

Philosophers and Saints Summoned by the Same Truth

500 Years of Orthodox Iconographic Program

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Abstract—The research takes to account a series of murals found on the walls of some monasteries in Bucovina in the north of Romania: Humor (1530), Voroneț (1546) and Sucevița (1595). Their pictures depict some Greek heathen writers and philosophers, and also Sibyls—*Sages of Antiquity* (Socrates, Plato, Aristotel, Pythagoras, etc.)—who are associated with the Tree of Jesse. This idea highlights the importance of classical philosophy for the development of Eastern Christian theology. The article attempts to explain how it became possible that these philosophers living hundreds of years before Christ's incarnation, were so valued.

Keywords—Heathen philosophers; Christianity; murals; monasteries of Bucovina; theology

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Romanian space, the Christian theology and philosophy are depicted, in particular, on the exterior walls of Orthodox churches and monasteries in Bucovina, north of the country. Totally ornamented inside and outside, these monuments of the 16th century are unique in the world. It is not merely the question of some buildings impressing by their dimension, as Gothic cathedrals that span the entire West and delight the eye with their buildings grandness, the beauty of stained glass and ingenuity of decorative design. As to the monasteries of Bucovina, their specialness roots in the 'Byzantine prudence' (Louis Bréhier) that generally defines the ecclesial Eastern art. The monastery buildings are small in size, sometimes probably too small for the expectations of medieval wanderers and even our contemporaries – and the only adornment is represented by small, colorful murals depicting characters and scenes designed in line with the coherent iconographic program belonging to the Moldavian ruler Petru Rares and the Metropolitan Gregory Rosca. These paintings are remarkable since they speak of a specific Romanian thinking expressed by essences rather than by grandeur. This may be seen even nowadays, in spite of the flow of time, weather challenges (the sun's full blaze, harsh winters, rain or wind) or warfares.

The watchful eye of a researcher would be able to observe that the iconographic program with all its characteristic original elements presents no details to escape the dogmatic rigors. These representations had been dictated

and controlled by theologians. It is common knowledge that the Holy Tradition in the Eastern area had been respected with great piety – totaling the literature of the Holy Fathers, dogmas and decrees set forth and approved by the seven Ecumenical Councils. The Nicene Council in 787, for instance, at the end of the iconoclastic controversy, established that “painters should do what the Fathers ordain and prescribe”. It is intrinsic to an Orthodox Church painter to abandon his personal pride and personality while painting. He traces the outline of each figure's holy religion, elements that differentiate one another and conduct records. He draws religiously the outline of saints' figures, the elements that differentiate them one from another. Since the icon painting presented a gesture containing communication with God, the beauty of works transpire more powerfully from the works of some authors in relation with other. The difference was given by the asceticism of the painter, by his capacity to attract divine grace to his work through praying, by assuming the limits and silence to give space to the divine manifestation. The idea is that the authors did not seek to restore photographic beauty of the sanctified, as it is happening in the Western Renaissance, where one can see certain naturality and sentimentality in the figures' carnation.

Paintings of Bucovina had acquired their unique originality. Indeed, they complied with the specific pattern of Byzantine¹ painting, from which is highlighted a certain transfiguration of the saints' represented faces so much different from the extremely carnal option of the Renaissance line (to take into account, for example, the works of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel). The achievement had promoted the initiative to decorate the places of worship both

¹ The mentioned monasteries and paintings are dating back a post Byzantine era (the 16th century), for the Byzantine Empire ended its history with the fall of Constantinople under Mahomet the Conqueror in 1453. Due to the the Holy Tradition, however, which contains recommendations including decoration of churches and iconography, the artistic style is the same, the Byzantine. Indeed, in the strictly chronological context, we can speak of a post-Byzantine iconography, which changes nothing about the said before, nor draws attention to a particular technical detail. Sometimes this very aspect is reproached to the Eastern Christians, that they are not innovative, stay close to the recommendations of the Sacred Tradition, and do not come up with the artist's individuality. Those making such comments miss the permanent transcendental perspective of the Orthodox, the desire to overcome the immediate, the profound sense of the divine.

inside and outside, in full. This, if the researcher may put it this way, was a certain departure from the Tradition.

