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A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN ORGAN TRANSPLANTATION

Lorena TĂRUS¹

Abstract

In sociological terms issues such as religion, religiosity or church institution they were approached by various keys of interpretation. The church is approached including, or especially, when we refer to challenges of the current reality such as euthanasia, cloning, in vitro fertilization etc.. In contemporary society, the appeal to the church institution seeks to the identify of the meaning to the events of the individual. Today the individual and collective path of people includes an extensive and diverse range of experiences which only the church sometimes finds meaning. The religious dimension of the current church makes such an important social actor, looking like the glue of the community. At the same time the church can be seen in various situations that come to confirm the role and its importance in society. This paper brings out the church as a social actor in the issue of organ transplantation. the donation and the transplant of the organs include some aspects that do not match with the church speech. However, the church represents an actor which can adapt in a way that it can not be trapped in the religious texts that do not refer to issues under discussion. The second part of this article presents arguments and data regarding Romanian Orthodox Church and its ability to outline an important actor in the Romanian territory.

Keywords: donation, transplant, church, the role of the church, Romanian Orthodox Church

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The church – an actor in the issue of transplantation

The church is the institution that is the first and most entitled to issue a minimum of directives concerning organ transplantation starting only from features such as respect for the body, bodily integrity and dignity, the body at the end of life etc.. At the same time, “at the start of the third millennium, Christianity in general and the church in particular find themselves in the situation of re-asserting their capacity to acknowledge the changes found in our society and to prove that the ecclesial element does hold the appropriate answers to social and technical mutations” (Iloaie, 2011: 101). Thus, in associating organ donation and transplantation and the church/religious belief, we aim to see, first and foremost, what are the favourable and unfavourable aspects identified in the texts and opinions belonging to the members of the church in terms of organ donation and transplantation.

Organ donation and transplantation, although essentially altruistic processes, based on the notion of helping others, are very rarely present in the discourse of religious representatives. This statement cannot be generalised, but when searching for studies or research work on organ donation from a religious perspective, the perspective narrows considerably, as most of them refer to religion just as a reason in favour or against organ donation. Thus, there is a very small number of studies that reflect a clear and assumed religious vision, fact that proves the weak presence of church voices that have something to say in this respect.

Organ donation and transplantation, from the perspective of any church, call to altruism and charity, to unconditional and discreet giving, under the cover of anonymity. Organ donation and transplantation often come up against the barrier of religion, the dogmas of which do not allow or do not deal with this challenge of today’s world. Hence the question regarding the relevance and the visibility of a church that is up to date. The research carried out so far has included this aspect, and the religious representatives who were queried have argued in favour of interpreting reference works written thousands of years ago and harmonising these writings with the requirements of today’s society. (Randhawa, *et al.*, 2012; Ozer *et al.*, 2010).

The church appears thus to have an antinomic role: on the one hand to explain, express and assume a point of view that the society can relate to, so that individuals can acquiesce or not, depending on subjective precepts, and on the other hand to stay close to its sacred character, by showing a too permissive adaptability or an acceptability lacking an accurate rationalisation. A third direction would be to say nothing or to provide a minimum of information at official level, without integrating organ donation in a visible “strategy” for making known its adopted position. The research that has focused on the religious factor, the subjects of which were members of the church, have mentioned the lack of debates concerning donation and transplantation that would involve individuals from a wide range of domains, in order to articulate the information in an accessible language. (Randhawa, *et al.*, 2012; Ozer *et al.*, 2010; Naçar *et al.*, 2009). Integrating the religious discourse in the everyday one can prove to be very difficult, and this is

the reason why the role of the church representatives is the more important. However, religious individuals want to have a church that is active and present in their lives, as whenever they face a problem they go to church, they talk to its representatives and they look for solutions together with them. The religious factor is often included in the studies concerning donation, but a clear connection between religion and organ donation has not been established in any other spaces than the Muslim and the British ones (Türkyilmaz *et al.*, 2013; Uskun & Ozturk, 2013; Randhawa *et al.*, 2012; Ozer *et al.*, 2010). Christian churches do not have studies that point to a well-formed opinion concerning organ donation. For this reason, the relation to the topic is considered to be purely theoretical and hypothetical, inferred from the official positions presented by these institutions (Kinnaert, 2008). Christianity is divided into numerous denominations and therefore the various views cannot be compressed into an unanimous one. Nevertheless, Christians believe in eternal life, and death is merely a passage to another life in their belief. Transplant is permitted, but the decision is left to the patient or to his/her family. The organs must not be removed until death has been established unequivocally (Puchalski & O' Donnell, 2005). Irrespective of persuasion, all theologians supporting organ donation assert that the act is praiseworthy, but not mandatory. The autonomy and the dignity of the human being must be respected both in life and in death. There are differences in opinion between Orthodox and Protestant Christians concerning certain aspects, but none of them rejects outright the entire procedure (Kinnaert, 2008).

