

## Abstract

The cornerstone of modern Romanian cremationist movement is the life and work of Archimandrite Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu. He was a complex and contradictory personality of his time, who stood out through several important activities. He was an activist member of the Orthodox clergy, involved in society, a missionary among the Roma population and supporter of cremation. Therefore, due to his initiatives and options, he often stood against the major trend of thoughts of the time, for which he was often criticized and even deposed as an Orthodox clergy member.

This book is a collection of various articles focused on cremation published by Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu in the written media of his time. The need to republish his texts is supported by the fact that Șerboianu was and still is the only Orthodox clergy member in Romania to publicly support cremation. That is why his work is also important for a global history of cremation.

### **The life and work of Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu**

Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu was born on October 16, 1883 at Șerboieni in Argeș County, in southern Romania. His father was an Orthodox priest. He became a student of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest, which he graduated with a thesis entitled *Ten Sunday sermons, from the Publican and Pharisee Sunday to Easter Sunday only* (the work was published in 1909). In 1909, on November 16, he was appointed deacon at the Romanian Orthodox Chapel in Paris, where he served until July 1910. Due to disagreements with Caesar Stefano, who served as high priest at the chapel, he left the French capital and returned to Romania. In 1913, he was deployed to Southern Dobruja (a south-eastern Romanian region at that time - an area of north-eastern Bulgaria now), and for a period between 1914 and 1918 he served as pastor of St. Elias Church in Bucharest. He tried but did not succeed in pursuing doctoral studies at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest in 1914. Before the outbreak of World War I, he wrote for the journal *Culture. A journal for church singers in Romania*, and signed as hierodeacon.

Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu fought in World War I, as a cavalry officer. After the war ended, he taught French, Greek and Latin at the Theological High School in Curtea de Argeș. In 1922, he left for America for three years, sent by the Orthodox Patriarchate to spread the Orthodox faith among Romanians who had settled there. After his return from the United States of America, for two years (1925-1927), he was pastor in Beiu, Teleorman County, where he held the position of inspector-missionary at the Buzău diocese for three months. He then visited several monasteries, among which Cozia and Stânișoara (in southern Romania).

In 1929, he began a longer journey for studies, which included Italy, Albania, Macedonia and France. In 1930, in Paris, he managed to publish his famous work dedicated to the Gypsies. His work enjoyed appreciation, but also criticism, especially among the Romanian academic world. After his return from France in 1931, for a period of two years (1931-1933), he was abbot of the Crasna monastery, where, according to Gheorghe Lăzărescu Lăzurică, he was degraded from the rank of Archimandrite by the Diocese of Vâlcea and expelled from the monastery on February 1, 1933. The reason was serious

moral offense and failure to comply with the Orthodox doctrine, as well as an alleged propensity for the Greek-Catholic Church.

After his arrival from France (1931), Șerboianu began to organize the Gypsy community in Romania. Thus, in April 1933, he founded the General Association of Gypsies in Romania. His merit was obvious, since this was the first attempt to organize Romanian Gypsies in an association. The purpose of this association was the emancipation of Gypsies. Șerboianu thus issued a "Call to all Gypsies in Romania", in 26 points, which included publishing a newspaper, books, organizing evening classes, establishing libraries, setting up theoretical schools, schools of crafts, a people's university, establishing museums, hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, instituting scholarships, guilds, legal aid, reclamation of land for the nomads, etc.

On the other hand, in September 1933, the General Union of Roma in Romania was founded in Bucharest, led by Gheorghe Lăzărescu Lăzurică, with the same goal of emancipation for the Gypsies. Differences and mutual hostilities arose between the association led by Șerboianu and that led by Lăzurică, despite the fact that, at first, the two leaders had worked together. Thus, Șerboianu was accused of trying to organize the Gypsies, so as to integrate them into the Greek-Catholic Church. On the other hand, Lăzurică was accused of pursuing political purposes through his association. Lăzurică, of Gypsy origin, accused Șerboianu, who was not a Gypsy and no longer a member of the Orthodox clergy, of intent to convert the Gypsy to Greek-Catholicism. This was a decisive point in their separation. Șerboianu's alleged conversion to Greek-Catholicism was just a rumour launched by Lăzurică. Also, Lăzurică insisted on the fact that he was supported by the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, which, because of suspicions about Șerboianu, would rather support his rival.

Dissension between the two faded in time. The Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate withdrew their support for Lăzurică as a missionary among Gypsies and favoured Gheorghe Niculescu, a new leader of Romanian Gypsies of the time. This was the reason for a new rapprochement between Șerboianu and Lăzurică. Petre Matei showed that in 1937, the two simultaneously launched attacks against both the Orthodox Church and Niculescu.

