

SCIENCE AND FAITH IN DIMITRIE CANTEMIR'S WORKS

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Abstract. Dimitrie Cantemir was a humanist, his work covered almost all the spiritual domains of the time. Mixing both the scientific and artistic creations, Cantemir continued the Renaissance tradition. He was also a politician, involving, as an enlightened ruler, in diplomatic and military actions which build his reputation as state's man, along with those of humanist and artist. Cantemir's ontology in the *Sacred science* – where, for example, as regards the time issue, the author tries to demonstrate that this is an attribute of divinity – is essentially reformulated from the point of view of the sacred – historic (profane) relationship in his historical works. In short, Cantemir grants the historical life a certain immanent finality.

In *The Divan*, Cantemir gives faith an essential part as compared with the reason, with the human intellect, with the free manifestation of one's own will, with the historic finality of human condition. From this point of view, his opinion is not different from the conclusions – not always expressed – which we may have after reading *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab*.

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Dimitrie Cantemir was a humanist, his work covered almost all the spiritual domains of the time. Mixing both the scientific and artistic creations, Cantemir continued the Renaissance tradition. He was also a politician, involving, as an enlightened ruler, in diplomatic and military actions which build his reputation as state's man, along with those of humanist and artist. He finished his education begun in Iași, where he studied the classic subjects (Greek and Latin and elements of neo-Aristotelian philosophy, having as a mentor the Greek scholar monk Jeremiah Cacavelas), at the Constantinople Academy. There he studied the main works and met the most important scholars of the time, also the accredited diplomats at the Sublime Porte. Among the Greek scholars, professors at the Patriarchal Academy of Constantinople or the Peripatetic philosophers, some who studied in Occident, I mention Al. Mavrocordat, Hrisant Notara, art archbishop, Meletius – who initiated him in Van Helmont's philosophy –, Spondonis Vizantios, Jacob Manos of Argos, an influent adept of Coridalean¹ neo-Aristotelian.

Cantemir's early scientific work, starting with his first one, *Sacrosantae scientiae indepingibilis imago* dedicated to his first teacher Jeremiah Cacavelas, is

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¹ *Istoria filosofiei romanesti*, vol. I, București, Editura Academiei, 1972, p. 59.

situated in the context of these discussions, in which the conflict between neo-Aristotelianism and Van Helmont's¹ philosophy.

Sacrosantae represents also an attempt to systemize the main theologic and philosophic notions. It has three volumes (physics, metaphysics, ethics), of which only the first one, (titled by Nicodim Locusteanu, *Metaphysics*) is finished. In the first book of this work, Cantemir describes in an allegoric background which appears also in his next works, the "sacred science" principles. One may find the concepts of theological philosophical ontology, the work being a cosmogony structured like the patristic Hexameron, quoting the *Genesis* text from Pentateuh. The originality of Cantemir consists in the historical approach of the Creation, as compared to the Van Helmont's philosophy who gave less importance to universal diachrony. The link between the Christian dogma and neo-Aristotelian doctrine, through Coridaleu commentaries appears especially in the IIIrd Book: On time and eternity, in the Vth Book. On life or the quadruple form of things, and in the Vth: The sacred science garment in which things preservation and free soul operation are explained.

The concepts of Aristotle physics confirm, in Cantemir's view, the relation between Creation and the world, between the eternal life and physics principles, between the duration of sensitive things and divine time. The IVth Book discusses this in detail, as hazard (*casus*) and luck (*fortuna*), and is consecrated mainly to the relation providence and nature also providence and the free will, being presented by Cantemir as a preliminary of theologo–metaphysics and theologo–ethics."² (tr. n.)

The scholastic method, in which are approached the physics, metaphysics and Aristotelian ethics problems, is upside down and ironic to some extent (in fact a masterpiece of the genre) the 1705 *Hieroglyphic History*. One may notice the critic realism of the Moldovian Prince, as well as his visionary historical idea – approached as satiric attack, which exaggerates the characters and the habits of autochthonous boyards, also vices of the Ottoman noble men – developed in *Incrementa atque...* (1714–1716). The Cantemirian work, especially the philosophic one, but also the literary and historiographic or literary one, has at the basis a strong cultural motivation, specific for the pre – enlightenment period and for Renaissance and Humanism, centred around two categories, ratio and fides. In historiographic works, rational principles are not inferred anymore, as in *Sacrosantae*, from the scholastic works and the theologic Eastern dogmas. The truths of the Christian creation show their own meaning, being opposite to the the laic ones in the work "the Divan or the Wise Man's Dispute with the World or the Litigation between Soul and Body", though the literary form permits in a smaller extent a systematic approach. The polemics between the atheistic spirit,

¹ *Ibidem*.

² *Ibidem*, p. 64.

representing the world order which reflects, in its becoming, the order of the eternal things and Wise Man spirit, claims both rational and dogmatic arguments. As Virgil Căndeia said the litigation between the Wise Man and the world resorts to the reason court, using the notions of Aristotel logic, the spirit-substance dualism, fed by inner contradictions, specific to the historic medieval life¹.

