

Ioana-Zoia Ursu

Prayer, Resistance, Repression: the “Burning Bush” from the Antim Monastery

Abstract

“The Burning Bush of the Mother of God” Association represented a community of intellectuals and monastical clergy coagulated around the Antim monastery in Bucharest. Its members, having come from the spheres of journalism, literature, poetry, religion, art, music and even mathematics, transfigured the object of their profession into Christianity, succeeding in outlining landmarks for a more profound experience of the Christian faith. These reasons were considered enough a danger to cause incarceration for a number of 15 participants to the Burning Bush - among them, the spiritual and intellectual elite. Our research inquires whether the spiritual and cultural movement known as The Burning Bush may be considered a



Ioana-Zoia Ursu (b. Sandu), PhD candidate in History, “Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

response/ a reply given by orthodoxy to the communist doctrine and regime.

Keywords

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“Because, sometimes, one almost has the ‘certainty’ that history is on the side of communism, one is forced to say/affirm/assert a terrible thing: any attempt of denying communism in its plan of affirmation would be erroneous and meant to fail. (...) While communism can be denied only by those who passed through it and surpassed it in spirit.” (André Scrima)

1 Introduction

Among the ways in which Romanian society tried to answer to the aggression of the communist regime, a „spiritual resistance” or a „resistance through faith” is often reminded. The concept, usually referring to intellectuals and clergy who tried to provide a reply to communism on a spiritual plan, can be applied to situations found both inside the concentrationary universe (as a reality assumed by those who found God in prison) and outside its walls.

Among these forms of „resistance of the spirit” one may inscribe the cultural and spiritual movement at the Antim monastery, known as „The Burning Bush of the Mother of God”. Its fame, due to personalities, intellectuals and fathers who found themselves tied to these events, attracted focus on the

research of the group's history¹, its activity, as well as the communist repression directed against these spiritual and intellectual elites².

The present research proposes to address some interpretations of the Burning Bush phenomenon; through the memory of the archives, memories and secondary literature, the paper attempts to discuss whether the activity of the Burning Bush may be seen as a means of response to communism (perceived as a threat or aggression), and whether this type of response may be considered a typical orthodox one (through the spiritual ethos the Burning bush identifies with).

2 The unicity of the Burning Bush, between spiritual ideals and historical context

Historical context – the instauration of communism – served as catalyst towards the searches of the Antim community. Since

¹ We note the works of George Enache, *Ortodoxie și putere politică în România contemporană*, (București, Nemira, 2004); *Monahismul ortodox și puterea comunistă în România anilor '50* (along with Adrian Nicolae Petcu), Galați, Editura Partener, 2009; *Rugul aprins din perspectivă istorică* în Revista „Tabor”, year VII, nr. 3, March 2013, p. 55-70 etc.

² There isn't an entire cognuency between the ones who took part at the meetings at the Antim Monastery and those arrested in 1958 in the prison lot named as well „the Burning Bush”. In the first case, besides the „core” represented by Sandu Tudor (later, father Agathon or hieroschemamonk Daniel), Benedict Ghiuș, Sofian Boghiu, Adrian Făgețeanu we also mention the Antim monastic community, intellectuals such as: Alexandru Mironescu, Vasile Voiculescu, Anton Dumitriu, Alexandru Elian, Ion Marin Sadoveanu, Paul Sterian, youth (usually, students in Theology) André Scrima, Leonida Plămădeală, Roman Braga, Nicolae Bordașiu. On the other hand, the group of 16 men to be arrested included medical doctor Gheorghe Dabija, theologian Dumitru Stăniloae, as well as students in Architecture: Șerban Mironescu, George Văsâi, Nicolae Rădulescu, Emanoil Mihăilescu and Grigore Dan Pistol.

