

*Carmen ALEXANDRACHE**

**RELIGIOUS SUPERSTITIONS IN THE PRE-MODERN ROMANIAN SOCIETY –
SOCIAL SOLIDARITY, PIETY OR THE DISTORTION OF FAITH?**

Abstract: Our study deals with a controversial aspect of the religious life of the pre-modern Romanian society. Certain religious beliefs were considered superstitions by some people, while others took them as proofs of piety. In our analysis, we availed of the notes of some foreign travellers, of the Romanian chronics and of other religious texts.

We concluded that the approach of the problem should consider the perspective of the epoch under scrutiny.

Keywords: *religious life, mentality, alterity, discourse.*

**SUPERSTIȚIILE RELIGIOASE ÎN SOCIETATEA ROMÂNĂ PREMODERNĂ –
SOLIDARITATE SOCIALĂ, PIETATE SAU DISTORSIUNE A CREDINȚEI?**

Rezumat: Studiul de față abordează un aspect controversat al vieții religioase din societatea română premodernă. Anumite credințe religioase erau considerate drept superstiții de unii oameni, în timp ce alții le luau drept indicii ale unei pietăți autentice. În analiza noastră, am făcut uz de însemnările unor călători străini, de cronici românești și de alte texte religioase.

S-a ajuns la concluzia că abordarea problemei trebuie să ia în calcul perspective epocii avute în vedere.

Cuvinte cheie: *viață religioasă, mentalitate, alteritate, discurs.*

Perhaps more than any other problems of religious faith, superstitions dominate the space of religious discussions and manifestations having the tendency to amplify and strengthen the barrier between the “believers” and the “irreligious”, between “faith” and “anti-faith”. Hiding behind the mask of the “local custom”, the superstitious beliefs and behaviours were associated with pre-Christian practices, fact which emphasised their dissonance with the Christian Church, entering thus

* Universitatea „Dunărea de Jos”, Galați (carmen_alexandrache@yahoo.com).

the interdiction area. Their significance was however much more flexible¹, they being explained either as elements of the mythological faith, or as “fragmentary remains, or irrational rituals and systems”², which designated “the religion of the many”³ that was “always in power”⁴, being the oldest form of religion as well⁵. Even in their fragmentary and “primitive” form, they entered the structure of the popular folklore which is difficult to understand for those outside the community in which it was formed. All these aspects are dominated by the belief in the supernatural⁶ and in its unseen forces whose unleashing and unfolding could have been influenced⁷ or whose meaning could have been decoded⁸. This way, the superstitions reflected the man’s will to change the ordered established by God, resorting to means the church would not promote. As this facet gets accentuated, they become forms of unfaith rather than religious faith, their emphasis insisting upon their retrograde and ignorant aspect, an image which has become acute during the modern age⁹. As a result, superstitions quickly gained a pejorative meaning related to the inheritance of the antic paganism (referring here to the barbaric religious practices)¹⁰. Therefore, to leave the discussion about religious superstitions on this level helps neither the individual, nor the moral life of the society, nor the contemporary inter-human and interethnic dialogue. These aspects have also held true in the case of the pre-modern Romanian society.

Usually, the mentions of the existence of superstitions in the religious life of a community amplified during the periods of theological debates which tormented the Christian Church, these superstitions being considered as religious manifestations of a Christian community which were not accepted by another Christian community. This oppositional character dominated the discourses related

¹Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe. Superstition, reason and religion, (1250-1750)*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 5.

²H. Parish, W. G. Naphy, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

³Gh. F. Ciaușanu, *Superstițiile poporului român. În asemănare cu ale altor popoare vechi și noi (The superstitions of the Romanian people in comparison with those of other old and new peoples)*, I.Oprișan edition, Saeculum I.O Publishing house, București, 2001, *passim*.

⁴ The longevity of these religious beliefs must be associated with the fact that they are the result of some conclusions developed through observation and experience. Most often than not, these beliefs formed in relation with the manifestation of situational coincidences.

⁵For “the religion of fear” and the one of “the greatest minuteness”, “the religion of shapes, where one believes in formulas and gestures”, see Gh. F. Ciaușanu, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁶Dale Martin, *Inventing superstition, from the Hippocratics to the Christians*, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 15.

⁷In the popular thinking, superstition reflects the man’s attempt to influence, by all his means, the spirits considered superior to him or to protect himself against their unleashing, see Gh. F. Ciaușanu, *op. cit.*, note 3, p. 30.

⁸The religious practices were more easily mistaken for the superstitious ones because they include the faith in extraordinary event, in miraculous interventions and apparitions, in omens, in the protective force of the so-called sacred objects.

⁹ D. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁰ H. Parish, W. G. Naphy, *op. cit.*, p. 1-2.

to the others' superstitions and superstitious attitude¹¹, but it was also noticed that, in the writings of the Catholics and the Protestants, the presence of the superstitions represented an opportunity for an even stronger commitment for the understanding of the fundamentals of the Christian religion, grafted upon the truth-error relation¹². This is why their preoccupations focused on establishing more schools and on developing the educational system, as measures to eradicate ignorance, the main source of superstitions. Parallel to this "purifying" effort of Christian expression, a Godless rationalism develops sharing the same claims of being the true way and the same missionary and "pedagogical" spirit, whose aberrant expression was the communism. This highlights the best the temptation of the modern spirit to "purify" through education or even coercive means a primitive world, dominated by "superstitions" which prevent the man and society from evolving. The beliefs of the rural world become "folklore", a notion used to denote a simple cultural vestige of a gone world, opposing both Christianity and secularizing modernity¹³.

Since the first half of the 19th century, in order to clarify the concept of "superstitions" and implicitly to remove them from the Christian's life, papers have been printed which, instead of an all-encompassing definition, offered extended explanations of the aspects in which superstitions were present: allegedly good or bad signs of the events, of the lucky/unlucky days, facts or things pretending to influence the planets, to bring luck or bad luck, all dreams and visions, premonitions, witchcraft, apparitions and miracles pretending to help knowing future events¹⁴ and so forth. All these elements labelled as superstitions cannot be known through reason but can neither be discovered through scriptural writings¹⁵. As a matter of necessity, they had to be representative on the level of the community practicing them¹⁶.

Another perspective useful to our analysis belongs to the Romanian folklorists and ethnographers whose attitude of "sympathy" and "condescension" towards the popular manners of faith and expression nuanced the relation between Christianity and "folklore" in the Romanian world. We can better understand the evolution of this phenomenon in the history of the Romanian culture if we analyse the work of three exceptional personalities: Tudor Pamfile, Ernest Bernea and Ovidiu Papadima. In his well-known book, *Sărbătorile la români*, Tudor Pamfile

¹¹ E. Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹³ Arnold van Gennep, *Le folklore*, Paris, Stock, 1924, http://rupestres.perso.neuf.fr/page0/page12/assets/Van_Gennep.pdf.

¹⁴ Superstitions were interpreted as a tacit pact with the devil, see *Superstions anciennes et modernes: préjugés vulgaires. Qui ont induit les Peuples à des usages et à des pratiques contraires à la Religion*. Amsterdam, 1733, p. 18.

¹⁵ For such attempts of defining superstitions and superstitious conducts, see Bernard Whitman, *A lecture on popular superstitions*, Boston, 1820, pp. 5-21; Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, Cornell University, New York, 1972, pp. 6, 12- 19.

