CLERGY AND INTELLECTUALS AS ‘CLASS ENEMY’: THE “BURNING BUSH”

Ioana URSU**

Abstract: This paper¹ proposes to follow the history of the “Burning Bush”, a spiritual and cultural group in the 1940s in Romania that offered the solution of inner resistance to communism through religion and culture. The members of the group expressed spiritual and cultural affinities originating in the interwar era; having evolved into a rather heterogeneous lay-monastical community, they aimed to discover a more profound dimension of Orthodoxy, namely hesychast mystic. During the 1940s, the group held public meetings as well as narrow gatherings at the Antim monastery in Bucharest, discussing theological-apologetic subjects and focusing on the practice of the Prayer of the Heart. Due to their preoccupations of orthodox mystic, their social impact as well as their anti-communist views, they became targets of the Securitate’s informative tracking. In 1958, a decade following the dissolution of the official Burning Bush association, sixteen members connected to the group were arrested and sentenced to prison for “conspiracy against the social order”. The article will attempt to retrace the history of the Burning Bush, by referring to various sources: the archives of the Securitate, written memories, as well as oral history interviews.

Keywords: *communism, ideology, hesychasm, mysticism, repression*

1. The Characters and Their Story

“The Burning Bush of the Mother of God” Association

* PhD candidate, “Babeş-Bolyai” University (Faculty of History), Cluj Napoca, Romania.

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represented a community of intellectuals and monastic 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, transposed the object of their profession into Christianity, succeeding in outlining landmarks for a more profound experience of the Christian faith.

First of all, learning about the Burning Bush involves approaching several themes: the history of cultural and intellectual elites, the attitude of the regime towards cults and religions, repression against intellectuals and the clergy, the Orthodox Church under communism, as well as policies of the church hierarchy towards former political prisoners.

Secondly, when speaking of the Burning Bush, it is usually admitted that their activity represented a form of anti-communism resistance, namely spiritual resistance. However, I believe this feature isn't enough to define the Burning Bush.

My hypothesis is that their ethos, their values and their way of being were essentially opposed to communism and its values, its propaganda, and its regimentation of society. This was the reason why communism, through its repressive apparatus, discovered them to be 'incompatible' to the new social order. Therefore, they would be tracked; they would be arrested and sentenced to prison. They were deemed 'unsafe' even after their detention time, which indicated how dangerous the regime considered them. The key-question is: why were they so dangerous to the regime, why was it needed to reduce them to silence?

Understanding the Burning Bush through the historical method alone would be rather incomplete, since their ethos was primarily a religious one; therefore, I will attempt an interdisciplinary approach, through history and theology.

The historical context that shaped the birth of the Burning Bush happened during the 40s decade, as an intertwining of personal destinies and 'great history' gradually led to the aggregation of the group.

The story is as follows: interwar writer, publicist and poet Sandu Tudor (born Alexandru Teodorescu)², a controversial personality, but of

² Birth name Alexandru Teodorescu, writer, publicist, owner of the newspaper "The

strong Christian convictions, was demobilized in 1942, after having served three years in the war. On his return home, having found out the failure of his third marriage, he decidedly renounced lay life, turning towards monasticism.

The first steps in the direction of a spiritual movement were set during 1943, when metropolitan Tit Simedrea of Bukovina responded positively to Sandu Tudor's initiative of inviting a group of interwar intellectuals to Chernivtsi to hold debates, share ideas and thoughts during daily lectures and prayer; the seven-day programme took place in the Mitropolia chapel³.