“an era had begun, when no one could remain lukewarm, complacent in semi-ignorance, in empty formalism and vulnerable to the offensive of the materialistic-atheist propaganda”³, the conferences at Antim appeared as a necessity, as a response to questions and conscience issues which were made acute by the acceleration of communist instauration⁴. “Great overthrows, the forcing of the previous models, arbitrary and incompetence, it all obliged to abandoning concepts that were difficult to define and held no perspectives”⁵, in such a way that “no one could remain secluded inside their own tower of intellectual erudition, of passion for documents and reflection”⁶.

The pursuit of those from Antim was fulfilled through contact with the authentic working of the Prayer of the Heart passed on by Father Ivan Kulâghin⁷. Having followed the spiritual tradition from Optina monastery⁸ and binding the knowledge of philokalic literature with the practice of the Prayer, father Ivan Kulâghin inscribed the living heritage of hesychasm into the hearts of those from Antim.

³ Nicolae Nicolau, *Rugul aprins al Maicii Domnului*, in: „Din arhiva rezistenței”, nr. 4, 1992, p. 34.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Ivan Kulîghin (Culighin) was the confessor of Nicolae, metropolitan of Rostov, along whom he sought refuge during the war years at Cernica and Antim monasteries.

⁸ Where he had been a monk until the destruction of the monastery by the Soviets, during 1924-1925. André Scrima, *Timpul rugului aprins*, (București, Editura Humanitas, 2010), p. 177-178.

3 The communist aggression and repression

3.1 The destruction of the "old man". Communism versus Church and Religion

Communism had proposed "to destroy the enemy of socialism. It first had to destroy the institutionalized enemy: the bourgeois, the rich, the capitalist, and the wealthy. Then came those who nurtured hostile feelings, inconformity or indifference towards the Party. The enemy could have been everywhere"⁹. In its aggressiveness against the "ancien regime", communism included not only its political adversaries, but also turned against the entire society. The intellectuals searching for spiritual refuge at the Antim monastery were part of an interwar era elite, whose mentality was not structured by "revolutionary" principles, and not even by the minimal options of ideological orientation¹⁰.

Although the intellectuals of the "Burning Bush" were men of culture, they had overgrown the vision on Christianity as a cultural phenomenon or as an intellectual refinement¹¹. The "Burning Bush" had been searching, had found and was trying to pass on a Christian authentic spirit of introspection and prayer.

The experience of the Holy Tradition of the Church, as it was perceived by the Burning Bush, was essentially antagonistic to Marxist atheism that represented the ideological foundation of the new regime. Although officially the communist regime guaranteed the freedom of religious faith, by rendering itself as a protector of the acknowledged religions, it drastically made

⁹ Alain Besançon, *Nenorocirea secolului*, (București: Editura Humanitas, 2007), p. 23.

¹⁰ Nicolae Nicolau, *art. cit.*, p. 35.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

amends to the “mysticism” and “obscurantism” which would have hindered the development of a modern, evolved society¹². Defining and situating these two themes represented the pretext for numerous actions of aggression and repression against society – in general, and against clergy – in particular. “Mysticism” and “obscurantism” would represent accusations often reiterated inside the Securitate files; their “translation” actually indicates the existence of an authentic Christian life in spite of the obstacles and interdictions imposed by the regime. “The bourgeoisie... made obscurantist theology... pursuing the ideological consolidation of the reactionary positions, by enlisting towards mysticism a disoriented intellectuality... A culture and thinking such as the bourgeois one, held no shame in gathering around churching the trash of the most obscurantist mysticism...”¹³ underlined ardently a 1949 volume regarding the status of religious cults in the Romanian People’s Republic.

“Obscurantist mysticism” therefore becomes one of the main attributes of the “class enemy”. As we will consequently demonstrate, this optics dominated the reasons for performing informative tracking on those from the Burning Bush group. The inability to frame “mysticism” as a legal guilt led to the creation of an entire narrative that would allow the incarceration of a larger number of people connected to the Burning Bush group from Antim. Beyond fictitious accusations, the communist files echo the hatred against the “mysticism” and “fanaticism” that alienated those accused from the communist system and bound them to Christ.

