

The missionary work of Mihail Moxa

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Abstract: *This paper aims to analyze the liturgical language used by the erudite monk Mihail Moxa in his religious writings. The Romanian literature had considerably enriched in the seventeenth century because of this monk who, at the request of Bishop Theophilus, writes *The Universal Chronicle* (1620), the first writing of its kind in Romanian. Convinced that a nation can advance only through awareness of the place they assume in history, the Bishop Theophilus of the Râmnic asked Moxa to write two religious works, translations of St. Gregory – *The Signification of the Sacred Liturgy* – and of St. Basil – *Teachings for Priests*, both kept in a manuscript that is currently at the British Library in London. In a time when the cult language was Slavonic, two papers written in Romanian were more than necessary. By translating these two works, the monk earnestly fulfilled the role of the Holy Word's preacher.*

Keywords: *preacher, religion, culture, chronicle, language.*

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*Limba e testimoniul și icoana cea mai fidelă a unui popor...*²

Introductory considerations

The Orthodox Romanian Church strives to preach the Gospels to all people. Its main reason is to make known the Holy Word and, at the same time, to glorify it. The firsts to preach the Holy Gospels (after Christ) were the apostles and thanks to their missionary work – of teaching and baptizing ”all nations” – the Christian Church was founded³. The duty of successors is to continue their gruelling efforts of spreading the word until there is no one left outside the Church.

The flame of faith enlightened the flame of knowledge. Every monastery had a library and some even had literate monks, who worked hard to increase the number of books, by copying and translating many works. It is no wonder that the first schools began their activity next to a church, and the priests played the teachers’ role for many years.

As the Slavonic language lost its authority, being replaced by a young language⁴, the spreading of the gospels was left, from the sixteenth century to erudite monks, whose efforts of translating the Holy Writings gave birth to early writings in our country, and so the tradition of the religious works has started.

The erudite monk, Mihail Moxa, lived a monastic life at Bistrita Monastery, Vâlcea county. Under the patronage of the *Râbnic*’s Bishop, Theophilus, a thirsty man of culture, the monk will translate two religious works belonging to Saint Gregory and to Saint Basil the Great. The manuscript, elegantly bound in wood covers and

² V. Gr. Pop, *Conspect asupra literaturii române și literațiilor ei*: ”Language is the testimony and the most accurate icon of a nation”, Ediție critică, studiu introductiv și note de Paul Lăzărescu, București, Edit. Eminescu, 1982, p. 53.

³ <http://patriarhia.ro/i-nceputurile-vieii-crestine-pe-teritoriul-arii-noastre-crestinismul-daco-roman--101.html> (Accessed October 20, 2015).

⁴ E. Negrici, *Iluziile literaturii române*, București, Edit. Cartea Românească, 2008: „slavona își va pierde puterea, înlocuită fiind de o limbă încă *brudie*”, p. 112.

black leather, will eventually end up in Great Britain, where it was first kept in the custody of the British Museum; currently, it is hosted by the British Library, at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section. Tied in small format, the writing waits, undaunted in the face of time (although, with writings, time is always patient), for avid researchers.

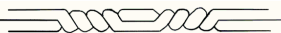
The author's religious style differs greatly from his historical approach. The historical work was done in September 1620, when the author finished compiling the Slavonic sources that made up *The Universal Chronicle*, which is now the oldest universal historical writing that had been preserved in Romanian language. Some years later, he finished his religious works, where he used a different language, suited for sacred writings. Although most of the manuscript is written in Romanian, when he is quoting parts of the sermons, he uses Slavonic.

The manuscript's outline

The religious manuscript counts 136 sheets (although 137 were recorded, the last one is missing now) and starts with the teachings for priests by St. Basil the Great, the teacher of priests, stretching up to the page 121f, page from which starts *The Semnification of the Holy Liturgy*, by St. Gregory Bgslov, which ends at 136f.

In the interests of accuracy I numbered the pages according to their numbers, followed by: *f* – front and *v* – verso.

The importance of serving God is marked on the first page of the manuscript, stating that an *angelic* nature (not *earthly*) is needed for serving God. The priest should officiate the sermon in a truthful manner – *direaptă*, to hold no grudges, otherwise he will chase the Holy Spirit away from his sermon. The priest must read everything until the time of the sermon and stand with fear before the Holy Table, he must not shorten the prayers or be hypocritical, nor give the Holy Communion to the unworthy. Regarding the Holy Communion (on the page 1v) occurs the first prohibitive form of the verb *to give* (*a*



da): *nu dareți*.

