CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND FAITH IN ROMANIA. WHAT THE ORTHODOX BLOGGERS SAY?

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Abstract

The last twenty years have seen a rapid development of religion and conspiracy theories amid the expansion of digital technologies. This study seeks to address the gap in the literature on conspiracies and digital religion by focusing on the perception of Ortho-bloggers as a new type of religious actor emerging online, towards Faith and conspiracy theories in the Romanian Ortho-sphere. The study uses Romania as a case due to its Orthodox majority, good internet infrastructure, constant flow of conspiracies online and its unique geopolitical features. The findings point tendency among Ortho-bloggers towards thinking and sharing conspiracies.

Key words: *Ortho-bloggers, conspiracy theories, Faith, Romania, perceptions.*

INTRODUCTION

The last two decades marked a revival of religion both globally following and adapting to technological developments[1], as well as individually with new institutionalized and non-institutionalized religious actors emerging on the

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[1] Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan Dialogue, 2005.

background of Internet, digital applications and social networks' expansion.[2] All these developments were captured by the literature on religious studies within two particular concepts: digital religion and religion 2.0.[3] Considering the topic of this research, digital religion can be defined as nothing but a mechanism for dealing with modernity by weaveing together religious metanarratives, other non-religious topics and features of the digital space.[4] Religion 2.0 can be defined through the idea of a third spaces of digital religion where new digital religious actors emerge. It was developed as a way of recognizing the emerging space that is created through 'the religious digital' as people engage religion within the networked world.[5]

One such new digital religious actor emerging within the third space of digital religion are Orthodox Bloggers or Ortho-bloggers. They can be defined as individuals or groups of individuals active in the online environment, who share the same Orthodox dogmatic norms and values. Their online activity is focused on spiritual life and religious moral values, thelology debates, Orthodox clergy's activity and the Orthodox Churches' activities offline and online.[6] However, what makes them a particular religious actor is the fact that their digital activity it is not limited to religious topics only. Often, together with their digital communities or alongside other Ortho-bloggers, they discuss political, security or economic issues[7] and even engage in various forms of digital activism such as advocating for women's rights.[8]

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[2] Giulia Evolvi, "Blogging My Religion. Secular, Muslim, and Catholic Media Spaces in Europe," in *Routledge Studies in Religion and Digital Culture*, ed. Heidi Campbell, Mia Lövheim, and Gregory Price Grieve, New York: Routledge, 2018.

[3] Gregory Grieve, "Religion," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell, New York: Routledge, 2013.

[4] Heidi A. Campbell and Alessandra Vitullo, "Assessing Changes in the Study of Religious Communities in Digital Religion Studies," *Church, Communication and Culture* 1, no. 1, 2016, pp. 73–89.

[5] Christopher Helland, "Digital Religion," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell, New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 177–96.

[6] Michail Suslov and Irina Kotkina, "'Ortho-Blogging' from Inside: A Virtual Roundtable," *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*, vol: 14, 2015, pp. 163–72.

[7] Dragoș Șamșudean, "Digital Orthodoxy. A Typology of Non-Institutionalized Ortho-blogs," *Baltic Words*, vol. XV, no. 3–4, 2022, pp. 92–102.

[8] Nadia D. Zasanska, "New Producers of Patriarchal Ideology: Matushki in Digital Media of Russian Orthodox Church," *ESSACHESS - Journal for Communication Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2 ,2019, pp. 99–128.

At the same time conspiracy theories continued to remain a topic of interest in the field of social sciences. More than that, the recent Covid-19 pandemic offered a new dynamic to researchers on conspiracy theories who explored both the adaptation to digital technologies of conspiracy ideas[9], as well as the effects of this phenomenon in crisis situations such as the global pandemic.[10] In particular, considering the religious conspiracies, there is an urge coming from religious studies researchers on the need for more studies on the conspiracy and religion.[11] From "God" perceived and analyzed as a standing ultimate conspiracy[12] towards religious values acting as catalysts for spreading and believing conspiracies[13] and digital religious communities and conspiratory ideas the connection between religion and conspiracy theories seeks to be explored.[14]

In spite of the rich evidence on the digital religion and religious Catholic, Protestant and Neo-Protestant actors online dealing with conspiracy ideas, we know very little about how Ortho-bloggers position themselves towards conspiratory ideas, society and Faith. This is important since during the COVID-19 pandemic some of the Ortho-blogs active online were closed by the Romanian security services on account of spreading disinformation and conspiratory ideas about anti-Covid vaccine.[15] Their perceptions regarding

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[9] Benjamin J. Dow et al., "The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Search for Structure: Social Media and Conspiracy Theories," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, Vol.15, no. 9, 2021, pp. 1–22.

[10] Lotte Pummerer et al., "Conspiracy Theories and Their Societal Effects During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* Vol.13, no. 1, 2022, pp. 49–59.

[11] David G. Robertson, "The Hidden Hand: Why Religious Studies Need to Take Conspiracy Theories Seriously," *Religion Compass* Vol.11, no. 3–4, 2017, pp. 1–8.

[12] Brian L. Keeley, "God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory," *Episteme* vol.4, no. 2 ,2007, pp. 135–49.

[13] Moreno Mancosu, Salvatore Vassallo, and Cristiano Vezzoni, "Believing in Conspiracy Theories: Evidence from an Exploratory Analysis of Italian Survey Data," *South European Society and Politics* Vol.22, no. 3 ,2017, pp. 327–44.

[14] Joseph E. Uscinski, Darin DeWitt, and Matthew D. Atkinson, "A Web of Conspiracy? Internet and Conspiracy Theory," in *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, ed. Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem, Leiden: Brill, 2018, pp. 106–33.

[15] Digi24 News, "Site-ul ortodox.info închis pentru fake news [ortodox.info site closed for fake news]," 2020, https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/sci-tech/lumea-digitala/site-ul-ortodoxinfo-ro-inchis-pentru-fake-news-se-pregateste-omorarea-pensionarilor-in-lagare-de-concentrare-si-exterminare-1297481. accesat la data de 06.12.2023.

Orthodoxy and current socio-political topics[16] are translated into articles and narratives posted online with which digital users interact. Thus, within this research I try to address the gaps within the religious studies and conspiracies literature by analyzing the ways in which Orthodox bloggers perceptions and activities online are linked with conspiracy theories topics.

My qualitative research is based on a deductive thematic analysis applied to 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with Ortho-bloggers in June-November 2021. I chose Romania as a case because it is one of the majority Eastern Orthodoxies from the perspective of the number of believers.[17] Also, the internet infrastructure from the perspective of the network and digital technologies is well developed, there is a constant presence of conspiracy ideas in the online environment.[18] In the end, Romania presents unique geopolitical characteristics due to its membership in the EU and NATO[19], its ethno-cultural diversity and its proximity to the Russian Federation (an actor that politically instrumentalizes Faith conspiracy narratives).[20]

PROFILING CONSPIRACY THEORIES: WHO? WHAT? WHERE?

