



ROMANIA
MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION
“1 DECEMBRIE 1918” UNIVERSITY, ALBA IULIA
DOCTORAL SCHOOL
FACULTY OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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Ph. D. Candidate:

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Contents

1.Thesis Argumentation.....	3
2.Aim of Research.....	6
3.Documentary guidelines.....	8
4.Stage of research.....	9
5.Research Methodology.....	12
6.General framework.....	14
References.....	21

CREMATION - MISSIONARY CHALLENGE OR ANTI-CHRISTIAN STATEMENT?

Keywords: *Anthropology, Roman Catholic Church, ash, cemetery, communism, crematorium, Pontifical Decrees, eschatology, fire, Jesus Christ, cremation, burial, grave, resurrection, Christian witness, death, relics, sepulcher, New Testament, Orthodoxy, phoenix, funeral services, body, urn, Old Testament.*

1. Thesis Argumentation

The topic chosen for present research, of great interest for the current theological studies, represents a challenge to which the Orthodox Church should answer more and more sturdily since the number of the cremations in Europe and not only in Europe vertiginously increased nowadays. The theme represents the result of a discussion that I had with Prof. pr. Mihai Himcinschi, the coordinator of the present research, who is aware that cremation represents nowadays a missionary challenge for the Romanian theology. He considered that a scientific work about this *controversial* yet topical theme is auspicious and absolutely needed. More than ever, we are urged to understand that nowadays things continuously change. This is the reason why we should change the type of approaching the existing problems as well since each Christian faith, religious organization and even each Christian soul are confronting with new and surprising

realities calling for the replacement of the anonymity of religious detachment and confessional self-sufficiency with common and current answers to the existing problems, cremation being included. We might say that globalization, like all other current phenomena, is amoral, i.e. it is neither good, nor bad, and the way in which people act determine its existence in one way. We might note that it even brings more positive rather than negative effects but if we excessively worship its principles and forget about what the human factor represents at personal level, globalization might become an agent of the end of human civilization, if we are thinking about its form of evolution in time.

Our society was concerned with the theme of cremation all the time. In our country, this issue was intensively discussed in the inter-war period, after the moment when the first crematorium, *Cenușa (Ashes)*, was set up in Bucharest. At that time, two divergent sides emerged: one of them supported the idea of cremation (the laymen) and the other one stood against it (the theologians). During the Communist era, this issue of cremation was hardly discussed and put into practice because it was not considered a matter of priority for the respective regime. Paradoxically speaking, it seems that the above mentioned atheist system did not transform incineration into a top priority. Many voices asserted that this problem was not discussed during the Communist Age because of an implicit agreement existing between the state institutions and the Romanian Orthodox Church. The topic became matter of interest after the moment when the film director Sergiu Nicolaescu died, and an immense media scandal emerged. The Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, in its meeting from July 5, 2012, maintained in law the decision from June 15, 1928 re-confirmed on February 28, 1933, and made

other more decisions about the unchristian cremation of the dead, emphasizing arguments from the Holy Scriptures and other patristic, historical and archaeological pros that will be mentioned and discussed in the present work as well.

The Romanian Orthodox Church is one of the most credible institutions in our country and it bears apostolic origins. It is called nowadays to involve, more than ever, into the life and issues of the contemporary society and it is invited to provide a part of its bi-millenary experience to the great existential problems that torment this post-modern society.

These brief reasons and other previous concerns about cremation determined me to study thoroughly this topic and to emphasize the fact that, in general, the Orthodox theology, and especially the Romanian Orthodox theology is not a closed circle, static or indifferent to what happens in our present-day society. It is not careless about the real problems and requirements of the contemporary world. On the contrary. It enjoys a firm, clear and very much alive identity, and a constant movement, is open to the challenges of our society and actively participates in the problem solving process. Both for the present society and for the Church testimony, cremation incorporates, on the one hand, the practical expression of the Christian faith and testimony, and, on the other hand, the contempt manifested against the sacredness of the human body and man's image of God, manifested nowadays by the anti-dialectical, secular thought created by reasoning and doubt.

2. Aim of Research

The present work attempts to provide the reader the opportunity to know more things about cremation after an evident, precise, and punctual reading that follows *a red*, logical and coherent *thread* as possible. The title of the research is both a question and an answer wishing to emphasize the fact that, in general, the Romanian Orthodox Church had and still has as essential part of its missionary activity in all the problems of the present-day society, one of them being the issue of cremation. The fact that cremation is used is not a secret either for the Church or the theological community since this problem was discussed since the conference held in Rhodos in the fall of the year 1961 aiming to prepare the future Pan-Orthodox Synod. At this meeting, it was acknowledged that cremation is current issue and a matter that urges for future debates in forthcoming synods. And, indeed, this theological issue was listed on the initial panel of topics that should have been approached at the above mentioned Pan-Orthodox Synod (held between September 23 and October 1, 1961) entitled *The Cremation of the Dead and the Orthodox Theology* but it was subsequently removed from the synodic order of business. Nevertheless, it remained a constant concern of the Church.