¹⁶ H. Parish, W. G. Naphy, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

did not condemn these practices¹⁷, although he admitted their pagan origin¹⁸, because he did not consider them “void” as well, dealing in fact with “a complex code which shows what is to be done and what is not, by means of which the order of the world is preserved: “the people who does not have them does not feel, does not want, is like a cow carried by a child by a rope”. Far from being a characteristic of the Romanian nature, respecting the traditions gives away the human incapacity, obsessed with the concrete and with the polyform character of the mundane realities, of conceiving the existence of a single God who takes care of everything: “It is way insufficient to cover all needs – the people said to themselves, it is hardly possible for God to give rain for the fields and at the same time sun for drying the cloths at the bleaching house”; however, those beliefs that were to be forgotten as a result of their unwanted effect, could have been corrected only by the power of example¹⁹. In the case of the Romanian society, the spiritual meeting between the old pagan beliefs and Christianity generated a strong and coherent blending of some apparently disparate elements²⁰. Therefore, “the Christianity of our folklore is a reality” but not one “of an unflinching fidelity to dogmas” because, “following its own structural lines”, it “always remains Christian in its spirit”²¹.

The problem of superstitions in the religious life of the Romanians is not new; the Church being careful from early beginning to distinguish, by means of canons, what is the true belief from what is the distortion of the belief. However, on a practical level, the observance of superstitions had more than a religious significance: they represented a connection with the memory of the past generations, a manner of preserving the social wisdom and experience, but also a way to reconfirm and strengthen the intra-community relations. This might be the main explanation for their persistence in the life of the Romanian society.

Our premises is that superstitions, generally considered as old ways of religious belief, sometimes integrated within Christian practices, are in fact components of alterity (therefore, subjective), belonging to the discourse of the Other, interested in explaining the nature and existence of all things and events. In other words, superstitions gained identity proportionally with the extent to which “some” perceived the religious experience of “others” whom they did not know well or had less harmonious relations with. As a rule, the “identification” of the superstitions from some religion or other was made relatively superficially, under

¹⁷ Tudor Pamfile, *Sărbătorile la români (Romanian holidays)*, Bucharest, Saeculum I.O. Publishing house, 1997, p. 406.

¹⁸ They are “pagan” “because they do not appear in the canons of the official religious books: they belong to another law, which we have made for ourselves or had been given to us before Christianity” (*Ibidem*).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 404.

²⁰ Ernest Bernea, *Civilizația română sătească (The Romanian village civilisation)*, Bucharest, Vremea Publishing house, 2006, p. 67.

²¹ Ovidiu Papadima, *O viziune românească a lumii (A Romanian vision of the world)*, Bucharest, Saeculum I.O. Publishing house, 1995, p. 170.

the impulse of the sensational, of incomplete knowledge and of the religious “self-sufficiency”.

As it was expected, the existence of superstitions in the Romanian was mentioned more often by foreign travellers even though the Romanian literary conscience was aware of these superstitions as well. These travellers being mainly clergymen (Catholics and Protestants) but also representatives of a more “advanced” world, dominated by the illuminist rationalistic spirit, for them the Romanians’ religious manifestations were generally superstitious. From their perspective, the gestures of exaggerated worshiping of the religious objects were the most invoked evidence of superstition in the Romanians’ life; associated with idolatry as they did not denote piety but ignorance and lack of religious education, they turned into stereotypes used by many of those who passed through the Romanian Principalities or lived here for a short period of time. Therefore, the superstitions themselves were stereotypical components and prejudices present in the creation of any ethnical construction. This meaning has been cultivated in time so as today, especially in the western world, superstitions are identified with a sum of beliefs and practices of others, which we do not agree with²². These are the aspects that we will try to focus on although the explanatory illustrations will be very few due to the space limitation.

The travellers coming from the western space do not seem to understand the “oriental religiousness”²³, focused to a greater extent on the external manifestations of devotion²⁴; for them, the Orientals’ religious experiences belonged to the medieval world, to “ignorance and absolutism”²⁵. Some travellers manifested a “hatred dissimulated with great difficulty” towards these “Greek vagations” while others, trying to be more objective, either recalled them with detachment, or did not include them in their accounts²⁶.

The traveller Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, referring to the Romanians’ religious life, which he wrote about in 1714, tried to emphasise their superstitious behaviour, which he explained through their lack of education. Let us quote a generous portion of his impressions because this lengthy fragment is illustrative for the general vision of foreign travellers referring to what they call

²² Helen Parish, William G. Naphy, *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe*, Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 3. The difference between religion and superstition is closely related to those who perceive them: religion is represented by what the Self of that who lives it believes (that is why it is considered to have objectivity), while superstition is represented by what Somebody else believes (thus seeming to belong to subjectivity).

²³ The foreign travellers who wrote about the Romanian principalities “do not understand the spirit of Orthodoxy”, see S. M. Catalan, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

²⁴ Mihaela Grancea, *Călători străini prin Principatele dunărene, Transilvania și Banat (1683-1789) Identitate și alteritate (Foreign travellers through the Danubian Principalities, Transylvania and Banat (1683-1789) Identity and alterity)*, “Lucian Blaga” University Publishing house, Sibiu, 2002, p.165.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 161

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

“the Romanians’ superstitions”: “They fall to the ground as if the icon were the saint himself or even God. They would like to pray as well but they don’t know any prayer, even *Our Father* is known by very few (...) some only bow and make the cross sign for about 20-30 times, fall on their knees, kiss the ground (...) you can hardly see young girls and boys at the church”; “they have no knowledge of the God’s word or the Bible, and their few priests have little knowledge as they know (...) just to read, while many of them can’t write. Nobody in the country knows what a sermon is. The priest sings the songs and the ritual psalms only out of habit (...) the parishioners can neither understand well, nor interpret what they heard (no layman has a book of prayers or any other book for that matter) (...) for the common people the notions about Christianity goes no further than the fact that they know they were baptised and that there is a Holy Trinity, there are the angels and the satan and that there is an everlasting life and a never-ending punishment”²⁷. The same religious stubbornness²⁸ of Romanians was noticed in the paintings and frescos of their churches, which he called “superstitious representations”, because they depicted the punishments of hell or, quite often, “profaned” the walls with “a senseless bodily representation of God father, fact allowed here against the confessed principles and the declarations of the Greek church”²⁹. Therefore, what might look like piety for the Orthodox, in the case of the foreign travellers proved to be a superstitious attitude.

Another “superstition” transmitted from generation to generation (a “fairy tale” “worth laughing at”) and considered by the Romanians “as a part of the creed” was related to their belief in immortality. Thus, it was said that on great Thursday the souls of the dead used to come back to their families “for food”³⁰. For this reason, “early in the morning, the father of the family of the mother of the

²⁷ Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), pp. 352-353.

²⁸ The strong resistance to the attempts of explaining the falsity of these superstitious beliefs in the Romanians’ life was underlined by Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel as well, when presenting the custom of commemorating the dead. This happened when he was invited to the funeral repast organised by a Christian from Furceni “for his son’s soul”, “so he can have something to eat on his long journey”. That was a superstition, concluded the Swedish traveller with resignation, “which was impossible for me to divert him from”, in *Ibidem*, p. 363.

²⁹ Edmund Chishull, in *Ibidem*, p. 202.

