

THE CHURCH AND THE ROMANIANS RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN THE EARLY MODERN TIME. PERCEPTIONS, CONVICTIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FOREIGN TRAVELLERS

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Abstract: The mentions of the foreign travellers about the Orthodox Church in the Romanian reflect the aspects which especially interested in the organization of the Church, in the relation with political power, in the hierarchies of Church and in their social role, in the political community attitudes towards religion, in the religious ritual and practices associated its.

Keywords: foreign travellers, religious attitudes, mentality, church.

During the pre-modern age, the interest in the particularities that characterized the geographical, ethnic, culturale and political areas have been very active. This fact can be proved using the memories of foreign travellers, meaning the way people who came from different cultures expressed themselves, people who came in contact with these areas during longer or shorter periods of time¹. The same interest was observed in the case of the Romanian Principalities, especially as a result of their political situation to Ottoman Empire, Poland, Hungary and Russia.

The foreign travellers must be seen with reservations², because of their unavoidable subjective and fragmentary vision³, a situation caused by,

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¹ The writings of the foreign travelers were included in the following volumes: Nicolaie Iorga, *Istoria românilor prin călători*, ed. de A. Anghelescu, București, 1981, pp. 203-370, the collection of documents *Hurmuzaki*, the concerns of Sadi-Ionescu, P. P. Panaitescu, Paul Cernovodeanu, and *Călători străini prin Țările Române* (coord, Maria Holban), which I used it in this article.

² Ovidiu Cristea, 2005, 13-25.

among others, by the movements of ideas, the degree of intellectual training, by the cultural preoccupations of the times and the literary genres appreciated by their contemporaries. More than⁴, this time was dominated by the political instability⁵ and mistrustfulness, of the feeling of insecurity lived acutely by the contemporaries, the message of the foreign travelers has adapted its form of expression, by giving up sometimes, to the stylistically adornments and to the erudition.

In these writings, the baroque orientation, determined by the attempt to impose in culture and in the mentality „rigid models of social types, exact formula and criteria of interpretation, *exemplary* judgments over events and people, together with especially dramatic and conflict vision over the social realities”⁶, is found.

The purpose of the foreign travellers was straightened toward the organization and activity of the church and the faith and religious practices of Romanians. Of course their memories had been stamped by the religious beliefs of their writers, often different from the Eastern Orthodox ones, so they cannot be considered sources of information and their usage for historical purposes must be taken with certain reservations.

Considering the above aspects, we have taken some of affirmations of these foreign travellers, so we can contour in general terms how was presented the Romanian Orthodox Church and how was regarded by them the religious faith of Romanians.

³ Paul Cernovodeanu, 2004, 7-40.

⁴ This problem is linked by the identity and alterity aspects, to see Al. Zub, 1996.

⁵ Rosario Villari has synthetically described the atmosphere of this “period of great tensions”, in which cohabits “the traditionalism and the search for something new, the conservatism and the rebellion, the love for the truth and the cult of dissimulation, the sensualism and the mysticism, the superstition and reason (...) the contradiction and war” (2000, 9). For to develop the idea, see Toader Nicoară, 2006 and Lebrun François, 1967.

⁶ Rosario Villari, 2000, 10.

1. Imagine of the Church. Construction, Ornamentation, Impression

Many times, the foreign travelers were attracted by externals of religious buildings, their beauty and solidity⁷, their place and role. For example, Muslem traveller Evlia Celebi related about 11 monasteries which „have nowhere pair, maybe in Kiev land of Muscovites". Impressed by the Three Bishops' Monastery („Trei Ierarhi"), he expressed that it cannot be described in the words⁸.

In vision of foreign travelers, building many monasteries in the same time has been explained by the political situation of the Romanian Provinces in relation to the Ottoman Empire (the Turks allowed the rulers to build completely out of stone only churches and monasteries⁹, this is why they had a defensive appearance). The traveller Vasile Gagara, who has been in Moldavia in the third decade of the XVIIth century, he explained that „reinforcements are not – because they have fear to sultan - but only at the Princely Court / Curtea Domnească (...) and to one monastery (Three Bishops' Monastery) with the surrounding wall rock (...), so that they have where they can shelter if would come against them Turks and Crimean Tatars"¹⁰.

