

Article

Folk Religion in Transformation: A Religious Studies Perspective Based on Examples from Romania

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Abstract: The present study deals with some changes identifiable on the level of folk religion, i.e., of the religious expression of ordinary people. Its premises are that folk religion is a subsegment of religion, fulfilling specific functions which official or elite religion fail to satisfy. The paper lies on a theoretical grounding stemming mainly from the Scandinavian school of comparative religion and folkloristics and applies these theories to examples from Romania. In this way, the specific functions of folk religion are analyzed, and the question is asked how these needs come to be met once people detach from the rural values. It is found that individuals which have lost their connection to traditions also head with their needs to cognitively less costly religious forms, this time to global forms, which had become contents of the now enlarged pool of tradition. These contents are actualized in accordance with the concrete personal needs. In different forms of new spiritualities many characteristics of folk religion can be identified, moreover, they take similar roles. This demonstrates that folk religion has its own dynamism, transforming to reflect social and cultural change.

Keywords: folk/popular/vernacular religion; religious change; religious transformation; new spiritualities; New Age; cognitively optimal religion; religion in Romania



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1. Introduction

Folk religion is the primary focus of this article. Long dismissed by a part of the scholars as an inferior form of religiosity, which does not rise to the conceptual level of the religion of the elites; and does not benefit from sacred writings or organized forms, folk religion sums up ways of understanding and of practicing religion that deserve to be considered as such by both scientific research on religion and religious practitioners.

Folk religion has been addressed either in the field of folkloristics and ethnology, where it has been treated as a secondary determinant, as the focus of such disciplines are folk traditions in general, or within the different endeavors centered on religion. These took very different approaches, ranging from contesting folk religion and combating it as superstition that needs to be eradicated (Nizami 2019) to idealizing it as a pure expression of sensibility of the folk (Eliade 1985, p. 228). From the perspective of contemporary religious studies, studying folk religion as religion entails posing queries like: how do people address their religious needs by means of folk religion? Why do they turn to folk religion rather than official religion? What religious forms do they create to meet their needs? How do the forms of folk religion evolve over time to reflect broader changes in human life? What do these dynamics reveal about the dynamics of religion in general?

The current study, conducted from a religious studies perspective, investigates what happens to folk religion in a time when people move away from the rural traditions that comprise its content. Is folk religion declining and expected to disappear along with rural traditions? Or does it follow a distinct dynamic, and if so, what are the drives of these transformations and how does its content change?

To address this issue, folk religion must first be defined. The next step will thus be to establish a working definition, centered on the roles that folk religion plays. The current study will then investigate how these people's needs are met after traditional forms of folk religion begin to fade. The goal of such a paper is not to provide a comprehensive answer, but only to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of our time. It will accomplish this by drawing on previously developed theoretical ideas and by analyzing some examples from Romania. The examples are based on previous studies conducted by ethnologists, sociologists, and scholars of religion, which will be addressed from a new perspective, in light of the general interest of this paper. Therefore, following chapters will define folk religion and its roles, present some theoretical insights that can offer clues to understanding the processes, introduce into the Romanian context, analyze aspects of the Romanian folk religion practice, and track their transformations as a result of the social transformations of the last decades. The analysis will provide new insights into the religious dynamics of our time contributing to both theoretical debates and a greater acceptance of folk religion in research and everyday life.

2. Theory: Folk Religion and Its Characteristics

It is widely acknowledged that religion, as well as folk, are concepts that defy any attempt to define them. Furthermore, they have been contaminated by ideological definitions derived from the 18th century Enlightenment and the 19th century national romanticism (Anttonen 2004, pp. 73–74). Still, in order to use concepts, they must be defined, while keeping in mind the potential biases and incompleteness of each definition. When it comes to folk religion, the term has several meanings: it can refer to religious aspects that are not congruent with the official or elite religion, or even those that come from the religious substratum, remnants of the religious practices which existed on that territory prior to the spread of Christianity; or it can refer to popular ways of practicing the established religion, which may differ from the understanding and the practice seen as normativity (see Krech 2005, pp. 1170–71; Bowker 2003, p. 1066).

However, the two meanings are not as dissimilar as they appear. According to one of the most comprehensive definitions, “folk religion is the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion” (Yoder 1974, p. 14). This definition suggests continuity between the two meanings mentioned above.

