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IDEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY IN BYZANTIUM:  
THE MEANINGS OF IDEOLOGY BEFORE  
MODERN TIMES

This work explores the paradigms which generated the state ideology before the modern times in the only case in which the genuine existence of it can be proven: the Byzantine State. Byzantium is the only pre-modern society that has fulfilled the criteria which define the existence of a state that has, among others, a vast bureaucratic mechanism, propaganda instruments and an ideology. This study targets, in particular, the meanings received by the ideological in the Byzantine horizon, the connotations which the high official or the common people had when being the subject for the ideological message. These connotations cannot be understood if we do not take into account the meaning and use which philosophy had in the Byzantine cultural model, a different sense and use from what modernity accredited as philosophy.

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### Ideology before the modern times: arguments

Enunciating a title like the one of the present study could seem quite hazardous considering that the term “ideology” and its connections to philosophic grounds appear to refer only to the horizon and the concerns of modernity. Both terms, “ideology” and “philosophy”, received a different approach from what we understand now and this is why an analysis of such perspective regarding the Byzantine cultural paradigm is not forthcoming. The usage of the term *ideology* is associated with the changes of mentality that accompanied the French Revolution. Destutt de Tracy saw ideology as “a science of ideas”, the sources of this vision being Locke’s and Condillac’s philosophical doctrines. Tracy affirmed that the entire knowledge is *knowledge of ideas*. In time, the term receives a more specialized and limited usage, so that Britannica defines ideology as a type of theory with practical intention or any attempt to make politics in the light of a system of ideas, with reticence upon the existence of difficulties in the clear definition of the sense. Today the term receives a double connotation: a positive one and one that refers to the negativity of the experiments and social manipulations of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. The totalitarian experiments and the collective manipulations brought a reaction regarding everything that refers to ideology and a certain adversity towards this term. However, by ideology we must understand more than the totalitarian social experiment. Certainly the evolutions of the society and also of the cultural paradigm in the modern times cannot be explained without identifying the active role that ideologies had. Typical of

modernism is the fact that the advancement of ideology was a conscious one which regarded the applications of certain social theories. But could we talk about this kind of attitude before the modern times? If the answer is yes than it is certainly the case of the Byzantine state. For the beginning, it seems too daring to talk about a State, in the full meaning of the word, before modernism. As McCormick said, the term “state” seems almost a historic anomaly in the medieval world. Nevertheless, Byzantium – the only one in the Christian Middle Ages – knew how to maintain a political system based on an institutional class of professional employees which was to define the structure and the final feature of the Byzantine aristocracy by the XII<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>.

The Byzantine cultural and social paradigm registers the encounter of some decisive elements in the delineation of the possibility of the effective existence of an ideology before the modern times: we are talking about the inheritance of the Greek classicism, the Roman law and the Christian spiritual horizon. The claim of the Byzantine culture from the Greek classicism was present everywhere. Philosophy, as an essential aspect of the Greek cultural inheritance, has as a characteristic note the conceptual usage of words. This manner of using the language implies trust in the capacity of reason to find out the truth with intrinsic instruments, this dimension being essential for the existence of a “science of ideas”, of an ideology. As it is defined almost everywhere, the ideology has its reason in the notion of making changes in society through the normative thinking process. Without the Greek speculative thinking the presence of the ideological element in the social arrangement is not possible. But this base offered by thinking according to logos, although constructive and essential, is not sufficient. It takes a social and institutional frame appropriate to setting an ideative construction of ideological profile: the Roman law could offer the ground of such an organization of the social corpus, knowing that the famous Justinian’s code was actually an adaptation of the Roman law. The interlacing of these first two aspects was visible and consciously assumed in the Byzantine society, a fact emphasized by the usage of the Latin language in the administration and of the Greek one in practice. Philosophy was made in Greek and the administration and the jurisprudence in Latin, a situation valid for a long time in the history of Byzantium. And because the Byzantine elite was involved in both the philosophic discourse and in the administration act, the appearance of a speculation was possible regarding the way in which ideas could have an impact on the social restyling (Plato’s *Politeia* has always been a subject for reflection on this matter, although at Plato the notion of the *idea* had a different meaning which has been abandoned in the Christian context). But put together these two are not enough for the appearance of an ideology as it is understood in modernism. A third factor, with a decisive role regarding Byzantium, was Christianity. For the present analysis it is important for us to mention that what Christianity brings is

