps or other countries. The insecurity resulting from this experience of forced displacement makes Christians even more vulnerable to further violence. China's pattern of oppression is spreading to all authoritarian states. China's apparent success, especially in economic terms, is appealing to many leaders around the world. The promise of growth and prosperity, coupled with the ability to control all groups and individuals perceived as deviant, has piqued the interest of leaders around the world, regardless of their ideological background. Countries as diverse as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Malaysia have headed down the same authoritarian path, joining Central Asian states such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

On the other hand, Christianity in the Middle East is small and still under pressure. The Church has failed to recover from the resurgence of the Islamic State and extremist attempts to eliminate Christianity altogether. Discrimination and oppression, coupled with crippling economic decline, are advancing serious pessimism especially among the young. In the Levant region of the Middle East (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Israel/Palestinian Territories and Jordan), the Christian community is shrinking due to deprivation, discrimination and persecution. Since the Islamic State (IS) group entered

the scene, Christians in these areas of Iraq and Syria have been struggling to make a living; young Christians in particular face high unemployment and continued hostility, encouraging their desire to emigrate, which can be seen in the huge flow of migrants to Europe. When Christian emigration increases, church communities are correspondingly weakened, lacking the next generation of leaders and families, making them easier targets for further marginalisation.

Conditions for the Christian Church have also worsened in Latin America. On the 2022 list, three Latin American countries were ranked in the top 50 countries with high levels of anti-Christian violence. On the 2023 list, there are now four: Nicaragua is ranked 50th in 2023, the first time this country has appeared in the top 50. It joins Colombia (22nd), Cuba (27th) and Mexico (38th). Government repression in Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela has intensified against those seen as voices of opposition. In Nicaragua in particular, communist repression against church leaders became increasingly visible during the year.

Another theme explored in the paper is the issue of restrictions imposed by European countries on religious freedom during the COVID-19 pandemic. The subject is analysed from the point of view of respect for human rights in a situation of conflict between public health values and religious freedom. In this context, the perception of importance and urgency regarding the values that should be protected and the concept of "essential goods", which are understood differently in secular and religious perspectives, are of particular importance. Another key issue is not only the scope but also the "depth" of state intervention in the life of religious communities. In Europe, there has been a wide variety of national approaches to restricting religious freedom in order to protect public health. Some have pursued a very restrictive policy in this regard, others moderate, and others very mild. It was also possible to see the difference between the decisions taken by most countries during the first and second waves of the pandemic. A significant element that allows a possible evaluation of the solutions applied is the question of their duration. Are the limitations introduced only temporary, implemented for reasons of the extraordinary situation, or should they be seen as part of a "radical political experiment" which will change the very understanding of religious freedom and its place in the hierarchy of human rights. Philosophical, theological, legal and sociological arguments are analysed by developing methods appropriate to each of these disciplines.

The pandemic has revealed the true face of our Western societies in many areas that were previously somewhat hidden. Sometimes this true face has been better than the one we knew from our daily contact with it, sometimes worse. The pandemic also revealed the attitude of the leaders of those countries towards religious freedom. This is because religious activity involves the organisation of gatherings during which - regardless of their secular or religious nature - the virus spreads particularly easily. However, judging by the variety of specific decisions on restrictions to the right to religious freedom taken by the respective governments, the virus has been "less pious" in some countries and "more pious" in others; in some countries it has been more likely to frequent the supermarket and in others the church.

The question therefore arises whether such a variety of restrictions on the right to freedom of religion was introduced in Europe on the basis of scientific knowledge, or because of the panic that gripped the state authorities in the countries concerned at the beginning of the pandemic, or whether it resulted from certain philosophical assumptions (prior prejudices) about the importance of religion shared by politicians, regardless of the pandemic itself? Were health arguments of greater importance in the order of 'closing' and 'opening' certain areas of social life, or were they as significant as the understanding of 'essential goods' and the perception of the hierarchy of human rights? What were the reasons for differences between countries in changing or maintaining policies towards religion between the first and second waves of the pandemic?

