

CONFESSIONAL AFFILIATION OF ROMANIANS: A HISTORICAL AND STATISTICAL PERSPECTIVE

MANUELA GHEORGHE*

ABSTRACT

By means of statistical analysis, this article aims to provide the reader with a general view of the evolutions and tendencies registered in the structure of the Romanian confessional system, over an extended period of time (1859–2011). According to the 1992, 2002 and 2011 census data, the Orthodox Church continues to be the dominant Church in Romania. However, there is also a tendency towards diversification of religious preferences among the population, in consensus with the general influences of secularisation and globalisation.

Keywords: confessional affiliation, religious congregations, religions, sects, religious associations.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STATISTICS IN UNDERSTANDING THE RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON

The advantages of taking a quantitative approach to the religious phenomenon have already been emphasised in the heyday of the sociology of religion, by prestigious names as Gabriel le Bras, Emile Poulat, Henri Desroches a.s.o. All of these researchers underlined the value of quantitative studies, both in better understanding each distinct religion through evaluation of the numerical following and vitality thereof, and in providing evidence of changes in the religious structure and religiosity. Therefore, statistical and cartographic analysis of the population is absolutely necessary in order to understand the various social situations. The Romanian sociologist Dimitrie Gusti was fully aware of this when he described censuses as “a living inventory of a nation’s social phenomena and

* Senior Researcher, Institute of Sociology, Romanian Academy, Calea 13 Septembrie no. 13, 050711, Bucharest; e-mail: *manu_er2003@yahoo.fr*.

„*Revista română de sociologie*”, serie nouă, anul XXVII, nr. 1–2, p. 125–134, București, 2016



Creative Commons License
Attribution-NoDerivs CC BY-ND

social facts at a given moment. It is in any case a quantitative expression, an initial, serious and positive scientific expression of society that may be used as a foundation on which to build any scientific or political construction". (Gusti cited in Alexandrescu, 2007: 7) Statistical, empirical data represents a solid basis on which the researcher can construct their entire scientific and imaginative framework.

Another not insignificant aspect worthy of mention concerns the difficulty of gathering this data, due to the subjectivity of some of the census agents, not to mention the rapidity with which social changes often occur (change of address, occupational or confessional mobility, etc.), under which circumstances data becomes obsolete so rapidly that it is often out of date even before it has reached the centralisation and processing phase. What we have tried to emphasise thus far is the fact that, while providing partial and, up to a point, even superficial data (not in the sense of imprecision, but in the sense of insufficient for complete analysis of a social issue), religious statistics are indispensable for any serious, thorough researcher and represent a good example of what one French sociologist called "the fruitful alliance" between the exact sciences and the humanist sciences. (Le Bras, 1956: 21)

THE BREAKDOWN OF THE CONFESSIONAL LANDSCAPE BEFORE 1990

The first general statistical survey in France was performed in 1831 and included only vague data on religions, in the context of the sums allocated to them from the State budget. The following censuses, of 1841, 1851, 1861, 1866 and 1872 progressively increased statistical understanding of nineteenth century French religion and constitute even today valuable documentary sources for sociologists studying religion. (Poulat, 1956: 26)

According to our documentation, statistical information of a religious nature was available for the Romanian Principalities even before the 1848 Revolution. In an almanac from 1838, for instance, there are detailed information relating to the existing monasteries at that time, their number, incomes, monks/nuns, livestock, etc. (Almanah, 1838) Another almanac shows that, only two years later, the number of monasteries had risen rapidly, from 50 to 70. (Almanah, 1840: 165) At the institutional level of the church, we observe a steady increase in statistical records, especially following affirmation of the autocephalous nature of the Romanian Orthodox Church. (in 1885) This is proven by the decision, taken by the Holy Synod in 1888, to create an "ad-hoc committee to get a general overview of the Romanian parishes, as well as the necessary ecclesiastical staff..." (Raportul, 1888: 2) The value of the report completed by this committee is exceptional, given that it offers a complete inventory, in over 500 pages, of every parish in every county, including the total number of parishioners, priests and deacons.

