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The cultural-spiritual harmfulness of the secularization of communication in the media

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Abstract. Today's society is experiencing an accelerated phenomenon of secularization due to communication through today's media channels. Daily, the global village called Earth transmits billions of news, information, cultural and spiritual values beneficial to the cultural and spiritual condition of contemporary man. We propose to analyze the phenomenon of media secularization on contemporary society, but also the harmful cultural and spiritual effects that society feels because of the secularizing informational flow. We will show the origins of this phenomenon and how it affects society through atheism, occultism, syncretism, hedonism, perfectionism, and media narcissism.

Keywords. communication, media, culture, secularization, society, values

I. The origin of secularization through media communication: the commercialization of communication

The origin of the phenomenon of media secularization can be found through a careful analysis of the way in which contemporary media communication has reached a dual status: on the one hand, it is secularized, through the prism of the cultural-spiritual values of the editorial content, but, on the other another part is also secularizing, through the effects of the propagation in society of these cultural-spiritual values of the editorial contents.

Since its beginnings, except in cases where the interest shown was of a governmental-strategic type, media communication has been viewed as a business, as a kind of profit-making industry. The idea was simple: the act of media communication was seen as a social means of propagating ideas or material goods, and because of this service certain profits were obtained. Here we find the origin of the secularization of the means of media communication; the commercialization of the act of communication itself, expression of the desire for profit. This constituted a major error in the construction of the message sent to society. Due to this profit culture philosophy, the cultural and spiritual value of the media message has been altered by commercial interests. In this way, the pursuit of audience figures at all costs to account for the profit made has degraded and, in some cases, dehumanized the media industry. In this way, media communication began its secularizing and secularized adventure. Georgios Mantzaridis draws attention to the destructive effects of the financial spirit: "Today, everything comes down to money. Country, religion, conscience, everything that man has or needs, even man himself

is valued and bought with money. The financial spirit paralyzes man from a moral point of view and turns him into a passive recipient of external developments. In this way we are taken to the periphery of morality"¹.

By supporting secularization, globalization propagates the market as the central model of the world, in this way there is a temptation for all areas of social life to turn into commodities subject to the law of supply and demand. A new type of totalitarianism, of an economic nature, appears in this way, a suicidal type of economy, in which the market rules by the unique law of profit, and the states of the world only administer, powerless in the face of the market's upheaval. There is a clear mutation of values towards economy, finance, technology and media, and the slogan of globalization seems to be: "All the power of the markets". In this way, society becomes increasingly controlled by the values of corporate management, public relations, and professional marketing².

Along with this, the cultural-spiritual disaster is amplified by the creation of the last type of man, homo economicus, the atomized man, who lives only for the culture of production and consumption, emptied of true cultural values, meaning, consciousness, spirituality and any transcendence, the product of a veritable social engineers, in which the roll of secularized global communications played an important role³.

The beginning of evils must therefore be sought in the financial spirit, as the Scripture defines it: "between the sale and the purchase sin will gather" (Jesus Sirah 27, 2). This is how the tendency to commercialize the entire existence appears, which will eventually lead to an apocalyptic landscape masterfully described by St. John the Evangelist, in his work: "And the merchants of the world weep and lament over her, (the city of Babylon - n. n.) for no one buys their merchandise anymore, gold and silver merchandise, precious stones and pearls, mink and porphyry, silk and scarlet cloth, all kinds of fragrant wood and all kinds of ivory, precious wood and merchandise of brass, and of iron, and of marble, and cinnamon, and balm, and spices, and myrrh, and frankincense, and wine, and oil, and fine wheat flour, and wheat, and cattle, and sheep, and horses, and chariots, and bodies, and souls of men." (Rev. 18, 11-13)

Carefully reading the text above, it is almost impossible not to notice the uncanny and almost identical similarity between the city of Babylon and the secularization of today's media, which trades anytime and any of the elements described by the evangelist in the text. Moreover, specialists in the study of the human psyche already state that, at the present time, secularization is, in fact, generated by the lack of moral values among the economic and political elites of the world: "When will you understand that the reins of political and economic power are in the hands of some unscrupulous and unscrupulous people who lack the ability to understand others, you will look in a new light on this scourge of evil that is spreading throughout the world. To rule, a psychopath does not need the support of the majority, it is enough to be supported by an interest group, which can guide and rule the population, such as, for example, the owners of a powerful television station"⁴.

