

## BOOK REVIEWS

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DORU RADOSAV, *Sentimentul religios la români. Sec. XVII-lea-XX-lea. O privire istorică*  
 [The religious sentiment among Romanians. 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A historical overview]  
 (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Școala Ardeleană, 2025)

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Starting from a fragment of a literary text (*Orbitor*, by Mircea Cărtărescu), Doru Radosav captures the reader's attention from the very first pages by offering a clear point of orientation regarding the relationship between the two fields under scrutiny (popular religion and formal history) from which religious experience and sensibility may be reconstructed. Under the author's guidance, the reader advances along the winding path of historical understanding, becoming increasingly aware of the thematic layers and interpretive levels that structure the entire undertaking. A glance at the table of contents already signals the fields and areas of research from which the answers to the central question will be drawn: what the religious sentiment among Romanians means/is/embodies over the 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The book's four chapters communicate to one another and form, in my view, a balanced, coherent structure. The first chapter is devoted to the literature of religious sentiment, which Doru Radosav understands as having a formative dimension, an expression of religious sensibility and experience. This body of literature is carefully reconstructed from liturgical books, catechetical works, hagiographic writings, as well as mystical and ascetic texts. By examining the emergence, frequency, and circulation of this corpus, the author retraces the entire mechanism through which religious experience and sensibility were shaped by (secular or liturgical) reading, showing that the Christian message *extends* into the very perception of the religious book as an object and as a projection of piety.

The second chapter traces manifestations of individual piety by examining types of prayers as well as the practice of the sacraments, highlighting the Church's role in regulating sacramental forms and formalizing ritual practices (baptism, marriage, communion). By analysing the various types of prayers (those of the Lord, of the boyar, of the monk, or of the peasant), the author identifies new elements that help define religious sentiment in relation to the forms through which individual piety is expressed within a social framework.

The third chapter is devoted to the phenomenon of death, examined both in terms of a Christian's perception and lifespan, and through the lens of the funeral ritual and ceremony, which requires the participation of the community, whose representations of death and of the departed project themselves not only onto the religious imaginary, but also onto the history of society and its shifting views on death over time. Reconstructing an era's perception of death and of separation

from the world strikes me as an approach that would benefit poetic and literary studies as well. Particularly compelling in this chapter are the author's incisive analyses of the rhetoric of the funeral discourse, which bring readdress the relationship between religious texts and literary texts, especially in the early stages of Romanian literature, when the poetic-literary discourse had not yet emancipated itself from the models of the religious, funerary one.

The fourth chapter broadens the interpretive horizon toward collective piety, suggesting that the community's participation in liturgical life through events organised by the Church arises not only from the imperatives of religious custom, but also from a constant human need to dwell within the realm of religious mystery. The author examines pilgrimages, processions, the cult of saints and icons – that is, all those elements and forms of collective devotional practice that the Church, in close connection with the community, manages both for its own purposes and for sustaining the vitality of the religious sentiment. An illustrative example in this respect is the phenomenon at Maglavit (1935), which also chronologically marks the end of the period under scrutiny.

Even though the book's four chapters can be read separately, depending on a researcher's interests, I believe that a coherent understanding of the religious sentiment among Romanians in the 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries requires a full reading. The recovery of the representations of religious sentiment, traced as it manifests in social, literary-cultural, theological, ethnographic, or psychological frameworks, unfolds slowly, under intense focus, as the reading progresses.

One of the book's exceptional strengths lies in its remarkable capacity to synthesize the issues discussed in relation to the idea of religious sentiment among Romanians. As the reader progresses through the book, the impression that arises is that its foundations were excavated quietly, like the workings of a mine, from which only the essential ore of ideas has been brought to the surface, carefully selected and finely sifted to allow for the clearest possible understanding of religious sentiment. The book offers splendid surprises throughout its pages.

On page 212, for instance, when defining the religious sentiment in terms of the rejection of modern innovations, Doru Radosav formulates one of his most defining insights:

*The religious sentiment is, above all, a sentiment of the past, and from this premise, the past becomes the true faith, while to live religiously is equivalent to preserving the past. Religious experience is, for the most part, an anamnesis, and the religious sentiment is a retrograde one. To be a Christian means to live the past in the present. This is precisely why religious experience is univocal, linear, unspectacular, and compresses the present as much as possible. The greater this compression, the stronger the religious sentiment. Religious experience in the present is subjected to intense pressure coming both from the past (biblical and Christic events) and from the future (the eschatological moment). The religious sentiment, in general, "lacks a present tense."*

In this paragraph, one finds, in my view, a complete and philosophically grounded definition of the religious sentiment. And here I must note a second major strength of the book: its epistemological foundation. It is impossible not to perceive, while reading, the philosophical substratum of Doru Radosav's writing, which evokes the great thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Marc Bloch, Max Weber, Paul Ricoeur, or Michel Foucault) who reflected on the past, on the very object of history and historical writing, or on the modes of narrating historical events. In this passage, one

recognises Doru Radosav's interest in historical writing, in historiography, as well as in understanding the ways in which historians write (or choose to write) about history. Doru Radosav is not merely a seeker of the traces of the past; in his case, this traditional task of the historian is doubled by that of the modern, reflexive historian who interrogates the very ways in which those traces can be rendered *in* and *through* language.

Another legitimate observation about the book concerns its uniqueness within larger sphere of Romanian historical research. It is striking that the idea of such a research topic, although seemingly simple and readily accessible, has not been frequently pursued. Undoubtedly, there are numerous studies across various fields (church history, theology, the history of religious books, sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc.) that analyse the phenomenon of Romanian religiosity and spirituality from one viewpoint or another, but I am not aware of any major work that combines, in a totalising vision, the research sources and conclusions drawn from several thematic areas. As a type of approach, however, this book can be included within the broader sphere of studies conducted in France and other European countries, and can be situated thematically and/or methodologically close to such remarkable historians as Henri Brémond, François Lebrun, Philippe Ariès, or Pierre Chaunu, as well as others who have examined similar aspects of everyday and/or religious life within their national histories.

A scholarly undertaking of this magnitude is far from an easy task, as it requires immense work in documentation and analysis. Every assertion in the book requires careful reading of sources and the ideas result from an extraordinary hermeneutic effort of interpretation. Moreover, the researcher who embarks on such a project must move with confidence and ease across multiple fields of study and thematic areas. *Sentimentul religios la români. Secolele al XVII-lea și al XX-lea. O privire istorică* [The religious sentiment among Romanians. 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A historical overview] may serve, as yet another strength of the book, as a model for future inquiries into the religious sentiment among Romanians in other historical periods.

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