Most references to the Romanian churches are displaying the fortified and defensive aspect, citadel like appearance that they had¹¹. In this sense, traveller Evlia Celebi mentioned the Three Bishops' Monastery and the problems the Ottoman spies had in defining it as a monastery or fortress¹². To him, monasteries (from Iași) resembled fortresses, like as Galata' Monastery, fortified as a fortress¹³. The monasteries from Bucharest had the same aspects¹⁴.

Later, Daniel Krmann, a Slovak traveler in Moldavia, mentioned in the 1709 one „proud and fortified monastery that looked more like a

⁷ Evlia Celebi, 1972, 478-479.

⁸ Evlia Celebi, 1972, 478-479.

⁹ To see Marco Bandini, 1973, 328; Paul Beke, 1973, 279.

¹⁰ Vasile Gagara, 1973, 148.

¹¹ Voica Pușcașu, 2003, 103-159.

¹² Evlia Celebi, 1976, 479.

¹³ Evlia Celebi, 1976, 478.

¹⁴ Evlia Celebi, 1976, 715, 731.

fortress' up on a hill in Iași"¹⁵. Also, the Strehaia' Monastery „resembles a large fortress and has strong inner walls and many battlements. Above the gates there is the tall belfry, massively built, the gates are made from iron and are brand new"¹⁶.

Nicolo Barsi, in *Discours* („*Discurs*") from 1697, referring to the political authority of Constantin Brâncoveanu and Șerban Cantacuzino, reached the conclusion that Romanians „can defend themselves because in the woods there are many monasteries that might serve, if needed, as cover and shelter (...) they have built many monasteries in positions appropriate for building cities"¹⁷. Tismana' Monastery was also „prepared for a fierce resistance (...), it has no match in the country nor in others with the beauty of the place and the settlement, with the plenitude of its waters and the natural strategic advantage, helped also by the surrounding walls"¹⁸.

Possibly, the fortress like appearance of the monasteries fuelled the general belief, often proved as real, that they safeguarded the royal treasures, especially during difficult times.

Toward the end the century, Bolognese geographer and diplomat Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli described Bistrița Monastery (Vâlcea), founded by Craiovești boyar family and noted that the treasure of Șerban Cantacuzino was found here.

Their strong external appearance offered a Christian coming from the Islam dominated lands a feeling of joy and safety. Paul of Aleppo, in his journey to Galați noted in his notes that „the happiness of the beholders", who saw „from far away' churches' steeples and shining crosses"¹⁹. The same feelings were provoked by the place where they were raised. To others, their beauty and the beauty of the surroundings made a pleasant impression. It is the case of The Holy Wayside Cross' Monastery („Mănăstirea Sfânta Troiță) raised in the outskirts of Bucharest and rebuilt by Mihnea Radu in the 1613.

It was considered by Jerzy Krasinski „the first and the most beautiful", „in which the messenger has been accommodated", being „in a

¹⁵ To see Daniel Krmann, 1983, 259.

¹⁶ Daniel Krmann, 1983, 205-206.

¹⁷ Nicolo Barsi, 1973, 143. Similarly at Paul of Aleppo, 1976, referring at Mărgineni' Monastery, 147, The Holy Wayside Cross' Monastery, 259, 265.

¹⁸ Paul de Alep, 1976, 197.

¹⁹ Paul de Alep, 1976, 31.

nice place, up, on an island, resembling some sort of citadel surrounded by the river Dâmbovița”²⁰.

2 Romanian Orthodox Church as a Praying Place

First of all, the Church was the main place of prayer. Inside the monasteries, the importance of prayer, cultivated as a duty by the monks, has been noted also by Paul Beke who, referring to the Moldova around the year 1644 he noted that in monasteries „the monks have their own prayers that need to be made inside the church, reciting and chanting them at certain hours”, even if it was said about them that „they have no idea” about the theological disputes of the time and about what was „the meaning of the name of the saviour Jesus”²¹.