II. FROM THE "WISDOM OF THIS WORLD" TO THE "TRUE PHILOSOPHY"

As noted earlier in the article, among the painted images on the walls of the monasteries in Bucovina, the most prominent are those of Greek philosophers and writers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Tucidides, Plutarch, Sophocles and several Sibyls. We have at least three reasons for wondering about their presence on the monasteries walls:

- They had lived hundreds of years before the birth of Christ;
- They were Hellenes;
- They had been mainly bound up with rationalising, defining, transposing ideas into the discourse and racking their brains, which is the very fact of thinking, which is absolutely opposite to the mystical practices of the Christian, to whom the constructions of the mind is of an inferior level of knowledge. To the Christian, any rational investigation is futile since the mind dwelling in the heart discovers truth in a simple and straightforward manner, suchwise coming into communion with God.



Fig. 1. The Sages of Antiquity. Detail from the Tree of Jesse, Moldovita Monastery.

Besides, it should be kept in mind the precautions against and even disregard expressed by the Fathers of the "wisdom of this world" that the philosophy is associated with. Though they had been elitists, accomplished orators, great textualists familiar with ideas, complex concepts and syllogisms, those practising philosophy was considered by Christians as "so-called philosophers" (Justin the Martyr and Philosopher), a term not at all flattering but at the same time implying the existence of true philosophers, held in high respect and representing an ideal that all Christians should attain.

Plato and Aristotle once reproached the sophists for selling knowledge en gros and detail, as Pierre Hadot puts it, in order to teach their disciples the technique of persuasive discourse, set to build the general knowledge to seducing the audience and gain political success [1] [3] [6]. Neither would

Clement of Alexandria later forgive the sophists for the lack of substance of their intention, for their masterfully combining of words to observe the differences between them, for juggling with them as they were formalists talking in vain, "because they are more loose-tongued than the doves" [2]. Plato assumed that lingering in the sphere of "the illusion of science" as well as the "impression that the man inhabits space of the truth" seemed entirely ridiculous, for this is the "supreme ailment of the spirit and the uttermost embodiment of vice (*ignobility*)" [4]. The sophists were deemed guilty for that very disease as they cultivated the "ignorance that pretends to know" [5]. It is these sophists whom the Apostle Paul refers to in his letter addressing the Corinthians, reminding of the words of Isaiah, "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And the discernment of the discerning will I bring to nought." (1 Corinthians 1:19; Isaiah 29, 14).

III. PHILOSOPHERS ANNOUNCE THE COMING OF THE SAVIOR AND "BUILD" THE CHURCH

Nevertheless, the heathen philosophers are peacefully present alongside the Christian saints on the walls of Bucovina's churches. Let us try include in parantheses the essence of tenets so essential to the Eastern Church and so finely represented in the mentioned images so as to draw the attention to that line of elements conveying subtly the factors, which had contributed to the development of the said dogmas: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras and other.

The Tree of Jesse that represents the ancestry of Jesus Christ is one of the most beautifully and elaborated scenes. At the base of the Tree there are the *Wise Men of Antiquity* that foretell Jesus' birth. Their saying is illustrated on the phylacteries that each of them holds. What did the authors of the iconographers' program at Sucevița or Moldovița (the ruler Petru Rareș and the Metropolitan Grigorie Roșca) wanted to say by setting themselves in relation to the Jesse Tree? This significance might be a response to and means of cultivating the 'need in a story telling, for eloquence' (Răzvan Teodorescu) among illiterate public, if to believe that Petru Rareș (as well as those who followed his path) thought his pictural program, in line with the words of Pope Gregory the Great '*pictura quasi scriptura*' (image as a writing, a text). As a result, a mass of *iliteratti* was supposed to understand by looking at those pictures, that even the heathen philosophers from geographically different from that Jesus would emerge in place, outside the Judaic culture and centuries before, were foretelling the coming of the Christ. Like prophets, the Wise Men could have been painted anywhere else, and that really happened in the case of churches built after the rule of Petru Rareș, when, as it happened, the tradition of painting the exterior church walls was abandoned altogether. The paintings actually addressed the people, the worshippers who had no access to high culture, narrating the relationship between the theology and philosophy, and the importance of the Greek Wise Men's role in spreading the message of Christ and in building the Christian Church itself since the Tree is also signifying the Body of the Church.

