“Byzantium after Byzantium” and the religious framework. A conceptual analysis

Constantin Stoinescu

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“BYZANTIUM AFTER BYZANTIUM” AND THE RELIGIOUS FRAMEWORK. A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

CONSTANTIN STOENESCU

Abstract

My working hypothesis is that the phrase “Byzantium after Byzantium” has multiple meanings which can be revealed by a type of conceptual analysis. I have discovered five constitutive elements: firstly, Iorga wanted to express the paradoxical twinning of historical change and continuity; secondly, he agreed with the rise and fall model of the historical development; thirdly, he conceived the historical process at the level of largest entities, namely, the civilizations understood as complex societies; fourthly, he thought that religion could be a general framework for an explanation regarding the course of events; fifthly, Iorga searched for an explanation in terms of tradition.

Keywords: Nicolae Iorga, “Byzantium after Byzantium”, rise and fall, complex societies, Orthodox tradition.

“Byzantium after Byzantium”

The fortunate phrase “Byzantium after Byzantium” (“Bizanț după Bizanț” in Romanian) was used for the first time, or at least it was consecrated by the historian Nicolae Iorga as a book title for one of his many works. His thesis suggests that the cultural forms which have assured and guaranteed the identity of the Byzantine Empire have survived, being preserved in Southeastern Europe for a long time after the fall of Constantinople in the year 1453, especially by the Romanian Principalities, despite the Ottoman suzerainty.

In his book, Nicolae Iorga described in details a lot of facts which happened after the conquest of Byzantium, from the exile of the scholars in

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1 University of Bucharest.
2 Just a few words about the method I used here for the analysis of the phrase “Byzantium after Byzantium”. My idea is that the method of conceptual analysis could be applied, in a weak sense, to the social sciences and history, with good results regarding the clarity of these different judgments. I rather think to a connective analysis than to a linguistic one. Therefore, my aim is to reveal the constitutive elements of ideas, to clear up the multiple meanings and to make the connections between concepts and ideas.
3 Iorga (1972).
Western Europe (especially philosophers and theologians), to the revolutionary beginnings of the 19th century. The chapters VI and VII contain a derivative thesis regarding the continuity of the Byzantine imperial idea in the Romanian Principalities, like Wallachia and Moldavia. The reliable foundation of this historical process was the Orthodox Church and the Christian communities. This explains why so many rulers from the two principalities were not only the main donors for the Christian communities and churches but also their protectors.

I think that there is no hermeneutic risk to say that Iorga discovered the multicultural level as a component of the identity of different communities. However, he usually described the Romanian culture as a mixture or confluence of Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman linguistic heritage.

The purpose of this research is to investigate this theoretical paradigm by extracting the strong presupposition of Iorga’s thesis, according to which the Orthodoxy was the main factor for the preservation of Byzantine identity, assuring the continuity of this kind of civilization in a geographic space. Maia Todorova, a contemporary historian, agrees that “Byzantium after Byzantium” understood as a descriptive term, denotes “the commonalities of the Orthodox peoples in the Ottoman Empire concerning religion, private law, music, and the visual arts.”

Undoubtedly, Iorga’s thesis shows some remains of his ideological attitude and emotions, but I think it has a cognitive content, therefore it could be used as an interpretative tool. Its theoretical core regarding the historical continuity of religion can reject many skeptical replies. Again, the main idea is that a kind of social and economic structure, a type of culture and a dominant religion have joined together for many centuries in a geographic space. But how is such a historical process possible? How should we explain the historical stability? Have we historical cases as good examples? And which is then the role played by the religious framework? Finally, was the Orthodoxy the support for the Byzantine values, mores and folkways common to all peoples in Southeastern Europe? And could we suppose that the main social rules, which assured the stability of economic and social interactions, derived from this ethos?

**Rise and Fall**

The historians have rather tried to explain the historical change than to show the stability or the slow change. Traditionally, the historians were superior to simple chroniclers of their times, though they were not at all theorists of history. To write about battles and winners, for example, was already a strong engagement in the interpretation of facts. And, as we know, there are no pure historical facts. So, there is always a hidden vision about history behind any chronicle.

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The expression “Byzantium after Byzantium” was used by Nicolae Iorga as a description for a historical change, having the advantage of suggesting both a sequence and a continuity. His intention was, probably, to embed the seeming paradox that something has changed and simultaneously remained the same into this expression.

It is interesting to mention that this way of speaking was used by some historians in order to describe major historical changes, like the growth of civilizations and empires and their decay. The well-known modern philosopher Giambattista Vico reinvented this vision about history. He argued that there is only one universal law in history, whose source and legitimacy reside in God. All these different historical facts are expressions of this law. Vico tried to explain why different societies accomplished this unique law differently.

