

Article

Representations of Divinity Among Romanian Senior Students in Orthodox Theology Vocational High School

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Abstract

The process of secularization was long considered irreversible and characteristic of all contemporary culture. Nonetheless, more recent approaches view it as strictly linked to Western religiosity and in relation to a process of de-secularization and post-secular orientations regarding the sacred. For Romanian Orthodox theologians, secularization represents more of a trial than a danger. The current article presents the results of qualitative research regarding the religiosity of future graduates of Orthodox vocational theological high schools in Romania. The students enrolled in the research were asked to graphically represent God and briefly explain their drawings. The data were theoretically coded and compared with the canonical attributes of God as acknowledged by Orthodox theology. The results indicated the canonical correctness of students' representations of divinity. Orthodox vocational high school education proves to be effective in imposing the Christian dogmatic line to the detriment of popular religiosity characterized by old pre-Christian beliefs and practices.

Keywords: secularization; vocational theological education; Orthodox theology; graphic representations



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1. Introduction

The process of secularization is considered representative for the evolution of modern Western culture. Modern scientific knowledge, which emerged as a defensive reaction to church censorship of the imaginary (Culianu 1994), gradually imposed a representation of the world in which God is no longer a necessary presence. According to J. Turner (1985), the Western educated population is logically, predictably, and gradually losing religious faith. By providing unrealistic representations about humans and solutions to humanity's great problems, acting as a barrier to social and intellectual progress, generating hostility and wars, and endangering the lives of believers, religion itself justifies such an evolution (Bainbridge 2011). Secularization, namely the loss of social power by religion and the diminishing of individual piety (Dobbelaere 2011), has been associated with actions like stimulating independent thinking in children and expanding the horizons of knowledge (Zuckerman 2014).

Christianity is one of the great monotheistic religions of the world and the dominant religion in the history of Western culture. Within Christianity, several denominations have differentiated over time, a consequence of the Great Schism that separated Eastern Orthodoxy from the Catholicism of Western Europe. Romania is predominantly an Orthodox

country. According to the final data of the 2021 Population Census, 85% of Romanians declared themselves Orthodox ([Recensământ România 2021](#)). At the European level, the religiosity of Romanians is considered very high (10 Revealing Maps [Churchpop 2014](#)). The hierarchs of the Romanian Orthodox Church have a reserved position regarding the danger of secularization for Eastern Christianity ([Conovici 2009](#)). [D. Popescu \(1996\)](#) presents the synthesis between the lucid rationality of the West and the mysticism of the East as Romanian Christianity's way of countering secularization. The Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church considers that secularization forces believers to grow spiritually, moving from Christianity inherited as a tradition to the conscious, discerning assumption of a living faith ([Ciobotea 2001](#)). In the background of this approach lies the authentic knowledge of the resources of Orthodoxy and the religiosity of Romanians.

According to [Berger \(2005\)](#), the piety of Eastern Christianity is very different from that of the West. Unlike the latter, centered on the inherent suffering of Good Friday, Orthodoxy is centered on the joy of Resurrection Sunday. The focus on the luminous dimension of the Gospels, that is, on the Resurrection, is the defining feature for Orthodox Christianity, according to [Stăniloae \(1991\)](#). The Resurrection is more important than the Passion. Vladimir Lossky also refers to the constitutive, defining joy of Orthodoxy, intimately connected to the saving dimension of the Resurrection, referring to Easter night as a "feast of faith" at the end of "The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church" ([Lossky 2010](#)).

Orthodox Christianity tacitly allows various dogmatic freedoms in Romania. Romanian Orthodox priests adopt local customs and traditions of the communities they shepherd. In the Romanian cultural space, ancient pre-Christian beliefs have survived, partly due to this permissive pastoral attitude (and thus are efficient and wise). These are beliefs that had already disappeared in Homeric Greece, according to [Eliade \(1991\)](#).

Regarding the meaning of the secularization process, the opinions of theorists are divided. They operate with terms such as "growth of spirituality," "de-secularization," and "post-secular stage." We wanted to find out how, in the context of the importance attributed in the Occident to secularization and its meaning, the religiosity of graduates of theological education at the high school level on the Orthodox vocational path is configured. We consider that their religiosity is the result of overlapping dogmatic knowledge and confessional practices due to the vocational high school they attend over the beliefs and practices of the communities from which the students come. Their religiosity is, at the same time, a measure of the efficiency of the Orthodox school curriculum in imposing a canonical representation of divinity on adolescents. Orthodox theology carefully emphasizes the attributes of God. We wanted to find out which of these traits attributed to God by Orthodox theology are considered relevant by students. We also wanted to find out if and what kind of non-canonical features are preserved in the whole representation of God by theology students. We consider the presence of such non-canonical components as an expression of the survival of pre-Christian beliefs and/or the openness of students to alternative forms of religiosity.

2. Some Theoretical Considerations

2.1. *Secularization Is Neither Irreversible nor Universal*

In contemporary Western culture, secularization is accompanied by an increase in spirituality ([Dobbelaere 2011](#)) as an alternative religiosity to dominant, institutionalized Christianity. These forms of alternative religiosity are similar to old folk religions (Stark, Hamberg and Miller 2004, cited in [Hamberg 2011](#)). In the context of the declining importance of the nation-state ([Rountree 2014](#)), globalization, technocracy, and ecological challenges ([Linguist 1997](#)), along with all the anxieties associated by [Bauman \(2000\)](#) with "liquid modernity", contemporary Europe is experiencing a flourishing of neo-paganism

(Linguist 1997). The continuous and irreversible decrease in religiosity throughout human history, as posited by Norris and Inglehart (2012), thus seems to refer only to Christian religiosity, countered by the flourishing of other spiritual movements outside the church (Hamberg 2011). Secularization belongs to the West and is dependent on capitalism, industrialization, individualism, pluralism (Dueck et al. 2017), European liberalism, and pragmatism (Nikiforova 2017). Intellectuals in Central and Western Europe are secularly oriented, but this orientation is more of an exception than the defining feature of contemporary religiosity, according to Berger (2012). Secular discourse coexists with a plurality of religious discourses (Berger 2012).

Dobbelaere (2011) considers the process of secularization reversible and cites the reevaluation of religion in Russia and other ex-communist countries at the end of the last century as evidence in this regard. Coffey (2013) points out the inevitable revitalizing influence of Christian movements from other parts of the world on the West. In turn, Lambert (2003) notes the development of belief without belonging, concurrent with a revival of Christianity among young people and a slowing pace of secularization. Hamberg (2011) highlights the growing interest of young people in religion and religiosity. All these characteristics corroborate, on the horizon of Protestant Christianity, Berger's (1999) diagnosis of de-secularization in contemporary times.

