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Orthodoxy and Islam in the 18th Century

The Place and Role of Dimitrie Cantemir in this Period¹

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Introduction

The dialogue between Christianity and Islam has a long history that goes back to the Islam's beginnings, knowing the different periods in which successive moments of understanding and conflict fallowed. Following this controversial history, the representative figures who have contributed to trying to find the bridges of dialogue between the two monotheistic religions, are distinguished. Among these, an important place takes Cantemir (1673-1723), prince of Moldavia (1710-1711), member of Academy from Berlin in 1714, who lived for a long time in Constantinople, the former capital of the Byzantine Empire which in 1453 fell under Turkish occupation. Thus, his works dealing with the history of the Ottoman Empire and Islamic doctrine, have their basis in the personal experience that Cantemir has lived in the capital of the Ottoman Empire and also in-depth knowledge of the main Islamic sources that helped him to give to the posterity representative works for understanding the Muslim religion and the relations between Christianity and Islam during the Ottoman Empire development and decline.

Christianity and Islam in the History

In one of his works, Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos speaks of the existence of three great periods of the dialogue between Orthodox and Muslims in the Byzantine era, from the emergence of Mohammedanism until the fall of Constantinople under Turks on May 29, 1453.

¹ This article was presented with the occasion of the International Conference „Dimitrie Cantemir - Educator of Romanians”, 3rd edition, October 22-24, 2015, Bucharest. This present study will be published in Romanian in the Journal *Teologie și Viață*.

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The first phase extends from mid-century 18th until mid-century 19th AD, the Byzantine attitude being “mainly derisive and disparaging”.³ Among the early Christian writers who have dealt with this problem include St John of Damascus (d. 750 or 784), with the work *The Source of Knowledge* (chapter *Against Heresies*). For him, Islam is not a religion that should be considered serious, being considered more than a Christian heresy. Another writer dealing with Islam is Bishop Theodore, the Bishop of Harran (or Roman Carrhae) in Mesopotamia in his work *Against the Jewish and Saracen Heresies*. It is considered the first serious work related to the study of Islamic teaching. “The first period of literary confrontation between Christians of the East and Islam was centered in Syria, where the seat of the caliphate was located. The works of the two theologians referred to above reflect actual experiences based on direct personal dialogue with Muslims. Both of these theologians lived among a Muslim population and knew the Qur’an in the original”.⁴

The second phase of dialogue between Orthodox Christians and Muslims is between mid-century 9th and mid-century 14th, the central concern of Eastern being the Byzantine capital, Constantinople. Among those involved in the talks are Samona Gazes, with the work *Dialexis with Ahmet the Saracen*, Euthemios Zigavenos with the work *Dogmatic Panoply*, Nicetas Choniates, with the work *Treasury of Orthodoxy*, Bartholomaios of Edessa, with the work *Censure of the Haragene* and Nicetas of Byzantium, with the work *A Refutation of the Book Forged by the Arab Muhammad*. This text, although controversial, is a careful analysis of the Qur’an, being at the same time, an translation attempt of the sacred book of Muslims in Greek, while the Latin translation appeared only in 1141. “The impressive success and spread of Islam was becoming a nightmare for the Byzantines. They realized that this religion, in spite of or perhaps precisely because of its logical and ethical peculiarities, was a major threat to the empire. They therefore adopted a more hostile policy”.⁵

The third phase of relations with Islam runs from mid-century 14th and mid-century 15th, during which “was distinguished by its gentleness and

³ Archbishop ANASTASIOS YANNOULATOS, *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, Translation by Pavlos Gottfried, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2003, p. 104.

⁴ Archbishop ANASTASIOS YANNOULATOS, *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, p. 105.

⁵ Archbishop ANASTASIOS YANNOULATOS, *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, p. 105.

objectivity”.⁶ It is noted personalities like St Gregory Palamas (d. 1359), the author of several works: *To the Atheist Chionai, A Conversation Recorded by the Physician Taronites, Who Was Present and Witnessed the Event; Letter Sent to the Church from Asia, Where Its Author Was Being Held Captive; Letter to David the Disypatos, a Monk*. Other Byzantine writers with similar concerns are: the monk Joseph Vryennios (d. 1425), with the work *Conversation with an Ishmaelite*; emperor John VI Cantacuzenus (d. 1383), with the works *Against the Muhammedans* and *Against Muhammad*; emperor Manuel II Palaeologus (d. 1425), with the work *Dialogue with a Persian of the Rank of Mouterizes in Ancyra, Galatia*. “The Byzantines can be considered the forerunners and initiators of Christian-Islamic dialogue, which in our day is encouraged on an international scale”.⁷

