

## **Eschatological Time in Romanian Traditional Culture\***

*Cosmina-Maria BERINDEI*  
*Faculty of Letters,*  
*Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj*

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**Abstract:** The present study presents the results of an extensive research on how eschatological time is perceived in Romanian traditional culture. In this text we analyze the cumulative model of the Romanian beliefs and superstitions about the eschatological time. The conclusion we reached is that imaginary Romanian traditional culture is a cultural synthesis between elements of Christian dogma and pagan elements present in the cultural substrate. This was articulated, for example in a belief that the end of the world can be postponed by one hundred years through prayers to the Virgin Mary. It is a comfortable period of time, equal to the life of a generation, which gives additional security to the contemporaries.

**E-mail:** [cosminamariaberindei@yahoo.com](mailto:cosminamariaberindei@yahoo.com)

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The present study proposes an extensive research on how eschatological time is perceived in Romanian traditional culture. We shall analyze how the imaginary of Romanian cultural space is articulated while meeting the thought of the end of time, namely how the eschaton moment is configured. By eschaton we understand the precise moment of the Apocalypse, and the present text tries to analyze it according to a cumulative model of the Romanian beliefs and superstitions about eschatological time, which represent a time-gate to exit history. According to Christianity, the end of times is actually the ultimate goal toward which history<sup>1</sup> is heading and to which we get closer with each passing moment. Christian faith has exploited the idea of salvation at the end of time, followed by eternal life spent in God's Kingdom; thus the end of the world has become, in this context, the purpose of existence. But it is not less true that in Christianity the end of time also has another valence, being equated with the idea of a natural disaster, but also of the Last Judgment, which confers it even a greater severity. In the following we shall see to what extent the Christian eschaton scheme and its specific elements occur in the beliefs articulated in Romanian traditional culture.

Before proceeding further, we shall specify that the documentary sources we used in our research are archival documents, studies and ethnographic collections of folklore. Thus, responses to questionnaires issued on behalf of the Romanian Academy by Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu and Nicolae Densușianu during two campaigns in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century represented important sources of research. To these we have added research tools developed by Ion Mușlea and Ovidiu Bârlea (*Folklore Typology from the*

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Histoire et eschatologie* (Neuchâtel-Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1959), 82.

*Responses to the Questionnaires of B. P. Hasdeu*<sup>1</sup> as well as by Adrian Fochi (*Popular Traditions and Superstitions of the Late 19th Century: Responses to the Questionnaires of N. Densușianu*).<sup>2</sup> Priceless are also the original documents from the Cluj Folklore Archive, containing answers to Ion Mușlea's questionnaires, which we have studied in manuscript form. Although questions about eschatology were not numerous, they were very useful, infrequently containing information not yet been brought to light by research efforts. We have also used documents from the Archives of the Faculty of Letters Folklore Club, at the Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. Another source of research were the first collections of folklore and ethnographic studies conducted by passionate and eminent researchers of Romanian traditional culture out of which, for the present study, we used those by Simeon Florea Marian, Elena Niculiță-Voronca, and Alexiu Viciu.

According to the concepts articulated in Romanian traditional culture the proximity of the eschatological time is not determined by the physical exhaustion of the earth, but by the advanced stage of decadence to which humanity has come: "Our world will die, people think, not because of the land, the earth, the clay but because of man, because of people, (...), as it has already died once, when God flooded it."<sup>3</sup> The selfishness and wickedness of men is understood as a direct consequence of the excessive propagation of the human species that will generate more conflicts to ensure the necessary means of survival. The eschatological imaginary cultural space links Doomsday to the Christian idea of humanity's moral decay. It must be mentioned here that this decline is triggered by overpopulation and its consequences. Below we quote a fragment of the study of Tudor Pamfile given its descriptive flavour:

"Evil in the world will be caused by the excessive reproduction of people. In order to acquire the necessities of life, they will live forever in quarrels and fights. This situation is wonderfully illustrated by the Romanian people, who say that the end of times will come:

When there will be mills on every ford and stream, to fill the multitude of people.

