
THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE STATE AND ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH REGARDING CREMATION IN THE COMMUNIST PERIOD

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Abstract

In this article, we tried to summarize how the ritual of cremation was perceived in the totalitarian period. We see today that the problem of cremation is extremely topical and stirs fierce controversy. A recent and eloquent example in this respect is the case of the famous director Nicolaescu, who has expressed his wish to be cremated long before passing to eternity. The Orthodox Church forbade any religious service raising protests among family and friends and fuelling an extended media debate. With or without religious ceremony, the practice of cremation is, however, much older. Thus, in 1928 and 1933, by two synodic decisions, the Orthodox Church clearly spoke out against performing the religious service (requiem) for those who were to be cremated. However, according to the theologian Vladimir Prelipcean, it seems that after these decisions, there were many clergymen attending the funeral service before the cremation ritual. The religious services were made somehow hidden, at the home of the deceased or at the mortuary chapel. In these circumstances, we might say that the Church has informally allowed this practice and the communist regime chose to remain neutral regarding this practice.

Keywords: synodic decisions, burial, requiem, crematorium, communist leaders

1. Romanian Orthodox Church during communism

Communism arose in the early nineteenth century being considered as a system with modern vision, with a political and social project to serve the masses. Taking into account the cultural and religious anti-modernism of the same period, we can see two main and concomitant trends which soon become rivals. Anti-modernists challenged Western modernity on behalf of past's paradigm; the Communists did in the name of future's promise. Communism seems incomprehensible, if we overlook the social problem marked by the serious inequalities of European capitalism in full genesis, or by the dispute within the socialist movement related to the use of force in order to achieve political goal [1].

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Due to the byzantine influence, the Orthodox Church felt the need to relate to the state and to claim the national project by the state, by implementing the concept of national state in modern Constitutions of Romania, doing nothing but confirming, for the Church, the fairness of its choice. The Orthodox Church has not entered into modernity as opposed to the state, but it went in the same way as public institutions. In exchange for a partial withdrawal from the public sphere, the Church was granted a relative autonomy and, even during the communist regime, the survival.

After the death of Patriarch Nicodim, the communist regime allowed the election as Patriarch of Justinian Marina, on 24th of May, 1948. Professor Dennis Deletant claims that Patriarch Justinian owed his rapid ascent to Gheorghiu Dej, whose support he had won in the summer of 1944, when he housed him for a few days in the parish church in Râmnicu Vâlcea. Patriarch Justinian had support not only in Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej who did not allow himself at least to touch the Patriarch, but in Petru Groza, who was not a member of the Communist Party, but was what they called a fellow traveller, with a particular political catch, but who was the son of an Orthodox priest [2], a member in the Transylvanian Church Assemblies and later, member of the National Ecclesiastical Assembly. Petru Groza had a moral influence over then leaders of the Party, so that when he could not help the Church directly, he informed or warned the patriarch about certain conspiracy. His last wish was to be *buried by a priest*, the religious service being held by the Patriarch Justinian himself, with a group of priests.

The new status of the Orthodox Church, conceived under Patriarch Justinian, ensured his control over the management of the Church, allowing him to intervene in the affairs of dioceses, with or without the approval of hierarchs. This provision proved the state's centralism mirrored in the organization of the Church, and thus being more easily for the communist regime to manipulate it [3].

D. Deletant's opinion is only partially correct, because by changing the new status, the Church was stripped of all its possessions, making it totally dependent on the state. Since 1948, the religious education was forbidden in schools, thus the family played an important role in passing on the faith. Through all these approaches, the communist regime did not want to put religion outside the law, but wanted to discourage it through tricks like: the restraint of religious practices, banning baptisms and weddings and celebration of Christmas and Easter. The party members, officers and soldiers were instructed not to attend the religious services. Only the civil marriages were officially recognized, even after the religious ceremony was permitted. Even if some hierarchs of the Orthodox Church have reached a compromise with the regime, ensuring the survival with the price of losing moral authority, they saved what was more important, namely the Church of Christ [4].

