

TAMARA'S ILLNESS: Pilgrims, Fate, and Lived Religion in Post-Communist Romania

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ABSTRACT: Romania has seen an increase in religiosity since the fall of communism. The number of pilgrimages has multiplied and they have gained in popularity over the last fifteen years. The pilgrims' religion seems to relate less to abstract endings such as salvation and more to solving everyday life problems. Their attraction for practical ends rather than for spiritual experience is a matter of criticism for those that promote a more "protestant" version of Orthodoxy. This article comes from a desire to grasp the ways in which Orthodox Romanians understand and practice religion in everyday life. Following observations made during several pilgrimages in Romania in 2012, I examine one particular aspect that was highlighted by the fieldwork: the pilgrims' attitude towards fate. As it turns out, two contradictory attitudes towards fate emerge: action and resignation. I argue that the tension between the desire to influence fate and resignation to it may explain what is seen as irrational in the eyes of an external observer.

KEYWORDS: lived religion, pilgrimage, fate, Romania, Eastern Christianity.

Over the last fifteen years, religion has seemed to play an ever-increasing role in the lives of Romanians.¹ The number of pilgrimages has multiplied and they have been gaining in popularity each year. Pilgrimages represent a space for many religious practices: pilgrims pray and kiss the relics; they rub personal objects against the miraculous icons and holy human remains; they touch the priest's clothes; and they drink holy water and rub the sick parts of their body with holy oil. These practices relate less to abstract endings such as salvation and more to solving everyday life problems. Following my observations during fieldwork carried out in Romania in 2012, it appeared to me that people's participation in pilgrimages in order

¹ See the data from *European Survey Values*. In 2008, 97.7% of Romanians declared that they believed in God, compared to 96.3% in 1999, and 89.1% in 1993. Romanians seem to respect the fasting days marked by the Orthodox calendar more strenuously and attend Church more often. While 18.6% of Romanians declared that they attended church at least once a week in 1993 (Gheorghiu 2003, 117), that number grew to 24.9% in 1999 and 30.3% in 2008. In addition, a survey carried out in April 2015 by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy reveals that 66% of Romanians fasted partially or totally during the seven weeks of Lent and 58% of them went to confession – as tradition asks – before Easter. Retrieved from http://www.ires.com.ro/uploads/articole/ires_sarbatorile-pascale-la-romani_2015.pdf (Date of retrieval 14 April 2015).

to solve their problems is an attempt to take control of their lives, whereas the lamentations during these occasions indicate resignation.² Starting with the case of one woman pilgrim who expresses concerns about her health, I intend to examine the seemingly paradoxical behaviour of pilgrims by looking at the question of fate through the lens of *lived religion*.³ It is important to point out from the beginning that this paradoxical behaviour is not a characteristic of women. Men show a similar worldview to women in the context of pilgrimage. However, the participation of women in pilgrimages is in general higher and they tend to talk more about their beliefs and practices than men. Therefore, women are at the centre of my enquiry. However, it is not my aim to discuss the status of women in post-Communist Romanian society following the feminist approach, but to grasp how Orthodox Romanians practice and express religion in everyday life.

Ambivalent and contradictory, the religion of Romanians (more visible during pilgrimages) does not seem to match the definitions – formulated from a blend of theological and theoretical reflections – according to which there should be no discrepancy between declared belief, religious practice and observance of Christian values.⁴ This observation has made some scholars question the authenticity of the religion of Orthodox Romanians (Bădică 2013; Gheorghe 2006; Gheorghiu 2003; Gog 2006) and others propose new questionnaire items, and therefore new questions, to measure religiosity in an Eastern European Christianity context (Dungaciu 2004; Tomka 2006). These questions will not be taken up in this paper. As I already said, my main objective is to explore the religion of Romanians from another angle.