The relationship sacred-profane is approached from the gnoseological perspective: sacred reason – scientific reason; it is a continuation of an old scholastic dispute, known under the name of double truth: “about one and the same truth, which is simple, the theologians speak indeed theologically, on the other hand the physicists speak in physics terms and usually they treat the simple truth in different manners they call sciences, but their divergent axioms and much special doctrines do not stand.”² In the light of this statement and of others in *Hieroglyphic History* or the *Chronicle*, the author seems to grant an independent status to the truth of each science, to the sacred one or to the profane one, although the delimitation of the theology from science is more clearly formulated in the historiographic works. According to him, history is not a field of faith, but especially of the logical research, in which the historical proofs should be confronted and if they lack, in compliance with the methodological norms or canons, can be drawn conclusions about the existence of the facts on the basis of the proofs that existed before or after them. The research of the Roman continuity in Dacia, presented in the *Chronicle*, offers Cantemir the opportunity to expose the principles of a real historiographic criticism, following the path opened by Cantacuzino High Steward. According to this method – the prince states – the contemporary sources are preferable to the late ones, and the internal sources should not be favoured to the external ones, as they can be suspected of partiality.³ The witness of a single source should be regarded doubtfully: *dictum unius, dictum nullius*. Yet, the real efficacy of the critical method is met in *The History of the Ottoman Empire*.

The topic of this work, which brought him the fame of European scholar and that represented the foundation of the Western diplomacy in the relation with the Sublime Porte for over a century, resumes the principles drawn by the author in a paper that can be considered an Introduction to the history of philosophy: *Monarchium phisica examination*. Cantemir introduces here the theme of the cyclic evolution in history, of “rising and falling of the states”, before Vico’s in “*corsi e ricorsi*”, launched in *New science*, published in 1725. Like Vico, he

¹ Virgil Căndeia, *Studiu Introductiv la Divanul*, Bucuresti, 1969, p. I-LI.

² *Sacrosanctae*, mss.f. 243, translated by Locusteanu, preface by Em. C. Grigoras, Bucuresti, Ancora, 1928, p. 21.

⁶ Dimitrie Cantemir, *Hronicul vechimii romano-moldo-vlahilor* (*Chronicle of the durability of Romans-Moldavians-Wallachians*), ed. G.G. Tocilescu, “Carol Göbl” Institute of Graphic Arts, p. 62 (218).

presents the idea of finality in history, the succession of the three ages or stages – “rising”, “stagnation”, “falling” – being taken over from Cantacuzino High Steward. In fact, the cyclicity of history development is a thesis that develops from nature philosophy, the philosophy of physics, an Aristotelian influence, exposed in the doctrine of generation and corruptness, depicted in his first volume of *Sacrosanctae*.

For Cantemir, all the particular things are subject to evolution, being coordinated by the law of rising and falling. The world states, the monarchies, have also a cyclic existence. While the prophets, inspired by God, foresaw the general lines of the direction towards which the humanity history would evolve, people could also research the natural determinism of the things and, through rational forecasts, could describe the order of nature and society. As regards the movement of the societies, the question is if the individual – as part of this order – can interfere with history, changing the direction of the events and making the facts favourable to him or he is constrained by the course of the historical events, as well as by the natural phenomena. The historical causality and the individual freedom are two distinct notions on which Cantemir insists upon in his philosophical or historiographic works. As a humanist, knowing the classic disciplines, he praises the antic civilization and culture. In a chapter in the *Chronicle*, in which he describes the history of the Roman Empire, he stresses the fact that the power and the nobility of a people do not consist in the political and military force or in the size of the conquered territory, but in culture, in sciences and in the good manners. In *Chronicle* we notice a contradiction between the praise the author brings to the antic civilization and its minimization in *Sacrosanctae*, where are highlighted the superstitions in the old cultures or the worship of heroes, because of a “haughtiness” inspired by the devil – the author states. The explanation of the position in the latter is offered by the theological and theologizing principles it is based on, while in the *Chronicle...* or in *The History of the Ottoman Empire*, the mythology and the culture of the antic history (especially the Greek one) show the evolution of Cantemir from his early writings (and readings) to the crystallization of the humanist notions and their integration in the maturity works.

The historical determinism at Cantemir takes the form of the cyclic evolution. Things and facts evolve by virtue of an “order” that is immanent, by virtue of their nature. In history we can notice a category of finality, taken over from Aristotle’s metaphysics or rather, through Van Helmont’s influence. The cyclic development – a current idea in the epoch, developed also by Vico – is placed in the field of anthropology. The model is the biological one. The idea is configured even from the *Hieroglyphic History* (it was only sketched in the *Sacred science*). It is preserved the principle of sacrality, of the first engine or of the primary cause, later becoming an immanent principle: any being is born,

growths and degrades, but transmits the life principle to another being, to the descendants, who will continue the evolution cycle to infinity. Cantemir grants it the character of a law and generalizes it philosophically in *Monarchium physica examinatio*, where he stresses its character of law, of “uninterrupted order of nature (*ininterruptus naturalis ordo*), which nature follows endlessly.