³⁰ A similar custom, noted down by Gh. F. Ciușanu, was observed on the Wednesday before the Great Thursday, (“Joimari”), when, using the dry dwarf elders or the sticks gathered that day they would make a fire in the evening, placing chairs, flowers and water bowls around it. It is believed that the souls of the departed come then, thirsty and trembling with cold. The lady of the house is censured the place to chase away the bad spirits that might unrest the souls of the departed ones (Gh. F. Ciușanu, *op. cit.*, p. 147). In *Descrierea Moldovei* (Description of Moldavia) by Dimitrie Cantemir, “joimărițele” were female-spirits who would wonder around early in the morning on the “green Thursday” and, if they had come across a house where the fire was not on, then they made the “woman who was sleeping” there “to be lazy all the year long” (p. 270).

family makes a fire in front of the house's main door, puts a little chair next to the fire, covers it with a clean cloth and puts some bread, food and drink on it so as the parents, the forefathers and foremothers may feed their soul". The ridiculousness of this superstition was exposed, of course, by a Catholic, the mayor of Baia, a settlement where such an "offering" happened to be snatched by a dog. When seeing the scene, the mayor shouted in laughter: "Behold the soul of your grandfather with four paws, fangs and tousled hair running away with the good food!"³¹

The "superstitious" nature of Romanians manifested also by gestures that were considered idolatrous (worshiping the icon³², the cross³³ and the banners³⁴, the holly relics of saints and the saints, even the priests and great hierarchs), which we have already largely mentioned in the previous subchapters.

The Romanians seemed "governed by little piety and even less devotion"³⁵ when fasting³⁶. Observing the fasting period was done so "drastically" that "they do not even want to hear about the exemptions from their holly canons for cases of

³¹ Marco Bandini, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. V (1973), pp. 344-345.

³² See also the notes of Ioan Argento, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. IV (1972), p. 261.

³³ We also mention Edmund Chishull's tale, in 1702, who noted, while crossing Walachia, that "on our way we encounter many crosses erected in many places to waken the piety of the Christian travellers", see *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 195.

³⁴ When Camillo Cavriolo's embassy arrived at King Radu Șerban's court, an anonymous Italian wrote in 1603, it was welcomed with solemn pomp. Due to this occasion, they exhibited two large country banners, considered by the Romanians as "miracle workers"; that is why they "kneeled, kissed the ground and bowed their heads in worship, which was a truly superstitious action"; "from this point of view, these nations sin a lot", see in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. V (1973), p. 320.

³⁵ Anton Maria del Chiaro, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 375.

³⁶ The Moldavians fast on Wednesday, on Friday and four times a year, "at the right time", without fish during the Lent and the Virgin Mary's fast. Some, "out of a great error", do not eat meat on Monday either and "others decide by themselves to fast on other days as well" on the wakes of saints Atanasie, Gheorghe and Dumitru. Some women, although not nuns, "willingly take a vow not to eat meat all their lives" (D. Cantemir, *Descriere (Description)*, p. 270). These forms of manifestation of faith were also encountered in the *Descriere curioasă a Moldovei și Țării Românești (A curious description of Moldavia and Walachia)* (1699), in the case of both the Orthodox and the Catholics. Moreover, the Romanians "drastically observe these fasts, eat only garlic, onion and other things like these with simple bread, eat neither cheese, nor eggs and even less meat" (*Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII, 634). For sure, the superficial nourishment was not entirely due to religious beliefs. For instance, the use of garlic had a superstitious connotation as well, as it was believed that it was effective against the evil eye, the harm done by ghosts and other spirits, according to Gh. F. Ciușanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 194, 202, 203. Garlick, as well as wormwood, was also worn as a lucky charm, especially by children, because of some alleged miraculous, protective powers, (*Ibidem*, p. 204).

illness or other need”³⁷. An equal indignation was showed earlier by Petru Bogdan Baksic, who, referring to the manner in which the Romanians understand to be religious, noted that “almost the entire country is fasting on Monday, Wednesday and Friday”, because they “are forced” to do so, idea proven by the fact that they “could not care less about God’s law”. The Romanians observed the fasting periods but lives “like animals, unaware of what God and his law mean (...) very stubborn and persistent in being schismatic”³⁸. This attitude toward observing the fasting period determined Marco Bandini to note that the Romanians “believe that is a lesser sin to steal // to kill a man, than to eat meat on forbidden days”³⁹.

The Romanians’ superstitious beliefs also manifested when it came to the need of protection against the disease and epidemics, of soothing the effects and sufferings caused by these. Believing in their therapeutical powers over individuals and animals, the people would resort to various practices, plants and behaviours considered superstitious, even if they invoked the presence of divinity. Other travellers wrote about the empirical means of treating the sick ones, such as enchanted “herbs”⁴⁰. It seems that the Romanians, especially the women, took pride in “knowing the herbs and their virtues so they know how to use them in case of a disease, even in spite of the doctor whom they later fully blame if the patient dies”⁴¹. The situation was not the same for the members of the elite, because “the reasonable people” “follow the doctor’s orders”, the latter being “well paid by the treasury” and also given tokens of gratitude from the boyars⁴². In the next example, the Romanians’ gestures were not Christian at all, according to the interpretation of a liberal Catholic, even if the details of their doing would have been most

³⁷ Anton Maria del Chiaro, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 375. “The Moldavians do not allow pregnant women or terminally ill people to eat meat or milk; not even as medicine”, see Marco Bandini, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. V (1973), pp. 345-346.

³⁸ For Bogdan Baksic, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. V (1973), p. 225.

³⁹ Marco Bandini, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. V (1973), p. 344.

⁴⁰ This practice was preserved in time, being noticed by Gh. F. Ciaușanu among the customs of those from Vâlcea, specific to the night of Saint Gheorghe (*George*). Then, “the old women who know a lot pick up the good herbs from the field, charm them and tie them on the stable’s jambs for the cattle’s health, on the gate’s pillars and on the girder or on the upper frame of the doors, for the wellbeing and health of those living in that house (*op. cit.*, p. 29).

⁴¹ Anton Maria del Chiaro, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 378. Obviously, an exaggeration, because the presence of doctors was not a rare thing in the Romanian space; however, only the ruler and the boyars could afford their services. It is true that their number goes up in the 18th century as well as the references to them. For the biographical presentation of these doctors with religious vocation, see Pantelimon Miloșescu, *Clerici și teologi medici în istoria poporului român (Medical clerics and theologians in the history of the Romanian people)*, Tridona Publishing house, Bucharest, 2008. The cases that present interest for the period under scrutiny here were those mentioned by the Greek Ioan Molivdos Comnen, who taught Physics and Mathematics at the Royal Academy of Saint Sava in Bucharest (p. 30-38), by Daniel Fonseca (pp. 38-40), by Ioan Hrisoscoaleu, etc.

⁴² Anton Maria del Chiaro, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 378.

significant for judging them⁴³. Thus, in order to stop the plague or other catching disease from spreading⁴⁴, a “certain number” of Romanian women used to gather together to spin and weave, in 24 hours, a hemp shirt which they would burn afterwards in the middle of a courtyard, believing that “the plague was annihilated along with the shirt”⁴⁵. Most certainly, the enchantments uttered on this occasion would have helped us more to understand this practice.

Most often than not, in order to protect their children, more vulnerable to disease and evil eye, the Romanians would resort to charms and spells⁴⁶, convinced that in doing so they would fortify their organism and protect them against these evils. For this matter, after the children had been given a bath, every day till they were 7 or 8 years old, the “nursemaids” made “a black sign on their forehead” as they believed that if “the eye of that black sign is stopped from the very beginning, the danger of the child being bewitched by the evil eye was smaller”⁴⁷.

