

**Investigating the Imaginary:
Premise for a Bioethical Construction of Cremation***

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Abstract: Our study aims to point out, especially from a cultural point of view, using an interdisciplinary approach, the fact that the problematic status of cremation in contemporary Romania, as well as the status of Western cremation makes a bioethical perspective necessary. Our paper supports the idea that bioethics should study cremation, because cremation symbolises life and death at the same time and it is a delicate subject as far as the communication between the historical and religious aspects is concerned. Also, bioethics is underpinned by a strong ontological principle (e.g. noticeable in the human dignity concept), fundamental to a good understanding of cremation, especially as a personal choice and decision towards one's own post-mortem situation. A second purpose of the study is to demonstrate that the reinvestigation of imaginaries corresponding to cremation (fire, ash and death) is a premise for its bioethical reconstruction, because the imaginary can offer answers for a series of current attitudes regarding cremation.

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1. *Socio-cultural* aspects of cremation in Romania and the Western world. The necessity of a bioethical approach

We want to use this chapter in order to sketch a general cultural portrait of cremation in Romania, but also in the Western world. We will see how, even though there are numerous differences between the two, both portraits suffer from the lack of a bioethical approach and that this perspective is necessary for both of them, because it has numerous benefits, among which the biggest one is the possibility to think about cremation in a critical way. The second part will clearly show that only a bioethical approach can go beyond the relative autism of each field, whether it is the historical, social or theological one, an aspect which applies to Romania as well as the Western world.

1.1. Cremation in the West. Social acceptance, ethical relaxation and cultural issue

In the current Western world, cremation represents a way of “disposing of the body” which coexists with burial, as an option which is gaining in popularity.¹ It is regulated

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¹ *Pharos* 4/77 (2011): 29-43. Ruth McManus, *Death in the Global Age* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 22; Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 48.

for every state and it is more frequent in Protestant countries than in Catholic ones, it has been accepted by the Catholic religion through Pope Paul VI, in 1963. Imposing modern cremation was not without major socio-cultural challenges, because it was associated with extreme liberalism, elitism, the destruction of cultural taboos, laicization and departure from tradition, especially in the sense of belonging to a system of religious beliefs.¹ Cremation is more frequent in urban than rural areas. Discussions for and against cremation have practically involved all major areas of social reality such as medicine, economics, law, politics, sociology.² Cremationist movements, supported by the right socio-economic context, such as a strong general laicization or the lack of burial spaces due to urbanisation have managed to impose cremation as a practice rivalling burial. It is accepted both ethically and religiously. There is even an ethical code of cremation, established by the International Cremation Federation.³ The most common attitude is one of ethical relaxation, meaning that cremation is not viewed as a problem, resulting from the dissolution of combativeness against cremationists. The public opinion, but also specialists in different fields seem to agree on the fact that the ethical status of cremation is certain.

There are two major consequences of this ethical relaxation. The first one is an absence of cremation on the list of ethical and bioethical subjects. If the problems of organ transplants, artificial life support through medical technology or euthanasia remain of current interest, cremation is not part of the same group of interest. A second consequence is the latent cultural problem of relating to cremation. Marie-Frédérique Bacqué, in an article from 2007,⁴ talks about the fact that people and scientists develop another resistance towards cremation, a resistance which is psychic and cultural at the same time which could come from the neglect of symbolic aspects, of the relationship between the modern man and cremation, aspects which are not perfectly identifiable through their report with the social reality of cremation. On the other hand, S. N. Vigilane, a specialist in modern history observes the fact that today's elites have lost their previous enthusiasm towards cremation and determines the indifference for feelings and emotions of people in the face of death and cremation.⁵ This is how, even though ethically accepted, cremation loses its relevance for the science of bioethics, which leads to a surprising cultural anxiety in the Western world as far as cremation is concerned.

1.2. Cremation in Romania. A practice socio-culturally not accepted and ethically rejected

Today, in Romania, research regarding cremation is done mostly from a historical perspective, with clear arguments which lead to the view of cremation as a personal option, as well as the creation of a logic of social necessity to implement funerary

¹ Davies J. Douglas, *Encyclopedia of cremation* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005).

² Hilary Grainger, *Death Redesigned. British Crematoria: History, Architecture and Landscape* (Reading: Spire Books Ltd, 2005).

³ <http://www.int-crem-fed.org/>, last accessed 10.12.2011.

⁴ Marie-Frédérique Bacqué, "Pourquoi la crémation résiste sur le plan psychologique en France", *Etudes sur la mort* 132 (2007/2): 47-54.

