

Mirel Bănică, *Între două lumi. Monahismul orthodox și modernitatea [Between Two Worlds. Orthodox Monasticism and Modernity]*, Iași: Polirom, 2024, 297 p., ISBN 978-973-469640-6.

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Discussing religiosity and religion is a complex task due to their profound and intimate nature at the individual level, which makes their understanding challenging in a shared context. Furthermore, the operational aspects of religious organisations involve structural characteristics that complicate the study of religiosity. Despite these obstacles, anthropologist Mirel Bănică has scientifically delved into a lesser-known element of the Romanian religious world: Orthodox monasticism. This topic is particularly challenging due to the scarcity of Romanian social science literature and the low social visibility of monasticism because of its fundamental characteristics.

Mirel Bănică's approach materialised in a book published at Polirom Publishing House in February 2024. The book aligns with Mirel Bănică's interest in the current Romanian religious world; he has published other books on religious topics, such as *The Place of Other: Orthodoxy in Modernity* (Paideia, 2007) and *The Need of Miracles. The Pilgrimage phenomenon in contemporary Romania* (Polirom, 2014).

From a structural-compositional perspective, the volume has a spherical character. Two theoretical parts surround the comprehensive field research conducted in 45 monasteries from September, 2020 to June, 2023. Managing the informational aspects involved listing the monasteries in historical regions, with a selection of five areas out of nine, ensuring an asymmetric sampling of the monastic landscape.

The book's title, with a high level of generality, connects two key concepts: Orthodox monasticism and modernity. However, the conceptual frame guiding the field research needs to be explicitly stated; namely, the meaning of the above two concepts needs to be more accurate. For instance, modernity is considered a historical period that ended around 1950. The long and fruitful debate about modernity must be mentioned. Some other concepts were launched in this debate: late modernity, second modernity, postmodernity, and multiple modernities. What concept does the researcher consider particularly in his research? What are the

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characteristics of modernity that monasticism had to adjust to? In addition, cultural factors don't play any role in identifying these two ideal types in social reality.

The title suggests the double oscillation of monasticism: between tradition and modernity and between the social world and the ideal one towards which it aspires. A crossing point occurs since entering modernity is associated with entering the social world, the last equating with coming down to the layman's standard. The compromise of monasticism with modernity determines "the internal secularisation of the monasteries and the decreasing of the eschatological tension" (p.251) between Christianity and the contemporary world. The author identifies some elements of compromise: church tourism, bio-eco products (the monastic economy), and the change in internal authority. At the same time, these elements are considered to have axiomatic value at the theoretical level (p.11). This balancing confuses the reader regarding how knowledge is acquired: inductive or deductive?

Monasticism represents, for the author, the key to understanding the relationship between religion and modernity (p.9), being an accurate image of the "tension" in this relationship. Also, monasticism is understood as a powerful explanatory factor of the current Romanian religious field. The reasons for its selection as an explanatory factor and the temporal selection of its action are unclear. Why does it explain only the post-communist period and not the entire period of its existence in the Romanian world? Thus, a temporal framing would have been preferred to clarify some features of the post-communist period compared to other periods of monasticism in the Romanian religious field.

Mirel Bănică has chosen "the monastic economy" (p.14) from all facets through which Orthodox monasticism can be considered – theological, historical, and geographical (p. 250). This facet is important because it indicates monasteries' adjustment to the contemporary world's characteristics (p.286), taking over the ecological and sustainability principles specific to it in their efforts to survive (pp.250-251). Thus, inside the Marxist paradigm, the existence of the most valuable religious fact in the Orthodox field – monasticism – is explained using an economic factor, namely the transformation of monastic crafting into an economic process. The author presents monasteries which don't perform an economic process (Golia and Bistrița monasteries). It would be challenging to determine the distinction between them and the others, which developed a successful economic process.

