IMPRESSIONS OF ROMANIAN RELIGION AND MORALITY IN SOME NINETEENTH-CENTURY TRAVELLERS' ACCOUNTS OF THE DANUBIAN PRINCIPALITIES

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Abstract*: Mostly Protestant, and coming from a culture influenced by Evangelicalism, British travellers in the first half of the nineteenth century often express their disquiet at aspects of religion and morality in the Danubian Principalities, in particular, The paper looks at some of the points of difference that prove particularly disturbing for the travellers and attempts to set them in the context of typical British attitudes in the period.*

Keywords*: Travel, Wallachia and Moldavia, Religion*

For British travellers in the decades before the Crimean War, the Danubian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia might seem to be "on the verge of Christendom", as William Macmichael remarks on approaching the Danube from Bucharest and seeing the mosques and minarets of the then Ottoman outpost of Giurgiu (Macmichael, 1819: 123), or even a transitional space where Europe and "the East" meet and mix. Charles Colville Frankland, for example, passing through Transylvania and Wallachia in 1827 on his way to Constantinople, writes of Pitești , where he arrives after crossing the Carpathians from Transylvania: "Here one begins to feel that one has left Europe and arrived among a different people; for at this point the manners and costumes of the East first begin to show themselves. (Frankland, 1829: I, 30-31)

In such a space of transition, the identity of the traveller was frequently confronted with perceived alterity. For British visitors in the first half of the nineteenth century, the shock of difference could be particularly powerful in matters concerning religion and morality. Despite, or perhaps rather because of being aware that they were in Christian lands, British travellers in the Principalities—in most cases Protestants, and indeed some of them Anglican or Presbyterian clergyman—, found much that seemed to offend against the religious practices and, for them inseparable from religion, the moral norms that they were accustomed to. It is the aim of this paper to highlight some of the points of difference in religious and moral matters that seem to have been particularly disturbing for British travellers, and to show how their perceptions of alterity are shaped by their own Protestant identity, in a period in which, across denominational divisions, the Evangelical movement, with its focus on word rather than ceremony and its preoccupation with personal and public morality, was becoming "a basic ingredient in the dominant ideology" (Harrison, 1979: 133).

An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia by William Wilkinson, agent of the Levant Company and de facto British consul in Bucharest from 1813 to 1818, was the first book in English exclusively devoted to the Principalities, and an important influence, directly or indirectly, on the perceptions of later visitors. Wilkinson's portrayal of religion in the Principalities is entirely negative: he sees it as characterized by superstition and by the corruption of true Christian doctrine by an uneducated clergy:

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> The absurdities of superstition, which form so great a part of the fundamental principles of the present Greek faith, have gained equal strength in Wallachia and in Moldavia: even the most precise doctrines of the Christian religion are there corrupted by the misconceptions or selfish view of low-bred and ignorant priests, a set of men, indeed, who have here made themselves a manifest disgrace to the sanctity of the Christian name. (Wilkinson, 1820: 151)

Outward observance takes priority. Frequent attendance at divine worship is required, but seemingly trivial gestures have displaced what, from Wilkinson's unmistakeably Protestant point of view, is most essential: Bible reading and preaching: "the signs of devotion performed in it, consist in making crosses and prostrations before the images, kissing them, and lighting a candle to some favourite saint. The Gospel, when read, is heard with indifference and inattention. Preaching is not customary" (Wilkinson, *op. cit.*: 153). Equally displeasing to a Protestant, Wilkinson finds that among the peasantry: "Invoking the Holy Virgin or any saint, is always substituted to regular prayer. Divine Providence is never directly addressed" (*ibidem*: 157).

Turning from Wilkinson's generalizations to the particular impressions of other writers, we find that wayside crosses are prominent among the visible marks of Romanian religion for travellers in transit through the Principalities, evoking varied reactions. For Charles Colville Frankland, they seem more suggestive of pagan idols than anything he can recognize as Christian:

> I observed many crucifixes, sometimes three together, and sometimes twelve all in a row. These crucifixes are covered with inscriptions in the Wallachian character, and with the most barbarous symbols of the Deity, of the Blessed Virgin, of the Magdalen, St. John, and other saints. I never saw among the Mexican or Peruvian idols anything more grotesque and barbarous than these objects of veneration and worship.—(Query, how far is the Greek church removed from Paganism?) (Frankland, *op. cit.*: I, 29-30)