Therefore, I would like to emphasise that it is not official religion that is the primary object of my inquiry, but rather *lived religion*. The lived religion approach that I use in my analysis is inspired by the work of Robert Orsi (1985, 1997, 2005), Meredith McGuire (2008) and Nancy Ammerman (1997, 2007, 2013, 2014).⁵ Lived religion appears to McGuire as “[the] religion and spirituality . . . *practiced, experienced, and expressed* by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of . . . everyday lives” (McGuire 2008, 12; italics added). This approach breaks with the distinctions between elite and popular, religion and superstition, and material and spiritual. It delineates itself from the common definitions of religion that favour its understanding from a theological perspective (in particular protestant theology) that always opposes sacred to profane in the manner of classical authors such as Émile Durkheim (2007 [1912]), Rudolf Otto (1936 [1917]) and Mircea Eliade (1965 [1957]). From this perspective, a religion that conforms to “creedal formulations and doctrinal limits developed by cultured and circumspect theologians, church leaders, or ethicists” (Orsi 2005, 191) does not exist in everyday life. Following these remarks, I do not consider the pilgrims’ religion as a popular or rural religion marked by traditionalism and in opposition to an official religion. In addition, I am not interested in a particular social class, but in Romanians in their daily lives to whom I refer in general as Orthodox Romanians.

Observed through the lens of lived religion, the religious person is not an actor who passively accepts the dogmas, rules, texts, and the authority of religious institutions (Sullivan

² My study is based on fieldwork carried out in Romania in 2012. I use participant observation from pilgrimages and semi-structured interviews with believers in Bucharest.

³ By *fate*, I understand the irrational, neutral and flexible power that, within certain limits, determines human destiny (Weber 1996[1922], 237–39).

⁴ The gap between religious belief and religious practice is certainly not a characteristic of Orthodox Romanians alone. Several scholars have discussed this subject in different contexts such as Great Britain, France or United States (Beyer 1998, 2006; Davie 1994; Hervieu-Léger 1999; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2005; Riis and Woodhead 2010).

⁵ The propositions of the lived religion approach were more clearly formulated in the work *Lived Religion in America. Toward a History of Practice*, edited by David D. Hall in 1997 (Neitz 2011, 47). Based on criticism of the understanding of popular religion, this approach was developed in the American context. However, the concept of lived religion existed long before its utilisation by American scholars in the French sociology of religions (for more information, see Hervieu-Léger 1997).

2005, 36); he or she acts upon the world using religious idioms inherited, improvised, found, and constructed as they need them, in response to particular circumstances (Orsi 1997, 8; Orsi 2003, 173). The sacred in lived religion is not the irreducible experience of the wholly other as in Rudolf Otto (1936 [1917]), but the space of activity, engagement, ambivalence, and doubleness (Orsi 1997, 12) that is experienced through everyday practices (Ammerman 2013, McGuire 2008). Lived religion appears thus as an emotional, fluid, mobile and incompletely structured entity that transforms itself in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with everyday life (Hervieu-Léger 1997, 22; Konieczny, Chong and Lybarger 2012, 399; McGuire 2008, 12-13; Orsi 1997, 8). It is through daily actions that one gives meaning to religion.

The study of lived religion marks a change in methodology: instead of questioning the people's belief, it is more desirable to explore everyday religious practices that go from private to public rituals, informal or formal (Frankenberg 2004; Hall 1997; Hervieu-Léger 1999; McGuire 2008, 118; Morgan 2010, 6; Nabhan-Warren 2011, 379; Stirling, Shaw and Short 2014). Questioning the people's belief in divinities means to value ideas to the detriment of practices, things, and the ways in which the sacred is experienced. This approach seems opposed to reality: if people reflect on their belief, the presence of divinities does not need to be explained because for them it is real (Ammerman 1997; Claverie 2003; Orsi 2005). Orsi recommends that scholars be attentive to:

religious messiness, to multiplicities, to seeing religious spaces as always, inevitably, and profoundly intersected by things brought into them from outside, things that bear their own histories, meanings different from those offered within the religious space. It is also a call to surrender dreams of religious order and singleness or of being able to organize descriptions and interpretations of religious worlds around sets of publicly shared and efficiently summarized meanings and practices (Orsi 2005, 167).

