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Identitary Character and Social Hypostases of Christian-Orthodox Femininity

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Abstract

This study is a theoretical attempt to analyze a category of femininity which is called Christian-Orthodox femininity within the conceptual framework of the symbolic interactions and social representations. This paper focuses on outlining the characteristics defining the social identity of the orthodox femininity and its social roles as they are depicted in the primary resources of the Christian Tradition. The aim is to theoretically delineate a new model of feminine social identity and to bring sociological and theological arguments in favor of the points of view.

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1. Introduction. *Social configuration of feminine identity*

The common perspective of all theoretical approaches analyzing the identitary phenomenon in its multiple dimensions is that the individual cannot define oneself as an identity without making reference to *the other*. There have been identified several models or identitary types which are interrelated. This has been the very ground on which all the theories about woman's social identity have evolved. There are numerous approaches related to the feminine identitary construction. If we were to consider only the feminist doctrine, it incorporates a whole political, social and juridical philosophy in which woman's identity is permanently reinvented. Even a brief presentation of all these theories would constitute the body of a separate research. Since they do not represent our main concern, we are going to tangentially refer to them.

If the social history of gender justifies the dialectic on which all the analyses have relied so far, we believe that our modern civilization is ready to go beyond an antinomic type of approach. We are referring to the classical approach of gender differences, the antinomy between femininity and masculinity. Ideologically speaking, we can

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envisage a movement from feminism to post-feminism. Some of the exaggerations supported by feminism were useful in their socio-historical context due to the fact that they had the power to bring about significant mutations concerning serious social issues like gaining some natural rights (the right to vote, other civil rights, contraception). Other ideas supported by feminism have become obsolete for a long time especially from socio-historical point of view. Nowadays the woman's social status is shaped according to completely different principles. The woman would sooner define herself by taking herself as a referential point. The social worthiness of femininity has increased to such an extent that there is no need for an external evaluation, namely from the masculinity sphere.

Since gender differences profoundly marked the gender identity, we will briefly review the main feminine identity traits and we will mention some of the most general hypostases of femininity in order to further develop the feminine identity concept announced in the title of this study – the orthodox feminine (also called the orthodox femininity).

The traditional model of femininity is characterized by submission and conformity to a masculine sexual model, passivity, self-sacrifice, maternity, protecting attitude, self-actualization in the private life. The contrast between the traditional traits of femininity and the non-traditional ones are obvious: autonomy, sexual independence, desire to reach fulfillment in the professional field, emancipation, self-actualization or at least visibility in the public space. The housewife, the religious woman is in sharp contrast with the businesswoman or the feminist one. Starting from the fact that on the social stage the opposition between the traditional and non-traditional femininity have become so obvious, we can sense that the latter has the tendency to monopolize owing to the intense promotion of certain women who are labeled as being powerful, independent and desirable models to follow.

The public visibility of the models regarded as desirable or successful by mass-media represent the best-selling image and the commercial value of these "public figures". The identity of such characters is diluted in the image created by them. The traditional model of femininity is often ignored. It becomes visible in the public eye only when mass-media considers it appropriate to be shown in a certain temporal context: the great religious holidays, occasions on which the traditional model of femininity is intensely promoted and commercialized. The universe of this type of woman is the household, the preparation of the traditional dishes, the church attendance. Another tendency is that of blending the two typologies more or less successfully. We have no intention of pleading in favour of any of them or to put forward any syncretic model. Irrespective of what society offers or claims, women have the liberty to construct her own feminine identity and to consequently assume her natural role of social actor. The social actors' life is determined by a person's identity is based on the gender distinctions. From a feminine perspective, *the other* is the masculine according to which she defines herself. Michel Foucault in his book *The History of Sexuality* and Pierre Bourdieu in *La domination masculine* consider that the differences between the masculine and the feminine are created by society. In their turn, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Dale Spencer criticized the masculine language and pleaded for a feminine writing and form of expression without which we would not have the chance to explore women's experiences and feelings in a sexist society. Yet, we cannot overlook the predispositions and the biological peculiarities characterizing genders. However, all the psychological, socio-cultural, linguistic and symbolic distinctions stem from certain preconceptions and stereotypes imposed by social rules or ideologies. Distinctions of this type originate not only from gender oppositions, but especially from social clashes between tradition and modernity, public and private area, domineering and dominated social categories, patriarchy and matriarchy.

The contrasts existing in the present Romanian society have a negative impact on the female identity construction due to the unstable values and the models' devaluation. In this social context, the woman's affiliation to the Christian-Orthodox values provides the elements of stability of permanence needed for the formation of any identity. It is what the theorists dealing with the identity concept call *the sense of belonging to a group*.

A woman belonging to the Christian-Orthodox community finds not only her religious identity, but also her social identity. As an actor of the Christian- Orthodox community and of the society as a whole, a woman assuming to lead her life according to the Christian values will confront with a series of challenges. These add to the difficulties, successes and failures of a life led in a less coherent and secularized society. The option to live according to the principles and values preached by the orthodox Christianity may be inspired by the need for stability, security and resilience in observing the moral precepts. These can be found in the social role assumed by women in the orthodox community. Woman's valuation, the respect shown by the Orthodox Church and the model of femininity promoted by this institution can be the ground for assuming the social role of a Christian woman.

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