However, all of the aforementioned cases only offer sporadic and partial data. The unification of the principalities, on 24 January 1859 (a date which also coincides with the Romanian society's wholesale entry into modernity, in all respects, including the statistical field), occasioned the first official and complete population census. The general census undertaken in 1859 remained the reference and comparison point for the subsequent censuses that followed in 1899, 1912 and 1930. The successive data gathered by these censuses allow us to observe developments and changes in the confessional landscape over a long period of time.

A first comparative analysis referring to the faith of Romanians was made, at the turn of the 19th century, by Leonida Colescu. His work, *Analiza rezultatelor recensământului general al populației din România din 1899* [Analysis of the Results of the General Census of the Population of Romania in 1899] deserves to be brought back to the attention of researchers and re-evaluated on its own merits. (Colescu, 1944)

According to the data of the 1859, 1899 and 1912 censuses, the Orthodox Church maintained its majority status throughout the whole survey period, at 94.89%, 91.52% and 93.09% of the population, respectively. The second largest faith group, although far removed in terms of actual numbers, was Judaism, at 3.03% in 1858, 4.48% in 1899 and 3.33% in 1912. Islam gained numerically, from 1321 (0.03%) followers in 1859 to 44 732 (0.75%) in 1899 and to 46 406 (0.64%) in 1912. This fact is to be explained by the territorial changes resulting from the War of Independence of 1879, and the assimilation of counties with majority Turkish and Tatar populations. The situation of the Lipovans, also present in Dobrogea, is similar, showing a numerical increase from 8 375 (0.19%) in 1859, to 15 094 (0.25%) in 1899 and 21 628 (0.64%) in 1912. Only Armenians and Protestants saw a fall in numbers. The low number of those identified by the "other religions" field, should also be noted, which leads us to suspect a narrower range of faiths, with the majority of believers being drawn towards the large traditional, historic religions, something which might well be expected in the era in question. There is a tendency towards confessional diversification and an increase in the number of those identified as "other religion", but only up to a certain point. (*Table no. 1*)

The Great Unification of 1918 was a high point in the history of the Romanian people which resulted in massive territorial and demographic changes. This led to changes in the ethnic and confessional structure, in the form of an increase in the number of ethnic minorities. In Dobrogea, the number of Turks, Tatars and Bulgarians increased considerably with the addition of the 'Quadrilateral' region (southern Dobrogea); Banat brought in significant numbers of Swabians, Hungarians, Croats and Slovenians; Crișana-Maramureș, a large number of Hungarians, Jews, Germans, Czechs and Slovaks; Bucovina – Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Jews, Germans and Polish; Transylvania – Hungarians, Saxons and Jews.

Table no. 1

Breakdown of the population by faith from 1859–1912.

Religion	Year					
	1859		1899		1912	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Total	4 424 961	100	5 956 690	100	7 235 320	100
1. Orthodox	4 198 862	94.89	5 451 787	91.52	6 735 444	93.09
2. Jewish	134 168	3.03	266 652	4.48	241 088	3.33
3. Catholic	45 154	1.02	149 667	2.51	157 938	2.18
4. Protestant	28 903	0.65	22 749	0.38	24 727	0.34
5. Armenian	8 178	0.18	5787	0.10	6 985	0.10
6. Lipovan	8 375	0.19	15094	0.25	21 628	0.30
7. Muslim	1 323	0.03	44732	0.75	46 406	0.64
8. Other religion	–	–	222	–0.01	1 104	0.02

Source: Sorin Negruți, “The evolution of the Religious structure in Romania since 1859 to the present day” (2014): 39.

