Christian Think-Tanks in Europe and North America

Abstract

In contemporary literature, think-tanks are often considered political, strategic, security, foreign policy and international relations. Unfortunately, the concern for religious think-tanks is missing from scientific analysis.

The most appropriate classification of think-tanks entails specific religious defining them. Thus, we will consider: religious analysis think-tanks, Christian think-tanks (with their categories: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Evangelical), ecumenical and inter-religious think-tanks, Islamic think-tanks, Jewish think-tanks; Buddhist think-tanks, New Age think-tanks, atheist think-tanks.

Among these, Christian think-tanks present a common organizational and functional theme, which makes them suitable for a separate approach – which constitutes the object of the following research.

Keywords: Think-tank, Religion, theological research, Catholicism, Orthodoxy, religious policies.

Introduction

The genesis of public policies in contemporary times is closely linked to the activity of think-tanks - formal research groups consist of experts in various fields who work together in programs and projects in order to present policy makers with solutions (McGann, Weawer 2000; Abelson 2002).
Political, strategic, security, foreign policy and international relations think-tanks are known and frequently analyzed. Religious think-tanks, on the other hand, are virtually unaddressed as far as analysis is concerned although their numbers are growing and the analysis performance of which closely follows that of classic think-tanks. This happens as a result of the fact that they do not direct the object of their research towards national and international policymakers – hence they benefit from a limited material support and understanding. Their research serves policymakers pertaining to the cults and religious organizations they represent and their active members.

Under these circumstances, we have to resort to an adaptation of the classical definition of think-tanks as it phrased by the researchers of the “Notre Europe” think-tank (Boucher 2004: 4).

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<th>Classic think-tanks</th>
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<td>provides an original production from reflection, analysis and counseling</td>
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<td>in order to be communicated to the government and public sector</td>
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<td>are not required to perform governmental functions</td>
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<td>strive, in general, to maintain freedom of research and not related to specific interests</td>
<td>proclaim and respect subordination to the religion or religious cult</td>
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<td>their main task is not academic or awarding of degrees</td>
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Consequently, seven of the nine essential characteristics of traditional think-tanks are kept strictly within the definition of the religious ones. There are two minor differences:
The recipient of the research does not usually consist of state officials in the case of religious research (except for the cases in which religious researchers propose legislative action, but this is not the main objective of religious reflection). On the other hand, public opinion is the beneficiary of think-tanks’ products in both cases, but a more specialized one appears in the case of religious think-tanks.

Regarding the claim of autonomy of classic think-tank reflection, one must state that this is more of an ideal than a reality – the one who commissions or finances the research is always favored as his interest serves a different purpose than research. In this respect, an additional dose of honesty is obvious in the explicit statement of the bias of religious reflection.

The most appropriate classification of religious think-tanks is the one that invokes the specifics of their (self) definition. Thus, we will consider: religious analysis think-tanks, Christian think-tanks (with their categories: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Evangelical), ecumenical and inter-religious think-tanks, Islamic think-tanks, Jewish think-tanks; Buddhist think-tanks, New Age think-tanks and atheist think-tanks.

**Religious Analysis Think Tanks**

It is a category that claims – and mostly succeeds - an independence from religious cults, even if their researchers are active members of one or the other. Their fundamental objective is to analyze the religious phenomenon, status and major trends in the contemporary world, the relations between religions. Most times, they are undeclared Christian think-tanks. Representative may be considered “The Hartford Institute for Religion Research” from the United States of America, which has a history of 35 years of “rigorous registration, policy relevant research, anticipation and generation issues, and commitment to disseminate teachings”. The Institute states three main objectives: 1) Dissemination of research results in the sociology of religion, 2) Presentation of research findings online for the benefit of pastors, religious leaders, journalists and the public domain, 3) Technical assistance to those

interested in using statistical data and the technology of constructing religious sites. Major research directions are: Megachurches, Women and Religion, Religion and Family, Religion and the Internet, Pentecostalism, Orthodox Churches in the United States, Homosexuality and Religion. The books and articles are published in full or in summary on the official site.

