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## ***Rome attraction. About Renaissances in Europe***

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Rome has always attracted nations and leaders from Antiquity to Modern Europe. Whoever conquered Rome or was conquered by her, wanted to be Roman. This attraction to Rome is rooted not in her wealth, but in her power: political organization, mentality, civic virtues, nobility of the Republic and the Empire, her imposing figure and presence.

This attraction to Rome is a distinctive feature of her successor, Europe<sup>1</sup>, which stands in awe before the remains and relics of the Empire. And how could it not?

Rome respects and keeps her Gods and mythological rituals. However, mythology and religion, unlike archaic cultures/civilizations, are not the only characteristic of her ideology. Religion is but one singular aspect of her political organization, it does not absorb everything else. On the contrary, it can be absorbed by other “cults”, those of the state, the military duty, justice, civic virtues.

#### **Rome is a secular state and so is her successor Europe.**

European laity is rooted in the very phenomenon which by definition should entail the opposite, that is, the relation to a higher power. This phenomenon – Christianity – ought to dissociate Europe from Rome, but it does not. On the contrary, it works for mundane affairs.

Christianity is not a religion of the ancient, archaic type; it is not collectivizing and universally applicable to the whole ethnicity. It is a new individualistic religion, unique as the civilization it flourishes in, for it is connected with a lot of secular issues at a very early stage of its development. The active factor is the institution of the Church. In its quality of an authority in the secular individualistic civilization, the Church absorbs its features, instead of spreading its fatal influence over it (as does the Orthodox Church), thus escaping the traditional framework of its predecessors. Rome is thus capable of shaping this institution.

There are no boundaries or ethnical differences as far as this first universal religion is concerned. It aims not at the mass, but at every individual man, whose soul

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<sup>1</sup> The article is a chapter in the three volume research *Abandoned by the Gods*. (Attempt at theorizing European civilization)

has to be saved. And it is not a constraint to the population of the continent, no matter how strong its influence may be in Europe, it gradually weakens over the centuries. Christianity is mainly a religion of the town. In the village the memory of ancient festivities and traditions is vivid, and there is little zeal for the new religion, as opposed to the town, where its temples are. (For further reading see Gurevich, 1990, Burke, 1997, Bloch, 1968, Russel, 1972) Moreover, Christianity is not the only religion of this civilization which encompasses various peoples and states. Judaism and Islam have many followers (there are many vestiges of the Jews and the Moors in Spanish culture; for further details and interesting insights see Castro, 1948). The diversity of Rome is replicated in Europe.

This replication dates way back. Scholars and preachers such as Boetius (480-524), Cassiodor (480-573), Isidore of Seville (560-636), and Beda Venerabilis (673-735) manage to save the culture of Antiquity in its essentials, expound it in a form accessible to the medieval mind and drape it in the veil of Christianity.

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How does the Church take on Rome's role? According to the Vatican, Christianity must conquer the world. This means that the Church must possess the whole world with all its wealth, just as Rome wanted/that is what Rome coveted.

**If the Rome of the Caesars thought that the world is centred on it; why not expect the Rome of the popes to do the same.**

Not only does the Church meddle in the state affairs, in the social and personal life of its citizens, but it also wants to interfere in the world order as well. And the motive is not to achieve comprehension of the God's mystery, but to strip the world of its riches and shape it to her liking. One of the great reformers of the Church Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) introduces a new conception of the role of the church. And if until his papacy Christ's ideal had been contemplation and secular life, Gregory insisted that the church should be responsible for the "creation of a righteous world order". Gregory and Innocent III are known for their ruthless aggression towards kings (as is the case with the German Emperor Henry IV), kingdoms and duchies. The latter started the Albigensian Crusade and was responsible for killing over a million people and used to repeat: "As people kneel before Jesus, they should kneel before his deputy."

Knights and counts manifest quite buoyantly their attraction to Rome. The feudal elite are famous for their taste for splendour and prodigality, for the vain joys

of life and the pleasures of the flesh. A real seignior is he who gives away treasure without counting and spreads joy. In order to be loved and to be served loyally, he must live with a grand entourage and must organize great festivities with a lot of friends and faithful subjects. Such festivities are boastful ceremonies with a ritualistic value, where seeking the pleasures of life is elevated to sacrifice. The seignior conquers the nature, robs it and gets away. (Duby, 351)

In this respect these festivities completely oppose religious rituals which please and attract all people alike. They are the festivities of individuals who nourish a personal cult to vanity and who do not share the collective ardour to the original act of Creation.