Starting from the above mentioned theoretical premises supported by consistent theological and doctrinary reasons, the present study presents the most important historical references of this phenomenon, and attempts to enlighten the reader about the reasons why this unchristian practice twarts with the Christian teachings of the Church. The work focuses on several aspects little known and insufficiently approached in the specialty works, i.e. the inter-confessional presentation of the cremation of the dead and the

historical evolution of this matter in the course of time since the study and the knowledge about this problem bearing theological connotations is a current responsibility for the entire Orthodoxy.

The aims of the present research are the following ones:

- ❖ The topicality of the theological Orthodox message for the society, therefore underlying the universal and dynamic character of the role played by the Christian Church in the post-modern society;
- ❖ The publication and study of several official documents with theological content about cremation, drawn up by the local Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church as well, and the imposition and acceptance of these theological concepts in time;
- ❖ The contribution brought by the Orthodox and Catholic theologies to the development of several solid and precise arguments about the re-heathendom of Christianity through various practices and methods dissimilar to the Christian life and its teachings;
- ❖ A serious and pertinent analysis of the cremation of the dead, the main argument in this respect being the faith in body resurrection and our communion with Jesus Christ's body in accordance with the Eucharist;
- ❖ The way in which the Orthodox Church influences and actively contributes to the re-orientation of the post-modern world towards a life that centered round Christ, and aimed to a full communion with Him.

3. Documentary guidelines

The present research topic relies on its analysis and elaboration according to several aspects that we shall present synthetically as follows:

- ❖ Elements of biblical theology through which we emphasize the identity, essence and peculiarities of the Orthodox theology;
- ❖ Elements of systematic theology through which we present the main teachings of the faith concerned with the arguments against cremation;
- ❖ Elements of historical theology that aim to present a series of data and events about the cremation of the dead;
- ❖ Elements of contemporary Orthodox theology through which we underlie and update the message of the Orthodox Church and its role and contribution to the present-day society.

A large part of the documents used in the present work were investigated in *Patriarch Iustinian* Library of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest, in the University Library of Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, in *Andrei Şaguna* Library of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of Sibiu, in the University Library of Trento, in Italy, in the Library of *Saint-Serge* Institute of Paris, France, and in the Library of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of Alba Iulia. There were also used documents and pieces of information downloaded from official internet websites and audio materials as well. Most of the items of information used in the present work are relatively recent and focus on the above mentioned topic but the older materials do not influence the issue under research in a negative way as well.

4. Stage of research

The topicality of the theme induces a debate about the issue under research both in the public space and in specialty journals, studies and articles as well. This is the reason why it is *impossible* to approach it from all points of view. In general, mass-media refers to this issue in an acid and tendentious manner. Yet we should not ignore the other side, i.e. the people who appreciate the work of the Church and its mission in the present-day society. Still, what I studied and investigated until now entitle me to say that no other work in theological Romania approaches this issue of cremation so concisely and systematically as my work. In the Catholic theologian environment we can find many items of information about this topic but most of them are not translated into Romanian. There are few studies and scientific articles that approach this matter in part in the Romanian theological literature and also clarify it to a certain extent. Even if, generally speaking, we find pieces of information about this topic or its adjacent subjects, no other work fully approaches this matter. It is partially and redundantly investigated. The novelty of my work consists in a rich and updated documentation based on the material listed at bibliography and its presentation in a logical and original manner.

The present research work is based on some reference works from abroad that approach the issue of cremation.

Encyclopedia of Cremation, coordinated by Douglas James Davies and Lewis H. Mates, was printed in 2005, in Great Britain. Douglas James Davies teaches Religious Studies at the University of Durham, in Great Britain, and Lewis Mates is research assistant at the same University. *Encyclopedia of Cremation* is the first major work about cremation. Among

the characteristics of the volume, mention should be made about the general outlines, the historical chronology of the practice in all significant religions of the world and, in the end, about the statistical presentation of the cremations carried out in the world.