Distinct from categorizing contemporaneity as de-secularized, the era has also been analyzed as post-secular. This term, originating from Habermas' perspective, has been used to indicate the recovery of the sacred through the profane (Rorty and Vattimo 2008; Girard and Vattimo 2009), or the blurring of boundaries between the two, as seen in religious tourism, churches used as concert halls, religious relics kept in private collections, consumption transformed into spiritual experience (Nikiforova 2017), religious attitudes manifested in secular spaces, and profane attitudes displayed in sacred places (Pfister 2017).

2.2. Canonical Representations of God in Orthodoxy

Representations are mediated, selective, and schematic psychological processes that reflect concrete properties of objects or phenomena, independent of prior sensory experience (Cosmovici 1996). The concept of social representation was established by Moscovici (1961). He reevaluated Durkheim's concept of collective representation, highlighting its dimension as a guide for interpreting the symbolic reality of a society. The theory of social representations developed by Moscovici emphasizes the importance of social context in forming people's knowledge and perceptions about certain phenomena, as well as their values and meanings within a society. Knowledge is transformed and transmitted within a society, thus influencing both collective and individual behaviors. According to Moscovici (1961), through social representations, people construct a common understanding of a particular phenomenon. Social representations are formed through social interactions and are influenced by the specific socio-cultural context in which they develop. Social representations are essential tools for understanding human interactions and how opinions are formed. They exist in an interdependent relationship with the culture where they become manifest, reflecting not only the understanding of the external world but also the ways of collectively constructing meanings of social reality through symbols, values, and traditions passed down from generation to generation (Curelaru 2006).

Social representations of divinity have played a central role throughout different cultural eras in human history. They are endeavors of humanity to create a connection with divinity (Meslin 1993). Spiritual values relate to a transcendent reality, and people's trust in these supreme values stems from representations (Andrei 1945). Moral values have most often been configured in relation to the divine. P. Diel (2002) distinguishes three essential stages in the historical evolution of the representation of divinity: animism, which

arose from the feeling of human powerlessness in the face of nature/life and represents the source of any religious sentiment, with its animated objects and spirits as personifications of the elements of nature; polytheism, a stage in which divinities are personifications of positive human qualities, in opposition to demons, which are personifications of negative qualities; and monotheism, which is characterized by the worship of a single divinity.

Religiosity can be established through a formal framework, namely the Church, but also informally. The system of beliefs, practices, and religious symbols manifested in customs, superstitions, even rituals, comprehensively called “popular religion,” is not always regulated by official religious institutions, but it represents an accessible and flexible variant of living the faith transmitted from generation to generation (Radosav 1997).

Dumitru Stăniloae is one of the great contemporary theologians, canonized by the Romanian Orthodox Church in 2024 (Basilica 2024). According to Stăniloae (1996), the dogmatic foundation of the Orthodox religion is constituted by God’s revelation, as well as by the tradition of the Orthodox Church, being not just an abstract system of teaching, but rather a personal knowledge lived in communion with God through the Church. The essential modes of knowing God, which complement each other (Stăniloae 1996), are cataphatic–rational and deductive knowledge, through which God is known as the creative force of the world; apophatic knowledge, meaning the direct experience of His presence in the world; and knowledge in the concrete situations of daily life, meaning each person’s path toward perfection by enacting moral attributes. The absolute attributes of God revealed through cataphatic knowledge are not merely abstractions but also simultaneously generate the experience of encountering them. Through apophatic knowledge, one directly feels what one knows about the absolute attributes of God.

The attributes of God (Stăniloae 1996) are infinity, manifested in God’s endless works of creating, sustaining, guiding, and perfecting the world, that is, its deification; simplicity or unity, which contains the trinitarian distinction and is shown in the relationships between created things and in their relationship with the Creator; eternity, meaning the immutability of God’s life and His activity regarding creatures. In Dumitru Stăniloae’s formulation, “God’s life is an infinitely continuous present plenitude” (p. 124); and supra-spatiality meaning that God is above space and at the same time present in all space. Through the Incarnation, God’s omnipresence has become accessible and active. Additional attributes include omnipotence, meaning God’s power to accomplish anything in the created order, is the source and cause of all power. The omnipotent God acts as All-Sustainer, meaning He uses from His omnipotence as much as it is necessary for the salvation of the creature. God, who is good, protective, and helpful, gives people increasingly higher energies, corresponding to their spiritual growth. The attribute of paternity relates to the revelation of communion “between God the Father and man, His child” (p. 155) and manifests in God’s actions as Savior and Comforter. All these are attributes related to God’s supereminence. Additionally, there are attributes related to God’s spirituality: God’s omniscience—He knows everything since He is the cause of everything that exists. God’s omniscience is manifested in the connection between all acts of knowledge, that is, in wisdom, being related to the world, but without limiting human freedom. The challenge of the relationship between foreknowledge and predetermination is resolved in Orthodoxy by John of Damascus, as Dumitru Stăniloae shows, repeating the theologian’s formulation: “God foreknows everything, but does not predetermine, taking into account the freedom of creatures” (p. 166). Justice and mercy are inseparable attributes in God’s relationship with humans, since “If He were only just, God would not be fully free; if He were only merciful, He would not take into account human efforts and would not encourage them” (p. 172). The remaining attributes are holiness, that is, the manifestation of God’s transcendence through His descent into the world, simultaneously revealing the difference between God

and the world; goodness, the defining feature by virtue of which God gave existence and form to creation, which cannot, for this reason, be anything but good in turn; and God's love, which some theologians consider indistinguishable from goodness and which is His inclination toward union with created beings. The Incarnation is the full expression of this love.

Conceptually, in Orthodox theology, grace is considered in synergy with human freedom, with salvation representing an act of free communion between humans and God. Tradition and Holy Scripture are complementary sources of religious truth. In the concrete experience of salvation, each believer is in a personal relationship with God, and perfection is achieved in communion with Him (Stăniloae 1996).

The canonical representations of God in the Orthodox religion derive from several dogmas: the dogma of original monotheism and God's absolute perfection, the dogma of the creation of the world from nothing, the dogma of the original sin of humanity, the dogma of the divine–human nature of Jesus, the dogma of the Trinity (formulated in the Creed), the dogma of salvation through the Church (one, holy, synodal, and apostolic), the dogma of the resurrection of the dead, and the dogma of the Last Judgment or Righteous Judgment (I. M. Popescu 1996).

