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978-1-107-01303-2 - Radical Platonism in Byzantium: Illumination and Utopia
in Gemistos Plethon

Niketas Siniossoglou

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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.

NIKETAS SINIOSSOGLOU is a British Academy Post-doctoral Fellow in the Faculty of Classics and Junior Research Fellow of Wolfson College, University of Cambridge. He is the author of *Plato and Theodoret: the Christian Appropriation of Platonic Philosophy and the Hellenic Intellectual Resistance* (Cambridge, 2008).

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PREFACE

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

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issue of spiritual illumination, grace and experiential, rather than cognitive, contact with god/truth. Consequently, it is not the reification 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 existential 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 primarily pagan/modern and a Judaeo-Christian position refers to antagonistic ideal-types or paradigms and, moreover, that this tension 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: Georgios 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 Palamas 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 Byzantines defined themselves as Romans of the Eastern Empire. See p. 4, n. 8.)

My primary interest has been to bring to light two alternative 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 irreconcilable 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) methodological 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 reification 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 Platonism 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

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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.

Alexandre	C. Alexandre (ed.), <i>Pléthon: Traité des lois</i> , French trans. A. Pellissier, Paris 1858 (reprinted Amsterdam 1966)
Apomn.	V. Laurent (ed.), <i>Les 'Mémoires' du grand ecclésiarque de l'Église de Constantinople Sylvestre Syropoulos sur le concile de Florence (1438–1439)</i> , Rome 1971
Basilica	H. J. Scheltema and N. van der Wal (eds.), <i>Basilicorum libri LX</i> , 8 vols., Groningen 1955–88
BG	J.-A. Fabricius (ed.), <i>Bibliotheca Graeca</i> , vol. XII, Hamburg 1809
CAG	<i>Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca</i> , Berlin 1882–1909
CHC	M. Angold (ed.), <i>The Cambridge History of Christianity</i> , vol. v: <i>Eastern Christianity</i> , Cambridge 2006
CJ	<i>Codex Justinianus</i>
DHGE	M. Baudrillart et al. (eds.), <i>Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques</i> , Paris 1912–
DK	H. Diels and W. Kranz (eds.), <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i> , 3 vols., 6th edn, Berlin 1951–2

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<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i> , Washington, DC 1941–
<i>HAB</i>	S. S. Horujy (ed.), <i>Hesychasm: an Annotated Bibliography</i> , Moscow 2004
Lampe, <i>PGL</i>	G. W. H. Lampe (ed.), <i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> , Oxford 1961–8
Lampros, <i>PP</i>	Sp. Lampros (ed.), <i>Παλαιολογία και Πελοποννησιακά</i> , 4 vols., Athens 1912–30
LS	A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley (eds.), <i>The Hellenistic Philosophers</i> , vol. I, Cambridge 1987
LSJ	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones <i>et al.</i> , <i>A Greek–English Lexicon</i> , 9th edn, Oxford 1996
<i>MB</i>	K. N. Sathas (ed.), <i>Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη</i> , 7 vols., Venice 1872–94
Mohler III	L. Mohler, <i>Aus Bessarions Gelehrtenkreis: Abhandlungen, Reden, Briefe von Bessarion, Theodoros Gazes, Michael Apostolios, Andronikos Kallistos, Georgios Trapezuntios, Niccolò Perotti, Niccolò Capranica</i> , Paderborn 1942
<i>Notizie</i>	G. Mercati (ed.), <i>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</i> , Rome 1931
OC	L. Petit, X. Siderides and M. Jugie (eds.), <i>Œuvres complètes de George Scholarios</i> , 8 vols., Paris 1928–36
<i>OCD</i>	S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (eds.), <i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> , 3rd rev. edition, Oxford 2003
<i>ODB</i>	A. Kazhdan <i>et al.</i> (ed.), <i>Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i> , Oxford 1991
Petit, <i>Documents</i>	L. Petit (ed.), <i>Documents relatifs au concile de Florence</i> , vol. II: <i>Œuvres</i>

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	<i>anticonciliaires de Marc d'Éphèse, PO</i> 17.2, Paris 1923
PG	J. P. Migne (ed.), <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca</i> , Paris 1857–66
PLP	E. Trapp <i>et al.</i> , <i>Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit</i> , 15 vols., Vienna 1976–96
PO	R. Graffin and F. Nau (eds.), <i>Patrologia Orientalis</i> , Paris, Turnhout 1903–
PS	P. Chrestou <i>et al.</i> (eds.), <i>Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ, Συγγράμματα</i> , Thessaloniki 1962–
Synodicon	J. Gouillard (ed.), ‘Le Synodicon de l’Orthodoxie. Éd. et commentaire’, <i>T&MByz</i> 2 (1967): 1–316
TBT	C. G. Conticello and V. Conticello (eds.), <i>La théologie byzantine et sa tradition</i> , vol. II: <i>XIIIe–XIXe s.</i> , Turnhout 2002
TLG	<i>Thesaurus Linguae Graecae</i>
Tomus I, II, III	<i>Tomi synodici tres in causa Palamitarum</i> (Tomus I: <i>Contra Barlaam et Acindynum</i> ; Tomus II: <i>Contra Prochorum Cydonium</i> ; Tomus III: <i>Contra Barlaamitas et Acindynianos</i>) PG 151.679–774

Works by Plethon are abbreviated as follows:

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

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<i>Recapitulation</i>	<i>Recapitulation of Zoroastrian and Platonic Doctrines</i> (Ζωροαστρείων τε καὶ Πλατωνικῶν δογμάτων συγκεφαλαίωσις)
<i>Reply</i>	<i>Reply to Certain Questions</i> (Πρὸς ἠρωτημένα ἄττα ἀπόκρισις)

Works by Scholarios are abbreviated as follows:

<i>Ad Pleth.</i>	<i>Ad Gemistum Plethonem de libro suo contra Latinos</i> (OC 4.118–51)
<i>Contra Pleth.</i>	<i>Contra Plethonis ignorationem de Aristotele</i> (OC 4.1–116)
<i>Ad exarchum Iosephum</i>	<i>Ad exarchum Iosephum de Gemisti Plethonis libro et contra multorum deorum cultum</i> (OC 4.155–72)
<i>Ad principessam Pelop.</i>	<i>Ad principessam Peloponnesi de Gemisti Plethonis Tractatu de legibus</i> (OC 4.151–5)
<i>Against Polytheists</i>	<i>Tractatus de uno deo et contra quos qui deum esse negant et multos deos colunt</i> (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.