From a legal perspective, the situation regarding the coexistence of all these faiths was regulated under the Law on the general arrangements for religions [*Legea pentru regimul general al cultelor*] of 1928. This guaranteed freedom of religious belief and practice but at the same time also maintained unequal statuses for the religious groups, which it divided into three categories: **1.** The “dominant” Orthodox Church; **2.** The “historic” religions: Byzantine Catholic (the “primary” of these), Roman Catholic, Calvin Reformed, Evangelical Lutheran, Unitarian, Armenian Gregorian, Jewish and Muslim; **3.** “Tolerated” or accepted religious associations. This last category included Baptists, Gospel Christians and Seventh-day Adventists, which were frequently called “sects”¹ (*secte*) and operated subject to Law no 21/1924 on legal persons. Other religious groups, as the Nazarenes, Bible Students, Millenists, Reformist Adventists, Harvesters, Pentecostals and Inochentists were “completely forbidden”. (Gheorghe, 2005)

All of these changes were first documented in the 1938 census. (Recensământul, 1938) This census was truly historic and remains a fundamental

¹In this article the word “sect” is taken in its non-pejorative, neutral sense, as defined by the DEX 2009: “a religious community that has broken off from a larger religion (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc.) in order to practise an independent rite based on its own doctrine”. (<https://dexonline.ro/definitie/sect%C4%83>)

point of reference and source of information regarding the socio-demographic structure of the Romanian population at that time and Romanian society in general, at the turn of the century. The census was coordinated by Dimitrie Gusti and one of its priority objectives was to record the breakdown of the population by “origin” (by ethnic group), according to mother tongue and religion. As a reflection of these changes, Orthodox numbers fell from 93.09% in 1912 to 72.59% in 1930. However, an increase in the range of faiths professed was observed: Byzantine Catholics (the Byzantine Catholic Church in communion with Rome), Baptists and Adventists are mentioned for the first time; notably, also for the first time, record was made of citizens identified in the categories “No religion” or “Religion not given”, each with a weighting of 0.04%. (*Table no. 2*)

Table no. 2

Religious adherence of the Romanian population in 1930

Romania Total	18 057 028	%
Orthodox	13 108 227	72.6
Byzantine Catholic	1 427 391	7.9
Roman Catholic	1 234 151	6.8
Calvin Reformed	710 706	3.9
Evangelical Lutheran	398 759	2.2
Unitarian	69 257	0.4
Armenian Gregorian	10 005	–
Armenian Catholic	1 440	–
Lipovan	57 288	0.3
Adventist	16 102	–
Baptist	60 562	0.3
Jewish	756 930	4.2
Muslim	185 486	1.0
Other religions and sects	7 434	–
No religion and free-thinkers	6 604	–
Not given	6 686	–

Source: *Romanian general population census, 1938 (Recensământul, 1938: xxiv)*.
(Note: “–” represents a percentage lower than 0%; the original names of the religions have been used)

Under the Communist regime (1945–1989), freedom of religion was guaranteed under the Constitution of 1948; however, in accordance with “party requirements”, censuses held during that era did not include questions regarding

citizens' religious identity. The Law on Religions [*Legea Cultelor*] promulgated on 4 August 1948 by the Communist state, legally recognised the following faiths as religions: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Reformed, Augustana Evangelical, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Baptist, Unitarian, Old-rite Christian, Seventh-day Adventist, Muslim, Gospel Christian, Jewish, Armenian Gregorian. (Chivu-Duță, 2007: 18) All other religious organisations (as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Reformist Adventists, Bethanists, Stylites, Nazarenes, the Romanian 'Lord's Army' [*Oastea Domnului*] etc.) were qualified as "sects" and outlawed. All religious associations and foundations were also banned. In 1948, the decision was taken to disestablish the Byzantine Catholic Church and annul the Concordat with the Vatican.

CONFESSIOAL STRUCTURE OF ROMANIA AFTER 1990. NEW STEPS TOWARDS RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Religious pluralism is one particular attribute of democracies that are progressively consolidating, as politics is separated from religion and societies and states become secular. In Romania too, after 1990, there were significant changes in the religious and faith landscape; a reconstruction of the religious landscape, such that today the most diverse religions coexist: some with territorial or ethnic roots, others more recent arrivals, hoping that they have found fertile ground here for their missionary endeavours. The state has adopted new religious legislation in accordance with democratic principles and rules, thus creating itself the premises for real religious pluralism. These laws are included in: The Romanian Constitution, certain provisions of the Penal Code (*Viața religioasă*, 2005: 115, 116), the Law on Religions no 489 of 2006 (<http://www.culte.gov.ro/detaliu-legislatie/vrs/IDleg/18>) and other legislative acts (Emergency Orders, Government Decisions etc.). From a strictly legal point of view, as per this legislation, the main players in the Romanian post-revolution religious landscape are the main recognized religions (numbering 18) and the religious associations. (numbering 21)