The scarcity of literature on this topic (p. 250) determines the selection of Western bibliographical sources (p.251) that address Catholic monasticism. So, a few references from the Orthodox cultural field, in general, and the Romanian cultural space, in particular, provide a vague conceptual definition of monasticism and don't consider the differentiation of Catholic monasticism from the Orthodox one. However, this aim was pursued as intention (p. 16) and necessity (p.89). The unity of the two types of monasticism is acquired through their incorporation into the concept of monasticism as a "utopian project" (p.10). It is "the distinction of reference to society which aims at the perfect society features" (p.11). Following the sociologist J. Segny's idea (pp.272-278), three dimensions frame the operational definition of monasticism as a utopian project: life structuring (of the space and the social and physical time), the relationship between rural and urban (escaping from daily social space) and personal relationships. To what extent is this concept a valuable tool for understanding Romanian Orthodox monasticism? This is a challenging question, especially regarding the second dimension, that of the separation of the lay world from the monastic world. Archimandrite Ioanichie Bălan's toponymic research demonstrates the hermitage-related origin of Romanian monasticism and its roots in "small brotherhoods". They refer to groups of laymen with high religious importance who had chosen to live near the village church in a close spiritual relationship with the priest. The phenomenon of rural hermitages occurred before the end of the first Christian millennium. Archimandrite Ioanichie Bălan considered rural hermitages an incipient monastic life structure, pointing out that the Romanian cenobitic and anchoritic monasticism would develop from these. Even in the case of the second type, the anchorite and his followers always communicated with the inhabitants of the nearby villages. If a hermitage was near a village, the first houses would appear surrounding it, a new village being built. Also, if the hermitage was in difficult to reach places, the anchorite and his followers would come to more accessible places for villagers after some generations. Thus, there is an intercommunication between the lay world and the monastic one in the Romanian Orthodox field, questioning the validity of monastic utopia as a tool for understanding Romanian religious reality.

Another topic that invites us to reflect is the divide that manifests in two situations –between the conceptual framework and the field research. Firstly, the incongruence between the originating concept - monastic utopia - and the description of the visited monasteries is observed.

Conceptually, the focus is on how the monastic project loses its utopian features because of the compromise with modernity, which refers to transforming traditional monastic handmade crafts into an economic process. Practically, the collected data refer to the conceptual framework to a small extent. Secondly, what is the conceptual connection between monastic utopia and Christian utopia? The meaning of the two concepts is skipped over because the stake of the Christian world is the same for all its participants: the Christian utopia. The rules for lay people inside the Christian world are valid to the same extent for attaining the field's stake as the monastic rules. Therefore, the monastic utopia concept is less specific to the Christian world.

The ethnographic approach is explicitly pursued as methodology, along with the methods of participant observation and the experience of living in the studied community for a long time. The author mentions the difficulties of the research field many times in the book: finding accommodations, developing a proper conversation with the monks because of the communication barriers they raise, and the mention of topics considered sensitive by them. The last difficulty causes the author to frequently associate the monastery with a "secret society" (p.72).

A two-stage sampling is used: 1. randomly selecting an unspecified number of monasteries from all 844 hermitages and monasteries and visiting them; 2. selection of 45 monasteries from the visited monasteries which are considered to be "the most significant for the understanding of the current monastic reality" (p.20). A well-defined criterion isn't used in the first stage. In the second stage, the selection criterion is "the monasteries noticed in the market due to their cosmetics or nutritional products" (p.14). Nevertheless, the selection criterion isn't used every time. It can also be a waypoint on the route (Războieni monastery), "discovering Transylvanian nationalism in action" (Mihai-Vodă monastery) or reading from a book (Bucium monastery). Along the same lines, specific indicators don't define the importance of a monastery in Romanian marketing. The reader could use various indicators instead, such as the number of customers/tourists, the number of products the monastery sells over a certain period, the product quality, the visibility of the products on social media, and the list could continue.

The research data are presented in the second part of the book. The reader easily identifies the researcher's strategy for collecting the data. Presentation of each monastery starts with natural and social environmental descriptions, and some historical perspectives are used when possible.

The author “photographs” (p.249) diverse characters who give life to the monastic world (ordinary monks, monks in charge of the unfolding economic process, permanent or chance visitors), but also events that animate (religious services) or preserve monastic history (monastic museums). He pursues a comprehensive perspective. Therefore, in addition to the short visits to the monasteries, the author describes his participation in the Rebra-Parva monastery community events and his engagement in its activities (pp.182-197). The experience of living in the Rebra-Parva monastery community confirms its efficacy in data collecting as a central method of the ethnographic approach. In this context, it must be mentioned that the Orthodox monastic world’s uniformity coexists with the variation between the monasteries. Diversity is mirrored not only in the monasteries’ economic dimension but also in their religious one. Thus, from a methodological angle, the two years that the researcher intermittently spent in the monastic world are not similar to the long-term participant observation and the experience of living in a community, even though these years involve his presence in the same world: the monastic one.

The most important place for each visit is the store where the monastery sells religious or other products. The researcher describes all aspects of it accurately: architectural details, elements of spatial organisation, types of products (jam, syrup, preserves, bee products or pastries, teas and various treatments), the packages and the recipes used for their production. The marketability of monastic products is determined by a mixture of “bio-eco fashion, the nostalgia of the olden village, local identity and fascination with the monastic world” (p.252).

