

NICHIFOR CRAINIC

Nichifor Crainic (1889-1972), Romanian theologian and philosopher of culture, was best known in interwar Romania as the chief theorist of Orthodoxy, a doctrine of spiritual and ethnic essences. In formulating it, he was intent on explaining who the Romanians were, what their place in contemporary Europe was, and what course they should follow in the future. A bold theoretician with a solid grounding in Orthodox theology and extensive reading in European philosophy, he used *Gândirea* (Thought), the literary and cultural monthly he edited from 1926 to 1944, as the main vehicle for his ideas. His numerous essays established him as a leading figure in the wide-ranging debate among Romanian intellectuals about national identity and paths of development.

He was part of a creative group of intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, the so-called Orthodoxists, who approached spiritual life and social change from the perspective of the teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy. They were conservative and were wary of “Europe,” that is, the West, because it embodied modernism and thus, they thought, threatened their own traditional, “organic” society. Despite occasional differences among them, they were united in perceiving a sharp division between Orthodox Southeastern Europe, including Romania, and the West.

The First World War was a watershed for Crainic and his colleagues; they were certain that they stood on the threshold of a new era. But their thought on the nature of that era and what it held in store for their community depended on their estimate of the world as essentially rational or mystical, and on their judgment of the relative merits of civilization and culture. To a great extent, their apprehensions and expectations revolved around their conception of “Europe” and around the relationship they perceived between this Europe and its southeastern corner.

As Orthodoxists they were the heirs to traditionalist currents of ideas extending back to the middle decades of the nineteenth century that had opposed the relentless advance of Western political and economic forms and the assimilation of Western cultural values. They stood for “authentic” local values and an “organic” development of society rooted in the “eternal village,” and they criticized the contemporary civilization of the West as hostile to this native spirit. Although they thus opposed the encroachments of modernism, they also made original

contributions to Romanian traditionalism by placing Orthodox spirituality at the moral center of their debates about identity and development.

Crainic and his fellow Orthodoxists dealt with these matters from an anti-rationalist perspective, that is, they insisted that reason and science could never adequately explain the universe or account for the human condition; they proposed other ways of knowing, particularly faith in God and respect for intuition and mystery. They thus asserted the primacy of the spiritual over the material as the motive force in human history, a conviction that lay at the heart of their views on Europe and their response to modernism and explains the harsh criticism they leveled at conditions in their own country. The shortcoming they found most glaring in Romanian intellectual and cultural life was the lack of genuine spirituality. As they were not social reformers in the usual sense of the term, they tended to neglect issues of everyday material existence. Rather than specific measures to alleviate poverty or reduce inequality, which they judged ineffective, they proposed a “rebirth of the spirit” or a “revolution of the soul” as the antidote for the ills of modern society.

As for social organization, Crainic and the Orthodoxists were deeply attached to the ethnic nation, which they treated as a unique phenomenon, and they made its essence and the character of its people the objects of constant attention. They tended to define the nation in spiritual terms because, for them, ethnicity was inseparable from feeling, instinct, and faith. Modernism struck them as the antithesis of all these admirable qualities.

The image of the West and of modernism that emerged from Crainic’s meditations was shaped by the responses he gave to two fundamental questions: How sharply did the West differ from the East, and what were the implications of their incompatibility for the future of the East? By East, of course, he meant the Orthodox world. How, then, did he characterize the West? What kind of Europe emerged from his exercises in Occidentalism? First of all, he recognized Europe as economically and technologically more advanced than the East. He thus admitted the obvious, but, in doing so, he intended to emphasize what for him was a fundamental truth: the spiritual was superior to the material. He could thus claim the predominance of the East over the West because he was certain that spirituality was the essential quality that defined the East. The West was something different. For him, it was the city with its industry and bourgeoisie and

cosmopolitan culture. He expressed his feelings bluntly in his denunciation of the “world city,” which stood for everything that had gone wrong in Western society. He held up Berlin and New York as places of “unrelieved materialism” and “colorless internationalism” which smothered all the higher aspirations in man.

Crainic contrasted the European city and its “impersonal human relationships,” its lack of spirituality, and its inhabitants absorbed in the pursuit of worldly goods, on the one side, with the village and the peasantry of the East, on the other. But the village about which he spoke with such affection was an ideal place removed from history where people were spared social turmoil and economic want. He was convinced that an innate religious sense characterized the village. He even detected a unique bond between Eastern Christianity and peasants. Orthodoxy, he insisted, was a peculiarly local faith which over time had become intimately fused with the customs and beliefs of ordinary people. He praised Orthodoxy as the “indispensable force” that had separated the peasants’ patriarchal culture and mentality from the sophisticated currents of European civilization and had thus “saved” the native genius from assimilation by the urban, materialist world of the West.