Between 1934 and 1938, Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu worked as a priest at the Cenușa Crematorium, where he performed religious services mainly for the Orthodox Christians who chose to cremate their relations. He died in 1941 and was buried in the Bellu cemetery, but in 1948, his remains were exhumed and cremated at the Cenușa Crematorium in Bucharest.

The publishing activity of Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu was intense and began early. He published three books, the most popular of which was dedicated to the Gypsies. The third book was published in 1931 and it was a guidebook for prospective visitors of Cozia monastery. Thus, the archimandrite used his time spent at the monastery as a source of inspiration for his writing.

In addition, he published a series of articles in various newspapers and magazines of the time, thus showing constant interest in writing. Several stages can be defined in his writing activity. First, Șerboianu stood out as a defender of traditions in the Orthodox Church, before and after World War I. His articles published in *Glasul Țăranilor* or *Cultura Poporului* are worth mentioning, as they were moralistic and in keeping with the teachings of the Orthodox belief. Also, Șerboianu stood out in his early years as a critic

of some facts connected to the Romanian Orthodox Church. Thus in 1910, he criticized the measures taken against vagrant monks by the state authorities.

### **Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu, a supporter of cremation**

At the time Șerboianu became a supporter of cremation many changes in the field had taken place in Romania. The Orthodox traditionalist rhetoric had already recorded significant victories: in addition to the press campaign against cremation and cremationists that had already begun before the opening of Cenușa crematorium on January 26, 1928, the hierarchs of the Romanian Orthodox Church decided by two decisions of the Synod that met in 1928 and 1933, to prohibit any religious service in the case of cremation (valid to this day). Therefore, from the Orthodox point of view, cremation was completely outside the "truth" and its supporters were publicly stigmatized for advocating the overthrow of traditions, of the church and, through these, of the very foundation of the Romanian people. Iuliu Scriban, Marin C. Ionescu, Dionisie Lungu, Ioan Popescu Mălăiești, Iulian Mihălcescu, Haralambie Roventța were just some of the personalities of the Romanian Orthodox Church who adopted such a view, among other important figures of the Romanian public life of the time (for example Nichifor Crainic and Cezar Petrescu).

The country had passed a law on cremation, the Criminal Code issued in 1936, which gave it equal legal status with the practice of burials.

On the other hand, Romanian cremationists had achieved important victories by the year 1934: the opening of the crematorium was the most significant because it meant that the idea of Romanian cremation had come to life. For a while, the cremationist society was financially supported by the Mayor's Office in Bucharest, but the support gradually decreased in time. On the other hand, by 1934, work at the Cenușa Crematorium had almost been completed, the number of Cenușa society members had significantly increased and the number of cremations had slightly gone up. Romania was at that time the only Balkan state to own a crematorium and the first country with a majority of Orthodox believers to have such a facility.

An outline of the number of cremations since the opening of the crematorium until 1940 is shown below, which can hopefully shed more light to the matter:

1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939	1940
262	266	297	332	470	602	580	480	364	581	230	261	243

Source: Marius Rotar, *Eternitate prin cenușă. O istorie a incinerărilor și crematoriilor umane în România secolelor XIX-XXI* (Eternity through ashes. A history of cremations and human crematories in Romania between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century), Institutul European, Iași, 2011, pp.194-199

Although the traditionalist Orthodox rhetoric had subsided during the fourth decade of the twentieth century, it was still extremely vehement about cremation. Within this context, *Flacăra Sacră* (Sacred Flame), a journal written by and for Romanian cremationists, was first issued on December 1934. The journal served several purposes. On the one hand, it was a platform from which Romanian cremationists could now firmly

express their views and, on the other hand, they could answer all accusations and rumours sprung at the idea of human cremation. As in the Western world, the journal was a means to forward the development of cremation in Romania, now in the possession of more direct and effective means of propaganda.

Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu's interest on cremation dates from the early twentieth century. In 1909, he published in *Gazeta Țăranilor* an article openly critical of the practice. At that time, he was priest at the Romanian Orthodox Chapel in Paris. He attended a cremation at the Pere Lachaise crematorium, which he described in the journal in the form of a letter. According to him, cremation had been embraced by atheist socialists in particular, and it constituted a drift from the truth of those times. He compared it to burials and the cemetery, which, in his opinion, were one of the highest divine pedagogy lessons for humanity. At the end of his article, Șerboianu predicted that not before long, such aberrations, highly damaging to our national spirit, would also appear in Romania. Twenty-five years later, after he had already come to support cremation, Șerboianu admitted that he had unrealistically described cremation and cremation. He explained that he had written in the spirit of the times and had wrongly thought that he was helping the peasants. Meanwhile, he had come to believe that peasants led their lives according to various superstitions, many of which were encouraged by the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Șerboianu's pro-cremationist opinions were published in *Flacăra Sacră*, starting with its second issue in January 1935. Hence, the former archimandrite's presence in the journal was a necessary step for the Romanian cremationist movement of those times, because it provided a foothold from within the Orthodox rhetoric, even if its exponent was, at that hour, completely marginalized and excluded from the Orthodox clergy.