At the middle of the 17th century, the use of spells, divination and charms was quite frequent within the Romanian space, fact which was documented by

⁴³This attitude of ignorance manifested by the Romanians towards medicine was criticised in the 19th century as well, see Dr. Gheorghe Crăiniceanu, *Igiena țeranului român. Locuința. Incălțăminte și îmbrăcăminte. Alimentațiunea în diferite regiuni ale țerii și în diferite timpuri ale anului* (*The hygiene of the Romanian peasant. The house. The footwear and clothing. The nourishment in various regions of the country and in various moments of the year*), Bucharest, 1895, paper printed and awarded by the Romanian Academy in the same year. The causes which lead to this situation were the same: “the ignorance, superstitions, fatalism and obstinacy that make many of them, even among the relatively educated ones, to preserve the old legacy tooth and nail” (p. 11). There was however, as it had been before, a possibility of the peasant’s improvement: through “his diligence for learning, as the foreign observers travelling through our country also noticed”, through the advice coming from “his culture exposed fellow man” or from the “one who managed to get some education”, “we can hope that he will get rid of his bad habits, that he will not remain insensitive in matters of life, that he will not find comfort only in the words: «God’s will be done»” (p. 12). Another interesting solution suggested by him was that the priests should preach “cleanness along with religion” (p. 103); this comes to strengthen the idea that the link between the church and the people was fairly strong but not too well exploited from the perspective of the need to catch up with progress of the age. We shall revisit and further analyse these aspects.

⁴⁴ According to the popular beliefs, the diseases are considered “attacks from the unclean spirits”, and their multitude of forms can be inventoried through the countercharms uttered against them, see Gh. F. Ciușanu, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁴⁵ Anton Maria del Chiaro, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 378.

⁴⁶ For more terminological clarifications and exemplifications, see Emanuela Timotin, *Descântecetele manuscrise românești (secolele al XVII-lea–al XIX-lea) (Romanian manuscript countercharms (17th – 19th centuries))*, Romanian Academy Publishing house, Bucharest, 2010.

⁴⁷ Anton Maria del Chiaro, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 378. According to this custom, also described by Gh. F. Ciușanu, whenever somebody, especially a child, is bewitched by the evil eye, he/she must “be counter charmed by *benghi* [beauty mark]”, by making a mark of mud and spit on the child’s forehead (*op. cit.*, p. 23).

foreign travellers as well⁴⁸. Marco Bandini dedicated this matter a special fragment in the description of the journey he took to the Catholic parishes in Moldavia. We take several statements from his notes which help us understand the significance of charms and countercharms for the Romanian religious mind. In Moldavia, the spellbinders (*Incantatores* – male spellbinders, *Incantatrices* – female spellbinders) were “valued” almost as much as “they value the very subtle and pious learned ones in Italy”. It seems that learning and practising the art of incantation and spellbinding (*incantations et maleficiorum artem*) were not forbidden, this conferring “respect to all”. Leaving the obvious irony and resentments aside, the gravity of committing these acts surpassed the one of the old times, because “what the Antiquity attributes to the old foretellers, in these parts is known by personal experience”. However, the importance of the spellbinders in the life of the Romanian society was given by the amount of trust in their abilities to solve the most various problems of an individual: “if somebody gets sick or loses an object (...), if somebody is at enmity with a friend or a well-wisher (...), all these and other similar to these (...) could hardly be comprised in a single volume”⁴⁹.

The visions, seen as omens/future predicting signs⁵⁰ do not seem to have been included by the foreign travellers among the superstitious beliefs, probably due to their association with the delirium of the sick or dying ones, or with the miraculous apparitions of the saints or, more likely, with the belief, pretty developed in the Western world as well, that the future can be read through deciphering the signs it constantly shows to humans. At least, this is the impression left by Anton Maria del Chiaro when he told the vision that Stanca, one of Constantin Brâncoveanu’s daughters, had when her end was getting near. Having her mother and sisters close to her, she said “trembling” that she “saw many Turks coming to take father by the neck and get him to Constantinople”. The Romanians’ superstitious nature became apparent only after the girl’s funerals when, as the ruler got in front of his palace’s gate, where there was a cross made of white stone which marked with Cyrillic letters the end of his father⁵¹, Papa the chamberlain of

⁴⁸ Antonio Angelini from Campi, in the letter addressed to the Congregation’s secretariat (September 3, 1676), explaining the need of an “obedience” of one year, so as to be able to treat his suffering, being at the same time dissatisfied with the fact that he had to go to Walachia (Moldova), where “there are no quality doctors but only the murmur of the old women”, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VII (1980), p. 334.

⁴⁹ Marco Bandini, *Codex. Vizitarea generală a tuturor Bisericilor catolice de rit roman din Provincia Moldova (1646-1648) (Codex. General visitation of all Catholic churches of Roman rite from the Province of Moldova (1646-1648))*, bilingual text, ed. T. Diaconescu, Presa Bună Publishing House, Iași, 2006, pp. 416-419.

⁵⁰ Related to this aspect, although it refers to a much earlier moment than that analysed by us, we recommend Timotin Andrei’s work, *Vision, prophéties et pouvoir à Byzance. Étude sur l’hagiographie méso-byzantine (IX-XI siècles)*, Paris, 2010.

⁵¹ In the popular belief, the crosses erected on the spot where a person died had the same importance as the grave where his/her body had been buried, becoming the place where the deceased’s soul had rested the most before crossing into the other world, or the place where it continued to exist if this soul had not found its peace, closure, or rest.

Brâncoveni, a chicken flew on his arm⁵², “which was immediately considered a bad sign, especially by those persons inclined to superstitions, who are convinced that even the purely accidental events are some miraculous effects of providence”⁵³. Therefore, an event was considered an omen or not according to its context and participants.

Generally speaking, not every gesture meant to decipher the future was included into the category of superstitions; such a preoccupation was sometimes interpreted as some people’s special ability to read the signs of destiny, even by means of stars’ movements and alignment⁵⁴. These preoccupations existed in the Romanian space as well, protected somehow by the legal norms of the 17th century⁵⁵ and by the curiosity of intellectual nature⁵⁶. However, many of them gave importance to the custom “of foretelling the mildness or harshness of weather on the basis of certain signs”, which was done before certain holydays and it neither changed the natural order, nor tempted God’s will⁵⁷. Such a custom was observed on November 18, on Saint Platon’s day, when Romanians watched closely “anything that happened on that day” because these things became “a clear and definite indication”: “if it is snow or cold on that day, they say the cold of that year is going to be harsh; if it is rain and sun, they foretell that the following winter is not going to be too cold, but milder”⁵⁸.

The examples can go on, and are more numerous in the case of describing the burial customs, of which these travellers seemed to be particularly interested, especially that the death phenomenon continued to dominate the sensibility of the

⁵² In the popular beliefs, the chicken was considered a death bird, about which it is said that it accompanies the deceased’s soul on its journey to the world beyond.

⁵³ Anton Maria del Chiaro, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 390.

⁵⁴ In the Western world, these preoccupations were encouraged by the development of scientific knowledge, especially in the fields of botany, physics, chemistry, astronomy, zoology etc., according to Paolo Rossi, *Omni de știință (The man of science)*, in Rosario Villari (coord.), *Omni Baroc (The baroque man)*, translated by D. Cojocaru, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2000, pp. 281-307.

⁵⁵ The law did not accuse that “philosopher or star reader” who “searched someone’s face and called him a thief”, because “he found out that he was a thief by means of his craft” (Gl. 106, p. 132).

⁵⁶ This is how we explain the presence of a manuscript of an astrological nature written in Turkish telling about the influences of each month of the year upon people’s deeds and behaviour (Doc. no. 2, dated November 2, 1662), of a religious text in Armenian (Doc. no. 3, dated in 1700), of a calendar depicted on a parchment in Persian (Doc. no. 4, dated also in 1700), see DANIC, Inv. *Fond Personal Siruni (The Siruni personal Reserve)*, II (1597-1972).