Since 1951, in the United States also operates “The Religious Research Association”3 which defines itself as a group of “academics and religious experts operating at the intersection of research with practical religious activities”. Over 600 members from universities, colleges and seminaries are religious leaders, organizational consultants, legal specialists. Association offers networking opportunities, promotes the circulation, interpretation and use of one’s own research in the religious organizations and other stakeholders, and provides a forum for publications. The two periodicals are entitled “Review of Religious Research” and “Context of Religious Research”.

In the same category the prestigious British think-tank “Ekklesia”4 must be mentioned (founded in 2001 and ranked every year since by the British “The Independent Newspaper” among the top 20 think-tanks), which assumes the Christian perspective as an “independent nonprofit think-tank that examines the role of faith, values and religion in public life.” In this respect, the research aims at: Community and Family, Crime and Justice, Ecology and Environment, Economy and Politics, Education and Culture, Globalization and Development, Life and Death, Peace and War, People and Power; Race and Identity, Religion and Society, Sex and Gender. The official website publishes books, liturgical texts, and offers a media center that publishes news and press releases.

The UK (London) also hosts the religious analysis think-tank “Theos”5, which “organizes research, publishes reports and conducts debates, seminars and lectures at the intersection of religion, politics and society in the contemporary world.” Areas of analysis refer to Multiculturalism, Christian Education, Religious Freedom, and Parliamentary Representation of Religions. For the future, the organization announced the launching of Research Areas related to Religion and Law,

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3 Established as „Religious Research Fellowship", see http://rra.hartsem.edu/
4 http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/
5 http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/
Political Economy: The role of Religion in International Affairs. They materialize through seminars, conferences, debates and readings, research and publishing, reviews, analysis and information for the media, politicians and policy makers, newsletters via e-mail.

Christian Think-Tanks

Quite naturally, Christian think-tanks vigorously dominate numerically and qualitatively the religious think-tanks landscape. They are based mostly in the West, where the think-tank phenomenon is the oldest and most well-defined, best perceived in intellectual circles and public opinion - and best supported in financial terms. Inside the Christian world there is significant a numeric difference between Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical think-tanks - on the one hand, and Orthodox - on the other. The advantage of the first category is explained by the continuous democratic tradition of Western Europe and North America, whereas freedom of thought and institutional organization of intellectual reflection is a reality for only around two decades in Eastern Europe. It is impossible to prove, at this time, a greater receptiveness to Western Christian religions compared to the Eastern ones towards the think-tank type of organization.

Catholic Think-Tanks

The intellectual core of Catholic religious thought is “Pontificia Academia Scientiarum”⁶ (“Pontifical Academy of Sciences”), founded 1603 and re-founded 1936 at the Vatican. The founding manifesto launched by Pope Pius XI defines the main objective “science, if it is true knowledge, never comes in contradiction with the Christian faith. Indeed, as is well known by those who study the history of science, one must admit on one hand that the Roman Pontiffs and the Catholic Church have always supported experimental research, on the other hand, this research has paved the way for the defense of supernatural truths embedded in the Church (...)

Nowadays, the Academy focuses its research efforts on six main areas: Basic Sciences, Science and Technology of Global Issues, Science

⁶ http://www.casinapioiv.va/
in the service of the Third World, Ethics and Science Policies, Bioethics, Epistemology. Its publications, in periodical or book form, are grouped into collections “Acta”, “Extra Series”, “Scripta Varia”, “Documenta” and “Varii”.

The number of academy members totals 80 (in certain historical epochs it was set at 70), among them appearing the Academy Chancellor, the Library Prefect, the Apostolic Prefect of the Vatican’s Secret Archives. The president of the academy is elected by majority of academicians and approved by the Pope.