the affirmation and the justification of man's liberty based on a new anthropological outline that emphasizes his dimension as a *person*<sup>2</sup>. In a Patristic description, the personal existence implies the ability and the profound assumption of liberty. The significance of man's free act does not include only the ability of choice, but goes further aiming at the existential dimension of existence. (In the classical period, Greeks could not understand that because, as they saw it, the reason of the world implied the idea of order in which destiny played an important part). It is obviously that exercising liberty this way involves decision and therefore the need to justify the done deeds. Only with the appearance of this anthropological vision the importance of an ideology becomes really significant because the effects that an ideology could have are quite dramatic. After this we can talk about a real stake in propaganda, understood as a way to create motivations for people at a social scale, and therefore to produce changes of an unsuspected dimension. Even if throughout history there were advanced social organizations before Byzantium (for example, China) with efficient instruments of exercising power, we cannot talk about the existence of a real propaganda; at the most we can name it inculcation. This way we understand propaganda today, as an ideological instrument, which aims at making changes in society through the normative thinking process. The involvement of abstract thinking and of the willingness and moral reaction of subjects whom propaganda addresses is a context that sends to Byzantium as a first possible horizon to talk about ideology.

A certain interpretative grid of history imposed by the enlighteners gave little credit to the period from antiquity to the dawn of the time they lived. Therefore, they found as a name for that period the *Middle Ages*, buffer and passing between a glorious period and the dawn of a new one. The Middle Ages were understood and characterized as one, and the valuation for what happened in the European East during this time was even smaller because over there, from an enlightened point of view, immobilism dominated. This is partly the reason why only recently the specificity of Byzantium begun to be understood, a particular social and political construction which differs from everything known during the Middle Ages. Par excellence, Byzantium can be named *State*, in the sense we give today to this organization of society, a fact emphasized by the title of the latest systematic study on this matter: Warren Treadgold's book, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, published in 1997<sup>3</sup>. Among the central aspects of the efficiency of a social organization as a *state* we could find in Byzantium the existence of a great bureaucratic corpus that dealt with tax gathering, kept strict evidence of the land ownership across the entire empire and generally had written records of great accuracy<sup>4</sup>. This is a significant fact but it is not the only one. Byzantium found and maintained its identity because of an ideology. An ideology that kept together different nations and ethnic groups, an ideology that proved to be efficient in coagulation of a nations' conglomerate around a state

construction. Moreover, the ideological frame was accompanied by an efficient propaganda manifested by other means than today mass-media's, but which were not less powerful. Nevertheless, the Byzantine ideology had an important part and a quite different nature than the one that animated the modern social experiments. We think that what we call *Byzantine ideology* should mean a different type of exercising an ideative influence and that because of a different perception from those who were the subjects of this influence. Generally, the modern ideology and especially the totalitarian one are trying to modify a social status by a programmed ideological manipulation. This programming implies the existence of a programmer, the *ideologist*, the one who aims at the completion of a social ideal by series of instruments and levers of power. Specific to modernism is the fact that the ideals influenced by ideologies were mainly grounded in the philosophic systems of the last three centuries, especially in the German philosophy, although the French one could not be neglected either. Characteristic to modern philosophy is a distinctive anthropology, an anthropological paradigm centred on the notion of human nature. Human *nature* is something that can be studied and understood, something noteworthy to science. The scientific investigation path with its own instruments and methodology *might* find out something about man by positive study of human nature (psychology also uses the same path, but it excludes the soul theme as the one that cannot be put under investigation). As the scientific understanding of human nature progressed, it became quite clear that, one way or another, more or less, man could interfere in it.