When there will be need to plough every pieces of land, every unburned ground, every furrow, every field which separates people's households.

(...)When the pastures around the villages will be ploughed, and there will not be no place for people to feed their cattle and poultry on;

When people will be as many as mushrooms, almost having no place to fit on earth, and they will eat each other;

When the rich will not have enough, but will seek by all possible means to deceive and steal from the poorest, even using the most evil means;

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<sup>1</sup> Ion Mușlea and Ovidiu Bârlea, *Tipologia folclorului din răspunsurile la chestionarele lui B.P. Hasdeu* (The Typology of Folklore According to the Answers to the B. P. Hasdeu's Questionnaires) (București: Minerva, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Fochi, *Datini și eresuri populare de la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea: răspunsuri la chestionarele lui Nicolae Densușianu* (Folk Customs and Superstitions) (București: Minerva, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Tudor Pamfile, *Povestea lumii de demult după credințele poporului român; Pământul după credințele poporului român, Sfârșitul lumii după credințele poporului român* (The Tale of the Old World According to the Beliefs of the Romanian People; The Earth According to the Beliefs of the Romanian People) (București: Paideia, 2002), 287.

When it will not be possible any more to speak about justice in the world, “and justice would not be found anywhere, even if looking for it on a bright day at noon with lights turned on”.<sup>1</sup>

We identify here an issue that could be a mark in the setup of a Romanian identity map: selfishness and evilness are not intrinsic in people, they are rather the consequence of exploitation of instincts because shortage of food will involve people in a competition for survival, competition which generates at its turn social sins which would not occur under natural circumstances. People are not evil in themselves, as suggested in this text, they become evil because of an increased survival instinct.

Eschatological time is fascinating because it ignores the precise dating of the end of the world, while this may be close or further away; on the other hand, it states that the time will be preceded by ominous signs, which all generations have tried to identify in the present, living in the awareness of an ever postponed end. The ominous signs carry on the tradition that there is a communication between God and man through signs, a tradition which was commenced by the covenant made by God with Noah and his descendants and also present in the Romanian traditional cultural imaginary.

Regarding the Romanian beliefs according to which the approach of the eschatological time is represented by overpopulation, which would determine the maximum use of all resources that the land can offer, the following statement must be made. In the text cited from the study of Tudor Pamfile it is stated, the world’s end will come when there will be a need to plough the fields which separate people’s households. This belief could be related to the popular legend<sup>2</sup> that a long time ago, when the scorpion<sup>3</sup> tried to eat Virgin Mary, St. George interfered, catching the scorpion, burying her in the seventh milestone, and cursing her to come out of there when the milestones will open up. By their attitude, people will help this evil character to come back into our world, and will implicitly determine the end of the world. We encounter here another important aspect, namely that for Romanian traditional cultural imaginary, any fact which leaves the usual pattern is seen as equivalent to the entry in eschatological time. On the same line goes the fear that the age beyond is close because “the ox-cart came without oxen (train)”,<sup>4</sup> which is explicit in one of the responses to B.P. Hasdeu’s questionnaires and which occurred when rail transport was introduced in Romania. This man belonging to a traditional society conformed the world to his capacity of understanding; when there was something that could not be interpreted within his universe, for him the world’s end was coming.

Another element that helps on enter the eschatological time is when the world order is threatened, as it was known and agreed on in the traditional space, as encountered in traditional fisherman carols on the end of the world. Carols are ritual songs that have great stability in time; they are very important in terms of preservation of old images and archaic thinking. Carols by fishermen on the end of the world are built on a dialogue between the fisherman and Otter/Judas, or between a host and a figure

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 287–288.

<sup>2</sup> Elena Niculiță-Voronca, *Datinele și credințele poporului român: adunate și așezate în ordine mitologică* (The Customs and Beliefs of the Romanian People: Gathered and Place in Mythological Order) (Iași: Polirom, 1998), II, 288.

<sup>3</sup> The scorpion is a supernatural being in the Romanian folklore imagined as a female fire-breathing monster with several heads, whose blood has miraculous characteristics.

