

Identity and Continuity: Sources of Byzantine Philosophy in Patristic Theology

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Abstract:

The analysis of a spirituality, such as the Byzantine one, and the revealing of the aspects that mark the profile of philosophy within this horizon could represent for the postmodern human being a necessity in understanding the dynamics of Eastern Christianity. In a culture dominated by reactions to previous philosophical systems, of postmodernist deconstructivism, a rediscovery of what we can call “Byzantine philosophy”, as a successor of the evangelical message, specified and developed within the patristic theology and accessible in the form of a completely spiritual philosophical discourse. This is the main aim of the article: to explore the sources of Byzantine philosophy in the theology of Saint John Chrysostom.

Keywords: *Byzantine philosophy, Patristic theology, Saint John Chrysostom, knowledge*

The present study is intend to present a general framework of what „Byzantine philosophy” is, but I am not interested in justifying the criticism of some Western researchers regarding the phrase „Christian philosophy” (Bréhier 1931: 133-162; See also Blondel 1931: 599-606) as representing two irrevocably contradictory notions: philosophy belongs exclusively to reason, while the Christian religion asserts that revelation is the main source of knowledge. The philosophical approach of the Byzantines cannot fall within the broad acceptance of a certain pattern of discourse, since the first Byzantine thinkers had to give expression to the Christian way of understanding divinity, the universe, the human being through faith (See: Kapriev 2015: 1-9; Zozulak 2018).

1. Byzantine philosophy - a specific identity of congruence between philosophy and theology

Understanding the specific character of the Byzantine philosophy, or more specifically of the Byzantine philosophizing discourse, implies identifying some of its essential elements. Firstly, the Byzantine philosophy is historically unfolded and shaped by the culture of the Byzantine Empire, considered as its essential aspect by the orthodox theology. According to Katerina Ierodiakonou (Ierodiakonou, 2002: 3-4), Byzantine philosophy has been developing since the end of the 9th century - with Photius the Patriarch of Constantinople (820-897), Arethas of Patras (860-932), bishop of Caesarea and Leon VI the Philosopher (the Wise) (866-912) - until the fall of Constantinople (1453). The foregoing period is considered to be dominated by the patristic, that is, by the theology and philosophy of the Fathers of the Church, which represents a necessary premise within the study of Byzantine thought, taking into account the religious, conceptual and thematic influence that the patristic had.

Secondly, *philosophy* [It is very important to point out that the Fathers did not criticize the philosophical study of the concepts in revealing the senses of the existential problems, which, in essence, has been raised in every human religious culture, but the philosophical approach per se or more precisely the path, the philosophical direction of problematizing within the knowledge horizon without reference to the revelatory dimension of the Logos. The flexibility of human thinking in the area of the immanent and the transcendent has been exploited to unimaginable limits. It must be accepted that Socrates, Plato, Aristotle being in a pre-Christian chronological order cannot be criticized and rejected by Christian theologians due to the fact that they did not experience thinking within the horizon of grace, in the condition of the restoration of Man by Jesus Christ. Greek philosophy marks a stage in the process of developing human thinking, a philosophy that offered to Christian theology a vocabulary of terms full of precious meaning (eg, *eros*, *ousis*, *prosopon*) that Christian theology recalibrated into meaning by being able to articulate teachings towards sensibly doctrinal references, such as the dogma of St. Trinity] has been accepted within the Byzantine background with a double connotation: external philosophy (*exoterike*) and inner philosophy (*esoterike*). External philosophy referred to the ancient Greek and pagan philosophy. The aspect

of most interest to the Byzantine within the practice of this philosophy was the training of the mind towards a correct and nuanced thinking. The emphasis was on *how* and not on *what* [The Greek language and the philosophy of this tradition offered the Holy Fathers new meanings in the direction of a precise and nuanced expression. The terminology imposed by Plato and Aristotle represents a good chance to express in the most appropriate way the ineffable of the Christian Revelation], therefore on a spiritual vector. Thereby, the inner philosophy is represented by the praxis, the practical meaning of philosophy, as an application of Christian virtues, as a personal experience of the relationship and knowledge of God. Philosophy as praxis, as fulfillment, means the preparation of the mind to become capable of receiving those above it. The appreciation of this way of philosophizing has never been underestimated by the Byzantines: both the school of philosophy and the monastery were equally ways of practicing within those of philosophy. The whole Byzantine society was structured from the perspective of this ideal of preparation of the mind and body in order to experience contemplation. All human spiritual endeavors converged on what we call true philosophy: the theory, as an act beyond the mind, yet through the mind. Byzantine philosophy was articulated within history especially when the expression of the authentic way of Christian experience of reality was absolutely necessary.