Associating the Greek philosophers with the Tree of Jesse meant the Orthodox Church's acknowledgement of the Greek philosophy's evident contribution to the development of the Christian theology "Fig. 2".

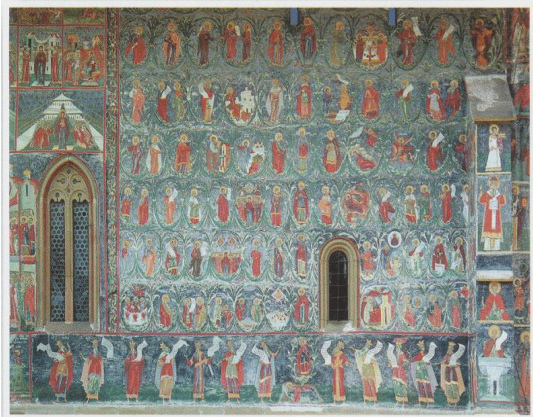


Fig. 2. The Tree of Jesse, Moldovita Monastery.

IV. THE PHILOSOPHY CONSIDERED CHRISTIANITY ABLE OF PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS

Even beginning with the Apostle Paul a signal was fired upon the value of philosophy and its place in the effort to use the most appropriate language to give evidence of God, like Logos that was commemorated centuries before Heraclitus and Plato. It is the crucial historical milestone when the Greek philosophy and Christianity met for the first time at the Areopagus, whereat the Apostle Paul held his famous speech before the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (Acts 17:17) about the 'unknown god' (*Agnostos Theos*), to whom an altar was raised in Athena, about God that, he said, came to introduce Him to the Greeks—"For as I passed along and observed objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god'. What you therefore worship, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23).

The Athenians laughed at the Apostle as he told them about the Resurrection. Still the dialogue continued since even the Apostle John spoke in a language that proved to the rigors of Greek reason that Christianity offers the religion capable of philosophical concepts, "*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him; and without Him was not any thing made that was made*" (John 1:1-3).

Beginning with Martyr Justin the Philosopher and continuing with Clement of Alexandria and Origen, the philosophy acquired the right of existence in Christianity. There was an attempt to recover the Greek philosophy and culture, especially by making recourse to Plato. Through the Holy Fathers Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzen, the 14th century marked the time of complete symphony of the Christian thought and philosophy, the time when the patristic literature flourished. Plato's ideas made their way into Christianity, helping to finalize the Christian foundations and philosophy. The great theological

construction occurred due to the philosophical heritage. Meeting of the Greek philosophy with Christianity presented one of the happiest and the most fruitful development in the history of thought. Everything was possible because of the actual mutual need. The philosophy was in an impasse, it craved for fresh solutions to old problems, while Christianity needed the language competence and philosophic skill to defend itself from attacks of the heathendom or Jews and to make itself clearly understood. In the early Christian period, however, the Christian thought became loose, giving rise to heresies and polemics. According to Pierre Hadot, no one could foresee that at the outset of the 2nd century some Christians already begun to perceive Christianity not merely as a philosophy, namely a Greek culture phenomenon, but as the philosophy all by itself [7]. Moreover, one can speak of a mutual service that the Greek philosophy and the Christian theology made to each other since the Greek philosophy got the chance to refresh itself and restart its history through the new faith, while Christianity fulfilled its historical destiny through the Greek philosophy and recovering its tumbling ancient culture. Their synergy gave birth to what we know today as the Eastern Christian theology.

V. CONCLUSION

Isaiah's announcement of the coming Savior had been enforced by the wise heathen prophecies. This is the most handy meaning for a meal of *iliteratti (eidota)*. However, there are two more important issues. Firstly, Petru Rares thought theology and philosophy to be synergetic, unlike the West where they were considered to be separate areas and which led to the 'violation of historical reality' (Etienne Gilson). Here, in the medieval Romanian space, it was understood that the theology and philosophy present an interior affinity which make them stay in a permanent relationship. Secondly, the Greek philosophy helped develop the theological discourse, defining the dogma, the fructification of which we now call the Orthodoxy. Otherwise, supposing the philosophers were just prophets, they could be painted as solitary figures.

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