The term “vernacular religion”, which means “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (Primiano 1995, p. 44) expresses this continuity of the different forms even better. According to Primiano, all aspects of religion, even the institutionalized ones, have a vernacular character (Primiano 1995, p. 45). Many other researchers have since adopted these insights, with the Finnish and the other Scandinavian schools of religious studies making significant contributions (see, e.g., Anttonen 2004; Rydving 2004; Pyysiäinen 2004; Illman and Czimbalmos 2020).

In Scandinavia, the close relationship between folkloristics and comparative religion has aided in the understanding of folk religion as “the paradigmatic form of religion” (Kamppinen 2014, p. 4). Official religion is viewed as an abstract construct that can be useful and used as a reference point, similar to literary language versus spoken dialects (Hukantaival 2013, p. 103).

The use of cognitivist theories, such as Harvey Whitehouse's differentiation between “cognitively optimal religions” and “cognitively costly religions” (Whitehouse 2004), has further developed the concept. Folk religion has been found to be cognitively less costly than official religion, as it “aims at practical solutions to everyday issues, not at creating general theories” (Hukantaival 2013, p. 104). This “leads also persons who are explicitly committed to orthodox concepts to occasionally ‘slip’ into this mode since it is both easier to handle and more relevant from the everyday point of view” (Pyysiäinen 2004; apud Hukantaival 2013, p. 104).

Another significant feature of folk religion is the selective interpretative takeover from Christian and pre-Christian sources. Folk religion is therefore a mix of reinterpreted pre-Christian elements and reinterpreted Christian constructs. “The result is a dynamic, non-consistent whole that includes many elements that could be seemingly contradictory, but still no conflict is experienced in the mind of the practitioner.” (Hukantaival 2013, p. 104).

The reason why people select one or the other element when building their syncretic whole is purely pragmatic. “For the real man, the foundation of the idea of the sacred belongs, however, to the centrality of the ego and integrates with the individual’s need to strengthen and propel this personal ego” (Marian-Bălașa 2010, p. 219). The desire to obtain direct benefits in return is the reason why people worship gods or venerate saints. “This is why accumulation—up to amalgamation—of ideas and of favorable (religious, magical and mentally-superstitious) practices—is one of the fundamental, structural principles of popular religion.” (Marian-Bălașa 2010, p. 219)

Organized around such pragmatic interests, folk religion lends itself to analysis from the standpoint of its contribution to the religious welfare of religious practitioners. Folk religion fulfills its specific tasks, whereas official and elaborate religion focus on other aspects. While elite religion is in charge of developing the theoretical foundation, defining and applying norms, and institutional religion deals with internal regulations, folk religion meets people’s everyday, ordinary emotional and cognitive needs in a “cognitively optimal” manner. “Ordinary, everyday thinking typically proceeds from the immediate experience of individuals; it aims at short-term, practical efficacy, not at creating general theories; it seeks evidence and not counter-evidence; it makes use of individual cases as evidence and personalizes values and ideals; it makes use of abductive inference; and its argumentation often takes narrative form” (Pyysiäinen 2004, p. 157). Following along these lines, folk religion helps people calm down in difficult situations and accept reality as it is, without being too morally or otherwise challenged; and it provides an intellectually less demanding, less costly worldview, that they can easily integrate into their understanding.

The needs of the people are met in folk religion, as well as other folk specific cultural elements that are not subject to authoritative directing from above, by recourse to a set of elements available as cultural components, which are actualized in accordance with a specific context. Lauri Honko introduced the distinction between the “pool of tradition” (Honko 2000, pp. 18–19), which is the “coexistence of traditional multiforme, genres and registers in the human mind” (Honko 2000, p. 17), in other words the sum of resources, the “reservoir of meaning carriers” (Kamppinen 2014, p. 9) and the culture as a system of actualization of such resources in specific contexts. Meanings themselves are defined as “functions of a higher order” or “groups of functions” that a cultural entity may have depending to the context (Kamppinen 2014, p. 8), thus, Honko speaks about “the processes of the construction of meaning in a particular cultural context” (Honko 2000, p. 12).

The “folklore process” (Honko 1990, p. 569) thus consists of the conceptualizing of a lived experience using resources from the pool of tradition, and in verbalizing it again and again in different settings, while each verbal actualization implies a reinterpretation, i.e., a new functionalization based on the needs as perceived in the new context and drawing upon different elements from the same pool of tradition (see Kamppinen 2014, p. 9). In the information age, “pools of tradition become more dynamic”, assimilating global elements; and various cultural systems coexist next to each other, but the process of actualization follows the same patterns (see Kamppinen 2014, p. 11).