Crainic and his fellow Orthodoxists perceived European society and culture as “artificial” and “inorganic.” Such a judgment followed naturally from the contrast they made between the city they disdained and the village they extolled. Their disparagement of European society drew them into a passionate debate about the relative merits of “civilization” and “culture.” Here their indebtedness to German philosophical and sociological thought is particularly striking. They warmly embraced the teachings of German Romantics about the superiority of “culture,” defined as a unique, “organic” expression of the spirit of a nation, over “civilization,” conceived as material progress. Others, like the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, taught them to appreciate the difference between “community,” that is, the primary, organic form of social life based on tradition and the “natural” links among its members as opposed to “society,” which was composed of individuals connected to one another by merely “exterior” or “mechanical” relations. For Crainic, the embodiment of “community” was the village, while he equated “society” with the great urban centers. He praised rural society as “authentic” and “organic” and branded Western society as “unnatural” and “inorganic.” Not surprisingly, then, he was certain that Europe was in the throes of a moral and spiritual crisis of immense and ultimately fatal

proportions. He found support for his grim prognosis in the writings of Western commentators themselves, notably in Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*. Like Spengler, he viewed the West as having come to the end of its creative life, as having reached the stage of a civilization, that is, of having entered the old age of a culture.

Despite his condemnation of Western civilization, Crainic could take no comfort in watching Western Europe implode, because he recognized that his own country was deeply enmeshed in the crisis. The blame, he insisted, lay with earlier generations of Romanian intellectuals who in the nineteenth century had ignored the traditions of their own land and had "recklessly" imitated the West. It thus seemed to him that Romania had deviated sharply from the path it should have taken, had it remained faithful to its primordial Eastern heritage. The unfortunate result, he complained, was the lack of genuine spirituality and, hence, of originality in modern Romanian intellectual and cultural life. Intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth century, he insisted, had started the process by replacing institutions that had evolved through the ages in accordance with specific Romanian conditions with careless, wholesale borrowings from the West. Their work reminded him of how Peter the Great had imposed Europeanization on Orthodox Russia. In both places the spirit of the West, exemplified by a cosmopolitan, urban civilization, had undermined the organic spirit of a rural, agricultural society. Both Romanian intellectuals and Peter, then, were guilty of "denaturing" the spiritual, almost magical foundations of an autochthonous culture by turning religion into an ethical and social problem.

Where, then, does Crainic's thought about identity and development in the modern world belong? He shared the anxieties of many intellectuals, in the West as well as in the East that arose in the wake of the First World War. He and they were reacting to new and disturbing threats to familiar institutions and long-held beliefs, and their thought was a characteristic conservative response to the challenges of modernism. Yet, their harsh criticism of Europe lent their ideas a distinctive tone.

Opposition to Western influence in Romania was by no means a phenomenon of the interwar period. It can be traced back at least to the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, before 1914 we do not find the drastic assertions of the interwar period that the West and Southeastern Europe were irrevocably segregated from one another. Nor was there such

determined emphasis on spirituality and religion as the defining trait of Romanians and the primary cause of the divide between East and West.

Why, then, did Crainic and his fellow Orthodoxists give these matters such emphasis? It seems clear that the postwar generation felt the threat to established values and institutions from a triumphant and aggressive West more acutely than prewar generations had. The ethnic nation itself, a mixture of the patriarchal and the spiritual to which the Orthodoxists had committed themselves so passionately, seemed in danger of dissolution, overwhelmed by what struck them as a tidal wave of rationalism and materialism sweeping in from the West. The First World War seemed to justify their anxiety, for its cruelty and destructiveness had undermined the prestige of Western civilization. Thus, everything that modern Europe represented seemed to them to be in flux, to be temporary and unstable. Crainic and his colleagues sought stability and permanence in eternal truths, and thus their search for spiritual values became an obsession, leading them away from an innovating Europe and compelling them to seek refuge in traditional local beliefs and institutions.

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Bibliography

There is little on Crainic in languages other than Romanian.
On his career one may consult:

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The best source for Crainic's ideas on national identity and paths of development are volumes of his essays, many of which first appeared in *Gândirea*:

Puncte cardinal în haos, București, 1936

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On Crainic as a theologian see:

Michael Weber, *Der geistig-geistliche Mensch im Konzept der Gnade bei Dumitru Stăniloae*, Berlin, 2012, pp. 120-187.