The event, known as "Seven Days of Vigil", comprised lectures on: *Calendar and Vigil* (rev. Nicolae M. Popescu⁴), *From Icon to Spirituality* (Alexandru Elian⁵), *The Relics of Saint Stephen and the Eternity of the Body* (Alexandru Mironescu⁶), *Knowledge and Asceticism* (Anton Dumitriu⁷), *The Seven Youths of Ephesus and Proofs of the Resurrection* (Paul Sterian⁸), *Pathos and Patmos* (Constantin Noica⁹), *The Transfiguration of Christ and the Redeeming Beauty* (Petru Manoliu), *Confessor and Healing* (archimandrite Benedict Ghiuș¹⁰), *The*

Faith" during the interwar years. He became a monk at Antim under the name "Brother Agathon", was later ordained into priesthood (Hieromonk Agathon), and afterwards received the great skeme (Hieroskemamonk Daniil). He was the main catalyst of the Burning Bush.

³ Antonie PLĂMĂDEALĂ, *Rugul Aprins*, Sibiu, 2002, p. 24-26.

⁴ Priest and historian. He studied both Theology and Letters-Philosophy, followed by studies in History and Bizantinology at the University of Vienna. Specialist in history of the Church and Romanian cultural history. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Dicționarul teologilor români*, București, Enciclopedica Publishing House, 2002, p. 380-381.

⁵ Byzantinologist, member of the Burning Bush group, although he did not serve time in prison. Member of the Romanian Academy during the communist regime, and professor at the Theological Institute in Bucharest (1956-1975).

⁶ Chemist, scientist, philosopher, doctor in Science at University of Sorbonne, one of the main members of the Burning Bush.

⁷ Philosopher, logician and mathematician, suffered political detention.

⁸ Economist, poet, suffered political detention during 1959-1964.

⁹ Philosopher, poet, writer, suffered political detention during 1958-1964.

¹⁰ Archimandrite and theologian, confessor of many of the Burning Bush members. Close to patriarch Justinian Marina, whose confessor he was after his prison release. One of the beloved personalities of the Burning Bush, said to have achieved the unceasing prayer.

Prayer of the Heart and The Holy Hesychasm (Sandu Tudor)¹¹.

This connection between intellectuals with similar concerns and their long-term friendship dating from the inter-war era (most of them did belong, after all, to the Criterion Generation¹²) would carry further, around the Antim monastery in Bucharest.

Being situated centrally in the capital, the Antim monastery¹³ had the premises for becoming a focus point of cultural and spiritual interest. For instance, Abbot Vasile Vasilachi's initiative of renovating the monastery buildings after the war was promptly supported by a group of generals and their wives, who frequented the monastery for religious service¹⁴. Among the contributors were also Sandu Tudor and Alexandru Mironescu¹⁵. At the same time, these benefactors were *mecenas* of the young theology students in the monastic community¹⁶. The religious services were frequented by many people¹⁷.

As explained by the surviving participants, the birth of the Burning Bush group occurred on one hand as "a result of friendship and long-established relations on the road of common spiritual searches within the cultural context of the epoch: a crossroads of destinies and aspirations"¹⁸; on the other hand, it was born as a reply to the acute advance of atheistic materialism and its propaganda¹⁹. This is the context in which the first meetings of the Burning Bush settled into

¹¹ Antonie PLAMADEALA, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹² The name given to the young generation in the interwar era, derived from the name of the "Criterion" Cultural Association which comprised many young intellectuals and was popular for its cultural activities.

¹³ Dating back to 1713, the monastery had been built by Saint Metropolitan Anthim the Iberian.

¹⁴ Some of them, as mentioned by rev. Vasile Vasilachi, were World War II generals Gheorghe Stratilescu, Gheorghe Iorgulescu, Ioan Țone, and Traian Tetrat. Vasile VASILACHI, *De la Antim la Pocrov. Mărturii și mărturisiri*, Detroit, Michigan U.S.A., p. 17-22.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹⁶ George ENACHE, "Rugul aprins din perspectivă istorică", in *Tabor*, no. 3/2013, p. 61.

¹⁷ V. VASILACHI, *op. cit.*, p. 34-35.

¹⁸ Șerban MIRONESCU, "Rugul aprins, un mod de a retrăi Ortodoxia", in *Memoria*, no. 1/2008, București, Fundația Culturală Memoria, 2008, p. 61.

