

The Church – A Model for Society

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ABSTRACT: The church was placed by God at the confluence between men and God to promote the interests of Heaven in favor of the earthlings. As these two elements, which are defining for the human existence, are becoming more and more estranged from each other, as a result of the influence of current human ideologies, the Church is becoming increasingly limited in options and is forced to choose between cultural accommodation and spiritual revolution. For the same reasons, the Church has also been deprived of the image potential it used to enjoy, as its means of expression have been limited. The aim of this article is to prove that the audience to whom the Church is addressed, which is overwhelmingly influenced by postmodernism in its various forms of manifestation, might have the opportunity to opt again for different divine approaches to life. This might happen only to the extent to which the Church is willing to assume a brave and responsible role on the ideology market, while also providing a life model promoted by the genuine Christian lives of its members. Despite all the challenges posed by Christianity, Postmodernism can give the Church the opportunity to be revived.

KEYWORDS: church, postmodernism, culture, society, community

Who is the Church for?

People all around the world, ask the same questions about the causes of suffering, the inability of the Good to limit the effects of evil, the search for credible and satisfying sources of spirituality, the trust in the Church and the place of man in the universe. David Horton states that "the new millennium brings a radical shift in economic trends, political uncertainty, all-encompassing technological innovations, and fundamental changes in values that have been around for ages in the social, ethical and religious worlds" (Horton 2006, 576) and continues with the following list, which describes what happens in the present times: the spread of civilization and cultures, the proliferation of persecutions, the expansion of secularism, the generalization of postmodernism, the deepening of the gap between the rich and the poor, the mass spread of incurable diseases, the increase in the number of children at risk, the effects of the widespread migration, the growing number of Christians in countries with other religious mores, missionaries coming from countries without a tradition in this area. In this article, we will be looking into some of these, as they are represented in the reality of people's daily life, both among the Church members, and among those whom they must approach.

1.1. The precarious economic situation

Rapid social changes have led to the obvious detachment, in the negative sense of the word, of those who live below the limit of subsistence, a feature that affects many other personal aspects that are conditioned by the economic situation: earning a living, housing, health care, or other aspects of community integration - access to education, culture and, unfortunately, access to religious life mediated by certain religious

institutions. If the Church does not change the way it relates to the poor, it will not be able to address this category.

1.2. Hedonism

At the opposite pole, there is a totally different reality as a higher, unprecedented living standard level has been achieved, especially in the Western world. Starting from the modernist focus on work to the detriment of rest and leisure time, Western postmodern man has come to talk more about ways of spending rather than saving money. Therefore, if the world keeps going in this direction, the Church must intervene and speak outright against the reversal of the values scale. Hedonism considers pleasure equivalent to the purpose of life and mass media propagate this idea, liberalizing biblical standards of integrity (interpersonal relations, couple relationships) and reducing all searches to achieving pleasure at all costs. The advertising industry speculates this weakness of human nature in its favor and proclaims filling the daily agenda with pleasurable activities. "Recently, Christian hedonism has gained ground, supplementing the truth that God promises His children joy and pleasure in the relationship with Him, both here and in His kingdom to come, with the addition that He actually fulfills his promise here and now." (Packer 2006, 400). The author believes that this expression is improper to Christianity, as it wrongly implies that the search for pleasure at any cost would be a priority of Christianity. Conflicts between these points of view - the hedonistic behavior and the religious dedication - have always been present, pleasure being considered a means of immunizing the present against the omnipresent pain. The Church must discover ways to address those are "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4) who are not necessarily in favor of the suppression of any external power but who simply want to prove their full authority over their own program, budget and future. As some hedonists live a double reality (they are people who are deeply committed to work on working days and completely focused on fun at the weekends), the Church finds it even more difficult to come up with a solution. Which side of the personality should it address first, the one which is working or the one which is having fun? Perhaps, when approaching this category, the Church must add something else to its many roles, besides the traditional ones of irrefragable salvation commander and imposer of the standard holiness standard (Rotaru 2017, 57-76).

1.3 Attachment to tradition

In this context, by people attached to tradition, we mean those who are pleased with the place they are in, the stage of life they go through, the ideals they cherish, the goals they pursue and the very few aspects which they would like to change. These people do not necessarily fit exclusively into a well-defined economic or social category (since they have no survival problems and are scattered on multiple levels). Their concern is to prolong the current state of affairs characterized by a certain degree of comfort and balance and to continue unhindered the foreseeable course of life. Any challenge bothers them because it takes them by surprise. They are faithful to the values of the traditional family, to their occupation and work, to their political affiliation and to the currents of thought they have once embraced. As far as church programs are concerned, they are little influenced by the insertion of the new and again, what really counts is peace of mind and predictability. This category - the traditionalists - cannot be neglected, as long as it is present and has potential that can be used constructively.