As a conclusion, we can reinforce the idea that the Romanian Orthodox Church got through this stage in its history, being led by Justinian Marina as Patriarch, who has tried to find a *modus vivendi*, consisting in a dialogue with

the new government and making what is called political compromise in any and in any diplomacy. On the one hand, this *modus vivendi* claimed the freedom of Church, the freedom to organize, and particularly, the believer's freedom to believe and to express his faith, and on the other hand, it offered everything that could be offered, up to where the dogma can be achieved: the fight for peace, the fight for abundant crops and the fight for a better life. Patriarch Justinian's *policy* was to convince the communist leaders that the Church, by its mere existence, represented a force, primarily a moral force [5].

2. Church's position regarding cremation

Regarding the issue of cremation we cannot speak of an official position of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Its position was made clear in the interwar period by the two synodic decisions of 1928 and 1933, which categorically forbade any religious service for those who wanted to be cremated. Regarding this topic, in the communist period appeared several articles, consisting of: the answer to a question especially dedicated to the problem of cremation, in the paper '*Învățătură de credință creștină ortodoxă*' (*The Teachings of the Christian Orthodox Faith*) in 1952, and two articles by theologian V. Prelipcean, in the 60s. In the first paper mentioned arose the following question: what should we think about those who give their bodies to the crematorium to be burned? And the answer was: "Burning the body means its destruction. Therefore, only those who imagine that everything ends with death, and that after death there is nothing, burn their bodies after death. But we, Christians, firmly believe in eternity and immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body, i.e. their re-creation from the elements they were composed, and in their reunion with soul in order to be judged and rewarded together with the souls with which they have lived on earth. We bury the dead in the earth because God Himself said to Adam: <For you are dust and to dust you shall return> (Genesis 3.19). The Scripture also teaches us: <All flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust> (Job 34.15). And as living example we have the Christ himself Who was buried and stood in the tomb three days, and become the first fruits of them that slept (I Corinthians 15.20)." [6]

The lack of information on this issue is due to changes that occur in the sources, generated by the disappearance of some publications and newspapers which were replaced with new ones. Since this is an attempt to implement some models in a totalitarian society, they obviously excluded debates like the one between creationists and traditionalists in the interwar period [2, p. 359].

Although some sources have changed during the communist era, one can identify innovations and continuity in cremation in Communist Romania. On the one hand, the Romanian Orthodox Church's position remains unchanged to this practice, and on the other hand, the practice of cremation is legally allowed.

Based on the two interventions belonging to Nicolae Cotos and Ion Popescu Mălăiești, Vladimir Prelipcean addressed in two of his articles the history of cremation, the emergence and development of modern cremation, but

also the arguments pro or against cremation. In the 1962 article, the author remembers the discussions held around the introduction of cremation of the dead, out of which resulted a series of arguments and evidence put forward by the supporters of the two practices. Both those who support and those who contest cremation have arguments based on hygiene, and also economic, legal, social, psychological, emotional and religious arguments. Burial supporters claimed that the introduction of cremation practice would cause major problems among people due to well-established traditions and customs related to the funeral, which did not match cremation. Names like “*kitchens of human corpses*” [7] were used for the crematoria by those who were against burning the bodies. Among the arguments invoked by cremation supporters were:

- Through incineration is avoided the danger of being buried alive, in the case of apparent death;
- From an economic point of view, the ritual of cremation is cheaper than the burial;
- Cremation is more hygienic than burial of corpses, claiming that the bodies’ rotting in the graves infects the rainwater, the wells with drinking water, and the air we breathe.

Theologian Prelipcean fights against these ideas, arguing that the introduction of the practice of cremation would cause major problems among people, because old funeral traditions and customs do not match with the cremation practice. Regarding the danger of being buried alive, this can be avoided through a serious test to ascertain a person’s death. The economic aspect is relative, depending to circumstances: in big cities where burial places are more expensive and there are not enough such places, cremation may be cheaper, while in the villages, on the contrary, crematoria and columbarium will be more expensive than burial places.