Therefore, lived religion is less a network of meanings and rather a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving people and sacred figures together (Orsi 2005, 2). According to David Morgan, this network looks like a cultural exchange system whereby the participants (humans and spirituals) negotiate their place starting from expectations and obligations and through gifts, demands, and supplication practices (2010, 18). The researcher is not a completely external observer, but he is caught with the actors and divinities in this network of relationships "between earth and heaven" (Orsi 2005, 2).⁶ This does not mean that the researcher has to adopt the religious practices and beliefs of the actors that he studies, but should embrace a more empathic position towards them. This empathic approach allows me to unravel what seems at the first view irrational without questioning the pilgrims' religion. In his essay, *When 2+2=5*, Orsi (2007) notes that there are "certain ways of being in the modern world, certain ways of imagining it".⁷ One of the qualities of the lived religion approach is to respect the different ways to experience the sacred in the world.

Let me begin my reflection with an excerpt from my fieldwork notes made during the pilgrimage to Saint Dimitrie the New in Bucharest. The position of the pilgrims will be explored, starting with the case of one woman, Tamara. I met this woman shortly after the procession of relics that opened the pilgrimage. She wanted to pray to the relics in order to heal her illness. Two attitudes towards fate appeared in her story: action and resignation. My aim is to understand two points: how do action and resignation express themselves in the

⁶ The methodology of radical empiricism proposed by Robert Orsi (2003, 2005) is defined as follows by the anthropologist Michael Jackson: "A radically empirical method *includes* the experience of the observer and defines the experimental field as one of interactions and intersubjectivity" (1989, 4).

⁷ Orsi, R. "When 2+2=5. Can we begin to think about unexplained religious experiences in ways that acknowledge their existence? ", *American Scholar*, 1st March 2007. Retrieved from [https://theamericanscholar.org/when-2-2- 5/#.VS0sZlqJmqA](https://theamericanscholar.org/when-2-2-5/#.VS0sZlqJmqA) (Date of retrieval 7 March 2015).

context of pilgrimage? And how does the tension between action and resignation find a path of appeasement in religion?

ONE STORY: TAMARA'S ILLNESS

On Wednesday, October 24th 2012, around noon, a large crowd surrounded the Patriarchate Hill in order to participate in the great procession of relics that opened the ceremonies of the pilgrimage of Saint Dimitrie the New in Bucharest. Several relics were about to be displayed in the court of the Patriarchate for one week. Emotion was in the air. People around me had tears in their eyes and were immortalising the moment with their smartphones. Women were holding the icons of Saint Dimitrie or Saint Nectarios of Aeginos (Greece), candles and little books of prayer (*Acatiste*) for Saint Nectarios, the Thaumaturge. Some of the pilgrims were exclaiming: "Look there is Saint Nectarios!" while people working in the office buildings near the Patriarchate Hill looked on, crossed themselves and took pictures with their smartphones. The relics of Saint Nectarios – brought from Greece especially for the occasion – were seemingly at the centre of interest for the women that formed the majority on that day. The saint is famous for his alleged powers to cure serious illnesses such as cancer.

IMAGE 1: The court of the Patriarchate during the Saint Dimitrie pilgrimage in Bucharest. The women spent a lot of time before the closed space where the relics were displayed. It is here, that I heard Tamara's story (© Author).



That day, shortly after the procession of relics, I met Tamara. Her story captivated my attention. In a few sentences, she summarised what I have been referring to for some time as the paradoxical behaviour of pilgrims, who, when facing a problem, look for solutions while at the same time designating God as solely responsible for their lives. Tamara wanted to write a prayer for herself and for her children, but also, as we will see, to speak about her problems.

I will begin my analysis with an excerpt from my fieldwork notes:

Tamara started her story by complaining about the hardships of loneliness. She was suffering from breast cancer and also she was not on good terms with her children. Tamara asked the other pilgrims whether they had children, but without waiting for an answer she complained about hers. She said she suffered a great deal for them during the Ceausescu regime and nowadays they were unmoved by her illness – telling her that she had lived a long time already and that they would be happy to live as long as she did. They were envious of her status of retired person: she received her pension no matter what. In her conversation with other women, Tamara came back several times to her suffering for her children without indicating the period. Then, she mentioned, in passing, her husband who was no different from other men: he would wake up in

the morning, come back at night, eat and go to sleep. Therefore, she was always lonely. Suffering from breast cancer, Tamara had not received chemotherapy treatment because she refused to accept a mastectomy. She did not want to be mutilated in that way. At this point, she was looking for alternative treatments. Sympathising with her story, the women around her offered a lot of advice" (Fieldwork note, 24 October 2012).

