

**Mihai-D. Grigore, Neagoe Basarab – Princeps
Christianus. The Semantics of Christianitas in
Comparison with Erasmus, Luther and Machiavelli
(1513-1523)**

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The volume under review was first published in German (*Neagoe Basarab – Princeps Christianus. Christianitas-Semantik im Vergleich mit Erasmus, Luther und Machiavelli (1513-1523)*, Frankfurt M.: Peter Lang 2015. *Erfurter Studien zur Kulturgeschichte des Orthodoxen Christentums* 10) and was, originally, a work accepted as a Habilitation thesis by the University of Erfurt (2013). The excellent scientific quality of this work was confirmed by its very positive reception in the German academic milieu, made manifest in the two awards it received: “Preis der Gesellschaft zum Studium des Christlichen Ostens” and the Award of the “Association of the German Book Trade – Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels”. Mihai-D. Grigore’s book presents a seminal work of premodern Romanian culture, *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius* by Neagoe Basarab (Prince of Wallachia between 1512 and 1521) to Western audiences, and at the same time demonstrates the European vocation of this culture in which the Latinate linguistic pattern, the Slavic influences and the Byzantine religious model merge.

As Orthodox countries in South-Eastern Europe began negotiations to become members of the European Union, some Western politicians argued that the eastern border of Europe actually lies where the influence of Catholicism and Protestantism ceased; therefore, E.U. enlargement policy should, in their view, be in line with this geographical and civilizational reality. Such an argument begins from the premise that Orthodoxy, with its religious, cultural and political forms of manifestation, is fundamentally different from other Christian denominations. The work of Mihai D. Grigore exemplarily argues that, at the beginning of the 16th century, a type of theological-political discourse was articulated in Wallachia which demonstrates not only the similarities between the Orthodox political ethos and that of Western Christianity, but also the compatibility between them. In order to demonstrate this compatibility, the author uses the generic term (*Oberbegriff*) of *Christianitas* – the idea of the common faith of European peoples – and the operational concept of *Princeps Christianus*, which essentially refers to the political function of the Christological in pre-modern Christian states: Christ leads with human beings, guiding them through the Christian ruler (p. 4f.).

The similarities, but also the differences between the way in which the identity of the Christian prince and his relationship to God and with the political body are constructed in Neagoe Basarab’s work (c. 1520), in Erasmus of Rotterdam’s *Institutio Principis Christiani* (The Education of a Christian Prince, 1516), in Martin Luther’s *Von weltlicher Obrigkeit* (On Secular Authority, 1523) and in Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Il Principe* (The

Prince, 1513) shows that, at the beginning of the 16th century, without having prior knowledge of the works of his above-mentioned contemporaries, the prince of Wallachia achieved, through his “Teachings”, a true synchronization of the Byzantine Orthodox theological-political pattern and that of Western Christianity. As the author points out, the comparative analysis aims to present Basarab as a participant in a broader European debate on the normative principles of Christian political theory and practice (pp. 8-9).

The book consists of six parts: a methodological introduction, followed by four chapters, each dealing with one of the authors mentioned above, and a concluding chapter. It should be emphasized that the work of Mihai-D. Grigore contains the first systematic analysis of the content of Neagoe’s work (pp. 127-192): the research on “The Teachings” thus far has focused primarily on technical issues such as the history of the text or the issue of author’s identity. At the base of Neagoe’s theological-political construct is anthropology: man is seen “as a doxological being created to glorify God and to praise and exalt Him communally”. The political community is, thus, identical with the community of those who praise God, which means that “the political” is, for Neagoe identical, with “the doxological community of Christians.” The Christian ruler has a privileged position in this doxological-political community: just as Christ concentrates the whole of humanity within Himself, so does the person of the ruler fulfil a similar function, allowing them to enter into a privileged relationship with God. Therefore, what defines the ruler as a Christian ruler is his mystical relationship with God. When he reaches the stage of enlightenment in his mystical experience, “the ruler becomes Christ-like, a *homoiousios*, and an enlightened one.” As we can see, mystical experience thereby becomes the precondition for the possibility of the political act. Mihai-D. Grigore emphasizes that the mystical theology that Neagoe develops in his work is hesychastic, placing the Wallachian prince as one of the proponents of political hesychasm. Consequently, the enlightened ruler is he who coagulates around him the political community, understood as a doxological community. At the same time, as the image of God on Earth, he is the means through which God acts in history. The political actions of the ruler are therefore good because he is God-like, a condition he achieved through spiritual and ascetic effort.

