

FROM THE THEOLOGICAL SPEECH OF A TEACHER INFLUENCED BY ȘAGUNA: SIMEON POPESCU

Corina TEODOR¹

1. Assoc. Prof, PhD, "Petru Maior" University, Târgu Mureș, Romania
Corresponding author: teodor_ccorina@yahoo.com

Abstract

The present study proposes an analysis of the intellectual formation and historiographic creation of a historian and theologian, today almost completely forgot. Simeon Popescu is part of a generation educated in the spirit of Șaguna's beliefs and the fact that these youngsters attended some European Universities gave them an important advantage over the former teachers at the Sibiu Theological Institute. The adolescence spent by Simeon Popescu in a school in Blaj and later on the rigour that he found at the University of Leipzig, will strongly influence him, making him part of the generation that had already displayed a strong critical spirit, but it also made him tolerant to the Greek Catholic Church and its history. His works reflect his interest for the historical truth, thorough documentation and the role of history in understanding the present.

Keywords: *ecclesiastic historiography, Orthodox Theology, Simeon Popescu, Andrei Șaguna, theological education.*

Today only those who read the memories of Titu Maiorescu, Ioan Slavici or Ion Barbu can get in contact with Simeon Popescu's name among other people. On the other hand, the history of historiography has been much more reluctant to offer him the place that he deserved. However, despite this almost unanimous silence on behalf of the historiography historians, one may notice, from the correspondence of those times, the intellectual brilliance of an exceptional personality. Contemporaries noted an enigmatic figure, an oratorical talent and a passion for teaching. Who was Simeon Popescu? A part of the answer can be found in Ion Barbu's writing, one of his students from the Gheorghe Lazăr High-School in Bucharest: "I know almost nothing about him and I don't even try to know. I prefer his figure to remain somewhat legendary. Was he a professor? Was he a priest? I used to listen to him fascinated by his every word. I don't think there has ever been a student more attentive to his lessons... Can you remember his

very proud stature, the way he wore the frock, his emaciated face and his eyes worn out by colds? What a certainty of gesture, how much nobility in this ascetic face!"¹

Today we can, at least partially, reconfigure the biographic profile of Ion Barbu's "enigmatic" teacher. Simeon Popescu was born on august 6, 1848 in Rîpa de Jos village and was the son of Vasile, an orthodox priest. Because the history of historiography has kept him hidden up to know, we shall try in this study to thoroughly analyze his intellectual formation and his work, in order to give him his well-deserved place in the Romanian theological culture.

After graduating the elementary classes in his native village and the Romanian school in Reghin, he was sent to the Greek-catholic secondary school in Blaj, which he graduated in 1870 with very good results². The years spent in Blaj represent a positive experience for the young student, who integrated into an atmosphere of Romanian solidarity, stimulated by a dualism which allowed him to exercise his literary talent and his interest for history. Between the years 1866-1868, we find him among the initiators of the manuscript magazine "Constanția (Statornicia)", as the author of the historical article "The hero Michael, ruler of Dacia", and of some poems. The lack of confession spirit that he displayed in his years of maturity may have had its roots in the third number of the above mentioned magazine, dedicated to Ioan Micu Moldovan³.

His theological studies, between the years 1870-1873, at the Orthodox Institute in Sibiu gave him a new experience. It was the time of the director Ioan Hannia, and of the teachers Ilarion Pușcariu, recently returned from studying in Vienna, Nicolae Cristea, the well-known editor

of the “Romanian telegraph” and than of the “Tribune” and Ioan Popescu who launched a rich pedagogical literature. They were also șașuna’s last years of pasturing and Simeon Popescu was to keep an unaltered image of this hierarch for the rest of his life. Withdrawn by the imposing image of the metropolitan, he has often dedicated him deep reverence thoughts, full of a sentimental load characteristic to the romantic period. This is the case with the preach that he has held at Săliște, in 1886, at a reunion of school masters in Sibiu: “among us there are many who have had the chance to see his face, hear his voice, see his facts, be amazed by his wonderful look and be overwhelmed by the charm of his name. We, the ones who have seen him and got to know him know, missing him more and more, are obliged to mourn more than those who know him just from what they have heard. But both the one who have physically seen him and the ones who haven’t, we feel his warmth and his sweetness: we all thank the Heavenly Father for giving him to us and we shed tears of blood for having taken him from us.”⁴