¹⁹ Nicolae NICOLAU, "Rugul Aprins al Maicii Domnului" in *Din documentele rezistenței. Revista Asociației Foștilor Deținuți Politici*, no. 4/1992, București, Asociația Foștilor Deținuți Politici, p. 34.

shape.

Historically, 1944-1947 were years when the internal political situation was marked by ambiguity; communist and atheist propaganda kept expanding. This was perceived as an imminent threat towards religion and spirituality, and it contributed decisively to the anti-communist beliefs of those who gathered at Antim.

With regards to the spiritual preoccupations of the group, an essential feature was the practice of the Jesus Prayer; it was catalysed by the fortunate meeting of hieromonk Ivan Kulâghin, the confessor of metropolitan Nikolai Amasiski of Rostov. Both of them were war refugees established at the Cernica Monastery in 1943²⁰ with the permission of patriarch Nicodim²¹.

Having inherited the spiritual tradition of the Optina Monastery in Russia, Hieromonk Ivan possessed a living experience of the unceasing prayer. Two of the students close to Antim²² were said to have discovered him at Cernica and were the ones who connected him to Sandu Tudor and rev. Benedict Ghiuș. The spiritual communion between Ivan Kulâghin and the Antim group was a natural consequence, therefore Father Ivan was often invited at Antim to pass on his mystical-ascetical experience; he did so until the end of 1946, when he was discovered by the Soviet authorities, arrested and then exiled to Siberia²³.

The Burning Bush meetings would take place weekly at the Antim monastery, both on Thursday and Sunday afternoons, usually from the beginning of the Advent until Easter²⁴. Up until 1948, public lectures were held in the library of the Antim monastery, displaying a range of mystic-apologetic themes, such as: *The Martyrdom of Saint*

²⁰ Adrian Nicolae PETCU, "O cronologie a Rugului Aprins", in *Tabor*, no. 3, March 2013, p. 103.

²¹ ****Cuviosul Ioan cel Străin* (din arhiva Rugului Aprins), edited by Sorin DUMITRESCU, with a preface by Gheorghe VASILESCU, București, Anastasia, 1999, *passim*.

²² These were Roman Braga and Nicolae Bordașiu, according to the latter Interview with rev. Nicolae Bordașiu taken by monk Moise IORGOVAN, Bucharest, August 23rd, 2012. Personal archive of monk Moise IORGOVAN of Oașa Monastery.

²³ ****Cuviosul Ioan cel Străin*, p.96.

²⁴ Daniil SANDU TUDOR, *Taina Rugului aprins*, București, Anastasia, 1999, p. 97.

*John the Baptist, The Life of the Great Martyr Anastasia the Deliverer from Potions, The Unseen Warfare of Saint Paisius the Great,*²⁵ *Hesychasm, Jesus – Incarnation of the Logos, The Original Sin, The Prayer of the Heart*, as well as portraits of the great mystics of the Philokalia etc²⁶. The authors referred to were not only the traditional orthodox mystics, such as: Evagrius Ponticus, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Gregory Palamas; Russian mystics such as: Paisius Velichkovsky, Nikolai Berdiaev or Dmitry Merezhkovsky; but also French authors (Jacques Maritain, Charles Péguy, Antonin-Dalmace Sertillange, Fr. Mauriac, Garrigou-Lagrange) and French catholic publications: *Cahiers de la Jeunesse catholique française, Irénikon* et. al.

Among those who contributed actively to the conferences were: Sandu Tudor, Alexandru Mironescu, Benedict Ghiuș, Sofian Boghiu, Felix Dubneac²⁷, Adrian Făgețeanu, Vasile Voiculescu²⁸, Constantin Joja²⁹, archimandrites Vasile and Haralambie Vasilachi³⁰, Anton Dumitriu, Alexandru Elian, Paul Sterian, Petre Manoliu, Ion Marin Sadoveanu³¹, Olga Greceanu³², and the young Roman Braga³³, André Scrima, Adrian Făgețeanu³⁴, Leonida Plămădeală³⁵, Mihai Rădulescu³⁶, Nicolae Bordașiu³⁷ and others.