<sup>4</sup> Mușlea and Bârlea, *Tipologia folclorului...*, 156.

from Christian mythology: the child Jesus or John the Baptist. The oldest are the ones presenting the baby Otter, they are reminiscent of the pre-Christian mythological substratum of Romanian traditional culture. Subsequently, by syncretism with Christianity, the otter becomes Judah, and in variations closer to the present this figure is replaced by Jesus or John the Baptist. The Question asked by the skilled fisherman who managed to catch the baby Otter / Judah is:

“When is the end of times,  
And the end of the World?”<sup>1</sup>

The response suggests that falling into chaos was caused by the abolition of the social code of conduct, which included unwritten rules but which were deeply imprinted in the community and respected as sacred. This time is equivalent to traditional collective mentality, with the eschathon. Thus the carol suggests that the end of the world will come when the daughter will beat her mother, when the son will beat his father, when the niece will beat her godmother, when the godson will beat his godfather, when there will be no love between siblings and between parents and children.

In our discussion we must dwell a moment on the character to which the question of the end of the world is addressed in older versions of the carol. Otter/Judah, is a mythological creature, embodying the spirit of bad water, it can have different appearances, which is believed to be located in the villages on the shores of the Danube. With malefic attributes, the baby Otter/Judah knows all the ways of fishermen and can either help or create problems everywhere.<sup>2</sup> Catching his stride requires a cunning fisherman who takes the opportunity to learn the secrets that baby Otter/Judah has. The fact that a question about the end of the world is addressed to him can be linked to other mythological episodes involving this character. He was reported more than capable of knowing the ways to fishermen and fisheries. According to Romanian folk beliefs Otter/Judah is the character involved in a possible eschatological scenario: it nibbles the pillars on which the earth stands, which could lead to its sinking. On the other hand, Judah/Otter occurs frequently in the carol as stealing the stars. There are two issues directly connected, the regression into chaos very easily assimilated by the popular imagination and the idea of the end of the world. Regression into chaos, suggests the carol, is caused by the stealing of the stars; this inverts the supremacy of God into that of the devil for a short time, after that order is restored. This episode involves a periodic regeneration of time. The scheme of apocalypse design is identical, however this results in a new land, so a final regeneration.

Being part of a ritual, which offers the guarantee of its preservation for a long time,<sup>3</sup> the motif of stealing the stars contains pre-Christian valences. What is important is that at this level the archaic belief of an evil being which is guilty for the regression of the world into chaos is made compatible with the new Christian religion, which identifies a character that is given the old attributes of evil beings. It will bear the name

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<sup>1</sup> Tudor Pamfile, *Sărbătorile la români. Studiu etnografic* (The Festivals of the Romanian. An Ethnographical Study) (București: Saeculum I. O., 1997), 314.

<sup>2</sup> Tudor Pamfile, *Mitologie românească* (Romanian Mythology) (București: All, 1997), 256.

<sup>3</sup> Andrei Oișteanu, *Ordine și haos. Mit și magie în cultura tradițională românească*. (Order and Chaos. Myth and Magic in the Romanian Traditional Culture) (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 61.

of Judas, the apostle who is guilty of betraying Jesus. The moment when this phenomenon of regression into chaos is placed, is close to the New Year, claiming such a situation of cosmic regeneration. St. Elias and St. Peter will be able to restore the cosmic balance, by recovering the stars. It is therefore a first aspect that shows the involvement of Otter/Judah, a female character in the popular beliefs, in an event which could entail the loss of the stars and thus the end of the world.

The other eschatological aspect involving this aquatic evil character is linked to the belief that the earth is supported by some forks, called forks of the earth that God has made and that support the earth, after the devil had tried to overthrow it in the sea. The forks of the earth are equal to the number of posts over the year and their proper functioning is based, according to popular belief, on keeping the posts by the people.<sup>1</sup> The same character that was guilty of stealing the stars is also involved, according to this belief, in trying to destroy the forks of the earth, for it to fall into the sea. But he stops the destructive activity at Easter, when he looks at the red eggs and at Christmas, when he listens to Christmas carols, but also when, during their domestic activities, women cause various noises, distracting his attention: be it when they sprinkle flour or cornmeal, or when they wash the bucket at the fountain. God quickly recovers and restores the forks, the supporting pillar of the earth, if people respect the four fasting periods??? of the year.