There is much realism in this description because Simeon Popescu owed șașuna his place among the scholars sent abroad by the orthodox consistory. From 1874 up to 1877, he was at Leipzig University, together with his colleague, Ioan Crișan and studied theology and philosophy and took his PhD in theology and philosophy on June 20, 1877.⁵

Returning to Sibiu, he started his teaching career. Due to the fact that in 1878 Ilarion Pușcariu was elected “consistorial assessor” his place as a teacher was taken by the young Simeon Popescu, who taught dogmatics and biblical studies and who became in 1882 a permanent teacher after graduating the contest with a very good grade⁶. Anyway in Sibiu, there were many well-known predecessors who have taught these theological subjects: Grigore Pantazi, Sava Popovici Barcianu, Ilarion Pușcariu⁷.

This was the first period of his livresque creation, his theological work being remarkable in presenting the experience that he gained at his German studies. A theme that was present in the author’s biography in the following years was that related to the four fundamental creștian texts, the Gospels. It was presented in Sibiu in

1880 in a scholarly manner, aimed at the general public and at his students. Choosing these subjects represents a connection to the șașunian activities. The orthodox metropolitan published in 1857 “Interpretation of the Gospels in the Sundays and Holidays of the Resurrection”, a students book aimed for the ones enrolled in the Theological Seminar in Sibiu. Despite the fact that the paper printed by Simeon Popescu in 1880 belonged to the biblical studies, he included some contemporary and historical reflections, reiterating the versatile personality of șașuna. Future biographers were warned about the four facets that they had to present about him, due to the fact that șașuna had been a model, a Church leader, a political person and a culture representative. The teacher from Sibiu believed that only this kind of an analysis may lead to a complete picture of șașuna, in the same way the four Gospels are complementary despite certain differences: “however these biographies would make an impression and offer consistency, they would unite into one, meaning that șașuna lived in Ardeal and he was a Bishop... The relationship between șașuna’s biographies can also be found between evangelists.”⁸

The really impressing aspect when first reading this book is the way in which Simeon Popescu built syllogisms to solve historiographic differences about in genesis of the Gospels. Each Gospel was thoroughly analysed using the same analytic pattern: a critical view of the historiography of the subject, reason for writing, purpose of writing and a demonstration of the authenticity by means of the rich classical ecclesiastic historiography. Theologians such as Saint Augustin, Eusebiu from Cesareea, Origene or Irineu are often included in the references.

The logic of the livresque construction answered the initial pleading, which invoked the differences between the four texts that are explained by Simeon Popescu by means of a different historical context. Putting them in chronological order according to the eledged writing time, he found the specific of the four Gospels: *Matei’s Gospel* addressed the Jewish Christians in Palestina and was meant to show that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah; *Marcus’s Gospel* was written for the pagans and Simeon Popescu can prove it with the help of linguistics;

Luca's Gospel is meant to be an extension to the first two and it demonstrated that Jesus was the Savior of the world and Ioan's Gospel, which stirred up the most controversy related to its authenticity, was meant to present Jesus as the "incarnated divinity."⁹

Simeon Popescu's book differentiates itself through a rigorous use of his contemporary foreign historiography and this includes the works of Chr. E. Luthardt, his "illustrious master."¹⁰ Nevertheless the young theologian did not hesitate to express a critical view, selecting the contradictions from the arguments of his former teacher. At the same time, he signalled the importance of the topic which he presented in an era in which the culture of the orthodox priests had plenty of problems: the scepticism towards authenticity. *Ioan's Gospel* "I heard it from the mouth of some orthodox scholarly priests, which claim that Ioan's Gospel is a philosophical poem written by an unknown author from the second century."¹¹

A paper which is at least as interesting as the one printed in Sibiu in 1882, *The development of the papal primacy and its influence on Christianity. Historical research*, which begins with a Prologue, in which Simeon Popescu presented in an original way the need for objectivity when it comes to the ecclesiastical history: "if for the so-called profane writers is hard to remain strictly objective, for the ecclesiastic writers it is even harder. The reason is that here the earth is even more fascinating..."¹² The book, which aims to follow, in the historical evolution, a crucial problem for the Western church history, and also for the Eastern one, had however a history in the Romanian religious literature: Alexandru Sturza had published in 1851 a volume which limited the history of the topic up to the XVI century¹³.

