Radical Platonism in Byzantium

Byzantium has recently attracted much attention, but principally among cultural, social and economic historians. This book shifts the focus to philosophy and intellectual history, exploring the thought-world of visionary reformer Gemistos Plethon (c. 1355–1452). It argues that Plethon brought to their fulfilment latent tendencies among Byzantine humanists towards a distinctive anti-Christian and pagan outlook. His magnum opus, the pagan Nomoi, was meant to provide an alternative to and escape route from the disputes over the Orthodoxy of Gregory Palamas and Thomism. It was also a groundbreaking reaction to the bankruptcy of a pre-existing humanist agenda and to aborted attempts at the secularisation of the State, whose cause Plethon had himself championed in his two utopian Memoranda. Inspired by Plato, Plethon’s secular utopianism and paganism emerge as the two sides of a single coin. On another level, the book challenges anti-essentialist scholarship that views paganism and Christianity as social and cultural constructions.

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RADICAL PLATONISM IN BYZANTIUM
Illumination and Utopia in Gemistos Plethon

NIKETAS SINOSSOGLOU
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Niketas Siniossoglou
Frontmatter
More information
The conventional way of interpreting philosophical texts and ideas is within heuristic frameworks defined by the well-established criterion of periodisation. Ancient philosophy is considered within the borders of its own context and so are medieval, modern and contemporary philosophy. But there is another way to do history of philosophy: explore the development of notions and conceptual shifts spanning particular time periods and socio-cultural contexts. This means to focus on the recurrent manifestation and transformation of key ideas within shifting networks of meaning, rather than the more restricted study of individual authors and texts.

Two opposed ideas, or rather existential positions, run through the history of Western thought and resurface in various forms and manifestations. One is that man may apprehend god/truth by means of his own natural disposition and faculties. This is the belief that social and epistemic truths are cognisable, that man may access the ultimate foundation of reality by utilising inherent intellectual gifts. This entails man’s being actually or potentially capable of attaining godlikeness or moral perfection, and of realising or approximating a perfectly just politeia. This conviction about human perfectibility has its roots in one interpretation of Plato’s epistemology and political philosophy (see for example Republic 532a–b; Timaeus 90b–d) and became the hallmark of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the project of modernity.

There is a contrary position, which appears in various guises: any philosophical, religious or political project claiming to access truth by investing unlimited confidence in human powers is destined to degenerate into either intellectual hubris/sin, or totalitarianism, or both. This persuasion is commonly associated with the Judaeo-Christian world-view that acknowledges the limitations of human nature and prioritises divine revelation. Godlikeness becomes an
issue of spiritual illumination, grace and experiential, rather than
cognitive, contact with god/truth. Consequently, it is not the reifi-
cation within history of any secular utopia but the return to a
spiritual homeland that emerges as the desired and feasible end.

There is a caveat. Often the polarity between these existen-
tial positions can be nuanced or even diminished; for example,
Friedrich Nietzsche attacked Platonic optimism and utopianism,
while also hammering Judaeo-Christian aspirations. As he saw
it, both are offspring of a single error, namely man’s fallacious
tendency to idolise or make an absolute of concepts, be it the
Idea of the Good or god. This said, a case can be made that from
the viewpoint of the history of ideas the tension between a pri-
marily pagan/modern and a Judaeo-Christian position refers to
antagonistic ideal-types or paradigms and, moreover, that this ten-
sion broadly construed signifies an unresolved schism deep within
Western intellectual identity.

This book explores the clash between these two blueprint ideas
of thinking about man, god, the world and politeia in a crucial,
albeit under-studied, period: the late Byzantine fourteenth and
fifteenth centuries. It focuses on an unconventional man whose
enduring legacy appears to have developed underground: Geor-
gios Gemistos Plethon. Often considered among the founders of
modern esotericism, Plethon continuously stimulated the interest
of uneasy spirits ranging from Marsilio Ficino, Thomas More and
John Dee to Giacomo Leopardi and Ezra Pound. This book argues
that Plethon’s radical Platonism exemplifies the pagan origins of
modern epistemological optimism and utopianism. But it also deals
with the process that led into Plethon’s philosophical and political
radicalism. Part of the background is the intellectual civil war that
erupted between the Roman Orthodox theology of Gregory Pala-
mas and Byzantine humanism in the fourteenth century, though the
beginnings of the confrontation were much earlier. (In this book
the term ‘Roman Orthodox’ is used more or less interchangeably
with the anachronistic modern coinage ‘Byzantine’. The Byzan-
tines defined themselves as Romans of the Eastern Empire. See
p. 4, n. 8.)

My primary interest has been to bring to light two alterna-
tive intellectual constellations, two competing world-views that
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transcend conventional periodisation in the history of philosophy. To be sure, the pagan Platonic paradigm represented by Plethon clashed with Christianity (Hesychast and Thomist) in a particular historical context. Still, the philosophical hallmarks of each have deep roots in the pagan–Christian confrontation in late antiquity and extensions into modernity. Plethon’s pagan Platonism and the Christian Orthodoxy of his time are manifestations of trans-historical paradigms, which issue in philosophically irrec- oncilable intellectual and spiritual identities assumed by different agents throughout the history of ideas.

In this regard, I believe that it is time to abandon the anti-essentialist or anti-foundationalist (in reality relativist) method- ological approaches that blur the boundaries between Hellenism and Christianity, and to return to a realist perspective.

