

Magda Craciun

(together with MA students in anthropology: Monica Chereches, Oana Matei, Vlad Volintiru and Anda Becut)

Religious objects in post-socialist context.

A comparison between the Romanian Orthodox and Polish Roman Catholic markets for religious objects

Research Report.

Few details about the Romanian context

The aim of this first part of our research was to gather as many details as possible about one aspect of the expansion of religious life in post-socialist context, namely the market for religious objects. This research focused not on the ceremonial objects (censer, priest clothing etc.), but on (popular) religious commodities produced for/bought by common people. We started from the presumption that visibility, diversification (in terms of materials, models and object origins), innovation (?) and competition are its main characteristics within the post socialist context.

To gather these details, we mainly used participant observation, photography and interviews/conversations. In addition, we collected from the street vendors “curiosities”, from our point of view, to present them to our interlocutors during our discussions about the definition of a religious object.

Diversity

The first thing that struck us was the diversity of religious objects, better described through photographs than through the following categories:

- icons (painted on wood/glass/small stones; printed on paper of different quality; with or without a frame);
- crosses (made from wood, plastic, bone, common or precious metals; sometime adorned with phosphorus/LED/bright string, many of these being obviously imported; specially designed to be put on the wind-screen);

- books and booklets (from prayer books to Christian children books);
- rosaries or prayer beads (knitted rosaries; wooden or plastic beads; framed within the context of a religious celebration or a special shop, every bead put on a string can be sold as a rosary; the same bracelet can be sold as jewellery in a place and as rosary in another);
- religiously inscribed key chains (some with wrappings indicating their origin: “made in China”; when we showed her this keychain, one of our interlocutors exclaimed: “They don’t even bother to unwrap it. China! My God!);
- incense, bottles of perfume and oils;
- candles and votive lights;
- angels (made of glass, wood, porcelain, gypsum);
- greeting and post cards;
- audio and video cassettes, CDs and DVDs
- souvenirs (sold in monastery and church’s shops or in the official shop of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchy; plastic/metal/porcelain representations of a church/monastery, postcards and booklets with a church/monastery/priest/monk
- and objects for which we don’t have a name: a cross on a small cushion soaked with unction (mir) and wrapped in plastic; a sacred image glued on a shell.

Field note:

Discussion in front of the monastery shop between a woman who already bought it and one who wanted it: “How should I name it? Shell?” “Yes, yes. Call it shell, the monk will understand you.”

Another thing is worthy of mention: religious commodities, especially icons and candles, are sold in many places, not only in specialized shops: market stands, church and monastery shops, museums, foundations, supermarkets, bookshops and stationers and within the spontaneous market organized near a church or monastery on a saint’s day.

Field note:

*Interior decoration shop: A seller gave me a contemptuous look when I asked if the icons are painted at a monastery.
Stationer’s: The same contemptuous look when I asked if the icons are blessed.*

Thus, we suddenly found ourselves confronted with a plethora of items, most of them mass-produced, and moreover, many of them imported mass-produced commodities that are somehow (how?) integrated to the Orthodox market. What were we to make of all this? We continued the research using three directions of investigation: the definition of a religious object, production and distribution, and consumption.

Definitions of a religious object

Student in theology:

A religious object is not a talisman, its purpose is not to bring good luck to its owner; it opens a window to the other world. Examples: cross, icon, basil, holy water, candles, books, votive lights, religious books. He proposed the following categories: icons (Orthodox icons realized by respecting the Erminii; childish icons with the Virgin Mary wearing lipstick); books (blessed by a bishop; or books without the Church formal approval); candle and incense; holy relics; talismans (key chains, bracelets, tattoos).

Folk craftsman/crosses maker:

A religious object makes you think at God, it is connected to and connects you to the holiness; a religious object must be produced only by the faithful and must be then blessed by a priest; icons must be painted only according to the Erminii rules.

Icon painter:

A religious object belongs to the Orthodox ritual and can enable a transcendental experience. "For me the domain of religious objects is very limited. I cannot include the candle, the list for the requiem mass (pomelnic) or the rosary, not to mention all the small mass-produced objects. Only the icon, the cross and the prayer book are religious objects."

Irina, who selects the folk religious objects that are sold in the Romanian Peasant's Museum shop:

"A religious object is used during the religious ceremony or it is kept inside the house, linked with a more or less religious preoccupation. You can say a prayer in front or using

that object, you can put it near a deceased's photography...It is very different from a decorative item." Examples: inside a house/icon, cross, rosary, printed icons which can protect you or bring you good luck; outside/troita, church.

The other definitions gathered can be grouped as following:

1. a object can be considered a religious good only if it meets one of the following criteria: painted/carved/created according to the Orthodox aesthetical rules; created by a monk or nun/produced in a certain place associated with religiosity; hand-made; blessed by a priest;
2. a object, no matter by whom/where was produced and respecting or not the formal Orthodox rules, can be a religious object as long as its owner believes in its transcendental power;
3. a religious object is like an art object, bought for its aesthetical qualities (the icon collectors; the pilgrims, buying beautiful commodities from the monasteries they were visiting).