The Catholic Catechism confirms the fact that organ transplant is in agreement to the moral law and it can be seen as praiseworthy as long as the final aim is to save human lives. Post-mortem donation would therefore be a noble act, which should be encouraged as an expression of human solidarity. However, organ donation cannot be presented as mandatory, because the decision must be left to the believers themselves. Conservative Orthodox theologians firmly oppose post-mortem organ harvesting and autopsy. For them, the soul does not leave the body immediately after death, and the separation process requires several days. Such medical procedures would therefore be harmful to the deceased individual (Kinnaert, 2008). The religious institution is one of the main institutions Muslims turn to for support and advice. For most of their problems, Muslims look for reference and directions among the representatives of the faith. The latter are very often consulted about issues of everyday life. Organ donation and the position of religious institutions concerning it are aspects for which Muslims seek answers in the religious institution itself. Despite the importance given to consulting a religious leader in the Islamic world, the representatives of the faith believe themselves not to be very well informed about the issue of organ donation. Information here concerns the two dimensions being discussed: the religious/spiritual one and the medical one. Moreover, the urgency concerns not so much the collection of information regarding these two dimensions, as their integration and adaptation to the discourse of the religious representatives. One of the studies made in the Islamic space pointed out the unwillingness of half of the interviewed religious leaders to donate organs. This percentage of religious leaders, although unrepresentative, shows both rigidity and a weak intention to become role-models. They do not forbid organ donation, they agree with it, they

do find arguments to relate to in their particular religious writings, but when facing the situation of donating their own organs they choose not to (Uskun & Ozturk, 2013). However, the research carried out captures the contradiction between the picture of Islamic religious “strictness” (as it is often seen or known outside it) and the openness towards the topic being discussed (Uskun & Ozturk, 2013). We are dealing both with an openness “extracted” or synthesised from the religious dogma, as well as with an acceptance of the organ donation practice, even with a certain degree of support for the latter. Unlike the Muslim space, in the Chinese one religion and culture intertwine or overlap much more intimately. Chinese culture is rooted in the belief in reincarnation and in spiritual progress, and this affects end-of-life decisions (Cai, 2013). The three great religious movements in Chinese culture are underpinned by elements that give top priority to bodily integrity. Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism are religious movements deeply embedded in the Chinese mentality, and they propagate issues such as bodily integrity, following the natural course of life, reincarnation. In this context, extending and preserving a person’s life, harvesting organs from the deceased and the very concept of brain death challenge the beliefs about person transmigration, bodily integrity, bodily harmony through the existence and preservation of all organs etc.

The abovementioned issues are deeply embedded in the Chinese mentality. Nevertheless, the need to interpret them is part of the adaptation to what amounts to a genuine social challenge nowadays, and some authors have reshaped the traditional patterns according to the frameworks of modernity (Wu & Lu, 2011). Organ donation and enrolling in a donor’s register should be a normal thing nowadays. Underlining the role of the church in this issue can be done by identifying the resources of such institutions. Organ donation can be redefined as the expression of a great love, but the way of transposing this principle into practice also needs to be identified. Although at the opposite end of the spectrum in relation to other cultures, having doctrines that apparently do not accept organ donation, the Chinese space also possesses cutting edge technology for organ transplant, a good sign that the relevant cultural practices that would support donation will not be long in changing. Judaism also believes in life after death, but the topic is not as central to the belief as it is in other religions. Orthodox Jews are against organ transplantation, but other Jewish denominations have more permissive and more up-to-date opinions (Puchalski & O’Donnell, 2005).

As we have mentioned above, literature includes only a few studies concerning the opinions of religious representatives about organ donation. These studies belong to the Muslim space, and the references to religion in the matter of organ donation are the usual, basic ones, without stating opinions synthesised as a result of research. We could say that the lack of studies in this area appears to be in contradiction with the religiousness many societies display. Moreover, this absence of assumed opinions points to a certain visible but unjustified detachment on the part of organised religion, irrespective of the society being discussed. On the one side we see religion being identified by various studies as a barrier for organ donation, and on the other side – the lack of voices in the

church being firmly in favour or against donation and supporting one stance or another.

Some authors underline other, less visible nuances of organ donation and transplantation. Professor Hans Grewel points out the unjustifiably high cost of a transplant, while many people do not have access to basic healthcare. Hans Grewel believes that associating organ donation with neighbourly love is inappropriate. Moreover, the professor believes it is unacceptable to insist on discussing organ shortages, because this creates guilt among potential donors. For Grewel, there is no such thing as a right to transplant, because society has forgotten that death is a natural process. In the case of patients who die as a result of organ failure, one should not blame the lack of available organs, but instead accept the destiny that decided their death at that particular moment (Kinnaert, 2008).