This does not necessarily amount to the hypostatisation or reifi- cation of Hellenism and Christianity. Max Weber warned against the danger of seeing ideas as a ‘true’ reality, which ostensibly operates outside history. The ‘pagan’ Platonic ideal-type is a mental construct that embraces a set of metaphysical, theological, moral and hermeneutical views, inclinations and contentions, some of which may be absent from Proclus, while present in Plethon – or vice versa. Historical descriptions and ideal-types such as Platon- ism and Christianity do not strictly or necessarily contain the same conceptual contents in all their manifestations. They are causal schemata referring to existential positions. Thus, I do not contend that pagan or Christian ideal-types are ahistorical. However, they can, and in my view should, be seen as referring to real modes of being, even if they are never fully exemplified or exhausted within social and cultural phenomena.

Christian theologians, philosophers and intellectuals in late antiquity and Byzantium certainly thought about Christianity and Hellenism in realist terms: as possessing an essential core or inalienable meaning. To study these essentialist world-views and the texts in which they are contained by adopting a relativist non-essentialist standpoint, as is commonly done in recent scholarship, means never to take Christian intellectuals, philosophical pagans and other intellectuals at their word, to assume, in effect, that they were not the persons they thought themselves to be. The
intellectual and religious identities which Christians such as Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Palamas or pagans such as Proclus and Plethon gave themselves should not be thought of as unreal and should not be dissolved into constantly shifting, impersonal collective discourses.

This book was written in Cambridge. I am grateful to the British Academy for the award of a post-doctoral fellowship and to the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge, for hosting this project. I am indebted in many different ways to Malcolm Schofield and David Sedley for their encouragement and feedback. Anthony Kaldellis read an early draft of this book and made incisive comments of rare acuteness. Dr Constantin Macris provided excellent feedback at the closing stages. Thanks are due to Michael Sharp and Jan Chapman for expert advice and valuable assistance in preparing this manuscript for publication. Finally, I am grateful to Peter Garnsey for initially encouraging me to work on Plethon and for his intellectual and personal support over the years.

This book is for my friends.
ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviations used for ancient and late antique sources conform to those in LSJ, the OCD and Lampe, PGL. Abbreviations of journal titles correspond to those used in L’Année Philologique. Other abbreviations used are listed below. Full bibliographical details are given only for those editions of texts and reference works not listed in the bibliography of primary sources.


BG J.-A. Fabricius (ed.), *Bibliotheca Graeca*, vol. XII, Hamburg 1809

CAG *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, Berlin 1882–1909


CJ *Codex Justinianus*

DHGE M. Baudrillart *et al.* (eds.), *Dictionnaire d’histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques*, Paris 1912–


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<th>Title</th>
<th>Location/Edition</th>
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<tr>
<td>DOP</td>
<td>Dumbarton Oaks Papers, Washington, DC</td>
<td>1941</td>
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<tr>
<td>HAB</td>
<td>S. S. Horujy (ed.), Hesychasm: an Annotated Bibliography, Moscow</td>
<td>2004</td>
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<td>Mohler iii</td>
<td>L. Mohler, Aus Bessarions Gelehrtenkreis: Abhandlungen, Reden, Briefe von Bessarion, Theodoros Gazes, Michael Apostolios, Andronikos Kallistos, Georgios Trapezuntios, Niccolò Perotti, Niccolò Capranica, Paderborn 1942</td>
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<tr>
<td>Notizie</td>
<td>G. Mercati (ed.), Notizie di Procoro e Demetrio Cidone, Manuele Caleca e Teodoro Meliteniota: ed altri appunti per la storia della teologia e della letteratura bizantina del secolo XIV, Rome 1931</td>
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## List of Abbreviations

- *anticonciliaires de Marc d’Éphèse, PO* 17.2, Paris 1923
- *PS* P. Chrestou et al. (eds.), *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, 15 vols., Vienna 1976–96
- *TBT* C. G. Conticello and V. Conticello (eds.), *La théologie byzantine et sa tradition*, vol. II: XIIIe–XIXe s., Turnhout 2002
- *TLG* *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*

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**Works by Plethon are abbreviated as follows:**

- *Contra Lat.* *Contra De dogmate Latino librum*
- *Contra Schol.* *Contra Scholarii pro Aristotele obiectiones*
- *Diff.* *De differentiis (Περὶ ὧν Αριστοτέλης πρὸς Πλάτωνα διαφέρεται)*
- *Mem. I* *Consilium ad despotam Theodorum de Peloponneso*
- *Mem. II* *Oratio ad Manuelem Palaeologum de rebus in Peloponneso*
- *Nomoi* *Book of Laws (Νόμων Συγγραφή)*
- *Orac.* *Commentary on the Chaldean Oracles (Μαγικά λόγια τῶν ἀπὸ Ζωροάστρου μάγων)*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Recapitulation Recapitulation of Zoroastrian and Platonic Doctrines (Ζωροαστρειών τε καὶ Πλατωνικῶν δογμάτων συγκεφαλαίωσις)

Reply Reply to Certain Questions (Πρὸς ἡρωτημένα ἄττα ἀπόκρισις)

Works by Scholarios are abbreviated as follows:

Ad Pleth. Ad Gemistum Plethonem de libro suo contra Latinos (OC 4.118–51)

Contra Pleth. Contra Plethonis ignorantem de Aristotele (OC 4.1–116)

Ad exarchum Josephum Ad exarchum Josephum de Gemisti Plethonis libro et contra multorum deorum cultum (OC 4.155–72)

Ad principessam Pelop. Ad principessam Peloponnesi de Gemisti Plethonis Tractatu de legibus (OC 4.151–5)

Against Polytheists Tractatus de uno deo et contra quos qui deum esse negant et multos deos colunt (OC 4.172–89)

Translations of Platonic passages are from Plato: Complete Works, ed. J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis 1997). Individual translators are acknowledged in the notes. Occasionally I have made use of and modified the English translations of Plethon’s texts by Charles Woodhouse and George Finley.

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