Therefore, the commercialization of media communication has generated the possibility of its secularization, due to indifference in relation to the cultural and spiritual values of media contents, which are built through the philosophy of material profit. It is easy to notice

¹ Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *Globalization and universality. Chimera and truth*, Byzantine Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, p. 13.

² Suzi Gablik, *Has modernism failed?* Ed. Curtea Veche, Bucharest, 2008, p. 24.

³ Ioan I. Ică Jr., *Globalization, mutations, and challenges*, in vol. "Social thinking of the Church", Deisis, Sibiu, 2002, pp. 484-485.

⁴ Andrew M. Lobaczewski, *Ponérologie Politique*, Les Éditions Pilule Rouge, 2006, pp. 309-317

today that the media phenomenon has strong globalization tendencies, since we are talking about monopolies, concerns, businesses worth millions of euros or dollars, global coverage, influence on public opinion, etc.

To make a profit, media communication had to profile another industry, older than the media, namely the advertising industry. The connection is simple: the advertising industry is the turntable that brings the profit so desired by the media industry. In this way, media communication has undergone an interesting personality transplant from the advertising industry, as it has taken over most of its operating principles, which are profit-generating. Thus, the cultural and spiritual values of the transmitted message were contaminated by the values of advertising culture, in fact flawed communication mechanisms, which propagate secularization in society. Let us briefly review them to better understand how much of today's media communication has come to be an industry of secularization.

Advertisements often appeal to cultural values such as myths, archetypes, and stereotypes because they produce strong emotional impacts that are essential in suggestive advertising through unconscious persuasion. The most used advertising myths are those related to sexuality (through the exploitation of sensuality), heroism (which is based on the desire for vain glory, selfishly understood as reputation) and the return to origins (which, using the capacity of imagination, leads to imagining and cheating). However, the use of age, gender, linguistic, social, cultural, or historical stereotypes, which build the self-image, the tendency to integrate and the lifestyle of contemporary man, is not avoided. The advertising industry has also not neglected the times or periods in which certain advertisements are broadcast. By associating the context in which the public is with its needs, a careful scheduling of the spots is reached. Thus, at mealtime, when we are usually hungry, food products are promoted more, in winter warm clothes are promoted, and in summer, seasonal items or construction materials. Even the innocence of childhood has not escaped untouched by the advertising industry. Often our children's innocence, naivety, mimetic ability or "childhood defects" (especially taste, playfulness or incompletely developed psychic abilities) are exploited. Currently, there are real polemics on the topic of the advertising industry, essentially there are two camps. Some argue that advertising is beneficial to society because it leads to increased consumption and, therefore, economic dynamism, profitability. Others, however, criticize the fact that advertising creates non-values, artificial needs, wastes energy, promotes social conformity and, through persuasion, gives consumers the illusion that they are free. Furthermore, specialists such as Philippe Breton argue that the advertising industry provokes consumerist or conformist behavior, virtually canceling the freedom of the individual, but what is much more serious, it seeks to seduce the individual through sensuality or dramatization, something discovered long ago by St. Maximus the Confessor, who spoke of the affections of pain and pleasure, transformed into passions.

All these mechanisms are found, sometimes even diversified, and refined, in the current secularized and secularizing media industry. Thus, the complete answer to the question "Why has the media become secularized and secularizing?" takes shape and can be succinctly formulated: due to financial interests, which generated its commercialization, and from the transfer of values from the advertising industry.

Going deeper into studying the phenomenon, I mentioned in passing another decisive factor in describing the contemporary media industry: the audience. As is well known, the advertising industry derives profit from the sale of goods or services, or in other words, from consumption. The more people consume a product, the higher the profit. In this way, profit-making is quantified through the audience, because in the media industry, it is the audience that

defines the potential consumption of goods exposed to the public. In other words, the chances of the media making a profit are directly proportional to the number of receivers of the media message who are, at least in theory, potential consumers.