3. Materials and Methods

Religion and religiosity are sensitive research topics. Sociological surveys and/or approaching them through direct questions can generate reactions of rejection (Wilson 2000). On the other hand, as we witness a development of innovative techniques for researching social reality, the use of visual data in qualitative research, or “visual research,” becomes increasingly relevant (Scârnci-Domnişoru 2016). Drawings are such visual data. The central role of images in religion and spirituality justifies the option to use the drawing technique (Williams and Whitehouse 2015) in research. Religious meanings are easily accessible through drawing (Harms 1944).

The qualitative research we conducted aimed to outline the representation of divinity used by students in their final year of vocational high school education in Orthodox theology. In such high schools, which are public educational institutions in Romania, boys and girls are educated in the Orthodox theology specialization. The main competencies acquired are primarily related to understanding and deepening the specifics of Orthodox spirituality, but also to the correct performance of divine worship. Other competencies aim at integrating values from the field of spirituality and raising awareness of their importance for personal and community life, as well as organizing philanthropic activities. Graduates can choose to take a job as a priest with secondary education, as a deacon, as a missionary priest with secondary education, as a cantor in the case of boys, or as workers in social assistance, heritage, sacred art, etc., in the case of all graduates, or to deepen their studies in higher theological education—Pastoral Theology, Theology—Letters, Theology—Social Assistance, Theology—Heritage, or in other faculties with a humanistic profile (isjbrasov 2024).

The research was conducted between January and May 2024. The study involved 28 students in their final year (12th grade) at a vocational Orthodox theology high school, including 17 males and 11 females, with 11 students from rural areas and 17 from urban areas. Among the participants, 23 were 18 years old—the age of majority in Romania—and 5 were 19 years old at the time of the research.

Regarding research ethics and considering that the vocational Orthodox theology high school is a public educational institution, we requested and obtained prior approval from the county school inspectorate and from the school's administration. Students signed an informed consent form for participation in the research. To maintain data confidentiality, each research participant received a unique identification code consisting of numbers and

letters (Pn/participant gender, n = 1–28). The research results are presented in this paper with exclusive references to these codes. The processing of personal data was conducted in accordance with European legislation in the field (GDPR). The research was conducted with the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the Transilvania University of Braşov (CEU-CECS No. 38/5.12.2023).

The participating students were invited to draw the first image that comes to mind when they hear the word “God” and to explain in writing on the back of the drawing what they had drawn. We considered the visual data (drawings) and textual data (explanatory sentences) thus obtained as provoked social documents. The processing and analysis of the drawings and explanations was performed using NVivo 12. The data was theoretically coded, with initial open coding (Scârnelci-Domnişoru 2016; Saldaña [2009] 2013) followed by selective coding and axial coding. The coding highlighted categories related to the representation of divinity among students in their final year at an Orthodox theology vocational high school. In analyzing the data, we considered gender and background environment of the participants as variables. In interpreting the data, we compared the emergent research categories with the attributes of God, as highlighted in relation to the fundamental concepts of Orthodoxy by Stăniloae (1996).

The students were directly and non-participatively observed during the time allocated for creating the drawings and explanations. The observation focused on the classroom atmosphere, the relationship with the high school teacher who introduced the researcher, the students’ interest in the drawing topic, and their willingness to fulfill the request.

4. Results

4.1. Divine Attributes Highlighted by Theology Students

Following the open coding of visual and textual data, we identified categories that configure the representation of divinity among final-year students in the Orthodox theology vocational stream. The categories and their subcategories are presented in Table 1, in descending order of the number of associated codes and differentiated by the gender of participants.

The most significant category is Absolute Superiority of God, with a total of 105 graphic and textual codes and the following subcategories: all-powerful, creator, holy, guide, sovereign, wise, infinite, perfect, trinitarian, eternal, inconceivable, omnipresent, all-sustaining, and invisible. The next category is God of Love, with 70 codes and the following subcategories: God’s love, protection, goodness, gentleness, mercy, forgiveness, and patience. Far behind these, we identified a group of categories with a similar number of codes: Religious Practice, with 19 codes and the subcategories Church, prayer, and cult of the dead; God with Human Appearance, also with 17 codes and the following subcategories: long beard, long hair, powerful penetrating eyes, smiling, male, with traces of wounds, elegantly dressed, and thin; God of Iconography, with 17 codes and the following subcategories: the cross, angels, halo, and the Trinity; and God of Justice, with 16 codes and the following subcategories: divine justice, testing of people, and free will. The other two categories are Light of the Universe, with nine codes and the following subcategories: the sun, vision, and presence of God, and the Supreme Tree, with two codes.

Table 1. Categories and Subcategories of the Representation of Divinity (M: masculine gender, F: feminine gender; T: textual codes; G: graphic codes).

Categories/Subcategories	M	F	T	G	Total Codes	Categories/Subcategories	M	F	T	G	Total Codes
1. Absolute Superiority of God	68	37	94	11	105	4. God with Human Appearance	4	13	15	2	17
Almighty (of which) Miracles	14 3	12 3	25 6	1 0	26 6	Long beard	0	4	4	0	4
Creator	18	6	21	3	24	Long hair	1	3	4	0	4
Holiness	4	4	8	0	8	Powerful eyes	0	3	2	1	3
Guide	3	4	7	0	7	Smiler	1	1	1	1	2
Sovereignty	4	3	4	3	7	Male	0	1	1	0	1
Wise	4	2	6	0	6	Traces of wounds	1	0	1	0	1
Infinite	5	1	5	1	6	Elegantly dressed	0	1	1	0	1
Perfection	4	2	6	0	6	Thin	1	0	1	0	1
Holy Trinity	6	0	4	2	6	5. God of Iconography	14	3	8	9	17
Eternity	2	1	2	1	3	Cross	9	1	4	6	10
Inconceivable	2	0	2	0	2	Angel	3	0	1	2	3
Omnipresent	1	1	2	0	2	Aura	0	2	2	0	2
All-sustaining	0	1	1	0	1	Trinity	2	0	1	1	2
Invisible	1	0	1	0	1	6. God of Justice	9	7	14	2	16
2. God of Love	44	26	67	3	70	Law	4	3	7	0	7
Love	17	6	20	3	23	Testing people	1	4	5	0	5
Protection	9	12	21	0	21	Free will	4	0	2	2	4
Goodness	8	5	13	0	13	7. Light of the World	2	6	5	3	8
Gentleness	3	1	4	0	4	The sun	2	2	2	2	4
Mercy	3	1	4	0	4	The yearning	0	2	2	0	2
Forgiveness	2	1	3	0	3	Presence of God	0	2	1	1	2
Patience	2	0	2	0	2	8. Supreme Tree	2	0	1	1	2
3. Religious Practice	6	13	12	7	19						
Church	6	6	7	5	12						
Prayer	0	4	3	1	4						
Cult of the dead	0	3	2	1	3						

We used the results of the open coding organized with the help of NVivo12 for selective coding and then axial coding of the data. Figure 1 presents the resulting coding scheme.