Simeon Popescu's merit was that he delimited, with originality, the two phases in the development of the papal primacy, the first one up to the schism of Photius, the second one up to the First Vatican Council, as well as the criticize of the old historiography in the name of truth: "the present treaty is neither apologetic nor aggressive. Besides all the pain, the writer observes some bad parts, which took place in the church to which he belonged, even with the danger of being labelled *heretic* and *reformer* and

of being gratified with anathemas.... He presents facts that cannot be challenged, putting the truth is its rightful place."¹⁴

Despite the fact that this methodological belief isn't always respected and sometimes one may feel inflections of the religious bias, the book is important due to the difficulty of the subject which can be claimed both by theology and by the history of the Church. The author draws, following the theories from the catholic and the orthodox theories, his own conclusions, according to which the papal primacy existed at the end of the first century and not later and its source can be found in the "religious society of Rome."¹⁵ The development of the papal primacy was traced back in the historical context by ordering the stringent conditions that have favoured it, from the role of the bishop of Rome, to the political position of the city of Rome, the support offered by the Roman Emperors or the myth of Petru's Cathedral. It is to be noted the way in which Simeon Popescu explored the historical sources, starting from Eusebiu, Origene, Cyprianus, Tertulian, Ammianus Marcellinus and up to the famous collection of documents established by Mansi in 1759.

Cohesive work, Simeon Popescu's book also includes his German experience, the influence of the German history, of Herder's philosophy, which stems from the widely used saying "the spirit of the people", as a particular conception of the individuality of nations. The roots of its constantly declaimed objectivity can be found in the german historiography of the 20th century, especially in the works of Leopold von Ranke.

A first turning point in Simeon Popescu's biography appeared in 1883, when despite the recommendation made by the consistory Metropolitan for his teaching skills, he preferred to turn to an ecclesiastic career: he was ordained priest and he was chosen the Dean of Sibiu (1883-1888). We may find this vocational metamorphosis inexplicable, if it hadn't been for his friend Slavici, who wrote about the tension created by the hostility of the bishop Miron the Romanian: "the position of a seminar teacher is very hard, the students know that the bishop cannot stand their teacher... My friend Popescu doesn't fight anymore: he accepted to be elected arch-priest because, spared of the constitutional

settlements of the church, he can work freely in this small circle"¹⁶.

In the five years in which he worked as an arch-priest he remained the same dynamic person. He got to know everything due to his visits in different parishes and he watched very attentively the ecclesiastic and school life, he earned the sympathy of the parishioners, he collected funds for restoring churches and he increased the revenues of priests and teachers¹⁷. His constructive spirit could also be noticed through his involvement in the cultural life of Transilvania and as a correspondent at the *Romanian Telegraph* during the time he spent in Lepizig, where he used to sign by his nickname Simionas Răpeanu and in 1884 he was part of a delegation of the *Tribuna* newspaper, along with the other founders: Ioan Slavici, J. Bechnitz, Diamandi Manole, Eugen Brote, Nicolae Cristea and Ion Russu Șirianu¹⁸.

The idea of a new Romanian newspaper in Transilvania appeared during the time of the Putna celebrations, among a group that will be formed in 1876, around *Foișoarei Romanian Telegraph*. This newspaper spread in Ardeal the junimist spirit, which had made Șaguna thrilled, as well as a counter etymological trend and the language purification of neologisms¹⁹.

In all this time Simeon Popescu was among the participants in the discussions related to the new editorial board, and he participated in the merger talks with the leaders of the *Gazeta Transilvaynia*.