The hermits needed the church also. Paul of Aleppo noted of a hermit that he had his small house („chilie”) bonded to a church where he served and recited the liturgy²². In the other passage the traveller noted that nearby the house of a hermit was a small and clean church dedicated to St. Anthony the Great („Antonie cel Mare”)²³.

The murals of the churches have attracted the attention of the foreign travellers, even if they were not interested in the significance of their symbolism. For example, the mural of the Church from Vaslui where were the palaces of the prince was appreciated as „beautiful” by a Polish diplomat²⁴. Sometimes, the colours of the paintings added to the emotional impact they produced on the beholder, it determined the Muslim Evlia Celebi to name them „alive and very beautiful”²⁵ like „they are real”²⁶.

The Eastern Orthodox customs decreed that on the iconostasis be painted saints, on several levels, each on top of the other, a fact observed repeatedly by Paul of Aleppo after the visits he made to the monasteries in the Romanian Provinces²⁷. The same gestures of veneration were committed by Romanians and view the faces of the saints the cross and

²⁰ Jerzy Krasinski, 1973, 120-121.

²¹ Paul Beke, 1973, 278.

²² Paul de Alep, 1976, 184.

²³ Paul de Alep, 1976, 196

²⁴ *Călători*, 1973, 117.

²⁵ Evlia Celebi, 1976, 479-481.

²⁶ Evlia Celebi, 1976, 479.

²⁷ Paul de Alep, 1976, 34.

other religious symbols which were represented on their flags, „considered to be sacred”²⁸.

Evlia Celebi wrote in *Book of travelling* („*Cartea de călătorii*”) about a „discussion” he had with „a priest” from The Three Bishops’ Monastery / „*Mănăstirea Trei Ierarhi*” from Iași. When questioned „why do you worship these idols, saying that they are gods?”, Evlia Celebi was answered „God forsake, we do not say that they are gods (...). When we see them and walk past them, we take our hats off and we say a prayer, in this way we are honouring them (...). Seeing that we are honouring them, the people bring us gifts, so we are able to make other paintings, and in this way we are earning”²⁹. We believe that the answer had been „fabricated” by the author, who had the occasion to renew the disputes on the worship of icons, also on the belief that in countries in which the Christian tradition has been stubbornly kept, the religious manipulation of consciences had a great contribution.

3. Political Role of the Romanian Orthodox Church

In general, involvement of Church in politics was presented by the actions of his great prelate. To a foreign beholder, interested in finding out who had the true power and by what means, the moments of religious ceremony have been the best occasions for the display of the power relations. Their impressions were recorded in stories and reports which they have made. In these writings, the „permanent” presence of the bishop next to the ruler, usually surrounded by his high priests, all dressed in „canonicals” and wearing the signs of their ecclesiastic power left the impression that, in the Romanian political governance system, the church held an important place. For example, the presence of the bishop (Mitropolitul Varlaam) in addition to the prince was considered normal, because he was the only intimate counsellor of the ruler who dared to call him to justice and admonish him³⁰. Marco Bandini wrote a letter to secretary of the *Congregation* on 10 December 1644, from Bacău, in which he noticed that the bishop went with great pomposity to all the public

²⁸ Camillo Cavriolo, 1972, 320.

²⁹ Evlia Celebi, 1976, 481.

³⁰ Paul Beke, 1973, 278.

audieces which were organized by the prince³¹. The Italian merchant, Bartolomeo Locadello noticed in the 1641 that the bishop had the complete authority over all other monks and churchmen, Greeks and Romanians³².

Petru Bogdan Baksic had another impression in the 1641 when he made an apostolic inspection in Moldavia. This traveller noticed that the bishop „always spends his time in Iași, next to the ruler”, even if his official residence was not in Iași, it was in Suceava. He went every day to the court, „astride a black horse with black blanket, with two servants and two monks”³³. This fact must have caused resentments to the foreign beholders, especially to those who came from more austere environments from the religious points of view, because, in this way, the bishop seemed to neglect his spiritual mission and, through the luxury displayed, did not prove he was a servant of Christ. To Marco Bandini, the shining way the bishop presented („cu mare alai și pompă”) himself gave him reason to ask for the support of the Congregation for *Propaganda Fides* that, in the same manner, its own display would lead to the rise in prestige for the Catholic Church³⁴. The same impression had Petru Parčević, the archbishop of Marcianopol and apostolic vicar of Moldavia: „the Moldovans bishops ride beautiful chariots with 6 or 8 wonderful horses”, a reason for which, the author believed, „are feared, appreciated and priced, even if they are the most unknowing of the Bible, of the religious teachings and of the true belief”³⁵.