Here comes the key moment of the secularization of media communication: the message is constructed not to convey essential values, but to obtain a large audience, which generates a large profit. Thus, the secularization of the media means that the media aims to obtain a large audience by any means, of course, that falls within the limits of state laws. But here too an interesting discussion arises, because the regulation of the media framework is nothing but the sign of the appearance of illegal things. Because, as St. Apostle Paul says: "where there is no law, there is no lawlessness" (Romans 4, 15).

Of course, the phrase "any means" denotes the collapse of the system of cultural and spiritual values transmitted through the media. Generally, of thumb for getting a large audience, the message is built to "please the audience." We often hear in the media space the formulation "this is required / this is not required" when it comes to the opportunity to broadcast a certain topic. Behind them, in fact, hides a whole mechanism that, in a cold and calculating way, seeks to obtain the maximum audience. In the design of editorial content, it is always considered first whether they have audience potential or not. In this way, the audience becomes a key factor in the development and dissemination of media content, and the cultural or spiritual benefit of the media message is no longer found in media philosophy.

Thus, a harmful triad is built for society: advertising, consumption, media. To attract as many audiences as possible, the media industry tries to offer man anything that can keep him captive in front of the TV, radio, computer, newspaper, etc. Christ draws our attention to the fact that there is a moral danger when we talk about majorities, with the word: "wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many are those who find it" (Mt. 7, 13), which describes, the spiritual state of many who decide to follow the paths of sin. Therefore, a large audience entails the risk of offering a cultural-spiritual waste, prepackaged in three great forms that St. John the Evangelist describes as: the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1 John 2, 16). From this point on, it is obvious that the media will only intensively exploit the weaknesses and effects of man, in order to make him consume the media message, which, in turn, is a profit generator for the media industry. Thus, we have in front of our eyes the entire media cynicism of secularization: people are reduced to mere numbers, being exploited and captive in media consumption, through editorial content that often offers illusions, the entire humanity becoming just a tool through which the media magnates share the profit obtained through the advertising industry. In fact, Mr. James Harff, the director of the company "Ruder&Finn Global Political Affairs", whose object is to manipulate the images of international conflicts, the image of some peoples and ethnicities, through the media, according to the interests of the client, stated in an interview given to the journalist Jacques Merlino, in Paris, in October 1993 that: "We are professionals. We had to do a job and we did it. We are not paid to be moral"⁵, a statement that seriously makes us think, in the context in which most of the media are private and are coordinated through the prism of the interests of the shareholders

In this way, the secular media completely abandons the ideal purpose of an act of communication, namely the transmission of true cultural and spiritual values, instead assuming the secularized role of a merchant, which degrades society in value, by spreading false values as an illusory way of life. The "abomination of desolation" is necessarily wanted "in the holy

⁵ Jacques Merlino, *Les vérités Yugoslaves ne sont pas toutes bonnes à dire*, Paris: Editions Albin Michel S.A., 1993.

place", since, under the guise of justice, impartiality and equal opportunities, the media today wildly exploits the weaknesses of human nature, to obtain "ugly profit" before God. In other words, the media industry abandons the true mission, that of announcing the Truth of salvation to the world and assumes the thankless mission (in fact a counter-mission) of media subjugation of contemporary man, by idolizing the concept of "audience". In this way, the human being degrades massively and irreparably, because the foundation of his existence, the true cultural and spiritual values, are seriously altered.

Consequently, in a secularized and globalized world, cultural-spiritual values tend to undergo ontological mutations, in one of two possible directions: either they collectivize in an integrative or fundamentalist type of movement, or they dissolve individualistically, no longer there is social and ecclesial commitment⁶.