⁵⁷ The same conviction that the man and his house (the micro cosmos) are part of the very extended macro cosmos which contains the stars and the spirits as well, also manifested in the feudal Montaignou society, according to E. Le Roy Ladurie, *op. cit.*, vol. II, Meridiane Publishing House, București, 1992, pp. 168, 172.

⁵⁸ Paul de Alep, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VI (1976), p. 236. This episode can also be used in the demonstration related to the time of celebration, as the rhythm of work and knowledge of weather.

European world. Called funeral customs and practices, such gestures and attitudes have already been highlighted in our discourse, in the section dedicated to this aspect⁵⁹.

Now, we will revisit the Romanians' attitude towards the deceased's body, because it was labelled as superstitious by the travellers. Probably, this was why Anton Maria del Chiaro mentioned the Romanians' aversion to open the dead bodies⁶⁰, even if this was done in order to enrich the anatomical knowledge. The dissatisfied liberal Catholic noted that a surgeon who came to that place "had to be very careful" because he faced the danger of being called "filthy and everybody would avoid using his services, even under circumstances which suffered no delay such as taking blood or other surgical act"⁶¹.

A Westerner, especially one who had an ecclesiastical background, found it difficult to accept such forms of religiousness that he considered superficial and far from the real love of God, which had to be based on knowing God and not on automatic mechanisms, be they religiously motivated. However, what is more interesting is the explanation given by these foreign travellers to the fact that the Romanians observed the superstitions; according to the causes indicated, we will be able to nuance what was generally called the Romanians' superstitious attitude. It seems that the main factor leading to the Romanians' superstitious behaviour in the 17th century belongs to ignorance, generated either by the general lack of interest in culture, or by not knowing Slavonic, the language of cult in the Romanian churches. Marco Bandini noted that as far as the Moldavian Romanians were concerned, "the blindness, ignorance and madness of this people are so big that they hardly know anything of God and the happiness of heaven". This was due to lack of religious education⁶², as "there is hardly anyone that knows Our Father" and in churches "there are no preaches held" and neither do they "teach the

⁵⁹ We add a short fragment from *Descrierea curioasă a Moldovei și Țării Românești (A curious description of Moldavia and Wallachia)*, in 1699, which we consider illustrative for demonstrating the existence and use of such image clichés in that era. The practice of commemorating the dead on every Friday was ironically and scornfully presented, as a proof of the Romanians' ignorance: "they light a little candle at the head of the dead buried under a rock and bring all sorts of food to the grave which the priests take later on and eat in the name of the dead and their poor souls", see in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 634.

⁶⁰ In the popular mentality, the human corpse "is the dirtiest, most filthy thing", which "defiles according to the degree of kinship"; touching it was more dangerous for family of the deceased one, see Gh. F. Ciușanu, *op. cit.*, p. 106. Moreover, as "every other people", it was believed that every part of the human corpse was "good for something", for magic or as a talisman (*Ibidem*, p. 123).

⁶¹ Anton Maria del Chiaro, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 378.

⁶² This lack of religious education would be especially due to the Romanian clergy, uneducated and seemingly also unwilling to change this. The metropolitan bishop Antim, clearly dissatisfied, saw "among his priests" "so much stupidity, so much lack of education and so much amateurism", which bring "no use to the miserable herd", see Antim Ivireanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 166, 174.

Christian doctrine in their schools because the teachers and priests themselves have hardly learnt anything about the matters of the spirit". Instead of these, "their entire piety resides in making the cross sign, which they call *mătanie* (genuflexion)", and "some old-womanish fairy tales pass as the divine truth"⁶³.

The ignorance status invoked by the foreign travellers must be correlated with the effects of the Reformation and those of the Counter-Reformation, by means of which the priest's authority in interpreting the biblical texts is questioned⁶⁴, which was rather great in the case of the Romanians⁶⁵, as well as with the idea of Christian ethics and, implicitly, of Christian morals. Consequently, for some travellers, the responsibility for the people's lack of culture was attributed to the clergy⁶⁶, whose lack of interest in theology walked hand in hand with vanity and propensity for luxury, for worldly habits, worthy of the sober westerners' disdain. Petru Parčević, an apostolic vicar in Moldavia, wrote to the Cardinal of Propaganda, on July 20, 1670, that "the Romanian bishops are the most uninformed, the most ignorant of religious education and real faith"⁶⁷. As a matter of fact, it seemed that the entire clergy was interested in cultivating their believers' superstitious beliefs. Anton Stepančić, addressing the cardinals of the Congregation, on July 29, 1673, told about the collapse of their church in Bucharest, affected by a "babble" concocted by the "schismatic Greeks and Romanians": Dositei II Notara, the patriarch of Jerusalem had allegedly cursed it and "as soon as he had uttered the curse", it collapsed. Talking about this event, the priests and monks "immediately started to shamelessly bark against the holy church" and "the stupid crowds of Greeks and Romanians" "believe them without a trace of doubt – even more than the faith dogmas", "with the same strength as they believe that fire falls from the sky from Jerusalem on every Saturday before Easter". In spite of the fact that there were still "three or four enlightened boyars

⁶³ Marco Bandini, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. V (1973), pp. 343-344.

⁶⁴ The deference to priests was generally assimilated with superstition. In reality, this behaviour was regulated by church teachings and religious and juridical norms. *Îndreptarea legii (The justice of law)* insisted on the circumstances under which a hierarch could have been accused by a layman (Gl. 56, p. 106) or "judged" for his sins (so as "not to forsake the Godliness or the holiness", Gl. 68, p. 111), threatened with penance those who would curse or hit a clergyman (Gl. 47, p. 100) and draw attention to the fact that the priests had "a right judge", (Gl. 56, p. 106).

⁶⁵ We would also like to mention here the following fragment which does nothing else but strengthens the other statements made by foreign travellers: "few from this people can read and even fewer can write. Regular people can not pray for that matter"; this fact generated the saying "once you pass Braşov into Transylvania, Our Father is over". The Romanians use to "leave the matters of faith as well as praying to the priests and this is why they believe everything they are told and take as holy things even the most laugh-worthy tales and lies", see *Descrierea curioasă a Moldovei și Țării Românești (A curious description of Moldavia and Walachia)*, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII, (1983), p. 634.

⁶⁶ In the foreign travellers' vision, the Church was "responsible for the state of religiousness" in the country, see M. Grancea, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

⁶⁷ Petru Parčević, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VII (1980), p. 175.

who know very well that this church stands upon a very weak foundation and that it has been roofless for many years”, its rebuilding was however impossible because :the patriarch placed a curse”. As a “wise measure”, the Bulgarian observer suggested that there should be “a blessing of our holy master and allhappy father vicar of Christ, so as the patriarch’s curse could be erased”⁶⁸. This statement proves the importance the curse, especially the church one, had in the Romanian mentality, aspect presented by us in Chapter III of this work. Moreover, the statement proves that this form of religiousness was not generalised at the level of the entire Romanian society.

The fact must be underlined that, according to circumstances, the foreign travellers themselves were interested to use, in their favour, the same arguments which denounced the Romanians’ propensity towards superstitions⁶⁹. Pan (Sir) Michal Floryan Rzewuski, reporting the entrance of the Polish delegation in Iași, noted on June 26, 1677, that even if it was raining, for a while, “where the delegation was walking, a God’s miracle, there fell no rain”. On the other hand, the fact that the rain started precisely when the delegation entered Moldavia, added Ioan Gninski, the secretary of the delegation, with obvious pride, for the Moldavian boyars was “a good sign for our negotiations and an instance of God’s mercy, especially that God has punished them with a terrible drought so far”⁷⁰. Later on, Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, describing a locust invasion in Moldavia, which happened in August 1710, underlined the fact that “many simple peasants blamed us” for this “calamity” and they “did not believe that this was a certain punishment from God”⁷¹.