These images have not developed the impression of a pre-eminence of the Church to the Lord, but more an impression of obedience. Petru Bogdan Baksic noted: when the archbishop took no punishing measure against a cleric who „stirred discontent”, the ruler himself intervened and punished him severely by „chaining him in a dungeon”³⁶. Also, when the ruler wanted to remove someone from the position of bishop, he did not ask for permission from the patriarch but, by his own power, took the staff

³¹ Marco Bandini, 1973, 306. To see also Petru Bogdan Baksic, 1973, 233, 239 and Paul de Alep, 1976, 25.

³² Bartolomeo Locadello, 1973, 35.

³³ Petru Bogdan Baksic, 1973, 224. Also Petru Parčević, 1980, 173.

³⁴ Marco Bandini, 1973, 306.

³⁵ Petru Parčević, 1980, 175.

³⁶ Petru Bogdan Baksic, 1973, 225-226.

from his hands, in public, and, by so doing, it was clear that the bishop has been fired from his position³⁷. Sometimes they reached the conclusion that „the ruler is free to do whatever he pleases in his country, with no barriers: to judge, to command, to punish to death even the noblemen or to free them, in one word he was free to do whatever he liked”³⁸.

The destiny of the bishop was sometimes like the destiny of the prince. The traveller Anton-Maria del Chiaro noted the ruler's insistence of Nicolae Mavrocordat, while in refuge, to convince the bishop Antim Ivireanul „to stay together”, promising him greatness and threatening him with punishment; „the bishop begged for forgiveness, stating that there was no way for him to leave his flock, especially during those unfortunate times, an act which might have led to an insane uprising of the people when they realised they have been abandoned by their ruler and also by their bishop”³⁹.

After a time this connection between the Church and the political power was kept, although in the XVIIIth century it was more tempered, probably due to the new socio-political conditions. Anton-Maria del Chiaro noted the effort of the ruler of Ștefan Cantacuzino, prince of Wallachia to „begin his rule with a notable action, which would offer people an occasion to remember it for a long time, forgetting the sinister supposition they all had against him that he had murdered Brâncoveanu”; he surrounded himself by high priests and offered tax exemptions in the eyes of the noblemen, with powerful curses and with the support of the patriarch from Constantinople and the country's bishop⁴⁰.

Of course the fragments mentioned before are just impressions and external manifestations of the way the relation between the political and the religious power worked, somewhat difficult to be understood by a beholder unused to the Romanian realities. The Romanian viewer had the same difficulty, which explains that the connection between the Prince and the Church was not a priority.

³⁷ Petru Bogdan Baksic, 1973, 225-226.

³⁸ Clas Brorsson Ralamb, in the 1657 considered that the prince of Moldavia conduct „as he wishes” (1980, 612). In the *Curious Description on Moldavia and Wallachia* (1699) it noted that „the prince has a fairly large power over his people, because as how he says or commands, as remained” (like as the Turks), 1983, 633.

³⁹ Anton-Maria del Chiaro, 1983, 393.

⁴⁰ Anton-Maria del Chiaro, 391.

4. Social Role of the Romanian Orthodox Church

Another preoccupation of the monastery was to offer assistance to the needy, by offering donations, clothes or regular meals. Evlia Celebi noted, apart from the grandness with which the Three Bishops' Monastery from Iași inspired its beholders, they were also impressed by its charitable works; having „many pious foundations”, in „its Christian kitchen can be found plenty of foods and they are being shared with generosity to all the passers-by”⁴¹. The same generosity has been noted at Prince Grigore Ghica, founder of a charitable foundation „where wheat soup is being boiled daily, served as an offer for the soul of Saint Mary and distributed with the same generosity to the poor Christians as to the Muslim or non – Muslim travellers”⁴².