Regarding Erasmus, Mihai-D. Grigore points out that for the Catholic humanist from Rotterdam the most appropriate way by which human beings can be deified is not through asceticism or mysticism, but rather through education (see esp. pp. 209-234). For Erasmus, a ruler can be defined as a *Princeps Christianus* only insofar as he is a Christ actualized, that is, a person who acts on the basis of the Gospel’s principle. Erasmus

emphasizes the role of the Gospel's spirit, and even creates an antagonism between it and the rituals and ceremonies of the Catholic Church. Thus, the fact that the prince is God-like has an ethical foundation and not a sacramental-ecclesiastical one. Mihai-D. Grigore emphasizes that, unlike Neagoe, for Erasmus the premise of political decision and political order is not the mystical experience of the ruler but rather his ability to assume the ethical code brought by Christ. The prince is not a means of manifesting God, but merely someone who strives to lead Christians on the basis of ethical principles that are rooted in Christ and, if necessary, even give his life for the political community of Christians.

The author emphasizes that Luther's theology of justification lies at the origin of his political theology (see esp. pp. 266-287). Mihai-D. Grigore begins his analysis from the premise that the notion of trusting in or relying on God is key to understanding Luther's political conception. Thus, for Luther, the authority that the Christian political leader assumes is justified if it is based on unconditional trust in God. Fulfilling this condition is what also justifies the right of the political ruler to make decisions regarding the Christian faith. The author shows that, for Luther, the Christian becomes a subject and a religious-political agent through grace: the grace and freedom in Christ that every Christian experience are materialized in Christian works, i.e., the care and protection of one's neighbours. Mihai-D Grigore points out that, for Luther, the relationship between God and believers is one of partnership, a partnership based on the ruler's reliance on God. The political ruler is therefore "a curator who, within a political framework, ensures the individual's immediate relationship with the merciful God. This, too, is a form of partnership." For Luther, the partnership between God and the Christian political ruler means that the latter fully submits to God and considers his political action to be, in fact, a manifestation of God's effectiveness.

Machiavelli's conception of the prince is completely different from that of the authors mentioned above. Mihai-D. Grigore highlights that, for Machiavelli (p. 325f.), the criterion of the prince's action is not the Christian faith but his own wisdom, through which he independently constructs his attitude towards the situations and possibilities he faces. Machiavelli does not offer advice that the ruler must follow in different situations, but proposes a methodology that each leader can use to extract their own principles to act in each given situation. The radical change that Machiavelli brings consists in the fact that politics is seen in its immanence, without any relation to divine transcendence. Mihai-D. Grigore emphasizes that what prevails in Machiavelli's conception is not the mystical (see Neagoe Basarab), ethical (see Erasmus) or practical (see

Luther) likeness of the political ruler to the divine model, but rather his immanent political success as an end in itself. Through his work, “Machiavelli inaugurated the de-divinification of the political discourse of rule” in the intellectual history of Europe.

The final chapter (pp. 331-344) highlights the common elements and the differences between the way the four authors understood the identity and political function of the Christian prince. In this sense, the author points out that Basarab’s conception is based on the “mystical Christianitas”, while for Luther and Erasmus the practical dimension of the concrete implementation of the Christian faith on Earth is placed at the forefront. For Basarab, Erasmus and Luther, a Christian ruler is the condition for the possibility of the Christian state and politics. A common element of the four authors is the awareness of the difference existing between the theorized ideal and reality. The fact that there was no perfect Christian prince until the beginning of the 16th century made Machiavelli reject the Christian perspective on politics and adopt a pragmatic-immanent one. For Machiavelli, the *Christianitas* of the political body is useful only insofar it makes individuals open to political manipulation. In contrast, Basarab, Erasmus and Luther see in *Christianitas* a means of transferring the transcendent order into the order of the *saeculum*.

At the close of this inevitably schematic and simplifying presentation, it must be noted that Mihai-D. Grigore’s volume has all the qualities to impose itself as a seminal study on Neagoe Basarab and, therefore, it must be translated into Romanian as soon as possible.