The question was raised as to how radically and decisively is man marked by a cultural behaviour, and implicitly by the extent to which humanity is marked by the need of the ideological construct. Within the Byzantine spirituality there is an interesting answer to this question, but before we see what that is, let us understand the connotations of ideology against the Byzantine background. Byzantium offers a very interesting perspective over what could be the positive connotation of ideology and of the need for ideology in a society fully aware of the report between religion and power, between acronychal and secular. Since its beginning Byzantium faced some clarifications without which the efficiency of the new state was in jeopardy. Beginning with Constantine in the IV<sup>th</sup> century and until Justinian's time there was a progress in textual formulation of the reports between the secular power and the acronychal one. The new empire declared itself Christian from the very beginning, and the legislators' main task was to bring this new spirit in all the articulations of the new State's organization. It is interesting to notice the way in which the ones who created the profile of the new organization referred to their own Roman inheritance. As Averil Cameron states in *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire, The Development of Christian Discourse*, the Christian discourse shaped less on the revolutionary novelty path and more by

beginning with what was known, going from what was more familiar towards what was less known. This is a general situation mirrored by the Byzantine writings, a fact well illustrated by the rhetoric practiced during this interval. As Cameron said "That was certainly the case in the fourth century, when the social and political conditions, at least in the cities, began to be genuinely supportive of Christian advancement in ways not open before. But how different was the situation in the early centuries? We have less direct evidence about the transmission of Christian ideas in the second and third centuries, and much of what we think we know depends on partial testimony. But it would be surprising if Christians really distanced themselves from pagans as much as they sometimes claimed"<sup>5</sup>. Regarding this situation we could see the subtlety of a political solution, of a general social paradigm. The Christian emperors of the new Eastern Roman Empire expressly wanted this empire to be a faithful representation of the new religion spirit, but that did not mean a sudden formal rupture with the traditions and standards of the past. The key was a modification in *spirit* and not in shape, a change of the orientation which the social organization was to achieve. A background analysis demonstrates that, if the ideology of the imperial power is of Roman origin, it has been deepened and reformulated under the impact of the powerful Christian and Greek currents which began to manifest their influence in the world of late Antiquity<sup>6</sup>. There is a hermeneutics that has its origins in the primary and essential decisions which the Church Fathers of the IVth century A.D. considered as referring to the Greek culture, the cultural background in which the dogmatic statements of Christianity were made.

### The foundations of Byzantine ideology: Philosophy as an existential act

In the background of the first heresies, beginning with Arie's, there were certain aspects of the Christian doctrine that had to be formulated because until then they were based mostly on the practical experience of the Gospel. The background of these formulations was the one of late Greek culture, of a Hellenism dominated by the neo-platonian philosophy. That was a philosophy with a different profile from the one that characterized the antique philosophical thinking, because its themes very much approached not only to what was understood by spirituality, but also by a radical form of religion, mystics. The Hellenic philosophy was no longer preoccupied with explaining the world and accounting for the grounds of reality, but with unification or better said the re-unification in the supreme Existence, the One. Of course, the purpose of philosophy was another one which referred mostly to the interests of *practice* and less to a theoretical justification. In this neo-platonian environment the terms of Greek philosophy received new gradations because they had to adequately observe the inner experience of the mind that leaves and exceeds itself in

the ecstatic unification with the One. The *rapture* was thought to be the supreme experience and the neo-platonian terminology finds its senses around this notion. However, the original meanings of the philosophical terms were still used, so that many times in the same text the same term could have several meanings.

The spirit of the Gospel was different, because it was situated on a fundamental difference regarding the neo-platonian doctrine. If for Plotin the mind is co-natural with the One and therefore it can get to contemplating Him and to unite with Him, in the Gospel there is a radical difference between God and man, between God and His creation: the difference between *created* and *uncreated*<sup>7</sup>. This difference implies important consequences on the understanding of the nature of the supreme experience in those two spiritual horizons, because Christians did not believe that the mind could reach on its own the contemplation of divinity. Therefore, a difficult decision was to be taken regarding the way to put Christian experience into words because the handiest vocabulary, the neo-platonian one, was centred on different understanding of the mystic experience meanings. The solution offered by Gregory of Nyssa or by Basil the Great in the IV<sup>th</sup> century was one of delicacy and subtlety and at the same time one with practical efficiency. They propose to give new meanings to the philosophical terminology not by adding a new conceptual dimension, but by using this terminology as a sign for a reality that cannot be classified, beyond understanding. Thus, an understanding bridge was created with the mentality of that period and at the same time difference was emphasized, change becoming visible in the way terms were placed in texts. However, the philosophical terminology of the classic Greek thinking proved to be the most suitable for this kind of change. When philosophy appeared as a rational reflection on reality, the way to express such understanding implied a radical modification in using words, which were pulled out from the meanings of their natural language. Words were shaped in such way so that they restrained their meaning area, gained precision and at the same time they could describe something beyond senses. This act is defined as *conceptualizing*, meaning that words have a given understanding and description, limited and definable. The evolution of philosophy during the classic and late period brought a continuous re-dimensioning of words, each of the major philosophical doctrines making changes in the meanings given to the terms used in the previous philosophic horizon. This elasticity of terms was favourable to a spectacular change as the one made by Patristics. The Capadocian Fathers were troubled by the question of how it is possible to tell the difference between what men could rationally conceive and what is beyond senses and reason. The most appropriate solution proved to be the usage of the words that achieved a maximum form of non-intrinsic usage, conceptual but again non-intrinsic, symbolically speaking. But what should nominate what was *conceptual* now nominated the *mystery*. (Many times the modern