Recognizing the primacy and authority of the Academy, the main Catholic religious orders established their own centers of reflection.

The Jesuits open research and education institutes in many countries: United States, United Kingdom, South Africa, Philippines, etc. The “Jesuit Social Research Institute”7 sponsored by the Jesuit Society and the University of New Orleans can be viewed as representative, as it proclaims four core values: Faith leads to justice, Prophetic vision leads to transformation; the love for thy neighbor leads to solidarity, Doctrine leads to action.

Founded in 2007, the Institute examines four areas in which faith influences society: Catholic Social Thought, Migration, Poverty, Racism, and Interconnection (in terms of building institutional networking). All these contribute to the quarterly “JustSouth E-News” and “JustSouth Quarterly”, as well as book collections.8

The Dominicans organized an international network of think-tanks based on the Jesuit model. We can point out one of the most active, operating in Limerick - Ireland, as “Dominican Biblical Institute”9, the objectives of which are formally summarized as follows: The Advance of Biblical Research, The Promotion of Global Dialogue (especially between the Bible and Science In relation to other disciplines), The Use of the Bible in everyday life. To this end, the following categories of reflection are promoted: Bible and Science, Bible and Dialogue, Bible and History, Synoptic Issues, Divine Lessons, Transfiguration.

These research gains constitute the foundation of the classes that result in the receiving of a diploma in “Biblical and Theological Studies”.

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7 http://www.loyno.edu/jsri/
8 Under status of Research center such think tanks operating in all American countries, but also in Jordan and Zambia-Malawi.
9 http://www.dbclimerick.ie/
There are Dominican think-tanks focusing on pastoral training, such as that of Michigan - United States of America, entitled “Dominican Center for Religious Development”\textsuperscript{10}. It was founded in 1980 based on three spiritual assumptions that today proclaim: God communicates to all men; this communication was made obvious through contemplation and personal reflection; the Articulation and clarification of this experience through dialogue with a spiritual director is significant for anyone. The internship programs promise a development as a spiritual evolution, a thorough understanding of theological and psychological bases of spirituality and spiritual communication skills.

Meanwhile, academia remains the preferred host for most Catholic think-tanks, which thus may rely on the academic and research experience and on the energy of generations of students.

Also, in this regard the United States includes more examples. To be noted here “The Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies”\textsuperscript{11} at the University of Southern California. Here one can study the Catholic tradition based on a long line of brilliant works by Catholic authors in the fields of theology, philosophy, science, history, literature, art, architecture and music.

Interdisciplinarity appears necessary in the logic of research methodology for programs entitled: The true wealth of nations, Catholic Education, Catholic Tradition, Generations in dialogue, Interreligious and ecumenical issues. Resulting publications are published by Oxford University and Fordham University.

**Protestant / Neo Protestant Think-Tanks**

The geographic concentration of Protestant think-tanks is remarkable in Western Europe and the United States - where the landscape is still vigorously dominated by neo-Protestant analytical reflection. In other parts of the world it is an insignificant presence.

Amongst Lutheran research centers, the “Protestant Academy of Bad Boll”\textsuperscript{12} (German state of Baden Württemberg) is rather notable as it organizes about 200 annual events per (meetings, roundtables, sym-
posia, conferences, lectures, study trips, themed holidays). Research directions are called: Economy; Globalization; Sustainable Development; Society, politics, State; Culture, Constitution, Religion. An impressive exhibition center hosts literary salons, exhibitions, publication launches.

From the plethora of Protestant thought in the US, a good example is “Discovery Institute” – associate of the Calvinist cult, based in Washington DC. Mission statement aims at “advancing a culture of creativity and innovation” that employs an interdisciplinary group of academics and specialists in public policy research teams grouped around the following areas: Science and Culture, Economics and Business; Human Exceptionalism Center, International Affairs; Local Government and Community; Religion and Public Life.

