

Pietro Pomponazzi — the Triumphs and Tragedies of Religious Free Thinking

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Abstract—The article discusses the problems of religious and secular interpretation of faith, knowledge, immortality of the soul on the example of the philosophy of the famous Renaissance thinker P. Pomponazzi. His concepts of free will and divine predestination are also analyzed. According to the author, Pomponazzi's interpretation of religious miracles and religious morality is radical even today. The author considers him one of the predecessors of the Reformation. The undoubted relevance of Pomponazzi's philosophical ideas in the conditions of growing clerical influence and escalation of religious contradictions are pointed out.

Keywords—*Renaissance; religion; faith; knowledge; truth; immortality of the soul*

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the great figures of the titans of the Renaissance — comprehensively gifted and educated, actively and vividly manifested themselves in all spheres of life — should not get lost the modest figure of University Professor of philosophy Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525). To some contemporaries, he seemed a typical fragment of a medieval tradition gradually disappearing into the past. He was a doctor of scholasticism, engaged exclusively in teaching (lecturing and scientific debates in the officially prescribed form of detailed comments on fragments of authoritative authors), he published during his lifetime only one large treatise with a trivial for that time title "On the immortality of the soul." But this work (in fact, a record of his lecture courses) turned out to be one of the most significant books of the XVI century.

Pomponazzi was a native of Mantua, came from a noble and wealthy family, graduated from the University of Padua, where he then taught most of his life. He never left Northern Italy, and in the last years of his life was a Professor in Bologna. On the background of the brilliantly educated humanists, possessing sophisticated Greek language and classical Latin, Peretto Mantuan (his famous nickname), who knew no Greek and spoke a "barbarous" Latin, seemingly lost, but nevertheless, his lectures were a success, and he was always surrounded by many admirers and disciples. This ugly, little man was able to attract the hearts and minds of people. Many of his disciples subsequently occupied a high position in the political and Church hierarchy and established a high intellectual reputation of Pomponazzi throughout

Europe. But the real glory came to him after his death, when two of his biggest treatises were published — "On the causes of natural phenomena, or on Sorcery" and "On fate, freedom of will and predestination." And again, behind the titles — quite traditional for that time — there was very radical content, because of which they actually could not be published during the life of the author.

The main subject of professional activity of Pomponazzi was the philosophy of Aristotle — the highest authority of scholasticism, which cult was opposed by many humanists. This was especially true of the traditional interpretation of the teachings of Stagirite, for which Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was the standard for Catholic thought. It seems that these scholastic disputes belong to history, but in fact their problems affect the very relevant issue of the state of religion in the system of knowledge and in social life.

II. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE POMPONAZZI'S INTELLECTUAL ACTIVITY

The significance and originality of Pomponazzi's ideas are revealed only in view of the contradictory realities of his critical time. The Renaissance, with its flourishing humanistic culture and the revival of the ideas of classical antiquity, literally invaded to the conservative system of University education, built on the medieval scholastic model.[1] Pomponazzi, perfectly knowledgeable of the ancient philosophers and the works of his contemporaries (humanists were predominantly followers of neo-Platonism), have developed his own version of the "humanistic aristotelianism", which includes some ideas of Stoic philosophy, and is optimally used for this scholastic manner of thought development (with the endless questions-answers, proofs-denials, arguments-doubts). But if a typical scholastic dispute could end with "the only correct conclusion", supported by a reference to the indisputable authority, the lectures of Pomponazzi sometimes ended with the words: "my Lords, you will have more doubts by the end than you had at the beginning ..." [2]. He taught his students to doubt everything, for "doubt is not alien to science, and no one will reach true knowledge unless he doubts." Until the end of his days, this Professor of scholasticism was open to new and was not afraid to contradict any authority in the face of changing facts of life. His favorite saying was the famous words of Socrates: "I know only one thing, that I know

nothing." But even the most advanced thinkers-humanists bowed before the authorities, although no longer in the face of the Church, but in the face of ancient philosophy, and few dared to develop ideas that were not supported by any authoritative opinion.