interpreters did not know how to situate this fundamental notion of the Eastern Christianity ethos and they assimilated it to what is transcendent, inaccessible or mysterious. But the mystery, in the form of the seven Sacraments of the Church or as the experience each Christian has, has a known rational character. If it cannot ever be expressed and understood, there is always a measure of expression of something intrinsic that marks it. This paradoxical game of hide and seek is a continuous curl which always enriches Christian's experience. Therefore it must express something regarding the mystery and this is done by the double attitude of the conscious, because on one hand there is always more to say about the appearances of the mystery but its meaning, on the other hand, could never be exhausted.)

Talking about the unsaid, expressing the inexpressible, was the language task for the thinkers of the first formulation of the Christian dogma. But how is it possible, for example, to talk about the difference between the divine nature and the persons of the Holy Trinity? It was a process missed by the previous interpreters who sought only the conceptual level in philosophy, that is the paradoxically usage of the Greek philosophy terms, which formally had the load received in the philosophical exercise, but they actually nominated a reality that could at most be indicated by them. The word essentially receives the role of a *sign*, leaving aside its quality of *concept*. Vladimir Lossky is the one who noticed this difference that marks the way in which philosophy in the Eastern tradition was made possible<sup>8</sup>. The philosophic discourse receives a new role. Its previous role was to investigate, to discover the truth by exercising reason – which had exceptional results in the Greek tradition – and this role was left aside.

But we must emphasize the fact that the new spirituality did not impose itself by a rupture or as a rupture, but it begun from what was familiar and known and went towards what was new and could not be situated in that time explanatory schemes. This way of culturally expressing the spirit and the letter of the new credo proved to be a common feature of the IV<sup>th</sup> century evolutions and of the ones that followed in the new empire. The central supposition as basis of such solution was certainly the definition of an attitude towards the classic Greek inheritance, which now received the name *pagan*. This attitude had its origin in two types of recovering the classic inheritance. In the III<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. some apologists, among whom Justin the Martyr, stated that the great philosophers of the classic period – Plato and others too like Heraclites or Socrates – were inspired by the Logos, but the same Logos embodied in Pontius Pilate's time that bore the name Jesus. Therefore we cannot reject the entire philosophy up until then, but we also cannot accept the philosophic doctrines as they were. This referring to the classic thinking produced a type of textuality rather unusual for the modern interpreter, because we cannot find a systematic manner in order to present or to interpret a philosophy or another. What would best describe

Byzantine's relation to the antique philosophies is the manner in which Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* were composed. The eclecticism proven by this work is the sign of the role given later by the Byzantine to classic philosophy. What was interesting was not an authentic discovery of Plato's or Aristotle's philosophical contents, but the usage of certain themes and notions to deepen the meanings of the Christian doctrine. This is not a contempt for the ancient thought, but the supposition that each one of them had a glint, a divine inspiration, however only partially, and none of them had the entire revelation. This is way the Byzantine read selectively the Greek philosopher. And this selection was mostly done according to the accents the reader wanted to discover in that text. Nevertheless, there was a huge respect for the Greek classicism, a fact proven by the embracement of the Greek philosophical terminology, but also by the style of the best works of the classic literature. The clearest example is the apparent superposition regarding the terminology and the expression manner of the neo-platonism over the Christian platonism<sup>9</sup>. Modern exegetes' controversy over the characteristics of Dionysios the Areopagite's work is well known, whether he was a platonian Christian or a neo-platonian posing as a Christian. But this discussion will lose its sense if we strictly limit the intention of the Areopagite's studies.

