

# TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE AT DIMITRIE CANTEMIR

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In the history of European culture, the last two decades of the XVII.th century denote the revival of a new, powerful and transforming spirit, which delineates, on the cultural map of Europe, a pre-Enlightenment epoch<sup>1</sup>, clearly distinct between Classical Europe and Enlightenment Europe. Described by Paul Hazard in a fascinating book<sup>2</sup>, pre-Enlightenment was defined as an epoch of European conscience crisis.

It is an epoch confronting tradition with innovation, the cultural frontiers disappear, making room for a real dialogue between Western and Eastern worlds in the European space.

The current interpretation established new links between the politico-ideological and socio-economic phenomena in the history of the continent and the phenomena which appeared following the redimensioning of Europe by reintegration of the Central, South-Eastern and Eastern territories of Europe.

The return from a continent divided by the Ottoman rule to one in which political geography was remade had profound cultural consequences; the Ottoman withdrawal and the increasing Ottoman crisis contributed, after 1683, to the stimulation of European intellectual circles in the South-East and East of Europe. The Western world showed a rare scientific interest in the Eastern world, in the Romanian one, in our case.

The intellectual action of European pre-Enlightenment has in view historico-geographical and political, cultural and religions facts of the Romanian countries, all the ethnic populations, confessions and spiritual traditions.

This interest is met by the Romanian countries with the integrating frontier of pre-Enlightenment, animated by pre-eminent intellectual spirits of the Romanians, Hungarians or Saxons.

The links with the German pre-Enlightenment circles, opening of scientific publications about the history of Romanians are proofs of the interest of these circles in the role of the irradiation centres of pietism and pre-Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup>

From this new "historistic" viewpoint, which considers the *wholeness* of civilisation, a new sensitivity resulted that could distinguish the relationship between man, God and the established rule.

In fact, the relations Pierre Chaunu spoke about, characteristic of the Enlightenment, were announced already in the pre-Enlightenment epoch.

In the spiritual geography of central and south-East Europe, DIMITRIE CANTEMIR (1873-1723) holds a prestigious place.<sup>4</sup>

Author of resounding writing, the Romanian prince became a familiar name in the European and extra-European worlds of letters of the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries, being sometimes included among the preoccupations of famous scholars such as Voltaire, Leibniz, Francke, N. Tindal and Büsching. It is, of course, significant for the Romanian culture in the first place, *but also for the world history*, owing to the ideas he conveyed.

Of wide encyclopaedic formation, historian, philosopher, geographer and musician, Dimitrie Cantemir mediated a fruitful dialogue between West and East in an epoch marked by mutations.

In November 1710 he acceded to the throne of Moldavia (1710-1711); during his short reign he took several steps to raise the international position of Moldavia and to reinforce the rule by the alliance treaty with Russia against the Turks.

It is important to stress the political character of his historical theory, subordinated to a practical aim – an alliance of the Habsburgs with Peter the Great, which might bring about the freedom of the Romanian countries. Thus, he is early to state one of the basic concepts of Enlightenment: the political, militant attitude on history.

Thus the prince met with the scholar, his political and cultural personality being actively engraved in the general atmosphere of the political standpoints of the continent and in the process of modernization of European culture.

Elected member of the prestigious Academy of Berlin (*Societas Regia Berlinensis*), Cantemir met Leibniz's project expressed in a memoir concerning the study of languages and peoples of South-Eastern Europe, by which the German scholar manifested interest in the origins.

In Russia, Dimitrie Cantemir also had the function of chief counsellor for relations with the *Mussulman* peoples. It is to be noted that the European fame of the Romanian scholar was due to his works about the history and civilization of the Islamic world. There are three important works in this respect:

*The History of the Ottoman Empire* (*Incrementa atque decrementa Aulae Othomanicae*), *The System of Mohammedan Religion* (*Sistema de religione et statu Imerii Turcici*) and investigations in the Caucasus, integrated in *Collectanea Orientalia*.

*The History of the Ottoman Empire* is a scientific book, as it pursues truth and uses a historical critical method, by comparing and judging the sources and their value. Besides, it has a vast conception on the history of civilization, it does not limit itself to political history but also describes institutions, culture, religion, state organization and social life.

However, when considering this work one must distinguish between the author's position towards the Ottoman Empire as a *political power* and his position towards the Turkish *life and civilization*. The distinction is *not* emphasized as it reflects two different attitudes of Dimitrie Cantemir, apparently paradoxical and irreconcilable, between the political and cultural levels of the Ot-

toman Empire. The same two attitudes will be present in other works of Cantemir concerning Islam. On the one hand, we notice the anti-Ottoman attitude of Dimitrie Cantemir as a *political man*, presenting to the Porte's enemies all useful knowledge on Turks, with their past, habits and defects; on the other, we are surprised by the attitude of Dimitrie Cantemir as *man of science* who approaches the institutions, culture and Islamic civilization with a profound and clear understanding. And thus, a question arises: what is the explanation of these two attitudes so completely different?