Primarily, the essential vectors of the Byzantine philosophy were reproduced by St. John Damascus (Sf. Ioan Damaschinul 2010: 448-449) through the following six references: (1) knowledge of the things that truly exist (γνώσις τῶν ὄντων); (2) knowledge of both divine and human things (γνώσις θείων τε καὶ ἀνθρωπίνων πραγμάτων); (3) concern for death (μελέτη θανάτου); (4) resemblance to God (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ); (5) art of arts and science of sciences (τέχνη τεχνῶν καὶ ἐπιστήμη ἐπιστημῶν); (6) the love of wisdom (φιλία σοφίας).

These definitions highlight, besides the theoretical and classical aspect of philosophy (φιλοσοφία θεωρητική), the practical one too (φιλοσοφία πρακτική), represented particularly by the moral conception; therefore, a very important aspect for the Byzantine human being who thinks within the parameters of the Gospel. Thus, philosophy is not an exclusive domain of rational speculations but it is also considered a “way of life”, a dimension that today is holding more and more the

attention of scholars yet for the Byzantines it was an axiom. Thereby, the Byzantine philosophy, which is by no means a conceptual one par excellence, has the purpose of helping the human being reach the resemblance to God.

2. Exploring frameworks of Byzantine philosophy in writings of Saint John Chrysostom

Following these introductory elements regarding the specificity of the Byzantine philosophy, we are now in a better position to contextualize and motivate why we can refer to Saint John Chrysostom about the Byzantine philosophy references and from what analytical angle the *philosophy* is understood by Him.

As a source of analysis in dealing with these two aspects, I referred especially to the *Homilies on Matthew*, and particularly to the *Sermon on the Mount*, where the term *philosophia* is used several times. The term *philosophy* appears several times in the Chrysostomian homilies, having a lot of meanings and due to these methodological reasons it appears very difficult to translate it with a theological consistency. The Greek *philosophia* is sometimes translated in the general technical sense of *philosophy* and sometimes as wisdom. It also defines “a Christian way of life” or “an ascetic way of life” (²Mayer 2000: 56).

St. John Chrysostom considers the *Sermon on the Mount* as a fundamental discourse of Christian *politeia* (“the conditions and rights of the citizen, or *citizenship*”, analogous to the Latin *civitas*) that represents „the life of all Christians, who are called to a philosophical life lived permanently on the eschatological horizon. This way of life is a *peripoliteias logos* (³Greenman 2007: 23). In this sermon, according to St. John Chrysostom, Jesus Christ instructs His disciples the “ways of life of a Christian philosophy,” which he otherwise calls “highest philosophy” (*pleion philosophia*) or “the apogee of philosophy” (*akros philosophias*). St. John Chrysostom is among the first Christian thinkers who presented the message of Christianity as a philosophy (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1994: 17, 7): the sacramental and liturgical space of the Church is “a spiritual school” where people come “to be taught about spiritual philosophy” (St John Chrysostom 1882: col. 248). St. John speaks about Christian life as a

philosophy, referring to faith in God as a true philosophy, as Packard (Packard 1963: 396-406) points out, opposed to the pagan philosophy:

Philosophy represents a great asset. I speak about our philosophy because, as far as the religious teachings are concerned, this is all about words and stories with no philosophical elements. Philosophy is therefore a truly great asset, because, in this very life it rewards us. He who despises riches, already feels, from now on, all the usefulness of this contempt, he lacks any extra and useless concern (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1997: 320-321).

In the opening homily of the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5,7), respectively the Homily XV, Saint John notes some details that come in consistency with the above mentioned facts. He underlines the methodological efficiency that Christ the Saviour proves: “By acting like this, Christ was making the lesson of His philosophy easy to digest”. What was the meaning of Saint John’s philosophical instruction (*tes philosophias he didaskalia*), addressed not only to the apostles, but to the humanity itself?