Italian universities of that time were in some sense "breeding grounds for free thinking": the lack of theological faculties (there were only departments of theology), the priority role of medical and law faculties, the relative independence from the Church authorities created conditions for a more free study of nature and man. Especially native to Pomponazzi Padua University was distinguished by the spirit of rationalism and freethinking: many "heretics" were alumna of this University (and later Galileo taught there). It has long been the center of the spread of the most "revolutionary" (for the Church consciousness) interpretation of Aristotle-in the spirit of Averroes (the Arab thinker (1126-1198) — the so- called concept of "dual truth". [3]

The essence of it is that there are truths of reason, proved by science and philosophy, and the truths of faith, as evidenced by Holy Scripture and religious revelation - and, as it were in different planes, they cannot contradict each other. Consistently developing this very radical concept for medieval consciousness, Pomponazzi emphasized that the truth of philosophy is precisely the truth of rational knowledge based on sensual impression, and that it cannot be distorted even for the sake of coordinating its conclusions with the provisions of faith (i.e. he risked to recognize as true in philosophy even that which cannot be true according to Christian doctrine).

The attempt to demarcate the fields of knowledge and faith has always met with fierce criticism of medieval Orthodoxy, convinced that any philosophical truth should correspond primarily to the truths of theology. [4] In 1513, this criticism led to an official prohibition of the concept of "dual truth": the highest ideological authority in the person of the Fifth Lateran Council declared that "the Truth does not contradict the truth" — and threatened "despicable and disgusting non-Christians and heretics" adhering to such misconceptions, "rejection and punishment"! But even in such dangerous conditions Pomponazzi continued to defend the right of philosophical truth to be independent from the dogmas of religion.

III. THE PROBLEM OF IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL AND POMPONAZZI'S ETHICS

Another decision of the Fifth Lateran Council of 1513 concerned the most important theological and philosophical problem — the immortality of the soul. "We curse and condemn all those who assert that the rational soul is mortal ..." - as a result, the dogma of the natural immortality of the individual human soul was officially accepted. Obviously, the need for a special decision on this issue was dictated by ambiguous interpretations of the immortality of the soul, and they took place even in the deeper Middle Ages. One very juicy quote, clearly responding to doubts about the posthumous existence of the soul (and borrowed from Bruno Nardi — the Italian researcher of Pomponazzi), "walks" on

the Internet (including, as the author was surprised to find, Islamic and Orthodox sites). [5] It belongs to the second-tier Franciscan theologian, Pietro de Trabibus, who lived in the 13th century: "If there is no other life... a fool who does virtuous deeds and abstains from passions; a fool, who does not surrender to lust, debauchery, fornication, and filth, gluttony, prodigality and drunkenness, greed, robbery, violence and other vices!" [6]

It is difficult to more expressly point out the close connection between the dogma of the immortality of the soul and the doctrine of afterlife retribution (punishment for sins and reward for virtues) which is the basis of Christian morality. The Catholic Church believed that the denial of afterlife immortality would lead to the collapse of all moral principles. But, despite the direct threats of the ideologues of the Lateran Council against those who dare to doubt this dogma, Pomponazzi published in 1516 his treatise "On the immortality of the soul" - in the traditional form of commentary to Aristotle's book "On the Soul". In this essay all the prohibitions of official Orthodoxy were violated by Pomponazzi and this problem that has a personal character for the author (taking into account his old age and serious illness) was examined with the utmost intellectual honesty.