Another way to recover the classic inheritance is illustrated by the distinction between *esoterike* and *exoterike* in the philosophical discourse, meaning between the *outer philosophy* and the *inner philosophy*<sup>10</sup>. By the outer philosophy they understood the ancient Greek philosophy and the pagan one from the first Christian centuries. In learning and exercising this non-Christian philosophical tradition the Byzantine was interested in training his mind in correct and gradient thinking. The stress was on *how* and not on *what*. But the understanding of the inner philosophy was much more complex. On one side, this could mean the Christian learning as a corpus of doctrines, ideas and methods inherited orally or in writing. It is a philosophy because in this learning Wisdom itself is revealed, the immortal Logos, who embodied Himself. On the other hand, it meant the general living of the Christian learning. At this level it is obvious the emphasis on the practical sense of philosophy as an application of the Christian virtues at a personal level. This living of the Christian doctrine bears the name philosophy because the conformity to the commandments always has a non-recurring character although it is common in spirit. Illustrative for this is the case of the stylites. Under the name philosophy certain particular forms of spiritual practice were also known, especially the inner peace and the inner need. This meaning becomes more important beginning with the XIII<sup>th</sup> century when the hesychasm becomes a major spiritual and cultural theme. Philosophy could also mean simply the love of God. But another sense of the term was the one referring to the monastic or hermitical life and principals. We can see that the meanings of the inner philosophy are not only complex, but always gradient. They cannot be put



into a formal attempt of definition and, moreover, there are always new meanings that could be added to them. Of course, culture as matter that belonged to the “outer learning” almost always played an important part in the expression of Byzantine spirituality, but as Steven Runciman said, its part was to teach us *how* to think and not *what* to think<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, we have to emphasize that the distinction Runciman considers as revealing for the interpretations of the paths which the Byzantine culture took, between the “outer wisdom” and “inner wisdom”, is extremely complex and has many shades. We find this distinction not only in the Byzantine authors’ texts belonging to different periods, but also in the way the education has been structured at all of its levels. This distinction between two types of wisdom does not imply the outlining of a rupture or some incompatibilities among them, but the warning that the fruits of the “outer wisdom” are never enough.

Nevertheless, beginning with the IV<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the philosophy and philosophizing receive another identity and have other assignments than until then. Beginning with this period it became obvious that the conceptual usage of the terms rather blocked the access to what should normally be the aim of every expression: the presentation of what is intrinsic to a spiritual experience. It could only be the role as a sign for words, because no expression of the human thinking could pretend to indicate such a reality understood as indefinable and paradoxical. A term cannot describe, it can only indicate. Therefore, a delicate dialectics of the relation between living and the discursive expression took form. There was no need for conceptual speculation that would be preoccupied with a continuous redefining of the terms (we refer of course to the ultimate terms, to the words that describe what was above the possibility of creation), because there was nothing there to define. A modification of the words of philosophy on a speculative path would have seriously compromised the ability to communicate the spiritual experience, which was very difficult anyway. The possibility to subtly gradate its livings laid in a simpler and clearer usage of the terms. From the point of view of the one to whom the discourse was presented to, what mattered in understanding the narration of a spiritual experience was not the focus on comprehending the implied terms or the approximation of the their definition, but on what was aimed beyond them. Although today such manner to philosophize could seem rather confusing because of what could be a slight imprecision in the discourse, for the Byzantine spirituality what was important was not only the need to know but also to formulate in words the ultimate experience (which today we call mystical, but the connotations given to this word by modernism make it less appropriate to designate a path which in Byzantium was not seen as exceptional, reserved to a few chosen ones, but a common one for everybody). However there was another type of precision based on the need to reject as illusion any ecstatic living that implied the leaving of one’s self, the loss of reason. The

clarity of the mind was a mandatory privilege of any kind of living and this fact was verifiable by the ability to express as much and as clearer as possible the typology of that living.

This was the reason for which the Byzantines never questioned the value of the Greeks' classic and late philosophy. The role of mind forming was given to an education centred on the philosophical discourse of Platonism and Aristotelianism and the better trained the mind was in the outer philosophy, the serious were the chances of a true mystical experience. The lives of many important saints from the Byzantine tradition who were pillars of the monastic living relate their passing through the forming period within the Aristotle's philosophy which was normal to Byzantine education up to the age of 18. The frequent mentioning of this biographic aspect is an intrinsic proof of the importance that the period of preparation and formation of the mind had for the Byzantine Christian.