From a theological perspective, Șerboianu embarked upon a difficult task in writing his study on cremation: he had to offer compelling and unsophisticated arguments on the lack of grounds for the anti-cremationist rhetoric that cremation was a pagan practice, completely against the Romanian spirit, as well as anti-Christian and, especially, anti-Orthodox. However, such an approach implied mastering a broad theological culture, the ability to identify such possible theological arguments, and, an act of great courage at the time of the year 1934.

Overall, Șerboianu's contribution became fundamental to the aims pursued by the Romanian cremationists and stated in the journal *Flacăra Sacră*. Their agenda, published in the first issue of December 1934, marked the itinerary of the future struggle, under the circumstances of the Romanian Orthodox Church opposing cremation: "*Cremation should be considered to be equal to burials in utility and purpose and it should be allowed to include without any restraint, the complete religious service*"<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, the archimandrite published about 12 articles related to cremation in the journal *Flacăra Sacră*. The most consistent and representative study on cremation that Șerboianu published in *Flacăra Sacră* was dedicated to *Cremation and Christianity*. The study was published in 16 issues of the journal between December 1934 and April 1936.

Șerboianu engaged in direct accusations against the Orthodox Church regarding their error in approaching the issue of human cremation. He highlighted the fact that the Orthodox leading structures did not use the same measuring unit for various drifts from the Christian spirit of the time, some of which they even tolerated and included in their

---

<sup>1</sup> „Cuvânt Înainte (Foreword)”, in *Flacăra Sacră*, I, 1, 1934, p.2.

own practices. Thus, he blamed the tolerance shown towards witchcraft advertisements, smoking or other pagan habits "*stabbing the heart of the deceased presumed to be a walking dead with a burning spit, chaining the foot of a living lunatic with an iron chain, a custom practiced in Oltenia and in other provinces, the public exposure and street procession with the bloodied nightshirt, worn by the bride on her wedding night, the outrageous wake for the deceased custom practiced in Moldova, repeating baptism for epileptics and other people possessed by evil spirits, warlocks pulling out saints' eyes.*"<sup>2</sup> Calinic therefore strongly condemned the intolerance against cremation in the Romanian Orthodox Church, which stood in a mismatch with their Synod decisions from 1928 and 1933. He noticed that there was a leniency towards the priests who carried out religious services for those who were cremated elsewhere than the crematorium's chapel. The intolerance towards cremation grew even more serious due to the activity of "*priests who had their own interests and a poor theological culture*"<sup>3</sup> who created an anti-cremationist neurosis in Romania of that time, instead of guiding the religious towards a true life in the light of faith.

On the other hand, Șerboianu did not exhibit a cremationist propensity only in theory but also in practice as he performed religious services for Christians (mostly Orthodox) who had chosen to be cremated. In recognition of his merits in the field, he became an honorary member of the cremationist society Oganj in Serbia and some of his articles were published in the journal issued by Oganj.

Șerboianu systematically dismantled the arguments of the Orthodox rhetoric against cremation. For example, he argued that the Bible passage "*for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return*" (Genesis, 3:19) could not be solely considered as the grounds to reject cremation. He argued and proved that the texts of the Scriptures and of the Bible did not reject cremation. Thus, the accusation that cremating the deceased was a pagan practice had no real base.

The other articles written by the former archimandrite, with few exceptions, follow the same guideline: he strove to prove that cremation was a valid practice, in accord with the Christian teachings; he criticized the Orthodox leading structures for their attitude toward cremation, which he considered to be wrong.

I find significant for his views an article that he published in 1937, when Șerboianu, noting the ignorance and disbelief, he openly blamed the Orthodox priests and Orthodox higher structures for manipulation and petty interests on cremation. As compared to his previous articles, this time, his tone was more radical. The archimandrite stated his viewpoint starting from various rumours of that time about the crematorium and cremations. Such rumours spoke about the cremation of political dissidents, burning people alive, the use of body fat to produce Vaseline and make-up, movements of the body during cremation, turning human ashes into sugar and so on. Some of the rumours had been heard during confession<sup>4</sup>. He believed them to be purely fantasy stories, encouraged by some of the priests of that time.