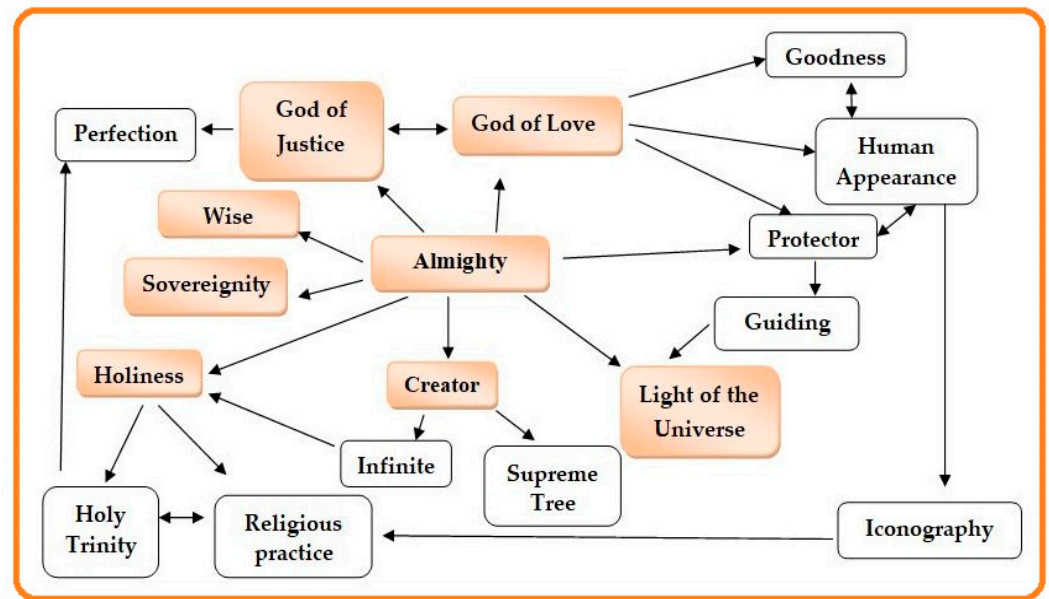


Figure 1. Representations of divinity among final-year students in Orthodox theological vocational high school.

Thus, in the representation of students in their final year of Orthodox theological high school, who are at the end of their basic theological training period, God is primarily almighty. His power, which manifests in miracles, is connected to omniscience and is recognized as holiness, making Him the Creator and ruler of the world. The almighty God is just and embodies perfection. But more importantly, the almighty God is a God of Love. He is good, protective, and guiding. He is even the light of the world. Out of love for people, God took on a human appearance. The two characteristics of God's justice and love meet in religious practice and iconography.

In detail, using the words and drawings of the student respondents, God is almighty because "He takes care of everything" (P1/M) and "is above all" (P3/M), "spiritually (is) interpreted through flames, meaning through power" (P17/F), and is a "force in the universe" (P5/M), meaning "our all-powerful one who protects us" (P28/F).

Almightiness is closely linked in the students' representation to the performance of miracles: "God performs miracles" (P11/F, P12/F, P20/F, P6/M) or "there are many people who think about miracles in our days, as they no longer see many. Fortunately, miracles exist!" (P25/M).

God is wise, He has all the "wise moral attributes" (P12/F) and is "all-wise" (P23/M).

God's holiness is found in the fact that He "has all moral, good, and Christian attributes" (P11/F), is "the only person without sin" (P15/M, P17/F, P18/M, P4/M), and possesses "absolute purity" (P7/M, P8/F).

God made the world: "God creates the world through the deeds of each person. He created it at the beginning, but after Creation, He uses people for its continuation" (P7/M). The relationship between people and God in the proper functioning of the world is depicted in a drawing as that between small trees and the "supreme tree": "I drew several small trees representing people, and the large tree represents God, being the supreme tree. The closer we are to God, the tree of our soul and life or the tree that represents us begins to grow to become more majestic, stronger, while distance from God uproots us, drains us of life, and makes our path to death more difficult, making us smaller, stagnating in despair" (P23/M). The graphic representation of divinity as the "Supreme Tree" is presented in

Figure 2. As sovereign, God “is in everything and above everything” (P16/M), is lord of the sky as “a man in the starry night sky and illuminated during the day” (P10/F). Figure 3 reproduces two of the graphic representations of God’s sovereignty.



Figure 2. Representations of the divinity as the “supreme tree” by final-year students of the vocational high school of Orthodox theology (P23/M).



Figure 3. Representations of the sovereignty of the divinity by final-year students of the vocational high school of Orthodox theology: (a) P10/F; (b) P16/M. “Dumnezeu” means God in Romanian.

God of Justice is “especially fair, being good to the good and harsh to the bad” (P14/F). He is the one who “judged the worthless, punished the hypocrites” (P23/M), and is “a righteous father who at some point will draw the line” (P13/M). Perfection is characteristic of God. He has “all perfect qualities, and we humans have an infinitesimal reflection and a small particle of His qualities” (P23/M).

God of Love is “all-loving” (P21/M), such that “if God were to be defined in one word, that word would be love” (P25/M), or “God for me, in one word, is love” (P13/M). Divine love manifests in several ways (unconditional love, gentleness, forgiveness, merciful love, protection, and patience), always seeking good: “to do good deeds, to stop being bad to one another, and to help each other more. This is what God wants most and what He likes most: for us to be good!” (P27/F). In His goodness, God brings “healing” (P19/M) and “gives us strength” (P8/M), and is responsible for “the gifts with which we are endowed” (P22/F). The moral attribute of infinite goodness is associated with God’s beauty: “I drew a beautiful path full of flowers and God welcoming us. I drew this because I think of His

beauty and goodness” (P11/F). God is protective, like a “caring father/mother” (P16/M); “fights for our good” (P4/M); and “saves humanity” (P6/M, P23/M). The divine protector aspect is associated with guidance. God is guiding, He “is always present in our actions to guide us on the right path” (P21/M), and “even if He gives us hardships, He doesn’t do it to punish us” (P17/F); “sometimes He also gives us some challenges in life to strengthen our faith” (P27/F). Figure 4 reproduces one of the graphic representations of God’s love, poured out upon people and upon the church.