In her story, Tamara publicly deplored her situation: sick and forgotten by her family, she rejected medical treatment and went on a pilgrimage in order to pray not only for herself, but also for her children who seemed untouched by her illness. Did she exaggerate her marginal position in her family? Perhaps. However, the actions and the story of Tamara are quite representative of the behaviour of women in the context of pilgrimages. What does her story tell us? And how should we understand this woman in the context of pilgrimages?

The first aspect that drew my attention was the way Tamara talked about her illness: she was not a "woman that suffered from breast cancer" but a "mother suffering from breast cancer". The maternal role that she assumed seemed valued not only by the pilgrims, but also outside of the religious space. One of the questions that women asked me very often in Romania was if I had children. During pilgrimages, my negative answer to this question led women to presume that my presence in pilgrimage was due to my desire to become a mother. They looked at me with compassion and offered me successful examples involving the help of saints. What mattered was to believe, they said. Outside of the religious space, I was asked the same question. However, here the absence of children did not bring compassion, but placed me in a rather inferior position: the women said that I did not know the true joys and hardships of life.

Tamara's choice to talk about her children appeared initially difficult to understand because I did not take pilgrims' attitude towards illness into account: for them sickness seemed to be linked to divine will and according to popular religious texts illness was related to sin. For instance, in a very popular book written by Arsenie Boca – a now deceased monk who is the subject of a veritable cult nowadays – we can read that illness represents a punishment for a personal or family sin that can go as far as "the third and the fourth generation" (2006, 55). From this perspective, Tamara was a woman who wanted to attract the sympathy of others, but needed to dispel the suspicion of sin. She stressed her maternal role, insisting on the suffering provoked by the behaviour of her children and her constant attention for her family. Her remark about the Ceausescu regime highlighted that she had brought up her children in a period where the economic problems of the country made it difficult for people to obtain basic necessities such as food. In the present, just as in the past, she was preoccupied with her children. During the pilgrimage, Tamara wrote a prayer for herself, but also one for the children who needed a better material situation. The mention of the husband who only came home in order to eat and sleep accentuated her martyrdom: Tamara was not only a good mother, but also a good wife.

Tamara constructed her story in order to stir the emotions of an audience made up of other women who seemed to share the same values and interests and who seemed to know "how to be good at being a woman" (Caraveli-Chaves 1980, 146; Haland 2008, 56). The women listened to Tamara carefully. They deplored her situation and offered her advice, but they did not hesitate to contradict her. Tamara's long complaint about children drew criticism from other women who seemed more sympathetic towards younger people preoccupied by current working conditions.

By presenting herself mainly as a mother, Tamara is not only indicating that women are valued through this role but that they are attributing themselves this role in society. Her role as a woman, expressed through the refusal to undergo mastectomy, was not at the centre of her representation. It seemed that her suffering to lose features of her body that symbolise her femininity did not stir empathy. Anyway, pilgrims were not in the habit of talking about these

things. It was though the metaphor of the suffering mother that her suffering as a woman with breast cancer found a voice and stirred compassion in others.

Tamara was lamenting but she did not go on a pilgrimage just to talk about herself. She was looking for solutions to cure her illness. Even though she rejected medical treatment she was not resigned to death. However, while looking for solutions, Tamara would shrug her shoulders, sigh and say: "What is there to do? This is life . . ." (*Ce poţi să faci? Aşa e viaţa*). A paradox was revealing: it seemed that women would find force to act in a context – the pilgrimage – that appeared to me as a situation of resignation. During pilgrimages, women took action for themselves and their family, but by trying to find their salvation through relics and icons they were delegating responsibility for their own lives. How can one understand these two tendencies that intertwine and give birth to a type of behaviour that is apparently irrational?