Being involved in destructive activities, directly linked to the idea of the apocalypse, Judas/Otter might possess the secret regarding the end of times. When this creature is able to carry out the actions in which it is engaged, the end of the world will be certain. But the eschaton is not determined by such events as suggested in Otter's/Judas's answer in the carol. This is an important detail in our discussion, whereas it suggests that for the imaginary of Romanian traditional culture, man can be worse, by his actions, even than an evil being. The end of times will come when signs of an indecent world will become more obvious, as mentioned by Tudor Pamfile in his study: "Another kind of evidence will show that the end of the world will be the loss of justice. Thus, it is said that prior to this time there will be no shame in the world, old age will not be respected any more by the young (...)"<sup>2</sup> In addition, in other versions of the carol about the end of the world, certainly newer, but also less widespread, when the character is asked when will be Jesus Christ's or John the Baptist's eschaton, the answer is the same in terms of the narration. It is suggested a breach of the social code which ordained a life based on respect for one's parents and godparents. The imaginary that articulated these beliefs suggests that this state of fact incorporates an eschatological scenery.

Earthquakes<sup>3</sup> are other signs that foreshadow the end. But before the time beyond arrives, there will also be terrible droughts, heavy rain and merciless diseases. All these predict the time of eschaton called in Romanian popular language the time beyond, the days beyond, end of times, tail of times. It is said that the living, full of fear, will run to the graves and will cry:

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<sup>1</sup> Tudor Pamfile, "Mitologie românească III. Pământul după credințele poporului român" (Romanian Mythology III. The Earth According to the Beliefs of the Romanian People), *Din viața poporului român, XXXII*. (From the Life of the Romanian People) (București: Academia Română, Cultura Națională, 1924), 32.

<sup>2</sup> Pamfile, *Povestea lumii de demult...*, 290.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

“You dead, come out, and let us enter  
As the end of times has come!”<sup>1</sup>

The very fast flow of time is another sign that eschatological time has been entered, where the year passes as fast as the month, the month as the week, the week as the day, the day as the hour and the hour as the minute.<sup>2</sup>

But because the moment of the apocalypse is a scary moment, marked by an entire series of terrors and preceded by numerous needs and shortcomings, God will spare his children from these experiences:

“At the end of the world children will no longer be, and no creature will have any young ones.”<sup>3</sup>

“Young children up to the age of eight will begin to die in order not to reach the days of torture of destruction that will toss the sinners. Such deaths have not been seen except in the time when Christ was born.”<sup>4</sup>

Children are known to be loved by God. Pure figures, God’s favourites,<sup>5</sup> according to these beliefs children are protected from the tortures of the apocalypse to which men are subjected as a punishment for the evil deeds they committed. Since they are not guilty of the malice that caused the eschaton world, God will relieve them from participating in the drama of the universe, through death, which is in fact understood as a door to a new life.

Eschatological time will be announced by both the wars in which all the peoples will be involved “there will be so many armies that all tree roots will be stamped out by horse hoofs”.<sup>6</sup> These wars will continue until only one herd and one shepherd will remain, and then Jesus will come and will become king over all. His presence in the world will be completed however, by a pseudo-Christ, by a false and deceptive Christ, who will walk around the world with the pretext of quenching all thirst, trying in fact to lure people to him. A terrible drought and lack of drinking water will cause the people who live in that time to accept the Antichrist spirit luring them, and those who accept will be sold to the devil. Instead of water, in the cup that the Antichrist will extend to them, people will find money or gold, the well-known objects of greed. Thus the first sentence applies to those who always loved wealth, while ascetism will be rewarded with salvation.

