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# MYSTICISM AND RATIONAL SPIRITUALITY WHEN THEOLOGY MEETS PHILOSOPHY IN BYZANTIUM

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## Abstract

During the Byzantine era philosophy never connected with theology as *ancilla theologiae*. Inside the Greek philosophy of the Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages there were two tensions: the mystical and the rational. These two philosophical tensions were expressions of that epoch and passed inside the theology, which was partly in the sphere of Neoplatonic influence. However theology in Byzantium never was systematized as in the case in the West. As the Platonism and as the Aristotelianism were continued in the Middle Ages also the Byzantine philosophy followed an autonomous course and with theology developed an empirical point of view.

*Keywords:* mysticism, spirituality, theology, philosophy, neoplatonism

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At the first centuries after Christ, the Christian theologians faced the phenomenon of philosophy, choosing three attitudes: i) They rejected it totally (as apostle Paul had already done and Tatianus, Ermias (2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.) and Tertullianus (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries); ii) they accepted it partly, as a source of useful knowledge (Origenes (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries), Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa (4<sup>th</sup> century); iii) they defended and accepted it totally (Athenagoras, Ioustin, Clement of Alexandria (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries) and Eusebius of Caesarea (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries) [1, 2].

The movement of Neoplatonism, which was founded at the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. by Plotinus (204-270), introduced in the history of Western Philosophy the mystical and religious vision of the world. Parallely, it maintained the respectable and most widely known, till our days, rational tendency of the way of philosophising [3]. The philosophy in Byzantium and the West, after the movement of Neoplatonism has an analogous evolution. In other words, it maintains through all the duration of Middle Ages and Renaissance these two streams of thought, the mystical and the rational [4]. (Of course in the modern philosophy and science a mechanistic rationalism is dominant, after R. Descartes

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and I. Newton [5], without the absence of the opposite irrationalistic souls, who nevertheless they haven't big influence upon their time).

The Neoplatonism from Plotinus and Porphyry passed in Augustine (354-430) and Boethius (6<sup>th</sup> century) in the West, till the beginnings of the main Western Mediaeval Philosophy, which is with Erigena (9<sup>th</sup> century). The Christian Fathers in Byzantium who were partly in the sphere of neoplatonic influence are the Cappadocians (especially Gregory of Nyssa) and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, whose writings (5<sup>th</sup> century) were commented by Maximus the Confessor. But we can trace neoplatonic impacts also till the Hesychastic controversy of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and yet till the fall of Constantinople.

The theology in Byzantium makes the use and elaborates, as the Logical and the other works of Aristotle [6, 7], as the metaphysics of Plato and the neoplatonists, who continued and transformed the platonic philosophy. But it is the Byzantine Theology which condemns the Greek Philosophy as being 'from without' in relation with its own intimate spirituality.

So theology didn't incorporate the systematic rational knowledge, something that has happened in the case in the West, where the philosophy was *ancilla theologiae*. Also it condemns often the representatives of Neoplatonism, as John Italos (11<sup>th</sup> century), and even George Gemistos-Plethon (whom, at the 15<sup>th</sup> century his adversary, the later patriarch George Scholarios burnt his work *Treatises of Laws*).

In this way, the philosophy in the theoretical field keeps its autonomy and doesn't join with the theology. The same happened to the philosophy in the institutional practice due to the lack of professional organization and because its representatives were coming under attack from the ecclesiastical authorities [8]. The circumspection and often the aggressiveness of the official Church against the representatives of Byzantine Philosophy, made the latter to maintain a personal speech and to be autonomous in relation to the theology, which hadn't always something important to say [2, p. 362]. Of course, the scholars and the philosophers in Byzantium had as the main point of their thought the Christian doctrines [9]. Nevertheless they were afraid of facing the anger of the theologians, so they were confining themselves as regard the religious matters, but also they maintained a closer touch with other sciences.

In this way the theology in Byzantium wasn't united with philosophy, neither used the philosophical *ratio* extensively. The historical and ideological spirit of the first Christian centuries, in the manner that was imprinted, as to the mystery religions, as to the neoplatonism, with Plotinus, Porphyry, Iambichus, Proclus and Damascius (6<sup>th</sup> century), has influenced the mystical experience of Christians and Pagans. The mystical path, as to the philosophy, as to the theology, was based on the ascetic manner of living and in purpose to be communicable, had the need of the discursive reason, therefore a form of order. See here what the problem was: how come the order into the world from a disordered exaggeration? Hence, as the 'likeness to God', which was promulgated and formulised by Plato as the spiritual life and which according to

Aristotle brings us happiness, were used by Christianity for the expression of new meanings. Thus, the independency of philosophy didn't stop the development of a rational spirituality or of a Christian humanism [1].