Taking control of her life

In order to fully grasp Tamara's behaviour, it was important to forget my own understanding of the world and to try to follow the pilgrim's reasoning: if illness was sent by God, the cure could only come from the same source. The pilgrimage was, therefore, not only a space of resignation, but, on the contrary, it was also a place that allowed pilgrims to redeem their sins and act.

During the long hours of standing in line in order to touch and kiss the relics and miraculous icons,⁸ the women boosted their morale by saying that it is important to suffer (*nevoieşti*) in a pilgrimage.⁹ Sometimes, the women doubled their physical effort with fasting. Tamara was not prepared to stand in line before the relics, but she was searching for others ways to act, such as a written prayer (*acatist*). The *acatist* was, at first, a prayer of thanks for the blessing of saints, which took, in lived religion, the form of a desire written in order to heal an illness, to marry, to have a child, or to find a job (Stahl and Venbrux 2011, 161). Following the advice of other women, Tamara wrote out her desires on two pieces of papers: health for herself and material prosperity for her children. Then, she attached money to each piece of paper and asked a representative of the Church to put the papers in the special box located near the reliquaries.¹⁰ It is anticipated that the priests will read such prayers loudly for forty days or even a year. But, Tamara was not happy with the prayer alone. She asked the representative of the Church to rub her scarf and a basil bouquet against the Saint Nectarios relics. She had heard in the court of the Patriarchate that the objects that touched the relics could help her heal because these objects borrowed the special powers of relics. Before she wrapped the scarf around her neck,

⁸ During the most important pilgrimages, such as the pilgrimage of Saint Parascheva in Iasi and of Saint Dimitrie the New in Bucharest, standing in line can take more than twenty-four hours.

⁹ The anthropologist Alice Forbess (2010, 151) remarked that the Romanian word *nevoire* could be literally translated as non-wanting. For the Orthodox Church, the word is linked both to the concept of will (*a voi, vointa*), and to the idea of desire. In monasteries, the word refers to ascetic techniques (fasting, foregoing sleep, and repeated prostrations) practiced by nuns and monks. However, my observations showed me that the pilgrims did not know the meaning exact attached by the Church to this concept. For pilgrims, *nevoire* usually meant suffering or the need to suffer.

¹⁰ The reliquaries were located in a closed space. Only pilgrims who stood in line could enter this closed space. Usually, the organisers of the pilgrimages designated several volunteers – most of them students at theological seminaries – to serve as intermediaries between the relics and the pilgrims who could not or did not want to stand in line. They put pilgrims' prayers near the reliquaries and rubbed pilgrims' personal objects against the relics.

Tamara smelled the fabric for several seconds and, excited, she said that she felt the smell of Saint Nectarios.

Tamara's behaviour and the behaviour of other women I met during the pilgrimages, did not show resignation: they wrote prayers, touched and kissed the relics and obtained objects that were touched by the relics. In order to acquire a more satisfactory outcome, the women advised Tamara to strengthen her prayer with a whole arsenal of religious rituals and artefacts: self-imposed restrictions such as fasting, dressing modestly, covering her head near the relics, touching the sick parts of her body with holy water and holy oil, buying little prayer books and icons that could be rubbed against relics and thus become talismans. Several of these practices and beliefs accompanied women in their everyday lives; in fact, these rituals required a perpetual repetition. In this way, the women, as in Tamara's case, negotiate their everyday life problems with the saints. Unlike the Orthodox Greeks who make promises to the saints (Seraïdari 2005), the Romanian pilgrims seek to get into the graces of saints by making little gestures such as reading half a prayer. Taking control of her life in the context of pilgrimage meant obtaining the help of saints and respecting many religious rituals that, when followed regularly, said the women, would be quick to show their results.

The pilgrims' behaviour points to another interesting observation: women revealed themselves as the carriers of lived religion. Women were interested in bettering their lives, but also felt responsible for the welfare of their families. This feeling of responsibility and the desire to help their family seemed to motivate them to undertake a pilgrimage and search for effective rituals, artefacts, and relics.¹¹

Resignation

If the pilgrimages represented spaces that allow women to act, they also offered the chance for resignation. Indeed, their actions, such as the written prayers or the practices linked to the devotion to relics, were always followed by lamentations concerning their suffering. Sprinkled with several maxims about an unavoidable fate, these lamentations showed a belief in fate.