Le christianisme et la cremation (Christianity and Cremation) is a work written by Piotr Kuberski, edited in 2012 at Cerf Publishing House in Paris. Piotr Kuberski is professor of Religious Education in France. He is educated both in theology and archaeology at academic level. All his research work focuses on the funeral rites and eschatological issues both from Christianity and from other religions as well. The work presents the cremation of the dead from an historical perspective. The author presents and analyzes: texts and documents from various fields of study (biblical writings, theological treaties and comments, the passions of martyrs, the lives of the saints, various mythological texts, etc.), the decisions made by the religious and civil authorities, several historical essays and updated articles from the field of medicine. In the above mentioned study, Piotr Kuberki underlines that cremation is more and more employed, and especially in the Anglo-Saxon and the Italian world. Piotr Kuberki's book filled in a gap and brought to light the matter of cremation in the present-day society.

Poussière ou cendre? (Dust or Ashes?), written by Marie-Abdon Santaner, was printed in 1997 in Paris. Marie-Abdon Santaner wrote many spiritual books and works of biblical theology. He was a Roman Catholic priest. In January 2000, Santaner entered into Chardonnière Francheville Brotherhood of Lyon. The author believes that cremation rapidly spread in the West and became a popular choice among the Christians. Nevertheless, many Christian souls continued to ask themselves if their option is in

accordance with their convictions as well. The above mentioned book gives an answer to these doubts and provides adequate solutions for those who want to be cremated.

Les rites autour du mourir (The Rites around the Dead), coordinated by Marie-Jo Thiel, was printed in 2008 at the Printing Press of the University of Strasbourg. The coordinator of this volume is professor at the University of Strasbourg and doctor both in Medicine and Catholic Theology. In this book, one can find the most significant issue of the present day society, i.e. the problem of death. Nowadays, rites rely on a tradition connected with the main monotheist religions and to new expressions and practices provided by the contemporary society. For example, cremation is mainly significant for the present-day society and brings to light new religious, juridical and social issues as well.

1500 Grammi di cenere, Cremazione e fede Cristiana (1500 Grams of Ashes, Cremation and Christian Faith), written by Michele Aramini, was printed in 2006, at Ancora Publishing House of Milan. Aramini is member of the Catholic clergy, and graduated from political sciences and bioethics. He is also author of various publications about the bioethical topics. He collaborated at the journal of bioethics entitled *Social Updates*, in Italy, and currently is professor of Bioethics at the University of Milan and president of the Ethics Commission Saint Pius X of Milan. This book clearly provides historical and theological information for all those who want to take a closer look to this subject. Aramini provides practical pieces of advice for those who wish to choose this funeral custom, be he/she Christian or unchristian because nowadays cremation is permitted in the Catholic Church.

As far as the Romanian literature is concerned, mentions should be made about the book written by the researcher and historian Marius Rotar, *Eternitate prin cenușă. O istorie a crematoriilor și incinerărilor umane în România secolelor XIX-XXI*, (*Eternity through Ash. A History of Crematoriums and Human Cremation in 19th-20th Century in Romania*), printed in 2011 at the European Institute Publishing House. The author is historian and main researcher II at “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia. He is among the first Romanians who made a research on cremation and the author of the first doctoral thesis exclusively devoted to the analysis of the death in the Romanian historiography (2005). Rotar published more than 30 studies about death in specialty journals from Romania, United States of America, England, Italy, and Republic of Moldova. *Eternitate prin cenușă (Eternity through Ash)* is a premiere for the Romanian scientific environment and one of the few volumes dedicated to the history of cremation and human incineration. We might therefore talk about a history of cremation in Romania from the emergence of the arguments that support it (1867) up to the present-day society. The author analyzes important moments such as those from the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, from the inter-war period of time, and from the Communist regime as well as key moments emerged after 1990.

5. Research Methodology

We approached the present work from a pluridisciplinary perspective supported by the Department of Missiology and Ecumenical Research, and coordinated by Prof. pr. Mihai Himcinski, Ph. D. First of all, I

tried to imprint to my work a missionary blast. Secondly, the missionary approach is accompanied by a multiple interdisciplinary approach since I employed biblical and patristic sources and official documents as well. The literature in this field is ample and informative, yet dissimilar, and this is the reason why a rigorous selection was absolutely needed. Not all the items of information that we found were objective and real as well. On the one hand, the opening and adoption of this practice by those who support the idea of cremation is exaggerated and, on the other hand, the rigidity and intolerance manifested by some of the members of the Romanian Orthodox Church when they approach this problem still exist. From these two opposite positions, we might say that a sincere and objective opinion might be achieved, and it should neither diminish nor exaggerate the significance of this matter.