About the sacred wafer (*prescură*) the priest is being told to deal seriously in the process of making it: it should not be immature or unsalted, it has to be thoroughly dried.

The priest must be reconciled with everyone, must not have bad/evil thoughts and so the rules and advice continue until the page 121f, when the *Signification of the Holy Liturgy* unfolds.

Being the second part of the manuscript, *The Signification...* is characterized by the same simple language that reaches to the understanding of common people. Revealed to a common Arabic christian who was praying in the Church, each part of the Church is described using style figures as metaphors (God is seen as a *dove*, Christ as a *lamb*), comparisons (sweeter than *honey*). Right at the beginning we have Peter seen as a *stone* (the great apostle) on which God built His Church, the Church signifies God's *body*, the altar is the very *chest* of Christ, the God's son, and the person standing in front of the Holy Table signifies the very *feet* of Christ, while the Gospel represents his *purpose*.

The Holy Liturgy is an act of faith including many people; it cannot be performed by the priest alone, given its *communal nature*: the priest prays for the believers, while the believers pray in return for the priest, offering sacred hymns to God. The sacred language is full of metaphors needed to summon Divinity or to convey the sacred meaning of the old facts⁵.

After giving explanations for all things to be found in the Holy Church, the author explains God's mystery concerning the Holy Gifts which are in fact the *Body* and *Blood* of Christ. The Holy Communion's semnification is written, followed by explanations of Church hierachy, the benefit of taking the vows, the repentance, and fulfilling God's will.

⁵ M. Najim, T.L. Frasier, *Understanding Orthodox Liturgy*, New Jersey, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church Archdiocese, 1995, pp. 5-12.

Religious vocabulary in the seventeenth century

The Slavonic liturgy was introduced to the Romanians in the tenth century, which meant that our religious terminology had been established and refined (mostly the terms that aimed at organizing the cult). Through Slavonic language, as spoken language of Eastern Europe, Greek-Byzantine religious terms entered Romanian language. The ecclesiastical terminology research reveals the existence of two layers of religious words: while the first has a secular origin, the second was shaped in the process of development and organization of Christian cult, as well as being enriched with semantic and lexical neologisms⁶.

The terminology used by Moxa in the second part of the studied manuscript, *The Signification of the Holy Liturgy by St. Gregory*, can be distributed in the following semantic fields:

- sermons: *evanghelie* (123v, 124f); *leturghie* (127v – *leturghii* 121f); *pildă* (133f), *urariu* (129v, 130v); *molitva* (123v, 124f); *văhocu* (123v);

- used objects and materials: *aerul* (121v); *antimisul* (121v); *blid* (122v, 123f, 125f, 130v); *cadelniță* (123v); *cădi* (123v), *crucea* (132f; *crucii* – 135f); *discosul* (121v); *mir/-ul* (124f, 136v); *potir* (121v); *prescure* (122v; *prescure* – 123f); *priceaștenie* (128v); *pocroave* (121v); *sfintele daruri* (124v, 126v, 128f);

- buildings and furniture: *biseareca* (121f, 127v); *catapetazma* (121v); *mănăstire* (133v); *oltariu* (123v, 124v); *preastolul oltariului* (121v); *sfânta masă* (124v; *sfintei mese* – 125f);

- hierarchy: *arhierul* (129f, 129v); *vl(ădi)ca* (129f); *preot* (129f); *popa* (129f); *diacon* (129f, 129v); *cetețul* (129f, 129v); *călugărul* (132v, 134v) – *caloger* (129f, 129v);

- ritualic clothing: *analav* (135f, **gr. analevos**, *analab*, clothes belonging to monks, covering the chest and back, decorated with

⁶ Maria Frențiu Ivăniș, *Aspecte ale limbajului liturgic românesc*, Cluj, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2013, pp. 311-315.

many crosses); *brâu* (134v, **alb. bres** – belt, girdle); *cuculiu* (135v); *călțuni* (136v) *felon* (122v, **sl. felonu** , a short cape, also called *sfită*, which is dressed over the priests clothes), *mantie* (134f, **sl. mantija** - cape), *petrahiriu* (130v), *pomisălnic* (122f, an ornament for the head), *procoave* (121v, **sl. pokrovŭ**, cloth), *scumă* (135f); *stihariul* (130v, **ngr. stihári, sl. stihárŭ, rus. stihári**, a cloth with sleeves worn by the deacon at the sermon; is also worn by the priest under the *felon*).