The literature on conspiracy theories embodies a wide range of definitions. A general approach towards conspiracy theories emphasize that they are "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of esignificant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors"[21]. Studies from Psychology consider conspiracy theories as beliefs that are

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[16] Dragoș Șamșudean, *Op.cit.*

[17] Sergiu Gherghina and Aurelian Plopeanu, "Social Networks, Attachment and Integration: Understanding the Church Attendance of Romanian Migrants," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* Vol.42, no. 1, 2021, pp. 110–23.

[18] Raluca Buturoiu et al., "Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories about the Covid-19 Pandemic in Romania? An Analysis of Conspiracy Theories Believers' Profiles," *Societies* vo. 11, no. 4 ,2021.

[19] Dan Dungaciu and Lucian Dumitrescu, "Romania's Strategic Initiatives in the Black Sea Area: From Subregionalism to Peripheral Regionalism," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea*, vol.19, no. 2 ,2019, pp. 333–51.

[20] Denys Shestopalets, "Religious Freedom, Conspiracies, and Faith: The Geopolitics of Ukrainian Autocephaly," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* vol.18, no. 3 ,2020, pp. 25–39.

[21] Karen M. Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology* vol.40, no. S1, 2019, p. 4.

usually unsubstantiated and implausible[22] or as an "unnecessary assumption of conspiracy when other explanations are more probable"[23]. Researchers in the field of social sciences define conspiracy theories as "an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good"[24]. Douglas and Sutton [25] in their recent study further argue that "The claim made implicitly by every conspiracy theory, is that the wider public should (but do not) know about a conspiracy. Each serious conspiracy theory is in fact bidding to become incorporated in public knowledge". At the same time, conspiracy theories are also framed as a sub-category of fake news and disinformation[26]. A study conducted by van der Linden and colleagues' highlights conspiracy ideas as a component of fake news broadcast through the mainstream media[27]. While the definition of conspiracy theories embodies different approaches, the effect of conspiracy ideas can be traced among individuals from the perspective of three major categories.

On the one hand, there are those who believe in conspiracy theories, driven by a wide range of motivations that are related both to their own person and to the society in which they live. Among the personal categories of reasons are demographic factors[28]. The low level of education among individuals is associated with a high level of belief in conspiracy theories. The "belief in simple solutions for complex problems, feelings of powerlessness and subjective social class" represent mediators of this relationship between education and conspiracy

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[22] Robert Brotherton, Christopher C. French, and Alan D. Pickering, "Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale," *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 4, no. MAY, ,2013, pp. 1–15.

[23] D Aronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History.* ,London: Jonathan Cape, 2009, p. 5.

[24] Joseph E. Uscinski, "The Study of Conspiracy Theories," *Argumenta*, no.3 , 2018, p. 235.

[25] "What Are Conspiracy Theories? A Definitional Approach to Their Correlates, Consequences, and Communication," *Annual Review of Psychology*, no. 74 ,2023, p. 282.

[26] Salman Bin Naeem, Rubina Bhatti, and Aqsa Khan, "An Exploration of How Fake News Is Taking over Social Media and Putting Public Health at Risk," *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, vol. 38, no. 2 ,2021, pp. 143–49.

[27] Sander van der Linden, Costas Panagopoulos, and Jon Roozenbeek, "You Are Fake News: Political Bias in Perceptions of Fake News," *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 42, no. 3 ,2020, pp. 460–70.

[28] Douglas et al., *Op.cit*.

theories[29]. Other demographic markers associated with belief in conspiracy ideas are the male gender, unmarried people, those with lower income, unemployed, members of an ethnic minority group and with a weaker social network[30].

Conservative norms both at the religious level (dogmatism and proselytism) and at the political level (rightwing populism) represent another set of factors that explain the existence of beliefs in conspiracy ideas[31]. More than rightwing populism, conspiracy theories "are associated with ideological extremism, distrust of rival ideological camps, populist distrust of mainstream politics, and ideological grievances"[32]. According to another study, "white males with high conservatism and Protestantism showed higher endorsement of conservative conspiracy theories. Furthermore, ideological conservatives who frequently discuss politics showed higher association with a conservative conspiracy theory" [33].

Finnally, in the category of personal factors associated with belief in conspiracies there are the existential reasons, as they are called by the literature on conspiracy theories [34]. Several aversive feelings such as 'fear', 'uncertainty' or the feeling of 'being out of control' increase the likelihood of believing conspiracies[35]. Other studies point to personal feelings of 'powerlessness'[36],

[29] Jan Willem van Prooijen, "Why Education Predicts Decreased Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 1 ,2017, p. 50.

[30] Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories"; Robert Hogg et al., "Conspiracy Beliefs and Knowledge about HIV Origins among Adolescents in Soweto, South Africa," *PLoS ONE*, vol. 12, no. 2 ,2017, pp. 1–9.

[31] Mancosu, Vassallo, and Vezzoni, "Believing in Conspiracy Theories: Evidence from an Exploratory Analysis of Italian Survey Data." *South European Society and Politics*, Vol.22, no.3, 2017, pp.327-344.

[32] Robbie M. Sutton and Karen M. Douglas, "Conspiracy Theories and the Conspiracy Mindset: Implications for Political Ideology," *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* , no.34 ,2020, p. 118.

[33] Seong Jae Min, "Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories? Network Diversity, Political Discussion, and Conservative Conspiracy Theories on Social Media," *American Politics Research*, vol. 49, no. 5 ,2021, p. 415.

[34] Douglas et al., *Op.cit*.

[35] Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M Douglas, "Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations ", *Memory Studies*, Vol.10, no.3, 2017, pp.323-333.

[36] David Zarefsky, "Conspiracy Arguments in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates," *Argumentation Library*, Vol. 24 ,2014, pp. 195–209.

'existential anxiety' [37] and attitudes described as 'anxious attachment style' [38] being linked with a high degree of confidence in conspiracy ideas among individuals. Thus, as a first category of determinants of beliefs in conspiracy theories, there are personal ones in the form of individual socio-demographic characteristics, personal values and feelings.

In addition to this, some other research points towards the historical and social context as another major category that embodies different factors that encourage the emergence and belief in conspiracy ideas. According to a recent study, the attitude of people who believe in conspiracy theories is a naturally occurring consequence based on a different social reality in which individuals live. This is generally characterized by the distinct perception of real norms and the existence of alternative norms according to which individuals behave, distrust in social relationships as well as lower trust in institutions and traditional authorities[39]. Van Prooijen and Douglas [40] emphasize that historically "societal crisis situations—defined as impactful and rapid societal change that calls established power structures, norms of conduct, or even the existence of specific people or groups into question—have stimulated belief in conspiracy theories". Thus, conspiracy beliefs are also associated with a paradoxical mechanism of adaptation to historical trauma [41]. At the same time, social curiosity expressed through finding meaning when information is unavailable, available information is conflicting or events seem random also lead individuals and social groups to believe in conspiracy theories [42]. Finally, studies on the psychology of social groups indicate that the "need to feel

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[37] Anna Kaisa Newheiser, Miguel Farias, and Nicole Tausch, "The Functional Nature of Conspiracy Beliefs: Examining the Underpinnings of Belief in the Da Vinci Code Conspiracy," *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 51, no. 8 ,2011, pp.1007–11.