¹² George Enache, Adrian Nicolae Petcu, *Monahismul ortodox și puterea comunistă în România anilor 50*, (Galați: Editura Partener, 2009), p. 22.

¹³ *Culte religioase în Republica Populară Română*, (București, 1949), p. 15, apud George Enache, Adrian Nicolae Petcu, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

3.2 The informative tracking of the Burning Bush members

Studying the archival records related to the repression against the Burning Bush, the first observation that comes to mind is that the investigation and the trial documents are preceded by extensive documentation of informative tracking. Records show that the members of Burning Bush were not arrested by chance, but after a secret police work carried out over an entire decade. Most of those arrested in 1958 "benefit" from these types of informative tracking records; beyond wooden language, these files sometimes reveal true martyrdoms or contemporary hagiographies.

Although individual tracking records may leave the impression of an accidental construction of the arrested lot, documentary entries show that the Securitate was interested in pursuing the activity of the entire group¹⁴.

3.3 The archives, between information and ideologization

Browsing the files also captures the recurrence of certain themes and events, which indicates that the accusatory discourse of the Securitate is built around a number of leitmotifs originated in the investigative tracking from the 1950s. O series of events particularly attract the interest of the inquisitors, being afterwards transformed into trial charges: father Daniel's visits at the Mironescu family home involved a number of students from the Faculty of Architecture, the outings of the youth to Rarău monastery, the external correspondence of archimandrite Benedict Ghiuș and so on.

The matter-of-course relations between these men of common affinities transform, within the Securitate's deformed optics, into criminal errors towards the People's Republic of Romania, namely:

¹⁴ The National Council for Study of the Securitate Archives, (ACNSAS), Informative Fund, file no. 2214, vol. 1, f. 16.

- "*hostile discussions*"¹⁵ that held a "hostile note towards the current PRR regime": attitudes toward the international status quo, the 1956 Hungarian revolution, attitudes concerning the internal policies, interception of foreign radio broadcasts and comments on the latest political news. However, the "hostile" epithet is not an exclusive political attribute, since the calls for deepening the spiritual life, discussing literature and theological education also counted as actions "hostile towards the people's democratic regime"¹⁶.

- *plot, subversiveness, clandestinity*¹⁷, the continuation of an activity deemed as illegal¹⁸; the impact of these meetings would rise through the participation of Architecture students – a part of them would also be arrested within the *Burning Bush* prison lot¹⁹.

- *accusation of legionary affiliation and the "legionary – mysticism" association*; this was indeed a handy accusation held by the investigators, within the frame of political demonization addressed to the Legionary Movement²⁰; the implications of this are deeper as the idea of "legionary activity developed under the mask of mysticism" is insinuated. This type of

¹⁵ ACNSAS, Criminal Fund, file no. 202, vol. 2, f. 262.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, f. 246-248 and interview with Emanoil Mihăilescu realized by Vlad Mitric Ciupe, Apud: <http://arhitectura-1906.ro/2012/10/interviu-cu-arhitectul-emanoil-mihailescu-fost-detinut-politic/>, accessed on 08.08.2013.

¹⁷ These are the epithets which the investigators use to describe the meetings in the Mironescu family home. ACNSAS, Criminal Fund, file no. 202, f. 273 verso.

¹⁸ „The Burning Bush of the Mother of God” Association had been, as well as all the other associations, banished by law in 1958.

¹⁹ Șerban Mironescu, Nicolae Rădulescu, Emanoil Mihăilescu and George Văsâi.

²⁰ Applying this measuring unit seems even more absurd while taking into account the legionary past of fathers such as Arsenie Papacioc or Adrian Făgețeanu, who had separated – ironically – from the Legionary Movement in order to achieve spiritual fulfilment within monastic life. Father Daniel had been against the legionaries since the inter-war years.

accusation would have justified the involvement of the communist regime in confining the monastic life – which was regarded as a citadel of reactionary and anti-state plotting²¹. With regards to the position of the Burning Bush members towards the Legionary Movement, the interrogations and informative notes suggestively illustrate the idea of abandoning political combat in order to follow spiritual fulfilment, the desirable way being monastic life²².