To summarize, folk religion can be defined as a subset of religion that fills roles which official religion or elite religion do not, by selectively drawing resources from the expanded pool of tradition, whether they are simplified and reinterpreted contents of the official religion, or other contents, adapted to the personal situational needs. Despite all of its limitations and the fact that other theoretical studies have highlighted other aspects of folk religion, this working definition will serve as the foundation for any further considerations in this study.

3. Folk Religion in the Present-Day Romanian Context

Romania's recent history has been defined by its membership in the communist block after the 2nd world war and until 1989 and by a turbulent post-communist period. Following an interwar period in which Romanian thinking was nourished primarily by German ethno-nationalism (M. Pătru 2022, pp. 76–79, 91–96), communist ideology implied a disconnect from Western cultural movements, as well as an oppression of religion in all its forms, particularly in its popular forms that were dismissed as superstitions. The period saw significant social changes brought about by industrialization and forced urbanization. After 1990, society did not automatically find the link to the pre-communist period, because people's mentality had undergone major changes during the communist decades and continued to transform in response to the new challenges represented by the country's intellectual opening, new social realities, and globalization in all its dimensions.

Some of these transformations, and even some transformations related to the rural, have been scholarly recorded and analysed (see, e.g., Mihăilescu 2017), while others continue to be overlooked. People's relationships to their folk traditions are a Cinderella story in sociological studies. The reduction in interest in and even knowledge of them is a widely observed phenomenon that has been recorded incidentally in various interviews during field work (see Pătru 2015a, 2015b), but it lacks solid sociological research. The researchers were interested in religion in general, official religion and its forms of expression (Bănică and Mihăilescu 2017), rural secularization (Tănase 2022) or specific categories of people in relation to religion, again in its established norms (Besoiu 2020). As a result, the few considerations on the evolution of folk religion have to rely on scant material, and the internal logic of argumentation.

According to studies conducted in Western Europe, folk religion is declining at the same rate as religion in general (Bruce 2020, pp. 182–203). Because folk religion can be viewed as a subsystem of religion in general, alongside official religion, it is natural that evolutions that affect the system to affect all of its subsystems. However, in Romania, folk religion is declining for other reasons, which are linked to the rural decline. Forced urbanization during the communist period, labour migration to Western countries in recent years and changes in the image of the peasant in the post-communist discourse (Mihăilescu 2017) are just a few of the causes. Furthermore, the efforts of theologically trained representatives of the official religion, such as bishops and parish priests, to combat superstitions, have had some success (see Pătru 2015a, p. 14; 2015b, pp. 84–85; Jiga-Iliescu 2022, p. 218).

All of these factors lead to a decline in interest in folk traditions, which are no longer conserved and passed on. Does this suggest that folk religion is also fading away? What transpires with the functions that folk religion performs and those that high religion does not? How are they addressed now that the previous forms have been abandoned? Are there any new forms that could replace the old ones? What are these new forms, if so? The next chapters will attempt to work towards an answer using examples from Romania.

4. Roles Fulfilled by Folk Religion in Its Traditional Expression

The following paragraphs will go over two examples, both of which focus on the roles that specific elements of popular religion play. As mentioned in the theoretical section, folk religion helps people calm down in difficult situations and accept reality as it is, without being challenged too much, morally or in some other way. Their own way of being, their imperfections, and the limited nature of life, mortality, i.e., their own finitude and the loss of loved ones, are two important fields where this acceptance operates. Of course, addressing these acceptance and integration needs does not exhaust folk religion's roles. However, dealing with them demonstrates the transformations that folk religion undergoes. The limitations of a short study do not allow to address the question thoroughly, but this shall be done in future research, which will address the question whether the findings of this study deduced from these examples are generalizable, or if they only represent possibilities for transformation, along with others.

The first example is about their self-acceptance. As is well known, Christianity has established high moral standards, requiring repentance for all situations in life in which humans have failed to meet them. Christian Orthodox prayers and liturgical texts place a strong emphasis on human imperfection and God's immeasurable mercy, on God who accepts every repentant sinner. The image of the human as depicted in canonic liturgical texts is not easy to identify with; this is cognitively very costly (see [A. Pătru Forthcoming](#)). Therefore, people resort to a cognitively more optimal image, which emerges within popular religion. It is the image of the Mother of God and of various saints, as depicted in various Romanian folk carols and legends. There are several Christmas carols in which the Godmother curses trees and animals that do not provide her with the comfort she needs on her journey, but she ends up blessing one plant or animal that satisfies her needs (see, e.g., the collections published by: [Breazul \[1938\] 1993](#), p. 31; [Constantin 2020](#); [Alexe n.d.](#)). In other carols, the Mother of God is enraged and very aggressive toward St. John the Baptist for baptizing her infant son prior to her arrival (see the collection of [Teodorescu 1885](#), p. 32). This desire for vengeance is shared by other saints as well (see, e.g., [Teodorescu 1885](#), p. 32) and even by God ([Teodorescu 1885](#), pp. 32, 44).