After this period of relative peace, the dialogue between Orthodox Christians and Muslims, the things have changed meantime with the dominance of Islam in the former Byzantine Empire. One of those who continued to write about Islam, but in another country, Russia, was Maxim the Greek (1470-1556), who wrote three books about the religion. “In this fourth phase the eastern Church suffered hardships. Despite the periodic tolerance of certain enlightened leaders of the Ottoman state, Muslim extremism often broke out and various sociopolitical pressures gave rise to waves of Islamization in Asia Minor, the Balkans, and Crete”.⁸

In the borders of the Ottoman Empire (15th-19th centuries) an entire literature has been developed that treated the rapport between Orthodoxy and Islam. From a first phase of mutual knowledge, closer than in the previous eras, it was reached at the end, to a real apocalyptic literature in that it feels increasingly the feeling of worry about the forced Islamization of Christian world.⁹

In the first part of the Ottoman period it can speak of a certain dialogue between the two religions that have tried developing the spirit of mutual understanding. Some of the early Christian writers who have dealt with the relationship between Christianity and Islam in the Ottoman

⁶ Archbishop ANASTASIOS YANNOULATOS, *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, p. 106.

⁷ Archbishop ANASTASIOS YANNOULATOS, *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, p. 108.

⁸ Archbishop ANASTASIOS YANNOULATOS, *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, p. 114.

⁹ ANGELIKI ZIACA, „Orthodoxy and Islam – Major Concerns for Orthodox Engagement”, in: *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism. Resources for Theological Education*, Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Thomas FitzGerald, Cyril Hovorun, Aikaterini Pekridou, Nikolaos Asproulis, Guy Liagre, Dietrich Werner (Editors), Regnum Books International, Oxford, 2013, p. 677-678.

Empire were Patriarch George Scholarios (Gennadios II) and the diplomat George Amiroutzes. In contrast to George of Trebizond, who also wrote about Islam (born in the Byzantine Empire and died in Rome), the first two continued to live in territory which was named Dār al-Islam (the territory in which Ottoman Empire stretched) without leave to the Western Europe. George of Trebizond, arrived in the Christian West, wrote the paper *On the Truth of the Christian Faith*, in which he presented the differences between the teachings of the Christian and Muslim, trying at the same time highlighting the possible similarities in the view of mutual understanding of the people of the former Christian Empire.

Some Christian writers who left the Byzantine Empire after 1453 and went westward, many founded Renaissance and militated on the western courts to start the crusades against the Ottoman Empire, for the salvation of Christians in Greece and in the Balkan Peninsula. Among these are Plethon Gemistos from Mystra, Manuel Chrysoloras, Cardinal John Bessarion, Janus Lascaris, Michail and Marcus Moussouros, Michail Apostolis, Gazis and Kallistos Chalkokondilis.¹⁰

A special form of literature developed in this period had an apocalyptic and eschatological nature, which spoke in the context of the spread of Islam and forced Islamization to the arriving of the final time when Christianity will finally triumph. Thereby are multiplied the writings like oracles, legends and prophecies, especially starting from Revelation of St John the Evangelist, where it was given political and social interpretations. This was the most widespread form of literature in those centuries, having also the function to awaken and maintain the hope among people of a final victory of Christianity. This kind of literature has been developed particularly in Russia, when Moscow began to be considered “the new Constantinople”, and the Tsar, “the new Constantine” (these formulas were used by Bishop Zosima of Moscow referring to Tsar Ivan III). Among the writers who created an apocalyptic and eschatological literature are: Maxim the Peloponnesian (1600), George Koressios (1645), Gordios (1717), Pantazes from Larissa (1767) and Cyril Lavriotis (1825). The apocalyptic themes treated were not only religious but also political and social, emphasizing especially the presentation of the actual situation as the last phase of human history, pending the triumph of Christianity. “The combination of this kind of history with theology, and the human need to interpret history and the future of humankind through predictions and prophecies from the past, is well known throughout the

¹⁰ ANGELIKI ZIAKA, *Orthodoxy and Islam – Major Concerns for Orthodox Engagement*, p. 678.

Christian world, and over time crept into the Islamic world as well, giving rise to numerous myths, beliefs, and expectations. The humans of every era dress their fears and concerns with eschatological images and await, under these symbols, a better future. In times of war and adverse social situations, they interpret the images as eschatological prophecies that foretell the punishment of believers for their apostasy, as well as their future redemption”.¹¹

Orthodoxy and Islam in the works of Dimitrie Cantemir

During this period, in which many territories, where Orthodox Christians were living, were under the Ottoman rule, lived and wrote Dimitrie Cantemir (1673-1723). His vast and important work established himself as a great scholar and humanist, the future Moldavian Principe remains in national and world history as encyclopedic, ethnographer, geographer, philosopher, historian, linguist, musician and composer. Meanwhile, Cantemir was also the author of several works in which both presents and analyzes the history of the Ottoman Empire from its beginnings to his time, and also the Islam and its relationship with Christianity. The importance of his writings in this area is because that he experienced directly the organization and the life of the Ottoman Empire and Islam in the period in which he was diplomat in Constantinople.