Another reflection direction belongs to Sebastian Moldovan, a Christian Orthodox theologian. He states that, given the changes in society we witness on a daily basis, we can sketch a few hypothetical metamorphoses in the case of organ donation. Once the practice of transplantation becomes routine, won't the donors' "heroism" be speculated in order to obtain mass altruism? Won't consent become more of a civic obligation, a way to social recognition, even a multiplied form of conformism, no longer an act that starts in the individual's unmediated self and desire? This remark is at least one that requires well thought-out projections for the long term (Frunza *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, this direction confirms even more the role of the church as an actor in the process of organ donation, a role that needs to be an active one. In a society in which standards are relative, certainties are periodically reversed and renewed, a reconfiguration of the role of the church is truly necessary. An entity with a high power of influence such as the church must look for the expression of a correct positioning when faced with today's challenges (Moldovan, 2009).

Religious and spiritual beliefs can be important for those who are sick or even dying. Religion helps people make sense of the world around them and overcome the stress and suffering of this world, and deepens their relationship with the others or with God. Religions include beliefs, teachings and practices that can be of real support in times of illness, loss or death. These religious traditions can be applied through spiritual caregiving that is detached from any particular tradition or belief. The practices could be incorporated together with the family, through discussions both with the patients and with their families in the cases where the patients show an interest in complementing the medical approach with a spiritual one. The important thing is to avoid generalising this possible approach, as each individual integrates religion and belief in his/her own manner. Also, by relating subjectively to these aspects, individuals will respond in different manners to suffering and illness (Puchalski & O' Donnell, 2005).

A brief analysis of the religious dimension in organ donation and transplantation reveals the fact that no religion forbids the donation or reception of organs, nor is any religion against organ transplantation, be the donors alive or deceased (Bruzzone, 2008). At the same time, however, religions do not view donation as a religious or mandatory duty. Nevertheless, all religious interpretations view

donation as the expression of a great love, a love that justifies self-sacrifice for one's neighbour, even though that neighbour may have caused one harm. Such aspects must, however, be nuanced, depending on the church/religion we refer to.

As we can see, the church/organised religion must and does have all the arguments for being seen as an "actor" in the economy of organ donation and transplantation. Based on the principle of helping ones' neighbour, the religious institution would be right to support already habitual practices such as organ donation and transplantation. Reality however shows the church as a rather invisible and imperceptible actor in concrete situations in which the individual is looking for a solution to a problem of the utmost urgency. Clearly, radical changes cannot occur overnight. This process, of assuming one direction or another is not unidirectional, instead it must include vast areas of the society. At the same time, an incorrect or wrongly promoted opinion can make the population change its mind and reconsider donation, a development that is not desirable.

The Romanian Orthodox Church and organ donation

The Romanian space is one in which the institution of the church has enjoyed a great deal of trust from the part of the population. At the same time, Romania, similar to other regions, has the problem of long waiting lists for organs needed in order to extend and improve patients' lives. Also, the Romanian space does not have a high donation rate, and thus any reason to be optimistic for the future. All these issues, taken together (although they can be approached separately), seem to point to a connection between the Romanian Orthodox Church and organ donation. In other words, we ask ourselves: if the Romanian Orthodox Church adopted an openly and firmly pro-donation stand, would the rates of donation increase? In the absence so far of studies among the representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church, we do have some arguments that could support a favourable hypothesis, converted from the interrogation above.

The perspective attempted here does not aim to discuss the ideal projection of the situation of organ donation; instead, it attempts to sketch a few reasons why some actors — the church in this case — could use and assume a voice that is quite well listened to in Romania. Using an association of the concepts *organ donation* and *Christian Orthodox vision*, both international databases and the classic online search engines have yielded works and collateral research, which, however, do not deal with these notions in the same content. The virtual space holds various pages that describe summarily the Christian vision in this matter, but they are mere lists of references to the acceptability of organ donation among the representatives of each faith, without citing any research carried out on this topic. The resources we refer to in the Romanian space when we discuss organ donation and the Orthodox Christian vision start, first and foremost, with the publications issued by the Romanian Patriarch's Office. The official institution of Romanian Orthodox faith does cite certain sources, but their content sometimes

deals with organ donation by using personal opinions and other times by citing the reference works the church members use in order to coordinate their activity. We have found that “for approaching the issues of everyday life, as a rule, Orthodox theology does not provide canons or concrete rules, but instead describes the assumptions and lists the basic criteria, which can then have various applications” (Buta, 2009: 106) Thus, the existing resources do not reflect any research carried out in the matter of organ donation.

