

ELENA PLATON, *Biserica mișcătoare. Eșeu de socio-antropologie religioasă* [The moving church. An essay on religious socio-anthropology] (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2024)

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Elena Platon's essay, *The moving church*, is remarkable in the manner in which it incorporates and intertwines a wide range of discursive levels, so as to form a unitary continuum throughout the entirety of the text, while also allowing for the text to be divided into multiple focus points, thus facilitating an easy reading experience. At its core, the essay examines the theme of interconfessional conflicts in the Transylvanian rural space, having as its case study the interconfessional conflict in the village of Cetățele, located in the county of Maramureș. Besides the central topic, Platon's analysis does not shy away from venturing into meta-discursive territory, examining, among other issues, the role of ethnological studies in shaping the idealised image of the Romanian village, the role played by the anthropologist during fieldwork, from the distance/closeness with the studied subject to the supposed "objectivity" to which the anthropologist needs to adhere or the effects produced at the informant level during interviews depending on the context in which the interview was conducted (e.g. individual/collective interviews), conferring both a continuous reflective and self-reflective nuance to the essay.

The structure of the essay can be separated into three major parts: first, an analysis of the church as a symbol, both from the perspective of its atemporal, unchanging and steadfast character, as well as from the perspective of its dynamic, prone to personalization and adaptable to people's needs character; second, an anthropological study on the state of conflict, covering it from multiple perspectives which intertwine both internal and external factors, anchoring the analysed rural space into a complex historical, social, political, economic and denominational context; third, an analysis on the changes which ensued in the aftermath of the state of interconfessional conflict, observing the effects on traditional customs during important holidays, everyday social habits or community-involving events such as baptisms, weddings and funeral proceedings. To these major parts which compose the main body of the essay there is added, in the opening chapter, a dedicated section which establishes the working methodology used in treating the subject matter. This review will concentrate mainly on the first part of the essay, as it is the main focus point and the central element which ties the text together.

To begin with, the essay opens by way of polemicizing on the topic of the study of conflict, and to a greater extent, on the study of religious conflict in a rural setting as this area of study tends to incorporate elements which have a resistance tendency towards analysis in the Romanian autochthonous scientific fields, such as the study of rural spaces from the aspect of the state of conflict or the analysis of religious matters from a non-theological perspective. In regards to the study of conflict, the author mentions a tendency which questions the capacity to ensure an objective approach in a researcher's fieldwork when encountering a situation which might easily

facilitate generating a bias on the researcher's part towards one or another of the involved parties, this tendency bringing forth the claim according to which conflicts, especially of a denominational nature, presume a moral and ethical component which might affect the researcher's capacity to maintain a satisfactory scientific distancing and objectivity towards the studied subject. The author opposes this tendency by bringing forth the reasoning according to which the endeavour of studying conflicts is being conducted in complete accord with the moral and ethical register in the scientific sphere, which is calibrated in a different manner than the moral and ethical register in the larger societal setting. Platon also addresses the element of subjectivity on the researcher's part, while conducting fieldwork on the studied subject and the possibility for bias to interfere in a study, by showcasing how such a matter pertains to the notion of biodegradability of theories (15-18), something which can appear regardless of the field of study, such elements being able to be identified later on through exterior critiques and analyses. While addressing the studying of theological matters from a non-theological standpoint, Platon, presents the resistance towards critical incursions, especially when said religious image is anchored in the rural space, as a cultural framework built up around the idealized image of the Romanian village which maintains a harmonious, stable, and peaceful relation with the religious element and its protective image represented in the form of the church, including even during the socialist period in Romania's history (28-29). On this topic, the author considers that it is enough to engage in a brief comparative approach between how the subject matter is treated autochthonously compared to how it is treated internationally – albeit focusing mainly on Western Europe – and reaching the conclusion that “it seems that the Western Christian world has an entirely different sensitivity to treating matters regarding faith in manners different than the theological one [...] the sociology of an Orthodox denomination seems to have remained, broadly, undifferentiated from ecclesiology” (32). As such, the essay, at the methodological level, argues for an analysis based on the form of sociological pluralism which “begins from the premise that religiosity does not constitute an empirical reality [...] and that what we can truly register are the gestures, words, and beliefs of people from different places” (23), thus tying the religious element into the state of conflict in the framework of studying the interconfessional conflict inside the rural space of Cetățele village by way of anchoring the religious imaginary in the historical context by which it was (and which it has in turn) influenced.