However, a person can use the first two at the same time. One interlocutor told us that an icon must be blessed in a church after it was bought, but he confessed that he always carries at him a printed unblessed icon because he feels it helps him. Another told that it is important to believe in the sacred power of every small printed icon, no matter how "humbled" it may look like, but it is better to be produced at a monastery, "as you cannot buy it just like that, from the street vendors."

Production

All the monasteries have workshops in which religious objects are produced. The candles sold in churches/monasteries are produced in the diocesan centers. The wine used for the Eucharist should be produced in the diocesan vineyards. Every Orthodox book should bear a bishop's seal, as a sign that it is official accepted. The Patriarchy imports religious objects only from other Orthodox countries (Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia).

Field notes:

- in the booklet about the Brancoveanu Monastery, the workshop for painting icons on glass is presented as the most important Romanian center. Surprised not to find icons on glass in the monastery shop, we asked a monk where these icons are distributed. We

found out that the workshop is very small, only three monks painting icons during winter to meet the abbot's obligations.

- "made in China" religious goods can be found in any church/monastery shop and in the "official" shop of the Patriarchy; at the Cernica monastery, the monk from the shop told us that they, the monks, do not approve the selling of the imported goods, but these satisfy the common people's needs or taste.

However, it is difficult to establish by whom/ where are produced and which are their networks of distribution in the case of the majority of the commodities that can be found on the market for religious objects.

Field notes

- the Cozia Monastery: an exchange inside the religious objects shop between a monk and a man offering wooden crosses put on a chain of wooden beads; the street vendors usually claimed that these kinds of objects are made by nuns/monks;

- a couple was selling religious commodities that were obviously imported at the gate of the Brancoveanu Monastery; they claimed they made the golden plastic rosaries and refused to give any information about the crosses with a LED put on a bright string;

- in front of the Cernica monastery, a street vendor from the Curtea de Arges kindly explained to us where are her goods from; she told that the printed items were realized in the diocese's workshop and the crosses with phosphorus were brought at the monastery by the Father, but she offered no information about the key chains "made in China".

Our sources of information were either street vendors or individual creators, in a way the opposite poles in this area of investigation. On one hand, the street vendors offered rather discourses of authenticity, not only for us, but also for the other curious customers (the nuns made the rosaries; Father X brought the crosses with phosphorus from Father Y; the icons are printed and blessed by the priest from a certain monastery etc.). On the other hand, the two icon painters and the crosses maker we interviewed spoke about the different ingredients of the production of religious objects and the market, in general: their religious attitude (fast, prayers, and confessor's permission); the materials used; the aesthetics of the religious object (specific Orthodox rules and a touch of originality); the blessing of an icon ("an unblessed icon is only an art object"); kitsch and low price as the dominant characteristics of the market for religious commodities; limited personal networks of distribution as they create mainly for connoisseurs.

We also gather some information about two workshops in which children are taught to make religious objects, especially icons: in Deva, a drawing professor teaches the children how to paint icons on glass and how to make crosses (pristolnice), takes them to different artistic contests and encourages them to give these objects as presents, not to sell them; in Buzau, a school for apprentices functions within a Christian foundation for poor children; some of the children are taught to make religious objects to meet the foundation's orders from private persons, churches and monasteries.

Distribution

We could not single out any network of distribution of the religious objects. We found out that the Cernica monastery is an old centre of distribution and that the Romanian Peasant's Museum is, at the same time, a distribution centre and a "school" for religious object makers, offering them advice and models.

Irina, from the Romanian Peasant's Museum

"With how many craftsmen are you working?"

I: About 20.

"Is the museum their only centre of distribution?"

I: No, of course. They have products for the museum, for the World Trade Centre, for Dalles and so on. I have seen once by chance the other products. The craftsman told me not to look at them, as they are not for the museum. They are proud that they are listening to our advice, and produce according to our criteria, in fact their parents' way of working.

We identified some of the characters involved in this process:

- the street vendors that go from place to place, covering sometime big distances (as the man one of us encountered in Bucharest and in Cluj); some of them are nuns/monks that come from a certain monastery; others are "hired" by a church/monastery; but for others, this is their small business.
- the Gypsy women that search for old religious objects in the villages nearby Bucharest and then sold them to the Romanian Peasant's Museum;
- the museum's employees that select the objects which will be sold in the museum shop.

Consumption

The consumption is closely related to the way people define a religious object. From a methodological point of view, this was the most delicate part of our research. Our field notes from the pilgrimage we went on are based mainly on observation, as it was difficult to formulate suitable questions or to find the proper time to ask about this type of consumption, no matter how many strategies we used or thought about. All the pilgrims, including us, bought religious commodities from the monasteries we visited. In fact, the acquisition of religious objects was announced, after the departure, as part of a pilgrimage program.

In stead of conclusions : ideas, questions, and plans

- Authenticity, aesthetics and price can be considered important for the construction of the market for religious objects
- Equally important are the practices of authentication and the discourses of authenticity.
- The next part of our research should start with a case study: the Cernica monastery that has functioned as a distribution centre for religious objects since the communist period. It will enable us to compare the present market with the one which existed during communism and to realize “biographies of objects”.
- Questions about the street vendors: Who gives them these objects? Do/can they include other objects? How do they define a religious object? Are they the producers? Who brings the imports (objects made in China, Korea, Turkey, and Taiwan)?
- More information about this market during communism; the history of one of the official shops of the Patriarchy