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PARALLELS OF HISTORY – IBERIA AND THE BALKANS

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I propose to draw the attention of the esteemed audience to two cultural-historical phenomena, the fruit of the vicissitudes of which world history is abundant. Only two areas of the continent, illegally called the Old World by its inhabitants, have suffered centuries of Muslim domination: Iberia and the Balkans. This is easily explained – it refers to the peninsulas that close off the Mediterranean Sea from the east and west. Thus they stand in close touch with Asia and Africa. Organically belonging to Europe, Iberia and the Balkans did not manage to isolate themselves from the dangers that streamed to them from the two neighboring continents. Every people, later nation, and finally its national historiography, contrives to work out acceptable explanations for its fate. In sum: someone else, someone from the outside is always to blame for the troubles of that nation – i.e. of ours. The pattern has no exceptions, and this is not the place to resort to examples. In this sense, today's historical writings differ little in spirit from folkloric epic cycles. For us, let's say, as far as the Bulgarian Middle Ages are concerned, Byzantium is generally to blame, because it often attacked our young and later mature state. We had protected the Byzantine dominions from many barbarian invasions that moved through deep Asia along the Way of the Nations, along the Danube. The last statement is true, but we forget that at least twice Byzantium saved us from mighty Muslim expansions. For the first time in the VIIth century, when the Arabs launched a campaign eastward to conquer Constantinople and cross into Europe. Thus, the birth of the Bulgarian state might not have taken place if Byzantium had not diverted the Arabs from an eastern to a western direction, through North Africa to Iberia. Once again, already in the course of the XI – XII centuries, Byzantium halted by desperate efforts another Muslim advance towards the Balkans, that of the Turkic Seljuks. This time, however, it only postponed its end by two centuries, for the dense presence of Turkic masses in Asia Minor created the ground for the imminent aggression of the Ottomans, providing them with sufficient manpower. We are also inaccurate when we point to the extraordinary, almost unique, durability of Muslim rule over the Balkans – half a millennium is indeed a significant period even for those slow centuries. In Iberia, however, Arab rule lasted for more than seven centuries: from 711 to 1492. There the Muslims found the kingdom of the Visigoths, whose age amounted to three centuries. Let us remember this because of the parallel with the Balkans, where the Ottomans had to fight the thousand-year-old Byzantium, the seven-hundred-year-old Bulgaria, and other countries slightly younger than the latter. So the Arabs take almost all

of Iberia; it is only at Poitiers in Southern France that Charles Martel stops them – remember the epic of Roland. We would not say that their rule over the westernmost part of Europe was uneventful. It was often punctuated by wars with the surviving but insufficiently powerful rulers of Navarre, Catalonia, Aragon and Leon – rather just big feudal lords.

There were, however, many other local aristocrats who collaborated with the conquerors; they were tolerated by them. The whole period from the VIIth to the XVth centuries turns out to be an unusually diverse, dynamic part of Spanish history, which we would not describe except as a progressive flourishing of economy, construction and especially culture. Even more important: as the creation of the Spanish nation. Like the Balkans, it was formed under Muslim rule. It is as if the desire of the native population and of some of the local aristocrats to have the foreign invader thrown back into Africa had mobilized the spirit of the Spaniards, leading it to a gracious outburst. Here is what is unique about the phenomenon of Spain. The Reconquista there began not even a hundred years after the Arab invasion. It lasted for seven centuries, having its ebbs, flows and ground swells. Despite the long-running conflict between conquerors and conquered, opposed religiously and therefore culturally, it did not prevent the two warring sides from interpenetrating to form something third: the culture of Al-Andalus.

Actually, we should speak not of culture, but of civilization, of a whole way of existence, in which fundamentally incompatible components were involved: Christianity (and Catholicism in its purity) and Islam. Without omitting the third component of that incredible syncretism, Judaism. For before the Sephardic Jews were expelled from Spain at the end of the 15th century, they played a major role in both the economy and the culture of Iberia. As they carried the Andalusian model to the islands of the Caribbean, across Central and South America, the traditions of the indigenous peoples, let us sum them up for brevity as Indians, became vigorously infused into it. Thereafter, when the conquistadors intensively imported slave labor from Black Africa, blacks also participated with their primitive creativity in the polyvocal cultural synthesis of Latin America.