[38] Ricky Green and Karen M. Douglas, "Anxious Attachment and Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 125, no. December 2017, 2018, pp. 30–37.

[39] Lotte Pummerer, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Non-Normative Behavior," *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Vol. 47 ,2022.

[40] "Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M Douglas, *Op.cit*, p.323.

[41] Michał Bilewicz, "Conspiracy Beliefs as an Adaptation to Historical Trauma," *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Vol. 47 ,2022, pp. 1–6.

[42] Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka, "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories," *Current Directions in Psychological Science,* Vol. 26, no. 6 ,2017, pp. 538–42.

positive about the groups they belong" be it a nationality related one, political party or religious group, it is associated with a high belief in conspiracy theories[43].

Among the themes on which conspiracy theories are built, politics and governance stand out as being addressed extensively. While authoritarian political regimes and far-right political movements are often associated with conspiracy theories, The global order having as the spearhead Illuminati and the Zionist Movement or events such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have also encompassed democratic societies too [44]. Conspiracy ideas based on Manicheanism, a sense of victimhood and an ambivalence towards representative politics represent discursive frameworks within the populist agenda of political leaders such as Victor Orbán in Hungary, Donald Trump in the United States and Chávez in Venezuela[45]. The effects of conspiracies rooted in political themes can be traced in the inability to implement political mandates and public policies or their hindrance[46], but also at a general level by inducing in society a long-lasting cynicism and distrust towards the government[47].

Another major theme related to conspiracy theories is health, part of what during the COVID-19 pandemic was called as infodemic [48]. Among the most widespread sub-theme is related to vaccines, mainly associated in the last decade with diseases such as E-bola, AIDS and smallpox. The main conspiracy

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[43] Douglas et al., *Op.cit*; W. Soral et al., "The Collective Conspiracy Mentality in Poland," in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. E. J. and Uscinski ,New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 372–84.

[44] Daniel Allington, Beatriz L. Buarque, and Daniel Barker Flores, "Antisemitic Conspiracy Fantasy in the Age of Digital Media: Three 'Conspiracy Theorists' and Their YouTube Audiences," *Language and Literature,* Vol. 30, no. 1 ,2021, pp. 78–102.

[45] Andrea L.P. Pirro and Paul Taggart, "Populists in Power and Conspiracy Theories," *Party Politics*, no. April 2021 ,2022, pp. 1–11.

[46] Stephan Lewandowsky, Dawn Holford, and Philipp Schmid, "Public Policy and Conspiracies: The Case of Mandates," *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Vol. 47 ,2022.

[47] Minchul Kim and Xiaoxia Cao, "The Impact of Exposure to Media Messages Promoting Government Conspiracy Theories on Distrust in the Government: Evidence from a Two-Stage Randomized Experiment," *International Journal of Communication*, 10 ,2016.

[48] Monica Stephens, "A Geospatial Infodemic: Mapping Twitter Conspiracy Theories of COVID-19," *Dialogues in Human Geography*, Vol. 10, no. 2 ,2020, pp. 276–81.

idea is that vaccines against such diseases cause convulsions, brain damage or autism[49]. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has led to a major return of conspiracy themes related especially to health, but not only. Medical measures such as vaccination, but also non-medical measures such as wearing a mask and social distancing were the focus of COVID conspiracy ideas[50]. In addition to the conspiracy theories regarding the production of vaccines and their effects, sub-themes such as the origin of the virus and the response of governments to the pandemic were found in the conspiracy discourse[51]. The health conspiracies associated with COVID were also linked with political authorities bringing up conspiratorial narrative as a regular tactic in the political discourse and endorsing non-authority persons who develop new narratives based on conspiracies[52].

Other conspiracy ideas consider topics such as religion, pseudoscience and science fiction (sci-fi) beliefs and climate change and environment. According to the studies related to conspiracy theories and religion, at the intersection of these ideas three distinct components stand out: a) conspiracies as religion which centers on the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of ideation; b) conspiracies about religion focused on the dynamics of social groups in various political contexts and c) conspiracies in

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[49] Gabriel Andrade, "Medical Conspiracy Theories: Cognitive Science and Implications for Ethics," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, Vol. 23, no. 3 ,2020, pp. 505–18; Chandra L. Ford et al., "Belief in AIDS-Related Conspiracy Theories and Mistrust in the Government: Eelationship with HIV Testing among at-Risk Older Adults," *Gerontologist*, Vol. 53, no. 6, 2013, pp. 973–84.

[50] Kinga Bierwiaczonek, Aleksander B. Gundersen, and Jonas R. Kunst, "The Role of Conspiracy Beliefs for COVID-19 Health Responses: A Meta-Analysis," *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Vol. 46 ,2022; Irena Pavela Banai, Benjamin Banai, and Igor Mikloušić, "Beliefs in COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories, Compliance with the Preventive Measures, and Trust in Government Medical Officials," *Current Psychology*, Vol. 41, no. 10 ,2022.

[51] Daniel Freeman et al., "Coronavirus Conspiracy Beliefs, Mistrust, and Compliance with Government Guidelines in England," *Psychological Medicine*, Vol. 52, no. 2 ,2022, pp. 51–63.

[52] Calvin Yixiang Cheng, Wanjiang Jacob Zhang, and Qiyue Zhang, "Authority-Led Conspiracy Theories in China during the COVID-19 Pandemic – Exploring the Thematic Features and Rhetoric Strategies," *Convergence*, Vol. 28, no. 4 ,2022, pp. 72–97; Tomasz Oleksy et al., "Content Matters. Different Predictors and Social Consequences of General and Government-Related Conspiracy Theories on COVID-19," *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 168, no. May 2020 ,2021.

religion concentrated in dogmatically harmonized sets of conspiracy ideas adapted to different religious groups and particular circumstances [53]. Considering the case of Romania, finding scapegoats in actors like the EU, for the declining faith and morality of society, represents a germ of conspiratorial ideas among the local Orthodox clergy.[54] Regarding pseudoscience and science fiction beliefs, conspiracy ideas advance the idea of "predictive programming", namely that, through mass media shows such as the Matrix movies and X-Files TV series, societies are indoctrinated and prepared for future changes[55]. At the same time, media productions related to the conquest of space and what is in the universe as well as the secrecy behind the space race fuel conspiracy theories based on pseudoscience and sci-fi[56]. Finally, conspiracy ideas are born around the climate and environment theme, including discussions about how governments control the weather and climate warming as a tool for the political world elites in their pursuit of building a new world order [57].