The problem of outbreaks and clusters of infections being a threat to the health of the living, used by cremation supporter is false. Many doctors claim that burial practice can be maintained without any risk of illness for the current generation and all future generations, nothing being proved from a scientific point of view. However, in terms of justice, burial is preferable to cremation and also recommended, being quite necessary. In case of murder, homicide, the courts can address to legal medicine when lacking other evidence. The same happens in cases of people who were poisoned, but could not see this immediately. By incineration, the organic poisons such as phosphorus or corrosive sublimate disappear, and the poisonous substances that fire cannot destroy, such as salts and lead, can be easily removed by scattering ashes by those interested. In terms of justice and forensic medicine, burial of the dead has obvious advantages compared to cremation [7].

Vladimir Prelipcean argued that cremation was usually preferred by non-Christians, but he also drew attention on the fact that there were Orthodox Christians who mentioned their decision of being cremated after death in their will, but also mentioned the traditional funeral ceremony. He highlights this reality on cremation by saying: “Without a formal provision in this regard,

Orthodox priests, usually at the request of close relatives, performed the funeral service in the presence of the dead, at home, before being transported to the crematorium. At the cremation ritual, priests are not present in a sort of tacit agreement.” [7, p. 425]

Marius Rotar, referring to this text, emphasizes the idea that the cremation ritual was certified at the time, which proves that in practice there was the clergy allowed this ritual. This agreement was a silent one and it was masked by not performing the funeral service inside the crematorium. Referring to the same issue, he argues that if the nature and orientation of the press were along the same lines as those in the interwar period, such an intervention would have created controversy and scandal [2, p. 365-366]. The Orthodox Church discussed this matter at the council in Rhodes, in the fall of 1961, a Pre-Synodic council held for the preparation of the future Pan-Orthodox Synod. It was recognized at this council that the issue of cremation is topical and has been accepted to appear among the issues to be discussed at the future council [7].

Five years later, in 1967, V. Prelipcean writes a new article on the issue of cremation. He stated from the beginning that the article he published in 1962 “has given birth to some interpretation and misunderstandings” and thus “the author deems it necessary to come back with some clarifications, additions and corrections” [8]. Prelipcean is concise in expression when mentioning about this problem, trying to avoid the subject, giving no details, and no name of the authors who had brought him some charges. But in the article from 1967 there have been some changes “leading to the review and rejection of some ideas previously expressed” [2, p. 369]. For Marius Rotar this “demonstrates the existence within Romanian Orthodox Church of those times of a very strong traditionalist core” [2, p. 369]. In this article, Prelipcean notes that the practice burial is exclusively in the Christian Church from its beginning, and that the funeral ritual composed and developed by the Church, from the apostles until today, was the established practice of burial. He also mentions the fact that from the 1054 schism until the emergence of cremation, the Orthodox Church took no action and ruled no law. The idea of introducing cremation emerged after the French Revolution, as an emancipation of the burial practice which had become the exclusive rite of Christians and which had to be replaced with a new practice [8].

In *Mitropolia Banatului* magazine from 1964, there is an indication about the changes in the Catholic world regarding the issue of cremation. The information is contained in the general section, and there is no analysis or explanation. In that text it was mentioned that the Catholic Church has changed its position regarding the cremation of the dead. The Holy Office issued a circular letter approved by Pope Paul VI which modified the decree enacted in 1866. This decree stipulated that those who comply with or attend the practice of cremation were called *public sinners*. Under the new regulations, the Roman Catholic believers, wanting to be cremated after death, could have a religious service. The article also underlined the fact that the Western press of the time mentioned that the Vatican has revised its disciplinary provisions relating to

cremation due to its spreading in many countries. This information was, in fact, taken from *Flacăra* weekly magazine [9].

In 1963, the Catholic Church lifted the ban to cremate the bodies. In the West this event was sometimes regarded as the meeting point in the history of relations between this funerary ritual and Christianity. This decision involves one or more previous convictions. In the suppression of the ban, one could see a first opening of the Catholic Church, after centuries of hostility. Instead, the position of the Protestant Church was perceived as more conciliatory. In countries with Protestant tradition, the cremation rate was much higher than in Catholic countries. This shows, on the one hand, the lack of an autonomy of decision-making authority in the Protestant world, and on the other hand, a much greater freedom in terms of liturgical celebration. The year 1898 is often mentioned as a landmark for the decision of authorizing cremation in Protestantism [10].