Of course, as primarily has been noticed, even inside the stream of Greek Philosophy of Late Antiquity was maintained the respectable and rational aspect of philosophising [10], as we can see from the so many commentators of the Aristotelian corpus. Therefore the opposition rational-irrational, knowledge-faith exists also in philosophy and not only in theology. So the Platonism, neither contains only a metaphysics, neither obtains an exclusive mystical meaning, as in Neoplatonism, because i.e. was connected with mathematics; while the Aristotelism also, doesn't confine itself only in Logic, because it has the particles of a theology before Christianity (i.e. the book 11 of *Metaphysics*), without of course saying that Aristotle is in some cases non-rationalist; maybe he becomes enough empiricist [11].

Well, in Christianity the union with God became possible due to the Incarnation, when Christ-Logos of God, became man. Parallely in Neoplatonism the Logos (-Hermes) at the level of Soul is the necessary mediation for the spiritual ascent. The mystical union with the One (the One God of Christianity) is achieved rationally; nevertheless eventually this effort can be accomplished only transrationally. If the question in Greek Philosophy of the Late Antiquity was: What are we? And the answer is: We are potentially Gods through the *ratio*, but even and surpassing the *ratio*, in the dominant Christianity of Byzantium the question is: Who is Christ? And the answer is: Christ is the Logos of God who was incarnated for the sake of humanity.

Thus, there is a rational spirituality, which has its sources, as in the Christian revelational truth, as in the Greek Philosophy; its outcomes were the Patristic Theology and the Byzantine and Mediaeval Philosophy. The autonomy then again of philosophy in Byzantium doesn't occur only because of its rational and systematic character, but because also of the mystical stream, which exists inside it, and which found its strong expression in the neoplatonism between the 3<sup>rd</sup> till the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. Also the theology makes the use of the Christian experience, which animates and fortifies it, overlooking the pure rationality, which exists mainly in philosophy. So inside the theology there is a mystical teaching, which is combined with a rational spirituality and of course, as we know, the latter found its expression in the ecclesiastic doctrines. Thus, as philosophy has two streams, the mystical and the rational, in like manner we might divide the theological tradition. Therefore we cannot say, neither that theology rejects totally the rational teaching of ancient philosophy, neither that it accepts absolutely the empirical and the mystical element. We cannot again say that Byzantine Philosophy is completely systematic, analogously with the extreme rationalism of the West. On the contrary, as the theology, as the philosophy, at the final face of Byzantium found an early empirical theory, which the West would discovered only after the scientific revolution in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries [12].

Consequently, there is a Christian or Byzantine Philosophy, where philosophy is most important, and a theology, which philosophises, having as the main points of its conversation the quest of God. The mystical stream inside the philosophy appeared almost the same time with the beginning of the theology and was constituted in the form of a philosophical religiosity. On the other hand, the theology itself in Byzantium doesn't make the use always of philosophy and often faces it as an adversary having also, as the mystical, as the rational element. The Byzantine Philosophy therefore has a theoretical and a practical autonomy, because it can't collaborate with theology, which didn't take from philosophy the way of systematizing, but persists in the primary Christological content of the revelational knowledge.

Eventually, combining faith and knowledge, reason and experience, the Christian world found a complicated and the same time a simple course inside the history. Theory and action, we would say today, are united in the Byzantine religiosity, something that in philosophy at some point after in the Eastern and the Western Mediaeval History couldn't be achieved. From the moment that Christianity is completely dominant, the meaning of the ancient philosophical schools as 'choices in life' [13], obtained negative value and in the field of philosophy a separation between theory and action appeared. On the contrary, in theology the empirical substratum was combined with spirituality and thus the mystical union with God, became more concrete and more common, since Plotinus had such an experience only four times during his life and Porphyry only one [14]. After the time of Gregory of Nyssa and inside the Christianity the mystical experience is an achievement extremely common [15].

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