More recent definitions came to clarify the meaning of the usage of the term philosophy in the Byzantine area and thus they succeed to come out from the interpretative impasse where the modern exegesis was situated regarding the cultural Byzantine paradigm. First of all, there was a better understanding of the reason that justified Byzantines' double attitude towards philosophy: rejection and at the same time usage of its explicative paths and means. Nikos Matsoukas believes the situation has its origin in what he calls the double methodology implied by the Byzantines in the gnoseological act. By contrast to what happened in the Latin West, where a unique method was applied, in the East a different method was used when it came to what Matsoukas calls charismatic theology as opposed to the case of scientific theology<sup>12</sup>. In other words, there is a discourse intrinsic to the one who speaks or writes as a result of receiving the charisma and there is another way of expression that follows the first and that aims at explaining the meanings of the statements made by the charismatic. Philosophy could only be involved in the second type of discourse. When the boundaries are crossed and philosophy claims to substitute the statements of the charismatic discourse, it must be rejected. This attitude of rejection can often be seen when there was a reference to ideas or statements of neo-platonian inspiration. Many times neo-platonism was considered a danger because of the confusions it could induce as regards the significance of the mystical experience and there were several Byzantine authors who were seduced by the possibility of using Plotinus's or Proclus's mystical frames in explaining and defining the Christian experience. John Italos is the best known and cited example, who was also the subject of some official anathema, but there were others, like Georgios Gemistos Plethon. Therefore, we could find a justification of Gregory Palamas' statement that he never read Plato although his work proves a clear presence of the Platonian philosophical terms. Nevertheless, we must not search in the Byzantine texts for a formal presence of the

methodological distinction mentioned by Matsoukas, because the Byzantine authors often used the term philosophy indistinctly. In order to identify the meaning an author from this cultural area gives to the term *philosophy* we should carefully evaluate the context in which it appears. This is not about an insufficient critical consciousness that would mark the cultural Byzantine paradigm, but about the preference for the concrete in a discourse, a preference imposed by the importance of textual recording of the data of one's personal experience, a fruit of assuming a living.

### The frames of Byzantine mentality

Generally, this complexity of the Byzantine understanding of philosophy seemed of no such importance and modernists often supposed as valid the semantics received by the term in the cultural area of the Western Christianity (a similar situation was created by the modern exegesis of the meanings given to the term *theology* in Byzantium). In the West, by inner philosophy, in its first sense mentioned in the Byzantine area, one understood the revealed and dogmatic theology. And thus appeared the misunderstanding of the meanings of philosophy usage in Byzantium and the apparent confusion between philosophy and theology. The term *theology* had a very precise usage in the East, being equivalent to its etymological sense from the Greek language, meaning the discourse about God. In this narrow sense, few were those who made theology, specifically in the Eastern Church there were only Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Gregory the Theologian and Saint Simeon the New Theologian. Instead, in Byzantium, the semantics of the term *philosophy* designates almost all the aspects related to Christian learning and practice<sup>13</sup>. Besides this overview of the Byzantine way of philosophizing, we must mention the existence of a true evolution of philosophy in Byzantium (contrary to the opinion that still exists imposed by the enlighteners who state that Byzantium was characterized by stagnation and stereotypy), and the delineation of a period and of currents in their philosophizing ways. Even though some terms and motives could be found anywhere in the Byzantine texts along the centuries, their usage and meanings differ from one period to another. The neo-platonian language could be found in the IV<sup>th</sup> century, and also in the XIV<sup>th</sup> century and this is valid too for the repetition of some constant themes and concerns which refer mostly to the always reconsidered Christian experience, its purposes and means. This fact generated a lot of interpretative confusions regarding the Byzantine spirituality. But as a paradigm, the new attitude towards philosophy which appeared in the IV<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium belongs to the Capadocians, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Saint Gregory of Nazianus, and it can be considered as a mark of the cultural model of the Eastern Christianity. In a remarkable study, Jaroslav Pelikan remarks the impression of close similarity between those three<sup>14</sup>. Together,