- "mysticism". Through the ideological lens of the investigative officer, one of the group members, Professor Alexandru Mironescu, stated that "the purpose of this organization [The Burning Bush] was to induce, to those whom the members contacted, *mystical education, hostile towards the people's democratic regime and to maintain the moral of the old regime through the intensification of the spiritual activities*"²³.

"Mysticism" is a synonym not only to the assumption of Christian life, but also to the anti-atheist moral that emerges from it²⁴. Hesychasm and the practice of the unceasing prayer do not escape the vigilance of the Securitate either, being regarded as a "hostile" act, directed "against the social order"²⁵.

²¹ In the opinion of historian George Enache, the arrest of the „Burning Bush” was one of the measures that proceeded and somewhat announced adopting the 410/1959 decree concerning the reglementation (restriction) of monastic life.

²² ACNSAS, Criminal Fund, file no. 202, vol. 1, f. 101.

²³ *Ibidem*, vol. 8, f. 1 verso.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, vol. 2, p. 248: „Through readings and discussions, we were given an entirely different education, contrary to the *scientific Marxist education* that we received in school. We were supposed to spread *the mystical, philosophical, idealistic education* that we received during the group's meetings. (...) *We also received a theological education* (my italics), in case we had entered the monastical life”.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, f. 217 verso: "The Prayer of the Heart represented the most exaggerated form of Orthodoxy, due to its adverseness and injuriousness towards the current regime, since those who correctly practiced this prayer would have to repeat it continuously during their hours awake. This would lead to our alienation from the regime and of

Among the examples of “mysticism” given by the archives, there is Father Benedict Ghiuș who – in the eyes of an informant – is “the most mystical orthodox clergy possible, recognized by all and *separated from the healthy organization generating social progress*”²⁶. Translating this reality – paradoxically, in an eyes of another informant, receives instead hagiographical meanings: “One must not forget that [father Ghiuș] is, by excellence, a deep experienter of the spiritual values, a man of permanent prayer, an “hesychast”, a genuine and sincere practitioner of interior prayers²⁷. (...) I consider him the most spiritually fulfilled man, whose main dominant in life has been the proximity to God...”²⁸. The conclusion of the repressive institutions regarding the “mystical, hostile” activity of the Antim group had been expressed since 1949, within a note from the files of the General Direction of the State Security [the “Securitate”] having referred to the birth of an association “*with a confessed mystical purpose*, which in fact holds political implications, manoeuvring *under the mask of mystical exercise* (my italics), the preparation of the flock for resistance against democracy²⁹. The association is named “The Burning Bush of the Mother of God”, “dedicated to a deeper quest and living of orthodox teachings and religiousness”. Its activity resumes to “all that can fulfil a true spiritual life, through the means of writing, own experience or achievement”. In order to show their ill mentality, it is enough to remind that their rule gives first place in conducting the settlement to „the Holy Icon of the Unburnt Bush of the Mother

any activity – particularly the political one – in order to have as much free time as possible. Besides this, we would gradually become very mystical and quite fanatic in regards to religion, which would made it necessary for us to retreat into monasticism”. Thus we understand that the advice “Pray without ceasing!” had no place within the “brave new world” of the communist regime.

²⁶ ACNSAS, Informative Fund, file no. 2214, vol. 6, f. 91.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, f. 17.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, f. 15.

²⁹ The „people’s democracy” of the communist regime.

of God, the one who is true guide and directress. (...) Inside this association there are entirely enrolled individuals who, through their structure, through their intellectual preparation and from their past activities are clearly reactionary. *They practice a sick mysticism that proposes to strengthen the resistance towards the political regime; (...) they maintain an atmosphere of morbid mysticism and agitation, in view of a supposed religious persecution coming from the communist side*³⁰.