His answer consists in a theory about the ideal, eternal history which assumes that all nations rise and fall according to a circular motion. Therefore, these historical evidences were considered in the context of some metaphysical claims. The philosophers of the Modern Age, especially those who framed the Enlightenment, associated the idea of progress to these historical sequences. The same vision of history was shared by Dimitrie Cantemir in his History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire (Historia incrementorum atque decrementorum Aulæ Ottomanae).

The cyclical pattern of history was also used by one of Iorga’s contemporaries, Arnold Toynbee, in his book A Study of History. He identified twenty-one civilizations and described their genesis, growth and decay and finally their disintegration and the new genesis. Briefly, “civilizations rise and fall and, by falling, they give rise to the others.” A similar pattern is used in his research on cities and their historical development, in the book Cities on the Move. For example, Toynbee tried to explain why the capital of Roman Empire was moved from Rome to Constantinople.

Nicolae Iorga had a similar general vision over historical development, seen as a series of civilizations; in addition, he adopted the same idea of a historical circular motion that interchanges growth and decay. He thought that the civilizations were the greatest historical units and judged their evolution from this point view, trying to find the basic source of unity in the context of evolution. In the same time, by using an idea already theorized in the philosophy of culture, Iorga described the civilizations in their economic, social, cultural and political complexity, as living realities structured by specific forms. I think we have sufficient reasons to say that the phrase “Byzantium after Byzantium” restores the relationship between forms and reality inside the Southeastern European civilization. It is a historical reality that the city of

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6 Toynbee (1948), p. 15.
Constantinople was conquered in 1453, even though the Byzantine civilization survived in the Balkans many centuries after that military event because the Byzantine “forms” didn’t cease to exist. In fact, a historical change presents an association of continuity and discontinuity. “Byzantium after Byzantium” expresses the availability of this idea in the case of the Balkan civilization.

Complex Societies

Let’s suppose the unproblematic idea that the Byzantine civilization was a complex society, gradually developed. I prefer to use the term “civilization” to denote the effects of the complex societies. In this sense, the Byzantine civilization produced a complex society which had its own political hierarchy, namely, a bureaucracy and a ruling elite, that social stratification being accompanied by a specialization of some groups and specific ideological or religious identity based on common values and concepts. This “common culture” was also described as “a combination of old habits of thought and folklore”.

If a complex society was such a historical entity then its relationship with its evolution must be explained. What do we mean by the growth of a complex society or by its collapse? We don’t find many answers or theories regarding this problem, but a starting point is easy to take, at least for the sake of our argument.

Joseph Tainter’s approach regarding the collapse and development of societies could be very helpful. He defines collapse as “a recurrent feature of human societies”. In the same time, he realizes that this assumption raises at least two methodological questions. Firstly, “the question of whether complexity is a continuum or it is characterized by discrete stages.” Secondly, “to explain collapse it will be necessary to discuss (...) alternative general views of how complex societies have developed”. I suppose that a causal explanation of the development and collapse would be the best option for each case. Therefore, a debate on these issues will reveal the hidden causes and powers. But other questions will become legitimate, for example, how do we explain the historical fact that a society remains unchanged for a long time.

The answer to the first methodological question is that a complex society has an identity assured by some deep structures and modes of operation, all of these being doubled by noticeable surface characteristics. In the same time, complex societies increase because they aren’t inert entities, so the balance between stability and change reveals equilibrium at the level of complex society seen as a totality. Therefore, complex societies change slowly, but they do.

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Additionally, their collapse is explained through the conjunction of different causes that produce the conditions for a catastrophic change. Except the natural disaster, the main cause of quick changes is, probably, the lack of natural resources.

The methodological conclusion is that, in history, the best explanations describe the genesis and causes of phenomena.

**Imagining the Byzantine World**

Conceived as a complex society, the Byzantine world is a very interesting historical case because it arises some questions regarding basic structure that assured its identity, and, above all, its long stability and continuity. Its slow decay (one thousand years) from an empire, Eastern Roman Empire, to a town, the city of Constantinople, must be explained. Was this millennium, first of all, a continuous historical decay, or, to the contrary, a surprising period of stability? The decay is obvious, but perhaps the historical showing of its slow evolution is more important than the decay itself. However, the Byzantine world was the best possible word for its inhabitants since they did not want to change anything. In other words, in one millennium, Byzantium lost its political primacy, but it remains almost identical concerning the historical daily life, namely, for all, social, economic and cultural events. The working hypothesis is that the religious faith was the cement of this world.