If till this point we have examined particular signs that prefigured the apocalypse, we shall continue the presentation with eschatological scenarios, the events marking effectively the eschatological time. While talking about the mythical episodes involving the Otter/Judah, we have mentioned scenario of the sinking earth, because of the pillars on which the earth rests are gnawed. This doomsday scenario is different from that articulated in the *Apocalypse of John* as well as in *the Bible* and it is linked with a dualist cosmogonic myth articulated in Romanian traditional culture. According to this

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>2</sup> G. D. Teodorescu, apud: Pamfile, *Povestea lumii de demult...*, 292.

<sup>3</sup> Niculița-Voronca, *Datinele și credințele poporului român...*, II, 590.

<sup>4</sup> Pamfile, *Povestea lumii de demult...*, 290.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Delumeau, *Liniștiți și ocrotiți. Sentimentul de securitate în Occidentul de altădată (Reassured and Protected. The Sentiment of Security in the Old Western World)* vol. I (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 109.

<sup>6</sup> Mușlea and Bârlea, *Tipologia folclorului...*, 158.

myth,<sup>1</sup> during the creation of the world God worked together with the Devil. The latter descended into deep water and dust out of which God made the Earth, then, being unhappy that the Earth was ruled by God, he tried to overthrow it into the water to become the only ruler on the Earth. The feud between the two is infinite, and to protect people from the devil's evil who wanted to overthrow the land in the sea, God put four pillars to support the earth, making a covenant with people, namely pillars to withstand as long as the four fasts throughout the year will be respected.

Particularly suggestive are the scenarios that revive ancient fears of the sun disappearing or its power decreasing. In this respect, a belief recorded in Dorohoi by a questionnaire of Ion Muşlea refers to the fact that: "The world will end by freezing, and this will happen when winter will come and summer will not come any more."<sup>2</sup> Such a doomsday scenario was the easiest to understand for the archaic man, a man who reduced everything to experience, not being impressed by complicated scenarios, incomprehensible to his living world.<sup>3</sup> A similar picture appears in a carol collected from Maramureş, which suggests that eschatological time is marked by the lack of sun and moon in the sky.<sup>4</sup>

Most often, apocalyptic scenarios that are configured in the imaginary of the Romanian traditional culture are built on the idea that the earth will end in a fire place, a time when people will call upon themselves the wrath of God, as a punishment for the sins committed by them. Sometimes it is said that before the earth will catch fire, birds with iron beak<sup>5</sup> will come and will eat people alive, looking for them everywhere they could hide. Fire is explained in popular beliefs in a very spectacular way. Thus, it is said that the land will catch fire from the rain of fire that will fall from the sky. The fire raindrops are sometimes explained in terms of the eschatological war: St. Elijah, St. John or Enoch, fighting with the Antichrist will be hurt, and their blood drops, falling down on earth will turn into a rain of fire.<sup>6</sup> A belief recorded by Elena Niculiţă-Voronca refers to Saint Michael who, after the trumpet will announce the eschaton, will be tortured by the Devil and his blood falling on the ground will make it catch fire. The earth will burn seven cubits high, to cleanse itself of all sins and inequities that are on it.<sup>7</sup>

Others believe that the earth will catch fire when the bucket of blood in which the blood of Abel's neck is dripping will be full and three drops will fall on the Earth.<sup>8</sup> This time the biblical character Abel who was killed by his brother Cain is referred to. The image suggests the first sin of murder is perpetuated on the Earth. In this sense the world will come to an end as a consequence. Fire will fall from the sky, it will burn the earth up to seven or nine cubits in depth, melting the hills and mountains that will

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<sup>1</sup> Niculiţă-Voronca, *Datinele și credințele poporului român...*, I, 23.

<sup>2</sup> AFC 654, 20, Material collected in the village Oraftiana de Sus, Lunca commune, Dorohoiu County, in year 1934, by Nicolae Axinte, student – Theology.

<sup>3</sup> Muşlea and Bârlea, *Tipologia folclorului...*, 156.

<sup>4</sup> Bîrlea, *Literatură populară din Maramureş* (Bucureşti: Editura pentru Literatură, 1968) I, 155.

<sup>5</sup> The birds with an iron beak appear in: Muşlea and Bârlea, *Tipologia folclorului...*, 158 and Fochi, *Datini și eresuri populare*, 226.