Kings, counts, dukes and marquises copy the lifestyle of Roman patricians, adding to it medieval splendour and diversity. So do popes, cardinals and bishops. But a bishop's attraction to Rome seems all the more misplaced and absurd than that of a count.

The Ten Commandments are the first to suffer from this attitude. They no longer mean anything for the clergy, especially as far as the oath for poverty is concerned. What is more, this attitude is officially condoned. Wealth, one of the mundane affairs, is legitimized in church documents as an expression of pious virtue. Cupidity is what relates the clergy to Rome. The clergy seeks riches with enthusiasm, applying the Roman mould with overtly anti-Christian means such as deceit, treachery, luxury, corruption, bribery and murder.

Goff is the first to mention the Roman institution as a mould the Church follows. The historian claims that the Church uses it as a frame, relies on it, and stabilizes its position through it. (Goff, 1997, 21) But it is the negative aspects of the Roman institution that the Church adopts, distorting and rendering perfunctory the Roman mould. The praised Roman virtues – justice, sacrifice, honesty, courage – are substituted by allegiance, feudal dependence and loyalty to seignior. “The man in Antiquity had to be just and honest, the medieval man had to be loyal”, underlines Goff.

The beliefs of Antiquity undergo the same process. They manage to survive through the Middle Ages, but are “fragmented, distorted and degraded by the Christian thought”. What is more, the Middle Ages inherit the beliefs of Antiquity not in their original state, but the vestiges the late Roman Empire bequeaths: a manipulated, simplified and displaced kind of literature, art and Greco-Roman

philosophy, so that the early age barbaric medieval mind could understand it. The clergy borrows from Carthaginian rhetorician Martian Capella, not from Cicero or Quintilian, learns geography from the 3rd century mediocre compiler Julian Solin, not from Pliny or Strabo. The Christian mould develops an ill-favoured intellectual habit of systematically distorting the author's idea and of putting quotations out of their context. (Goff, 1997, 137)

Such ambitions and actions of the church help shape it according to the European value system, kindled by its Roman heirloom, by its anthropocentrism and godless practices.

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Europe follows Rome on many levels and thus creates the impression of many Renaissances. Scholars in cultural studies, art and history define them as the cultural heroics of the medieval "dark age". But neither are they heroic nor is the age dark. Should a given cultural form be more secular, should it deviate from the religious dogma, or should it remind of or be influenced by Roman forms, it is proclaimed to be a Renaissance – Merovingian, Carolingian, of Chartres, 13<sup>th</sup> century Florentine and even Bulgarian of Ivan – Boyan. More and more books with such enthusiastic contents speak if not of Renaissance, than of proto-Renaissance, of ante-humanism, of rudiments of Renaissance (two such books appeared in our country by well-known specialists in their fields: Kiril Krastev, Rudiments of Renaissance in Bulgaria, and Tsocho Boyadzhiev, 12<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance. Nature and man). Erwin Panofsky treats this problem in a book with the expressive title Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art. Being a fine analyst of iconic meaning and a connoisseur of medieval and renaissance cultural production, he construes Resuscitations not only as a path towards the great Renaissance, but also as a continuous attraction of the West towards Roman values;

**he sees the Resuscitations not as a bright extravagance of the "dark ages", but as a logical stage in the development of the civilization.**

It is impossible for a civilization to be built on Roman remains and not to be influenced by them.

However, it depends on how we construe this influence, or rather this return to Antiquity, which maintains this process of secularisation. I see it as a distortion of the spiritual in religion, as it plays a smaller role in the value system of the civilization. The secular is by definition materialistic and it is defined by measurable things.

Yet, there may be another reason upon which we can conjecture freely. At the beginning Christianity is severely persecuted in Rome. The original Christian doctrine is completely inconsistent with the Roman world. Maybe by establishing Christianity, Rome sought to change it. Or did Rome infest it by its evil mongering in the sole desire not to let anything different roam its land? It could be. This early hostility towards Christianity is a good parallel to Judaic hostility and as such it seeks to change the God's way. Jews do so by using Paul (I treat this question in greater detail elsewhere), by proclaiming him "sinner", Romans do so using temptation.

