

BYZANTINE PHILOSOPHY

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview Eastern European philosophy, in the postclassical period, is here understood as the philosophy elaborated in Byzantium, presently Istanbul, between 330 C.E. and 1453 C.E., when the Byzantine Empire fell to the Ottoman Turks. The Byzantine Empire, established as it was on the foundations both of Christianity, to which the Roman Empire Constantine had converted, and of Greco-Roman culture, which was inherited from the Roman Empire, generated a unique philosophy, preserved til this day within the framework of the Greek Orthodox Church, and among our chief living bonds, today, to the philosophies of the early Christian and pre-Christian worlds.

The tenor of Byzantine philosophy Higher education, under the Byzantine Empire, was largely devoted to preparing educated employees of the vast bureaucracy of the Byzantine Empire. Thus there was a ready job market for the students of the educational system, which was widespread and highly developed. From the villages and townships of the Empire to the mundane and sophisticated halls of the University of Constantinople, which was founded by the Roman Emperor Theodosius in 425 C.E., prospective functionaries from all over the Empire--Antioch and Alexandria rivalled Constantinople itself for cultural development--prepared for careers in the labyrinthine halls of bureaucracy. The cultural homogeneity suggested by this state of affairs was assured by the common use of Greek throughout the Empire, a lingua franca of thought and communication.

The challenge facing Byzantine philosophy Aristotle and Plato may be said to have dominated the philosophical thinking of Byzantine philosophy, as they dominated the high period of Scholastic thinking in the West, the thought of Aquinas and Bonaventure. The most influential thinkers of the Greek East--Photios (810-after 893 C.E.), Michael Psellos (1018-after 1081 C.E.), Gregory Palamas (1296-1359 C.E.), Gemisthos Plethon (1360-1452 C.E.)--all studied Greco-Roman philosophy, in Greek, and made the thinking of Aristotle and Plato the axis of their positions. The assignment facing them was to harmonize their positions, on the relative values of the thought of Plato and Aristotle, with the fundamental principles of what became distinctively to be known as Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the dominant religion of the Byzantine Empire. The complexities of this assignment, orienting oneself both within the religious parameters of Orthodoxy and within the intricate interrelations between Plato and Aristotle, led to responses of great subtlety, which have made Byzantine philosophy, especially in light of its longevity, difficult to access from the outside.

Typical issues dealt with in Byzantine philosophy: the soul Central issues of Byzantine philosophy are the questions of the immortality of the soul and the nature of universals. Mediaeval philosophy, east and west, dwelt on the thorny Aristotelian issue of the nature of the soul. By some interpretations Aristotle believed that the soul and the body were indissolubly one, and that therefore when the body dies the soul is gone for good. Others disputed that this was Aristotle's meaning, insisting that for him the soul was a deathless principle of intelligibility that pervades the individual, and that the soul cannot perish. Both of these positions necessarily took into account the position of Plato--in the *Phaedrus*, for example--that the soul is the immortal dignity of the human person.

Typical issues dealt with in Byzantine philosophy: universals Like their fellow Scholastic philosophers in the West, Byzantine philosophers took up Aristotle's logic, and his preoccupation with whether and how universals exist. One example might be the universal, beauty. Many individuals have the property of being beautiful. Beauty therefore can be called a universal, a property applying to many individuals at the same time. But what kind of a thing is beauty itself? Is it 'real'? Has it independent existence? Arid though a non-philosopher might consider this issue, when it is attached to issues like the nature of love, or justice, or faith--which are embedded in Christian theology--the existential importance of the philosophical issue is immediately apparent.

Readings

Wilson, N., *Scholars of Byzantium*, London, 1983.

Ierodiakonou, K., ed., *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, Oxford, 2002.

Discussion questions

How did Greek become the lingua franca of the culture of Byzantium? What were the origins of the city of Byzantium?

What were the chief stages of the development of philosophy in Byzantium? You will need to do some research on this question, which will deepen your understanding of the wide variety of positions available within a seemingly monolithic tradition.

Gemisthos Plethon was the Byzantine philosopher with (arguably) the greatest influence on thought in the west. What did he think, and what was his influence?