Figure 4. Representations of divine love by final-year students of the vocational high school of Orthodox theology (P22/F). Text in the drawing: “Assumption of the Virgin Mary” Orthodox Church.

God is Light. He is “a sun reflected in water” (P8/F), “the Holy Trinity in the form of a triangle in the middle of a cosmic sphere, star, or sun” (P7/M), “a light present somewhere in the universe, a light with the help of which anyone, through a strong manifestation, can reach that desire which they truly have” (P14/F). He is reflected in our soul. Light and warmth “make one think of God’s presence in our life” (P8/F). Figure 5 reproduces several graphic representations of divinity as light.

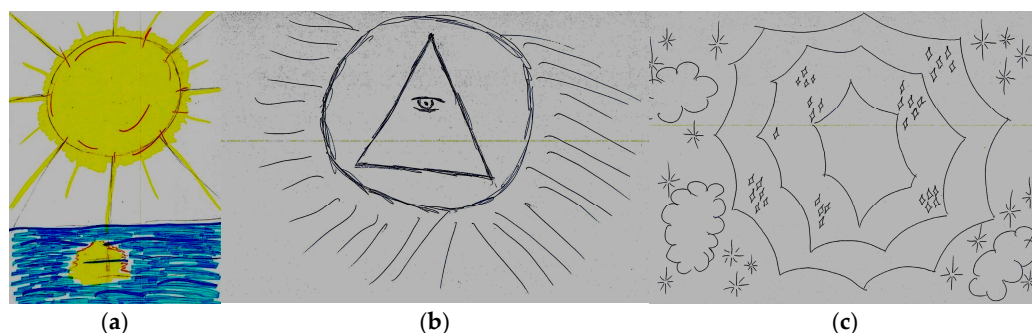


Figure 5. Representation of the divinity as the Light of the world by final-year students of the vocational high school of Orthodox theology: (a) P8/F; (b) P7/M; (c) P14/F.

God took on a human appearance. “God is like a man” (P18/M), “is a man” (P10/F), is “a bearded man” (P12/F); He has a “long beard” (P10/F, P11/F, P12/F) and “long hair” (P12/F, P11/F) “down to the shoulders” (P4/M). He is “thin” (P4/M) and “smiling”

(P10/F), and “elegantly dressed” (P10/F), with traces of wounds that represent “our sins” (P4/M). Figure 6 reproduces several graphic representations of God’s anthropomorphism.

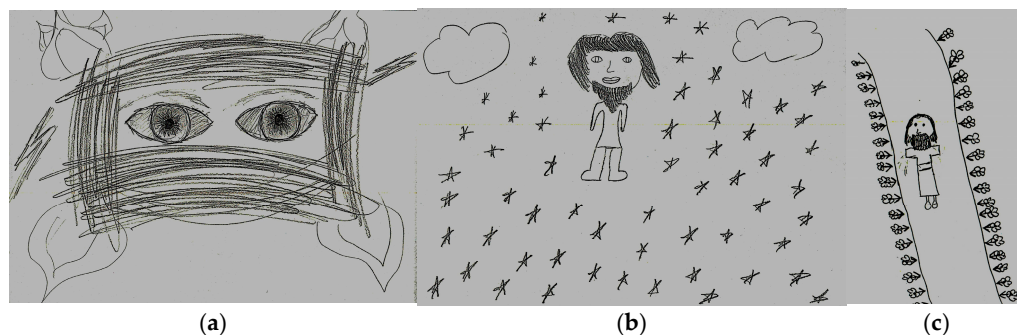


Figure 6. Anthropomorphic representations of divinity by final-year students of the vocational high school of Orthodox theology: (a) “strong, pressing eyes”/P17/F; (b) “male God”/P12/F; (c) “God with beard and long hair”/P11/F).

In religious practice, God is sought in and through the church. The church is “the visible body of divinity” (P21/M), “God’s house, the place through which we can reach God” (P22/F). “In church, each person finds peace, because they are in communion with God. Each person who feels they have no peace or has a problem should go to church to find peace” (P18/M). The cross is a central Christian symbol, with widespread iconographic use and overlapping layers of meaning. It “may seem like a simple piece of wood, but it has a special significance, a spiritual brilliance shared with people to whom it offers the meaning of life” (P26/M), which “reminds us of the sacrifice of God’s son, who endured many torments and accepted a painful death to offer us the chance to reach eternal happiness” (P26/M), since “before, the cross was used to punish pagans, but when our Savior Jesus Christ was crucified, the cross became a symbol of salvation” (P19/M). In some drawings, the cross is also represented on the church. Figure 7 reproduces several graphic representations of the church and cross, the main subcategories of the Religious Practice and God of Iconography categories.

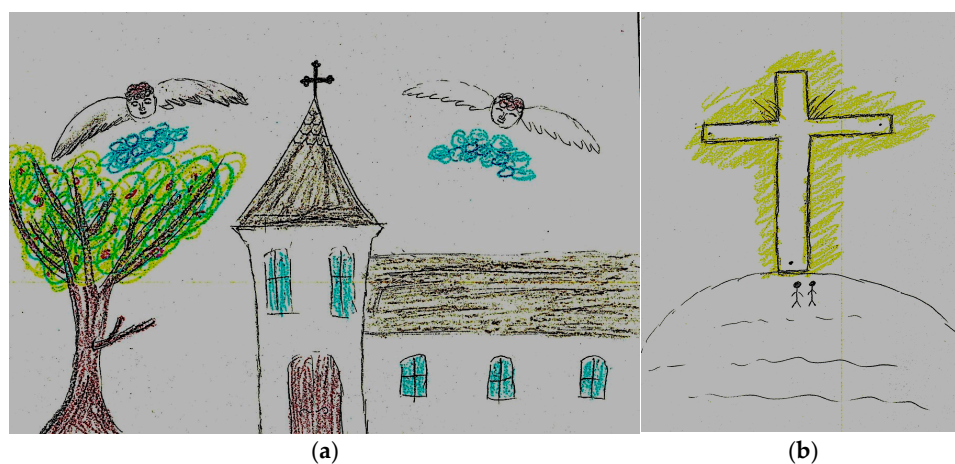


Figure 7. Representations of the church and the cross by final-year students of the vocational high school of Orthodox theology: (a) the church/P21/M; (b) the cross as a “symbol of salvation” (P26/M).