However Frankland's impression of radical otherness is not necessarily typical of British travellers' reactions. Robert Walsh describes the crosses that he saw by the roadside on his journey through Wallachia in a much more objective manner, drawing attention to their similarity to monuments to be seen in his own country:

> These singular and striking monuments begin at the Danube, and continue to the extremity of the Carpathian Mountains, and exactly resemble similar ones of stone in Ireland. The crosses here, however, are universally of wood, ten or twelve feet high, and covered with inscriptions carved in relief, in Sclavonian Greek. On the cross beams and the centre are monograms of Christ and the Virgin, with figures of saints; on the stem are the inscriptions, which occupy both front and sides. Sometimes ten or twelve stand together in a row, by the roadside; and sometimes a single one is enclosed in a little wooden temple: such was that which we now saw, which bore the date of 1824, but some are very ancient. (Walsh, 1828: 261-2)

He goes on to explain the function of these crosses, raised either as votive acts or in commemoration of violent death:

> A Wallachian, in any critical situation, makes a vow to erect, before his death, a bridge, a fountain, or a cross: the last seems to be the favourite, for these monuments are much more numerous than the other two. Whenever, also, a man has met with a violent death, a cross is erected on the road-side, to mark the place, and commemorate where it happened, and prevent the dead from becoming a vampire. (*ibidem*: 262)

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Part of the explanation for Walsh's particular interest in the wayside crosses is perhaps to be found in the first passage quoted, where he compares the wooden crosses of Wallachia to the much older stone crosses of his native Ireland. His appreciation of the significance of these monuments for cultural and religious identity in his own country, even for Protestants, is illustrated by his efforts to locate, recover and re-erect an ancient stone cross in the parish where he served as curate before his posting in Constantinople, which had been buried over 160 years previously to prevent its desecration by Cromwell's soldiers (Walsh, 1888: 147-149). For Walsh, then, the Wallachian crosses are not the primitive artefacts of an incomprehensible religion, but reminders of something familiar and valued in his home environment as markers of local identity and signs of Christian continuity.

The Church of Scotland ministers Andrew Bonar and Robert McCheyne, visited Wallachia and Moldavia in 1839 in the final stages of a mission of enquiry into the situation of the Jews that had already taken them through Egypt and the Holy Land. As members of a Church in the Calvinist tradition, with little place for visual symbolism (and indeed belonging to the Evangelical tendency within the Church of Scotland), it might be expected that they would disapprove of such objects as wayside crosses. In fact their reaction is more nuanced, however: what concerns them is not any suspicion of idolatry but the indifference with which the crosses appear to be treated:

> One object that meets the eye in these vast plains is a stone-cross at various intervals. This may be intended to remind travellers of Him who died for us; but certainly the people showed it no reverence. Seldom could we discover even the appearance of devotion among them. In the morning, indeed, one of our rough postilions, before mounting his horse, crossed himself three times, stooped down, and said a few words of prayer; but we rarely saw even this attention to religious duties. (Bonar, McCheyne, 1843: 511-2)

They have previously observed that the cross is also a prominent feature of Orthodox churches, though for them its glittering presence on church roofs is emblematic of the obscuring of the true cross:

> The ornamented double cross on the Greek churches attracts the eye by its glittering in the sun, being either gilded or made of polished tin. Alas! They hid the divine glory that shines from the true cross of Christ, and try to make up for what they hide by dazzling the carnal eye with its gilded image. (*ibidem*: 504)

The missionaries seem to have begun to form their impressions of the state of Christianity in the Principalities while still in quarantine in Galaţi, thanks to their discussions with the British Vice-consul Charles Cunningham, who provided them with a general introduction to the country, including the information that:

> The Greek priests of Moldavia are low in character; so much so, that half a dozen of them may be found openly drinking in a tavern at any hour of the day. Though they are priests, yet they often carry on business, and they oppose the Bible. (*ibidem*: 497-8)

This last allegation probably alludes to Metropolitan Veniamin Costache's refusal the previous year to allow the British and Foreign Bible Society to distribute copies of the New Testament in Moldavia, in contrast to the more positive reception the proposal had received both from the Prince and from the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Wallachia (Tappe,

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1966: 101-02)[***]. The shocking, to Bonar and McCheyne, spectacle of clergymen "openly drinking in a tavern" is confirmed later in the journey when they observe in Bârlad a Sunday in radical contrast to the Sabbath observance that they are accustomed to: after the Sunday morning service, "the whole day is spent in amusements, cards, billiards, and drinking, the priests themselves setting the example" (*ibidem*: 536).