In their path of believing conspiracy theories and the promotion of conspiracy ideas focused on the previously highlighted themes, individuals benefit from social media and the social polarization generated in the online environment[58]. Studies on communication and digital media point towards the growing impact of various social media networks in spreading conspiracy

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[53] Asbjørn Dyrendal, "Conspiracy Theory and Religion," in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight ,London: Routledge, 2020, pp.371–85; D.G. Robertson, E. Asprem, and A. Dyrendal, "Introducing the Field: Conspiracy Theory in, about, and as Religion," in *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, ed. A. Dyrendal, D.G. Robertson, and E. Asprem ,Leiden: Brill, 2019, pp.1–18.

[54] Sergiu Gherghina, Sergiu Mișcoiu and Dragoș Șamșudean,"Religion, Homosexuality and the EU: Grasping the Beliefs of Romanian Orthodox Priests", *Sexuality, Gender & Policy*, Vol.5, issue 2, 2022, pp.108-121.

[55] Seth Barrett Tillman, "Conspiracy Theories," *History Today*, Vol. 64, no. 2 ,2014.

[56] Andrei Rogatchevski, "Space Exploration in Russian and Western Popular Culture: Wishful Thinking, Conspiracy Theories and Other Related Issues," in *Soviet Space Culture Cosmic Enthusiasm in Socialist Societies*, ed. Eva Maurer et al. ,Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

[57] Mikey Biddlestone, Flavio Azevedo, and Sander van der Linden, "Climate of Conspiracy: A Meta-Analysis of the Consequences of Belief in Conspiracy Theories about Climate Change," *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Vol. 46 ,2022.

[58] Douglas et al., *Op.cit*.

theories, based on algorithms and the so-called 'echo chambers'[59]. Facebook represents one of the social media networks that is positively associated with the spread of conspiracy ideas within the digital environment. The conspiratorial activity of the groups formed within this network, although significant before the COVID-19 pandemic in promoting extremist ideologies and 5G conspiracies[60], gained momentum during the pandemic on health-related issues[61]. Instagram is another social media network that has stood out in spreading conspiracies through memes, funny photos that convey different messages[62]. Other social media apps that stood out as channels and 'echo chambers' for promoting conspiracy ideas are TikTok[63], Twitter [64] and Reddit[65].

Alongside the category of individuals who believe in various conspiracy theories emerging and propagated in the social media based on personal or systemic factors, there is another category of people who reject conspiracy ideas. A high level of education as well as critical thinking are associated with

[59] Peter L. Forberg, "From the Fringe to the Fore: An Algorithmic Ethnography of the Far-Right Conspiracy Theory Group QAnon," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol.51, no. 3, 2022, pp. 291–317.

[60] Axel Bruns, Stephen Harrington, and Edward Hurcombe, "'Corona? 5G? Or Both?': The Dynamics of COVID-19/5G Conspiracy Theories on Facebook," *Media International Australia*, Vol.177, no. 1, 2020, pp. 12–29.

[61] Daniel Allington et al., "Health-Protective Behaviour, Social Media Usage and Conspiracy Belief during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency," *Psychological Medicine* Vol. 51, no. 10 ,202.; Lena Frischlich, "'Resistance!': Collective Action Cues in Conspiracy Theory-Endorsing Facebook Groups," *Media and Communication*, Vol. 10, no. 2, 2022, pp. 130–43.

[62] Derya Gür-Şeker, Ute K. Boonen, and Michael Wentker, "#conspiracymemes A Framework-Based Analysis of Conspiracy Memes as Digital Multimodal Units and Ensuing User Reactions on Instagram," in *Conspiracy Theory Discourses*, ed. Massimiliano Demata, Virginia Zorzi, and Angela Zottola ,Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2022.

[63] Justin Grandinetti and Jeffrey Bruinsma, "The Affective Algorithms of Conspiracy TikTok," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* Vol. 67, no. 1, 2022.

[64] Amos Fong et al., "The Language of Conspiracy: A Psychological Analysis of Speech Used by Conspiracy Theorists and Their Followers on Twitter," *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* Vol. 24, no. 4, 2021, pp. 606–23.

[65] Chad A. Melton et al., "Public Sentiment Analysis and Topic Modeling Regarding COVID-19 Vaccines on the Reddit Social Media Platform: A Call to Action for Strengthening Vaccine Confidence," *Journal of Infection and Public Health* Vol.14, no. 10, 2021, pp. 5–12.

individuals who do not believe in and do not promote conspiracy ideas[66]. People who reject conspiracy ideas and are less inclined to believe in conspiracies are associated with democratic thinking and an open attitude towards political debates[67]. Religiosity in its moderate forms of dogmatic thinking and faith practice represents, in addition to the above, another marker of people who detach themselves from conspiracy theories[68]. Finally, besides those who either believe or do not believe in conspiracy ideas, there is a third category of individuals and social groups associated with ignorance.

Both at the micro and macro societal level, ignorance as a personal and group attitude is present among individuals[69]. From the macro-political perspective, ignorance is associated either with a political strategy of the leaders who try to preserve or increase their power (strategic ignorance) or with weak mobilization of the electorate in campaigns and referendums[70]. At the same time, macro-professional ignorance is also associated with the inability of individual or state actors to produce qualitative knowledge in different fields of

[66] Jan-Willem van Prooijen, "Why Education Predicts Decreased Belief in Conspiracy Theories" *Applied Cognitive Psichology*, Vol.31, no.1, 2017 pp.50-58; Viren Swami and David Barron, "Rational Thinking Style, Rejection of Coronavirus (COVID-19) Conspiracy Theories/Theorists, and Compliance with Mandated Requirements: Direct and Indirect Relationships in a Nationally Representative Sample of Adults from the United Kingdom," *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, Vol. 15, 2021.
[67] Seong Jae Min, "Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories? Network Diversity, Political Discussion, and Conservative Conspiracy Theories on Social Media," *American Politics Research* Vol.49, no. 5 ,2021, pp. 415–27; Adam M. Enders and Steven M. Smallpage, "Informational Cues, Partisan-Motivated Reasoning, and the Manipulation of Conspiracy Beliefs," *Political Communication*, Vol. 36, no. 1, 2019, pp. 83–102.
[68] Alexander Yendell and David Herbert, "Religion, Conspiracy Thinking, and the Rejection of Democracy: Evidence From the UK," *Politics and Governance* Vol.10, no. 4, 2022, pp. 229–42.
[69] Linsey McGoey, "Micro-Ignorance and Macro-Ignorance in the Social Sciences," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* Vol.87, no. 1 ,2020.
[70] Grégoire Mallard and Linsey McGoey, "Strategic Ignorance and Global Governance: An Ecumenical Approach to Epistemologies of Global Power," *British Journal of Sociology* Vol.69, no. 4 ,2018; Russell Hardin, "Ignorant Democracy," *Critical Review* Vol. 18, no. 1–3 ,2006, pp. 179–95; Ilya Somin, "Deliberative Democracy and Political Ignorance," *Critical Review* Vol.22, no. 2, 2010, pp. 53–79.

activity[71]. Micro-ignorance found in the form of what the literature calls 'willful ignorance' is considered "an important source of socially harmful behavior" due to the fact that "it can serve as an excuse for selfish behavior" which in the end affect the decision making process [72]. The micro perspective of ignorance is that of maintaining one's own lifestyle and personal ideas while they are challenged by reality, conspiracies or both[73]. Taking into account the presence of ignorance as a general attitude present at the personal and systemic level, although I did not identify studies regarding the ignorance of conspiracy theories, such a category cannot be ignored from the analytical framework of this study. While emphasize different attitudes and forms of conspiracies find within the digital space, this study seeks to address the urge within the religious studies on analyzing more about conspiracies, religion and the Internet using a little explored case that I will detail within the next section.