The indissoluble alloy in question, spilled over more than half of the New World and hardened its structure in the course of half a millennium, legitimately claims the concept of civilization. Without idealizing the coexistence in question, charged in its early period with immanent religious conflicts, no cultural historian would dispute the remarkable manifestations and the crowning masterpieces of the Iberian spiritual synthesis. Muslim cultic and secular architecture, proven by world-renowned examples from Indonesia to Iberia, has nowhere risen to the elegance characteristic of the Caliphate of Córdoba. Yet there it dates from the earliest, from the IXth to the XVth century. Arts and crafts, typical of medieval creativity, are also perfected in Córdoba. What about the Andalusians – the music, the song, the dance, the non-Christian passion that enchants and frightens us? In order to characterize them, we have to refer to García Lorca's famous essay “Duende”, where the Andalusian phenomenon is after all not defined, but only described; duende turns out to be an unnameable state of mind. Pondering on it, it is truly unique to invent a new human condition and impose it as something existing beyond dispute. The prose born

on Andalusian soil respects us for its early appearance and genre diversity. At least part of it is widely known – the philosophical one. The pre-Renaissance renaissance in the Caliphate of Córdoba gave the XIIth century two great thinkers: the Arab Ibn Rushd [1], or Averroes as Europeans call him, and the islamized Jew Maimonides [2]. Neither Christianity, nor Islam and Judaism outside Iberia had philosophers of this rank and at that time. The spiritual discoveries of those two Cordovians are the offspring of that very intellectual syncretism. Probably because there was no way in its atmosphere that thought could remain subordinated to the only concept of being, that is, to religion. To grow from historiographer to theorist of history, when for a millennium and a half even brilliant authors have been no more than chroniclers – this is the conquest of Averroes. To be an encyclopaedist then and there, when the rest of Europe did not get its own ones until the eighteenth century – that is the achievement of a free mind and exceptional knowledge, proven by Maimonides.

With the theme of today's speech, I would like to pose a question whose answer we have yet to find after interdisciplinary research: why, although we tout ourselves as inhabitants of the crossroads between Asia and Europe, as if all parts of our continent were not, have we managed to derive so little spiritual benefit from our objective location? Why did the co-presence of not two but more cultures in the Balkans produce a result so different from the Iberian one? Some Spanish historians have curtly assumed that the fruitful effects of the Arab conquest over their land were due to a higher level of development among the Arabs than the local one. It is difficult to accept such a thesis. The Arabs appeared in Iberia only 80 years after the beginnings of their religion and statehood. That is to say, they could not have been more advanced than the Ottomans, who conquered the Balkans a hundred to two hundred years or more after declaring themselves independent of the Seljuk Sultanate, but (pretty important!) inheriting from it a very developed Muslim tradition in the areas of: administration, military, law, construction. The great Seljuks in their turn and in their time borrowed these from the Arab caliphates of Cairo or Baghdad. That is to say that here the Ottoman sultans applied a state system well developed by their predecessors, making some changes in it, mainly under Byzantine influence. That a syncretism analogous to the culture of al-Andalus did not yet develop in the Balkans may have another explanation. Throughout Iberia in the seventh century Christianity had a shallower root than in the Balkan soil in the XIVth and XVth centuries. But the whole Reconquista reveals the Spaniards' bloody attachment to Catholicism, while throughout Byzantium, Bulgaria, and the rest of the countries here, a multitude of heresies were shaking the Orthodoxy in its Christian intransigence. In other words, it was hardly the depth of faith that prevented interpenetration of ideas between Orthodox and Muslims in the Balkans.

We are left, then, to suppose something third, because there seems to be no fourth: the Islam of the Turks would have been different from that which the Arabs spread. The Turkic one is more earthly, everyday-centered, consisting of rituals and prohibitions rather than a philosophical interpretation of religion. It did not stimulate spiritual production in the Ottomans themselves. By the way, this is also because their literacy used two languages quite foreign to the Turks – Arabic for theology and Persian for poetry. The Ottoman language was left for historiography, again intimately mixed Turkic with the two