1.4. Attachment to spirituality

Those represented by this category have not exactly lost touch with reality, but are more focused on the search as a process in itself rather than on the actual result of their search. Their concept of life is that reason has a limited, exclusively practical role and that true fulfillment comes from the discovery of unseen things. This may be the consequence of being enrolled in local churches that promote a non-target spirituality that only creates impressions without an evident transformational result. They feel good in the postmodern world, always looking for something from the outside which becomes objective and more important than the result they actually achieve along this journey. They cannot be distinctly assigned to a certain age category, but it is easy to get them involved in all sorts of initiatives, which idealistically promote certain concepts or currents. The Church is no longer attractive to them, especially since formal religion dominates the programs. The church no longer meets their expectations, influenced by a torn society, which is still intolerant of certain ideas and lifestyles. Instead, they are open to all kinds of versions of spirituality, which they assimilate as a result of costly pilgrimages, participation in spiritualization programs, and reading books that exclusively promise a new spiritual dimension. The Church must provide clues for a meaningful life and the Biblical certainty of continuous spiritual growth through initiatives and programs that involve the animation of the mind, the dedication of the heart, and the mobilization of the body.

1.5. Secularism

Since we cannot fully analyze this trend of separating religion from life, which characterizes the modern age, we will only present some of its practical implications. We can recall the lack of inclination towards any religious suggestion. As a rule, secularized people belong to that category of population, which is educated and has access to public decisions (Rotaru 2006, 251-256). Due to their contempt for anything related to religion and the institutions that promote it, they condemn any church initiative, any inclination to spirituality someone might have and seek to destroy the Christian faith. According to the World Values Survey (WVS) 2010-2014, the question asked was "If science and religion are in conflict, is religion always right?" Of all the answers, 10.3% fully agree that religion is always right (25.8% in Georgia, 0.7% in Slovenia, 19.6% in Romania), 19.6% agree that religion is always right (32.9 in Georgia, 8.4% in Slovenia, 30.6% in Romania), 34.8% answer that they disagree with the idea that religion is always right (50.0% in Poland, 24.5% in Georgia, 29.3% in Romania), 22.8 % categorically reject the supremacy of religion (43.8% in Estonia, 5.5% in Georgia, 11.9% in Romania), and 12.4% did not respond. By adding the number of those who agree and strongly agree that religion is always right we have a total of 29.9% and the number of those who disagree and do not categorically agree with the idea that the church is always right we will have a total of 57.6%.

1.6. Indifference

This category is made up of those who are not concerned about topics related to the purpose of existence, having a direction in life, or a reason for living. Their life unfolds linearly, according to patterns they have predetermined without unwanted interference from outside their circle, and is generally crowded with things which lack perennial value. Of course, they also have to cope with the repercussions of factors they cannot control, but these syncopes neither disturb their apathy nor change their direction. They try to avoid anything coming from the outside, they do not get involved in any action whatsoever, they do not have any expectations, and they have a tendency especially

notice the unpleasant side of things. Those familiar with the church atmosphere can talk about the presence of indifference both outside the Church and among its members.

1.7. Generation Z

Following this succinct representation of population by age (sociologists divide the current generations into four categories: Baby Boomers: born 1946-1963, Generation X: born 1964-1979, Millennials: born 1980-1994 and Generation Z: born 1995-2010), White (White 2017, 53-73) introduces his own description of that category population, which will soon be the most numerous and which the Church must address. According to the author, Generation Z is:

a. Influenced by the economic recession

Having witnessed the economic crises from 2000 and 2008, and having been burdened by the horrendous predictions regarding the times that are coming, which exacerbate their anxiety, the members of this generation are determined to fight for their economic security and to make a difference wherever they may go.

b. Defined by Wi-Fi

Apart from being skilled at using electronic devices, this category of population is defined by the excessive time it dedicates to the media, by the smart gifts they have received since they were kids, and the technological universe in which they spin. "While Baby Boomers cannot imagine a world without TV, and Millennials cannot remember what the world used to look like without a computer, Generation Z cannot live in a world without constant, immediate and convenient access to the internet." (White 2017, 54).

c. Multiracial

Massive population movements at a continental and an intercontinental level have given Generation Z members the opportunity to know, adapt to, and accept multiracial diversity, with all its costs, risks and benefits.

d. Sexually instable

Generation Z is the most exposed to same-sex marriages and the rights of transgender people. This does not imply that they are victims of these trends but live under the impact of these significant social changes and consequently, they value individual freedom.

e. Post-Christian

"The more recent the statistics, the higher the percentage of those who fall into the category of no religion people," (White 2017, 73) since the Christian context does not influence them in any way, the level of religious literacy is high and there are no models around them.

Does the Church have the necessary resources to meet all these needs? Can it reach all these population categories? Should it specialize in answers it can offer to one or the other category of people? Can it avoid being accused of dealing only with those who are in favor of religion?