As Marian-Bălașa argues, such folkloric texts do not suggest the presence of a Marian archetype, because they are not built on a logic of imitatio dei.

The image of the Godmother recreates "the profile of the Feminine and the Mother by excellence" ([Marian-Bălașa 2011](#), p. 23). This is accomplished by bringing to life not just the lightful sides of motherhood, but rather the problematic aspects. The Marian model is thus "the model of primary psychic reactivity and balancing" ([Marian-Bălașa 2011](#), p. 31). The Godmother is merely brought down to the human level:

"Mary's life is filled with tensions and traumas, fears and pains, anguish and tragedies from the moment of her pregnancy until the Apotheosis of her Ascension. The Mother of God is persecuted by people, assisted or hindered by animals, overcoming obstacles, but always reacting vengefully, always (through the Child, or using His name or power), to bless or curse, i.e., to defuse and exhaust her anguish, not without consequences . . . that mark the world or nature". ([Marian-Bălașa 2011](#), p. 23)

Of course, such carols have seldom been heard in recent years. Theologians and others attempt to safeguard and to correct the image of the Godmother (see, e.g., [Alexe n.d.](#); [Griga 2011](#)), while commentators on internet forums wonder whether such creations "are Romanian or not", implying that they have completely lost touch with them. ([Mihailt 2010](#)). This highlights huge mental and social changes. From the perspective of those who feed on folk religion, this means that the Mother of God and the saints have been confiscated by the elaborated religion and no longer belong to them. The implications shall be addressed in the next chapter.

Another feature of the Godmother's image in carols and legends, one that has survived, is her thaumaturgic power, which "is due both to her honor as a member of the pantheon, i.e., to her belonging to the superior hierarchy, being above saints and angels, and to her unique ability to understand the anguish of female destiny and suffering in general" ([Marian-Bălașa 2011](#), p. 23). "The natological and maternal destiny based on suffering", which includes both psychical and physical suffering, enables women to identify with the Mother of God ([Marian-Bălașa 2011](#), p. 34). Again, it is the Godmother's deeply human nature that allows people to expect understanding and protection.

The Godmother and other figures as stylized in such folkloric texts are representatives of the sacred which are neither intellectually nor morally demanding. On the contrary, such images allow those who use of them to be themselves, to accept their own "psychic reactivity", since the Mother of God reacted the same way. If they feel the need for understanding and comfort, they can turn to such images. Such religious thinking "proceeds from the immediate experience of individuals; it aims at short-term, practical efficacy . . . ; it makes use of individual cases as evidence and personalizes values and ideals; . . . and its argumentation . . . takes narrative form" ([Pyysiäinen 2004](#), p. 157).

A second example is the attitude towards death, which can be seen in in funerary folk songs, popular laments (bocete), authored, but strongly folk inspired songs of the dead (cântecul mortului) and customs associated with the commemoration of the dead. Mourning songs provide access to an understanding of death and afterlife, as it is characteristic of those who transmit them as well as those for whom the songs are intended, the loved ones who remain. This understanding and attitude are not those proposed by the doctrine of the official religion—the hope of being granted eternal life in Christ and the gratitude for the prospect of rising from the dead. It is also marked only superficially by the uncertainty about whether one has lived well enough to inherit heaven, as the ascetic literature and its liturgical reflections suggest. It is mainly the simple, primary, naturalistic understanding of death as loss and burial as return to earth, to the chthonic space with all its valences. In comparison with life here, the state after death is understood to be one of precariousness, of lack (see Kligman 1990; Pătru 2022a). Some songs and customs of almsgiving for the dead express the belief in the possibility of a connection between the realms, so that the remaining ones can improve the condition of their passed away fellow, enabling him or her to access some resources from this life (see Pătru 2022a). In the most optimistic, positive variants, masterfully expressed, e.g., in the folk poem *Miorița*, life continues after death as part of the great nature, integrated in its rhythms and thus enjoying a kind of peaceful immortality (see, e.g., Eliade 1970; Itu 1994; Surdu 2018).