For those coming from an Orthodox environment, these practices were not the same as superstitions. As a matter of fact, in the 17th century, for the Orthodox Church the problems were generated by “delusions”, “fairy tales” and “heresies” which, through their words alien to the Orthodox church tradition, the teaching of the Christian canons and synods, were threatening the Christian-Orthodox unity and faith. This is why the religious gestures made by the Orthodox believers, accused by others of being exaggerated and lacking Christian foundation, were in fact proofs of piety and, because they were observed by the people, they proved they were rooted in the old and true Christian tradition. The popular practices occasioned by certain religious events, even if not traceable in the dogmas, were labelled as local “customs” and “traditions”, included however within the religious feelings of those who observed them. Such local religious practices were written

⁶⁸ Anton Stepančić, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VII (1980), pp. 314-316.

⁶⁹ As a matter of fact, such inclinations towards superstitions were known among the Catholics as well, but this was explained as an influence coming from the orthodox side. Marco Bandini also noticed this but “our (of the missionaries) measures and the efforts of the Society of Jesus have straightened the bad habits of the Catholics”, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. V (1972), p. 345.

⁷⁰ Pan Michal Floryan Rzewuski in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VII (1980), p. 352.

⁷¹ Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 318.

about by the patriarchal companion, Paul of Alep; some of these we have already presented in the previous chapters where we emphasised the popular religiousness manifested when crossing the thresholds of Christian life.

The Romanian perspective was similar to this as it results from the internal writings of the aforementioned century. For instance, the Church, through its priests, participated in many customs observed by the Romanians during the great events of their lives, even if these customs did not belong to the church ritual; although they did not receive the support of the Church, they were not condemned either. The explanation can be found in the fact that the ecclesiastical discourse was directed rather towards defending the orthodox faith threatened by the pressures coming from the Catholics and Protestants. The popular practices did not constitute the core of the church interventions because the battle of Orthodoxy was against the enemies from outside⁷², coming under the shape of the “heretic lure”, of the “growing delusion” through western cultural influences and religious printings⁷³. The same spirit was present in the writings of Nicolae Milescu Spătaru, Petru Movilă and the laws of the 17th century, which we shall mention later on in this analysis.

As a matter of fact, the development within the Romanian space of those religious beliefs considered to be superstitious was somehow favoured by the specificity of the revealing ways by means of which the faith’s truth reached the believers; from this perspective, the (verbalized) “confession” and the “teachings” (written or contained in the tradition) were as important as the Scripture. These representations of dogmas (“the commands”) had, according to the explanation given by the metropolitan bishop Petru Movilă, “two faces”: “some teach the scripture contained by the theological books of the holy Scripture and others are dogmas transmitted from mouth to mouth from the apostles and these were interpreted by the synods and by the Holy Fathers and faith is based on both of them. It is not right to be kept hidden in our hearts alone, but our mouth should preach this and confess it without fear and doubt”⁷⁴. The faith in miraculous apparitions, in visions, was not incriminated either, because these were usually connected to the saints’ deeds, which one is expected to give testimony about⁷⁵. This is why, in the Romanian vision, superstitions had a different orientation. For instance, all practices meant to change the course of a destiny were not considered superstitions but wicked interventions which, in order to reach their purpose,

⁷² Among other reasons that determined Petru Movilă write *Mărturisirea de credință* (*Confession of faith*) was the fact that “the quarrels and heresies sowed (...) troubles and meanness among Christians” (p. 231).

⁷³ Due to this the world of the Romanian village witnessed vivid and harmful contradictions between the orthodox (seen by the others as superstitious and amoral) and those who chose to switch to other cults (pejoratively called “sectarians” by the orthodox).

⁷⁴ Petru Movilă, *Mărturisirea de credință* (*Confession of faith*), p. 191.

⁷⁵ The teaching referring to Saint John ended with the urge that “those who had diseases and experienced miracles in various forms from the saint should tell about it” (*Cazania* p. 458).

worked together with the forces of darkness. Called “spells”, “charms”, they were incriminated by the church and the juridical norms⁷⁶. However, provided they contributed to the discovery of certain mistakes⁷⁷, or to the healing of the body⁷⁸, they were no longer forbidden⁷⁹. Therefore, the fear of sin, especially the one mediated by the devil, was greater than the desire to purge the orthodox faith from remnants of the practices considered pre-Christian⁸⁰.

It seems that either this distinction was not very clear for the Romanians⁸¹, or they resorted to spells and charms much too easily. Anyway, the interventions

⁷⁶“The sick one should not indulge into ideas that are forbidden by the church, that is to wish to take care of his health by means of spells and deals with the devil, because by doing so he will get more poisoned than well, but to place all his hope and thoughts in the mercy of God and take the medicines made by the recognized doctors” (Petru Movilă, *op. cit.*, p. 286).

⁷⁷ The one who will find a treasure using spells and devils is to be given nothing (...) because his master is unknown” (*Carte Românească (Romanian book)*, p. 18); see also *Îndreptarea legii (The justice of law)*, Gl. 89, p. 124.

⁷⁸ “The medicine man is a teacher, as the doctors call them (...), better than the enchanter (...) we will believe what the medicine man says about a wound, on condition he doesn’t swear or if the medicine man is not Jew or of another religion” (*Îndreptarea legii (The justice of law)*, Gl. 249, p. 252).

⁷⁹“When the wounded man wants to heal with charms and spells, he alone is guilty of his death” (*Ibidem*, Gl. 249, p. 249-250; “When the wounded man wants to heal with charms and spells, he alone is guilty of his death but if the wound happens to be deadly and the medicine men abandoned him, saying that he will not get well, then if, out of necessity, he calls the charmer or the speller we should not consider that he has made a great mistake, so as those who wounded him could escape and not get punished with death” (*Carte Românească (Romanian book)*, p. 107).

⁸⁰ For this aspect, see Brian P. Levack, *Vrăjitoarea (The witch)*, in Rosario Villari (coord), *op. cit.*, pp 255-281. The fear of witch was so great in Europe that the theologians, the men of law and the doctors got involved in their exposure and persecution (*Ibidem*, p. 257). This fear was generated by the magical powers the witches had but also by the conviction that there was an alliance between them and the devil in order to receive such powers (p. 258).

⁸¹ As a result of these preoccupations to clarify the fabric of the Romanian magical practices, Dimitrie Cantemir established the differences between them in *Descrierea (The Description)*, defining each of them individually, of course as they were understood by his contemporaries. Here follows a list of them: “binding” (“spell”) = “stops the groom on the wedding night”; “unbinding” = “frees from the before-mentioned spell”; “spells” = “a kind of charm used by the peasants, by means of which the women think they can bind their lovers or can drive insane those who they hate”; “counter-charm”= a different kind of spell by means of which “they believe they can heal the diseases that are not deadly”; “rodding” = “a kind of divination using twigs/rods on the night of January 1st” in an attempt to find about “the misfortune and troubles of the year ahead” (for this purpose they also use “lentil, beans, pots placed one on top of the other in a well-known order” (p. 255). Therefore, in the 18th century the terms spell and charm designated the same magical practices, the performers being the wizard/witch and the charmer. Researching these aspects, Emanuela Timotin reached the conclusion that, in fact, the meaning given to these terms will fluctuate according to the confidence in the efficiency of the practices they stand for, see *op. cit.*, p. 19.

related to these practices made by the laws of the 17th century were numerous. *Pravila de la Govora (The Govora code of laws)* comprised several indications regarding the penance that had to be given to wizards and priests who, using the holy objects, indulged themselves into witchcraft⁸². *Cartea românească de învățătură (The Romanian book of teachings)* and *Îndreptarea legii (The justice of law)* considered that the use of charm was undoubtedly a harmful activity⁸³, possibly of a woman upon another person, as it was shown in the chapters establishing the conditions of breaking up a couple, presented by us in relation to the Wedding Mystery. That is why in *Pentru vrăji și fermăcătorie: și pentru ceia ce merg pe la vrăjitori; și pentru ceia ce poartă baere (For spells and witchcraft: and for those who go to wizards; and for those who wear talismans)* mention was made about the necessity of giving a canon to those who make or ask for spells to be made⁸⁴.

