An Investigation About the Attitudes Towards Death and Cremation in Contemporary Romania

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Abstract

In recent decades, the growing popularity of cremation throughout the world has led to an increase in scientific interest surrounding the topic. The development of cremation has not followed the same path in all European countries and Romania is a particular case in this context. Very rarely the subject of public debate, cremation is at first regarded with hostility and negativism. The purpose of this article is to examine attitudes towards cremation in contemporary Romania in the context of more general attitudes towards death. A particular place in this paper is given to the historical analysis of cremation. The theological position of the Romanian Orthodox Church is also discussed, since this institution exerts a considerable influence on the ethical opinions of its members (the majority of Romanians). Our investigation is oriented towards the potentially influential opinions expressed in the public space. We performed in our study a qualitative analysis of newspaper articles about cremation published in the last 10 years, between 2002-2012.

1. A short history of the practice of cremation in Romania

Cremationist ideas entered the Romanian socio-cultural space in the second half of the 19th century, being supported by a cultural elite represented mostly by medical doctors. The main argument in favor of this practice was a utilitarian one (Rotar, 2011). In 1923 the first Romanian Cremation Society, called “Cenușă” [Ashes], was formed. Several years later, in 1928, members of this Society opened in Bucharest the first Romanian crematory, built and run with their private funds. Romania became a pioneer in this respect, being the first Eastern European country with an operational crematorium before the World War II, apart from the Soviet Union. The crematorium brought substantial social, hygienic and economic advantages to the municipality of Bucharest. A remarkable fact is that it was built with the efforts made by the society itself not from a decision of the municipality or from other...
institutions of central administration, like in other Eastern European countries. The crematorium functioned as a non-profit organization, and all the funds collected from the fees charged for cremations were allocated for maintaining and improving the services and facilities. According to “Flacăra Sacră” [The Sacred Flame], the monthly journal edited by “Cenușa” Society (1934-1941), the crematorium was staffed by “people distinguished by their humane and civilized behavior” and the cremations performed there were far cheaper than the most modest of burials (Mates, 2005). Nevertheless, the Romanian Cremation Society registered a limited growth: in 1936 it barely reached 822 members (A XIV, 1937). Under these circumstances, the funds became insufficient for sustaining the activity of the crematorium. Another problem of the Romanian Cremation Society was the lack of real support from the municipality. Even if municipality representatives recognized the social importance of this militant organization, they refused to support it publically for a “political-religious reason” (Mates, 2005).

The Romanian Orthodox Church, the most influential Church in Romania (86% of the population declared themselves Orthodox at the national census in 2002), adopted a firm position against the practice of cremation. In 1928, as an immediate reaction to the implementation of the first human crematorium in Bucharest, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church issued a decision which stated that the priests must refuse any religious service to those persons that were cremated or will be cremated. The orthodox priests had the mission to inform their parishioners that they cannot have a memorial mass or a religious memorial service if they chose to be cremated. This decision was endorsed by another decision of the Holy Synod issued in 1933 and it is still applicable today (Rotar, 2011). The Romanian Orthodox Church defends its position stating that the practice of cremation is contrary to the Christian tradition regarding death and to the belief in the resurrection of the bodies. Cremation is also interpreted by Orthodox theologians as being contrary to the respect for the human being, including the body viewed as a temple of the Holy Spirit (see for instance Popescu-Mălaiești, 1931; Roșența, 1934). However, the most important development during the inter-war period was the legal recognition of cremation, and, through a series of regulations between 1929 and 1936, the granting of legal status equal to that of burial. This legislation remains in force to the present day.

Despite the economic and social advantages of cremation, before World War II, this practice was still not very popular in the Romanian society. In 1928, the year when “Cenușa” crematorium was opened, 262 corpses were cremated there. The number of cremations rose up to 581 in 1937, decreased to 198 in 1941 and rose up again to 552 after the war, in 1947 (Rotar, 2011). In 1935, at “Cenușa” crematorium were cremated 0.19% of the total number of the deceased in the country, a percentage that at that time placed Romania just behind France (0.2%) and Luxembourg (0.6%), at the bottom in a hierarchy of the countries where cremation was approved and used. This lack of interest in cremation of the majority of Romanians has several reasons, the most important being the opposition of the Orthodox Church, an institution with high authority in the interwar Romanian society. Many people refused cremation for religious reasons. This alternative to the traditional burial was often perceived as a lack of respect for the human body and human dignity, or it had a bad reputation generated by popular misconceptions. For example, shortly after “Cenușa” Society was constituted, it received many requests from people from different social classes who wanted to sell their corpses after death, because of inexplicable rumors according to which the Cremation Society bought corpses from people during their lives, paying different amounts of money according to their social status (Șerboianu, 1937). Another problem was generated by the so-called “administrative cremations”: cremations of body parts received from anatomical institutes, approved by the Society as a solution for raising funds, as long as these institutes paid well. This practice possibly affected the public image of the crematorium, regarded as a place “for the disposal of refuse rather than a place for respectable people to take their dead” (Mates, 2005).