The work *The History of the Rise and the Fall of the Ottoman Empire (Ottoman Court) (Historia Incrementorum atque decrementorum Othomanicae auditorium)* was written in the same period in which Cantemir worked at *The Descriptions of Moldavia (Descriptio Moldavie – 1714)* and he completed it in 1716. The work was then translated into English, French and German. Another Cantemir’s writing in which can be seen the concern of the Moldavian Principe for the study of Islam and the comparative religion is *The System or the Preparation of the Mohammedan religion*¹² (*Curanus*, that book of *Quran*), first published in Latin in 1722. These two writings supposed to complete with an another, about Ottoman governance, Cantemir intending to make so a trilogy that further emphasized his quality of orientalist who had acquired worldwide. Finally, the monumental work should include a volume about Muslim doctrine, the second about the organization of institutions from the Ottoman Empire and the third about the history of the rise and decay of the Empire. “The monument has the scale

¹¹ ANGELIKI ZIAKA, *Orthodoxy and Islam – Major Concerns for Orthodox Engagement*, p. 680.

¹² DIMITRIE CANTEMIR, *Sistemul sau întocmirea religiei muhammedane*, în *Opere complete* VIII, Tomul II, traducere, studiu introductiv, note și comentarii de Virgil Căndea, text rus îngrijit de Anca Irina Ionescu, Ed. Academiei române, București, 1987.

and the internal economy able to hold an erudition and an experience unusual then, able to attest the high scientific merit of the author, able to mentor to a political agenda – crushing of the Ottoman power – doctrinal argued, on behalf of the Christian faith, humanitarian in order to release so many oppressed peoples, but also through the opportunity – the military and institutional weakness of the Gate”.¹³

The work *The History of the Rise and the Fall of the Ottoman Empire* is the fruit of the work over 22 years that Cantemir spent in the capital of the Ottoman Empire. This is writing with a strong political character, offering a detailed look at the policy of the Gate and of how they are living in Istanbul should behave. The method used by Moldavian Principe is that to present the history as succeeding cycles, theory that opposed to the empiricism that describing the historical facts as succeed. The importance of this work is underlined by German Schroder Schmidt: “His high position brought him into contact with high statesmen and Turks scholars, in whose conversation could he find enough secrets news and so to get in the Turkish nature. Over these love of the truth breathes across all pages of its history (...). He loves his compatriots, he is very zealous in his religious faith and hates deep the Turkish tyranny, yet he can be as unbiased as he praises their virtues at every opportunity”.¹⁴

In view of Cantemir, the Ottoman Empire came to greatness because of the simple life of the sultans and also of their desire to expand the borders of the empire as much possible, preaching the religion of Muhammad worldwide. From Christian principles Cantemir encouraging them to embrace the Islam and only in case of refusal to become enemies, being put to the sword and fire. Meanwhile, the Moldovan Principe see decreasing the Ottoman Empire as having as principal cause, the sultans desire to conquer Vienna and reach the heart of Europe. This goal started from the idea that the Koran should be taught by any means throughout the world, an idea that has often led to hatred against Christianity. Instead, Cantemir considers the Quran a “collection of insults against Christianity”.¹⁵

In the work of future Principe appears an imaginary speech of Stephen the Great on his deathbed in which is predicted the release of

¹³ VIRGIL CÂNDEA, „Studiu introductiv”, în DIMITRIE CANTEMIR, *Sistemul sau întocmirea religiei muhammedane*, Opere complete VIII, Tomul II, traducere, studiu introductiv, note și comentarii de Virgil Căndeă, text rus îngrijit de Anca Irina Ionescu, Ed. Academiei române, București, 1987, p. VIII.

¹⁴ AUREL DECEI, *Dimitrie Cantemir – istoric al Imperiului Otoman*, în *Săptămâna*, nr. 150/1973, p. 3.

¹⁵ DIMITRIE CANTEMIR, *Istoria Imperiului Otoman*, cu note forte introductive, traducere română de dr. Ios Hodosiu, Ed. Societății Academice Române, București, 1876, p. 415.