This kind of eschatology imposes itself, because it is cognitively optimal. To imagine an afterlife of eternal communion with God and of bliss as a result of proximity to God, with all human needs transcended, as the official religion suggests, is cognitively very costly. Usually, people do not make this great leap and thus, in times of bereavement or crisis, in limit situations, folk religion is the one that best suits them. The ritual is also modified based on the circumstances and the emotional impact on those involved: "in time of peace, the ritual, which is meant to 'communicate' with the Sacred, is general and complex, while during crisis, it becomes simplistic, as it is customized to respond to the needs of the crisis" (Simion 2011, p. 145). This leads to the funeral songs which conclude the religious service and which are very suggestive expressions of folk religion (Pătru 2022a).

5. Folk Religion in Transition: Altered Situations and New Resources

As previously stated, people have drifted away from the aforementioned folk traditions in recent decades. Practices such as the song of the dead, lamentations and some of the customs are gradually fading in villages and they have never gained a foothold in urban areas. And it is not only the poetical forms that have vanished, but also the entire universe that they were transmitting. The practical customs of almsgiving remain the most vital, but they are frequently performed by newly urbanized individuals simply to keep the tradition alive, with no real connection to their meaning.

What is the attitude of this new, uprooted, and urbanized people towards death? How do they come to terms with their need to domesticate death and accept the passing away of loved ones? Have they integrated the Christian viewpoint, as a result of the hard work of priests and catechists of all kinds? The distinction between cognitively optimal and cognitively costly religions allows us to comprehend why the answer is negative: the Christian perspective is still cognitively very costly. Even if middle class people have received a higher education and have become accustomed to complex intellectual thinking in universities and schools, the death of a loved one is still a very strong emotional lived occurrence, and they very often slip back into the folk religion modus.

How does this happen? In this regard, Lauri Honko's theory about the pool of tradition and the actualization process is useful, as is Kamppinen's observation that "pools of tradition become more dynamic", assimilating global elements (Kamppinen 2014, p. 11). Processually, it happens in the same way: they select those elements from the pool of tradition, that fit their emotional needs. When about it comes to content, the differences are significant: the pool of tradition has expanded, now including various globalized cultural elements, while urban people no longer have the same connection with nature.

For many of the people mentioned, contemporary Western reincarnationist thinking is a cognitively optimal way of perceiving afterlife. Reincarnationist thought has spread so widely in Europe and in Eastern Europe as well, so that it is now a component of the pool of traditions, accessible for the mechanisms of folk religion specific meaning generation (see [Pătru 2022b](#)). Reincarnation has the same meaning for modern folk religion practitioners, i.e., it fulfills the same set of functions as integration in nature did for previous rural generations. Reincarnation, as understood in the West today, as “the prospect of living yet another life” ([Hammer 2014](#), pp. 215–16), is a cognitively not so costly way of perceiving the afterlife, since the reincarnationist afterlife is composed of the same elements as this life. Therefore, it is easily conceived by people who wish a continuation of life for a loved one. And it has the same capacity of calming down the remaining ones and those who are anguished by the perspective of their own death. Its functions are very similar to those of reintegration in nature, specific to folk religion in its traditional forms.

The situation is similar when it comes to people confronted with their own psychic reactivity and their need to be understood and comforted. They no longer identify with a temperamental image of the Godmother; on the contrary, such an image appears naïve to them. They also do not find solace in the Church’s cognitively costly offer, which preaches the idea of an all-loving and all-merciful God, while also overwhelming them with moral standards that they cannot meet. They turn to the now-expanded pool of tradition, where they can find a variety of discourses and practices aimed at developing and sustaining self-acceptance and a sense of comfort. From mindfulness theories and techniques, which are secularized forms of Buddhism, to apparently more laic proposals, one can find everything he or she needs to achieve calm and to accept himself herself as he/she is. The package includes simple daily rituals, such as breathing techniques, meditation, gymnastics, and mantras, as well as simple stories to support meaning.

How many people resort to such globalized elements from the enlarged pool of traditions? The number and the grade of resorting is constantly changing, i.e., growing. Debates about reincarnation can be heard even in church yards after the service ([Pătru 2022b](#)), and mindfulness has even been proposed as a school subject for children by Cioleş ([Roman 2019](#)). Most people adopt a mix of traditional and new, globalized elements which together fulfill the functions of folk religion. Sociological studies to give insight into the magnitude of the phenomenon would be extremely beneficial. Furthermore, more research is needed to determine whether this transition to globalized elements is a general trend encompassing all elements of folk religion, or whether it occurs only with reference to some specific aspects of it.