Among the methods employed in the present research, mention should be made about the following ones:

- ❖ The historical approach, i.e. the research of the evolution of cremation in the Christian world and not only in the Christian world;
- ❖ The analytical method that pursues the position and thinking of certain theologians, philosophers, historians, and men of science, beneficial for a descriptive and analytical meditation upon this phenomenon;
- ❖ The comparative method that shows the differences between the arguments provided by those who stand up for burial and those who support the idea of cremation;
- ❖ The theological method that points out various current theological opinions (from Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism) and the missionary instruments proposed by a Church confronted with these current challenges.

6. General framework

The present work is made up of five chapters preceded by the research content, abbreviations, key words, introduction and final remarks, annexes about the number of cremations in the world, made between 2008 and 2012, and quoted from the international journal *Pharos*, bibliographical references, curriculum vitae and declaration of originality.

In the introduction, one may find five distinct elements, i.e.: the thesis argumentation, the aim of research, documentary guidelines, the stage of present research, and research methodology. The introductory concepts were employed to familiarize us with the problem of cremation, by mentioning both the pros and the cons of the practice.

The first chapter entitled *Viața, moartea, focul – perspective filosofico-teologice (Life, Death, Fire – Philosophical and Theological Perspectives)* centers round the concept of *tanathology*, clarifying and providing various shades of the topic according to its historical evolution and emphasizing the current meanings of life, death and fire in a precise, updated manner. The problem of death in the Semite space is just a preamble of the present research, leading us to the proper theme: the cremation of the dead. Life, death and fire, the three general topics, aroused and still arouse numerous controversies, different reactions and questions about various existential matters to which philosophers, theologians, historians and men of culture from various fields of study tried to provide answers. This chapter deals with the death in the Semitic space in all its aspects: the problem of the life of the soul after death, the place of the dead, the issue of bereavement, and its manifestation in the community life, the faith in autochthonous gods,

the fast seen as funeral rite, and, finally, with the problem of the names of the dead.

“The phenomenon of death” implies three types of testimony about death, from a Jewish perspective. The first series of testimonies explain the sovereignty of the God of Israel upon death as occasional and discontinuous force. The second series of testimonies remind us about the resurrection of the dead mentioned in different contexts that vary from one text to the other, connected with the observance of the laws of nature or, sometimes, as consequence of Yahveh’s creative power. The third series of testimonies evoke the immutable character of the relations that unite them with their God. The Christian soul does not really expect its resurrection. It lives in the presence and from the presence of Yahveh, who, in a way, involves the idea of immortality and represents the guarantee for the future.

Fire is perceived as one of the four basic elements of the world, together with the air, the water, and the earth. Fire represents one of the symbols that stands for divinity and celestial beings. Its flames symbolise the presence of God Himself, and, under certain circumstances, might offer protection or can be destructive as well. In the Old Testament, there are several aspects where divinity is connected with this element as follows: God is fire, the consuming fire, the ritual fire, the fire seer, the purifying fire, and the fire of the last judgement. The New Testament brings the martyr’s fire or the liturgical fire, the apocalyptic fire, and the baptism of fire.

The second chapter, entitled *Incinerarea din perspectiva neo-testamentară (Cremation from the Perspective Provided by the New Testament)* consists of several issues connected with thanatology as seen from the point of view of the Holy Scriptures and theology, and its multiple

meanings, as well as the idea of Christian martyrdom seen as immutable updating by the Church mission, and the martyrdom seen as Eucharistic evolution, the Phoenix bird mythology and the importance of the cult of holy relics for the teachings about faith rendered by the Church. The result of the analysis is that death should not be seen as a final point of destination but as an eminent end, accomplished by the means of the activity carried out during our entire life. Its presence is axiological during the entire course of human life. Jesus Christ's resurrection changed the content of the death and transformed it from an outrage – life exhaustion by breaking up with God and, consequently, the body dissipation by ingress into God – into the Source of Life.

The same chapter also deals with the theme of martyrdom. We shall present the religious martyrdom and other concepts connected with it, such as the philosophical martyrdom, and the political one as well. As far as the Christian martyrdom is concerned, mention should be made about the following issues: it seems that cremation was considered an obstacle or it would have stopped the cult of burial in the communities where it was employed. Consequently, the holy relics were worshipped by Christians from the very first centuries, in a coherent manner, connected with the faith in body resurrection and in the Christian rejection of cremation that was employed in the pagan world. As far as the theme of martyrdom seen as eucharistic becoming is concerned, Christ-Easter give a meaning to the Eucharist and allow us - to the people - to understand this secrecy as presence, memorial and communion as well. The Eucharist is not a symbol but a reality of an eschatological world in which Christ is and lives. The union and transformation of the two elements – the bread and the wine – are

possible only in the Church. In this way, the Eucharist is the only one that bears eschatological value in front of Jesus Christ.