Religious associations are new religious structures, with legal personality, which may comprise a minimum of 300 members, Romanian citizens resident in Romania, who have formed an association with a view to professing a religious belief. These associations are established by court ruling, based on a favourable opinion from the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs. (Gheorghe, 2008)

Besides the religions and religious associations, other organisations exist and other religious activities take place, which are not legally recognised; some of these have submitted files to the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs for approval, pending which they operate as non-governmental organisations or associations.

There have been three censuses in the 26 years that have elapsed since Romania's political regime change: these were conducted in 1992, 2002 and 2011; all were coordinated and carried out by the National Institute of Statistics. The

results obtained provided researchers with a vast, accurate, unified statistical database indispensable for painting a statistical picture of our nation of the last two decades. However, this picture would clearly be incomplete without information regarding the confessional structure of the population. (*Table no. 3*)

Table no. 3

Breakdown of the Romanian population by faith 1992–2011

Religion	Year					
	1992		2002		2011	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Total	22 810 035	100	21 680 974	100	20 121 641	100
1. Orthodox	19 802 389	86.81	18 817 975	86.79	16 307 004	86.54
2. Roman Catholic	1 161 942	5.09	1 026 429	4.73	870 774	4.62
3. Reformed	802 454	3.52	701 077	3.23	600 932	3.19
4. Pentecostal	220 824	0.97	324 462	1.50	362 314	1.92
5. Byzantine Catholic	223 327	0.98	191 556	0.88	150 593	0.80
6. Baptist	109 462	0.48	126 639	0.58	112 850	0.60
7. Seventh-day Adventist	77 546	0.34	93 670	0.43	80 944	0.4
8. Muslim	55 928	0.25	67 257	0.31	64 337	0.34
9. Unitarian	76 708	0.34	66 944	0.31	57 686	0.31
10. Jehovah's Witnesses	–	–	–	–	49 820	0.26
11. Evangelist	49 963	0.22	44 476	0.21	42 495	0.23
12. Old-rite Christians ²	28 141	0.12	38 147	0.18	32 558	0.17
13. Old-style Christians ³	32 228	0.14	–	–	–	–
14. Evangelical Lutheran (Presbyterian Synod)	21 221	0.09	27 112	0.13	20 168	0.11
15. Serbian Orthodox	–	–	–	–	14 385	0.08
16. Romanian Evangelical	–	–	18 178	0.08	15 514	0.08
17. Augustana Evangelical	39 119	0.17	8 716	0.04	5 399	0.03
18. Jewish	9 670	0.04	6 057	0.03	3 519	0.02
19. Armenian	2 023	0.01	775	0.004	393	0.002

² Old-rite Christians (or 'Stylists') are a religious group that broke away from the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1924 because they disagreed with its adoption of the Gregorian instead of the Julian calendar.

³ Old-style Christians (of the Old-rite or Lipovan church) are Russians who fled the tsarist empire at the turn of the 18th century because they did not accept the reforms imposed by the patriarch Nikon, and who took refuge in Romania, initially in Suceava and then in Tulcea and Brăila in particular.

20. Other religion	56 129	0.25	89 196	0.41	30 557	0.16
21. No religion	26 314	0.12	12 825	0.06	18 917	0.10
22. Atheist	10 331	0.05	8 524	0.04	20 743	0.11
23. Not given	8 139	0.04	11 734	0.05	–	–
24. Unavailable	–	–	–	–	1 259 739	6.25

Source: Sorin Negruți, The Evolution of the Religions Structure in Romania since 1859 to the Present Day (2014): 46.