4.2. Gender and Background Differences in the Representation of God

The data analysis revealed gender differentiation in the importance given to various attributes of God in students’ drawings and explanations. This differentiation is not recorded at the level of the first two categories (by number of allocated codes), namely Absolute Superiority of God (68M and 37F) and God of Love (44M and 26F). However, male

respondents showed a proportionally greater interest in God of Iconography (14M and 3F), while female respondents proportionally indicated more attributes related to Religious Practice (6M and 13F), God with Human Appearance (4M and 13F), and Light of the World (2M and 6F). This differentiation suggests a greater sensitivity of female respondents to the tangible aspects of faith that are directly accessible to the senses, simultaneously with the inclination of male respondents toward clarity and simplicity.

The background environment also determined the differentiation of representations at a secondary level, after similar primary options for Absolute Superiority of God (65U and 48R) and God of Love (36U and 22R). In the case of urban respondents, at the secondary level, interest is directed toward God with Human Appearance (18U and 1R), while for rural respondents, this interest is directed toward the categories Religious Practice (7U and 12R) and God of Justice (7U and 9R). This differentiation might be an expression, on one hand, of the realism of urban dwellers, such as their tendency to transform everything into measurable things (Simmel [1903] 1969), and, on the other hand, of the habit of Romanian rural dwellers to rely only on their actions when calibrating their expectations. Figure 8 represents cumulatively by gender and background the distribution of codes for the main categories resulting from the open coding of the drawings and explanations of the student respondents.

4.3. Observation Results

When signing the participation agreement, the school management was cooperative, even showing interest in the research topic. The activity took place after morning prayer, in the classroom where students normally conducted their regular teaching activities. The scene “Jesus’s Descent into Hell” was painted across the entire surface of one of the classroom walls.

The atmosphere changed significantly after the teacher who introduced the research and the researcher to the students left the room. Students shifted from respectful seriousness to a more relaxed attitude, encouraged by the researcher to be creative in approaching the task.

However, participants did not show enthusiasm for the research topic, completing the requirement in a very short time. The impression was that they wanted to efficiently fulfill the request with minimal effort, to get it over with as quickly as possible. No refusals were recorded, although students were informed that they could refuse to participate. Although colored pencils and markers were provided, they did not opt to use them, often using only pencil or pen. The students’ willingness to textually detail the content and significance of their drawing on the back proved to be limited.

A few male participants vocally expressed their opinion about the task they received in the first part of the activity, but quieted down at the researcher’s intervention. Interactions between students were cooperative, with vocal students proving to be popular and influential in the group dynamics.

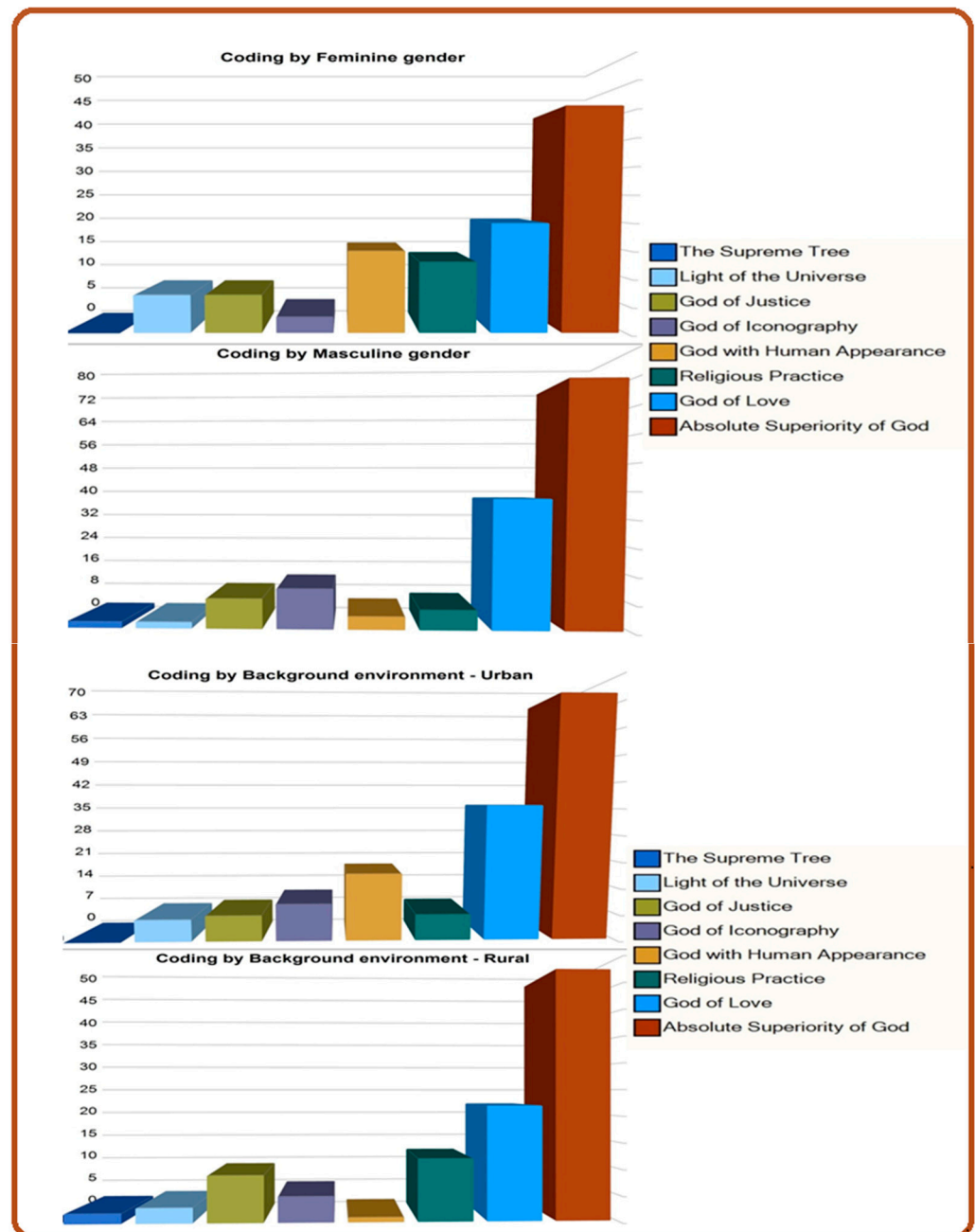


Figure 8. The distribution of categories resulting from the open coding: top, by gender; bottom, by background.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Canonical Dimension of Students' Representation of God

The attributes indicated by Dumitru Stăniloae are found almost entirely in the students' representation of God. Some are mentioned as such: God is infinite, eternal, creator, almighty, all-sustaining, wise, just, merciful, holy, good, loving. Others are present only through their particularizing connotations: God's unity is subtly present in the Holy Trinity, supra-spatiality is indicated as omnipresence, and God's paternity is manifest in His gentleness, protection, and patience, which indicates a shift in the attribute of paternity from God's supereminence.