The timing coincided with the beginning of a beautiful friendship: "I am here with the arch-priest Simeon Popescu, former theology teacher, a person my age, not married and an open and intelligent nature. He is a well-educated man, is interested in all, works for three, one of the men sent by Șaguna in Leipzig... Like all teachers here, is also a stubborn junimist."²⁰

Undoubtedly, the most dramatic episode in the biography of Simeon Smith was represented by his conflict with Bishop Miron the Romanian. Despite his exit from the Sibian teaching universe, this conflict could not be solved. On the contrary, in 1887, on the 18th of December he was the main focus of a letter sent from Budapest by Vincentiu Babeș to the Romanian bishop²¹. Beyond the personal dislikes, the disagreements between

Miron the Romanian and Simeon Popescu presented the conflict between the *Romanian Telegraph* and *Tribuna*, between the filo-guvernamental politics of the bishop and the devotion to the national movement of those favouring the *Tribuna* newspaper²².

The only solution to the conflict was to send Simeon Popescu away from Sibiu, the more so as he was only "tribunist" who, through his position, was subordinated directly to Miron the Romanian. The first step was taken on 10 March 1888, when, by means of a note, the orthodox bishop ordered the disciplinary investigation and suspension from office of the arch-priest. This decision led to a journalistic conflict: while *Tribuna* accused the incitements of Partenie Cosma, who had suggested the bishop to fire Popescu, *The Romanian Telegraph*, counter-attacked by publishing the deviations of the arch-priest, following which Miron the Romanian took the an important decision: material misunderstandings, abuses at the elections for the archdiocesan council and even disciplinary nonconformity: "Mr. Simeon Popescu blatantly walked the streets of Sibiu during summer in pants and a wide hat and his look resembled everything you want with the exception of a priest."²³

The Synod in May 1888 was meant, among others, to decide the faith of the Sibian arch-priest. However the external pressure continued and Slavici decided to publish in *Tribuna* the list of those who signed Popescu's dismissal, a group which was lead by none other than Partenie Cosma. Yet the bishop managed to have most of the Synod on his side and therefore he could take the most severe measures. The arguments in favour of the arch-bishop were also present, as it was the case with Nicolae Cristea's testimony, who proposed to have Simeon Popescu reinstated until the end of the investigation²⁴. As it was decided that the Synod cannot have disciplinary competencies only at the national congress of the Orthodox Church in Transylvania, opened on 1 October 1888, did the bishop manage to remove Simeon Popescu not only from his position, but also from his eparchy²⁵.

Fortunately, the unexpected time until the final decision offered the opportunity for some intellectual solidarity events. The spiritual leader

of *Junimea*, Titu Maiorescu gave the arch-bishop the department of practical theology at the Bucharest Faculty of Theology²⁶. His movement to the kingdom represents a new stage in his career, a retrieval of his teaching abilities. He has stayed at the Faculty of Bucharest for only two years, his resignation being caused by controversy regarding a dogmatic exegetical book which he had published in Sibiu in 1881, arousing Maiorescu's regrets: "I express my thanks for the conciliatory spirit that you have shown and for the pedagogical talent that you have proven during the time you have worked as a faculty professor."²⁷

He continued to work as a religion and a Romanian history teacher at the Normal School (1888-1900), and for short periods of time he was also the director of the Central State Library (1891-1894), director of the Sf. Sava Boarding-School (1894-1895), a teacher at the University Pedagogical Seminary founded by Spiru Haret (1899-1900) and he ended his teaching career at Gh. Lazar High-School (1901-1918) and he was also a priest at the Elena Doamna girls asylum²⁸.

Theologian and publicist, arch-priest and historian Simeon Popescu was an exceptional teacher and a master of elocution. It is a trait which can be noticed by analysing the memories of his former students from Bucharest: "no matter how much towering and impressive Gion was in his times, the boys were still reading a book during his class. When it comes to Simeon Popescu this was impossible." Not that he was bad and punished, because in his case we speak of a good badness, he supported his students very much, but his lectures were fascinating due to his artistic exposure and methodical knowledge and therefore it was impossible not to listen to him. Honestly speaking, there wasn't any other teacher more loved by his pupils, having more authority or being more suggestive in his presentation than "the priest Simeon", as the students used to call him in their own language. His classes were a feast. His lessons were arising from the depth of Holy Scripture, strengthened by many examples taken out of the pagan classicism, from the national history, but also from rationality²⁹.