4 The Reply of the Burning Bush

The ways of expression and the spirituality of the Burning Bush were focused on the coordinates of prayer, interiorization, intellectual preparation, intellectual opposition to Marxism and materialistic atheism and educating the youth in a Christian, anti-communist manner; we try to argue that these were ways of responding to the communist aggression and the communist attempt to restructure society according to a hierarchy of values that excluded faith in God.

4.1 Educating the youth in a Christian, anti-communist manner

One must mention the great importance that father Daniel gave to the education of the young students whom he met³¹. Emanoil Mihăilescu remembers meeting father Daniel at Rarău monastery, as a decisive point of being acquainted with the

³⁰ ACNSAS, DGSS Fund, file no. 213/1949, f. 114.

³¹ Whether it was students in Architecture, friends of Șerban Mironescu and George Văsâi, who were acquaintances of father Daniel, or students in Theology who visited him at Rarău. Also, the project of creating a current of intellectual monks to sustain a spiritual combat against communism was dear to father Daniel. See also George Enache, *Rugul aprins din perspectivă istorică*, in: „Tabor” Magazine, an VII, nr. 3, March 2013, p. 67.

spirituality of the Burning Bush: „The time spent there was, to us, an initiation in the mysteries of orthodoxy. Father Daniel spoke to us about concentration exercises, the preparation technique for meditation, the Prayer of the Heart and so on. Conversations were not restricted to theology; there were extremely diverse and interesting subjects, especially to us who “benefitted” only from what was allowed by communists and Russian advisers”³².

After the time spent at Rarău, the return to Bucharest and the participation of the students to the meetings in the Mironescu family home proved their strong desire to keep the spiritual ties to father Daniel. As a matter of fact, deeply preoccupied with guiding these students, father Daniel heavily insisted on the useful spending of time for inner, spiritual preoccupations. During one of the meetings, “he spoke to us about the way in which we must regard religious activity, stating that we ought to abandon useless preoccupations in favour of the religious one, which would have to be turned into a permanent issue of our lives”³³. On another occasion, “he stirred the students for letting themselves overwhelmed with busy schedules, institute projects, meetings etc., missing the truly precious things: prayers and other spiritual preoccupations”³⁴. Last but not least, “one of the purposes of the reunions was to practice collectively the Prayer of the Heart, as we have indeed proceeded at the end of every meeting”³⁵.

4.2 Spiritual guidance

The intellectual formation of the young students was closely linked to their spiritual guidance led by father Daniel and, in his absence, by father Benedict Ghiuș. The emphasis was put – as in

³² Interview with Emanoil Mihăilescu realised by Vlad Mitric Ciupe in *loc. cit.* and ACNSAS, Criminal Fund, file no. 202, vol. 1, f. 230.

³³ *Ibidem*, f. 232 verso.

³⁴ ACNSAS, Informative Fund, file no. 2214, vol. 3, f. 143.

³⁵ ACNSAS, Criminal Fund, file no. 202, vol. 2, f. 217 verso.

the Paterikon tradition, on the abbot - disciple relation. The truthful notes of an informant remind of "intimate confessions regarding his spiritual convulsions"³⁶ having been made to father Daniel on the account of their meeting in the Mironescu home; the confessions were accompanied by conversations and advice concerning "the technique of isolation and prayer"³⁷, with fr. Daniel insisting that prayer must prevail including in relationships between colleagues and friends, as "first the prayer must be done, then friendship will naturally occur"³⁸.

4.3 The anti-communist orientation

Last but not least, the anti-communist dimension was a constant idea spread within the Burning Bush circle. The archives help reconstructing some of the thoughts of fr. Daniel, archimandrite Benedict and Professor Alexandru Mironescu.

With regards to fr. Daniel, his ideas against atheistic materialism dated back to the inter-war era. After two years spent in prison (1950-1952³⁹), he became even more decided after having met the Romanian gulag. In such a way that among "the aspects of hostile activity led by Sandu Tudor from Rarău monastery" there also was an "intense propagandistic activity following an orthodox-nationalist spirit, against dialectical materialism and communism, propaganda which he induces in different occasions such as: religious services, on which occasions he also makes instigations"⁴⁰.