⁵ Serenella Nonnis Vigilante, "Crémation et interdits" (Cremation and Interdictions), , *Dictionnaire de la mort* (Dictionary of Death), ed. Philipe di Folco (Paris: Larousse, 2010), 274-275.

policies which can favour free access to cremation. The historical discourse on cremation is undoubtedly linked to Marius Rotar, PhD researcher at the University of Alba Iulia, who has founded a cremationist society and militates for cremation¹, has written a scientific paper in 2011, unique in the Romanian historic-graphical landscape, about cremation in Romania.² It is from his work that we find out that even though Romania was the first Orthodox Balkan country to have a crematorium – Cenușa, in 1928, even though the interwar period was a relatively blooming one for the cremationist discourse and the frenzied elite, largely made out of doctors, communism has managed to crush the cremationist effort whether it was discourse or practices. The historian explains this fact through the silent divide of power between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Party, based on the difference between matters of the living and the matters of the dead, but also through the fact that the majority of powerful people in the Communist Party had rural routes and were thus deeply rooted in Orthodox traditions. Among the powerful ideas which can be found in Marius Rotar's book, which can also be found on the website of the "Amurg" Romanian Cremation Association, is the lack of burial spaces, which is becoming more and more critical. The historian also points out several other borderline legal factors contributing to this situation in Romania such as the criminal organisations which buy and sell burial spaces. This helps points out a certain ethical vein of construction and orientation regarding the cremationist discourse. Incineration must develop, according to Marius Rotar, because it will represent the practical and moral solution for problems such as the one mentioned above. There are however certain technical – there is only one crematorium, in Vitan-Bârzești, Bucharest³ – and ideological obstacles in Romania at the moment – the most significant one being the position of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the vehemence with which it rejects cremation,⁴ but especially the *national* status of the Orthodox religion, which represents a majority of the cults and beliefs in Romania. National status means that the Orthodox religion is associated by the population with the Romanian spirit and it speculates, for its own benefit, regarding these overlapping levels. The ethical significance of this fact is also easy to observe. Because the Romanian Orthodox Church rejects cremation, being a representative of the national identity, it is obvious

¹ <http://www.incinerareamurg.ro/15-motive-ca-sa-alegi-incinerarea>, accessed 02.12.2013.

² Marius Rotar, *Eternitate prin cenușă. O istorie a crematoriilor și incinerărilor umane în România secolelor XIX-XXI* (Eternity through Ashes. A History of Crematoria and Human Cremation in XIX-XX Century Romania) (Iași: Institutul European 2011), 630. In Romania, 853 cremations were performed in 2010 and 840 cremations in 2011. The ratio of cremation is 0,33% of all deaths.

³ And also one incinerator in Oradea (<http://www.phoenix-cremation.ro/>).

⁴ Ioan C. Teșu, "Înhumare versus incinerare" (Burial versus Cremation), *Doxologia*, (2010), <http://www.doxologia.ro/puncte-de-vedere/inhumare-versus-incinerare>, accessed 10.12.2011; Vladimir Prelipcean, "Incinerarea morților și teologia ortodoxă" (Cremation of the Dead and the Orthodox Theology), *Crestinortodox.ro*, (2009), <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/diverse/incinerarea-mortilor-teologia-ortodoxa-69379.html>, accessed 08.09.2011; Gabriel Militaru, "Incinerarea morților, între dorința muribundului și învățătura Bisericii" (Cremation of the Dead between the Dying Man's Desire and the Church's Teaching), prgabriel.wordpress.com/, (2008), <http://prgabriel.wordpress.com/2008/09/29/incinerarea-mortilor-intre-dorinta-muribundului-si-invatarea-bisericii/>, accessed 08.12.2011.

that the option of cremation is doubly sanctioned, religiously and from the point of view of belonging to the Romanian community. Thus, the refusal of the Orthodox Church to carry out cremation rituals and considering it to be equal to suicide,¹ puts the human being in a situation where they must make a choice between burial and cremation in a way that is not correct.

The Romanian Orthodox religious discourse tends to oppose if not a history of cremation which it cannot deny, then certainly a complex necessity, situated at the crossroads between postmodern tendencies towards aesthetics, the growing personalisation of funerals and the lack of burial spaces. Another argument used by Orthodoxism is the unnatural characteristic of cremation², an argument which can be argued against by saying that religion is cultural rather than natural. Both directions can however be suspected of ignoring certain truths which are on an intermediary plain. Thus the first direction can easily combat the anti cremation arguments of the Orthodox discourse and can catalogue them as being retrograde and unconvincing, and the Orthodox discourse can argue that Romanian promoters of cremation only work for a sort of extreme *functionalism* of the body, especially the corpse, and that they ignore its role as a vehicle for transcendence whether divine, collective or national. Both, in certain proportions and on certain levels, ignore essential truths. The historic discourse overlooks the fact that the option for cremation is not only a result of the Orthodox threat and sanctions, but also a direct result of the absence of a clear ritual in the Romanian collective representation belonging to cremation. The other side forgets that ethics is not its attribute, but, if we would believe the words of Eugenio Lecaldano, ethics begins where God ceases to be.³

1.3. The necessity of a bioethical construction

The Western ethical relaxation could worsen different problems which deal with the representation of death as a cultural reflex, both individually and collectively. In other words, it is possible that this relaxation is an inhibitor for the discussions regarding cremation, not so much in ethical terms, where things are clear, but as a representation of death. The need to represent death and its continuous evaluation is fundamental for man, it helps give sense to the world he lives in. The Western social assumption does not automatically involve corresponding social response. As for cremation in Romania, it is possible that Orthodox inspired ethics, standing against the practice of cremation, as well as against the ones who choose it for themselves and people close to them, places cremation in a certain cultural position which is negative and which is only made even more visible by militancy for cremation. In both cases, through Western social acceptance – synonymous from a certain point with ethical indifference, and through Romanian ethical demonization, whatever happens is a wrong cultural placement of cremation at an individual and collective level.