The years spent in Bucharest gave him the chance to include his name in the same universe as his old protectors, Andrei Șaguna and Ilarion Pușcariu, as the author of two schoolbooks about the history of the Romanian church. Appeared successively in 1902 and 1903, the books presented a general image of the history of the Romanian church, starting from the dissemination of Christianity in Dacia and up to the end of the 19th century. It goes without saying that the didactic rigor and the methodological norms limited the author's analysis possibilities. The two schoolbooks did however analyse a fundamental problem, starting from the foundation of the Romanian and Moldovian metropolitans and up to the analysis of the other ecclesiastic institutional structures, the relationship with the patriarchate of Constantinople, the representative bishops from the medieval time, the monastic organisation, and the usage of the Romanian language in the church. The schoolbooks reflect the romantic conception of the author by frequently stating the nation-confession or the State-Church duality. From a spiritual point of view, the books don't present the same objectivity as his other papers written two centuries before. For example he makes a harsh indictment to the religious union with the Church of Rome: "the Romanians from Transylvania, following the misfortune of being united with Roma, in 1700, managed to preserve their Orthodoxy and therefore they avoided the complete disaster: the safe way to denationalization."³⁰

When we compare the two schoolbooks we can notice some clear differences: the one where Simeon Popescu is the only writer displays a greater interest for the confessional problems of Transylvania: the religious union was judged in the broader perspective of the Austrian politics based on prevalence support of Catholicism³¹, and Șaguna has his own chapter. At the same time, the second book, presents the ecclesiastic history of the other two Romanian provinces, Bucovina and Basarabia in the 18th and 19th century and it also includes considerations about the scientist hierarchies from the Principalities of the 19th century: Melchisedec Ștefănescu, Filaret and Neofit Scriban³².

If we analyse from the perspective of his entire work, from which, in this study, we have only selected the most important elements, one may say that Simeon Popescu was a talented author who combined the theological high elevation comments with historical sayings. His writing focused on two fundamental coordinates: the erudite one and the educational one. Apart from papers of a high theological analysis he also has many catechism editions, methodologies for studying religion as the one from 1882, revised in 1892,

Besides his books of school history (in 1902 and 1903) there also editions of the Deanery Synod acts in Sibiu in 1884 and 1885, hagiographic comments and numerous articles published in *The Romanian Telegraph*, *Tribuna*, or the *Theological Magazine*³³.

Gradually withdrawn among the theologians with a bitter polemic spirit faithfully practicing being a teacher in Bucharest, Simeon Popescu has kept a spiritual connection with Transylvania. He was part of the *League for the cultural unity of Romanians*, he was involved in the trial of the memorandists, and on the rare occasions when he went beyond the Carpathian Mountains he showed the same mysterious spirit as always. This is how it happened on the 21st of May 1906 when he was in Sibiu together with the bishop Mețianu, the vicar Mangra, Miron Cristea, Ilarion Pușcariu, Matei Voileanu and Ioan Lupaș at the celebrations for the sanctification of the cathedral. With much delight, his arrival was depicted by Nicolae Iorga: “among the glamorous hats of a group, wich comes back from the great synod, one may notice the face of a thin priest, wearing glasses, very tall, with a large gold cross at his neck and with a decoration on his chest. Foreign people were looking astonished at him: was he a Serbian or Greek bishop, or a patriarch, says from time to time an amazed individual? He is only the priest Simeon Popescu, a worthy Transylvanian from Șaguna’s chosen group, who came to Romania and now he is a teacher at one of our schools.”³⁴ We don’t know if this was his last meeting with the superiors from Transylvania, but it certainly was one of the most important.

Sick, lonely and refugee in a simple house, he died on February 11, 1919 and he was buried at the Saint Friday cemetery in Bucharest.

Certainly these words are only a preliminary note on a portrait. In the the archives from Sibiu or Bucharest one can find other information that complete the picture of this exceptional character, who can be reclaimed either by the theological culture or by the teaching culture.

In some way the present study represents a game of destiny. Simeon Popescu is mainly described by his books. I had the chance to read the first sample about the papal primacy which belonged to Augustin Bunea and a schoolbook about the history of the church belonging to Veniamin Pocitan, one of his last disciples. The Greek-Catholic historian and the orthodox bishop included it in their libraries. And I considered this situation the most wonderful testimony of the un-confessionalism in which Simeon Popescu has been taught, and to which I have to respond in some way...

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