II. The harmful cultural-spiritual effects of secularized and secularizing media communication on society

1. Atheism takes on different media forms: from the template of presenting death as "passing into non-existence", to the confusion between the secular and the atheist, or the confusion between the secular state and the atheist state, elements that are just unfortunate results of the diffusion of the contents secularizing editorials, or even become elements of media manipulation in broader editorial constructs, often called press campaigns. Either way, God becomes a pariah of the secular media, a non-existent or taboo subject. Things are much more obvious when we look at media messages that have as their subject the Church or its clergy. One can easily see the existence of persuasively created press campaigns that want to generate an artificial schism between God and the Church, between faith in God and trust (often presented as distrust) in the institution of the Church or in church clergy. In this way, both the Church, its clergy, but also God himself, are in the position of being a pariah or a taboo subject. Interesting to note here is the phenomenon of media attacks focused on the majority religions, too few times the secular media dealing with the poorly represented cults, thereby giving them an advantage from an imaging point of view.

2. Occultism is systematically present in editorial content. Astrology, the paranormal, magic, vampirism (classical or energetic) frequently appear in media messages. Practically, under the guise of an apparent scientific education, we are dealing with a re-actualization of old superstitious practices, which often even took on forms of pseudo-spirituality, precisely with the aim of constituting a "spiritual alternative" to Christianity. Media occultism, like the classical one, can be identified by the following elements:

a) Magic - which claims to be a high spiritual discipline, dealing with the study of hidden but inherent forces in things and events, with the aim of controlling them for practical, immediate, selfish, and material interest. Moreover, it is easy to notice how the value contents of media communication are more and more flooded with "magic".

b) Witchcraft - which differs from magic and represents its vulgarization, which includes forms of worship and ritual manifestations, sacrifices, invocations, with the aim of forcing someone to do things that are against the natural nature of things, using spiritual forces, of demonic rule. A casual analysis of contemporary film productions will find that a significant percentage of them are oriented towards witchcraft, vampirism, demonization, etc.

⁶ Rev. Prof. Univ. Dr. Valer Bel, *The confessing community in the context of the secularized and globalized world*, in vol. "Symposium "Modernism, postmodernism and religion", "Ovidius" University Constanta, Ed. Vasiliana "98, Iasi, 2005, p34.

c) Divination - also called the "science of divination", involves the analysis of past, present, and future events, by means of an occult mechanism, which stipulates access to a timeless (eternal) level of existence, from which information regarding temporal, concrete events are extracted.

d) Astrology - is almost obsessively present on most secularized media channels, through horoscopes, and states that the personality and life of an individual are rigorously determined and influenced by the position of the astronomical bodies thus undermining free will and human freedom. Here we note the intentional confusion that is made between astronomy and astrology, to project in the public consciousness, the image that astrology is science or has a scientific basis.

3. Syncretism is also often present, as a principle for developing media content. In the desire to create "equal and democratic chances" for all cultural and spiritual values, but also out of ignorance or even commercial interest, the mass media allows the construction of "amalgams" of cultural-spiritual values. The impact on society is a harmful one, through the prism of altering the authenticity of the cultural-spiritual values transmitted, through this, a tempting mentality is introduced into the collective consciousness, as if "no one owns the absolute truth", which leads to a cultural-spiritual re-education of the world.

As a result, an axiological overturning takes place, with the fundamental values being mixed or "parasited" by foreign elements. In this way, a "media alternative" to the already existing cultural and spiritual values is built, which responds very well to the post-modern man's need to create his own values, which syncretistically mixes cultures and religions: "We need a universal religion for the New Age: because all people in the world have become interdependent; because technology and knowledge are developing faster and faster; because the current religions have not been able to ensure a human capitalization of the available knowledge, nor to bring peace and joy to the peoples of the world"⁷.

Moreover, based on two philosophical principles, monism (in which everything is one) and pantheism (God is in everything), the secularization of the media contributed to the construction of a utilitarian spirit in society, accompanied by a tendency towards cultural regression, through which achieves a kind of spiritual infantilization of the world⁸.

4. Hedonism is defined as a philosophical trend according to which pleasure is the goal of life. An in-depth analysis of media hedonism would be the subject of a large separate study, but, in short, we can say that the secular media often uses pleasure, in all its forms, as a weapon to obtain an audience. Practically, there is no commercial media message that does not appeal to pleasure, be it of the instincts, or the senses, or even spiritual, when we talk about the idolization or, worse, self-idolatry of contemporary man.