After World War II, some important figures of the Communist regime newly installed in Romania, were cremated at “Cenușa” crematorium and had their ashes placed in the Carol Park Mausoleum (known during the Communist regime as the Monument of the Heroes for the Freedom of the People and of the Motherland, for Socialism), whence they were removed after the Romanian Revolution in 1989. During the Communist period, although the number of cremations increased slightly, with a particular peak in 1980, the practice did not develop greatly and indeed recorded an overall decline as compared to the inter-war period. The second crematorium, named Vitan-Bârzești after the Bucharest neighborhood where it is located was opened in Romania in 1994.
Nevertheless, in 2010, 855 cremations were performed in Romania, representing only approximately 0.33% of the deaths in Romania (International, 2010). This figure places Romania again in the last positions in a hierarchy of the practice of cremation in the Eastern-European countries.

2. Attitudes toward the practice of cremation in Romania today

2.1. The current situation

Today, there is one functional crematorium in Bucharest, namely Vitan-Bărzești, administered by the municipality (Bucharest General Council) and recently renovated. After several problems related to its placement, a new modern crematorium has been opened this year in Oradea, in the Northern part of Transylvania, from a private initiative (www.phoenix-cremation.ro). A similar project has been presented by another private society (RDK Cremation) to the municipality of Cluj-Napoca (the biggest city in Transylvania), but after several months of discussions in the city council and protests from some citizens led by Orthodox priests, claiming that this crematorium (projected to be placed in a cemetery between two important residential areas) would be a source of pollution, the majority of the members of the city council voted against the project. In a petition signed by several homeowners associations and presented in the city council they claimed that the incinerations would produce “an Auschwitz effect”, consisting of emissions of smell, smoke, particles from dead bodies and vapors of mercury from the dental fillings of the deceased, emissions which would cause important physical and psychical discomfort to the inhabitants (http://www.gazetadecluj.ro). The arguments presented in this petition convinced the members of the city council to deny approval for the construction of the new crematorium. Similar ideas were debated in the public space before the construction of the crematorium in Oradea, but there, the private company which managed the project found another original solution: Dorin Gherghiev, the owner of the company, chose to install an incinerator in a rented unit on the outskirts of Oradea: by using this trick, the company avoided having to acquire the necessary environmental authorization, as the incinerator was located in the industrial part of the city.

2.1. Aim of the study

After a brief historical presentation, the main aim of the study summarised in this paper was to explore the opinions currently visible in the Romanian public space about cremation.

2.2. Method

We performed a qualitative analysis of the articles published in Romanian newspapers in the last 10 years (between January 2002 and August 2012). We included in the study sample all the newspapers accessible online from the media archive www.ziare.com. The articles were selected by browsing the keywords: crematorium/crematoria (76), cremation (24), incineration (212). After this first selection, we proceeded to analyse the relevance of each article for the topic (human cremation in contemporary Romania), and all the articles referring to historical facts, the Holocaust, incineration of garbage or animal bodies, were eliminated. Finally, the study sample consisted of 83 newspaper articles as well as the free commentaires of the readers posted online at the end of some articles.
2.3. Results

2.3.1. About the crematoria

Several newspaper articles present to the general public the activity of the two crematoria in Bucharest, typically from a neutral perspective and based on objective data, but as an unusual activity, peculiar and strange. The journalists present lists with names of public persons or members of the Romanian cultural elite who chose even during their lives this “unusual practice” [It is true that, at least in the first half of the 20th century, cremation was practiced mostly by the Romanian cultural elite according to “Amurg” Romanian Cremation Association].

In recent years the municipality of Bucharest has approved important fund allocation for the restoration and modernization of both crematoria it has under administration. Cenuşa, the first Romanian crematorium [now closed for restoration] is promoted in the media like an unusual tourist attraction, the main arguments being the architectural value of its building and its historical value (at Cenuşa were cremated the corpses of prominent members of the Romanian cultural elite, as well as prominent members of the Communist Party and people who protested in the first days of the Romanian Revolution in 1989). In November 2001 1.3 milion euros were allocated by the Bucharest city council for purchasing new technology for the Vitan-Bârzeşti crematorium. Now, it is described in the media as an extremely cold and unpleasant place, destined mostly for the people with low financial resources (the total cost for one cremation is a little more than 100 Euros/589 Lei – but 1500 Lei/260 Euros for the entire service, far lower than the costs of a traditional burial). “At the main entrance of the crematorium a bored guardian is doing a crossword from an old newspaper and two old women are waiting quietly sitting on chairs. All around has the air of a hospital in a small town” (http://www.realitatea.net). The crematorium employees are presented in the media as picturesque figures with unusual jobs, of course, with the intention to attract audience with a peculiar aspect of social life. By contrast, the newly established crematorium from Oradea, managed by a private society, appears as a decent place equipped with modern technology (the costs of funeral services here are about 2150 Lei/500 Euros, still lower that the costs of a decent traditional burial). Some journalists wrote about the right of the persons to decide about their bodies, about the economical and hygienic arguments in favor of cremation, arguing that people should consider this option and that this is the right time for our society to rationally discuss about this topic. On the other hand, others journalists present the crematorium as a business that ignores our cultural and religious tradition (cremation is considered an idea imported from the United States and from countries in Western Europe where the religious tradition has been lost).