In Bucharest too, waking up in "Khan Manuk" (Hanul lui Manuc) on their first morning in the city, they find themselves nostalgic for the quiet of a Scottish Sunday:

> The second floor had a wide promenade all round, and on it were gathered groups from many different countries, especially Russians, Hungarians, and Greeks. A mixture of strange barbarian languages filled our ears. We sighed in vain for the holy quietness of a Scottish Sabbath, and being determined if possible to find a more peaceful residence, we removed in the forenoon to a much smaller and cleaner place, called Khan Simeon, kept by a Greek. Here we enjoyed the rest of the holy day, and worshipped together in peace and comfort. (*ibidem*: 327-328)

In order to place these observations in a broader context, it is only fair to quote also McCheyne's account of the Sunday the missionaries had spent in Paris earlier in their journey, in a pastoral letter to his congregation at home in Dundee. Paris is certainly no better than Bucharest as far as Sabbath observance is concerned:

> Alas! poor Paris knows no Sabbath; all the shops are open, and all the inhabitants are on the wing in search of pleasures,—pleasures that perish in the using. I thought of Babylon and Sodom as I passed through the crowd. I cannot tell how I longed for the peace of a Scottish Sabbath. There is a place in Paris called the *Champs Elysées*, or Plains of Heaven,—a beautiful public walk, with trees and gardens; we had to cross it on passing to the Protestant church. It is the chief scene of their Sabbath desecration, and an awful scene it is. Oh, thought I, if this is the heaven a Parisian loves, he will never enjoy the pure heaven that is above! (Bonar, 1892: 251)

Such observations clearly say more about their author and his convictions than about the society he is observing. Paris and Bucharest alike represent an offensive otherness to the Scottish missionaries for whom Sabbath observance is not only part of their religious identity, but indeed something taken for granted in the broader cultural environment to which they are accustomed.[†††]

Perhaps most shocking of all to the British travellers was the apparent ease and prevalence of divorce in the Principalities. Wilkinson devotes a full six pages to the theme (Wilkinson, *op. cit*.: 146-151). He sees it as a reflection of the general state of immorality and indecency among the Boyar class (*ibidem*: 144), aggravated by the Church's abusive use of the power to pronounce divorce (*ibidem*: 147) and by the tendency for parents to interfere in their married children's family life (*ibidem*: 150-

[***] The missionaries seem to know nothing of the same Metroplitan's conflicts with the secular authorities in Moldavia over state interference in Church affairs (Vintilă-Ghițulescu 2013: 165), an issue of concern also to them in the years leading up to the Disruption of 1843, in which Bonar was among the ministers who left the established Church in protest at state interference (McCheyne had died in the meantime) (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. Bonar).

[†††] Strict Sunday observance has come to be particularly associated with Scottish Presbyterianism, but it was then by no means limited to Scotland. Colin Matthew writes that "Nothing appalled Protestant visitors to the continent more than to see Sunday treated as a day of recreation" (Matthew, 2000: 5) Conversely, Geoffrey Best remarks (of the period 1851-1875) that the English Sunday became a "fixed thing of amazement and terror to the foreign traveller" (Best, 1979: 195).

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151). His general remarks are supported by a presentation of three recent cases of women who divorced their husbands for apparently trivial reasons, on which he comments: "They are such as to excite astonishment, and appear almost incredible; yet they created no other sensation at the time than any other common news of the day, deserving but little notice" (*ibidem*: 150).

To some extent the "astonishment" that Wilkinson expects to be excited can be explained by the contrast between the apparent frequency of divorce in the Principalities and its extreme rarity in his home country at this time. Prior to 1857, a divorce could only be obtained in England and Wales by means of a lengthy and expensive legal process, involving a private Act of Parliament, and it was more difficult for wives to obtain than for husbands (a double standard which remained even after 1857), in apparent contrast to the situation described by Wilkinson, whose three examples from the Principalities are all of divorce initiated by the wife (Howarth, 2000: 181).

There is, however, also clearly a moral and religious dimension to Wilkinson's shocked reaction, and this becomes even more apparent in the writing of other travellers. Edmund Spencer takes a generally more positive view of the Orthodox church than is typical of British travellers in the period, observing with approval the absence of any distinctions of social rank in its services—there is no princely pew—, and finding its ceremonies "imposing, and well adapted to strike the imagination with awe and reverence" (Spencer, 1838: II, 231)[‡‡‡]. However he finds that it suffers from "the want of a virtuous, well-educated, and enlightened priesthood", listing foremost among the effects of this weakness the fact that: "Perhaps in no other country of Europe is the sacred tie of marriage less respected, or violated with less remorse", before moving on to the common theme of the prevalence of "senseless superstitions" (*ibidem*: II, 230).

