

**SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL  
ENVIRONMENT**



## DIMITRIE CANTEMIR – AN ORTHODOX PRINCE AT EUROPE’S EDGE

**Christina Andreea MIȚARIU**

**Abstract:** *Dimitrie Cantemir was a valuable promoter of Romanian values across Europe, who manifested in various fields: he was a diplomat, conducted Byzantine and Roman studies, was an Orientalist, musicologist and not least a theologian. Cantemir’s merits as a scholar are doubled by his deeds as a faithful son of the Orthodox religion and a true patriot of Moldavia. With Dimitrie Cantemir, Romanian culture, sitting at the crossroads between the East and the West, for the first time clearly denoted in a major way its synthetic and ecumenical vocation.*

*The Western world’s appraisal materialised with his becoming a member of the Berlin Academy, at Leibniz’s proposal. His erudition made part of his works circulate in Latin overseas and be translated posthumously in English, French and German.*

**Keywords:** *scholar, linguist, musicologist, theologian, European*

The personality of Dimitrie Cantemir, the scholarly Moldavian prince, is deeply related to change, adaptation and continual crossing and not least to excellence. Being in the largest part of his life at the confluence of two worlds and two eras, the great scholar has shown remarkable openness and forward thinking, drawing the attention of European intellectuals. An accomplished polyglot (he knew perfectly Greek, Latin, Arabic, Syriac, French, English, Slavonic and, of course, Turkish and Romanian) with an encyclopaedic culture, Dimitrie Cantemir was a valuable promoter of Romanian values in Europe. Cantemir assimilated an almost unparalleled at the time vast culture in Byzantine, Roman, and Oriental studies, enriching it continuously until the end of life. His works cover the entire spectrum of humanities: history, geography, philosophy, ethnography, music. Thanks to his harmonious personality and reminiscent of the Renaissance man, Nicolae Iorga compared him with Lorenzo de Medici.

The great scholar’s assumed humanism was based on escaping medieval thought and approaching a new vision of man world. Thus, *The Divan*, one of the most valuable works of Romanian thinking, is the crystallisation of a plea for reason, being *avant l’heure* a true foreshadowing of Enlightenment.

*The Divan*’s general philosophical and ethical background is that of the orthodox Christian doctrine, dominant of Southeast European culture of the era in which Dimitrie Cantemir lived. Interestingly, however, is how the same

doctrine is perceived differently by laymen and the clergy, by the uneducated and educated. The theological concept began to change into a new one, religious, but rational and moral, being more permissive. Therefore this trend among Southeast European scholars was marked rather by the ideas of Western Europe and showed a keen interest for the neo-Aristotelian and humanistic thinking in general.

With a relatively short life, divided between very ambitious and demanding activities – politician, throne pretender and ruler, soldier, traveller – Dimitrie Cantemir was most strongly marked by the calling of scholar. Enriching European science with new data about the Near East, the encyclopaedist savant also brought an invaluable contribution to the development of the Ottoman Empire's musical culture. His great contribution was to ensure the shift from the transmission of music through listening to the use of musical notes. Also, his work helped maintain, preserve and perpetuate in time a rich repertoire of vernacular and cultivated Turkish musical culture.

In addition to other political-diplomatic concerns, writing was a constant in his life. His first book – *The Divan* – was published when he was only twenty-five, and his last book on the eve of his death – *The Mohammedan Religious System* – leaving behind an extensive and extremely valuable work. Living at the confluence of two worlds so geographically close yet so culturally and religiously distant, the great scholar dedicated some of his works to the history and philosophy of religion.

In 1700, Dimitrie Cantemir finished *Sacrosanctae scientiae indepingibilis imago* (*The Image of the Sacred, Undepictable Science*), published only in 1928, as *Metaphysics*, a religious philosophy work, inspired by reading the Flemish thinker Johannes Baptista Van Helmont. Addressing issues of contemporary philosophers (theory of knowledge, theory of atoms and the origin of matter, the notion of time, man's destiny and so on), Cantemir foreshadowed modern Romanian thinking.