Having considered the problem of personal immortality "in the natural boundaries, leaving aside the revelations and miracles", the philosopher came to a firm conclusion about the impossibility for the human mind to be independent of the body. Based on Aristotle's sensationalistic epistemology, according to which thinking is impossible without the sense organs, without sensations, without sensory images and representations, he concludes: if the mind needs representations for its activities, it is "inseparable from matter and, undoubtedly, inseparable from the body." It follows from this that the human soul is "in itself" material and mortal — that it dies with the death of the body. And Pomponazzi, unlike the above-quoted Franciscan monk, does not believe that the mortality of the soul should be a rejection of morality. Moreover, just the opposite: in the eyes of the philosopher, it is those who believe in posthumous retribution that cannot be considered truly moral people, since they follow the moral law solely in the hope of future reward and out of fear of posthumous torment. The sober observation of Peretto Mantuan about the vast majority of people who believe in the afterlife their souls: "if they do well, it's rather out of fear of eternal torments, than in the hope of eternal bliss, as torment is more familiar for them than the eternal good." [7] Moreover, according to the philosopher, both the hope for reward and the fear of retribution bring into the soul "something slavish", while the real morality is not for a slave, but for a person who freely chooses between good and evil. This is consonant with the ideas of the ancient Stoics and will later find a brilliant continuation in the paradoxes of Kant's ethics.

Although in the last chapter of the treatise Pomponazzi declared the immortality of the soul as true and indisputable from the faith point of view, he refused (as opposed to Thomas Aquinas and the whole school of rational theology) to seek rational proof of this dogma, which needs as little

proof as other dogmas of religion - the creation of the world, the Resurrection of Christ, etc.

Pomponazzi's treatise "On the immortality of the soul" testified to the crisis of the traditional religious worldview. He brought on the head of the author countless violent protests and curses, denunciations and calls for punishment. As a result, the book was publicly burned in Venice, and the case against Pomponazzi reached the Pope. But the worst level of terror of the Catholic Church against dissidents in the times of the Counter-Reformation had not yet arrived — and Pomponazzi's European fame allowed him to continue teaching. Moreover, in his writings *Apologia* (1517) and *Protective Speech* (1519) written in response to the threats of fanatics and orthodox, he continued to defend his right (and official duty!) to interpret the thoughts of Aristotle regardless of the provisions of Christian doctrine.

IV. MIRACLES AND LAWS OF NATURE IN THE CONCEPTION OF POMPONAZZI

In 1520, Pomponazzi completed his work on the treatise "On the causes of natural phenomena, or on Sorcery", fully aware of the unthinkability of its publication in the era of the so-called "witch hunt". The terrible massacres of women accused of witchcraft began in Western Europe in the second half of the 15th century, and were especially intensified after the publication in 1487 the infamous *Institoris* and *Sprengrer's "The Witches' Hammer"* and the corresponding decree of Pope Innocent VIII, unleashed a bloody bacchanalia: the number of its victims cannot be even approximately determine (in some regions even 4-7 year old girls were burned as witches!). In the midst of rampant religious fanaticism Pomponazzi wrote a book, in fact, exposing any "miracles" — both black magic of witches, magicians, and necromancers, as well as completely orthodox Christian miracles officially recognized by the Church.

Doubts about the reality of devil's bargains, the night Sabbats, flights through the air, damage and the evil eye were then equated with the commission of these acts themselves, hostile to the church and the Christian community. It is enough to mention the collection published at that time under the general title "The New Witches' Hammer", whose author proved the reality of witchcraft and demanded to bring to justice of the Inquisition everybody who consider everything was told by the witches as the fruit of sick imagination or delusion. But Pomponazzi, following the path of rational perception, considered the only possible natural explanation of enigmatic and mysterious phenomena. Denying the intervention of supernatural forces (whether God or the devil), Pomponazzi argued that these are not supernatural phenomena, but simply phenomena whose causes are not always open and obvious.

In an effort to give an explanation of "miraculous" phenomena through natural causes, Pomponazzi referred to the effects of healing herbs, minerals, evaporations, etc. (even if this explanations from the point of view of later science look naive and ridiculous). In any case, this approach paved the way for a new science as empirical natural science

[8]. But his attempts to take into account the impact of the human psyche — in cases of, for example, "miraculous healings" (which is very relevant for our time full of psychics and healers) are much more interesting. He emphasized that it is not an accident that healers often had more success than the most learned doctors, and that it was not an accident that unexpected healings more often occurred among "low-class and rude people, for they are the most gullible." The secret of the impact of the relics of the saints are concluded in the peculiarities of the human psyche: in the case of healing, it is not the mysterious power of the relics themselves that acts, but the imagination and impressionability of the healed believer, "so even in case they were dog bones, they would work by the great strength of imagination". More briefly, the same idea was expressed by the younger contemporary of Pomponazzi, the great doctor Paracelsus (1493-1541) — that miracles are performed by "faith, no matter whether it is true faith or false, it will always work wonders".