2. Who could be interested in the services of the Church?

The philosophical changes that society has been through have deprived the Church of the image potential it used to enjoy in the past, it limited its possibilities of expression, and left the believers disappointed and lacking perspective (Rotaru 2005, 33.446).

However, society is in great need of exponents of Christianity willing to go 'the extra mile' beyond their postmodern concerns and limitations, as Coleman put it: "The world is desperately looking for someone to follow. There is no doubt that eventually, everybody is going to end up following somebody, but will that person be someone who

walks in Christ' footsteps, or will there be someone who seeds darkness in the garden of their heart and mind and leads deeper and deeper into it? " (Coleman 1998, 21).

One of the main features of human existence, to which modernist individualism has not found a solution, is estrangement. This was the price that the life model devised by the Enlightenment had to pay, whenever it encouraged a human being to be independent, as detachment from others inevitably led to estrangement from them. (Gay 1998, 193). However, it is increasingly emphasized that human existence is defined by the balance between the individual and social life of the individual. As postmodernism became dominant, it was claimed that people want to be independent, but in a community environment.

According to the biblical teaching, community relationships are structural elements when learning about the church. Newbigin notes that "the human being in the Bible only exists in relationship to other people and only as part of the created world ... The Bible invites us to regard our genuine human life as one of shared relationships in a world of living creatures and created beings." (Newbigin 1995, 69). "As individuals, we find the meaning of life only in relationships, especially in relationships that offer love. Our peculiarity and distinctiveness are preserved only through and for interpersonal relationships." (Hiebert 2008, 287). Postmodernists are looking for a genuine fellowship experience of believers that goes beyond gender differences (Galatians 3:28), race (Acts 15: 9, Romans 10:12, 1 Corinthians 12:13) and social rank (Colossians 3:11). "This is what makes relevant the rediscovery of the church as the Body of Christ and of the Christian mission as the mission of a community for those who share a common destiny." (Bosch 1991, 362).

Due to the fact that in the context of Postmodernism, external aspects of human life are no longer determinant of human identity, individuals understand that they are equally created as an integral element of mankind. They also begin to understand that they belong to a continuous presence of God on earth. Blauw underlines that "This means that the church, since it replaced Israel, represents the salvation that came through Christ, just like in the Old Testament, Israel could, by anticipation, represent the salvation of the world." (Blauw 1962, 80).

Amaladoss outlines the existence of the Church through a perpetual mission, which promotes targeted action. "As Christians, we anticipate a world with "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21: 1), because we believe that God is active in the process of transforming this world. This is the hope that sustains us and makes us more creative, so that we give our best." (Amaladoss 1995, 317). Rusu believes that the church must take both conceptions, depending on the context: sometimes "Christ against culture," in other domains "Christ the Transformer of culture" (Rusu, 2016, 422-442).

Another element that postmodernists look forward to discovering, understanding and eventually following, is the relationship that God maintains with those He created. Our existence is defined by the relationship with God, and this implies more than depending on Him for existence, nurturing respect for an authority outside us, a relationship described in the most comprehensive biblical meta-narration: the history of mankind, before and after the fall.

Understanding this "storyline" is capital to the human being, as the individual gets to understand the role they play in this whole scenario. As MacIntyre notices: "I can answer the question, 'What should I do?' only when I have answered a previous question, 'What is the story I am the main character in?'" (MacIntyre 1984, 216).

Even if they generically reject meta-narrations, postmodern individuals must know the context they live in, in order to become aware of their redeeming route and in order to be able to choose the "narrative" they can identify with, from a wide range of possible "scenarios." Postmodern individuals have three options: they can understand

everything as being the result of an agglomeration of religious understandings launched by impersonal realities, they can believe there is no other reality beyond what is seen in the natural world or they can admit that there is a cosmic confrontation between Good and Evil, which influences both their identity and their journey through life. This third possibility, which sees history as the sum of all events starting from the rebellion against God in heaven (Revelation 12:7-9) and ending up with the renewal of all things (Revelation 21:1-6), gives every common postmodern individual the opportunity to understand God's nature (Genesis 1:26-27, Matthew 3:16-17, 28:18-19) and to meet an embodied God (Isaiah 7:15, John 1:14) and His descendants grouped in a community (Romans 12:10, 15:7, Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 3:13, 10:24, 1 Peter 1:22, 3:8, 4:9, 1 John 3:11, 3:23, 4:7, 4:11-12).

Conclusions

The extent to which the Church and its leaders still believe in the unique purpose and distinct mission they have received will be seen in the wise and responsible way of interpreting the context and preparing appropriate responses. Updating and adapting the approach to different population categories, providing solutions that take into account the significantly changed parameters of interest or respect for spirituality, and, last but not least, focusing on dialogue with the young population, should be the priorities of the Church. A shattered, selfish, and estranged society needs a balanced, fellowship-oriented, and visionary Church, as well as exponents of Christianity that go beyond their postmodern limits, and share the ultimate value of a rediscovered, upgraded and updated relationship with God.

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