Regarding these censuses, we shall first of all make a few general observations. The Old-style Orthodox Church was only included in the first census, thereafter being categorised as a legal association; the Romanian Evangelical Church was in the opposite situation, as it was not included in the first census; the Serbian Orthodox Church, on the other hand, was only included in the last census, as was the case with the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation; it is therefore impossible to confirm rising or falling numerical trends in any of these cases. Another observation that should be made is that the 2011 census, in accordance with European regulations, gave citizens the possibility not to declare their religious identity. Information on religious adherence is thus unavailable for 1 259 739 citizens (6.25%), which also contributes to difficulties in interpreting the results.

The Romanian Orthodox Church, the dominant church for Romanians, saw a decline in its congregation, a fact not without significance, especially when these losses are expressed in absolute figures: 19 802 389 (86.81%) followers in 1992, 18 817 975 (86.79%) followers in 2002, 16 307 004 (86.45%) followers in 2011. The same trend towards a fall in numbers may also be noted in the other traditional religions: Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran or Unitarian, but also in the case of neo-protestant religions (although these have seen lower rates of fall. However there is one notable exception: the Pentecostal Church; the only religion with rising numbers: 220 824 (0.97%) followers in 1992, 324 462 (1.50%) followers in 2002, and 362 314 (1.92%) followers in 2011.

The population identifying its faith as 'other religion' varied considerably during the period analysed, rising from 56 329 (0.28%) in 1992 to 89 196 (0.44%) in 2002, only to fall significantly over the next nine years to 30 557 (0.15%). These numerical variations might be explained by the changes that have come over the religious structure of Romania throughout this time frame: the inclusion of Jehovah's Witnesses, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Church as religions in the last census. It may also be assumed that this field would also record foreign citizens with various, possibly exotic religions, who have been naturalised in Romania since 1990.

Even under the difficult conditions of Communist repression and atheist propaganda, the religiosity of Romanians remained constant. Furthermore, after 1990, Romania was swept by a wave of religious growth, against a background of

general enthusiasm in society generated by the political regime change, a situation emphasised by a decrease in the number of religiously unaffiliated: from 0.17% in the 1992 census to 0.10% in the 2002 census (a value identical to that of the 2005 World Values Survey – Voicu, 2006: 112). The period between 2002 and 2011, however, saw an increase in the number of unaffiliated: those “without religion” rose from 12 825 (0.06%) in 2002, to 18 917 (0.10%) in 2011, while atheists rose from 8 524 (0.04%) in 2002 to 20 743 (0.11%) in 2011. We believe that possible interpretations of this trend might potentially identify the multiple disappointments of the population in the repeated failures of the transition and sometimes also in relation to the Romanian Orthodox Church. Relative to the vast majority of the population, who identified themselves in all three censuses as belonging to a religion (predominantly Orthodox), the percentage of atheists and of those without religion, although increasing, remains statistically insignificant.

CONCLUSIONS

All of these new realities are suggestive of the dynamisation and diversification of the Romanian religious landscape. Despite this vitality, however, we can speak of real confessional stability, at least in the case of the great historical, traditional religions, where the mechanism of upholding the religious model inherited from one or both parents is known to work more effectively. The last three censuses offer a vast fund of statistical data, a fund which, despite its extraordinary wealth, still remains underexploited. The data relating to religious affiliation between 1992 and 2001 indicates a slow but steady decline in numbers for all religions (with a single exception), a decline which accelerated in the period 2002–2011. Orthodox Christianity, even if the number of believers is seeing a slight downward trend, remains by far the most important religion for Romanians, both numerically and symbolically. In Romania – a majority Orthodox country – the Orthodox faith continues to be an essential defining element of national identity, affirming its specificity. The advance of secularisation and globalisation, however, raises serious challenges, concerns and questions for theologians and the Orthodox Church, as well as for society as a whole. Democratic societies, which include Romania since 1990, encourage religious pluralism and religious diversification, but also incur a risk for the great historical and traditional faiths. The statistical data tends to affirm the notion that Romanian society has not remained intact in the face of globalising trends and the free movement of material and symbolic goods. The emphasis on pluralism, confessional diversification, the individualisation of religion, progressive dissociation from faiths and so on, indicate emerging changes, both within the confessional structure and at the deeper level of religiosity.