The second most important theme of Pietro Pomponazzi's treatise is the universal regularity in nature caused by the movement of heavenly bodies. Being a supporter of Democritus' determinism, he supplemented it with the popular astrological ideas about the regulating influence of the heavenly bodies on earthly life. Not accepting the primitive "astromancy" and attempts to clarify the specific destinies of people by the movement of the stars, he was a supporter of the so-called "natural astrology", based on the influence of the highest celestial world on the world of earthly nature. Pomponazzi emphasized that everything in the world is subject to the general law of perpetual motion, emergence, change and death. But these periods of rise and decay are especially difficult to notice in things that have existed for a long time, "such as inanimate objects, rivers, seas, cities, laws..." Moreover, according to the philosopher, the religions themselves cannot avoid the general law of birth, development, decline and death. Obeying the inexorable law of nature, the gods themselves come and go, and the old "law" gives way to a new one with the birth of new gods. That is why the appearance of the founders of the "new laws" is confidently predicted by the prophets for many centuries to come. Therefore, miracles in every religion "are very weak at first, then they increase, then they reach the top, then they weaken until they turn into nothing." According to Pomponazzi, the Christian "law" has already passed its periods of origin and rise — and, obeying the dictates of rock, is declining, "so that now everyone lost interest in our faith, and miracles ceased, except for false ones, — for, apparently, it's near to the end". So his philosophy anticipates the coming of the Reformation.

V. THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL AND DIVINE PREDESTINATION IN POMPONAZZI'S PHILOSOPHY

Pomponazzi also did not intend to publish his last book of the most significant size — "On Fatum, free will and predestination" (it was published more than 40 years after the death of the author). He completed this essay three years before his death — at the age of 59 years. Exploring the very popular problems of the Renaissance, he considered all

possible points of view as equal — from the atheistic to the Aristotelian, from the Stoic to the Christian.

Pomponazzi was not an atheist and did not doubt in the existence of God. To his opinion, it was evidenced by the harmony and order prevailing in the universe. But the main difficulty for him was the problem which two centuries later the great Leibniz called theodicy ("God's justification"): how the presence of evil is possible in the world ruled by an omniscient and gracious God? Within the framework of the traditional religious worldview, there is no way to relieve God of responsibility for the existence of evil in the world: "God either rules or does not rule the world. If he doesn't rule, is he a real God? If he rules, why does he rule so cruelly?" — this is how Pomponazzi put the question. Evil reigns in the world of nature and in human society, where the rich oppress the poor, the strong oppress the weak, where "virtues are extremely rare", where "villains are surrounded by honour, flourish and inspire fear", and "it is not only now, but it has always been so, as evident from all the stories, it will always be". God, who admits the world's evil, "turns out to be a cruel executioner, the worst of all, unjust and full of deceit." With such a God, concludes Peretto Mantuan, "there is no necessity for the devil and his company", "... no other devil and evil tempter, except God himself, are needed!"

Pomponazzi understood how risky such a question was: "the soul is shocked, the members tremble and the person loses his temper hearing or thinking this — about God!" But this is not the conclusion of the author himself, but only the internal contradictory of the Christian understanding of God that has been brought to an absurdity. Pomponazzi was unable to justify the evil in the world strictly following the path of rational philosophy. As a result, he preferred the stoic concept of the *fatum*, finding a way out of the rejection of religious anthropomorphic ideas about the personal God. His God does not interfere in the affairs of people, is not subject to any pleas, he does not hear the groan of the oppressed; he does not punish sinners and does not reward the righteous. This is not the Christian God of the humiliated and offended, but a kind of impersonal principle that coincides with the *fatum*, with the natural necessity of the universal laws of nature. The world is not created by God in time, but is co-eternal with God. In fact, dissolving God in nature, Pomponazzi moves to the position of naturalistic pantheism. Being the beginning of existence and the source of movement, God, in his understanding, cannot make changes in world processes — therefore, he is not responsible for the world's evil, which "comes from the nature of the universe, and not from the injustice of God". And something which is considered as unfair, considered in relation to the Universe, turns out to be fair ... Later Leibniz will continue and develop this way of theodicy.