¹ Nicolae Necula, *Tradiție și înnoire în slujirea liturgică* (Tradition and Innovation in the Liturgical Sermon) (Galați: Editura Episcopiei Dunării de Jos, 1996)

² Alexandru Ulea, *Incinerarea este străină de viața în Hristos* (Cremation has nothing to do with the Christian Life), <http://alexandru.ulea.ro/>, (2011), accessed 10.12.2011.

³ Eugenio Lecaldano, *Un' etica senza Dio* (Ethics without God) (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2006).

Bioethics, as an interdisciplinary life science,¹ less rigid than ethics, but incorporating it, in order to orient it towards a superior object which is human value, is the only one which can solve both the current Western problem regarding cremation, as well as the one in Romania. Bioethics must take up cremation as a research object in the same way it takes on other significant aspects of human life such as aspects regarding reproduction (abortion, medically assisted human reproduction) and survival (euthanasia, palliative cares). No matter how reductive one would think, cremation is not only a practice of eliminating the corpse, but like any other funerary practice, it has to do with death as much as it has to do with life, it is an individual problem, not an individualistic one, linking man with the community. The advantage of bioethics is that it can use arguments from other fields, their values and their ideas, without taking their entire ethical substance. It is true that cremation is and always will be a subject with ethical connotations, whether it is an extremely positive connotation, like it is the case in the Western world, or whether it is an extremely negative connotation, such as the Romanian religious discourse. The role of bioethics is one that even though does not find itself in any extreme, still considers cremation as a complex way of positioning man before death, at the level of funerary practice and representation and only then discussing different circumstances and aspects of cremation.

We would like to investigate the imaginaries associated with cremation in order to point out the fact that cremation has a certain ethical connotation in the human imaginary (in relation with the acceptance of cremation as personal and social practice), even though it is accepted socially and economically. The ethical connotation signifies not only a plus or a minus, good or evil, yes or no, but both, in different proportions. We consider this move to be necessary because bioethics will be close to cremation in order to research it with its multidisciplinary means. It should, in our opinion take into consideration the fact that cremation is not only a social issue; it is also a cultural one. The cultural aspect is basically a network of symbols and images which can be found in the human imaginary. Its ethics are not rigid which is why bioethics must seek out the life of phenomena on the less visible axis of socio-cultural phenomena, but often more powerful than their purely social occurrence, meaning the axis of the imaginary.

1.4. Brief interlude: Evaluating the common ontological ground

Ethics should pay attention to cremation and integrate it as a topic among its other research topics, not only because ethics has the appropriate methodological ability, but especially because the ontological ground of bioethics coincides, in what concerns the general structure and the functions, with the ontological ground of cremation. For both bioethics and cremation, the recognition of the ontological nature of human being represents a chief issue. Bioethics defines itself as a science situated at the confluence between ethic and bios, a bios essentially human, while cremation (beyond its status of social practice), when it is reclaimed by the individual, appears as a normal consequence

¹ Gheorghe Scripcaru, "Bioetica între științele vieții și drepturile omului" (Bioethics between Life Sciences and Human Rights), *Revista română de bioetică* (The Romanian Journal of Bioethics) 2 (2003); Adina Rebeleanu, "Interfața între domeniul bio-medical și științele sociale" (Bioethics between Bio-Medical and Social Sciences), *Revista română de bioetică* (The Romanian Journal of Bioethics) 3 (2003).

of the awareness and the intuition of her/his own ontological nature: the man who chooses cremation implicitly reflects upon death, rediscovering, from a Heideggerian point of view, her/his inexorable condition of “being-towards-death”¹ and, to put it in Jankélévitch’s terms, exercising death in the first person.² Also, for both of them the ontological ground has a double and precise function. It guides and offers a horizon of expectation for those who confront bioethics and cremation, whether they are actors/researchers or spectators/outsideers, and, at the same time, it limits the possible deviations.³ This censoring function is more obvious for bioethics than for cremation. If the ethical side of bioethics is more flexible, prone to be encapsulated to utilitarianism and hence to a relativism potentially dangerous, the bios – the ontological part – is the strong nucleus that prevents the dissolution into multi-perspectivism or into multi-culturalism.

The major difference between the cremational ontological ground and the bioethical one stands in the degree of their socio-cultural acceptance. If for bioethics the ontology, as a human value, is clearly implied, one could say almost stipulated by the human dignity principle which is the core concept of bioethics,⁴ for cremation, as an individual choice, the ontology is an ideational dimension that raises many problems. In Romania, the cremational ontological ground is still far from a socio-cultural acceptance, and in the Western regions, where cremation is an extended practice, integrated in what collectively is constructed as normal, it tends to be downplayed and even concealed due to the emphasis on the social and pragmatic nature of cremation (e.g. cremation as a solution for the overcrowded territories).