EXPLORING CONSPIRACY AND FAITH IN ROMANIA: A RESEARCH DESIGN

The literature on methodologies within the social sciences points to several models for selecting cases. For the purpose of this study I select Romania as a single case, that is representative for the subject approach. Romania is a relevant case due to three major reasons. First, there is a high level of religiosity among individuals, both in the case of the domestic population and diaspora. The increased religiosity has been noted to be a constant in recent decades, with Romania ranking among the first in the EU in terms of the religiosity of the population.[74] At the same time, Romanian Orthodox Church continued to maintain its majority with a high confidence rank among the

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[71] Daniel Lee Kleinman and Sainath Suryanarayanan, "Dying Bees and the Social Production of Ignorance," *Science Technology and Human Values* Vol.38, no. 4 ,2013, pp. 492–517.

[72] Zachary Grossman and Joël J. van der Weele, "Self-Image and Willful Ignorance in Social Decisions," *Journal of the European Economic Association* Vol.15, no. 1 ,2017, p. 173.

[73] Penhall-Jones and Margaret Leila, "Self-Deception and Wilful Ignorance: 'Self-Induced, Purported Ignorance?'" , Thesis, University of Adelaide, 2022, Accesed in 08 December 2023.

[74] Gherghina and Plopeanu, "Social Networks, Attachment and Integration: Understanding the Church Attendance of Romanian Migrants." *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, Vol.42, no.1, 2021, pp.110-123.

population, despite controversies over its communist history[75]. Second, the digital space in Romania is constantly flooded with conspiracies on various topics and forms. The most current wave of conspiracies in the Romanian digital environment referred to the recent covid-19 pandemic.[76] However, political conspiracy topics[77] and even conspiracy ideas related to Orthodoxy and the Orthodox Church[78] have not escaped the offline and online media in Romania. Finally, Finally, Romania offers a particular social and political context, being a young democracy among European states, a young member of the European Union and offering a religious mosaic: from Christianity, Judaism and Islam to various denominations and heterodox religious groups.[79]

In order to collect my data I conducted semi-structured interviews with Romanian Ortho-bloggers. I focus on Orthodox religious bloggers who work in the Romanian online environment, from 2007 to 2020. On the one hand, 2007 marks Romania's accession to the European Union and the adoption of a new set of socio-political values and norms. On the other hand, the chosen period captures the technological evolutions in Romania in the digital sphere.[80] The present research uses 25 semi-structured interviews with Romanian Ortho-bloggers, which covers several themes related to their online activity (Appendix 1). Details about the Ortho-bloggers can be also consulted in Table 1

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[75] Lucian Turcescu and Lavinia Stan, "The Romanian Orthodox Church and Democratisation: Twenty Years Later," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* Vol.10, no. 2–3 ,2010, pp. 144–59.

[76] Nicoleta Corbu et al., "Romanians' Willingness to Comply with Restrictive Measures during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from an Online Survey," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* Vol.49, no. 4 ,2021, pp. 369–86.

[77] Dana Sultănescu, "War of the Words. The Online Conversation about NATO in Romania: Communicators, Content, Communities," *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations* Vol.24, no. 1 ,2022, pp. 25–46.

[78] Giuseppe Tateo, "When Conspiracy Meets Faith Making Sense of Tragic Events in Bucharest, Romania," in *Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories Comparing and Connecting Old and New Trends*, ed. Francesco Piraino, Marco Pasi, and Egil Asprem ,London: Routledge, 2022.; Gherghina, Mișcoiu and Șamșudean, *Op.Cit.*

[79] Mihai Popa and Liviu Andreescu, "Legal Provisions, Courts, and the Status of Religious Communities: A Socio-Legal Analysis of Inter-Religious Relations in Romania," *Religion, State and Society* Vol.45, no. 3–4 ,2017, pp. 297–316.

[80] Dan-Cristian Dabija et al., "Cross-Generational Analysis of Information Searching Based on Social Media in Romania.," *Transformations in Business & Economics* Vol.16, no. 2 ,2017, pp. 248–70.

(Appendix 2). At the same time, I used a selection of documents collected from Ortho-blogs active in the digital environment in Romania. In order to create the sample of Ortho-blogs I conducted a systematic review of the Romanian Ortho-sphere between January-May 2022. I identified more than 50 Ortho-blogs active (with a frequency of posting between several posts per day to one or two posts per month) based on dedicated blogging platforms such as WordPress and Web.com and 80 Ortho-blogs active on social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram).

Considering the method of analysis, for this study I use the deductive thematic analysis to interpret the answers to interviews and Ortho-blog documents. This method is suitable for the study of attitudes towards conspiracy theories among Orthodox religious bloggers, as it allows the identification of common themes in relation to the belief, rejection or ignorance of conspiracies, offering at the same time several ways to interpret the data.

ROMANIA ORTHO-SPHERE: CONSPIRACY IDEAS AND ATTITUDES AMONG ORTHODX BLOGGERS ACTIVE ONLINE

The few studies on Orthodox religious bloggers highlight a diverse activity of these new digital religious actors. From themes with a theological charge to topics related to political security, economy and ecological activism, Ortho-bloggers express different opinions within the religious communities they manage online.[81] Three major categories of attitudes towards conspiracy theories stand out in the Romanian Ortho-sphere based on the perception of faith and the systemic context surrounding the Ortho-bloggers. On the one hand, some of the religious bloggers believe in various own conspiracy ideas. On the other hand, others not only believe but take a step forward and share conspiracy content online through their own Ortho-blogs. Finally, there is an attitude of ignorance and rejection of conspiracy theories among Orthodox religious bloggers. All this are detailed within the paragraphs below.

Putting the own faith in conspiracies: perceptions and personal conspiracy narratives among Ortho-bloggers

The data provided by the interviews highlight the tendency of Ortho-bloggers to construct own conspiracy narratives. The association between religious activity and the national and international socio-political or economic

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[81] Suslov and Kotkina, *Op.cit*; Zasanska, *Op.cit*; Șamșudean, *Op.cit.*

situation is a way in which personal conspiratory ideas are born among Ortho-bloggers. One respondent detailing about the Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church explains that "The story from Ukraine was much stronger, being more politically related to the major themes: the West vs. Russia, Constantinople Patriarchate linked to USA versus Moscow Patriarchate. Romania was caught in the middle" (R1). This general idea that mixes the activity of a local Orthodox Church with that of some Autonomous Patriarchates and with the international activity of some state actors (USA, Russia, Romania) is not supported with any evidence by the respondent. Following the same pattern, another interviewee describes the Romanian Orthodox Church as being "the largest LLC with businesses worth of millions" led by duplicitous people in their faith (R4). As with the previous example, the respondent does not provide any evidence for the statement. Mixing elements of institutional Faith with political and economic topics, Ortho-bloggers give evidence of personal conspiracy beliefs. In this case, the belief that behind the activity of the Church there is a hidden, political or economic interest. Although this may be the case, the fact that the respondents have no evidence for what they claim puts their statements in the category of pseudo-science and conspiracy ideas.