The first part of the analysis on the essay's subject approaches the two facets regarding the image of the church, as a symbol of steadfastness and as a symbol dynamism, by beginning with the portrayal of the manner in which the image of the church marked by steadfastness is constituted in the collective mentality and imaginary. Platon begins from the relation between the human being and their primordial need to create a sense of coherence and stability in the face of the uncertainty stemmed from their surrounding environment by way of constructing “proofs of their victory over the passing of time and establishing laws of certitude” (35). Based on this relation, the church, as physical space, becomes invested with the status of a privileged symbol, both through its close relation with the sacred, which offers it from the start a major influence in people's everyday life, and through the creation of a vast cultural framework meant to maintain

this influence by way of associating the image of the church with the notions of equilibrium, steadfastness and persistence in the face of the passage of time, as Platon states:

“Through the complicity of theologians, of scientists, and [...] of believers animated by the nostalgia for ancestral rituals [...] [of] archaic elements, as well as by the desire to conserve the fetishism of a golden age, a mythology was created as to fuel the illusion religious life as absolute harmony, especially the one in traditional villages.” (35)

As such, the space of the church, both concrete and symbolic, becomes an anthropological place characterized by the intersection of relational, historical and identity elements (35). Besides the established role of the church in people’s everyday life, that of facilitating an intimate space between the individual and the sacred, as well as the reaffirmation of a rule-based rapport meant to protect against uncertainty through the securing character of the ritual (40), the church also plays a historical role in the worldly affairs of people, especially in rural spaces, acting as a central point for maintaining and strengthening the social fabric of the community by way of facilitating a space with multiple social functions, the essay mentioning that:

“Over the course of the Middle Ages, cathedrals were the place of officiating sermons, of mortuary processions, of political gatherings. The prices of grains or livestock would be discussed here, people would come to church to find solace, to ask for advice or to pray for forgiveness, constituting a true ‘city within a city,’ ‘the intellectual core of the settlement, the center of public activity, the peak of thought, of science, and of art.’” (41)

Observed from the perspective of its social function, it is not hard to imagine why the space of the church manages to become so well entrenched inside of the collective imaginary in the rural setting, to the point that it becomes a truly “intimate part of a *modus vivendi* both in everyday life, as well as during those breaks in the monotonous rhythm of daily existence which are the important religious holidays” (43), and how the loss of such a space might degenerate into a conflict of such proportions as the one from Cetățele, when the village’s only church was transferred to the Orthodox denominational believers, and thus depriving the Greek-Catholics of the space. The aspect of the loss of the church spaces, which contributes considerably to the formation of a group’s identity, is further developed in the essay by nuancing the relation between members of the rural space and the village church through exploring the community’s affective memory in rapport with religious imaginary and the capacity for mutual creation of particularizing identities, both for the rural collective, as well as for the church space itself, Platon pointing out that:

“Religious objects, as well as those which form *the decor* for the unfolding of religious services, so wide-spread in our villages [...] do not only express a special type of relation with God [...] but also personalize the church in such a manner that each village has a church, let’s say, ‘in its likeness and its image’ [...] the church cannot be reduced to it being a simple object tied to faith, but one of extreme familiarity ‘with which and in which they live,’ which belongs to them, which they can modify without any inhibitions and without contemplating too much to its status as a cultural object.” (45-46)

Stressing the manner in which both the members of the rural community, as well as the space of the church enter in a continuous relation of defining and particularizing of each other depending on needs stemming from conditions generated by the economic, historical, political, social, religious context, amongst others, is a recurring element in Platon's essay. This is noteworthy to mention as focusing on these relations showcases the real magnitude of social dynamism present inside of a space often considered as to be resistant to social changes, and as a space which tends to be generalized into a homogenous structure which, even though might present surface level differences depending on the region where it is localised, at its core operates on the same socially rigid, steadfast, and uniform mechanisms which are persistent in the face of the passage of time. These types of generalizations, argues the essay, can very easily fall under the category of ideology and fetishism (53) by reducing particular contexts, modelled by changes in particular historical contextual realities, to broad general depictions, often atemporal or frozen in the anachronistic temporality of an idealized past.

The analysis in the first part of the main body continues with Platon showcasing the reverse side regarding the image of the church, presenting its dynamic and adaptable character, as well as a deconstruction of the cultural framework built around the physical space of the church as to offer it a powerful, bordering on totalizing, influence on congregations in the rural setting by noting that:

“As sound as the rationale through which we have tried to highlight the dependence between the steadfast aspect of the church, and the perennality and robustness of its walls might be, the attitudes displayed by the worshippers in the aftermath of losing said walls unveils the shortcomings of this theoretical framework.” (63)

The image of *the moving church*, the one “which rocks the common interpretation schemes of the rural world and its religious mentality” (53) appears as a way to illustrate exactly the manner in which the members of the rural community can, in fact, not only adapt to change, but can also be agents of change themselves. To sustain the line of argumentation Platon brings forward examples of change and the manner in which members of the community adapt to change regarding the religious imaginary both in times of crisis, as well as in times when the state of crisis is not present.