The initial relation was one of divine origin, but Cantemir rephrases it in terms that should not contradict the principles of dogma, adopting the scholastic notion of the secondary causes: “The first created elements [...] are primary organs, but secondary causes [...], the earth gives us food, sun and moon rule, the whole celestial suite help to the preservation of the universe structure, all these being obedient subjects of the creator, and not authors or causes.”¹ Cantemir's ontology in the *Sacred science* – where, for example, as regards the time issue, the author tries to demonstrate that this is an attribute of divinity – is essentially reformulated from the point of view of the sacred – historic (profane) relationship in his historical works. In short, Cantemir grants the historical life a certain immanent finality. Following the line of the natural causality – where phenomena repeat over and over again, the species subsist to the individuals –, the biological cycle is repeated only at the individual level. In history the individual is responsible for his actions. Here does not work the theocentric principle – idea that is resumed especially in the *Chronicle...*, *The History of the Ottoman Empire*, *Hieroglyphic History*. “In fact the man's status is not considered in theological categories. His dignity does not consist – like in *Sacrosancta* – of his singular, unique relation with the religious transcendence (God incarnated only in man), in his transcendent vocation. Taking over the criticism of the natural and philosophic finalism from Van Helmont, as well as some themes from the Orthodoxy, Cantemir absorbs them in a synthesis from which results the revealing of rationality and of moral freedom, of the capacity of establishing aims, as fundamental determinants of man.”²

The ethical behaviour is based on reason. Of all the creatures of nature – to which he is related through his physical structure – man is the one who, through spirit – relates to God. The ethical action or the moral behaviour makes him singular, as an historical being, because, of all the creatures that follow unconsciously the divine “order”, only man can choose between good or bad. On the ethical level – Cantemir says in the *Hieroglyphic History* – man has “from the beginning of his actions, the thought of the end (of the finality – from lat. *finis* translation loan word)”³ The final cause (*teolos*) acts only on the ethical level, not

¹ *Sacrosanctae...*, p. 86.

² Petru Vaida, Dimitrie Cantemir – *Idei despre cunoastere. Logica* (Ideas about knowledge. Logics), in *Istoria filosofiei romanesti* (The History of the Romanian philosophy), vol. I, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing house, 1972, p. 88.

³ Dimitrie Cantemir, *Istoria ieroglifica (Hieroglyphic History)*, edition under the supervision and with introductory study by P.P.Panaitescu and I.Verdes, Bucharest, 1964, p. 175.

on the physical level. Reason creates the possibility of finality, of following conscientiously a purpose; through the knowledge of determinism (causality) man resembles God. This topic, taken over from the doctrines of the Orthodox theologians, is developed by Cantemir in *The Divan* and *Hieroglyphic History*. Freedom – the possibility to act freely in nature and history – is a “supernatural” quality, it does not come from his natural “diligence”, but it is a gift, a quality insufflated by the divinity. In this regard man feels freedom as a state of grace, “somehow – the author of the *Hieroglyphic History* says – against and beyond nature”.¹ It should be stressed this way of understanding freedom, present in the above mentioned writings, as one specific to the Orthodox thinking, as *theosis* is an ideal that includes also a component of Isichast origin.

If the other rulers were active and creative personalities, both at politic and cultural level, some of them creating epochs or styles named after them – Stephan the Great or Constantin Brâncoveanu –, Dimitrie Cantemir is, as Neagoe Basarab, but in a different manner, a personality who is very conscious of the fact that he creates through his work, renaissant and humanistic Romanian spirituality, closing a cycle, and having an entitled European acknowledgement. Before him, Miron Costin had started a unique humanistic approach which was meant to connect his people’s culture to the Greek-Roman Antiquity. The love for Romanian language and literature, and as well his intention to awake again in his contemporaries the conscience of their Latin origin, made him to use Latin topic “in formulating Romanian proposition and phrases, which make his style look artificial [...], as compared to flowing, spontaneous and authentic popular style of Neculce and Grigore Ureche”.²

We are interested, both in the scientific work of the Romanian Prince, and in the politic attitude manifested in his works, the role given to the individual within history, but, most of all, to his creative capacity which allows him to build, in the world in history, a significant destiny. In *The Divan*, Cantemir gives faith an essential part as compared with the reason, with the human intellect, with the free manifestation of one’s own will, with the historic finality of human condition. From this point of view, his opinion is not different from the conclusions – not always expressed – which we may have after reading *The Teachings* of Neagoe Basarab.

¹ *Ibidem*.

² *Istoria filosofiei romanesti*, p. 168.