I think it is useful to mention some historical views regarding this paradoxically slow decrease of the Byzantine world. I chose a well-known historian of civilizations, Arnold Toynbee, and two historians from the geographical area of Byzantium, the Bulgarian Maia Todorova and the Romanian Alexandru Duţu.

Arnold Toynbee is one of those researchers who causally explain the historical development of the Balkan society based on religious grounds. First of all, taking into account the differences between traditions, he divided Europe in two blocks, the so-called Western Christendom and the Orthodox Christendom. The difference between these two worlds is made through different causes and trends, but one of the most important features is the relation between the State and the Church. The Church preserved his freedom in Western Christendom: “Even where the Church has been re-subjected to the secular power in a Western state, this un-Western relation between Church and state has been tempered by the climate of ecclesiastical independence which has been prevalent in Western Christendom on the whole. In the Byzantine world, on the other hand, the successful re-establishment of the Empire in the eighth century deprived the Eastern Orthodox Church of the freedom that she, too, had momentarily regained. She did not re-enter the prison house without a struggle. The battle went on for about two hundred years, but it ended in the Church’s becoming
virtually a department of the medieval East Roman State; and a state that has reduced the Church to this position has thereby made itself ‘totalitarian’ – if our latter-day term ‘totalitarian state’ means a state that has established its control over every side of the life of its subjects.”\textsuperscript{11} The “peculiar institution” of Byzantine society brought the Byzantine civilization to a premature downfall due to a series of wars, for example, those between the Byzantium and the new Bulgarian state.

Toynbee asserts that this mixture between political power and Church was the main cause of the Byzantine decay: “The medieval Byzantine totalitarian state conjured up by the successful resuscitation, at Constantinople, of the Roman Empire had a disastrous effect on the development of the Byzantine civilization.”\textsuperscript{12} The effect of this combination was a totalitarian society, having a slow motion and a perpetual reproduction of the same cultural forms. To overcome these boundaries was an individual chance that some persons gained as recognition of their value. As Toynbee wrote, “the rich potentialities of the Byzantine civilization, which the Byzantine state nipped in the bud, are revealed in flashes of originality that burst in regions beyond the range of the East Roman Empire’s effective power, or in centuries subsequent to the Empire’s effective demise…”\textsuperscript{13} Two examples are given by Toynbee himself, the 10th century Sicilian monk Saint Nilus or the 16th century Cretan painter, Theotokopoulos, known as El Greco.

Another way to imagine the Byzantine world assumes the hypothesis of the so-called “Russia’s Byzantine Heritage”. Remember that for Peter the Great the city of Moscow was “the Third Rome”. Toynbee was also very clear: “The Russians have sought salvation in the political institution that was the bane of the medieval Byzantine world. They felt that their one hope of survival lay in a ruthless concentration of political power and worked out for themselves a Russian version of the Byzantine totalitarian state.”\textsuperscript{14}

Again, a different way to imagine the Byzantine world and the historical sequence (named with Iorga’s favorite expression “Byzantium after Byzantium”) starts from the relationship between the traditional Byzantine political, cultural and religious space and the extension of the Ottoman Empire. Maia Todorova suggests that the Balkan opposition against the Ottoman Empire must be explained, first of all, starting from the religious background, and secondly, starting from the grounds of the Byzantine Imperial tradition. Moreover, Todorova argued that without an elite it would have been a conflict between the old imperial tradition and the new tradition of the nationalism. On one hand, “the Balkan Christian locals were integrated in the bureaucracy only at the

\textsuperscript{11} Toynbee (1948), p. 179.
\textsuperscript{12} Toynbee (1948), p. 179.
\textsuperscript{13} Toynbee (1948), pp. 179-180.
\textsuperscript{14} Toynbee (1948), pp. 181-182.
lowest level”\textsuperscript{15}, while on the other hand, the political goals of the phanariotes were designed “on an individual basis and not as a social group.”\textsuperscript{16} Todorova mentions that “the only real exception in this respect was Romania, which had retained its local aristocracy despite a century of phanariote predominance; however, this is to be explained by the special status of the antecedent Danubian principalities as vassal territories, which also account for the peculiarities in Romania’s social and economic structure”\textsuperscript{17}

A quasi sociological perspective is proposed by Alexandru Duţu. He works with the well-known concept of solidarity and its different forms. For example, the difference between the organic form of solidarity based on family and the organized form of solidarity based on the membership to a wider community could be the \textit{explanans} for the historical events and traditions.