In 1946 some of the members agreed to a ‘spiritual recluseness’ or retreat at Govora Monastery, for praying and participation in religious services; while being here, they seem to have designed a form of legal constitution for their group; the birth of the “Burning Bush of

²⁵ Antonie PLĂMĂDEALĂ, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

²⁶ Nicolae NICOLAU, *art. cit.*, p. 33.

²⁷ Theology student and monk, later became archimandrite.

²⁸ Poet and medical doctor.

²⁹ Architect.

³⁰ Brother of Vasile Vasilachi. Monk at Antim, later on at the Pocrov Skete, he endured political detention and died in prison in 1963.

³¹ Writer.

³² Painter and writer.

³³ Theology student, later on became archmandrite.

³⁴ At that time Philosophy student, later on became hieromonk.

³⁵ Later on, became metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală.

³⁶ Student in Letters.

³⁷ Theology student, later on became priest.

the Mother of God” Association is said to have taken place the same year³⁸, but in 1948 the association was disbanded³⁹, and their meetings were banned.

Their activity was in essence a spiritual one; the historical context - the transition years marked by the rising aggression of communism, and their approach – an intertwining of spirituality and culture centred around the Prayer of the Heart (also known as the unceasing prayer or The Jesus Prayer); their purpose was, as stated: “for a deeper search and experience of the Christian dogma and faith”⁴⁰.

The Antim experience was referred to as a “living conviviality” (André Scrima) between laymen and monasticism – a “lay-monastical community” where intellectuals came in contact with the ethos of orthodox Christianity through cultural effervescence shaped into a cultural-spiritual profile.

They were, however, in the attention of the Securitate. The first informative notes concerning their meetings date back to the Antim reunions. One of the survivors remembers the habitual “redundant questions asked by the same one or two audients who needed to justify their payrolls to the party and state authorities”⁴¹. They were sought by a lot of public⁴² and their social impact could have also represented a concern to the political police.

The official dissolution of the Association in 1948 was followed by similar measures taken by patriarch Justinian Marina. At Antim, he replaced Abbot Vasile Vasilachi with Valerian Zaharia who was agreeable to the regime. Also, the patriarch dispersed the main members of the Burning Bush to different monasteries throughout the country. Sandu Tudor (at that time ordained as hieromonk Agathon) was sent to Crasna Monastery in Gorj County and then served political detention from 1950 to 1952. Benedict Ghiuș, Andrei Scrima and others were sent to Neamț Monastery (1950). Vasile and Haralambie Vasilachi reunited at

³⁸ The Association was named “The Burning Bush of the Mother of God”, Daniil SANDU TUDOR, *op. cit.*, p. 92-93.

³⁹ As were, in fact, all associations of any kind.

⁴⁰ Daniil SANDU TUDOR, *op. cit.*, p. 92. The same phrase is quoted by the archive documents; ACNSAS, DGSS Fund, file no. 213/1949, p. 114.

⁴¹ Nicolae NICOLAU, *art. cit.*, p. 31.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 31-32.

the Pocrov Skete (1949-1952)⁴³. Initially viewed with scepticism by the members, later on it these proved to be rather wise measures of the patriarch in order to prevent an eventual arrest of the Burning Bush members.

After being released from prison in 1952, Sandu Tudor (Hieromonk Agathon) retreated to the Rarău Skete and, in 1955, he became a hieroschemamonk⁴⁴. From this year on, he re-established contact with his old, close friends, and occasionally descended to Bucharest to meet them, usually at Alexandru Mironescu's home.