More active, more present in the public consciousness and better connected with political life are neo Protestant think-tanks, who claim to perpetuate the foundations of the American national spirit. They exert a serious lobbying function, influencing American political leadership in the adoption of legislation and their implementation.

“Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty” based in Washington, aims “to defend and extend divine religious freedom for everyone continuing the Baptist mission that promotes the principle that religion should be practiced freely without being promoted or inhibited by the government”. Essential Baptist debate themes are: Free exercise of religion; Church electoral systems; Religious manifestos; Civil religion. The Committee publishes in a collection of books the results of research focused on the themes above, as well as documents and testimonies.

Seventh-day Adventists are represented by “The Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist”, which aims to generate doctrinal and theological materials required for pastors and interested members of the confession, to encourage personal Bible study, to promote dedication the personal message of Christ, to disseminate reliable information about Adventist thought in Christian and non-Christian circles. The main publication is entitled “Reflections” but the Institute publishes collections of books and pamphlets as well.

13 http://www.discovery.org/
14 http://www.bjcpa.org/
15 http://biblicalresearch.gc.adventist.org/
Evangelical Christians have put together an “Institute for Biblical Research”\textsuperscript{16}, consisting mainly of specialists in the Old and New Testament and related disciplines. It has been in existence for nearly 30 years. They organize an annual conference, seminars and workshops, and sponsors biblical publications. Annually it releases the volume entitled “Bulletin for Biblical Research”, which has been ongoing since 1991.

It is remarkable the operation of the organization “The Flow of Times”\textsuperscript{17} from Romania, which is self-described as a “Romanian evangelical think-tank”. Its activity focuses around the official website that promotes debates and research on the topics: the Christian and the city; the Christian and culture; Uncomfortable discussions. Editorials and kaleidoscope-type of news are published to serve the members of the Evangelical community.

Evangelical think-tanks are best shaped and best consolidated nucleus in the neo Protestant research institutions in North America. A list of maximum concentration mandatory hyper-selective, one must note:

- “The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission”\textsuperscript{18} maintains a research institute which aims: to provide a professional organization in which conservative, evangelical theorists discuss American cultural trends, apply biblical truth in public policy and religious freedom with the purpose of transforming American culture, to develop a comprehensive biblical model with which to endow biblical Christians in order to assess family issues, and modern culture.

- “The Ministry of Chalcedon”\textsuperscript{19} has been active since 1965 as a Christian educational organization devoted to research, publishing and promoting Christian reconstruction in all areas of life. Research is reflected in the “Topical Index”, “Scripture Index”, “Position Papers”, collection of books and online articles database. Major themes include: Biblical Law, Christian Reconstruction, Theology, Philosophy, Education, Family, Christianity and State, Apologetics, Economics, Science, Psychology, Justice, Charity, American History, Conspiracies.

\textsuperscript{16} http://www.ibr-bbr.org/
\textsuperscript{17} http://www.mersulvremurilor.ro/
\textsuperscript{18} http://erlc.com/research_institute/
\textsuperscript{19} http://chalcedon.edu/
- “The Pascal Centre for Advanced Studies in Faith and Science”\(^\text{20}\), founded in 1988 by Redeemer College in Ontario - Canada, is remarkable in its research of the border between religion and cyberspace, but also the significance of nature in biblical writings. It organized a Conference Centre of Science and Faith, which hosts the majority of their events.

**Orthodox Think-Tanks**

Christian orthodoxy is less present in the specialized media and public opinion through its work relationship with political and economic lives. Indeed, its think-tanks are proportionately less, and are more heavily oriented towards analyzing theological foundations than to the role of the Church in the terrestrial world. Religious reflection occurs more inside educational institutions than outside, and support for private think-tanks initiatives is almost missing. In these circumstances, America is again the place where Orthodox think-tanks are more active – as they were forced to respond to local trends and competition between cults taking place (and) in this field.

Under these conditions, the think-tank type of activity of Orthodox intellectuals is found almost exclusively in research centers attached to the Faculty of Orthodox Theology.