While Wilkinson and Spencer focus on the causes of easy and frequent divorce, others dwell more on its effects. Not surprisingly, British clergymen visiting the Principalities tend to have more to say on this subject. For Bonar and McCheyne, divorce is a source of wider evil, as well as not just the symptom, but also the cause, of more general degradation:

> One of the most fruitful sources of crime in this country, and one of the most revolting symptoms of its depravity, is the frequency of divorce. This is easily obtained, is accounted no disgrace, and the separated parties are soon married again to others. (Bonar, McCheyne, *op. cit.*: 517)

Charles Boileau Elliott, an Anglican vicar, similarly regards the ease and frequency of divorce as a fountainhead of social evils, blaming the allegedly common practice of infanticide among the poor on the bad example set by the divorces of the "higher orders":

> Immorality of the worst description pervades all classes in the principalities, and mothers frequently carry their new-born infants to the Danube to drown them. "When they act so towards their own children," said a lady residing here, "you will readily believe that I cannot feel mine safe with them, when out of my sight." But the example so closely imitated originates with the higher orders. It is actually, we were told, in the power of every married person, man or woman, to obtain from the metropolitan a divorce on the score of caprice alone or the preference of another party. (Elliott, 1838: I, 161-2)

[‡‡‡] In this period there was little interest in ceremony in the Church of England. The High Church revival of ritual was a phenomenon of the second half of the century (Rosman, 2003:85).

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Not only is divorce easily obtained, it seems to carry none of the social stigma that an English gentleman might expect it to be associated with:

> Thus it frequently happens that a gentleman and lady, who were once man and wife, accompanying their respective partners to a ball-room, will there meet two or three ci-devant husbands of the lady, and as many ci-devant wives of the gentleman, nor will either party be less esteemed in society on account of their frequent divorces. (*ibidem*: I, 162)

But it is clear that for Elliott, divorce is above all a source of moral degradation that corrupts the whole of Wallachian and Moldavian society:

> Where the marriage tie, the bond of all the charities of life, is thus unheeded, the whole fabric of social happiness is undermined, and neither moral nor intellectual excellence can be expected. The result sanctions this conclusion; and it may safely be affirmed that Christendom does not contain a country more demoralized and more degraded than Wallachia and Moldavia. (*ibidem*: I, 162)

In view of the considerable coverage given to the issue of divorce in the writings of British travellers about the Principalities, it is perhaps surprising that another moral issue of considerable importance for the British in the nineteenth century, namely slavery, gets very little attention. Wilkinson briefly mentions the enslaved status of the Gypsies, remarking with apparent approval that the Principalities "make a more profitable use of them than other countries do, by keeping them in a state of regular slavery" (Wilkinson, *op. cit.*: 169), and emphasizing the discreet manner in which the buying and selling of slaves is carried out: "No regular traffic of them is carried on in the country, neither is it customary to expose to public inspection any who are to be disposed of. Both sales and purchases are conducted in private […]" (*ibidem*: 171). Other travellers occasionally allude in passing to the existence of slavery as a fact of Mold-Wallachian life, but Elliott stands out in suggesting that there is a moral dimension to Gypsy slavery, although his concern is more with its effects on family life among the slaves than with the rights and wrongs of slavery itself:

> A healthy man costs three pounds, a woman two ; and both sexes are bought and sold by the nobles without any regard to the bonds of domestic union. Only eight days before our visit to Tchernitz [Cerneți, Mehedinți county], a boyar, close to the house where these notes were penned, who had a slave, supporting a wife and three children by his daily labor, separated him from them and sent him to a distant establishment in the interior, while he sold his family into other hands. Another noble, one of whose Zinganis was making a little money as a blacksmith, sold his wife and children in order that he might dispose of all that the man earned. Nor are instances of this kind rare; on the contrary, they are of too frequent recurrence to be recorded as individual cases. (Elliott, *op. cit.*: I, 161)

In view of the importance of slavery as a matter of public concern in Britain at this time—following the banning of the slave trade in 1807, legislation abolishing slavery itself in the British empire had been passed in 1833, and Linda Colley has argued that opposition to slavery now became an important part of Britain's identity in the world, "offering [...] irrefutable proof that British power was founded on religion, on freedom and on moral calibre, not just on a superior stock of armaments and capital" (Colley, 1996: 380)—it may seem surprising that British travellers make so little comment on slavery in the Principalities; did they simply accept it as an inevitable part of the semi-"oriental" ambience of a land on the margins of the Ottoman empire, or did it seem to

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them in some way different in kind from the slavery of the Caribbean and American plantations?