The use of Slavonic language in the Church, as well as in the administrative system, was understood by many linguists as a cultural dependence on the Slavonic world (among those linguists is A. Lupul-Antonescu, who noted in his study on the sixteenth century: *The Language and Literature of the Romanians*⁷), even though just few of the terms have become popular in our language: *călugăr*, *icoană*, *pildă*, *prescură* etc.

In the technical text of sermons some lexical units appeared, many of these being terms attested in the first Romanian texts (the XVI-th century): *altar* (next to its variants: *oltar*, *oltareu*, *oltariu*), *duh*, *jertfă*, *post*, *taină*, *moaște*, *prooroc*, *sfânt*, *ceteț* (*citeț*), *sobor*, *jertfelnic*, *pocrovăț*, *sfită*, *cădelniță*, *pomeni*, *sfinți*, *praznic*, *mir* etc.

Most of the religious terms mentioned above have entered our language after the old Slavic phase (after the XI-th century). The name of Slavonic (proposed by the researcher Gh. Mihăilă and repeated by other researchers) is most suitable. Some Slavonic elements (occurrent in the religious texts) possess features of the Medio-Bulgarian or Serbian nature and many researchers agreed on the idea that the Medio-Bulgarian version is the fundamental variant of Slavonic. Being the

⁷ Anton Lupul-Antonescu, *Veaculă XVI – Limba și literatura românilorŭ*, București, Tipografia Carol Gobl, Strada Doamnei, 16, 1890, in this study he noted that the Slavic prevalence kept shackled the Romanian thinking: „Acestă predominare slavonă, ține cugetarea românească încătușată, presară țara cu mănăstiri în care se adăpostescŭ Bulgari, punŭ în mâna Domnilorŭ limba slavonă și le deprindŭ condeiulŭ să represinte cu slove cugetarea formulată în slavonește”, p. 26.

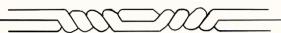
direct successor of old Slavic, it was the dominant cult language in our country during the centuries XIVth – XVIth. Therefore, by elements of Slavic origin, one should understand Medio-Bulgarian Slavonic terms. The only old Slavic term that Romanian language kept is *sfânt* (holy).

The Slavonic influence on the Romanian language had not manifested in one period or uniformly. Old Slavic words have been preserved or have been replaced with new, Medio-Bulgarian, afterwards Serbian or Russian, given that in our country many works belonging to Medio-Bulgarian, Serbian, and Russian-Ukrainian editions were drafted and printed.

The first part of the manuscript represents a codex for priests, having outlined advice and laws that cannot be broken, or else one faces the eternal sufferings. The manuscript was very important at the time, as little was written regarding the demeanor of a clergyman. As Simeon Ștefan wrote: *cuvintele acealea sunt bune carele le înțeleg toți*⁸, the monk's missionary work was fulfilled. Thus, thanks to Moxa's efforts, the priests read how to behave and serve God properly, as Saint Basil the Great wrote, but also they could discover the signification of the Holy Liturgy, as Saint Gregory explained it. The monk's efforts were undoubtedly rewarded in his time, but his legacy lives on, for we, after almost four hundred years, still read his writings in awe.

The presentation of the seventeenth century religious vocabulary highlights the conservatism and the archaic character of the technical language of worship. It has been said that the Byzantine-Slavonic terminology represents a common feature of Eastern spirituality, and rightly so. The Slavic influence on the technical vocabulary in the studied text was stronger than the Greek influence. Many of Byzantine-Greek lexemes penetrated Romanian through the Slavonic languages, and their presence in the first Romanian texts constitutes an argument for their age in Romanian language. At the same time, it

⁸ Simion Ștefan, in *Predoslovie*: "Those words are good, that all understand", http://ro.orthodoxwiki.org/Simion_%C8%98tefan (Accessed October 20, 2015).



confirms the stability of Romanian religious vocabulary. The analysis of the studied text aims to be a step in approaching the complex issues of religious language.

Resources

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