Christianity from the Ottomans, an eschatological idea that stand also by other Christians authors of the time they treated the relationship between Christianity and Islam. On the other hand, one of the causes that led to the conquest of part of Europe by the Turks was the misunderstandings between Christians: “God hates Ottoman power, because it threatens the Christianity with the destruction and the threat comes only from the discord between Christians Principles”.¹⁶

The English edition of the paper presents as well a map of Constantinople where the Muslim mosques were presented with the name of the former Byzantine Christian churches that were transformed after the conquest of the city. It was also presented the Phanar and the Orthodox Patriarchate, an approach of great benefit to those who did not know the capital of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷

Cantemir wrote the work *The System or Preparation of Muhammedane Religion* at the request of Tsar Peter the Great who wanted to know better this religion to winning of his side the Muslim population from Transcaucasia in preparing their struggles against Persia. Moldavian Principe uses in this paper all the information and documentation that he found during his stay in the capital of the Ottoman Empire.

The Structure of Cantemir’s work is one classic, following the logic of the similar works of the time: after life of the Prophet Muhammad are presenting sources, doctrine and his articulations: theology, eschatology, the description of the five pillars of Islam, with all that follows from this, personal status, rituals and institutions, circumcision, marriage, funeral, fasting, law and jurisprudence, then ascetic, heresiology or sectology and doctrinal derivate system (science and art). In the first edition published in Latin and is endorsed by the author, the paper has several parts: word of worship to Peter the Great; The abstract of the books from the first volume and of the chapters contained in them; Foreword. Cantemir: health to the beloved reader; First Book. About the false prophet Muhammad; Book Two. [About Qumran]; The third book. [About muhammedan apocalypse] that compris “hrisme” or revelations of Muhammad – pseudo prophet, about things that will happen before perishing of the world; The fourth book. Muslim theology; Fifth book. Muslim religion; The sixtieth book. About other ordinances of this religion.

In his writing, Cantemir presents himself as a genuine Christian that cannot accept a faith than Christianity. He says that the Koran is not

¹⁶ DIMITRIE CANTEMIR, *Istoria Imperiului Otoman*, p. 257.

¹⁷ Pr. ȘTEFAN REȘCEANU, *Creștinism și islamism în opera lui Dimitrie Cantemir*, Ed. Sitech, Craiova, 1999, p. 133.

revealed, and Muhammad is a “pseudo prophet”, and many of the teachings of Islam are taken from the Christian Gospels. The work is so “christianized” by the way that the subject is presented and the ideas that the Moldavian Principe promotes. Cantemir also highlights the discrepancy between the teachings of the Quran and the way that the Muslims of his time behaved. “Protected by his profession of faith, the author goes quiet steps toward a serene consideration of Islam, these steps being the common sense, the personal experience, unquestionable, and also reference to a humanist consensus of the values on which the authoritarian arguments of polemicist of Westerners could not him overcomes. The European promoters of the Arabic world of the eighteenth century justified their studies through the apologize of serving the theology – specifically apologetics. Before the great Reiske, that declared in the same century – but after Cantemir – that the study of the Arab culture interested not the sacred philology, but history, geography, physics and medicine, the Romanian scholar general was reveling the cultural interest of the Islamic values”.¹⁸

Cantemir adopt a critical position towards Islam starting from some Muslim writings which, according to him, would contradict the Quran themselves and especially the fact that the Muslim holy book was revealed.¹⁹ These things do not stop him to observe and to appreciate more things in Islam: “Let’s talk also right and to praise the good deed, even of the biggest enemy of ours”.²⁰ Other ideas of Islam, that Cantemir appreciated, were: the custom of release a bought prisoners after seven years of captivity, with the freedom to keep his religion; the kindness and the hospitality of the Turkish people from Dobrogea and Iconium; dervishes habits and customs: “For these philosophical virtues and for the working philosophy of good deeds that is in these dervishes previously obedient, I state that is a marvel”.²¹ Moldavian Principe appreciate the beautiful Arabic language in that it is written the Quran and the sciences which have been developed among the Muslim world, the calligraphy, the poetic art and the oriental music. “The complete selection of these assessments from Cantemir’s system is one of the most beautiful hymns of praise dedicated to the Islamic culture in Europe”.²² Analyzing carefully this paper, it is to observe that “Cantemir try not only the satisfaction of revaluation of so much rare knowledge that were to testify a deserved scientific reputation, but also the pleasure to relive the years of education, intellectual commerce

¹⁸ VIRGIL CÂNDEA, *Studiu introductiv*, p. XX-XXI.

¹⁹ DIMITRIE CANTEMIR, *Sistemul sau întocmirea religiei muhammedane*, p. 159.