The attributes of God as Savior and Comforter are not explicitly mentioned by the students. However, these can be implicitly linked to love, protection, goodness, mercy, which are attributes of God's spirituality that frequently appear in the students' drawings

and explanations. God's omniscience is not explicitly mentioned either, but Dumitru Stăniloae himself insists on the subtlety of the distinction between God's omniscience (in Himself) and His wisdom (in relation to the world).

We grouped the attributes related to God's supereminence in the category Absolute Superiority of God/Perfect God (in His attributes), and the attributes related to God's spirituality in the categories God of Love and God of Justice. In addition to the attributes highlighted by Dumitru Stăniloae, but easily related to these (in the categories already mentioned, according to Table 1), the students called God guiding and sovereign, showing that He is gentle but that He also tests people. Besides these, we identified three more categories that we consider associated with the respondents' familiarity with religious practice and Orthodox iconography: God with Human Appearance, God of Iconography, and Religious Practice/Piety.

All these categories signal the adequacy of theology students' representation of God to the canonical teachings of Orthodoxy. The gap in the number of codes in the categories God of Love and God of Justice also corroborates the emphasis that Orthodox theology places on the prevalence of love over justice. The teaching about God who is Love is at the core of Christianity (Mladin et al. 2003; Stăniloae 1993). The Old Testament law prepared the coming of Christ (Stăniloae 1993) and the commandment of love. Divine love demands justice, just as a good parent corrects their child (Chițescu et al. 2008), admonishing and punishing them (Moldovan 2022). Divine justice is necessarily linked to mercy and has a pedagogical purpose; it helps people grow (Stăniloae 1996). Justice without love is human, and an inferior virtue. According to human justice, people would not be worthy of God's gifts. But divine justice, the true one, is love (Moldovan 2022). By granting His grace and not punishing them, God shows His love for them. He does not condition the offering of grace on people's worthiness. His love, which does not fit with the human representation of justice (Moldovan 2022), is what shapes His relationship with people.

The last two isolated categories, Light of the World and Supreme Tree, with relatively few associated codes, are those that express fewer canonical components of theology students' representation of God. God as Light refers to a solar religion. In the pre-Christian past of the ancestors of today's Romanians, the Dacians on one hand and the Romans on the other, there were such expressions of religiosity (Eliade 1991). However, the textual codes in the students' explanations indicate the prevalence of the metaphorical character of references to God as the sun: He is reflected in our soul, is the power of the Holy Trinity, and is the support of human aspirations. These are reformulations of canonical attributes of the God of Christianity.

The Supreme Tree as such does not have canonical coverage in Christianity, just as the dendrolatry that the codes in the category seem to suggest does not. But in the Christian tradition, wood is the material of the cross, an instrument of death and support for Resurrection unto salvation, and the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life from the Old Testament have been preserved. It could be a conceptual contamination that also supports a metaphorical formulation: the understanding of God as the "Supreme Tree" suggests the vision of a world axis that connects heaven and earth. It also suggests the foundation and development of the world from the divine, specific to monotheistic religions. But, closer to the explanations of the one who drew it, God is the "Supreme Tree" because He is the continuous presence that is the spiritual center of existence as well as the means by which humanity is spiritually transformed (growth as approaching God). Distance from God ("uprooting") makes the path to eternal life more difficult, because the path of divine communication is interrupted. Uprooting "drains us of life and makes our path to death more difficult, making us smaller, stagnating in despair. Obviously, it depends on us how

much we want to evolve in loving God, because that's where everything starts, because He already loves us" (P23/M).

We consider, in this context, that the presence of the Light of the World and Supreme Tree categories signals the personal level of understanding of the Christian faith, rather than non-canonical orientations in theology students' representation of God. The presence of these categories functions as evidence of the students' Christian faith. However, this interpretation cannot be extended to all theology students participating in the research.

The students' representation of God is in accordance with the objectives of this educational stream regarding the competencies of graduates (isjbrasov 2024), which we presented above. On the other hand, obedience is important in Orthodox Christianity, and the research was conducted in a high school, within the parameters of the observations presented at the end of the previous chapter. Social desirability is an aspect that must be taken into consideration in this context. The research topic was familiar to the respondents; it is easy to assume that they approached it in the same way, using the knowledge they considered appropriate and paying attention to the boundaries of dogmatic teaching as in other educational activities. But, as Rotariu and Iluț show, individuals are inclined to present themselves in a favorable light not only to others but also to their own self. Thus, responses affected by desirability remain important in predicting the individuals' behavior, as "there are chances that they will offer answers saturated with desirability in other situations controlled by the respective norms and values" (Rotariu and Iluț 2001, p. 116). This means that there are many chances that the representation of God that the students provided in the research will be the one they will operate with after graduation in the fields associated with their theological training.

5.2. *Between Orthodox Theological Education and the Popular Religiosity of Romanians*

In both scenarios, whether personally embracing Orthodox faith or learning socially desirable answers, students will encounter the canonically unrestricted religiosity of Romanians after graduation.

In Romanian religiosity, especially at the level of popular religion, numerous pre- and/or non-Christian beliefs are interwoven with Christianity (Eliade 1991; Sorea 2013; Sorea and Popescu 2022). At Christmas, groups of caroling young men bring to the villages of Făgăraș Land a forest divinity from before the birth of Jesus (Herseni 1977; Sorea and Csesznek 2020), and in the Apuseni Mountains, villagers still expect to meet "solomonari"—specialists in meteorological magic disguised as simple beggars (Oișteanu 1989; Mișu 2000). Romanian funeral practices in many regions of the country remain closely connected to the power of water to transition from one world to another (Dorondel 2004). The post-1989 restitution of forests and pastures to their former owners reactivated the old communities and ancestral laws, religiously justified, of communal exploitation of the land (Roșculeț and Sorea 2021; Sorea et al. 2022).