languages mentioned. Naturally it did not enjoy wide popularity. The above is a hypothesis, of course, but in historiography it is permissible to judge some processes by their results. Thus, to the Balkan who finds himself in Spain, the undoubted similarity in popular life here and there strikes the eye. Clearly it stems from the mixture of European with Islamic tradition, a mixture not found elsewhere in Europe. Islam, for example, has had an impact on agriculture, importing from Asia a range of crops; it has enriched the craft technologies and patterns that abound in the Middle and Far East; it has influenced culinary arts; it has influenced civic and even cultic architecture. The above is also a matter of syncretism, albeit through domestic matters rather than pure creativity. But here we find mutual influences between Christians and Muslims in Iberia and in the Balkans in folk arts from music folklore to clothing and home decor. To the Iberian state of mind, fruit of syncretism, i.e. *duende*, we contrast our similar fruit – the *kaif*. *Kaif*, however, refers mainly to eating and drinking, to abundant rest, while in the Spanish areal it pleases the sight and the hearing. Last but not least in importance, the conquerors brought to the two peninsulas in question traditional Eastern medicine, positive knowledge in many fields of anatomy, astronomy, mathematics. Thus not a few phenomena which we take to be uniquely ours were in fact imported without necessarily being Ottoman or Moslem; the wise knowledge of life, and the attitude to life in general, inherent in the East, has permeated through Arabs and Turks throughout both peninsulas. There they have been accumulated and made sense of far longer than in the rest of Europe. The Balkans and Iberia in this sense reveal striking similarities.

However, we cannot speak of analogies in the spiritual life of these two communities. In our lands, the indigenous tradition seems to have exhausted its energies not to absorb and further develop what has been brought into, but to isolate and preserve itself. For the Ottomans, this was beneficial – they developed the practices in which they saw their interest: governance, organization and institutions, material production entrusted to the peoples subject to them. As for the spiritual sphere of the Balkan people, denied to the end as *Gyaour*, it remained out of sight of their conquerors until the end. Thus the possibility of creating a cultural synthesis here was thwarted in principle. Justice demands that we point out that the Balkan population also lacked the natural inclination to enter into the spiritual world of the newcomers, whom they did not accept as masters over their land. Thus, with relative domestic tolerance, except in conflict situations, we are faced to this day with an equally rare historical phenomenon: as though the two ethnic groups in question have not coexisted at all for over 600 years. They do not know each other because their presumed and firmly pursued goal was to remain each in himself, for himself.

In our search for parallels between Iberia and the Balkans, we are led to the observation that Spaniards today are more coolheaded about their history under Arab rule than the Balkanians are about their period under Ottoman rule. Does this mean a difference in degrees of tolerance? It seems to me that the answer to the question is simple: over Andalusia, Islam lost its dominance half a millennium ago. The memory of the Caliphs of Cordoba has long been buried in the minds of Spaniards. But similar memories live on through what has been passed down through many of our families. The remorse of the

Bulgarians for the Great Excursion* , which took place barely a decade ago, is alive in us. Quite analogous excursions were organized by the Catholic kings of Spain. After the Reconquista drove the Arab newcomers into Africa, the Jews were expelled from Iberia; a hundred years later, the same fate befell the Moriscos, at least the fortieth generation of Arabs born in Andalusia. A large number of Spaniards who had once converted to Islam – the Pomaks there, let us call them – left their homeland with them. Pretty basic ethnic cleansing.

Today, the softened, downright indifferent attitude of the Spaniard towards Islam is simply due to a distance in time. As in our country there is no ground for emotions towards the Tatars, for example, the cause of not a few devastations and blood in Bulgaria in the 13th century. A further string of parallels would lead us to similarities and differences between Iberia and the Balkans.

Today, the softened, downright indifferent attitude of the Spaniard towards Islam is simply due to a distance in time. As in our country there is no ground for emotions towards the Tatars, for example, the cause of not a few devastations and blood in Bulgaria in the XIIIth century. A string of parallels would lead us to further similarities and differences between Iberia and the Balkans. An essential but neglected topic in European historiography, which needs specific research. And it will lead us to other topics in our cultural history and ethnopsychology. This thematic circle certainly deserves attention. For its development we hope for the next generation of Balkanists and Orientalists. I hope I have helped my sketchy words to motivate them.

[1] Ibn Rushd, Latinized as Averroes (1126-1198) – an Arabic writing philosopher, peripatetic

[2] Maimonides (1135-1204) – Jewish Talmudic philosopher

* Popular sardonic euphemism for the 1989 expulsion of the Bulgarian Turks to Turkey. – Translator's note.