Cantemir's merits as a scholar are doubled by his deeds as a faithful son of the Orthodox religion and a true patriot of Moldavia. It seems that throughout the 650 years of Moldavian history, his personality, in terms of magnitude and importance, can be matched only by that of Stephen the Great and Holy. But unlike the great Moldavian waywode which stood out by bravery and patriotism, the scholar prince distinguished himself by scholarship and pencraft. For the first time since Stefan the Great, by his works of philosophy, history and geography, he forced Europe to speak of Moldavia, awakening interest in it in the most eminent thinkers and scholars of the eighteenth century. We may speak of courage when it comes to his pioneering as the first European layman scientist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century who published his thoughts on the **Holy Scripture**. By knowing the two cultures and using his encyclopaedic knowledge, Cantemir also brought to the attention of the European citizen the

history of the main dogmas of the Islamic religion. In a time when society was well placed, without today's cosmopolitanism, our great scholar managed to put into contact the two "worlds" and, moreover, to arouse interest and the need to study and understand each other. For the first time, the Ottoman Empire was presented to the European reader not as an enemy and potential adversary, but as a country rich in historical, cultural, political and spiritual traditions.

The Metropolitan of Ardeal, Antonie Plamadeala, considered him a "European theologian, a theologian of speculation, an erudite, a man incredibly cultured for his time". His constant preoccupation with theological issues is reflected in his works: *The Divan, Sacrosanctae, Locaobscura in Catechismi (Obscure Places in Catechism)* and *The Mohammedan Religion System or Making*, in which theological issues are addressed competently, proving a good knowledge of them. Emphasising the theological ideas expressed by Cantemir in the above mentioned works, A. Plamadeala includes him in a history of Romanian theological thought before the appearance of "actual theologians"<sup>1</sup>. The value of his contributions is given by deep reflection, and the richness of his philosophical and theological language. His encyclopaedic culture allowed the change of posture, from philosopher of history in the *Natural Interpretation of Monarchs* into a historian and philosopher of religion in *The Mohammedan Religion System or Making*.

In this paper, the author revealed the nature of that people's faith different from that of the Orthodox (himself being one), and the customs and habits of Muslims in general.

In the preface entitled "Димитрий Кантемир любезнейшему читателю здравия" ("Foreword to the reader"), the author tried to inspire the reader, to convince him in this way, too, that the Mohammedan religion is not true and his intention in writing this work was to give a "bottom-style and simple language version on Mohammedan religion and the political ruling of the Muslim people". The political substrate also becomes obvious, the author drawing attention to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, whose existence was not longer justified by social development, "being a disgusting monster or one which grows contrary to the laws and ideas of nature"<sup>2</sup>.

Being dedicated to Tsar Peter the Great, the work initially had to help organise his expedition into Persia, which would later trigger the inevitable wars between the Russian and the Turks. Designed for this purpose, the work could only be welcomed, because through it the Russians could closely know the past, present and customs of the Turks. Analysing the structure of Mohammedan religion and the spiritual life of the Islamic world, Cantemir then enriches his work with savant analyses on Oriental literature, which the

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<sup>1</sup>Plămădeală, A., *Dimitrie Cantemir, teologul*, in „Dascăli de cuget și de simțire românească”, Bucharest, 1981, pp. 242-251.

<sup>2</sup>Cantemir, D., *Descrierea Moldovei*, Ed. Ion Creangă, Bucharest, 1978, p. 16.

Moldavian writer and thinker had studied thoroughly, while spending a good part of his life at the court of the Turkish sultan as a Romanian diplomat at the Ottoman Empire.

During the work, adopting the position of keen observer, the author sought to explain some customs and traditions, indicating both their positive and negative parts. The Russian Synod, which published D. Cantemir's book, reacted quite strongly and strictly to the obscene stories, asking "the venerable author" to explain the origin of those written – "from the mouth of simple people" – or to say that the source of inspiration is Muslim thinkers<sup>3</sup>. The answer given by D. Cantemir to the Synod was a refusal to provide the information requested, proving by the tone used that he had been deeply offended by the high ecclesiastical forum. Overall, Cantemir's appreciation of Islam is negative, considering it a "wrong" and dangerous "faith", "because for them bad practices count as virtues and aberrations as rewards and they believe that true happiness is within the flesh...".

Cantemir relates to the Muslim faith as a Christian bounded by the Gospels and who therefore rejects by definition a "bad" book such as the Qur'an, negating it any relevant character. His strategy of "debunking" the Qur'an is based even on Mohammedan writings. Being a connoisseur of Arabic, Cantemir analysed the Qur'an's style, aiming to highlight the beauty and depth of the Arabic language used. Thus emerges, according to his logic, the profound earthly character of the teachings of Muhammad, which is nothing but "invention and human cunning", "concocted with devilish help".