As for archmandrite Benedict Ghiuș, he had been teaching at the Neamț Monastic Seminary from 1950 until 1955. During that time, he also came to Bucharest periodically and met with Sofian Boghiu, Felix Dubneac and Alexandru Mironescu.

Young students in search for spiritual guidance gravitated around these figures, particularly fathers Benedict and Sofian; eventually, youths came to take part in the reunions held at Mironescu's home or at the Plumbuita Monastery's⁴⁵ chapel. A couple of Architecture students made acquaintance of hieroschemamonk Daniil during a summer holiday spent at Slatina and Rarău monasteries⁴⁶. Thus, the initially closed circle was enlarged.

The content of the meetings varied from religious and literary readings to discussions on philosophy or, occasionally, comments on international events (such as the Hungarian Revolution of 1956), with focus on spiritual guidelines for the students, who also came for confession or advice from father Daniil⁴⁷.

To the young students who took part in the group's meetings and

⁴³ After a couple of years they would be arrested as well, mostly for their anti-communist sermons. The files of their political trial are found at National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (ACNSAS), Criminal Fund, file no. 17147, 3 vols.

⁴⁴ Monk of the Great Schema or Russian Skhimnik is the last monastic stage.

⁴⁵ Monastery on the outskirts of Bucharest.

⁴⁶ In 1956 or 1957. This meeting represented one of the main accusations brought to hieroschem. Daniil and three of the students - George Văsâi, Emanoil Mihăilescu and Nicolae Rădulescu - during the investigation that followed their arrest.

⁴⁷ Detailed accounts of the meetings are sometimes given by informants of the Securitate, infiltrated among the participants. For example, see ACNSAS, Informative Fund, file no. 2214, volume 3, p. 145-146.

received both spiritual guidance and intellectual formation, this was a breath of fresh air from the ideological guidelines. However, it would eventually lead to their incarceration along with other members of the group.

2. The Mechanism of Incrimination

The informative tracking⁴⁸ of the group preceded their 1958 arrest long beforehand. The trial group was not, however, homogenous. For example, the first one arrested was father Adrian Făgețeanu, in February 1958; most of the members were arrested in June, a few in July and August, and the last (probably to fulfil the quota) were only retained in September.

The reason for the first arrest may lie in the desire of the Securitate to orchestrate a ‘legionary plot’ as a head for accusation, taking into account Adrian Făgețeanu’s past with the Legionary Movement. This plan could not be implemented though, since it was obvious that their activity was of spiritual and cultural nature, and not political. Also, not all of the elder members were arrested, but five of the students were. What were the mechanisms of incrimination and the reasoning behind the actions of the Securitate?

If we take a closer look at the documents of the “Burning Bush” trial, we note that one of the elements of the accusatory discourse of the Securitate was that of “counter-revolutionary activity under the mask of orthodox religion”. This is relevant because one of the subdivisions of the 3rd Direction of the Securitate had precisely the responsibility of uncovering “the hostile activity developed by reactionary elements within the lines of orthodox clergy”⁴⁹. On one hand, the political police needed to justify its activity.

On the other hand, the same accusation may be integrated in a wider perspective concerning the ‘reactionary’ and ‘legionary activity’ led ‘under the mask of orthodox religion’ by monasteries. The Securitate had kept close watch on all the monasteries throughout the

⁴⁸ Illustrated by the informative group file at ACNSAS, Informative Fund, file 2214, 7 vols.

⁴⁹ Florica DOBRE (ed.), *Securitatea. Structuri, cadre, obiective și metode. Vol. I (1948-1967)*, București, Enciclopedică, 2006, p. 105.

country and had followed the effects of the patriarch's policies on the development of monastic life⁵⁰. The rise of educated monastics was not to the regime's liking⁵¹, and therefore measures for the limitation of monastic life would soon be imposed⁵². Arresting some of the troublesome monastic clergy may have been a suitable measure as well.