In recent years cremation has become an important topic of debate in the media, when two different private Societies have tried to build two crematoria in Transylvania: one in Oradea and another one in Cluj-Napoca. In both cases, the initiatives were followed by protests from citizens. The main objections of the protesters concerned the quality of the environment: they claimed that the crematorium would produce bad smells, smoke, ashes, particles of human bodies dissipated in the atmosphere, and also psychological discomfort for the people living nearby. The public voices of the inhabitants had a significant influence on the opinions of the municipalities: the Oradea crematorium has been opened in a second location and the Cluj-Napoca crematorium failed to receive the necessary approvals (after an initial positive response).

2.3.2. About the people who choose cremation

The pioneers of cremation in Romania were members of the cultural elite (medical doctors, professors, scientists, philosophers, writers) or public persons (politicians, actors) (Rotar, 2011). Now, in the Romanian public space there are only a few voices that advocate or militate for the practice of cremation (the most important pro-cremation voice in Romania is Amurg. The Romanian Cremation Association). Cremation is still not very popular in Romania. In 2010, 270.000 deceased were buried and 855 were cremated at the only functional crematorium in Bucharest, Vitan-Bârzeşti (“Cenuşa” needs urgent restoration and probably will became a museum). According to the administrator of Vitan-Bârzeşti crematorium, approximately half of the
people who choose cremation dislike the idea of the decomposition of their body underground or dislike the grieving atmosphere from the cemeteries. A significant part of the people who chose cremation do this from economical reasons. Others have an atheist or a nihilist philosophy of life and they want that their death be a final end. Other people are more practical, and consider that cremation is a more simple, efficient and economical procedure. There are a number of foreigners who are cremated each year in Romania (their reasons vary from cultural traditions to practical reasons, the transportation of a dead body to another country being often very difficult and costly).

2.3.3. Cultural traditions and the position of the Romanian Orthodox Church

Burial certainly has a long and well established tradition in the European culture. It is the common practice in Christianity, respecting literally the passage from the Bible: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis, 3:19). After Vatican Council II (1963) the Catholic Church accepts cremation but it does not recommend it (Davies, 2008, for the position of Protestantism & the Church of England upon cremation see Jupp, 2006). The Romanian Orthodox Church recently reiterated its position, initially expressed in 1928, condemning the practice of cremation (declaration of the Holy Synod from July 2012). In this new declaration of the Holy Synod (2012) it is clearly stated that “the Orthodox priests must warn in advance their parishioners that if a person chooses cremation, the Church will refuse him/her the funeral mass and any religious service”, “the priests that will accept to officiate a religious service to a person that has chosen cremation will be excluded from the Orthodox Church”, and “poverty is not a reason for cremation”. “The Orthodox Church believes that cremation is a sin because the human body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and it is not allowed to be burned” (an Orthodox priest interviewed for the newspaper “Monitorul”, October 2012, www.monitorulvn.ro; the same argument is frequently presented by the Orthodox priests) (see also for the recent anti-cremation position of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Neaga, 1991; Necula, 1996; Mureșan, 2011).

2.3.4. Opinions in favor or against the practice of cremation

The commentaires written by on-line readers that follow newspaper articles about the topic of cremation reflect two radical opinions: in favor or against this practice. People that agree with the practice of cremation usually argue that it is more simple, economical, esthetical, it does not imply a duty for the family to regularly go to the cemetery (an unpleasant place) and to cry or to publicly express their sorrow or grief. Cremation is also considered more hygienic and clean, because the body of the deceased will be not the object of decay. There are also voices expressing the desire that their ashes will be deposed in a favorite place, or thrown into the wind, or into the sea, instead of being placed in a cold and sad cemetery. For others, cremation emphasises the end of this life and they claim that they do not need future rituals or commemorations, preferring that their loved ones keep only the memories of the happy moments they spent together. There are people that criticize the position of the Orthodox Church against cremation, arguing that in fact according to the Bible the soul is important and eternal, not the body, and that the Orthodox Church should adopt a more modern ethical vision. Other people criticize more severely the Orthodox position, affirming that behind the official declarations there are economic reasons since the Church manages an important number of cemeteries across the country (the administration of the cemeteries is considered a successful business in Romania since the prices of land and the prices of the burials are considerably high). Several commentaires defend the right of each person to decide over his/her body before and after death. People who express opinions against cremation usually bring religious and cultural arguments (arguing that cremation is against our cultural tradition). For others, cremation is creepy, frightening or inesthetic. There are several remarkably humoristic or satirical “advantages” or “disadvantages” of cremation: the ashes could be placed in a bottle of Jack Daniels or in a pipe on the bookshelf, so that when coming back in the family house the deceased could watch his much younger wife: or, being placed in the family house, there are hypothetical risks that the ashes will be accidentally used for other purposes.
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