

BOOKS

Ioan Chirilă (ed.), *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România IV. Imaginar religios*. General editor: Corin Braga. Iași, Polirom, 2020, 383 p.

The hermeneutics of the Romanian imaginary has become the focal point of an encompassing *tour de force* collection of studies, *The Encyclopaedia of Romanian Imaginaries*, which is meant to offer a complex and comprehensive overview of Romania's cultural and spiritual underpinnings.

The fourth volume of the *Encyclopaedia*, edited by priest and professor Ioan Chirilă, brings together a body of research which, by means of a diachronic gaze, performs an analysis of the visual and symbolical concepts which have shaped both religion and religiosity within Romanian society. The volume draws on a wealth of complementary perspectives belonging to professors, researchers and historians who seem to belong to equally diverse religious communities.

From the outset, the volume dwells on the above-mentioned complementarity of perspectives and beliefs as a defining characteristic of Romanian and,

especially, Transylvanian realities. This cardinal reading in the history and development of Romanian religiosity engages voices as diverse as those belonging to researchers and historians (such as Mircea-Gheorghe Abrudan and Elena Dana Prioteasa), archaeologists (Florin Gogâltan), literature professors, as well as highly regarded representatives of the main denominations encountered across the Romanian territory. Consequently, such a profusion of interrelated conceptualizations opens the volume to a lattice of ideas, which, nevertheless, converge in an attempt to synthesize the conclusions of the researchers.

Reflections on the importance of religion and religiosity in the process of defining one's identity or on the function of religious symbols in conveying both a cultural and spiritual heritage echo through the pages of the study.

The volume's introduction touches upon the juxtaposition between, on the



one hand, the contemporary secular view and, on the other hand, the extensive points of reference which one encounters within religion. The multiple analyses which then find their way into the volume probe into precisely the juxtaposition above and inscribe the defining religious imagery into a sociocultural continuum. The studies presented in this volume range from thorough examinations of the archaeology of early Dacian traditions, their subsequent turning and evolving into early Christianity and up to minute considerations of the interactions between religion and the social sphere or the traditional mythos.

The beginning of the work, a study by the researcher Florin Gogâltan, presents the reader with a synthesis of the study of material remains and the "archaeology of the mind" (p. 29) in an attempt to inquire into the sociocultural practices of the Dacians and Daco-Romans, an as-of-yet novel theoretical approach as far as the archaeology of religious rituals is concerned. This retrospective trajectory is further developed in the following two chapters of the volume which deftly capture and cast light upon the beginnings of religion and, eventually, of Christianity. The volume also portrays the apparently inconspicuous transformation whereby early Christian symbols (such as the Thracian knight and the good shepherd) came to be associated with the Church and, ultimately, how these associations and their multiple underlying influences coalesced into what may be deemed the Romanian ethos.

Within the volume, considerable space is also allocated to the interpretation and tracing of the visual elements and symbols which are part of the specificity of the churches found across the

three historical provinces of Romania. The myriad of influences and the historic predicaments which shaped the edifices, together with their founders and contributors, are also outlined within the pages of the volumes. In keeping with the geographical positioning of the provinces, the reader will discover that the influences which have shaped both religion and its imagery which embraces the walls of the churches are posited in-between the Byzantium and the Western world, thus further calling attention to the creative power of intercultural exchanges.

Furthermore, a permeating feature of the work is the complementary nature of the research presented, as each subsequent study serves also to harmonize the information which came before it or to add further nuance. It is precisely this subtle structural balance which reinforces the introductory reflections on the need for a dialogical process of defining one's personal and collective identity. This dialogical process of identity-creation is depicted as an abiding characteristic of the interaction between the Romanian communities and the neighbouring ones: from the early interwoven religious beliefs of the Thracians, to the cultural exchanges which the Ottoman suzerainty gave way to and to the establishment of religious schools which functioned by following the particularities of the community they were addressed to, the multiple influences which account for the form of the Romanian ethos are aptly revealed.

Consequently, not only does the work present the reader with an interesting medley of perspectives but, by foregrounding important archaeological findings and historical developments, the volume moves even further than the sphere of religion and raises important issues

concerning both identity and openness to otherness. Given the wealth of archaeological discoveries which are presented throughout the volume and spread all across the historical territories of the country, the immanence of religion is conveyed at a literary level, thus almost allowing for a materialization of the influence the religious institutions have had on the emergence of the Romanian temperament.

Despite the extensive attention directed towards the deciphering of the echoes of the past, the volume also inquires into the contemporary role of both religion and the Church, while simultaneously reassessing the predicaments of the here and now. Whether by defining and examining Christianity's social imperatives or by discussing the role played by religion within present-day Romania, a great number of philosophical reflections and sociological considerations are interwoven in order to outline the religious imaginary which defines the Romanian territory, as well as the contributions of the religious institutions towards the development of the community. Inquiring into the role of religion and religious art for the diaspora community in the United States, Ileana Alexandra Orlich's observations interweave sociological references and interpretations of the religious imagery in order to portray the social and psychological valences of religion.

What also emerges, especially as one advances towards the end of the volume,

is a plea for both dialogue and reconceptualization, an instance which might be interpreted as proving Christianity's resistance and perseverance within contemporaneity.

Therefore, stemming from an overarching view of history, the minute observations delineated throughout the volume represent the premises from which the present is further scrutinized and interrogated. Emphasizing both a need for religiosity and the contemporary dilemmas with which we are faced, religion and its imaginary appear as not only a philosophical or sociological apparatus, but a method of affirming both hope and perseverance in the face of difficulties. A kind of quiet impetus thus seems to accompany the history and further progression of the Romanian religious imaginary, a force upon which the authors contributing to this far-reaching volume progressively shed light, while also allowing their polyphonic interventions to maintain and reinforce the ongoing conversations between the writers and their public.

All of these considerations account for what may be perceived as both a scholarly and a pleasant read, a work which, by means of its traversing the realm of the religious imaginary with its numerous spheres of representation, succeeds in providing the reader with an overarching view of the evolution of the imaginative powers which dictate our realities and inevitably shape our way of being in the world.

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