In line with the above, the contextual approach to religious freedom in the theological missionary space is topical as it problematizes contemporary situations to which the Christian Church cannot remain indifferent.

3. Methodology and research sources

In order to provide as complete an analysis as possible of religious freedom in today's world, of the relationship between the Church's mission and religious freedom, and, implicitly, of the condition of Christian mission within the framework guaranteed by religious freedom as a human right, we have tried to simplify the outline and methodological references in order to make the analysis more accessible.

As a large part of the thesis is a theoretical approach, we used the descriptive-systematic method, which facilitated the structuring of the analyses in a progressive

manner, from micro to macro, of the concepts and ideas with which we worked. I am referring here to the conceptualisation of religious freedom, secular intolerance, etc. The historical-critical method was also very useful when we presented the concretisation of religious freedom in the history of European Christianity. Given that the research also covers data from the sociological spectrum for the argumentation of actual concrete situations, such as persecutions and limitation of religious freedom during the Covid-19 pandemic, in some sections of the thesis the approach is a multilateral one and intended to cover the interpretation of data relevant to missiological interest.

The literature used is predominantly in English, as we intended to connect our approach to the most current analyses in the sphere of mission, human rights, and the relationship between religious freedom and Western secular politics. We have found the research of the Pew Research Center, Religion and State round 3 (RAS3) to be very useful.

The contribution of Romanian missiologists to the development of theological analyses of religious freedom is also indisputable. From their bibliographical references, one can observe their concern for the actuality of religious freedom in contemporary society and in the mission of the Church. Here we mention Pr. Prof. Istodor Gheorghe, Pr. Prof. Gheorghe Petru, Pr. Prof. Aurel Pavel, Pr. Prof. Gelu Călin, Pr. Prof. David Pestroiu, Pr. Prof. Mihai Himcinschi.

Last but not least, in the Romanian area, the Journal for Freedom of Conscience (Journal of Freedom of Conscience) sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Religious Studies and Internetworking (IARSIC-Corhisan) (France), in collaboration with the Association Conștiință și Libertate, Bucharest (Romania), stands out.

4. Structure of the thesis

The paper is divided into five chapters, each chapter containing several sections and subsections. Chapter I - RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND HUMAN RIGHTS: CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS - introduces the conceptualisation of the terms used in the paper: freedom, religious freedom, human rights. The following points are touched upon: the historical itinerary of religious freedom in the Christian area, the Christian origins of religious freedom, the international documents that frame the right to

religious freedom, the legislative framework of religious freedom in Romania, the conceptualization of human rights.

Chapter 2 - RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE CONDITION OF SECULARISM. MISIOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS - brings to the forefront the providential significance of religious freedom in European secular politics, with a clarification of the dimension of religious intolerance. A good segment of this chapter is devoted to the interpretation of the data provided by Religion and State round 3 (RAS3), which measured the reality of the application of religious freedom between 1990 and 2014 in the countries of the world.

The third chapter - ANATOMY OF RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION AGAINST CHRISTIANS: A SERIOUS CHANGE IN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM - highlights a sad reality taking place in the world today, namely religious persecution against Christians. We proceeded to present data on this situation provided by according to Globally, Social Hostilities Related to Religion Decline in 2019 and the Pew Research Center.

If Chapter Four - CONDITIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC PERIOD. INTERPRETATION FROM A MISSIONARY PERSPECTIVE - is devoted to whether or not religious freedom was violated during the recent SarsCov2 pandemic, Chapter V - THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN THE FRAMEWORK OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM -, the most extensive chapter, explores the Christian mission in the framework of religious freedom with the following themes: typologies of the missionary approach in a multi-religious society; the mission of the Church, religious freedom and the risk of proselytism; human rights and the mission of the Church from the perspective of Orthodox theology. Particular attention was paid to the official documents of the World Council of Churches and the 2016 Pan-Orthodox Synod of Crete, documents that address religious freedom, human rights and the principles of mission in a multi-religious society.

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