The characters accompanying the author in every monastery he enters are that of a monastery’s representative and that of a layman: the store salesperson, a pilgrim, a tourist, or a close friend of the monastery. Also, the researcher looks for an informer from the social environment to which the monastery belongs, which is essential to provide an emic and etic perspective simultaneously. A selection from literary works or information from online searches supplements the researcher’s observations. Even if this complementary information doesn’t always match the economic dimension of a monastery, it reveals the author’s effort in documentation.

The author’s voice is the most active in structuring and interpreting the data. However, “calling a friend” is an innovative technique to clarify some religious subjects. The friend is an active participant in the religious field. The author renounces his own competence in interpreting the data

in favour of the friend's explanation regarding the disinterest in using natural resources in economic activity at Bucium monastery, the constant building activity inside the monasteries, the new churches in the courtyards of the old monasteries, or the use of new materials in the process of the church building.

The researcher's attitude towards his field of expertise (in the various states of it: a religious fact, a participant in the religious field or outside of it) is that of a realistic writer. He anticipates facts and knows the meaning of them: the nun's behaviour is "innate, with no ostentatious, artificial or insincere details" (p.82), a monk "tries to convince himself more than ourselves that his choice to be a monk is appropriate" (p.120), a bakery from Horezu monastery looks artificial (p.140), the pilgrims have a false impression about their actions (p. 150), a head scarf is worn "perfunctorily" (p.138), some monastics are labelled as missing their vocation (p. 23) . In the same context, another topic for discussion is the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in ethnography, which is a rational way of knowing reality despite its descriptive character. Verbs of perception are quite numerous in the text: "it feels", "I feel" (p.42, 140), "I think" (p.71, 101, 127), "I suspect" (p.102, 105, 127), "It seems" (p.73, 195, 260), "it gave the impression" (p.77). They originate in the author's quality of being an observer but contrast with the reader's expectations of generalisation as suggested by the title. Also, they create an unstable image of the approach and suggest the idea of cognitive reductionism to the author's subjectivity. The author admits his subjectivity (pp.38, 123, 160) but doesn't counterbalance its effect. This instability is also created by the author's admission that he regrets that time doesn't allow him to thoroughly consider certain aspects of his approach (p.47, 97, 157).

The economic dimension is the central topic of the interviews. However, data about other facets of current monastic life is also offered. These regard medical (the infirmaries of the Turnu or Horezu monasteries) and cultural aspects (such as museums from the Nămăiești and Agapia monasteries). Still, they are described without any connection with the economic one. Thus, a fragmented picture of the monastery is outlined, contrasting with that of the monastery as a little community. Mirel Bănică believes that the main characteristics of the monastic economy are sustainability, the promotion of the local ecosystem, proximity to the natural cycle, resilience, small-scale manufacturing, and "person-to-person" marketing (p.252). The researcher focuses on the economic process carried out in the monasteries, but not all its stages have the same

visibility, the author pointing out mainly product marketing. The reader can summarise some of the economic strategies used by monasteries as revealed by the data: precisely identifying attractive and unused products (Turnu and Petru-Vodă monasteries), the collaboration with chemists (Turnu and Petru-Vodă monasteries), increasing profitability using technology (Văratec and Nera monasteries), the transfer of skills and knowledge from one monastery to others (Văratec monastery), the collaborative partnership for promoting products (Dragomirna monastery), the application for European funds (Negru Vodă, Comana, and Horezu monasteries). A challenging discussion could be launched: What factors determine the choice of economic strategies?

Some typologies can be considered using data in the book. Mirel Bănică proposes three types of typologies of visitors (p.77, 7.87, 8.256). I present only two types of them. The pilgrim-tourist has an average income, is retired, valorises religious souvenirs, looks for affordable accommodations, and has no defined spiritual purposes. The closer friend of the monastery builds relationships with monks and spends much time taking care of the monastery, is accommodated inside the monastery, and offers help to the monastery. The reader himself can find a typology of the monasteries. Some monasteries are producers, and their variation is determined by the level of technology used, knowledge, and expertise, as well as the distinction between nun monastery and monk monastery. Some monasteries are not producers, only retailers.

Regarding the conclusion, the author admits the unfinished character of the book because of the vastness of his subject of study (p.249). However, a conclusion for sure is that “there doesn't exist a monastic economy in Romania, currently, but more monastic economies” (p. 251). However, the keywords that describe Romanian monasticism's unity are tradition, nostalgia, and patrimonialism (p.258).

The rhetorical questions throughout the book's text are essential for future research on other dimensions of monastic life: Can the monastery be defined? What happens when a utopia routinises itself and turns into a habit? Why do poor monasteries produce honey and no other products? I would draw attention to additional aspects that require consideration: the longitudinal perspective on the economic process, the factors determining this process and its authenticity. Alongside the abundance of data, these elements turn Mirel Bănică's work into an invitation to continue profound research on Romanian Orthodox monasticism.