Therefore, Tamara's story, which insisted on her suffering, was not special in the context of pilgrimages. Other women like her talked about their suffering. Unlike the non-religious context, pilgrimages offered an audience always receptive to this kind of story. The example of similar experiences comforted the women and inspired their conduct of life as well as tales of saints' lives which reached Orthodox believers through church readings, and also through published literature (Forbess 2010, 142–43; Hanganu 2010, 39). The saints distinguish themselves by their long suffering and by their resignation before life's challenges. Saint Nectarios was an example in that sense: without protesting, Saint Nectarios found himself marginalised in the Church because of the envy of other ecclesiastics and he even died because of a cancer although he was a pious man (Stahl and Venbrux 2011, 151). Tamara and other women repeated that the hardships of life must be traversed following the example of saints, with patience and faith in God. However, the exemplary conduct of the lives of the saints was not always considered as a personal merit, but as a fate received from God. With envy in their voices, the women exclaimed: "What a chance for him/her to be chosen by God to become a saint!" (Fieldwork note, 26 October 2012).

The lamentations of Tamara and the other women were accompanied by sighs and maxims that marked their resignation. While Tamara was writing the prayers, she said: "As God wills!" (*Cum o vrea Dumnezeu!*). Her complaints concerning the behaviour of her family towards her

¹¹ This observation brings the Romanian case to a broader discussion concerning women's greater inclination for religion (Mahmood 2005; Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012). Why did women reveal themselves as the carriers of lived religion? This question deserves full attention and it will make the subject of another discussion.

illness made the other women exclaim: "What is there to do? This is life. . . ." (*Ce poți să faci? Așa e viața*), "This was your fate (cross)!" (*Așa v-a fost soarta (crucea)*), "That's how it was meant to be!" (*Așa a fost să fie*), or "God has his plans for each of us!" (*Dumnezeu are planurile lui pentru fiecare dintre noi*). These maxims, which are often heard in the vocabulary of Romanians, could indicate two different attitudes depending on the context in which they are uttered. When they are said after the outcome of an event, the maxims may show – as the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (1993, 242) noted in the Greek case – a strategy of legitimising failure. But before the outcome of an event, I argue, they may denote the presence of resignation. Therefore, Tamara engraved her illness in her fate. The doubt linked to God's plans signified that nothing could be done outside of the divine will. Believing in fate gave her a source of comfort.

PILGRIMAGES AND FATE

How to understand the paradoxical behaviour of pilgrims? For me, a possible approach was to look at what people indicated as the main motivation for undertaking a pilgrimage: concerns about health. Interpreted in a religious register, illness seemed to be linked to fate and the divine will. However, it was not a relentless fate. For the pilgrims, the mediation of saints and relics could influence it. People seemed to orientate their actions according to a belief in fate, which resembled that defined by Robert Musil (1979) in his novel *The Man Without Qualities*. It is as though there were "two comparatively independent layers of life within us, which are nevertheless profoundly balanced. . . . it's also as though one had two destinies: *one active-unimportant, which fulfils itself, and one inactive-important, which remains beyond one's ken*" (Musil 1979, 67; italics added). In the context of pilgrimage, people found a way to appease the tension between action and resignation. The pilgrims deplored their fate and looked for consolation in saints' lives, but they also tried to obtain the indulgence of divinity and to benefit from the special powers of the relics. Searching for a religious medium that could improve their fate, the pilgrims seemed ready to venerate new relics and saints, even those that the Orthodox Church is reluctant to canonise.¹²

In this article, I have chosen to discuss Tamara's case not because it was extraordinary, but rather because it was common. My interest in her came from the fact that her discourse encapsulates opinions that are shared by most of the pilgrims. In addition, her seemingly irrational behaviour was representative of an attitude for which critics castigate pilgrims as being "seekers of miracles" (Bănică 2011, 126–35; Bănică 2014), "superstitious," as well as being "tireless relics kissers" (Bănică 2014, 131; Cătălin Mihuleac in Gavriluță 2010, 91). The sociologist Dan Dungaciu described the Romanian pilgrim in 2011:

This character [the pilgrim] . . . is a fervent and frequent spectator of any procession: of icons, relics, or other effective 'instruments' from a religious perspective. He/she will not attend Church regularly. Anyway, he/she would prefer a concrete pilgrimage instead of a constant and monotonous presence at the religious services. He/she is not necessarily an unbeliever, but he/she is a person who wants immediate answers. For him/her, the liturgical life is dreadfully boring because of its slowness; he/she searches as a storekeeper concrete advantages and immediate effectiveness. In the end, this person does not fight for the life beyond, but he/she uses the sacred

¹² It is the case with the devotion for former political prisoners who died in Communist jails between 1945 and 1965 (see Grigore 2015; Stahl 2014).

*for present victories: win lottery tickets or pass an exam, overcome an illness, get an inheritance or marry again.*¹³

This image of the pilgrim, largely diffused by media, appeared often in the discourse of my respondents. They were dismissive of pilgrimages and presented a modern view of religion that supports a private religious practice. For them, displaying religion in public (as in pilgrimages) represented an exaggerated gesture: "I dislike crowded areas, pushing and shoving, cheap marketing, the kitsch . . . the idea of pilgrimage is already expired" (Interview with teacher, 7 November 2012). This criticism is based on an understanding of religion that leans towards a more "protestant and sanitised" version of Orthodoxy¹⁴ that sometimes goes against the Church. For its part, the Church embraces a more moderate position towards the pilgrims' religious practices. In fact, its attitude seems both accommodating and contradictory. Although its media¹⁵ try to discourage the practices considered excessive, the same media give lots of space to pilgrimages and miracles. The understanding of fate is no exception. While the critics of pilgrims insist on the freedom of each person to conduct his/her life according to his/her will, the position of the Church is not as clear in this matter. The bishop Antonie Plămădeală (2011, 32) explained that whereas Eastern Christianity rejects the idea of fate as predestination, it does not reject the existence of a rough fate given to people by God, in the sense that the individual did not choose his/her family, his/her country or his/her illness. However, because life is not limited to what was received at birth, each person has to improve his/her fate.

The participant observation that I carried out during pilgrimages, at churches in Bucharest and at a school close to the capital, led to another interesting observation: the tension between the desire to influence fate and resignation, which might explain the seemingly paradoxical behaviour of pilgrims could also inhabit some of those who embrace a modern discourse on Orthodoxy. For example, my respondents in Bucharest and in its neighbourhood wanted to make clear to me that Orthodox believers do not believe in fate. Their answers were consistent with the results of a quantitative study carried out by the sociologist Bogdan Voicu (2001). The study points out that 67% of Romanians reject the idea of fate (Voicu 2001, 51, 57–58). However, my observations contradicted the respondents' answers. While they ironised the pilgrims, they gave written prayers (*acatiste*) to people going on pilgrimages. In addition, many journalists, once they finished taping the TV report on pilgrimage in which they talked ironically about the backwardness of pilgrims, rushed in to kiss the relics or to light a candle, just as the police officers did, who were tasked to maintain the order and who sometimes ridiculed the pilgrims' behaviour. Thus, it appeared that lived religion is not a characteristic of pilgrims or the popular milieu as the Romanian media points out. To look beyond boundaries such as elite and popular, religion and superstition, material and spiritual, as well as sacred and profane may help us to understand how religion happens in everyday life.

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¹⁴ Thank you to Lori G. Beaman for suggesting this expression.

¹⁵ *Basilica Press Center* was inaugurated on 27 October 2007. It includes a radio station (*Radio Trinitas*), a TV station (*Trinitas TV*), three newspapers (the daily newspaper *Ziarul Lumina*, the weekly publication *Lumina de duminică*, and the monthly magazine *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei*), a news agency (*Basilica*), and a Press and Public Relations Bureau (Stahl and Venbrux 2011, 146).

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