6. New Age as Folk Religion in the Research

The idea of New Age as folk religion of our time is not new. Mark Mullins was the first to indicate a link between Japanese New Age and local folk religion ([Mullins 1992](#)). Although his theories have been criticized for relating to “animism” or “magic” as universal, static aspects of human culture ([Hanegraaff 2001](#)), he did pave the way for such associations.

More recent articles provide much stronger evidence for the connection between the two forms of religion. Dorota Hall contends that Polish holism can be seen as a form of folk religion. She understands folk religion in an ethnographic sense, as indicating the ways in which ordinary people relate to Catholic tradition, and believes that “the main justification for making an association between new spiritualities as exercised in Poland and the “folk religiosity” deeply inscribed in the Polish religious culture is that such an operation highlights local peculiarities of transnational holistic phenomena” ([Hall 2014](#), p. 154). In the Polish case, “both cultural currents refer to the same patterns: they affirm a sensitivity based on the more or less immanent vision of the sacred and support related practical activities” ([Hall 2014](#), p. 155). She also emphasizes that, due to the high rate of Catholic Church identification among the members of the holistic scene, “it is problematic to apply certain scholarly considerations on “New Age” or new spiritualities

to the Polish case, especially attributes of self-actualization and culture criticism”, therefore, “the operational employment of the category of “folk religiosity” seems to be more accurate” (Hall 2014, p. 158).

Sonja Hukantaival, who has characterized folk religion as cognitively optimal, merely notes in her intricate study on archeology: “When looking around today, with the role of ‘official’ religion partly replaced by a scientific worldview, there are numerous different ‘folk interpretations’ about matters of religion and other beliefs (for example, about health and diet)” (Hukantaival 2013, p. 116). Hukantaival also equates present-day magical thinking with folk religion, offering examples of “modern folk religion circulating on the social media” (Hukantaival 2013, p. 116).

Eugenia Roussou reaches some interesting conclusions about the interplay of Christian Orthodoxy and New Age spirituality in Greece. She analyzes the example of the evil eye as a link between both spiritualities. “Their amalgamation has given rise to a vernacular form of spiritual creativity in contemporary Greece”, she notes (Roussou 2021, p. 174). Her observations support the idea that New Age and folk religion are two similar things that share common ground or even enrich one another (Roussou 2021, p. 174). She is not the only author to highlight minglings of traditional folk religion and New Age (see also Kis-Halas 2014; Rowbottom 2014), but Roussou’s example is particularly intriguing because it concerns a Christian Orthodox context, broadening the research beyond Western Christianity.

The present paper is the first one to address the subject in the Romanian context. Similar to other studies, it depicts new religious contents as a folk religion, because they are a way for people, not religious elites, to interpret big themes (e.g., the problem of death and afterlife) and because they satisfy the same emotional needs that popular religion does for peasants (such as the need to find a state of security, to calm down, to detach from existential anxieties). Moreover, it addresses the process of actualization of meaning within folk religion as well as the cognitive optimality of both traditional folk religion and new spiritualities (as also in Hammer 2014, pp. 218–22). Furthermore, it refers to social transformations and the expansion of the pool of tradition, both of which lead to changes in folk religion as well. It refers to simple rituals, simple stories and explanations and morally not demanding contents as identifiers of the new forms of folk religion. In this way it contributes to the understanding of the new spiritualities as forms of folk religion and of folk religion as a reality in transformation rather than decline.

7. Conclusions

The current study has taken a broad walk through folk religion theory and used practical examples to investigate how folk religion has changed over the last few decades. The theory indicated that popular religion serves some stable functions and that when some forms of expression of religious needs no longer fit, people turn to other elements from the pool of tradition. The theory also suggested that the pool of tradition could be expanded to include global elements. Based on this theory, the paper examined examples from Romania. It analyzed global elements that entered the pool of tradition and now displace traditional forms, allowing popular religion to perform the same functions as traditional religion. And it discovered that such elements do exist, originating in the realms of new spiritualities and, in particular, New Age religiosity in its broadest sense.

Folk religion is the common way of living religiosity, the cognitively less costly variant by which humans attempt to satisfy their religious needs by drawing on the pool of tradition. For the present-day, a religious studies approach centered on the role that religious elements play in human life can identify the replacement of traditional folk contents by others with global circulation and conclude about the vitality and the dynamism of folk religion as a subsegment of religion, and of religion in general.

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