The order of accusation for Sandu Tudor (father Daniil) indicated that:

...Teodorescu Alexandru, also known as Sandu Tudor, has led counter-revolutionary activity insomuch that along with other accomplices, *he initiated and organized a subversive group where they developed activity directed against the popular democrat regime of PRR*⁵³.

The argument that the members of the "Burning Bush" group - 'hostile elements'⁵⁴ - were responsible for counter-revolutionary activity developed along two dimensions: the 'mystical, hostile education' passed on to students⁵⁵, and listening to 'foreign imperialist' radio stations' broadcasts, along with 'calumniously' commenting political news. Since the two accusations were insufficient for conviction, an absurd argumentation is added by the inquisitor; the situation is illustrated by the following excerpt from an interrogatory document:

In 1946 (...) we set up the "Friends of the Burning Bush"

⁵⁰ He had supported secondary and higher theological education for monks and nuns.

⁵¹ Because a proper theological education would lead to the rejection of communist ideology.

⁵² We are referring to the 410/1959 Decree for the Organization (in fact, limitation) of Monastic Life. The decree was the response to an extensive report presented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Alexandru Drăghici, in 1958; Cristian PĂIUȘAN / Radu CIUCEANU, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română sub regimul comunist. Vol. I (1945-1958)*, București, Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, 2001, p. 321-331.

⁵³ Italics belong to us. ACNSAS, Criminal Fund, file no. 202, vol. 1, f. 17.

⁵⁴ The elements noted as "hostile" by the Securitate included "all those who, under the mask of religion, make proselitism (different cults and religions), meaning that they speculate upon the religious feelings of the citizens in order to influence them towards hostile, malicious actions against the regime (miracles, lectures with hostile, chauvinistic substrata etc."; George ENACHE, "Misiunile Securității în problema 'Culte' la începutul anilor '50", in *Analele Universității 'Dunărea de Jos'*, Galați, [History series], 8/2009, p. 171.

⁵⁵ ACNSAS, Criminal Fund, file no. 202, vol. 1, p. 30.

Association, housed at the same monastery where its leader, Sandu Tudor, resided. In this way I managed to enter into relations of hostile activity against the regime along with a number of legionaries attracted to the association by Sandu Tudor, such as: Benedict Ghiuș⁵⁶, Sofian Boghiu⁵⁷, Braga Roman⁵⁸. In the association also took part other legionaries which I do not know by name, but I think Sandu Tudor can [name them]. *Since the “Burning Bush” association was mostly composed of legionaries, and the mystical-hostile education being made within the association had enough features of the legionary education, such as: fortitude, mystical fanaticism and others, one may state that the activity of the association also had a legionary character*⁵⁹.

The addition of the ‘legionary’ epithet is the device that transforms the ‘hostile’ activity of the group into a counter-revolutionary one, thus foreshadowing the conviction of the Burning Bush group.

Inside the files of the archives, the Securitate generated a discourse that instrumentalized reality through ideology and wooden language, assimilating the meetings and actions of the Burning Bush with facts worthy of conviction. They were in fact ‘guilty’ of defending themselves (and others) from communist propaganda through their spiritual and intellectual resistance. My personal belief is that their incarceration would have still occurred sooner or later because they were ‘class enemies’: they thought differently, acted differently and dreamed differently from the guidelines of the Party.

Communism did not tolerate alterity; the Romanian communist regime did not tolerate the Burning Bush. In their case, the regime proposed to destroy not a political opponent, but an ethos, because their moral, spiritual and intellectual values embodied the old regime.

⁵⁶ He was never a legionary, but was assimilated as one due to signing a controversial brochure proposing a moral reform inside the Church.

⁵⁷ Never a legionary.

⁵⁸ He was not a legionary, although he was considered so by the investigators, probably because his combative attitude on “fighting communism with spiritual weapons”. See ACNSAS, Criminal Fund, file no. 202, vol. 1, p. 251-320.

⁵⁹ Italics belong to us. ACNSAS, Criminal Fund, file no. 202, vol. 2, f. 158.

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