5. The same happens with perfectionism, especially in the field of image. Since today's technology allows for virtually unlimited "retouching" and "adjusting" of the image, media secularization tends to propagate perfectionism as a real way of being, deluding the audience that imperfection does not exist or has no purpose in the world, and pain, suffering or asceticism have no purpose in human life. But, propagating perfectionism, the media removes the possibility of being responsible for one's actions, since being perfect does not imply being responsible.

⁷ Lola A. Davis, *Toward a World Religion for the New Age*, Farmingdale, N.Y.: Coleman, 1983, p. 26

⁸ Archim. Teofil Tia, *Rechristening Europe? Theology of religion in contemporary Western pastoral and missiology*, Rîntregirea, Alba-Iulia, 2003, p. 59.

6. Media narcissism. The phenomenon takes on the appearance of a double challenge. First, narcissism targets the communicator of the message, who often tends to communicate not out of love for genuine values, but out of a desire to be flattered. In this way, a culture of stardom and image distortion is built for rating reasons. Narcissism, however, is also a challenge for the public, as the receiver of the message, the seeker of authentic values, in danger of being put on the wrong path by the secularization of the media. There are not a few cases in which extremist ideas, moral degradation, gross unculture and scientific aberrations posted on the Internet find enough followers who can, at some point, become social dangers, resorting to terrorism, radicalism, extremism, xenophobia, hatred, etc. "Very often, when a person communicates, he no longer takes into account the content of the communication, but is satisfied, self-satisfied with the fact that he hears himself communicating or sees himself communicating. This phenomenon has been called the narcissistic self-absorption of the ego. There are a lot of people who talk because they like to hear themselves talk, they appear as much as possible on television or in various images because they contemplate themselves. This shows a strong crisis of interiority, because only in interiority does man meet his archetype, God. But the more the communication with Him weakens, the more the self-absorption of us in a beautifully disguised solitude strengthens. So, the more narcissistic and self-sufficient society is, the more lonely it is, because man does not meet another, but meets himself, self-absorbs, self-consumes. That is why we need not only means of communication, but also a spirituality of communication. From this point of view, Christian reflection on communication is very necessary"⁹.

Conclusions

From what has been presented so far, we can affirm that the propagation of secularization in society is intensively stimulated and helped by media communication, which, often being enslaved by the financial spirit, builds a philosophy in a world from which God and authentic values begin to be absent. Representing a calculated system based on principles of marketing and free competition, the media makes heavy use of immediate and concrete pleasures. By disseminating these non-cultural and non-spiritual values, media communication essentially contributes to the secularization process of the entire society, with all its institutions. The phenomenon is more visible in the Eastern European space, after the fall of the communist bloc where, parallel to the revival of spiritual life in these countries, the inclination to copy the way of life and Western values was also manifested. In place of the cult of work and creation, the cult of fun was established, in place of traditions and values, an exacerbated libertinism was placed, and in the place of soulful joys are carnal pleasures. Almost everything in media content seduces and urges us to "live in the moment", to enjoy the present, but a moment and a present created by the secularized media. Man becomes an eminently immanent being, fleeing from eternity. The secularized man who lives in this world as if there were no God present in the world, "hides" not only from His Glory, but also from the faces of His Glory which are the saints. Instead of an authentic cult, a cult of stars has been established, which are worshiped by hundreds of thousands or even millions of admirers.

Thus, the secularized language of media communication increasingly influences and determines man's way of thinking and behaving, placing him in opposition to true cultural and spiritual values. Aided by image, color and sound, the media makes every human soul a commercial target, an indifferent number in a multi-figure financial plan. In the face of this

⁹ † Daniel, Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bucovina, Theological foundations of the communicative act and coordinates of the media apostolate in the current era", in "Candela Moldovai", no. 7-8, July-August 2003, p. 17-18.

troubling development, only culture and genuine spirituality can free man from the rule of sense pleasures which dissolve him culturally and spiritually.

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