<sup>6</sup> AFC 672, p. 27, Material collected in the village Ceamaşir, Ismail County, in the year 1934, by Matei Starâş – teacher, informant: Domnica Ciurţoaie.

<sup>7</sup> Pamfile, *Povestea lumii de demult...*, 308.

<sup>8</sup> Muşlea and Bârlea, *Tipologia folclorului...*, 158.

flow as resin.<sup>1</sup> Then a strong wind will clear all the remaining bad on earth, and then people will be called to judgment.<sup>2</sup>

In the wooden churches of Maramureș in the villages of Rozavlea, Iza and Dragomirești<sup>3</sup> this iconographic doomsday scenario is expressed. It depicts the wind that will clear the land of all eschatological elements which have distorted it. The picture appears in the iconographic composition of Judgment Day, and the reason of the four destructive winds is taken from the seventh chapter of the *Apocalypse of John*, which speaks of four angels who hold the four damaging winds till the right moment when the chosen ones were marked, and then they let them loose to destroy the Earth. In the images we refer to the four angels that appear on a circle representing the earth, and their action reflects on it, expressing such a possible scenario of the universe eschatology rarely expressed in religious iconography.

We also need to mention here the scenario according to which, once the earth burns and will be purified, it will turn upside down, with the currently inhabited part downwards, leaving the world of the gentles come to light, which is currently under our world.<sup>4</sup> This world is beyond the Saturday Water and the gentle ones are patient beings, peaceful and good at heart, living in darkness, in ascetism and prayer, waiting for the feast of Easter each year. Therefore, at Easter, people throw water on the red egg shells that reach the drain, and they enjoy the knowledge that they are celebrating the Easter. These gentle creatures will come again from the bowels of the Earth at the end of the world, the Earth will turn, with the part now below getting above. God will bring the gentles back to Earth and shall take care of the welfare of the chosen ones. “Will beat the corn” in an oven for them.<sup>5</sup>

An important event which is mentioned in the Christian sacred text on eschatological time is the Last Judgment.<sup>6</sup> According to this, after apocalyptic trumpets and cosmic cataclysms everyone will be called to the Last Judgment. This is actually the second trial in which the souls are involved, the first being the private Judgment, which takes place immediately after death.

According to the Romanian popular beliefs, the soul is judged immediately after death to receive punishment or damnation as provided in the Christian eschatology. Unpublished documents containing answers to the questionnaire are often concerned with this detail on the fate of the soul until Last Judgment. The place for waiting is rarely a neutral one, where the soul enters into an existential pause, but often the rest is in heaven or at God. These beliefs constitute a real expression of the fact that in the Christian Dogma that peasants heard in the church, there was a much more ancient faith, that they continued to believe in, whatever changes might happen in his life: they could not conceive that after death, they would not follow a life under the same parameters with the one on the Earth. Although until the Last Judgment, heaven and hell will be left

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>2</sup> AFC 677, p. 21, Material collected in the village Ciceu-Corabiei, Someș County, in the year 1934, by Constantin Mărinceanu, teacher, informant: Grigore Câmpean, 78 years old.

<sup>3</sup> The church has been located, since 1936, in the Village Museum, Bucharest.

<sup>4</sup> Pamfile, Tudor, Pamfile, *Mitologie românească III...*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Pamfile, *Povestea lumii de demult...*, 255.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed study of the Last Judgment in the Romanian traditional culture, see: Cosmina-Maria Berindei, “The Judgement of the Soul in the Imaginary of Romanian Popular Culture”, *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai – Philologia* 2, (2009): 139–150.

empty, this court is regarded as the second one: "By the second trial, heaven and hell is empty; souls are in the world, but we do not see them. Heaven and hell are also in this world, but very far; heaven is at sunrise and hell at sunset. When the time of judgment comes St. Peter opens the door and the good souls will enter, while the sinners will go to fire in hell".<sup>1</sup>