For the Romanian Orthodox Church, “organ and tissue transplant is one of the most advanced forms of current medical practice, turning suffering into hope for a longer life. It is an achievement of medical science and practice that the Church gives its blessing to, as long as transplantation solves a crisis cause by the lack of other solutions and restores a person’s normal life, without however robbing someone else of it: no-one must be killed so that someone else may live”. (<http://patriarhia.ro/transplantul-de-organe-1451.html> - accessed on 14.11.2014) With amendments aimed at various areas of donation and transplant (brain death, physician responsibility/liability, donor, recipient etc.), the Resolution of the Romanian Orthodox Church Bioethics Committee is the official document in which the majority church in Romania expresses an opinion concerning today’s challenges in this domain.

In the previous section we have seen what are the actors involved in the organ donation and transplant system/process and how they can be identified. The church is a visible and perceptible actor standing behind the religious factor seen as a barrier to donation. In this respect, the current section aims to highlight the roles with which the Romanian Orthodox Church can identify in the issue at stake. Compared to the European average (7%), Romanians point to the religious factor as a barrier in organ donation in a proportion of 17%². This percentage confirms the fact that the institution of the majority religion in Romania must identify this issue more clearly and assume an appropriate stand in this matter.

First of all, the Romanian Orthodox Church could be actor with great influence in the issue of organ donation. Although the beneficiary of significant trust, the church has a weak voice in social actions. Organ donation and transplantation are aspects in which the Christian principles of altruism and mutual help need to be applied in practice, not just in theory. A better visibility of the Church in this segment would position the institution as an actor with an articulated voice in the issue of organ transplantation.

Definitely, the involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the economy of the organ donation and transplantation system may be perceived as a challenge, as an interference. However, there are positive examples in this direction, and therefore models that can be borrowed and adapted.

At the same time, the Romanian Orthodox Church must be viewed as a resource. Whether we refer to it as a resource of information that does not condemn donation, or whether we can identify church representatives who would donate their organs or who have been/would be organ recipients in the case of a

² http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_333a_en.pdf

need for transplant, the Romanian Orthodox Church can position itself as an important resource for changing the numbers in terms of donation in Romania. One argument in this direction could be the press release on the Church's official webpage, saying that "The Church gives its blessing to any medical practice that reduces suffering in the world, and therefore the transplantation performed deference both for the recipient and for the donor, alive or deceased. The lifeless human body must enjoy all our respect"³. It is not possible to make a separation between the Romanian Orthodox Church as an actor, a resource or a challenge, as all these roles can overlap or interchange depending on circumstance. What can be anticipated without difficulty is the change in the perception of the religious factor as a barrier for donation in Romania, as long as the institution representing the majority religion assumes firmly some of the roles that it has played so far unintentionally. At the same time, the lack of a concrete transposition of the debates held and of the decisions adopted at formal, official level can no longer be ignored and pushed to the background in today's society, as adaptation to today's requirements and demands is naturally necessary.

Conclusions

The church has a large capital of trust (62% of the respondents in a study made in February 2013 stated they trusted the church highly and very highly; the percentage has decreased in the past four years)⁴. and enough means to become involved in the issue of organ donation and transplantation. Although the official position of the Romanian Orthodox Church concerning organ transplantation is commendable, the Church itself is too little present in terms of concrete attitudes in the population that declares itself as Christian Orthodox and which is in contact with the Church. Of course, in a broader context, it is not just the Church that could become an important vector in shaping opinions and attitudes concerning transplantation. Meanwhile we cannot help but notice the absence of debates in which the representatives of the Church could discuss donation and transplantation together with other professionals. An inter-disciplinary discourse could translate Orthodox catechism aspects into everyday language. Currently, the attitude of the church is perceived only from the point of view of an official position, rather than through a sustained effort to inform and enlighten the believers in an issue of such great importance. We believe that a series of debates on the topic of transplantation, adapted to the expectations of the population, could put into an accessible language much more elements from the Church's vision of this issue. Also, such debates would indicate both openness towards this social issue and a genuine interest for mutual help and saving the lives of others. Another approach would be to ask the Church to remain reserved, as today's challenges are nothing but waves that will sweep over the institution of the

³ <http://patriarhia.ro/transplantul-de-organe-1451.html>

⁴ www.agerpres.ro/social/2014/05/12/sondaj-csop-romanii-au-cea-mai-mare-incredere-in-biserica-si-armata-14-5126

church, which needs to be a pillar of strength and resist the challenges for which it is entitled to give its opinion.

With all these in mind, irrespective of the position adopted, the position of the Church must be a visible and transparent one, and most importantly, with all the necessary arguments in one direction or another.

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