The political activity of some regional and national institutions also attracts the Ortho-bloggers. Through generalization and trivialization, conspiratorial ideas appear among the respondents. R4 describes the European Union as "an impostor who tries to falsely identify himself with EUROPE". Further, it adds that: "The EU is an increasingly ideological quasi-extremist and totalitarian organization that tries to impose a uniform way of thinking". Finally it emphasize that "I am aware that my points, my opinions are classified by the Brussels Union as non-compliant. If they would have a way, the Brussels Union would show me a yellow card". There is no empirical evidence to support these statements regarding EU's activity, mocked by the expression "Brussels Union". The same respondent step forward with its conspiracy explanations stating that Facebook has an increasingly discriminatory position towards opinions expressed online that do not align with the requirements of the European Union (R4). The complexity of the conspiracy ideas highlighted by this respondent exceeds the "big brother" effect. The online environment seems to be only a controlled space where we take risks when we post and expose ourselves to EU sanctions (yellow card).

On the national level, one conspiracy that stands out is that other countries do better than Romania. On the background of Romania's admission to the EU one respondent states: "Serbs do better. The population was not consulted, personally I am against it. We deserve worse anyway, because that's what we're good for as a nation" (R11). The conspiracy resides in the fact that not only because of the EU Romania is having a hard time, but to a certain extent we deserve it because it is part of our national identity.

Continuing the idea of the previous respondent, another states that "I do not consider that Romania was greatly advantaged by joining the European Union. Unfortunately, Romania is exploited beyond measure, without offering its citizens the advantages they deserve" (R16). As it was with conspiracies above, no data on the excessive exploitation of Romania and the extraordinary life in Serbia were offered, the conspiracy identifying only the guilty party: EU.

Finally, conspiracies appear among the Ortho-bloggers interviewed with reference to the Orthodox Faith in Romania, subject to a constant attack from several directions. On the one hand, the siege of the local Orthodoxy is lead by the ecumenist movement through the association of the Romanian Orthodox Church with the World Council of Churches and the joint service with the Catholic Church and other cults. All this, as stated by respondent 11, makes the Orthodox religious cultural context in Romania a serious trap that continues to divide the believers. Another source leading the siege on the Orthodoxy is a part of the local political environment, as explained by interviewee 20:

> "in Romania, a political movement with a strong anti-ecclesiastical character has coagulated, which transmits violent messages, hate and threats at the level of party activists, respectively through the mass of voters. Messages that, although apparently, convey the intention to reform the Church, hide the intention to secularize society and drastically reduce the Orthodox religious phenomenon in Romanian society" (R20)

How the respondent reached this conclusion and the evidence of this plan are not presented. Adding on the sieged Orthodoxy conspiracy, another Ortho-blogger interviewed stats: "Regarding recent events such as Colectiv, ROC had nothing to discuss. I think it was a major trap into which ROC fell". Thus, while the Orthodox faith is besieged by ecumenism and secularization, local actors set traps to catch the Orthodox Church on the wrong foot. While all of the above shows conspiracies on an individual level among Orthodox religious bloggers, a closer look at the online Ortho-blogs may vary those and better explain the access and distribution of one's personal conspiracies within the Romanian Ortho-sphere.

Preaching the word of conspiracies: access and share of them within the Ortho-sphere

The Orthodox blogs shows the fact that the conspiracy narratives constructed by Ortho-bloggers at an individual level, sometimes find a way out and escape within the digital environment. On the one hand, this happens through articles which titrate and contain conspiratorial ideas. Within an SACCSIV Ortho-blog one such article title states: "Virtual Reality Porn Has Seen Sales Increase / Plans for Nervous System and Brain Implants". The news talks about how the Oligarchs of the world (called in the article the Controloligarchs) are trying to dominate people's private lives by implanting chips and VR systems, pushing humanity towards a dystopian world of pleasure.[82] Another Ortho-blog, another conspiracy title article stating: "The media and the prosecutors orchestrated an attack on the Romanian Orthodox Church". Further, within the article it is explained that "It can be seen with the open eye that there are obscure agreements between certain segments of the media and the judiciary system, their actions being coordinated and aiming at the distorted presentation of reality.[83] Combining real data and informations about technological breakthroughs or real judicial actions, Ortho-bloggers expose articles and news in a conspiratorial manner, designing an image of an Orthodox Faith besieged by shadow leaders at international or national level.

To facilitate access to conspiracy topics, some Ortho-blogs have created dedicated sections for such articles. Within the "ACVILA ORTODOXĂ blog" several such designated blog sections can be found called accordingly: "Books about secret societies", "The new World Order" and "The danger of vaccines".[84] Following the same construction of the Ortho-blog "OrthodoxINFO" blog introduces the following sections of content to online followers and users:

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[82] SACCSIV-Blog Ortodox, "Pornografia În Realitatea Virtuală a Înregistrat o Creștere a Vânzărilor / Planuri Pentru Implanturi Asupra Sistemului Nervos Și a Creierului," Blog article, 2023, https://saccsiv.wordpress.com/2023/11/27/pornografia-in-realitatea-virtuala-a-inregistrat-o-crestere-a-vanzarilor-planuri-pentru-implanturi-asupra-sistemului-nervos-si-a-creierului/#more-104926. Accesat la data de 07.12.2023.

[83] OrtodoxInfo, "Presa Și Procurorii Atacă Orchestrat Biserica Ortodoxă Română. În Culisele Investigației Recorder-DNA," 2023, https://ortodoxinfo.ro/2023/12/06/presa-si-procurorii-ataca-orchestrat-biserica-ortodoxa-romana-in-culisele-investigatiei-recorder-dna/. Accesat la data de 07.12.2023.

[84] Orthodox Aquila (Acvila Ortodoxa), "Acvila Ortodoxă," https://acvilaortodoxa.wordpress.com/. Accesat la data de 07.12.2023.

"Anti-System", "Big-Brother", "Chip", "WWIII" and "Vaccine".[85] Within these sections, it is possible to identify, even chronologically, articles with various conspiracy themes, from specifically religious themes to political conspiracies related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the so-called global occult. At the same time, Ortho-blogs stand as a proof for what I discussed in the previous section regarding the construction of own personal conspiracy narratives by Ortho-bloggers. In a section like the ones described above, from the OrtodoxINFO blog, we find the message: "The system wants to silence us! Support OrtodoxINFO! We strive to keep this site alive and provide you with information that sheds light on the challenges we are experiencing".[86] Although the blog indeed was closed during the pandemic for several months because it undermines the anti-COVID-19 vaccination campaign by spreading disinformation. This happened because it violates the legislation in force at that time not because the state violates freedom of expression, proof that after a few months the Ortho-blog became active online again and remaining so until today.