The Church due to its fortified appearance offered protection to people during military attacks or those by predators.

5. Romanian Attitude toward the Church

The foreign travelers, less familiar with the nature, religious beliefs and customs of Romanians were limited to issuing comments and impressions on acts committed or disjunction between the rigors of orthodoxy and Romanian morals in times of religious practices known to them and those that they would be assisted. Many times, religious beliefs of Romanians has been interpreted from the perspective of superstition and religious exaggerations.

The differences between the way the Romanians from Moldavia and those from Wallachia lived in terms of religion received a political - judicial explanation. For the traveller De La Croix, the Romanian way of celebrating religious events had been determined by the degree of religious tolerance of the ruler, who, in his turn, was dependent on the relation to the Ottoman Empire: „they are celebrating more solemnly in Wallachia and Moldavia – where there are only Eastern Orthodox believers –than in the other areas, due to their freedom of the cult”⁴³.

⁴¹ Evlia Celebi, 1976, 481.

⁴² Evlia Celebi, 1976, 730.

⁴³ La Croix, 1980, 267.

The first conclusion that can be drawn from the writings of the foreign travellers can be referred to the wide participation of people in the celebration of religious feasts: the church was decorated with „flowers and basil” and participants, bishops and laity, „they were dressed for the feast with the best and expensive clothes”. An unnamed Italian Catholic noted in the 1606 that people from Suceava and the surrounding areas were celebrating the holyday of the spiritual patron of the city of Suceava „by great solemnity and in large numbers”⁴⁴.

The second conclusion emphasizes the fact that the church marked the time destined for prayer by ringing the bell and tapping the plate. The greater ringing was used at the religious celebrations⁴⁵.

Another conclusion showed that, during the great religious celebrations, the mass took place in a specially prepared context, like a show. At the ruler’s request, the patriarch himself, if he was in the country, officiated the mass⁴⁶. It was, of course, a „representation” given by the Church and the ruler, that could not have been neglected. For example, while performing the Baptism and the Easter mass, the participants came in impressive numbers, because in the yard of the palace „if you would have thrown a seed of millet, it would not have fallen on the ground but onto people”⁴⁷; the army surrounded the „stage” in order to prevent the people „who attended in great numbers, to disturb the officials”⁴⁸. This is possible the reason for which Paul of Aleppo, impressed, wrote that „the greatness of the celebration and the public joy of the Romanians I saw manifested on the Baptism day I have not seen or heard anywhere else, not even at celebrations of the Christian kings”⁴⁹.

The grandeur of the feast was enhanced also due to the presence of precious liturgical objects, involved in the ritual, and due to the gestures of the high priests performing the mass, who were dressed in „shining canonicals”.

The celebration of a saint in the church continued with the consecration of the foods brought by the laymen and their sharing with all

⁴⁴ Unnamed, 1972, 336-337.

⁴⁵ Paul de Alep, 1976, 104.

⁴⁶ Paul de Alep, 1976, 160-161.

⁴⁷ Paul de Alep, 1976, 115.

⁴⁸ De La Croix, 1980.

⁴⁹ Paul de Alep, 1976, 115.

the people who were present at the celebration. At the end of the mass, „trays loaded with many fruits” „were blessed and distributed to those in the front, as well as the basil and the flowers that had been placed on top of the trays, without counting those with which the icons had been adorned”⁵⁰.

About this ritual gesture, repeated „on days of great celebration”, Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel also stated, presenting it in an ironical note: „they are bringing all their food to the church to be consecrated and the churches are often so full of pots that passage is impossible because of them, and this thing is taking place in the middle of the church”⁵¹.