Since Burkhard science is dominated by the idea of the Renaissance, but it is not capable of silencing altogether some lone voice of truth, seeking to link Europe with medieval practices, to shape it in the high spirit of religion. This is why such authors, to the best of my knowledge, keep silent about the inquisition and bloodsheds as permanent state of the West, about the disgraceful deviation of the clergy from the original Christian doctrine and from the high status of religion, about the fear and anxiety among the people. They see religion as the high spirituality that should spread over Europe; religion and not the spirit of the Renaissance or the secular.

Jacques Le Goff is the leading voice of such interpretations. He literally mocks the Renaissance of the Western society, even dubs the great Renaissance "a bright but shallow event" (Goff, 1998, 40). He proposes to "revolutionize the conception of Renaissance" just because "there is no Renaissance". All there is but a long Middle Age, expanding to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But what happens during that time? The Carolingian Renaissance is nothing more than the culminating point of several smaller Renascences which took place after the year 680 in Cobi, Tours, Saint Gallen, Fulda, Bobbio, York, Pavia and Rome. It is not innovating. It borrows its educational programme from preceding religious orders. In the Carolingian court culture is just a childish game that enchants the barbarians. With its verbal insolence, riddles and "scientific puzzles" it comes close to our modern day radio games and crossword-pages in newspapers. The king's academy is simply a mundane entertainment consisting in calling themselves David or Homer. Admiration for Antiquity is restricted to Cassiodor and Isidore of Seville. As Pierre Rocher and Aleksander Gieysztor convincingly demonstrate, Carolingian Renaissance fulfils the superficial ideas and needs of a small social group (Goff, 1997, 151).

According to this great French historian, the Great Renaissance has nothing original either. Most of its characteristics appeared long before the historical time of

its flourishing (15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century). The famous “return to Antiquity” is there from the early ages. In 13<sup>th</sup> century Aristotle makes his way into universities, Pisano father and son copy the style of Antique sculptures for the pulpits of Pistoia and Florence. Philip the Fair (1285-1314) establishes a Machiavellian state. At the end of 13<sup>th</sup> century perspective is used both in optics and in fine arts. Reading spreads even before the Gutenberg’s galaxy and literacy does not wait for the printing press to appear. The individual affirms his position in the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century as decisively as during the Quattrocento (Goff, 1998, 25-26).

This leitmotiv of Le Goff – to minimize the features of the Renaissance and display them as medieval – is easy to see. But his zealous effort to convince us in the existence of a Machiavellian state, perspective, reading and individualism is so apparently strained that we, his readers, feel almost sorry for him. And it makes it difficult for us to share his enmity towards this “accidental chunk of time” of the Renaissance in Europe and makes us want to understand it better. It is my belief that every guild wants to expropriate alien domains and ideas. What we are left with in medieval studies is Middle Ages without limit, with a couple of Renaissances in it and several historical lapses of time when small groups of selected people entertain themselves with Antiquity.

Ideas as the one expounded here also illustrate the attraction towards Rome. In these changes

**the West wants to discard its clothes like an antique statue,**

in order to enjoy life, with its material and gestural quality. There is nothing that could stop that. Western society is deeply involved in the palpable and measurable reality of the particular man, which is an inseparable factor in the secular life.

Chivalry – another aspect of the attraction towards Rome – is known to us as the secular emblem of the medieval European civilization. But it is a separate entity, like a state within the state, a culture within the culture. Our impulse though is to define it as profoundly Christian and feudal phenomenon, elaborating to the fullest the medieval notion of “loyalty to the seignior”. In its essence chivalry is at complete odds with religious values and practical military norms. Religion does not fit well the well-dressed soldier and the ostentatious worldly man, and military norms directly oppose him. He does not see himself humble and poor before God, for he is proud and craving riches, and he is simply appalled by the normal war practices such as retreat,

outflank, deceive the enemy or escape when in danger of death. Chivalry enhances the Roman ideal, but by its self-sufficiency it encapsulates it to an ideal against reality. This makes it anti-Roman. Chivalry is made of “beautiful exaggerations” (Huizinga). By denying the difficulties of real life with its rudeness, primitiveness and ugliness, chivalry evolves into a pure culture: a game, a spectacle, an entertainment, tournaments, duels, decoration, love for the Beautiful Lady, etiquette and literature. Thus it is wrapped in the elaborated veil of the fanciest mundane phenomena in the West, an exaggerated emanation of the secular. Huizinga calls it a play, a temporal mystical liturgy, a minuet (Huizinga, 45-51).