---

<sup>2</sup> Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu, „Cremațiunea și religia creștină” (Cremation and Christianity), in *Flacăra Sacră*, II, 5, 1935, p.4

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p.5.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, “Ignoranță sau necredință?” (Ignorance or lack of faith?), in *Flacăra Sacră*, IV, 12, 1937, p.3.

The conclusion was that a Church with such priests was merely a lifeless body, which no longer served the truth, but its self-interest to keep people in the darkness of ignorance. Șerboianu was particularly indignant against the ideas spread by some priests who believed cremation would have consequences on the resurrection of the dead at the end of time, a theological error due to their ignorance and profound disbelief, in his opinion.

But his cremationist belief is most clearly stated in an article published in *Flacăra Sacră* in early 1938. In this case, Șerboianu used as pretext for expression the idea of happiness. He defined it as harmony between individuals, but sadly noted that in those days, the concept of happiness was misunderstood as people sought satisfaction and tranquillity in petty and worldly things such as money, lust, wealth, or conspiring for their own ascension or conservatism as motif for personal interest. But his was most afraid of the happiness of the many, as he suggestively called it, which was driven by superstition. Consequently, the former archimandrite completely assume his stand on cremation, which he considered to be a formula for simplicity, an expression of freedom and true faith, in the light of Christ. He thought of himself as a martyr: "*I am writing these lines for the few intelligent people and not for those who have pilloried me for leaving their traditionalist den, for serving as a priest at this Crematorium and becoming a true citizen of my country and of the world, freed from private interests and serving the only truth Which is Jesus Christ*"<sup>5</sup>.

The last article that Șerboianu published in the journal *Flacăra Sacră* tackled the manner in which someone's relations should react if that person wished to be cremated. The matter has been fundamental within the context of the decisions adopted by the Romanian Orthodox Church Synod banning any religious service for those who choose cremation. Calinic Popp Șerboianu considered that "*the last wish does not belong to the living, but to the dead and they are the ones who will answer to God for their deeds in this life and for what they wanted their descendants to do for them. So, grant and respect so scrupulously and exactly the desire of your dead loved ones, if you wish to have peace of mind*"<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, an Orthodox priest had to grant this desire, even if he faced some risks. Șerboianu compared the situation of a priest to that of a soldier, who, in order to save his country, had to disregard his commanding officer's orders.

The public expression of his cremationist views determined various Orthodox theologians of the time to criticize Șerboianu in violent terms. Thus, he was considered to be a traitor, like Judas. He was also described in the Orthodox written media as in league with Satan, a punk and wretched alike. Șerboianu was said to plead for cremation because he was paid by the followers of cremation in Romania. Through his attitude, he allegedly spread anarchy among the Romanian Orthodox Church troubling the churchgoers.

His portrayal by Ion Irineu Mihălcescu in 1933 was also relevant. Mihălcescu was Dean of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest and was of the opinion that cremation was "*one of the many psychoses that mankind suffered from after the Great War, a dangerous spiritual disease or a whimsical fashion, like all fashions, and gruesome*"<sup>7</sup>. Șerboianu was considered a vagrant monk who dared to perform religious services in the crematorium, thus enabling cremationists to distort the truth.

---

<sup>5</sup> Idem, „Mi-e frică de fericire” (I am afraid of happiness), in *Flacăra Sacră*, V, 2, 1938, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, „Ultima dorință sau „Las cu limbă de moarte...” (The Last wish), in *Flacăra Sacră*, VI, 9, 1939, p.4.

<sup>7</sup> I. Mihălcescu, „Cenușarii și Biserica” (Cremationists and the Church), in *Glasul Monahilor*, XI, 384, December 31, 1933, p.1.

For the cremationist movement in interwar Romania, Șerboianu was considered a hero for his courage to support cremation. Thus, annual activity reports of Cenușa society (which built and owned the crematorium in Bucharest until 1948) expressed their gratitude and admiration for him. His death in 1941 was perceived by Romanian cremationists as one of their biggest losses.

## **Conclusions**

We can say that the texts defending cremation signed by the Șerboianu are an original contribution to the subject and that they deserve to be returned and submitted to the general public's attention through this book. They are the echoes of an era of fierce controversy over cremation, which marked the opinions of interwar Romanian society and whose effects can be identified to this day. Although sometimes speculative and improvable to a theologian's eyes, these texts have the merit of stirring up questions and favouring debate. Even though Șerboianu was stigmatized by the Romanian Orthodox Church, he stood by his choice aware of the risks. He believed he had a mission, rooted in the primary role of the priest as pastor of the soul, who shaped consciences. He is now considered to be the main voice of the fundamental attitudes of interwar Romanian cremationists, who made the most serious efforts to prove that there was no discrepancy between cremation and the Christian faith.