The spiritual concerns of children everywhere are natural and help them develop. Children grow up in anticipation of meeting divinity and organize their moral values around this expectation (Coles 1990). Their spiritual experiences, which do not necessarily align with canonical religiosity, express impressive representations about humanity's place in the world (Coles 1990). Previous research on Romanian children's religiosity (Sorea and Scârnelci-Domnișoru 2019; Sorea 2020) highlighted their openness to a spirituality broader than Christianity. Children who participated in the research were mostly from Orthodox Christian families. Children are naturally religious, without canonical conditioning, even with spectacular deviations from dogmas (for example, pantheism, or God's femininity). Children have God in mind before gradually attaching Christian features of catechetical origin.

The difference between the representation of God by students in the final year of Orthodox vocational high school and the representations of God by Romanian children, against the background of Romanian popular religion's openness to pre-Christian beliefs and practices, demonstrates the effectiveness of Orthodox vocational high school education. The theological students' representation, which is correct from the Orthodox theological perspective, covers/corrects infantile representations of divinity. This is natural and aligns with the justification for vocational education.

However, the existence of differences between representations signals a situation with potential for cognitive dissonance. We believe that vocational high school students should be taught/counseled about cognitive dissonance and its management. This could be carried out by introducing the topic into the school curriculum or by addressing the subject in students' relationships with their spiritual father. The cognitive dissonance management skills thus acquired would help theology students relate constructively to the religiosity of their families, their childhood, and the communities they come from, which is not rigidly anchored to the dogmas. At the same time, it would help future graduates understand and interact with those whom, by virtue of their chosen profession, they will encounter. Managing the potential for cognitive dissonance is useful with regard to both the personal religious background of graduates and their future.

The canonical anchoring of the theological students' representations of God, as indicated by the research results, also points to another potential danger. It is about a premature and, implicitly, not fully assumed fixation in the dogmas of the confession of the high school. This type of fixation is characteristic not only of Orthodox theological high schools, but of all vocational theological high schools, of all religions and confessions recognized by the Romanian state. Each of them assumes as educational objectives the imposition of their own dogmas. The potential danger comes from blocking the future spiritual development of graduates along the lines imposed in high school. According to [Jung and Chiriac \(1998, 1999\)](#), the assumption of a religious stance is a stage of maturity in the process of individuation. The position assumed is not necessarily that of the primary religious denomination, nor even that of an already established religion. The assumed position reflects the archetypal sensitivities of the individual and their individuating needs. Religious pluralism, the contemporary development of non-canonical religiosity in the West, and the characteristics of Romanians' popular religion outline an individuating background broader than the dogmatic one characteristic of the vocational path. In this context, for each individual graduate the relationship between faith and freedom in their spiritual evolution can take on different connotations. The emphasis on the freedom at the core of religious faith should redouble the teaching of dogma. To open and mark out a path of genuine individuation between faith, temptation, dogma, and heresies is an endeavor of great virtuosity and generosity on the part of the spiritual parents of graduates.

6. Conclusions

At the end of their high school studies in the Orthodox theological vocational track, Romanian students operate with a representation of divinity in accordance with canonical teaching. In their representation, among the canonical attributes of God's supereminence, almightiness occupies the central place. Among the canonical attributes of God's spirituality, love is considered the most important. The theology students' representation of God corroborates the characterization of Orthodoxy as a religion of the joy of the Resurrection. The cataphatic knowledge of God's omnipotence exists in the students' representation, which is in synergy with the apophatic knowledge of His loving manifestations for people and with the transformative light of His presence in people's souls and in their moral decisions.

The solar dimension in the representation of God and His organic, nurturing connection with people could be considered non-canonical. But they are canonically recoverable as metaphorical expressions of God's attributes as guide and all-sustainer.

By imposing such a canonical representation on theology students, Orthodox theological vocational education formally fulfills its objectives. The future graduates of Orthodox theological seminary participating in the research are well prepared dogmatically. This finding converges with the serenity of contemporary Orthodox theologians regarding the danger of secularization. The results of our research suggest that the Romanian Orthodox Church can count on graduates to transmit those teachings to the population, which strengthen piety. Concerns about making this transmission more efficient should be oriented toward preparing graduates for encountering/re-encountering the popular religion of Romanians. An efficient vocational education strengthens the Church as an institution. Dogmatically well-trained graduates contribute to the correct transmission of the Church's teachings and the preservation of its prestige. The process of secularization, understood as the loss of social power by religion (namely the dominant Orthodox Christianity) and the diminishing piety of individuals, is counteracted or at least slowed down in this way. The co-existence of formal religiosity, managed by the Church, with the informal religiosity of popular religion in contemporary Romania also removes from the question the acceptance of secularization as a reduction in religiosity in general. Managing the potential for cognitive dissonance between formal and informal religiosity, discussed above, should protect, not inhibit, Romanians' religiosity.

Moreover, in post-communist Romania, there has been a strong revival of religious manifestations and theological education, as an enthusiastic reaction to emerging from a programmatically atheist regime. From this perspective, one can speak of de-secularization and entry into a post-secular era in recent decades. The results of our research corroborate this characterization of Romanian religiosity. The foundation of the secularization process, which was politically supported under communism, was undermined by the regime change in 1989.

As we have shown, this is a qualitative study. The small sample size of 28 participants limits the generalizability of the results. They are valid for the participants and can be extrapolated to the level of all high school seniors in the Orthodox theology vocational path only as suggestions and hypotheses for future research with a representative sample. This represents a limitation of our research. But the 36 Orthodox theological seminaries and high schools in Romania ([Patriarhia 2020](#)) use the same framework curriculum, established by ministerial order, and teachers can work in these educational units only with the approval of the local archbishop. We consider, in this context, that theology students learn roughly the same things in the same way. The interval of freedom available to the high school/seminary leadership is quite narrow. The suggestion to extend the results of our research is justified from this perspective. However, we consider it justified to repeat the research with a larger sample, from several vocational educational institutions, which would refine and increase the relevance of the results.

Another limitation of the research is the suspicion that the social documents produced by the student respondents were affected by desirability. The methodology chosen for the research did not allow for the elimination or measurement of its level. Observations during the elaboration of the drawings and explanations requested from the respondents only indicated desirability as possible. But, as we have also shown above, the repetition of a desirable response is predictable in similar contexts. There are many chances that graduates will operate in their future professional activities with the representation of God that they acquired in vocational education.

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