Trying to reconcile somehow his philosophical concept with the traditional religious belief, Pomponazzi constantly repeated his favorite idea that philosophical truth is intended only for the thinking elite of society — for people who are able to see the punishment for the sin in himself and follow the virtues without fear of hell's torment and without hope for heavenly bliss. But the pantheistic image of the God of philosophers, who justify and accept the world order, is not

suitable for the "common people", who cannot rise to the heights of rationalistic ethics and stoically observe moral principles. Therefore, most people need religion — and Pomponazzi gave theologians-"lawmakers" the right to educate the people (provided that they would not make claims for the possession of the truth and would not interfere in philosophical disputes).

Thus, Pomponazzi as a philosopher could proclaim truth, but as a law-abiding member of society, aware of the need for religion, he repeatedly stated in his lectures and essays that he obeyed the authority of the Christian church and recognized all its dogmas. However, in the face of the threat of the approaching Reformation, even such a compromise position did not suit the Catholic Church: although Pomponazzi himself avoided a fire, his books were banned, and his supporters were persecuted. Peretto Mantuan always remembered the danger of violence and constantly reminded about it to listeners and readers. "My Lords, if you go to the right, there will be torture, to the left — there will be quartering," he warned students at one of his lectures. "In philosophy, believe what you are ordered by reasonable evidence, in theology, what theologians and apostles, and the whole Roman church are telling, or you will die as roasted chestnuts" [9]. And in his essays, Pomponazzi often referred to the persecutions and executions that philosophers underwent in antiquity. He also knew about the fate of his University predecessors in Padua and Bologna. One of them was burned alive, and the remains of the other was removed from the grave and burned by the sentence of the Inquisition.

VI. CONCLUSION

The history of Western European freethinking is hard to imagine without Pietro Pomponazzi. In the harsh times of the Counter-Reformation, which ended the risky game of European Averroism in the "dual truth", his name has become a real symbol of freedom of thought. His treatise "On the causes of natural phenomena, or on Sorcery" was used by progressive people of his time in the fight against the "witch hunt". Giordano Bruno, who became one of the most famous victims of the Inquisition (he was burned in 1600), was greatly influenced by the ideas of Peretto Mantuan. One of the most active followers of Pomponazzi was Giulio Vanini, who called him his "divine mentor" (Vanini for his bold atheistic treatises was burned in 1619). Pomponazzi also inspired the free-thinkers of the XVII century, and the philosophy of the religion of the French Enlightenment. His questions about the moral foundations of human behavior, which does not share religious dogmas, contributed to the formation of secular morality, and the pantheistic belief in the unity of the world, God and man as manifestations of the laws of nature anticipated scientific and philosophical discoveries of Modern time.

Nowadays, when contradictions related to the social role of religion and the Church are exacerbated almost everywhere, the relevance of Pomponazzi's ideas is more than obvious. The growth of fanatical intolerance, the increasing interference of the Church in all spheres of society, the blurring of boundaries between faith and knowledge, etc. — there is no need to give examples (they are all, if not on

the lips, then on the screens of computers and televisions). [10] [11]. Pietro Pomponazzi, in his much more ignorant era, was able to raise his voice in defense of freedom of thought and to warn future generations from plunging into the darkness of religious fanaticism and Church totalitarianism. He certainly deserves our grateful memory.

In addition, the main philosophical essays of Pomponazzi, dedicated to the non-religious justification of morality and rational (rejecting the impact of extra-natural forces) explanation of the mysterious phenomena, were published firstly in Russian only in 1990.

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