The traveller Weismantel, referring to the religious life of Romanians in the 1714 tried to emphasize their superstitious behaviour, which he explained through the lack of education. We will quote plenty of the author’s impressions, because the long fragment is illustrative to the demonstration of the common vision foreign travellers had regarding that what they called „the superstitions of the Romanians”. „They fall to the ground as if the icon was the saint depicted in it or even God himself. They would like to pray, but they do not know any prayer, even Our Father is known only by a few (...) some of them just bow and cross themselves twenty to thirty times, fall on their knees and kiss the ground (...) boys and young men are not to be seen in church”; „about the words of God and the Holy Bible they have no knowledge of, and their few priests have very little knowledge, because they only know (...) to read, and many of them do not even know how to write. Nobody in the entire country knows what a preacher is. The priest is singing the songs and psalms only by habit (...) the laymen are not able even to understand well or to interpret what they have heard (a book of prayers or any other book cannot be found on any layman) (...) for the common men, the notions regarding Christianity do not go farther than them knowing that they have been baptised, that there is a Holy Trinity, the angels and the devil and that there would be an eternal life and eternal damnation”⁵². The same religious stubbornness of the Romanians has been remarked also in the mural paintings from their churches, which he called „superstitious representations”, because they

⁵⁰ Paul de Alep, 1976, 97.

⁵¹ Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, 1983, 354.

⁵² Erasmus Heinrich Schneider von Weismantel, 1983, 352-353.

depicted the punishments of hell, or often „desecrated” the walls „with some bodily, unnecessary representation of the Father, a practice allowed here despite the principles imposed and the declarations given by the Greek church”⁵³. In conclusion, what might seem as piety to the Eastern Orthodox, to foreign travellers proved to be a superstitious attitude.

The situation of ignorance described by the foreign travellers should be regarded in correlation with the effects of the *Reform* and the *Counter-reformation*, which debated on the authority of the priest to interpret the biblical texts which was common practice for the Romanians, as well as the idea of Christian morals, implicitly of Christian morals.

In conclusion, for some travellers, the responsibility for people lacking in culture was of the clergy, whose lack of interest in theology mixed with the inclination towards vanity and luxury were worldly habits, worthy of condemnation by austere westerners. Petru Parčević, apostolic vicar in Moldavia wrote on 20 July 1670 to the cardinal for *Propaganda* that the Romanian bishops were the most unknowing of literacy, of religious teachings and true belief⁵⁴. Also, it seemed that the entire orthodox clergy was interested in cultivating the superstitious beliefs in their laymen. Anton Stepancic, addressing the cardinals of the *Congregation*, on 29 July 1673 spoke about the wrecking of their church in Bucharest, affected by a ‘tattle’ made up by the ‘schismatic Greeks and Romanians’. Dositei the second Notara, the patriarch of Jerusalem, would have cursed it and „as soon as he had stated the curse”, it collapsed. About this fact, the priests and monks „immediately started to speak with no shame against the holy church” and „the foolish mob of the Greeks and Romanians” „believes them without any doubt – even more than they believe the doctrines of the religion”, „with the same strength with which they believe that on every Saturday that is in the eve of Easter fire from the sky falls in Jerusalem”. Even if there were „three or four more enlightened noblemen who knew very well that this church was standing on very weak foundations and did not have a roof for many years”, yet its rebuilding proved impossible, because ‘the patriarch cursed it’. As ‘a wise measure’, the Bulgarian observer proposed that there should have been conducted ‘a blessing from our most saint master and vicar high priest of Christ, in order

⁵³ Edmund Chishull, 1983, 202.

⁵⁴ Petru Parčević, 1980, 175.

to erase the curse laid by the patriarch”⁵⁵. Also, this statement proves that this form of religiousness was not generalised on the entire level of the Romanian society.

The writings of foreign travellers regarding the Orthodox Church in the XVII-XVIIIth centuries might be considered as fragments of perceptions and individual representations, but also tributary to the cultural environment from which their authors came from. Their adoption as proof for the definition of the spiritual profile of the Romanian people is not an endeavour encouraged by the historians. The subjectivity of the writings is great, and to neglect this aspect might lead to wrong interpretations and unreal images. However, we need to retain them in our historical steps, because they are offering a perspective for the reconstruction of some aspects about which the Romanians did not write. Also, we might emphasize them in order to show the way those travellers thought and their level of understanding.

⁵⁵ Anton Stepančić, 1980, 314-316.

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