In the preachings of metropolitan bishop Antim Ivireanu, the magic act was not allowed at all, not even the one that the social practice encouraged, considering beneficial for the individual and the community⁸⁵. He also taught the confessors to judge this kind of gestures of the believers as gestures that have to be considered sins, and the laymen as well as the clergymen have to confess them. Constantly asking the believer to confess them, the priest helps him to understand their gravity, so as to be able to give negative answers to the questions of his confessor: "Tell me, my son, do you, by any chance, read the stars, do you *make spells*? Or

⁸² Here are just a few samples: "The priest who uses spells or goes to the wizard must be banished" (p. 122); "If a priest tells lies or indulges himself into witchcraft and if he does this to his neighbour or if he oppresses or steals from him, that priest should stop doing these and repent, and if not, he should not perform the liturgical service anymore" (p. 60);

⁸³ This perspective was present in the 18th century as well, as it could be seen in *Codul Calimah (The Calimah Code)* (1817): "By improper acts we understand the spells made by deceptive people for the deceiving and fear of the stupid and gullible ones" (Vasile Grecu, Alexandru Costin, Alexandru Rădulescu, *Codul Calimach (The Calimah Code)*, The Academy Publishing House, Bucharest, 1958, p. 243).

⁸⁴ *Îndreptarea legii (The justice of law)*, starting from Vasile the Great's Canon 65, presented the punishments of those who resort to magicians, adding that "sorcerers" are also those who "invent spells", which "means that the sorcerer or the one who spills wax or lead, or who binds the man and the woman so as not to mate, or who make any kind of spells shall not receive communion for 20 years (...) the sorcerer who conjures the devils and makes those spells that harm people (...), those who bring sorcerers in their houses to removes the spells or to have their clothes read, or to learn something they do not know, or go to wizards or witches shall not receive communion for 3 years (...) for spells and charms, and for those who go to wizards; and for those who wear talismans" (Gl. 328, p. 302).

⁸⁵ It seems that at the level of popular mentality the differences between white magic and black magic, as well as the high magic (divination) and the low one (malefic) were not clear and they have been established by the modern writers. They were often taken for science. Even if they lead to the same result, the differences between science and magic were fundamental: science (the experiment) "aims to teach the man" while magic (the tradition) aims to control. See Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, Cornell University, New York, 1972, pp. 5, 6, 12, 19.

did you spill wax, or lead? Or did you, by any chance, bring witches into your house to deliver you from spells? Or do you, by any chance, make them yourself or have you ever made them? Or do you, by any chance, charm the animals so the wolves won't eat them? Or have you had others do this? Or have you, by any chance, bound a man and a woman? Or any other binds for some disease? Or do you wear any talismans or herbs?" "And if it is proven that he has done such things or others have done them for him, he will be penanced for 6 years, as the holy canons command. And the sorcerer who makes this kind of work is penanced as a killer, that is for 20 years, as the great Vasilie commands"⁸⁶.

The metropolitan bishop Antim addressed again the magical practices identifying them with the denial of faith: "the confessor must ask the ones who confess (...) whether they have made charms or have told people their future with beads or coal or have had others do this for them, or believe in charms (...) or make bindings or other devilish things, for which they will be severely penanced because they give up God when making charms and believe in the devil"⁸⁷. We notice that beginning with the 18th century the church discourse became more combative against what might have encouraged a shifting away from the church. The danger was greater among the many because it was coming from a tradition that the church had tolerated for too long.

The people's customs and beliefs were not considered superstitions by the Romanian chroniclers either, probably due to their religious aspect and the moral effects they had upon the community. Perhaps, in the culture of the Romanian society, the idea of superstitions (as the westerners defined it) was more difficult to take shape as compared to the rest of Europe. It seems that Ion Neculce was the only chronicler who gathered traditions and inserted them into fragments referring to various personalities and events⁸⁸.

More was written about the Romanians' customs and traditions by the learned Dimitrie Cantemir in *Descriptio Moldaviae*, work which remained "a landmark in the annals of the Romanian ethnography and folklore"⁸⁹. There are a few aspects that we need to further focus upon. Dimitrie Cantemir was probably

⁸⁶ Antim Ivireanu, *op. cit.*, p. 207. "You should also ask the women if they are wearing herbs or have ever drunk herbs not to have children. If it comes out that they have done such things, as murderers they should be penanced. And if she made an abortion, she should not be given communion for a year. And those who have worn herbs or still do should quit doing it and be penanced for six years. And if she makes spells to know what child she will have or to know other things, she will be deprived of communion for six years. Moreover, they should be asked the same questions about all sins as you ask the men and for as many years they are in penance they are not allowed to knead communion bread" (*Ibidem*, p. 210).

⁸⁷ Antim Ivireanu, *op. cit.*, p. 317 ("What the confessor should ask the one who confesses and how he should start").

⁸⁸ Ovidiu Bârlea, *Istoria folclorică românești (The history of Romanian folklore)*, The Romanian Encyclopaedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1974, p. 22.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

aware of the westerners' attitude of condemning the superstitions and magical practices⁹⁰ and especially their conviction according to which these are to be found most often than not in the eastern world. The illustrious scholar inserted enough examples which he presented in the natural tone of a portrayer. We also intuitively grasp the sympathy he feels for his people, which softened the negative impressions the practice of superstitions might have had upon somebody ignorant of the Romanian civilization. In "Despre religia moldovenilor" (*On the religion of Moldavians*), Cantemir admitted that "the people is very inclined towards heresy and they haven't got entirely rid of the old uncleanness and still worship in poems and songs, on weddings, funerals and other known events, several unknown gods who obviously come from the old idols of the Dacians". However, in the same chapter he underlined the fact that "nobody doubts the letter of faith anymore, nobody seems to be unaware of any of the commandments and does nothing of what the church forbids. No heresy or heretic has ever appeared in Moldavia and so much the less could have something like this spread around (...) the people has never accepted the scholastic and mischievous teaching of the slanderers, but they have considered the simplicity of the Gospel and the teachings of the holy church fathers are enough for the redemption of the soul in the absence of school"⁹¹. Perhaps, not to encourage the religious resentments of the European readers, he inserted in this work an event which the author himself seems to have witnessed and which shifts the focus upon the utilitarian purpose of these superstitions. His father's treasurer had "a valuable horse" which, having been bitten by a snake, got swollen. In order not to lose his horse, the treasurer called an old witch to cure it. She asked the owner of the horse to fetch "unstarted water" from a spring, which she later on enchanted and gave the young man to drink. But because he was not "very happy" about what he had to do, the better the horse was recovering, the bigger he swelled and had "unbearable pains". It was only after the "old hag had enchanted the water again, that he recovered as well". There was also another case, when a witch cured the animals in a whole barn of scabies by uttering "disenchantments over a tuft of horse hair". Therefore, the disenchantments and charms uttered by the Romanians had the power to make things right and this was the reason for which the Romanians resorted to sorcerers.