Many of Cantemir's exegetes have noted that his closeness to the Muslim religion is not that of a believer, Cantemir acting more like a philosopher or political thinker. Being a true scientist, Cantemir strives to eliminate subjectivity, but obviously, his vision of Islam is exposed from a Christian's point of view, keen to emphasise the undeniable superiority of Christianity to Islam. Like other of his works, *The Mohammedan Religion System or Making* is an unfinished book. Written in Latin, it was published in Russian, to appear in Romanian only after two centuries and a half, translated by Virgil Candea (1977). It is only the first volume of a larger work entitled by Cantemir *On the Mohammedan Religion and the Political Ruling of the Muslim People*. The second volume, as shown by this long title, ought to have included a political treaty on the ruling of the Ottoman Empire. Though unfinished, D. Cantemir's book was for long an invaluable source of information, as it came from a connoisseur from within Islam.

It should be stressed that although he flirted with the era's philosophies and sometimes drifted to rationalist metaphysics and Stoic morality, Dimitrie Cantemir maintained a principled theological perspective on the world and

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<sup>3</sup>Ciobanu, Ș., *Dimitrie Cantemir în Rusia*, Bucharest, 1925, p. 43.

always observed the purity of Orthodox teachings<sup>4</sup>, in his old age criticising promptly in Latin (*Loca obscura in Catechisi...*) a Slavonic catechism of that period (Theophan Prokopovici, *First Teaching of Children*, 1720), plagued by lapses to Lutheran Protestantism<sup>5</sup>.

Of course, Cantemir had the vivid sense of pan-Orthodoxy and even that of the scrupulosity of the righteous teachings (see *Loca obscura in Catechisi...*, a prompt amendment to a Slavonic catechism containing drifts towards Lutheranism, from 1720), but also that of Christian and humanist Europeanness, as a representative of both Renaissance and Baroque Latinism, valued as such in the West.

**Descriptio Moldavie** consists of three parts: one geographical, one political and one relating to the “religious and literary status of Moldavia”. Referring to Moldavians’ religion, the author emphasises the Orthodoxy’s authenticity, stating that the West, and not the East, drifted from the true faith. He also states that the church hierarchy remains unchanged from the fourth century, as “both Dacias had their own bishops”. Reviewing the Moldavian monasteries, D. Cantemir recalls the four great monasteries and more than two hundred small ones which were either dedicated to Jerusalem, Mount Sinai and the Holy Mountain, or were “free”. It should be noted that during his short reign D. Cantemir managed to cancel the dedication of monasteries which, in turn, were required to pay a certain amount annually to the ruler<sup>6</sup>.

From this work, too, we found out that medieval Moldavia used in the religious service the gospels as constituted by the Church Fathers at the Council of Nicaea. The author also shows the independence rejoiced by the Metropolitan of Moldavia compared to other church forums outside the country.

With Dimitrie Cantemir, Romanian culture, sitting at the crossroads between the East and the West, for the first time clearly denoted in a major way its synthetic and ecumenical vocation, illustrated by subsequent great Romanian encyclopaedic personalities (B.P. Hasdeu, Mircea Eliade).

Thus, we can say that the work of Dimitrie Cantemir is true certificate of the Romanians’ traditional Europeanness and a testament to the desire to

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<sup>4</sup>Also see the third part of *Descriptio Moldoviae*, where he exclusively refers to *Filioque*, discreetly supporting the position of Orthodoxy (*Symbolum fidei, uti a patribus Nicenae Synodi conceptum est, simpliciter in sacris recitant, et papisticam additionem et a filio reiiciunt. De Spiritu S. processione eadem sentiunt, quae Christi verbis S. Iohannes evangelista pronunciat. Uti autem praeter S. Scripturae verba processionem a filio admittere nolunt, ita nec introductam a Palama formulam a solo Patre – cap. I*).

<sup>5</sup>For the **theological dimension** of Cantemir’s work, cf., inter alia, Dimitrie Cantemir, *Loca obscura*, translation and comments by T. Bodogae, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, anul XCI (1973), nr. 9-10; Vasile Mihoc, “Sfinta Scriptură în opera lui Dimitrie Cantemir”, in *Studii teologice*, anul XXV (1973), nr. 5-6; Nicolae Chițescu, “Ortodoxia în opera lui Cantemir”, in *Glasul Bisericii*, anul XXXII (1973), nr. 9-10; Antonie Plămădeală, “Dimitrie Cantemir, teologul”, in vol. *Descăli de cuget și simțire românească*, Bucharest, 1981.

<sup>6</sup>Cantemir, D., *op. cit.*, p. 201.

preserve unaltered the cultural and religious treasure the Moldavian prince so proudly boasted.

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**NOTES ON THE AUTHOR**

**Christina Andreea MIȚARIU** is a lecturer at the Faculty of Management in Tourism and Commerce Timisoara Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University. She holds a PhD. in Philology. She has published numerous books and articles.