Alexandru Duţu wrote about this complex web of different causal or surface factors: “It is commonly asserted that the new national state appeared in the Southeastern Europe as a consequence of the long fight for independence of people living in this area: a strong accent is put on political impulses and on the common values, necessary for the preservation of the ‘nation’. Nevertheless, a closer scrutiny of the mental background would observe that the national identity appeared as a consequence of the transformation of a whole worldview. The progress made by the lay spirit, the transformation of the enlarged families into mono-cellular family, the new relationship established between the man’s ‘inner’ life and his ‘outer’ life visualized in terms of social existence instead of religious devotion, show us that the national consciousness developed some desacralized forms of solidarity.”\textsuperscript{18} “The religious factor had its own role: “The traditional ‘Orthodox Consciousness’ that had maintained a form of solidarity between people under the Ottoman domination began to transformed itself into a different form of solidarity mainly inspired by the progresses made in the intellectual field”\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Tradition and Trends}

One of my hidden, previously assumed suppositions is that we act like some builders who use their available raw materials to raise an edifice when it

\textsuperscript{15} Todorova (2009), p. 171.
\textsuperscript{16} Todorova (2009), p. 171.
\textsuperscript{17} Todorova (2009), p. 171. In his “Byzantium after Byzantium” Nicolae Iorga tried to qualify this special status as a mark of historical excellence for Romanian nation. Romania’s eccentricity deserves a critical debate. In addition, Lucian Boia recently published a book in which these differences are imagined as some bad deviations from a so-called European historical normality. See Boia (2012).
\textsuperscript{18} Duţu (1998), p. 141.
\textsuperscript{19} Duţu (1998), p. 152.
comes to history writing assignment. We choose how to build according to our previous experiences, architectural imagination and utilitarian interests. This epistemological relativism in the writing of history doesn’t mean that our imagination is free to write on history like during a poetic exercise, but it is epistemologically limited by some constraints, first of all, the suppositional context of the research itself.

A metaphor can be understood according to its referential intentionality. In our case, “Byzantium after Byzantium” isn’t designed to explain, but only to suggest a way toward a comprehensive and general view of facts. I have tried to deconstruct this metaphor and find its hermeneutic layers. My working hypothesis were five: the first, that Iorga wanted to express the paradoxically twinning of the historical change and continuity; the second, that he agreed with the rise and fall model of the historical development; the third, that he conceived the historical process at the level of largest entities, namely, the civilizations understood as complex societies; the fourth, that he thought that religion could be a general framework for an explanation regarding the course of events and the fifth, that Iorga searched for an explanation in terms of tradition. The last two elements go together though, because the main content of tradition has a religious nature in this case.

To explain historical facts starting from tradition is an epistemologically accepted perspective. Some decades ago the debate about historicism and the possibility of historical laws ended with a cautious conclusion, the one that we can rely on the explanatory power of historical traditions and trends in a rational theory of tradition. There is neither time nor place to talk in detail about all these, so all we can do is to retain the idea that tradition became a favorite explanans and a balance between positivism and presentism.

Without having any connection with the epistemological roots of the debate mentioned above, Iorga was already convinced that the tradition could be used as an explanatory unit in the so-called historia rerum gestarum. His belief had another primary source though, an ideological one: he believed that there is a national tradition, that the national characteristics have an ethnical basis and that the history as a res gestae, as a sequence of facts and events, is an expression of this tradition. He supported that thesis in the public life, in his conferences or in different newspapers, first in the well-known nationalist magazine called Semănătorul. His theory of tradition was never clearly exposed, but his main intuitions are above all the doubt and they can be comprehended in the Romanian cultural and political context. But again, this paper is not the place to talk in detail about all these problems. I only want to mention that, following a different path, Iorga reached the epistemologically acceptable belief that the historical tradition can explain ordinary facts and events. Indeed, the way to the historical truth could be paved with emotions, feelings and other subjective ingredients.
The tradition sets the framework and the limits of the historical development. Therefore, the historical tradition, understood as a previous condition, becomes the starting point for the real trends. The fact that a social structure, an economic system and a type of culture were reproduced by themselves for many centuries in the Byzantine Empire isn’t a mystery, but a consequence of this historical tradition. Using a mechanical metaphor, I’ll say that the transitions from one stage to another were very slow too.

Finally, I reassume the thesis that the core of this explanatory tradition is something ineffable, namely, the so-called “Balkan mentality” and its religious components. In fact, the “‘Balkan mentality’ has been one of the most abused mythologemes in the journalistic and, generally, popular discourse.”20 But it works, I’d say.

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