From a political point of view an interesting fact is Cantemir's statement that the Ottoman Empire is in decline, which is a *historical process* and not only a temporary weakness; at the same time, he is a good observer of the Empire's "growth and decay" process defined by him in agreement with the evolutionism of his time.

As to the second plan (and attitude), it would be convenient to place it in the climate of the epoch. At the end of the XVIIth and the beginning of the XVIIIth centuries, the intellectual attitude laid a particular stress on ethic value, which greatly contributed to the decline of religious values. As such, these new orientations promoted a cultural direction, the logical rigour subordinating intellectual life to civil, that is, ethical-political, largely educative purposes.

In the same way in which Cantemir invests the unicorn (a character in his allegorical novel *Hieroglyphic History*) with victorious force, brilliantly representing the light of spirit raised against the darkness of a primary and violent world, he considers darkness as "barbarism", and light as "civilization".

In *The History of the Ottoman Empire* the author states that civilization means studies ("scientias") and good manners ("vitae cultum"). But this civilization does not have an ethnic character; it is the same for the whole mankind; every cultivated man with good manners is a Hellenic, that is, a civilized man. The idea of the migueness of human civilization appears in these words.

His second great work is *The System of Mahomedan Religion*.<sup>8</sup> This writing "surpasses in enlightenment significance even *The History of the Ottoman Empire*"<sup>9</sup>. About Peter the Great's expedition in 1722 entrusted by the emperor Cantemir writes a work of information for the use of the Russian politics.

The stress is laid not on the political history, but on the cultural aspect, on the history of civilization. The reader is acquainted with an ample fresco of Mahomedanism, described as a conception of life overstepping the bounds of the religious. Cantemir's interest was directed towards the people's beliefs, superstitions, traditional rites, magic, wedding festivities, burials, towards sciences especially the natural ones, history, art. More than in *The History of the Ottoman Empire*, it is from *The System* that the historian's deep sensitivity results, a princely opening of the Cantemirian spirit towards the true life of men tormented by superstitions, joys and passions, or tortured by the demon of knowledge. What is also impressive in *The System* is the deep knowledge of Mussulman civilization,

as well as the attitude of the man of science, who does not write a pamphlet but a work of science.

In relation to the Mussulman creed, in numerous places the *Koran's* revealed character is denied; Mahomed is only "pseudoprophet"; some Koranic advice was "stolen from our Scriptures".

But Cantemir does not confine himself to presenting Islam as a doctrine, under the form crystallized by *Koran* and the Mussulman theologians, but rather as a social and historical phenomenon, described after the reflection of the doctrine proper in the mind and attitude of the adherents of his time. Hence the frequent references to non-concordances between the word of *Koran* and the behavior of its believers. Thus, the prince's criticism is not always directed against Mussulman doctrine as such, but frequently against the way in which contemporaneous Mahomedans avoid it or misinterpret it in order to spare or justify forbidden practices such as hunting, luxury, drunkenness etc.

Protected by his profession of faith, the author ascends calmly the stairs towards a more serene consideration of Islam, these stairs being common sense, the unquestionable personal experience, but also the reference to a humanistic consensus of values which could not be conquered by the authoritative arguments of occidental polemicists.<sup>10</sup>

Cantemir takes up attitude against the radical understanding of religion – either Christian or Mussulman –, against bigotry and superstition. He examines Islam not from the angle of adversities – which most often means intolerance and intellectual primitivism – but from a superior, objectively critical attitude: even "some writings of the Mahomedans" would point out the falsity of *Koran*! His aim is to deny the revealed character, thus the authenticity of this religion. But taking, in his criticism, not a religious but a rational stand, he leaves room for all the positive appreciations which the same attitude also permits him the regard to the philosophical, moral, scientific, literary and artistical values of Islam.

And Cantemir goes further: he expresses openly his valuation of some aspects of the Islamic spirituality or culture with an admirable *objectivity*. He praises the custom of releasing the purchased prisoners after seven years of slavery, leaving them religious freedom; he exalts *Koran's* qualities, he is a great admirer of arts, music etc. "Cantemir has brought in this book – writes professor Pompiliu Teodor"<sup>11</sup> – a deep knowledge of the subject and at the same time the passion and sensitivity for the history of manners and spirit of the peoples, which, at a distance of two decades, will be theorized by Voltaire in his *Essai sur les mœurs...*"

The prince, belonging to the Eastern Europe, is sensitive to the military and institutional decay of the Porte, but he does not subscribe for the thesis of occidental cultural superiority. "By Cantemir – underlines Virgil Căndea<sup>12</sup> – Islam acquired for the first time in the modern epoch a European and Christian researcher and judge from within". With *The History of the Ottoman Empire* and

especially with *The System of Muhammedan Religion*, Romanian culture, by the agency of an illustrious representative, renders with sympathy and conviction a major homage to Islamic civilization.