(Translation from Romanian by Irina Stahl)

REFERENCES

1. ALEXANDRESCU, ION (2007). *Recensămintele României. Mică enciclopedie* [Romanian Censuses. Little Encyclopaedia], Bucharest: Editura Meronia [citing Dimitrie GUSTI].
2. Almanah (1938). *Almanah al curții și al statului din Principatul Valahii pentru anul 1838* [Court and State Almanac of Wallachia for the year 1838], Bucharest: Librăria Curții.
3. Almanah (1940). *Almanah al curții și al statului din Principatul Valahii pentru anul 1840* [Court and State Almanac of Wallachia, 1840], Bucharest: Walhaum.
4. CHIVU-DUȚĂ, CARMEN (2007). *Culte din România între prigonire și colaborare* [Romanian religions between persecution and collaboration], Iași: Editura Polirom.
5. COLESCU, LEONIDA (1944). *Analiza rezultatelor recensământului general al populației din România din 1899* [Analysis of the results of the Romanian general population census of 1899], Bucharest: Central Institute of Statistics.
6. DEX (2009, 2nd edition). *Dicționarul Explicativ al Limbii Române*, <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/sect%C4%83>
7. GHEORGHE, MANUELA (2005). “De l’Église dominante’ et des ‘nouveaux mouvements religieux’ vers une variété des confessions” [From the ‘dominant Church’ and ‘new religious movements’ to a variety of faiths]. In *Conscience et Liberté*, Bern, Switzerland, no. 66, p. 78–88.
8. GHEORGHE, MANUELA (2008). “Noile mișcări religioase – agenți ai globalizării religioase în România” [The new religious movements – agents of religious globalisation in Romania]. In *Revista Română de Sociologie*, new series, no. 1–2, p. 147–153.
9. LE BRAS, GABRIEL (1956). “Mesures des appartenances religieuses en France” [Measures of religious adherence in France]. In *Archives de sociologies des religions*, no. 2, p. 17–21.
10. NEGRUȚI, SORIN (2014). “The evolution of the Religious structure in Romania since 1859 to the present day”. In *Revista Română de Statistică* [The Romanian Statistical Review], no. 6, supplement, p. 39–47.
11. POULAT, EMILE (1956). “Les cultes dans les statistiques officielles en France au XIX e siècle” [Religions in French Official Statistics in the Nineteenth Century]. In *Archives de sociologie des religions*, no. 2, p. 22–26.
12. Raportul (1888). *Raportul Comisiunii Sfântului Sinod al Sintei Biserici autocefale ortodoxe române din Regatul României, pentru fixarea parohiilor urbane și rurale* [Report of the Holy Synod of the autocephalous Holy Church of the Kingdom of Romania, for the establishment of urban and rural parishes] Bucharest: Tipografia cărților bisericești.
13. Recensământul (1938). *Recensământul general al populației României* [Romanian general population census], Bucharest: National Press, vol. 2.
14. Recensământul (1992). *Recensământul populației și al locuințelor* [Population and housing census], Bucharest: National Institute of Statistics, vol. 2.
15. Recensământul (2002). *Recensământul populației și al locuințelor* [Population and housing census], Bucharest: National Institute of Statistics, vol. 1.
16. Recensământul (2011). *Recensământul populației și al locuințelor* [Population and housing census], Bucharest: National Institute of Statistics, vol. 2.
17. Viața religioasă (2005, 2nded.). *Viața religioasă din România* [Religious life in Romania], Bucharest: Editura Bizantină.
18. VOICU, MĂLINA (2006). *Valori religioase în spațiul urban românesc: o abordare longitudinală* [Religious values in Romanian urban space]. In Sandu, Dumitru (coord.), *Viața socială în România urbană* [Social life in urban Romania], Iași: Editura Polirom.

Cited internet sites (last accessed 4 January 2016):

<http://www.culte.gov.ro/detaliu-legislatie/vrs/IDleg/18>