Europe says goodbye to knighthood with the last hero of the humanity in the era of the “great stories”. Through the character of Don Quixote chivalry is parodied in order to blaze the path for literature. Its isolation quality chivalry owes to its attitude to Rome. A great number of knights adorn themselves with Roman titles and virtues.

Medieval scholars promote the idea that the Renaissance spirit, the desire to follow cultural and lifestyle models of Antiquity is rooted in the chivalry ideal itself. The scope of the Renaissance is somewhat narrowed because of the idea, but it is still worth investigating. The “island” phenomenon of chivalry spans the bridge that overcomes the church dogma. The knight opposes the saint in every way. The knight cannot isolate himself from worldly life; on the other hand, Christian humility, the feeling of sin, inactivity and contemplation are totally inconsistent with him. Two of the most typical genres in medieval literature – chivalric romance (inaccurately called novels) and hagiographies are diametrically opposite. Hagiography speaks of asceticism and mysticism, romance prose and poetry speak of military generosity and fairy-tale beauty.

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Universities are not indebted to Rome; they speak up for the temporal and Renaissance characteristics of the West. Other civilizations do not have this institution, even the Greeks and the Romans, who actually did have higher education schools. So the question is why does the European civilization create them, but not the others? Two original phenomena of the European civilization motivate their creation: the development of variegated knowledge and interest in the material reality (as opposed to civilizations of the archaic type, which use only knowledge of the mythological and ritualistic complex and deal with the unattainable spiritual realm).



West Roman Empire and Byzantine Empire, that is Catholicism and Orthodoxy, have a different attitude towards universities. Byzantine Empire and Orthodoxy (Greece, Russia, Bulgaria and Serbia) are indifferent to this temporal intellectual institution. These two Christian societies have many differences, but as far as universities are concerned, it is more interesting to emphasize the ardent taste of the West for the temporal and the conservatism of the East Orthodoxy. Byzantine Empire establishes the school of Magnaura but not a university.

The anthropocentrism and universalism that flourish in the West need the university frame. They are nourished there, comfortably preserved and developed. They are there for everybody to take, had he the money and the will. This type of knowledge is at first disseminated in monasteries and cathedral schools, where children are trained to be priests. Rich families consider education as a mark of high social status and covet more knowledge. They want their children to become notaries or merchants and to that effect they need to learn reading, writing and math. That is why they are sent to professionally oriented schools. Both students and teachers are laymen, and education is no more connected with Latin, but with spoken European languages. Teachers are not part of the clergy and they use non-clerical sources of knowledge, which allows them to pass judgment on priests and even the church. (World civilizations, vol. 2, 129)

Cathedral schools have yet another advantage over the monasteries: the education they provide is collective. They teach large groups of students - unlike the monastery practice where the older monk teaches the younger and leads him to contemplation of the Creation – and their number depended on the size of the cathedral library. Gradually, this practice leads to the establishment of big educational centres, where one can attend lectures read by many professors. The first such centres are Chartres and Lans. Soon it is Paris that takes the leading position with Saint-Denis and the charismatic figure of Pierre Abelard. Students from Paris, but also from Normandy, Germany and even England come in great numbers to hear his lectures and sermons. But even his passionate religious sermons had a distinctive secular flavour.

The first European universities are intellectual corporations (associations, guilds). The word *universitas* itself means “corporation”. Teaching is a craft, just one of the many activities of the town-life. According to Goff, “the book is no longer an idol, it is a tool” (1997,102). It is not the rare possession of well-read rich men, but

also the property of monastery libraries, and it serves the needs of the everyday education process. The increasing need of books triggered their mass production, which is carefully organized. Books are copied feverishly, for a large circulation. Scriptoria multiply, book copies pile in monastery and cathedral libraries and universities, but they also enter private homes. Books lose their high prestige, their position of “idols” to become a traded good.

The first European universities in Paris, Bologna and Oxford (12<sup>th</sup> century) award diplomas which are recognized everywhere on the continent and allow their holder to teach and perform citizen services. Their subjects and faculties multiply. Their secular role in the Renaissance transpires not only in the knowledge they spread, but also in the privileges they acquired with difficulties: juridical autonomy from the Pope, the right to go on strike and monopoly on awarding university degrees. Universities speedily dispersed in Europe and for less than three centuries covered the map of the continent with new centres of higher education.

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