But cremation cannot be correctly and completely understood without the ontological primacy. The social condition of cremation as a personal option is similar, to a great extent, to the social condition of euthanasia. In both cases one has to deal with an ontology weakened by the social discourses that systematically ignore their ontological ground. Even if he does not deny that what is specific for euthanasia is the relation/relational nature of euthanasia, for which he uses the term of *interpersonality*, István Király criticises the blindness of our contemporary society in the face of the ontological roots of euthanasia: “Our approach to euthanasia depends in fact on the ontology of death, that is, the factual metaphysics of death, and only indirectly and secondarily on how it can be fitted into the *a priori*, ready-made and hardly questionable frameworks of certain ideologies, metaphysics, ethics, deontology, or legal systems, or their current „developments” and ‘updates’”.⁵ The author explains the ontological articulations of euthanasia as a personal and socio-cultural expression of the dying, using

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Ființă și timp* (Being and Time), trans. Gabriel Liiceanu and Cătălin Cioabă (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006 [1927]).

² Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La mort* (Death) (Paris: Flammarion, 1977).

³ Although it is possible to discuss the Christian-orthodox bioethics of cremation (therefore, at least partially, ideologically contaminated) that from an ethical perspective reflects in a negative light the will for cremation, it is to be noticed that even in these circumstances, the ontological principle of bioethics seems to have a beneficial effect of cooling down the anti-cremational vehemence. Cf.: Kathryn Wehr, “The Bioethics of Cremation”, *Orthodoxytoday.org*, (2010), <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/view/wehr-the-orthodox-bioethics-of-cremation>, accessed 02.12.2013.

⁴ Maurizio Salvi, “Ontology and Bioethics: the Case of Human Dignity Principle in Human Genetics”, *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics* 8 (1998): 181-183.

⁵ István Király, “Euthanasia, Or Death Assisted to (Its) Dignity”, *Philobiblon* XVII/2, (2012): 344.

a third element, which is death. Death, more specifically, to be mortal, in a Heideggerian interpretation, is exactly the core of ontology. Practically, because euthanasia is a modality of dying, its ontological trait proves/reveals to be undeniable.

Like euthanasia, cremation as a personal choice of bodily disposal implies the relationship, the *interpersonality*, in a close sense (family, significant others) and in a broad, extended sense (community, society), but it is, above all, an ontological matter that pertains or should pertain to the person who opts for cremation. While euthanasia implies the acceptance of one's own mortality through a modal representation of earlier stages of dying, representation whose content is the access to death, cremation includes an acceptance of one's own mortality after the moment of death, through a representation again modal, but subsequent to death itself. From this perspective, the decision for a personal cremation turns out to lack the typical ease of taking decision without an existential stake.

By neglecting the connection between ontology and cremation, a connection necessary for a good cultural comprehension of cremation as a social funerary practice and absolutely mandatory for an authentic grasp of cremation as a personal choice, we may persist in sterile discussions gravitating around questions such as for example, has the dead person a right upon his/her own corpse and to what extent, can he decide his own bodily disposal, or if in the cultural process of imbuing the corpse with meaning are the personal representations of death and corpse more powerful than the social ones. It is true, the dead body is not synonymous, from a socio-cultural point of view, with the person before the decease, as it is also not equivalent, from a philosophical perspective, to the being-towards-death. Thus, one could advance the idea that the corpse has not the same rights that it would have as an alive body, being unable to claim its rights¹, or the idea that these rights exist, but are limited, residual and passive, the corpse being detached from the desires of the person that prefigured it in his/her vision of a post-mortem existence. Only that, as it was noticed in philosophy, using the concept of "*fostitate*"², but also in the social sciences, by displaying the continuous bound between the living and the dead, death is unable to reduce the deceased to a sheer non-being³; death cannot nullify her/his ontology, it can only discontinue the presence of the being starting from the point in which dying is completed and becomes death, engendering the ultimate product of the being that is not being anymore, namely the corpse.

Therefore cremation shouldn't be, when it takes the form of an individual option of bodily disposal separated from ontology. The problem raised by respecting or not someone's will to be cremated is not exclusively connected to the corpse, which is

¹ James Stacey Taylor and Aaron Spital, "Corpses do not have Rights: A Response to Baglow", *Mortality*, Vol. 13, No. 3, August (2008): 282-286. Stacey and Spital consider that the idea of the rights of the corpse cannot be sustain, the concept of *right* being closely related to the idea of conscious action and presence of the presumed claimant or beneficiary of the right. The so-called rights of the corpse, they observe, are but obligations towards the dead imposed by the society to the living. Otherwise, talk about the rights of the deceased is irrelevant, if not absurd.

² István Király, *Moartea și experiența muririi. In(tro)specție metafizică și filozofie-aplicativă* (Death. Metaphysical and Applied Philosophical Perspectives) (Cluj: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2002), 94.