By way of example, “The Interreligious and Interdisciplinary Studies Center”\(^\text{21}\) of the Orthodox Theological Faculty in Bucharest, having completed research projects “On the security implications of religion in the context of EU enlargement” and “Blessed are the peacemakers. Christianity and security: the Sermon on the Mount from September 11, 2011”. The Center is currently developing the project “The dynamics of intellectual life in Byzantium Palaeologan (1261-1453) under the influence of polemics”.

As a private Romanian initiative, we point out “The Hesychasm Association”\(^\text{22}\), which aims its research goals (embodied in the magazine “The Commandment of Love” and the series of books published in its own publishing house “Agaton”, but also in audiovisual productions about spirituality and Christian anthropology) advocacy goals (“guid-

\(^{20}\) http://pascalcentre.org/
\(^{21}\) http://www.ftoub.ro/
\(^{22}\) http://www.rugulaaprins.go.ro/
ing the people by the Church, towards a life in Christ”) and lobbying goals (“initiating local and national action - bills projects, statement of a fund for Christian mission - and supporting them through lobbying locally and parliamentary”).

Crossing the Atlantic, among the most famous American appearances include “Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute”\(^\text{23}\) in Berkeley - California, which “exists to educate, communicate, promote and support the traditions, values, teachings and culture of Orthodox Christianity.” Is constitutes an intellectual umbrella for Albanians, Antiochians, Bulgarians, Carpatho-Russians, Greeks, Romanians, Serbians and Ukrainians. Its scientific arsenal consists of research, academic lectures, symposia, rare book library and museum. It also hosts the only Orthodox educational center in North America.

The private initiative of the priest Hans Jacobse belonging to Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America is also quite remarkable which runs the “American Orthodox Institute”\(^\text{24}\) in Naples – Florida. The research projects of the Institute are entitled: Church and Society, Orthodox Unity, Sanctity of Life, Canon 28. All these can be found in articles published in the “Clarion” magazine, which has its own website.\(^\text{25}\)

**Inter-Religious / Ecumenical Think-Tanks**

The dialogue between religions cults, Christian or other origins, as well as the institutionalized dialogue between Christian denominations (ecumenism) has found an ideal form of expression in the work of think-tanks - which, as research claim to scientific objectivity, not binding formal leadership concerned cults directly, but identifying common or the like solutions, or even to establish common institutions. In this matter, Europe is the center of gravity of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, followed by the United States at a considerable distance.

Amongs interreligious think-tanks, one can name the “Interreligiöser Think-Tank”\(^\text{26}\) (“Interreligious Think-Tank”), in Basel - Swit-


\(^{24}\) [http://www.aoiusa.org/](http://www.aoiusa.org/)

\(^{25}\) [http://www.clarionreview.org/](http://www.clarionreview.org/)

\(^{26}\) [http://www.interrelthinktank.ch/](http://www.interrelthinktank.ch/)
Zerland, which operates as an “independent institutional gathering of the representatives of interreligious dialogue from Switzerland, reflecting together through dialogue on social issues, religious and political openness to mutual acquired know-how”. The Board consists of one representative of the Christian, Muslim and Jewish denominations. The directions of reflection: The positive and constructive role of religions in consolidating societal unity, security and peace; the potential of religion to establish social justice in all social areas; the preservation and enforcement of religious freedom; Religious women's voice in society; Work exchanges for women of different religions; Contacts with religiously and politically relevant institutions.