While organizing and putting into word through articles online their personal conspiracy theories, Ortho-bloggers actually engaged their users and followers. Thus, they actually engaged in debate their conspiracies, stepping forward from just construct them in their mind and post them online. The digital technologies of the blogs engage users, such examples being found within the Ortho-blog "OChilieAthonită". Within a blog article which predicts a great famine in the year 2025, 34 users share this information, while approximately another 40 followers react with various appreciative emojis to the material. The article does not provide any empirical, scientific evidence in support of the highlighted theses, on the contrary, considering climate change an invention and a scare used by globalist institutions to prevent farmers from producing food.[87]

Not only can users in their turn further share online the conspiracy ideas and react to them confirming the confidence in the information provided, but they actively engage in the development and expansion of the conspiracy ideas introduced by Ortho-bloggers. One such example can be found in the comments of an article that stated: "ALARM! Adoptions by homosexuals are taking place

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[85] Ortho-blog OrthodoxINFO, https://ortodoxinfo.ro/. Accesat la data de 07.12.2023.

[86] OrtodoxINFO, "Identitatea Digitală – Tiranie, Nu Securitate!," 2023, Chip Section of the Blog. https://ortodoxinfo.ro/2023/11/30/identitatea-digitala-tiranie-nu-securitate/. Accesat la data de 07.12.2023.

[87] OChilieAthonită Ortho-blog "Marea Foamete Globală din 2025," https://www.facebook.com/ OChilieAthonita, Accesat la data de 07.12.2023.

in Romania!".[88] In the comments section, one of the respondents continued the alarmist conspiratory idea of the article by stating:

> "If the "legislator" believes that "they were born this way"... did they announce (of course NOT) in the election campaign that they will give the children to... pedophiles? Like these – a gay in fact... he deals with this, pedophilia; otherwise, a homosexual man does not appear "per se" or "as such" but only through "coupling" with another, he needs another man and searches until he finds one to corrupt him. Now - it is not limited to such "direct" corruption, but the practice, helped by Satanists from "power", of hunting/capturing young, innocent children in order to destroy them. And for this reason, every homosexual is a SEXUAL CORRUPTOR, impotent with adults and then attacks and corrupts the young."[89]

Another comment explains the fact that "The entire parliament is made up of prostitute servants, as is the press. Only God saves us. Hierarchs the same, very few are honest with the people. The people are only with God at the present time."[90], and another user continued: "Let no one imagine that homosexuals will preserve the innocence of children, saving them from this terrible sin!".[91]

Finally, Ortho-blogs themselves are spaces for creating conspiracy ideas, not only by Ortho-bloggers, but also by users. Starting from non-conspiracy material posted on Orthodox religious blogs, followers bring conspiracy ideas to the comments section. One such example can be found in the Ortho-blog "ortodox.brothers.ro" where the following comment is posted on a sermon posted online: "I have never heard from the mouth of this priest "Christ", only the Lord Jesus. It makes me think of Pentecostals. Be careful what wolves in sheep's clothing you promote :). The pond is full of #ecumenism".[92] Because the

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[88] OrtodoxINFO, "ALARMĂ! În România Au Loc Adopții de Către Homosexuali!," 2021, https://ortodoxinfo.ro/2021/11/15/alarma-in-romania-au-loc-adoptii-de-catre-homosexuali/. Accesat la data de 07.12.2023.

[89] OrtodoxINFO-Comment 1. "ALARMĂ! În România Au Loc Adopții de Către Homosexuali!," Accesat la data de 07.12.2023.

[90] OrtodoxINFO-Comment 3. "ALARMĂ! În România Au Loc Adopții de Către Homosexuali!," Accesat la data de 07.12.2023.

[91] OrtodoxINFO-Comment 4. "ALARMĂ! În România Au Loc Adopții de Către Homosexuali!," Accesat la data de 07.12.2023.

[92] Ortho-blog "Ortodox.brothers.ro", "Părintele Daniel Avram. Noi Nu Înțelegem Pentru Că Nu Îl Avem Pe Duhul Sfânt," 2023, https://www.instagram.com/ortodox.brothers.ro/.

priest uses a synonymous address to describe the person of Christ, the user conceives the conspiracy idea that the Romanian Orthodox Church is infiltrated with Protestant theology and ecumenism. What should be noted when discussing Ortho-blogs is that on the one hand there are spaces where the personal conspiracies of Ortho-bloggers gain an audience. On the other hand, conspiracy ideas posted online engage Ortho-blog users who further distribute, react and elaborate on conspiracy ideas in comment sections. Finally, Orthodox religious blogs are spaces where users in turn, starting from correct information and data, create their own conspiracies online. Besides those who believe and generate conspiracy ideas in the Romanian Ortho-sphere, Ortho-Bloggers or users, there are Orthodox religious bloggers who distance themselves from conspiracy theories.

Keeping distance with conspiracies: from ignorance to objectively analyze the world around

Contrasting the respondents among whom I identified conspiracy ideas, more than half of the interviewed Orthodox religious bloggers ignore or objectively explain facts and actions in the context of their digital activity. On the one hand, there are Ortho-bloggers who ignore conspiracy ideas, this being emphasized by the explanations regarding the reasons of why they carry out their activity online. Respondent 2 explains that Orthodox religious blogging is for him only a way to get closer to the believers in the parish he shepherds by adapting the pastoral methods towards today's technological reality: "through blogging I have the opportunity to address a larger number of people and bring the message of the Gospel to people's lives and everyday problems" (R2). Another interviewee explains the fact that the themes and subjects he approaches in the digital environment do nothing but address the activities and the story of the parish of which he is a part of: "online posts help us share the story of our parish and make known the activity within the religious community in that we live" (R10).

On the other hand, some of the respondents objectively explain the institutional activity of different actors in society or empirical realities that surround them. Elaborating on the European Union's activity and Romania, R12 explains that:

> There is no way to say that joining the EU contributed negatively to the evolution of Romania, but only the fact that Romania was not prepared for the rigors of the EU. Belonging to the EU gives us the security guarantee that we are not alone in

the face of threats from the east, the EU is the guarantee of preserving the national identity of each state. We are lucky to be part of the European family. At the level of Romania, the truth is that the Romanian society is in a moral decline. The EU does not teach you to steal, kill, bribe, etc.

Contrary to the conspiracy ideas that identify the EU as the culprit for the negative developments in Romania, the respondent explains that it is not EU norms or Christian values that are the cause of the situation in which Romania finds itself, but rather what society does, what individuals do with those norms and values. Moreover, addressing the subject of this article directly, one of the respondents makes an indirect evaluation of the Romanian Ortho-sphere, through the answer it gives: "unfortunately, there are countless so-called religious posts that take advantage of the authority that a Church offers and run false information, with source that are impossible to verify" (R19).