³ Glennys Howarth, *Death & Dying. A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press)

no longer or in a great measure the being that died, but is fundamentally connected to the personal death, understood in its sense of vertebrant, inalienable axis of life. In the same way in which as the purest possible theoretical form, the will to euthanasia and, why not, to go further, the will to suicide, must be considerate as belonging to the ontology of the being that includes *already-not-anymore-the being*¹, cremation shall be interrogated in the light of its ontological coordinates.

2. Re-evaluating the imaginaries associated with cremation

Reinvestigating the imaginaries associated with cremation could build a third plane of dialogue between divergent discourses on cremation. The discursive segregation is not marked within the imaginary. The semantic substance which travels unhindered on all planes of reality along with the severing of the necessity of the disjunctive relationship of opposites contains the key for certain prejudices and stereotypes.² Last but not least, the social imaginary is responsible for the manner in which each individual constructs his/her representation of the world and of him/herself, influencing in a major way the concrete ways of ontological achievements. The resources necessary for a (bio)ethical reconstruction of cremation can be found in the imaginary. This is possible because the imaginary cannot be taken away from the inner part of life, because such an action would result in a warping of human reality. Lucian Boia, one of the famous researchers on aspects and the philosophy of the imaginary remarks the simultaneous, social and imaginary character, of any human construct of reality through which the being tries to find a sense in the world: “man lives on two plains at the same time: reality and the imaginary, different plains, but between which there is a constant interaction”³. It is here that we must add, even though we risk repetition, that it is necessary to study the imaginary, partially ignored, in specific ways, both by the positivist science and the theological ones.

2.1. The relevance of the imaginary for the study of cremation and its report with (bio)ethics

Insisting on its characteristics, it can be said that the imaginary – and this statement is generally true, not only regarding the imaginary of death – comes with and forms, conditions any insertion of man into society, so that he can be the one determined, the one who is under the influence of social existence. The same type of report, mutual influence, can be established between the imaginary and research.⁴ The imaginary, shows Gilbert Durand, is a continuous attempt to avoid meeting the unavoidable reality of death, a defensive reaction, an active counter-representation of death. This has two implications. As a function of the imaginary, a compensative representation of death, a

¹ István Király, *Moartea și experiența muririi*.

² Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *Filosofia imaginii* (Philosophy of the Image) (Iași: Polirom, traducere de M. Constantinescu, 2004 [1997]).

³ Lucian Boia, *Tinerețe fără bătrânețe. Imaginarul longevității din Antichitate până astăzi* (Forever Young: a Cultural History of Longevity), trans. Valentina Nicolae (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006), 7.

⁴ Basarab Nicolescu, *Noi, particula și lumea* (We, the Particle, and the World) (Iași: Polirom, 2002 [1985]).

function which is made up of a therapeutic vector, is similar to the function held by society, according to Robert Kastenbaum, seen as a *system of death* – meaning one which confronts death, going against it and dealing with its presence.¹ We can see that there are differences between the imaginary and the social, but they are not insurmountable, just the opposite. A second explanation would be the necessity of bringing into discussion the imaginary of death as an imaginary which takes the imaginary of cremation as its subordinate. If this is the way in which everything regarding the existence of humans in general is presented, as a link between the social and the imaginary, between the visible and the less visible, the situation still is more complicated in the case of death in general, where the imaginary holds an even greater power. Louis-Vincent Thomas mentions that „the power of death resides, especially, at the level of the imaginary”.² An imaginary in which all the discourses from different fields can be found whether artistic or research, and which also produce dynamics and reconfigurations of the imaginary of death which is difficult to interact with.

It is not the case to discuss the general morphology of the imaginary. We will concentrate on two very important matters. The first one refers to the possible tendency to unbalance the imaginary. This implies, according to Durand, choosing a single regime of the imaginary³, from which unilateral types of images and uses which are conscious or not result, such as the allocation of only good or evil for a certain element, which determines a fracture in the structure of the imaginary⁴. Because the imaginary is a question of anthropology, as we find out from the same Gilbert Durand, the extreme monopoly of a single regime of the imaginary produces an *anthropological deterioration*⁵. This one-sided situation regarding cremation becomes an already laid out trap which awaits its victims. Cremation tends to be assimilated, as we have already mentioned, by the theological discourse with sin, with the unnatural, with decadence, only pointing out its negative nuances, to the disadvantage of the others. Cremation is assimilated by evil, which is a sign that the corresponding imaginary has lost its radiant power of diversity regarding significance. The prevalent imagery is one of burning and infernal flame, ash as waste and symbol of killing the body which is a reflection of the divine. These images must not be ignored, because they could be a part of the future resistance, intimate and hard to rationalise, of people against the cremation procedure in Romania. The opposite risk, the recuperative and militant discourse of cremation in Romania, which is still fairly underdeveloped, is to make it excessively positive and create a vertebrate report of pragmatism and reduction of cremation to pure concrete data.

A second element, regarding the morphology of the imaginary and with implications in our research is that the imaginary is not only a fixed part, the conglomerate of archetypes privileged by researchers. The imaginary also implies transformation and Gilbert Durand constantly brings arguments towards this point. At

¹ Robert Kastenbaum, *Death, Society and Human Experience* (USA: Pearson Education, 2007, [1977]).

² Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Mort et pouvoir* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1999), 47.

³ Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Dunod, 2006 [1960]).

⁴ Jean Pierre, “Le statut de l'imaginaire: Approche sémiotique”, *Religiologiques* 1 (1990).

⁵ Gilbert Durand, “Fondaments et perspectives d'une philosophie de l'imaginaire” *Religiologiques* 1 (1990).

the imaginary level, he supports, as a series of researchers also do, the fact that current cremation has nothing to do with the ancient form of creation, could be exact. Louis-Vincent Thomas, an excellent researcher of death, but reserved towards cremation, shows in his 1980 book, *Le cadavre. De la biologie à l'anthropologie*¹, that actual cremation in the Western space is different from the traditional one in a series of essential aspects such as: space and time allotted to cremation, methods and instruments through which it is carried out, the purposes for which it is carried out. If there is a spirit of cremation, which justifies resorting to cremation in a different way than a simple postmodern practice, Louis-Vincent Thomas sees this spirit more as something he calls *a substitute of cremation* – burning the effigies or the clothes of the deceased. Maybe it is not the most appropriate view. It is true that cremation today, at least in the Western world, does not take place in a closed space for several hours anymore. It would be impossible from a social point of view, because a series of regulations and policies would prohibit such a funerary spectacle in front of people because it would be compared to a certain type of violence. The capital punishment also does not take place in front of an audience and it rather is carried out in a space hidden from curious eyes. What we want to point out is that social changes which have modified socio-cultural representations of cremation are not followed blindly by changes to the imaginary. Deeper probing is necessary for one to state, like Louis-Vincent Thomas that traditional cremation does not have anything in common with modern cremation. The imaginary is not rigid, it keeps reforming itself, captures new nuances and – it would be abusive to claim the exact same substance as content for the ancient and contemporary cremation. On the other hand, it would be unnatural, at an imaginary level, to claim a complete separation between these two types. Deeper layers could be responsible for the difference and the similarity between the two. We wish to discuss the imaginaries associated with cremation, both the imaginary of fire and the imaginary of ash. We will observe that both have ethical connotations and we will better understand why cremation cannot be without an ethical assessment grid.

2.2. The imaginary of fire, the imaginary of ash and their ethical implications

According to Gaston Bachelard, fire is, along with water, air and earth one of the fundamental elements which serve as the base for the ability to imagine. An original mystery, fire is analysed by the French philosopher in his 1938 book, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*² in all of its complexity, from different historical meanings, often contradictory, to the images it generates in the imagination, and also in society and culture. What characterises fire is the fact that it can be given opposing meanings. It can be viewed both as something good and beautiful as well as something evil and ugly. We will not go over Bachelard's study because the Romanian public is already familiar with it but we will concentrate on other post-Bachelardian approaches to fire, approaches which will make it easier for us to understand the ethical implications of the imaginary

¹ Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Le cadavre. De la biologie à l'anthropologie* (Paris: Complexe, 1980), 170-189.

² Gaston Bachelard, *Psihanaliza focului* (Psychoanalysis of Fire), trans. R. Munteanu (Bucharest: Univers, 1989).

of fire for cremation. We should however keep in mind the way in which the imaginary of fire is polarised.

In order to enter the imaginary of fire, we will begin by presenting and analysing the way in which Louis-Vincent Thomas relates to fire in the book dedicated to the dead body in the chapter about the problem of reducing it to ash. The anthropologist observes a semantic ambivalence as well as an ambivalence of value regarding fire, but opts to point out its negative side. Fire, according to Louis-Vincent Thomas, has been used as a means of cremation, in the moments in history in which contagious diseases have become calamities for humanity. Epidemics have been resolved through burning. The same things happened to bodies which have only been suspected of such diseases. On the other hand, fire has been used by the Inquisition and the Church, in general, to light the stakes prepared for those considered to be witches or different types of social and religious rebels. In both cases, fire works as an instrument of purification, says Louis-Vincent Thomas whether it was against the threat of disease for those left alive or the sin of heresy and antichristian magic. What Thomas does not clearly state is that fire, in these cases indicates a sanction from the community for those who are guilty of disease or lack of faith, and although it has the effect of purification, it is a purification carried out through exclusion. The religious faiths and practices in Bali see fire as a purifier and liberator not in relation to other, for others, but only in relation with the self and it has a similar value to the mythological Greek one and the one in the Upanishads¹. The difference between Western and the Oriental or ancient Greek views on fire is however not extreme. Both converge on the idea that fire purifies because it has something to purify, meaning that the human condition itself is unclean.² Variations appear especially from an ethical point of view. The fire of stakes implies an ethical value of what fire hides, and fire itself: witches are, beyond natural human impurity, evil, so fire, in its radical way of manifesting itself is called upon to resolve this *evil*, this *negativity*. Fire is positive in this case, but it is a relational positivity. Regarding the other case, it is an investment in sacred elements, power and transcendence, non-relation. The dead person in Bali is not pure until the family manages to gather the necessary resources to deliver him from fire and freeing him, this aspect does however not hold ethical connotations. Fire is kept away from good and evil, in a mainly metaphysical paradigm.