3. The position of the Communist State on the issue of cremation

Regarding the position of the state towards cremation issue, we find that it is very little addressed in documents of the time. There is no official act of the communist state regarding the issue of cremation. It is interesting that in the first part of the communist regime, the cremations' number decreases compared to the previous period (interwar), but there is a slight increase towards the end of the communist period. Researcher Marius Rotar indicates several factors that prevented the construction of new crematoria in Communist Romania:

- high costs implied by the construction of such buildings;
- the rural roots that were tributary to a traditional thinking valid for some important leaders and decision makers within the Romanian Communist Party (we can see that the most important leaders of communist Romania preferred the burial in exchange of cremation);
- the persistence and influence of the traditional perspective of rejecting cremation adopted by the Romanian Orthodox Church;
- the tacit understanding between the Romanian communists Romanian Orthodox Church on some areas of interest and action in society [2, p. 439-440].

The relationship between the State and the Romanian Orthodox Church was not as difficult as in other neighbouring communist states, the two institutions having a tacit agreement or an unwritten understanding. Although the Soviet model worked in some ways (political funerals from communist period) it did not spread to this area. In a regime that promoted atheistic doctrine, cremation was supposed to fit in. It was not so, and as evidence stays the fact that none of the senior leaders of the regime was cremated.

During 1948-1989, the statistics for cremation are relevant. If we were to follow the ideology of the new established regime, the practice of cremation would have to record a high percentage, which contradicts the reality of that time. In the first years of communism, the number of cremations in Romania

was much lower than in the interwar period. In the 80s, there was a significant increase in the number of cremations – the phenomenon becomes interesting – falling over the period of economic crisis; this period was also the peak of obituaries published in newspapers of the time [2, p. 362].

Even before the communism was installed in Romania, the practice of cremation has become a tradition for some Romanian communist leaders. We can mention here Bela Brainer, Panait Muşoiu and Constantin David. For example, in Hungary, many Hungarian communist leaders were cremated leaving clear instructions about how the ritual should be done, and then the ashes to be placed in a dedicated space, as an underground mausoleum, in Budapest. In Hungary, after the collapse of communism, none of the leaders' remains was placed in that mausoleum, where only half of free niches were filled. This example remains a powerful reminder of how, in this country, communists preferred cremation instead of traditional catholic burial, and particularly, of how the period ended. In Romania, local communist leaders from rural areas have not extended their ideology so far as to touch the issue of death, and they received the traditional ritual, being buried in the state's cemeteries, which were reserved for those who belonged to the Christian community of the Church [11].

4. Conclusions

Although the communist period was an oppressing one for the Church, it was set up a tacit agreement between the authorities and clergy. Thus, no official documents have been developed to impose one of the two funerary rituals, leaving the decision in this regard to be made by the Church;

During the communist period, the theologian Vladimir Prelicean is considered the foremost exponent of the Romanian Orthodox Church addressing the issue of cremation, publishing two articles in this regard, and bringing pertinent arguments for the burial practice, being inspired by the writings of his predecessors N. Cotos and I. Pop Mălăieşti from the interwar period.

In 1963, the Catholic Church lifted the ban on resorting to burning bodies. In the West, this event was seen as the meeting point in the history of relations between this funerary ritual and Christianity. In the suppression of the ban, one could see a first opening of the Catholic Church, after centuries of hostility. Instead, the position of the Protestant Church was designed to be more conciliatory. In countries with Protestant tradition, the cremation rate was much higher than in Catholic countries. This shows, on the one hand, the lack of an autonomy of decision-making authority in the Protestant world, and on the other hand, a much greater freedom in terms of liturgical celebration;

Most Communist leaders preferred the burial ritual against incineration (Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, Petru Groza, Emil Bodnaras, Nicolae Ceausescu's parents), but we cannot say the same about the leaders in the second or third line, most of which were cremated.

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