Very active and showing great quality of members and its activity appears to be the Romanian think-tank „INTER. Institutul Român de Studii Inter-ortodoxe, Inter-confesionale i Inter-religioase”27 (“INTER. Romanian Institute of Inter-Orthodox Studies, Inter-confessional and Inter-religious”), in Cluj-Napoca founded in 2005 as an “academic and civic non-governmental and apolitical initiative with legal the status of an association and reuniting laity and clergy, theologians and specialists from various fields, Romanian and foreign.” The main goal is to encourage, through research, exchange of opinions and debates, articulating a culture of informed dialogue. The research projects are called “Moldova between Romania and Russia. A controversial example of orthodox geopolitics”, “The Theological Sources of Orthodox Social Ethic”, “History of the Sermon in Balkan Orthodox churches”, etc. Representative publications are “INTER Magazine” and the series “Theologia Socialis”, which has produced 17 titles between 2008 and 2012.

As an ecumenic research institution representative for the American society, the “Institute on Religion & Democracy” is noteworthy, which proclaims itself as the “ecumenic alliance of American Christians that work together to reform their churches, for social participation, in accordance with biblical and historical Christian teachings and contribute to the renewal of society both nationally and abroad”. To support this, their research fields are shaped as follows: Marriage; Human Trafficking; The Sanctity of Life; Immigration; Religious Freedom; The Environment; War and Peace; The Middle East; The Belief in the public market. The results of the research are presented in their periodicals “Faith and Freedom” and “UM Action”.

27 http://www.inter-institute.ro/
Buddhist thinking intertwines with the Catholic one in the „Institute for World Religions” hosted by the Buddhist Monastery in Berkley – USA. The organization states it is a „result of eccumenic inspiration” and compiles its mission as it follows: „Dedicated to the creation of a sanctuary which encourages conversation about theological principles, religious beliefs and spiritual practices, the Institute creates the interface of the search for universal values in an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual respect. Its goal is to challenge the boarders in our minds and prevent the attachment to sectary differences”. To serve this purpose, the Institute hosts and supports research activity and organizes classes.

Ecumenism is a highly productive research direction attached to the Orthodox Theological Faculties in Romania. „Centrul de Cercetare Ecumenică Sibiu”28 (“Ecumenical Research Center Sibiu”) distinguishes itself as a research institution at the Lucian Blaga University, founded by the Faculty of Orthodox Theology “Andrei Șaguna” and Protestant Theology Department, which organizes four research areas: Ecumenical Dialogue (centered on the Orthodox-evangelical reality); Church history; Religion and Society; Interreligious dialogue. Research projects undertaken on these directions is called “Churches in Dialogue”, “DOSAR - Human dignity and poverty”, “NELCEE - Network for Ecumenical Learning in Central and Eastern Europe”, “InfoEcum”.

Conclusions

The category of religious think-tanks - mainly represented by the Christian ones– has not been addressed by analytical research so far, which undoubtedly places the first approaches (such as the present research) in the close proximity of work instruments. Even the most advanced catalogs of think-tanks accidentally contain individual cases of religious think-tanks, which places them in the other categories (general, civil society, political etc.) (McGann 2013).

We are at the stage of identifying, classifying, establishing common traits and significant differences. Qualitative analysis will follow. We note, however, those characteristics which confer an individual and unmistakable identity to the category of Christian think-tanks:

- The object of research is represented both by the transcendental and the society; methodology is different (but complementary) to address the two major issues;

28 http://www.ecum.ro/
- The training of personnel and specialists is limited by the constraints of the transcendental approach. Training, but also the entire instrumental arsenal of activities must be selective in terms of inclusion / acceptance participants initiated into Christian doctrine and rituals;

- There is a balance between the “lobby” function (influencing policy makers) and “advocacy” (influencing public opinion), Christian think-tanks showing a strong orientation towards consolidating the Christian faith;

- The most important beneficiary is governing bodies of the associated Christian denominations. They receive religious policy proposals to interact with object of pressure: national or local policymakers.

Within the landscape of Christian denominations a large numerical preponderance of the Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical is quite visible. Orthodox think-tanks are fewer and more rooted in doctrinal research. An obvious explanation is the general nature and level of pre-occupation for research in the West compared to Eastern Europe. If theological explanations exist, they will be the subject of an extremely complicated analysis.

**Bibliography**


**External links**

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