The changes during a state of crisis, stemming from the losing of the church on the Greek-Catholic worshippers' part denotes the capacity of the affected community members towards adapting and finding solutions in regards to the act of professing their faith within a given situation imposed by their particular circumstances. Two of the solutions emerging from within the Greek-Catholic community and presented in the essay are: first, holding the religious sermons inside the village's school; second, transforming the village's woods into a sanctified space for the worshippers by creating a Way of the Cross, culminating by erecting a cross on one of the forest's upper cliffs. In the case of the first solution, conversion and sanctification take place, at least during the officiation of the religious sermons, of a closed space characterized by worldly functions, both in its main established function as an educational place from the local administration's point of view, as well as in the collective mentality of the community, many of them being former students

at the respective school (68), which made the accommodation process for the community members not the easiest of endeavours. Still, the capacity for accommodation, be it not entirely perfect, represents a capacity to adapt not often considered as part of the rural setting's religious imaginary. As such, it is noted that the power of the religious imaginary does not reside only inside the walls which form the space of the church, but also in the manner through which the conventions and compromises inside the collective imaginary manage to inject the power of sacrality into spaces and places otherwise considered atypical. In the case of the second solution, there takes place, on the one hand, the investing of an open space with the element of sacrality, but also, on the other hand, a return, conscious or not among the worshippers, to the origins of religious practice (73). Through the construction of a Way of the Cross by the villagers, culminating in a cross on one of the forest's cliffs, the members of the community, as the idea for the project came from amongst the community's members without involvement from the clerical sphere, demonstrate the capacity for the collective mentality to return to successfully tried and tested solutions without needing to depend on solutions mandated by church representatives. The capacity for finding solutions in a state of crisis through adapting to the conditions imposed by the particular context of a certain historical moment by using the available resources at hand denotes the manner in which both the collective mentality and the religious imaginary can be subject to change through collectively agreed conventions and compromises which go against the steadfast aspect attributed to the physical walls of the church and prove the manner in which the collective power of the ritual and of sacrality to create and recreate, convert and reconvert physical spaces depending on the community members' needs.

Changes occurring in the absence of a crisis tend to be less drastic. The example that Platon brings forward is the gradual abandoning of wooden churches by rural people for modern church constructions. This example is meant to highlight an instance where change appears in the rural setting not in a reactive manner, such as in a state of crisis, but in a proactive one when the individual living in the rural space becomes an agent of change in themselves inside their own community, a perspective which was rarely approached by the cultural framework built around the idealised village space, as Platon points out:

"In spite of the factors which sketch out a unitary picture of the methods of reporting to the sacred, there are elements which prove that the inhabitant of the rural space *also* meets the qualities of an agent of change, even outside crisis situations [...] let us think about [...] the ease with which *some* villages have given up on the old wooden churches [...] in favour of modern cathedrals, lacking in simplicity and beauty – qualities attributed, of course, by ethnographers, and not by their creators – of the former ones." (64)

The mention of attributing a "lacking in simplicity and beauty" in the character of modern churches in comparison to the wooden churches speaks volumes on the way in which the institutional cultural framework, represented in this instance by the ethnographers, relates to the image of the village in an aesthetic manner which looks at the space from an outside perspective, and while wishing to enforce and strengthen a version of an image created, yet again, outside said respective space it ignores the possible legitimate practical, pragmatic or even aesthetic needs

stemming from the individuals inside said space. The manner in which the institutional cultural framework relates to the image of the church can also be extended as to encapsulate the entire image of the village, such as in the case of the idealised and fetishizing depictions of the autochthonous village which follow the same mechanisms of projecting a predominately aesthetic image which ignores, willingly in the case of ideological instrumentation and unwillingly in the case of ignorance, the real, practical and aesthetic particular internal needs over which the exterior aesthetically idealized image overlaps.

In the case of Elena Platon's *Biserica Mișcătoare*, the central point and, in fact, the accomplishment of this essay is the manner in which, by way of treating a case study which has at its foundation the interconfessional conflict in the Transylvanian rural space, exposes the village of Cetățele, as well as the individuals whose totality composes its community, in the multiplicity of its particularities. Thus, through dislocating Cetățele from the general category of "village" and presenting the fullness of its facets, the essay sketches out its particular historical context marked by a conflict generated by and caught in the middle of the tumultuous intersection between the political, social, economic, and denominational sphere, both externally and internally. At the core of this essay, it manages to reveal the continuous capacity for reacting and adapting of individuals and spaces towards which the general tendency is to place them an artificial space of harmony, balance, and, especially, inertia.

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