The time of the trial itself is not spoken about directly in the popular beliefs. The trial is rather a sequence of evidences, God is gracious; he does not give scary verdicts: divine justice is impersonal, at level with the passed obstacles. Also, the ones remaining alive may help the dying with requiems: "The one who falls under the bridge is fallen, he can be taken out from there by his relatives if they hold requiems and memorial services for him. There, the soul is cleaned 100 times by fire and water, and when it is clean, he can pass on a bridge of gold, but it will still need nails to keep itself. And after the world will end and will be judged, the ones that God will send to hell will still go to heaven but after that will be cleaned. Only those who will not be cleaned and will not be able to leave will be helped out by the Mother of God with her hemp bundle consecrated at Epiphany.<sup>2</sup> The line of the heavy sinners breaks and they fall back, and no one will be able to get those out, they will remain in the bottom of hell forever and ever."<sup>3</sup>

This fragment contains references to the way the relatives of the departed may intervene to save him. Related to this aspect are probably the beliefs that those people who had children<sup>4</sup> can pass easier the tests that expect them in the World Beyond. It is equally important to obtain forgiveness for sins committed on earth, mercy: "Be a man however sinful, if alms are given for him so that others say, God bless you for it and if 100 of those are praying to God to forgive his sins, God will forgive him and he will enter into heaven."<sup>5</sup>

To get into heaven, the soul passes over the bridge of heaven, which is sometimes regarded as the last customs frontier. This bridge extends, according to some beliefs, over hell, and there is always the danger of falling for one who tries to pass it. For this purpose bridges or arches are placed in the way of the dead: "When they go to heaven, they must pass over hell. It was seen as a bridge put for the dead, a piece of canvas.<sup>6</sup> The soul when he goes, passes over a bridge greased with oil, to be slippery, therefore the man has nails on his hands and feet so that he can keep himself on the bridge."<sup>7</sup> The bridge to heaven is divided into three parts: from the first part fall off the people who have committed many sins and who are more difficult to rescue later from hell; from the second those who have committed many sins, but not too much, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Niculița-Voronca, *Datinele și credințele poporului român...*, II, 589.

<sup>2</sup> It is a Romanian folk tradition related to the feast of Epiphany to get in each house the finest bundle of hemp consecrated by putting it on the priest's cross. Its threads are believed to hold back all evil or to be made into a net by the Virgin Mary by which she catches the sinners' soul in Hell and raises them into the Heaven.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 578.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 571–572.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 598.

<sup>6</sup> It is customary in Romanian folk culture to place a piece of canvas as a symbolic bridge across any water the funeral procession must pass on its way to the graveyard.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 578.

third part is passed only by those who have very few or no sins at all. God gives them wings to pass in the World Beyond.<sup>1</sup>

We can hereby see such a great mercy the souls benefit of when their verdict of salvation, respectively final damnation is established. They are accompanied by the guardian angel who always takes care of the soul and protects him. Man can also find mercy by himself if he made acts of mercy, by helping the poor. To this we have to add the requiems and memorial services that the survivors keep for the dead. Last but not least, the soul may find an ally in the Mother of God, which stretches the tow from Epiphany and saves the soul this way from hell's works. An organic generosity that the Romanian peasant has showed continuously and which he has expressed it the most different modes, is well articulated here.

Unlike real courts described most accurately in Western eschatological texts, but also presented picturesquely in their entire complexity, the Last Judgment means according to the Romanian popular imaginary, an expeditious fact. It is like the ticking of a mandatory task in the agenda of centuries: "Judgment will only last for an hour, that is how much it will take, and during that time all souls will be judged. They will go to judgment as sheep to the gorge."<sup>2</sup>