The deficiencies of family life remains a concern for James Henry Skene, who travelled extensively in the Principalities in 1850-1851. Skene, who had lived in Athens and Constantinople and whose wife was Greek, the daughter of a former minister in the government of Phanariot Wallachia (Tappe, 1972: 581), generally treats cultural and religious matters with a degree of ironic detachment, but without the hostility to the Orthodox Church that is apparent in the writings of earlier travellers. He recounts with enthusiasm, for example, an excursion to a number of Wallachian monasteries, evoking for his readers the idyllic surroundings and relatively unrestrained life of the nuns at Nămăești, for example, and emphasizing the contrast with the negative images they have in their minds of enclosed Roman Catholic convents in Italy or Spain (Skene, 1854: II, 87)

When it comes to the transgression of what he considers the norms of family life, however, the detached tone gives way to direct moralizing. What distresses Skene about the ease of divorce is the destructive effect that it has on what he clearly firmly believes are the proper relations between husband and wife:

> The young ladies of this country are invariably Bloomers, in the moral sense of the term, and are regularly brought up to rule the roast. The fortune is generally theirs, and a divorce being easy, they keep their husbands in order by threatening to dismiss them. My host had fallen into a state of submission to the ascendancy of his wife, and they lived *quasi* happily for a few years, although they did not deserve their happiness, and had no right to it, for neither of them fulfilled the respective conjugal missions of their sex; marriage being protection on the part of the husband, and sacrifice on that of a wife; the former being an entity increased but not changed; and the latter, whose individuality is merged in her husband's, having ceased to be a unit and having become a fraction existing in, and by, another being. (*ibidem*: II, 23-4)

It would seem that even for a well-travelled "British resident of twenty years in the East" such as Skene, this particular divergence between Moldavian practice and British ideals[§§§] touched deep nerves.

Another visit, this time to a country house in the valley of the Argeș, leaves Skene with a far more positive impression, however. Although he does not identify his hosts, its is clear from Skene's description and remarks that he is talking about the Golescu family home at Golești:

> The house is spacious and comfortable, and its interior differs little from the style of such residences in England; indeed, the inmates too are more like honest Britons than members of the corrupt society of Bucharest. That, I also understood to be the reason for their preferring to live in the country, for they are a family forming an exception to the general Wallachian rule, and consequently incapable of devoting themselves to the frivolous and dissipated mode of life prevalent in the chief towns of the province. Several unaffected and well-informed young ladies, two kind and worthy parents, and a grandmother who looks like the eldest sister of her granddaughters, lively and good-humoured, always amusing herself

[§§§] British attitudes to marriage were of course not monolithic, and there was considerable change during the nineteenth century, but the patriarchal notion that a married woman's identity was subsumed in that of her husband continued for a long time to be reflected in law. It was only in 1870 that the law of England and Wales began to recognize the right of a married woman to own property in her own name (Howarth, *op. cit*.: 181)

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> with her garden in the morning, and gathering an affectionate circle around her after dinner[****]; such was the agreeable party which I found in the valley of the Ardjish; and it will be easily comprehended, however familiar may be to us the image of a similar home, it is heroism to realize it in Wallachia; elsewhere respectability is but a duty, here it is the highest of social virtues. (*ibidem*: 58-59)

Here, at least, Skene has found a family who conform in every respect to his ideals of home life, as well as being, as he goes on to show, models of patriotism and commitment to liberal values (*ibidem*: 60).

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[****] The grandmother is Zoe Golescu (1792-1879), widow of the man of letters Dinicu Golescu (1777-1830). The "kind and worthy parents" are her daughter Ana (1805-1878) and her elderly husband Alexandru Racoviţa; one of their daughters, Zoe Racoviţa, had married Effingham Grant, secretary of the British consulate, in 1851. Possibly it was Grant who had introduced Skene to the family. Zoe Golescu's four sons, Ştefan, Nicolae, Radu and Alexandru, were in exile at the time as a result of their revolutionary activities in 1848. (See Iordache, 1982: 215-229.)

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