From his manuscripts we retain the irreconcilable opposition between mysticism and materialism: "Materialism decapitates

³⁶ ACNSAS, Informative Fund, file no. 2214, vol. 3, f. 148.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ For a situation happened under his supervision during his time spent in active service. ACNSAS, Criminal Fund, file no. 13495, vol. 1-2.

⁴⁰ ACNSAS, Informative Fund, file no. 2214, vol. 3, f. 156; *ibidem*, vol. 5, f. 156: these instigations included, for instance, sermons against atheism.

man and makes him sterile. Man is left with some simple rational ideas, empty of any metaphysical subtleties. Mysticism is like the sun: you cannot look at it; however its light shines and clarifies the earthly. Materialism is clear in theory but cannot explain anything. Theory of the New man: the definite failure of materialism, the victory of mysticism..."⁴¹. The conclusion of the investigators cannot be other than the following: "Sandu Tudor, with systems such as Prayer of the Heart, metaphysical meditations as well as philosophical rationally argued documentation makes man an active fighter against the regime"⁴².

Similar ideas are also found at Alexandru Mironescu, who states that „Marxism is clear Satanism; Karl Marx was an embodiment of Satan to torture humanity, with his ideas applied a century after (...) Marxism is not just a social revolution, but a total one, an overthrow of every form of human life, thought and feeling (...) ‘Class struggle’ is not but a victory of Satan who destroys any system of love and friendship"⁴³.

5 Conclusions

The restructuration of society and the creation of “the new man”, as it had been designed by communism and applied by means of ideology, propaganda and repression, generated resistance⁴⁴ manifested in various forms.

⁴¹ ACNSAS, Informative Fund, file no. 2214, vol. 3, f. 158.

⁴² *Ibidem*, f. 157.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, vol. 4, f. 75. *Ibidem*, f. 76: Within this context, the investigators' conclusion can only be that “Alexandru Mironescu is a mystical element that has connection to mystical elements in which entourage he expresses hostility against our regime and against the new socialist order from countries of people's democracy”.

⁴⁴ Dragoș Ursu, *Tg. Ocna și Caransebeș. Episoade ale rezistenței deținuților în fața presiunii regimului represiv. Aportul lui Nicolae Itul*, in: „Anuarul Institutului de Istorie Orală Cluj”, no. XIII, Cluj-Napoca, Argonaut, 2014.

The spiritual resistance of the oppressed, both inside the Gulag and outside it, primarily expressed the courage and deep faith of those who understood the danger of communism and opposed to it; inside prison, spiritual resistance transfigured suffering and gave it meaning, and outside the walls this resistance was constantly in the attention of the repressive institutions, being considered a true danger "against the social order".

The Burning Bush – in its existence and activity – was essentially born as a reaction to the assault directed against the Christian faith, the Marxist indoctrination in the education system and the general communist aggression. The reply given to communism by the Burning Bush proposed a counterattack to the Marxist indoctrination through moral and intellectual formation based on Christian principles and by spiritual ties created through prayer. Following these principles, as well as the permanent anchor within the Church tradition, we consider that the Burning Bush represented both a reply of the orthodox spirituality against communism and a specific local response determined by the interwar cultural effervescence which influenced the intellectuals of the Burning Bush.

Having originated in a spiritual, not just political understanding of communism, father Daniel's "combat" was lead with the weapons of the spirit; however, the threats caused by the "obscurantist mysticism", the "Christian, idealist philosophy" and mostly the Prayer of the Heart – "adverse and nocuous to the regime" had become dangers that threatened the order of the regime. The instrumentalization of the accusations of the communist repression against the Burning Bush actually shows the communist hatred against a fully understood and entirely assumed Christian life.

The authentic experience of Christianity in its most profound form, the hesychast mystic, also drove the itinerary of the

Burning Bush through the experience of communist detention, in a complete identity with the destiny of their entire country martyred under the communism.

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