The third chapter entitled *Elemente de antropologie teologică ortodoxă (Elements of Orthodox Theological Anthropology)* is focused on the concept of *anthropology*. It is concerned with the body value in Orthodoxy and the Christian attitude in front of the death, the eternal historical character of Christ's tomb, and, finally, the positioning in favor of cremation and the reasons why this practice is finally chosen.

The first part of the chapter deals with two concepts: *the image and the resemblance* meaning the impression of the image of God in temper, according to the grace and participation. The anthropological theme is not something more given than a deed, a process, and human deification is the work of grace that deeply novelizes the creation so that the human freedom may know the human depth only in this creative concurrence. It was also demonstrated that body dissolution has nothing to do with people. Only God disposes of our life and body. From the Orthodox perspective, cremation, in itself, is not an absolute obstacle for resurrection, and it is not necessarily a dogmatic matter. Still, this problem continues to be connected with the dogmatic teachings provided by the Church. Indeed, the resurrection of the dead in which Church believes will not depend on the burial or the cremation of the dead. Yet, vice versa is valid as well: the burial of the dead does not lack in connection with the faith in resurrection.

At the same time, the same chapter deals, on the one hand, with the respect owed to the body even after death since the care for it manifested during life continues after death with the funeral rites, and, on the other hand, with the significance of the historical character of the tomb of Jesus Christ.

For Christians, Christ's tomb became the supreme pattern of their own burial. The model of His tomb transformed the interment in an expression of faith in resurrection. Christians should consider the tomb the place of a promise according to which they will resurrect at the Last Judgment.

The final part of this chapter deals with arguments that support the idea of cremation and the reasons why this practice is finally chosen. The present Western society developed the idea that the human being conceives the funerals in his own manner, according to his gestures, wishing to disincorporate to the traditional model at all costs. Cremation presents itself as a funerary fashion that provides a various range of possibilities, starting with the choice of the resting place, the urn and its shape. The reasons invoked by those who support the idea of cremation are ecological, social and psychological, economic and historical, and they are all presented in detail in this chapter.

The fourth chapter, entitled *Poziția Bisericii Catolice și a Bisericilor Ortodoxe locale vizavi de problema incinerării (The Position of the Catholic Church and the Local Orthodox Churches towards Cremation)* provides the reader with precise information about the practice of cremation according to the two historical churches. As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, mention should be made about the pontifical texts about this problem and the debate upon cremation from and after the Second Vatican Council. This chapter also deals with the matter of death which is no longer placed in society as a mass or social event but related to a personal, private environment. The increase in number of cremations registered in the Western society represents the consequence of a change through which the collective mentality passed in the course of time. This matter became a mode of social

analysis that allows us to explore the present state of mentality with applications at individual level. Mention should also be made about a series of official documents issued by the Catholic Church and the local Orthodox Churches that clarify the positioning of the above mentioned churches towards cremation to a large extent.

The last chapter entitled *Aspecte ale înhumării și incinerării în perioadele interbelică și comunistă din România (Aspects of Inhumation and Cremation in the Inter-War and Communist Period in Romania)* outlines the main dates and historical events connected with the idea of cremation in the inter-war period of time, during the Communist Age and after 1990 in Romania. The aim of this chapter is to discuss and clarify all the issues about this funerary practice. This chapter also deals with the chronological presentation of the dates and events that emphasize the attitude of several public figures from Romania towards the two funerary practices. It is significant to note that even if many leaders opted for cremation during the Communist Age, this option was chosen only by the Communists situated at the second level or old militants from the inter-war period of time. Most of the significant leaders of the Communist Age chose the inhumation and not the practice cremation of the dead when they disposed of their own body.

The analysis of this chapter demonstrates that, in Romania, there were not so many variations in the number of human cremations. During the Communist Age and after 1990, the number of cremations registered in Romania did not fluctuate. Romania is one of the countries with the lowest percentage registered in the number of cremations in Europe and the world.

The thesis concludes with the main general remarks that attempt to clearly and concisely summarize and point out the opinions presented in this

work. At the same time, the final remarks provide the conclusion that the present doctoral thesis deals with a very sensitive issue, insufficiently approached until now, with a high level of topicality at the level of the Orthodox theology and for the entire Christian theology as well. One might finally notice that cremation is a complex, exciting and controversial phenomenon embraced by *some* and rejected by *others*.

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