In drawing a conclusion as to the ideas referring to the problem of tolerance and its political, cultural and religious significances, it is to underline *the modern attitude of Dimitrie Cantemir*, free of prejudices as far as the mahommedan belief is concerned. Certainly, he fights against it from the positions of Christianity, but not even for a moment does controversy surpass the limits of a theoretical discussion.

At the same time, Cantemir affiliates himself with the mentality of contemporary scholars, manifested by the irreverent attitude towards dogma, attention paid to various cultural experiences and the pragmatic spirit. In this way – along with political reasons – the scholar's tolerant spirit as far as religion is concerned appears gradually, being actuated is both by the past and by the future, which will belong to Enlightenment.

On the other hand, the tolerance of his spirit and the sensitivity for the culture and civilization of Islam, the rational criticism of religion as well as the "happy subordination" of his theory on civilization to the political imperatives of the epoch from the European central and South-Eastern spaces demonstrates the modernity of his spirit and his concordance with the general evolution of European historiography towards the new Europe of Enlightenment.

Diversification of intellectual concerns, mutual influences of mentality between areas till recently divided by political or cultural boundaries, bring ahead the necessity of cultivation by education, writing and art. Consequently, *social conscience begins to shift from the confessional framework towards the historical one*; it is the reflux of religious or order solidarity; at the same time, the study of social-political realities is in the forefront, prior to the obligation of maintaining untouched a doctrine which has assured cultural resistance (orthodoxism). In this way, thinking begins to become more and more free and the traditional frameworks are increasingly abandoned. Freedom in thinking implies giving up confessional position, intolerance and affirmation of anticonfessionalism, of tolerant spirit in an innovating, modelling sense, able to define this epoch of crisis and of intermediary. By integrating Wissowatius, a Polish unitarian author, in an orthodox book (*The Divan*, 1698), Dimitrie Cantemir's tolerance to religion gains a new aspect.

The fact that his position was not traditional and confessional but anticonfessional, almost free, may be seen also in the way he opposes synod when this has attacked the matter contained in *The Mahommedan System*.

The same passion for knowledge is predominant in Cantemir's third work, dedicated to the Caucasian expedition and which has enlightened, by the agency of the Russian Academy and of the French savants, a fragment of European humanity.

From the point of view of this activity, there remains a spirit of the early Enlightenment. Through his researches and rich information about a fascinating world covered by prejudices, a world he made known, through the controversies occasioned by him, he contributed to the progress of European spirit.

## NOTES

1. For the problem of the European and Romanian Enlightenment, see Pompiliu Teodor – “Interferente iluministe europene”, Ed. “Dacia”, Cluj-Napoca, 1984, pp. 25-48 and 49-71; likewise Paul Hazard – “criza constiintei europene”, Bucuresti, 1973, and Pierre Chanu – “Civilizatia Europei în Secolul luminilor”, Bucuresti, 1986, pp. 58-62.
2. P. Hazard, op. cit.
3. About pietism, as reaction against counter-reformation, in the orthodox space, see Pompiliu Teodor, op. cit., pp. 38-40.
4. For the biography, political activity and works of Dimitrie Cantemir, see P. P. Panaitescu – “Dimitrie Cantemir, viata si opera”, Editura Academiei, Bucuresti, 1958; Pompiliu Teodor – “Evolutia gândirii istorice românești”, Ed. “Dacia”, Cluj-Napoca, 1970, pp. 43-56; and *Enciclopedia istoriografiei românești* (scientific coordination – Stefan Stefanescu), Edit. Stiintifica si enciclopedica, Bucuresti, 1978, pp. 81-82.
5. The translation of N. Tindal – “The history of growth and decay of the Othoman Empire, London, 1734; 1765.
6. “Histoire de l'Empire Othoman, on se voyant les causes de son agrandissement et son décadence”, 1743.
7. “Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches nach seiner Anwachsen und Abnehmen”, 1745.
8. This writing, in the author's intention, was intended to have two parts: one dealing with Islamic doctrine and the culture it engendered, the other presenting the organization and institutions of the main Mussulman state, the Ottoman Empire. Cantemir refers to this work under its complete title “De muhammedana religione, deque politico musulmanae gentis rimine”. *The System* represents its first part, the first volume of the Russian edition published at Sankt-Piterburg, 1722. See the critical edition published under the care of Virgil Cândea: “Dimitrie Cantemir – Sistemul sau fintocmirea religiei musulmane”, Opere complete – Complete works, VIII, Editura Academiei, Bucuresti, 1987, the introductory study particularly, pp. 212-220.
9. Pompiliu Teodor – “Interferente...”, pp. 58-59.
10. The European Arabicizants of the XVIIIth century used to justify their studies by apologizing for having served theology more precisely, apologetics. Prior to the great Reiske who had declared during the same century – but after Cantemir – that the study of Arabic culture is of interest not for the “sacred philology” but for the “history, geography, physics and medicine”, the Romanian scholar had emphasized the general cultural interest for the Islamic values. Consequently, by warning the reader against the precariousness of anti-Islamic demonstrations, we ask the question whether had another European done this before him.