²⁰ DIMITRIE CANTEMIR, *Sistemul sau întocmirea religiei muhammedane*, p. 203.

²¹ DIMITRIE CANTEMIR, *Sistemul sau întocmirea religiei muhammedane*, p. 294.

²² VIRGIL CÂNDEA, *Studiu introductiv*, p. XXIV.

and adventurous youth from Constantinople, it should not be ignored the evidence that the writing the of the book in lawful circumstances was not comfortable for author. Prince could to a point to reconcile his attitude as European scholar – so Christian – with his knowledge of Islam, in a sincere vision and in that, the tiresome apologetic and polemical notes of ecclesiastical contemporaries scribes, an Orthodox as Ioanichie Galeatovski or a Catholic like Ludovico Marracci, are rare. In the limit of this attitude he could leave room, as we have seen, also to rationalist critics of religion in general”.²³

Translated and published in Russian in 1722, after being drafted in Latin, *The System* of Cantemir aroused the dissatisfaction of the Synod of the Orthodox Church in Russia, which can see in this book a dangerous work for Orthodox believers, in that he present Islam with many details. Even it has been proposed, that at the end of the work, to be printed a statement stating that the work is authentic in the sense that the work reproduces exactly the beliefs of Islam or it is a picture of folk traditions. *The System or the Preparation of Muslim Religion* puts Cantemir between the researchers who were busy in Europe of 17th and 18th centuries with Eastern affairs as one of the most authentic and with correct attitude towards Islam. Although Cantemir claims strength and argued his affiliation to the Orthodox Christianity, just after this position he proves to be loyal scholar of the opponent, countering with arguments and authority the declines, but without to avoid noticing all seemed worthwhile in the Islam civilization”.²⁴ This attitude derives from the fact that, unlike the scholars of the era which were comparing the West with the East, pointing out the superiority of the first, Cantemir, coming from an area close to the Orient, he saw also the connection points between the two civilizations. For Islam, Cantemir was “a scientist and not a European judge”.²⁵

Conclusions

Through these works of a great value to the knowledge and understanding of the history and the Muslim religion, managing to highlight the beauty of the culture of Byzantium, “the geographically, historically and spiritually space located at the crossroads of two worlds, but also the fascinating of the Muslim peoples, the Romanian scholar becomes a complex personality, owning the dignity to be the first ours orientalist”.²⁶ At the same time, the

²³ VIRGIL CÂNDEA, *Studiu introductiv*, p. XXIII.

²⁴ Pr. ȘTEFAN REȘCEANU, *Creștinism și islamism în opera lui Dimitrie Cantemir*, p. 138.

²⁵ VIRGIL CÂNDEA, *Studiu introductiv*, p. LXIII.

²⁶ LILIANA BOTEZ, *Dimitrie Cantemir precursor al orientalisticii*, în *Revista de istorie și teorie literară*, vol. 23, nr. 1/1974, p. 51.

way that Cantemir represents the relationship between Christianity and Islam in his time, approaches him of the other Christian writers of his time addressing the same topic, highlighting the sadness of an era in which that the great Christian Empire fell under Ottomans and also the hopes of Christians around of the Orthodox world for the release of Christianity, having in the center the idea of approach of the apocalyptic time when Christianity will triumph. Due to these goals and eschatological hopes, the work of Moldavian Principe is unique in its complexity, objectivity and, not least, by knowing the main sources of Islam to which it related constantly.

Abstract: Orthodoxy and Islam in the 18th Century. The Place and Role of Dimitrie Cantemir in this Period

The interreligious dialogue is not a new theme in the history of Christianity, the possibility of its realization being analyzed from the early centuries. Nowadays, the way that other religions are viewed has changed essentially, the religious, political, economic and social realities, being completely different than in the beginning. However, a correct handling of interreligious dialogue cannot disregard the past, more than that, the ideas from the works of the Holy Fathers, church writers, theologians and old thinkers remain valid and are used as themes in the current discussions of the interreligious dialog. Among them, an important place takes Cantemir, the Prince of Moldavia, who lived for a long time in Constantinople. His works, which deals with the history of the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic doctrine, have their basis in the personal experience and in the depth knowledge of the main Islamic sources that helped him to give to posterity the representative works for the knowledge of the Muslim religion and relations between Christianity and Islam during the development and decay of the Ottoman Empire.

The way he presents the relation between Christianity and Islam, approaches him to the other Christian writers of his time which are addressing the same topic, highlighting the sadness of an era in which the great Christian empire fell under Ottoman rule and also the hopes of the Orthodox worldwide Christians to release the Christianity, having central the idea of approaching the apocalyptic time when Christianity will triumph.

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