The other examples described by Cantemir, probably also influenced by his readings, seem to stir the readers' will to find out more about such Romanian customs and practices, instead of intervening in order to straighten the Christian faith in these areas. As in a fairy tale, the Moldavians, the main character, were living in a world where magic and supernatural were as concrete as their very lives.

⁹⁰ One should not forget the fact that during the Transylvanian Reform, there were several witch trials, following the Western pattern, a phenomenon which was unknown to the Orthodox environment (details in Paul Bruszanowski, *op.cit.*, pp. 154-160).

⁹¹ Nicolae Milescu Spătaru expressed a very similar point of view: "no heresy spread here, God preventing it from happening, or if it appeared, it immediately vanished as a shadow (*op. cit.*, p. 41).

The Moldavians believed in bad spirits, whose dwelling was either in the water, or in the sky, most of them being girls and old women. Some of them, called “Ursitele” (The Fates), were present when children were born, bestowing on each of them “spiritual and bodily characteristics as they wished and decided from the very beginning all the misfortune and misery the child would face in life”. Others, called “Frumoasele” (The Beauties), were “sky nymphs” who often loved young and beautiful lads” whom they made ugly or sick if they “would not listen to them”. From sunset till midnight, at crossroads, a “shadow” that people called “north” would walk around and which “was said” to take “the shape of an animal”.

The Moldavians believed that things could be influenced in their favour. For instance, in order to bring the rain, some would dress a 10-year-old girl in “paparudă”, while others, the bad kind, could even kill someone. Striga, an obviously old witch, used to do this: “she stealthily killed the newly-born, with devilish craft”. That is why the people could not stand bad witches, the ones who got caught being harshly punished. As in the old times, if a woman was suspected of being a witch, then her hands and legs were tied up and she was thrown into the water. If she sank, she was not that guilty but if she floated, her guilt was so severe, that she had to be burned alive.

For the Church, this kind of beliefs could not be accepted and fighting them was not easy either, especially that they were grafted on the background of Christian religious feelings. At the level of popular mentality, the practices considered superstitious did not contradict the Christian religion at all. Explaining their falsity did not seem to be the best way of discouraging people from observing them⁹². That is why the Church resorted to pastoral measures, to religious training of its clergymen⁹³, especially to the appeal to the Canons where such practices were forbidden. Thus, St. Vasile the Great’s *Canon 65* and St. Gregory of Nyssa’s *Canon 3* forbidden the communion for 20 years or for the entire life, according to seriousness, for those who were guilty of “witchcraft, spell, fortune telling”, and *Canon 61* of the 6th Ecumenical Holy Synod, punished the priest with defrocking and the layman with 6 years communion interdiction if they practiced magic. The threat of depriving of “Lord’s body and blood” must have been terrifying for the Romanian Christian because, on the one hand, his sin became public and, on the other one, he lost the divine protection which he needed so much in those terrible times. Moreover, for the guilty one this punishment must have meant a form of exclusion, temporary of course, from the community of believers, relocation in the “marginals” area. We could not know for sure to what extent these canons were

⁹² For instance, in the Byzantine world, in time, they had tried to eliminate superstitions by means of canons or other regulating texts”, but the amplitude of this process does not compare with that in the Western world.

⁹³ For this, see also the patriarchal recommendation made when metropolitan bishop Atanasie was ordained: “you bishopness should take care of the holy vessels and the holy objects, that is to make sure they are honoured in all churches (...) our icons are should not be just adornments but should be honoured (...)”, *Condica Sfântă (The holy register)*, p. 85.

applied but we suspect that there were not many cases or that they did not become significant enough to be mentioned. Nevertheless, we believe that, in the 17th century, in spite of the theological interventions trying to clarify their non-Christian features, there was no separation between such beliefs and the religious feelings in the popular mentality. The apocryphal literature, the folklore, the customs, the popular art outlined the same conception about life that our peasant had, where “problems” were solved in the most Christian and proportional manner of understanding⁹⁴. An explanation for this was given by those who could be called connoisseurs of the Romanian popular soul, for whom “The ancient local spirituality adapted to the forms and meaning of the religious life represented by the church, without abandoning its content and values, while the official church adapted to the conditions and meaning of the local tradition, without abandoning what it was essential to it”⁹⁵. Consequently, our folklore is Christian and is based on the conviction that “among the cosmos, man and Divinity” “there is a huge brotherhood, where body and soul overlap, where there are no clear cut boundaries between «the kingdom of heaven» and «the light of the concrete world»”⁹⁶. The Romanians’ religious life would have unfolded between the official religion, preached by the church and that of the soul, lived collectively rather than individually, but where divinity continues to be present⁹⁷. The Orthodox Church seems to have been aware of this fact as well. Therefore, two large categories of facts take place in church. On the one hand, there is the Sunday liturgical service, more “official” in nature, along which various religious acts manifest giving rhythm to human life and often have a local, archaic character. In church, between the priest and the believers, there is a constant dialogue between the “official church” and the manifestations of the popular religiousness, a dialogue described by Ernest Bernea: “The Church fulfils religiousness, fulfils the peasant’s inner needs and gives the rules necessary to promote the village spirituality”. These aspects could not be understood by the foreign travellers, more willing to illustrate, with new “arguments”, the cliché-image of the Romanians’ religious life

⁹⁴ Teodor Bodogae, *Despre cunoștințele teologice ale preoților români de acum 200 de ani. Semnificația unui manuscris (On the Romanian priests’ theological knowledge 200 years ago. The significance of a manuscript)*, Sibiu, 1944.

⁹⁵ Ernest Bernea, *op.cit.*, 2006, p. 72.

⁹⁶ Ovidiu Papadima, *op.cit.*, p. 172-73.

⁹⁷ We could find a similar interpretation in E. Le Roy Ladurie, *op. cit.*, vol. II. The historian considered that for those living in Montaillou, the interest in obtaining the redemption of the soul was so obsessive that the use of magical practices went beyond their useful level (p. 195). Knowing the Romanians’ attitude towards the forgiveness of the sins and the salvation of the soul, we do not exclude the idea that those practices labelled as superstitious should be subordinated to these preoccupations.

dominated by superstition. The situation did not change in the next century either⁹⁸.

Consequently, the perspective of understanding the presence of superstitions in the life of the Romanians of the 17th century did not go away from the social practices which strengthened the bonds among the members of the community, but especially from the discourse of those promoting them. However, none of these discourses can become for the present day researcher a safe way of probing the religious mind, so as to make it possible to distinguish one act of religiousness from another. This is why the problem of superstitions must be assigned to the field of the action of alterity. As a matter of fact, this conclusion seems to have been present in the conscious of those who lived in the 17th century if we are to quote a statement of the politician and scholar Nicolae Milescu Spătaru: concluding the analysis of the “beliefs shared by the Eastern Church”, which it will keep, “God help, with no change”, inserted the reflection meant to put an end to the disputes over them: “what you praise, another despises”⁹⁹.

⁹⁸The Moldavians’ superstitions were “endlessly numerous and wicked, too rooted into the heart of this people” and they “destroy the very faith, because whenever they are in need, in danger and dire situations, they run quickly to certain spell-binders as they call those women who indulge themselves into such a deceiving art, and do not run to the Almighty, to the holy Virgin and the saints”, see the note of the Milanese conventual Franciscan of May 3, 1725, of Francesco Bosi, in *Călători (Travellers)*, vol. IX (1997), p. 149.

⁹⁹ Nicolae Milescu Spătaru, *op. cit.*, p. 55.