Finally, R12 offers some explanations for the conspiracies of the "Besieged Orthodoxy". It explains that part of the attacks on the Romanian Orthodox Church is also due to its lack of institutional response: "On the one hand, maybe it is the Church's fault because it fails to promote its philanthropic, pastoral and educational activity. This is the great disadvantage of the ROC, it did not know how to communicate, although the human resource exists in this sense". The respondent adds further on the topic of the cultural-religious situation in Romania, describing it as complex, with an ultraconservative Orthodoxy present offline and online: " We are dealing with a wave of ultra-conservatism and ultra-religious groups. It is our duty that through spiritual activity, including online, to say that the state is the state, the Church is the Church, there is a symphony, but to "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (R12). On the contrary, the activity of Ortho-bloggers should not involve spreading conspiracies but separating reality from wrong perceptions and messages.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to emphasize and explain how Ortho-bloggers position themselves towards conspiracy theories, society and Faith by analyzing the activity of Romanian Ortho-bloggers and the Ortho-blogs active online. The data collected from interviews with Orthodox religious bloggers and Ortho-blogs highlights several attitudes towards conspiracy theories. On the one hand, some of the Ortho-bloggers are creators of conspiracy theories. Starting from dissatisfaction with politicians and Romania's status as EU member or the

state of the Orthodox Faith in Romania, Orthodox bloggers are looking for scapegoats that give rise to conspiratorial ideas. Moreover, such conspiracy religious bloggers post different articles and texts within the religious blogs they manage, created on the basis of their conspiracy theories. This not only allows the spread of conspiratorial ideas but, through the digital functions of the blogging platforms, the users and followers of Ortho-blogs engage directly too in the development of those conspiracies.

Thus, the conspiracies ideas of the Ortho-bloggers acquire a parochial character, a snowball effect being created through which the followers add their own conspiracies to the initial conspiracy launched by the Ortho-blogger. At the same time, the data on Ortho-blogs show that there is no control of Ortho-bloggers over the comment section. Even in the context of non-conspiracy news or materials, users intervene with conspiratorial ideas. Thus, while Ortho-bloggers do not directly create conspiracy ideas and materials, by not managing the page and tolerating conspiracy theories from users, they show an openness and acceptance of such unverifiable ideas, as even one respondent explains.

On the other hand, contrasting the own conspiracy ideas created by the Ortho-bloggers themselves and the tolerance of some Orthodox religious bloggers towards such ideas present on their blogs, other Orthodox religious bloggers choose to ignore or argue factually and objectively the ideas they expose online. Whether their digital activity addresses specific activities or tries to identify real causes for various societal, personal or Romanian Orthodox Churches' problems, a part of the Romanian Ortho-sphere distances itself from the conspiracy discourse.

The constribution of this article is first an empirical one towards the general study of the relationship between conspiracy theories, Faith and society by focusing on a new religious actor online: Ortho-bloggers. More specific, this study extends the debates within the religious studies and conspiracy literature by emphasising and explaining the Ortho-bloggers attitudes and how Ortho-blogs function as a third digital space of online religion. At theoretical level, this articles emphasize how different themes how different conspiratory themes existing in the literature can be found in the Ortho-bloggers' way of creating, sharing and engaging conspiracies online. The views expressed by the respondents show that individual dissatisfaction, the search for scapegoats and the lack of evidence remain among the characteristics of conspiracy ideas even with the Ortho-sphere in Romania. Since the activity of Ortho-bloggers takes

place online, implying a transnational character, the analysis can be replicated in the case of other states, with a majority population or not, being Orthodox. At the same time, other researches can focus specifically on certain types of conspiracies among Ortho-bloggers: religious, political, scientific or of another nature.

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Appendix 1
Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Considering your activity online, what is your opinion about the expansion of the Internet and social media networks in the last 5-10 years?

2. How would you describe your blogging activity in the last 5-10 years?

○What about religious Orthodox blogging - Ortho-blogging?

3. What would be the topics you most often cover and address in your Ortho-blogging activities?

4. What might be your personal motivations for practicing religious blogging?

○What other personal motivations do you consider, taking into account your daily offline activities

5. Why did you choose to post in this Orthodox blogging format online?

○How did you start Ortho-blogging?

6. How would you describe the role and activity of the Orthodox Church in the last 5-10 years, as an institution, in society?

○What about the activity of Metropolies/Archdiocesis in their specific canonical areas?

7. From your experience, are there any provisions from the RoOC hierarchs regarding the activity of lay people and clergy in the online environment?

○What about synodal decisions (Holy Synod / Metropolitan Synods / Local Synaxes), documents, communications?

8. From the perspective of your online activity, how would you describe the Internet infrastructure in Romania, in the last 5-10 years?

○What about the national regulations/laws regarding online activities?

9. What do you think about the developments in the socio-political field in Romania after the accession to the EU in 2007?

○What could be possible advantages/disadvantages of Romania's membership in the EU?

○How do you assess the impact of these developments on your online activity?

10. How do you assess/describe the cultural-religious context in Romania in the last 5-10 years?

○What about the cultural-religious context at the regional level (Eastern Europe) from the perspective of the Orthodox religious actors in the area?

○How do you assess the impact of these developments on your online activity?

Note: The follow-up questions are presented with bullet points.

Appendix 2
Table 1: Profile of the Interviewees

Acronym	Urban/ Rural	Age Category	Region	Interview length (min.)	Gender	Education	Type of Interview
R1	Rural	30-39	North-West	64	M	Higher	Online
R2	Rural	30-39	North-West	36	M	Higher	Telephone
R3	Urban	40-49	South-West	31	F	Higher	Online
R4	Urban	40-49	South	44	M	Higher	Online
R5	Rural	30-39	West	37	M	Higher	Online
R6	Urban	40-49	North- East	68	F	Higher	Online
R7	Urban	30-39	North- West	31	M	Higher	Online
R8	Urban	20-29	Center	39	M	Higher	In Person
R9	Urban	40-49	North-West	32	M	Higher	Online
R10	Rural	20-29	North-West	32	M	Higher	Online
R11	Urban	30-39	North-East	35	M	Middle	Online
R12	Urban	20-29	South-East	67	M	Higher	Online
R13	Urban	50-59	Center	40	M	Higher	Online
R14	Urban	40-49	Center	33	M	Higher	Online
R15	Rural	20-29	North-West	37	M	Higher	Online
R16	Rural	20-29	North-West	29	M	Higher	Online
R17	Rural	40-49	North-West	33	M	Higher	Online
R18	Urban	60+	North-West	42	M	Higher	In Person
R19	Urban	30-39	North-West	25	M	Higher	Online
R20	Urban	20-29	North	31	M	Higher	In Person
R21	Urban	20-29	South	29	M	Higher	Online
R22	Rural	20-29	North-West	39	F	Higher	In Person
R23	Urban	50-59	North-West	22	M	Higher	Online
R24	Urban	40-49	North-West	34	F	Higher	In Person
R25	Urban	14-19	North-West	24	M	Middle	In Person