This detail which suggests the same lack of interest in the Last Judgment comes to reinforce that observation that the articulated eschatological thinking in imaginary Romanian popular culture is not centred on the idea of moral judgments, but is built on a way of thinking specific to archaic religions. The archaic man could not conceive his afterlife unless in the context of his ordinary life, together with others of his kind, and participation in this fate could not to be hindered in any way. Christianity, a superior religion, articulated the idea of salvation, has given meaning to the concept of a judgment; but even at this point, the Romanian popular imaginary combined to a great extent ancient beliefs with new aspects of the Christian religion. It has kept morphologically speaking, all the details of the Christian imaginary, but in terms of functionality, it operates the differentiation by the fact that instead of focusing on the trial, there is a complex range of modalities for saving the soul. Iconography on the Last Judgement concentrated on the balance of the soul, to which we shall refer now, it has valued even better the aspects of archaic eschatological thinking in this cultural space. Almost without exception, around the soul balance represented in the Romanian iconography, angels and demons dispute about the souls. The Devil sneaks on the balance pan, along with bad facts, stones, but the balance always tilts to the right, which suggests the saving of the one who is tried. Both this picture and the elements that we have previously noted that show the mercy the soul receives regarding its eschatological salvation, give us reason to seek explanations for understanding the mechanism which is operating in this respect. In this respect, that Christianity had a useful assessment of the history in this space. It is well known the Geto-Dacian belief in the immortality of the soul, materialized in an afterlife with equal life on Earth, which was not subject to the moral judgment of the soul. No source mentions such a faith, and nothing makes us believe that it existed, the more so as in Romanian popular culture we are dealing with this enormous mercy in relation to one's fate in the afterlife. Therefore, the Geto-Dacian

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<sup>1</sup> Simeon Florea Marian, *Înmormântarea la români. Studiu etnografic* (Romanian Funerals. Ethnographical Study), (București: Grai și Suflet – Cultura Națională, 1995), 289.

<sup>2</sup> Niculiță-Voroncea, *Datinele și credințele poporului român...*, II, 592.

religion was based on a rudimentary way of thinking in which people's fate after death did not depend on a moral trial, to this Christianity brought a new type of approach to the afterlife, based on a moral trial. In the Romanian cultural space, the idea of this moral judgment entered more on a morphological level and less on a functional level. In other words, the idea of the trial was taken over, but the old prototypes of the human relationship to the world beyond proved more powerful, they are responsible for the unlimited confidence in the salvation of the soul equivalent to an evaluation at a functional level, a moral trial.

Finally we need to highlight one last detail regarding the perception of eschatological time in Romanian traditional culture. This detail expresses the fact that the end of the world may be delayed by prayer: "if this end is coming, one can still defer it for one hundred years, by praying to God and the Virgin Mary."<sup>1</sup> Here the prayer is a way for obtaining security. The postponement is practically equivalent to the life of a generation, because these beliefs articulated the logic of exclusion of the contemporaries. One hundred years is a comfortable time that almost certainly excludes the people who live in the present from the end of the world. It is an exemplary way of alleviating the existential anguish: the identification of eschatological signs in the present time is accompanied by the hope of a possible delay, obtained by prayer. The anxiety, a natural human condition since the fall into sin,<sup>2</sup> is thus rejected. As there are only a few guardians of the earth, people have compensated for this anxiety by appealing to a lot of heavenly protectors. In the Romanian traditional culture, Virgin Mary is often considered the protector of and the intercessor for people.

The imaginary of the Romanian traditional culture did not ignore the dogmatic elements of the Christian religion, but it continued to feed from much older archetypal substrates, which occurred unconsciously. With concern to the eschatological time, the cultural synthesis achieved between Christian elements and pagan elements is really exemplary: over the faith of the Dacians according to which, after death, life continues in the same existential parameters and death is only a smooth and undramatic transition towards the world of Zalmoxis, Christian dogma which predicted the end of the time was superposed. Thus, even if the Romanian peasant accepted the end of the world, he found a special formula to tame the eschatological time: it was believed that the end of the time may be extended one hundred years through prayers to the Virgin Mary. It is a period of time equal to the life of a generation and that always excludes the contemporaries from living the eschatological time and gives them additional security.

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<sup>1</sup> Pamfile, *Povestea lumii de demult...*, 297.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Delumeau, *Păcatul și frica. Culpabilizarea în Occident (secolele XIII-XVIII)* (Sin and Fear. The Emergence of a Western guilt Culture (14–18<sup>th</sup> Centuries), (Iași: Polirom, 1997), I, 14.