When talking, He would look at His disciples, but He would not limit His words to them, but He would stretch His blessings to all people, regardless. Also, when he said: Here I am with you in all day to the end of the age, He was not addressing only His disciples, but, through them, He was addressing the entire world (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1994: 174).

The importance of this answer is decoded in the following affirmation: “What foundation does He give to the new manner of living that He offers (*he kaine politeia*)?” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1994: 174) Christ’s philosophy is focused, founded on the essential fact of humbleness: “Blessed are the poor in spirit...” and humbleness is “the beginning of any philosophy” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1994: 175).

But what is *politeia* that Saint John interprets from the sermon of Christ the Saviour and that must be passed in writing to all generations? If we stop at the analysis of the whole purpose of Chrysostom’s sermons at Matthew’s Gospel, we can observe that for Saint John this *politeia* is a comprehensive vision of human life and society that persistently overcomes any other paradigm, especially the one exposed by Plato in *The Republic*, in Greek *Politeia*. Practically, Saint John uses the argument of criticising the paradigm of Plato’s *Republic*:

The evangelists wrote their Sermons not like Plato, that wrote that piece called *The Republic* or like Zenon or like anyone else that emitted rules of behaviour and composed laws. (...) One cannot say the Gospels were received by all because they were short and simple. No, that is because they are much superior to the above mentioned writings. Not even in their dreams have the philosophers thought of their maidenhood - and not even its name-, of the willingly assumed poverty, of fasting or anything similar, at the same spiritual height. (...) They convinced people to philosophize about God and about the heavenly like no other philosophers ever did. (...) The philosophers teachings go, they die, they disappear faster like a spider's web (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1994: 21-22).

May there really exist something above laughter than a piece of writing like *The Republic* of Plato, in which the philosopher wrote pages and pages full of obscurity? Even if his sayings would have any worth, they are still totally useless to people's lives. (...) If somebody would spend years and years to learn from a philosopher's writings what justice is, that somebody died of hunger before understanding and left this world by ending their life by necessity, without getting to learn anything practical (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1994: 22).

What Jesus Christ sees in *philosophy* is a system of thought, as well as a set of specific practices that constitute a *bios*, a manner of living, as Pierre Hadot underlines that the authentic philosophy is "a way of living" (See Hadot: 1995). The Christian philosophy, as stated by Saint John, offers more persuasive to the same issues that were risen by the great antic philosophical treaties - ethical issues (life, manner of living), political issues (*politeia*, the freedom of slaves, the new condition of Christian fraternity), metaphysical issues (cosmogony, cosmology), life issues, death issues.

As one may notice, Saint John Chrysostom opens the ideational directions for a Byzantine philosophy that guides itself by the axiom of God knowledge; within this knowledge the human transforms itself, it becomes divinely: "because this is the definition of philosophy; to be skilfully pure at heart" (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1994: 597). The authentic philosopher is the one that takes on the Gospel precepts, confirming an ascetic way of living, a contemplative one, escaping its temptations, but also in the verticality of full congruency with God. These appreciations become whole through these few affirmations of Chrysostom: "what is the characteristic of the true philosopher? Is it not to despise fortunes and slavery and, eventually, to be above any envy and passion?" (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1902: 219); "John the Baptist was not alike those Greek philosophers, as he was

living in a desolate place like in the sky, showing through his life a great philosophy. He was the philosopher of a philosophy worthy of heaven” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1994: 125-126). “Follow that philosophy that is fully in accordance with God” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1937: 55).

Conclusions

A deep exploration of the works and theological reflections of Saint John St. John Chrysostom we discover a specific philosophical discourse. The purpose of the philosophical discourse is to persuade the human to live in a certain manner. A philosopher does not have to consider itself a philosopher simply because it develops a philosophical discourse, but because it lives in a certain philosophical rhythm. Philosophy does not have to be a simple way to reflect on life, but a way to infuse attitudes and a disciplined life; philosophy requires a conversion of the affections and actions into a tension to overcome the old manner of living in the horizon of a new one. An authentic philosophy allows the human to reorientate itself in the world by following the vectors that satisfy its longing for knowledge.

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