The same Louis-Vincent Thomas agrees with Jean-Thierry Maertens on the fact that cremation has been, especially in the beginning, a practice of nomads, generated by the desire not to leave their dead behind and that this practice has its roots in the logic of wars which demanded a quick disposal of soldiers which were not supposed to fall in the hands of the enemy.³ Thomas also gives the situation of African countries as an example, cremation is a privilege of men, women and children are buried. What is worth remembering from the works of the French anthropologist, is that cremation appears as a masculine practice – its toughness and radicalism lead to a certain conception, even outside of anthropological data – and directly proportional to the lack of roots in a

¹ Louis Vincent Thomas, *Cadavrul* (The Corpse), 170-172.

² Marie Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1966]).

³ Jean-Thierry Maertens, *Le jeu du mort* (Paris: Aubier, 1979).

certain place. It is possible that this discrimination of fire on one hand and the association of fire and war on the other – the imaginary of war incorporated fire – may mark a certain orientation towards the ethical value of cremation. There are fewer advantages for cremation than burial if one would look at the issue from this angle. The weak link between cremation and space is added to the discussion. Cremation represents the radical destruction of space. Space is the first location of the representation of death, according to Dennis Cettour,¹ containing life as a trace, which is the equivalent of a total elimination of death and life. Following the same imaginary line, cremation seems to produce not just the decaying of life but of death itself, the last sign of life.

This report of cremation to space will receive new value, in another sense according to Jean-Didier Urbain. In a work from 2004², he tries to clarify the relations between reality and the imaginary. Cremation, attested beginning with the Neolithic period is associated with orientalism and is confronted and defied today by our imaginary, beyond our Christian beliefs. The fact that fire is a sanction seems to be more active in our cultural memory than the fact that fire is purification and liberation. Not just the flames of hell, not even the Inquisition, but the ovens of the Nazi regime persist and haunt the imaginary of fire and cremation. It is an imaginary threshold which can and must be overcome, just like, according to the author, the confrontation between cremation and burial through the reactivation of the mechanism which produce imaginaries. Cremation includes a much more radical way to relate to space. An important aspect for Urbain, however, is the fact that it cannot be separated from a culture in which space, if it is not as powerful as the one activated mentally through burial, is a condensed and resists against burning and it is established by it. The space targeted by modern cremation, as opposed to burial, is not a collective one, based on public exposure, it is an intimate, private, personal and discrete one³. Fire leaves traces and creates spaces.

Before mentioning the second imaginary, with which we have already partially crossed paths, the imaginary of ash, we will talk about Umberto Eco's work, *How we construct our enemy*⁴, is a work about the specific duality of the imaginary of fire, but it gravitates towards its ethical rehabilitation. Eco begins by pointing out the special imaginary status of fire. Different from water, air and earth, fire tends to be forgotten, an aspect which is aided by our real experience with fire, which is becoming less frequent. The flame of the fireplace is just a memory. Its functions are almost entirely incorporated into programs which create electrical ovens and other forms of invisible energy. There are however ignored functions of fire such as the esthetical and imaginative ones. Eco considers fire a symbolic vehicle for any transformation and a complex metaphor for several experiences ranging from sexual experiences to

¹ Denis Cettour, "Thanatologie," in *Dictionnaire de la mort*, ed. Philippe di Folco, 1022.

² Jean-Didier Urbain, "La cendre et la trace. La vogue de la cremation," in *La mort et l'immortalité. Encyclopédie des savoirs et de croyances*, eds. Frédéric Lenoir and Jean-Philippe de Tonnac (Paris: Bayard, 2004), 1207-1221.

³ For example, the scattering of ashes in nature or their retention in an urn, in a certain place in the house.

⁴ Umberto Eco, "Flacăra e frumoasă" (The Flame is Beautiful), *Cum ne construim dușmanul* (How we Construct our Enemy), trans. Ștefania Mincu (Iași: Polirom, 2011).

epiphanies. Fire contains the ascending principle of transcendence but also the descendent one of death and fragility. The Italian author proposes unembarrassed semiotics to clarify several levels of significance for fire. The first semantic level of fire that Eco talks about is fire as a divine element. Fire is demiurgic because it does not come from a certain place, as an origin, and the sun is its best representation because it is essential for life. As a period, the semantic-imaginary level of divine fire is the most specific in the middle Ages. We can ask ourselves if the fear of fire has something to do with the current age that is losing the transcendent senses rooted in reality, so that, if God continues to exist, he is protestant in spirit, in our actions¹, while ethics, becomes *painless*, according to Lipovetsky², being governed by the spirit of spectacle and provoking the subjects which are involved in an ethical report to become passive. We could basically assume that the contemporary man becomes opaque to these ideas of fire being demiurgic and that man suppresses them. The second semantic-imaginary plain mentioned by Eco is the one of infernal fire. The biblical prototype is the sulphur lake of the Apocalypse, and the fire which comes from the depths of the earth serves as a material mode. Infernal fire has massive ethical connotations. It is the punishment for the evil done by men and the constant threat of the natural and human depths. There are four positive levels of fire: alchemical fire, fire as a cause of art, fire as an epiphany and regenerative fire. Their common element is the proximity established between man and transcendence. Eco also states that playing with fire does not only contain the confrontation of taboos, but also playing God, especially the God which brings death. We can therefore see that fire keeps its symbolism of destruction even on positive semantic levels. A final level registered by Eco is contemporary imagery where fire is the representative of large disasters such as the explosion of the atomic bomb, all wars but also of future disasters, even if they are only considered possible in the imagination. An example for this would be global warming. This is not a fire that burns or purifies, or sanctions, it is an explosion, a loss of control. Fire is contaminated by ethical judgement in such a semantic-imaginary context.

