
PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY IN BYZANTIUM

Linus G. Benakis*

Academy of Athens, Ypsilantou 9, 10674 Athens, Greece

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Abstract

Although the early Christian writers dealing with the ascetic theory of life had adopted the term *Philosophia*, the historical record shows that throughout the period from the ninth to the fifteenth century, in Byzantium, philosophy as a discipline remained the science of the cognition of fundamental truths concerning humanity and the world.

The view that philosophy is *ancilla theologiae*, which the Greek Church fathers derived from Philo and the Alexandrian school of theology, does not represent the dominant position of Byzantium, as is the case in the West. Philosophy, and Logic in particular, was never subsumed under theology either as background or as a basic instrument. By the same token, theology in Byzantium did not become a systematic method for the dialectical elaboration of Christian truths, that is, a science.

Keywords: Philosophy as *ancilla theologiae*, Theology and Science

The findings of recent research in Byzantine studies regarding the theoretical and practical autonomy of philosophy as a discipline in Byzantium support the following theses:

- Although the early Christian writers and the Church fathers dealing with the ascetic theory both in a monastic or not way of life had adopted the term *Philosophia* (φιλοσοφία), the historical record shows that throughout the period from the ninth to the fifteenth century, Byzantine philosophy as a discipline remained the science of the cognition of fundamental truths concerning humanity and the world. This science ‘from without’ (ἐξωθεν/θύραθεν φιλοσοφία) was regularly contrasted with ‘the philosophy from within’ (ἡ καθ’ ἡμᾶς φιλοσοφία, ἡ ἐνδον τῆς ἡμετέρας αὐλής,) namely theology [1-5].
- The view that philosophy is *ancilla theologiae* (servant of theology), which the Greek Church fathers derived from Philo and the Alexandrian school of theology (Clemens, Origenes, Didymus), does not represent the dominant position of Byzantium, as is the case in the Latin West. Philosophy, and Logic in particular, was never subsumed under theology neither as background nor as a basic instrument. By the same token, theology in

* e-mail: benakis@hol.gr

Byzantium did not become a systematic method for the dialectical elaboration of Christian truths, that is, a science. Byzantine theologians accepted and used only apodictical syllogisms and never dialectical ones, witness of the persistent struggle between the few representatives of Latin scholasticism (mainly translators of the works of Thomas de Aquino into Greek) and the majority of the Byzantine theologians who remained faithful to the Orthodox tradition [6-10].

After the well-known Hesychasmus-controversy, which led to the victory of the movement led by Gregor Palamas, the Orthodox theology in Byzantium remained in principle a matter of monastic spirituality, which was of decisive importance after the Byzantine Empire and other peoples on the Balkan were subjected to Islamic Rule in the following centuries (1453-1820). The Greek nation and the Slavic countries managed to save their orthodox religion and their national identity on the basis of the dominant spirituality of their faith and not on the basis of a possible 'scientific' theology of their church [1, 7, 11].

At any case, as a result of the above process the initial distinction between philosophy and theology remained intact.

- At the level of autonomy in institutional practice it should be noted that while theological schools and studies did not exist in Byzantium, the fact is that the purpose of higher education was mainly to train state functionaries and private scholars. On the whole, this instruction, based on philosophy and the *Quadrivium* (Logic, Arithmetic, Astronomy and Music theory), had **a private character** despite the support it received from the Emperor and the Church. We hear of occasional interference on the part of either secular or ecclesiastic authorities, which was possible due to the lack of professional organization of the teachers of philosophy. Furthermore, Byzantium did not had independent universities in cities or ones that were instituted by monastic orders, as was the case in the West due to different social and political developments. Finally, philosophy protected itself from possible involvement in theological controversies that were arising from time to time. In general, philosophy developed differently from Western Scholasticism [5, 12-15].
- Regarding the autonomy of philosophy in relationship to the other sciences, it should be noted that the prevalent intellectual model in Byzantium was a type of encyclopaedic teacher of philosophy, a *polyhistor*, i.e. an erudite master of scholarship who maintained close ties with the other sciences which comprised the *Quadrivium*, etc. and who furthermore set the philosophical tone for scientific subject matters and the problems under scholarly investigation [16-18].

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