The imaginary of ash cannot be separated from the imaginary of fire. Just as it is mentioned by Bachelard, Louis-Vincent Thomas and Eco – ash is, imaginarily speaking, an excrement. In other words, the ethical connotation is very clear. Ash means evil and at the same time ugliness, imperfection. On the other hand we cannot help but think that there is a certain correspondence between cremation and ash, burial and the body. The problem which appears here is one that has to do with visibility and the fact that it can determine certain ethical positions. The body is exposed and it is just that its ulterior transformations are hidden from public view in the case of burial. Putrefaction and mineralisation, the last two stages of definitive, organic death are usually not presented to the general public. The first post-mortem stage is part of a constantly developing industry, especially in Western countries, where the body is subjected to artificial procedures in order to make it appear more appealing and eliminate signs of death. Ash is a type of cadaver which must be faced because it must be collected by the family at

¹ Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Gândirea slabă* (Weak Thought), trans. Ștefania Mincu (Constanța: Pontica, 1998).

² Gilles Lipovetsky, *Amurgul datoriei. Etica nedureroasă a noilor timpuri democratice* (The Twilight of Duty), trans. Victor-Dinu Vlădulescu (Bucharest: Babel, 1996 [1992]).

the crematorium and put in an urn or disposed of in nature. There is a direct confrontation between ash and the others. Ash can also be viewed as a type of extreme residue – there is no type of similarity to the deceased person, an undesirable waste because it reminds us of the nothingness and fragile state of the human substance and can create anguish for those who remain. It would help to imagine what we would find in a grave years after the death of the person buried there in order to observe how the differences are not so much in the result, as they are in the temporality of the presentation and presence of the result. It is about visibility in time.

In his essay about mythical and poetic valences of ash, Ștefan Borbély¹ observes two large views on ash. One is anthropological, with cultural validity extended throughout time and space, according to which ash is an element which represents the transubstantiation necessary to reach another stage of existence. According to this view, Borbély considers that cremation is seen as a natural stage in a cycle of life, symbolising the passing towards something else. Another view, which is strictly Western and Christian, is that of ash as humility. Humility is derived from feeling the absurdity of human death, a metaphysical humiliation according to Ștefan Borbély. The author asks a welcome question regarding research into the imaginary of cremation: is it possible that, between the two coexisting views, *attitudinal and doctrinal* crystallisation of Christianity has sacrificed the first one, thus producing a semantic and imaginary release of ash? The answer given by the author is positive. If ash has the culturally well rooted meaning of humiliation in the Western imaginary, is it possible that there is a certain anthropological imbalance, like the one mentioned by Gilbert Durand? Is it possible that today's ash is more than an organic, ontological waste, a symbol of existential nonsense? Is it possible that the fear manifested in certain discourses, like the Romanian theological one, reflects the fear of the lack of sense in human existence presented by cremation? We must admit that ash is haunted by the risk of a one-sided ethical position. Therefore it can only be beneficial to remember that, together with Ștefan Borbély, the resurrection of the Phoenix from the ashes, the myth of Cinderella and Ash Wednesday.

3. General conclusions

Investigating the imaginary of cremation, composed of the imaginary of ash and the imaginary of fire, and which is a subordinate of the imaginary of death offers bioethics a starting point in approaching cremation. This is because of the morphology of the imaginary, characterised by co-existing contradictions, through the synthesis of archetypes and variables and because of its symbolic function. In a country where the theological discourse and the historical one each miss an important part of the cultural significance associated with cremation, one using pragmatic ethics and the other using an exclusively Orthodox one, in a Western world which is completely devitalised from an ethical point of view, but still anxious regarding cremation, it is imperative that bioethics, a science of the complexity of life, should take back the subject of cremation.

Therewith, one must not forget that the imaginary premise of a bioethical construction of cremation is closely linked to the ontological principle which defines both the object – cremation – and the methodology – the way of investigating cremation,

¹ Ștefan Borbély, “Cenușa – eseu de mitopoetică” (Ashes. An Essay of Mythopoetics), *Homo brucans și alte eseuri* (Homo Brucans and Other Essays) (Bucharest: Contemporanul, 2011), 184-196.

id est bioethics, organizing their deepest logic. In fact, the ontological principle is also connected to the imaginary of cremation, an aspect easier to perceive if we deem cremation as a choice, as a possibility of the human being, despite the fact that this imaginary is not reducible to this principle; yet by studying the products of this imaginary we may get information about the complex interactions between the individual on the one hand, and culture and society on the other.