these three will generate a cultural current that Endre von Ivanka names *the early intellectual Byzantine life*, after Constantine, Nice and Athanasius, but before Justinian, Dionysios and iconoclasm<sup>15</sup>. But to look for a philosophy as the one practiced in the ancient Greek is senseless. What the Capadocians did was an implication of philosophy which does not imply exercising reason in search of truth, but a confirmation and an expression of the revealed Truth. This explains the similarity between the three, because they aimed at the completion of an objective that preoccupied them in equal measure: finding the most appropriate formulation in defining dogma. It is not simple for us to discover how the Capadocian fathers used philosophy, but a chance is given by the interpretative way initiated by the XX<sup>th</sup> century hermeneutics and phenomenology. This is explained by the fact that the essential effort of the IV<sup>th</sup> century A.D. thinking consisted in reconsideration of the classic Greek philosophical terms and moving the meanings formulated by the Greek philosophy into the Christian spiritual dimensions.

The correct understanding of the specifics and of the role of ideology in Byzantium is not possible without the correct evaluation of the cultural and mental background in which it appeared. The Byzantine ideology obviously bears the mark of philosophizing which was imposed in this cultural model, philosophizing that covers mostly what we understand today by theology. Therefore, we cannot simply talk about a philosophical or theological reliance of ideology, but rather about an entire spiritual background, a mentality of existential type in which mainly concrete experience prevailed and less the theoretical assertion.

### Hierarchy as an ideology of participation

Norman Baynes notes the false perception according to which the bareness of the intellectual life in the Eastern Roman Empire is illustrated by the lack of debates in the political life. In his *Byzantine Studies and other Essays*, Baynes states that everywhere the political literature is impregnated with political theory and especially with the discussion about the state and the emperor's part<sup>16</sup>. Vasiliev illustrates this by describing the case of Theodore Metochites about whom he says: "Well-educated, an authority on the classical authors, an admirer of Plutarch and Aristotle and especially of Plato, whom he called "Olympus of wisdom," "a living library," and "Helicon of the Muses," a talented statesman, and first minister under Andronicus II, Theodore Metochites is an exceedingly interesting type of Byzantine humanist of the first half of the fourteenth century. This man of learning and distinguished statesman had exceptional influence in state affairs, and he enjoyed the complete confidence of the Emperor. (...) On the basis of his political opinions, which he sometimes expressed in his works, Sathas drew an interesting conclusion: inclined neither to democracy nor aristocracy, he had a political ideal of his own, a

sort of constitutional monarchy. (...) Of course the history of Byzantine political theory has not yet been told. But this example plainly shows that “the history of political ideas in Byzantium is not a tedious repetition of the same things. It had life and it had development”<sup>17</sup>.

When we discuss about the presence of the ideological in the Byzantine society we must consider a capital device of its efficiency: the relation established between the Emperor and the Church, between the civil power and the ecclesiastical one. If the imperial institution in a Christian society must base its authority on being a *hypostasis* of the divine monarchy, but that also meant obedience to the Church. Being also the secular supreme authority it had somehow to control the Church. However, none of the two powers of the Byzantine state invaded the other, a fact emphasized precisely by the attempts made by some emperors in this direction. The ultimate limit for the imperial power was the interdiction to interfere into the internal problems of the Church, mainly into the doctrinaire ones. From the opposite point of view, the Church was the one to confirm the emperor by anointing him so that the emperor was part of the clergy and was named *isapostolos*, an equal-to-apostles. On this ground we can see a very gradated and complex illustration of the way in which the Byzantine society presented itself, but what matters most is that the ideology of exercising power within the state was an independent and separated matter from the doctrine that founded the institutional existence of the Church and so it had to be defined as such.

Today we regard from a distance the effective presence of an ideology before the modern period because the absence of *propaganda* would make it very difficult to recognize an ideative construction on a dimension that would confer it the looks of the ideological. Nevertheless, this propaganda existed in specific forms and proved a real efficiency. There are two symbols that can be named which, as documents indicate, were present in common Byzantine’s consciousness and they could even be remarked by strangers: the imperial Palace (which was rather a city in the city) and the Great Church, Saint Sophia. Practically, these were the symbols of the sacred and of the secular dimensions of the Byzantine way of life. As for the imperial palace, there are two matters we would like to emphasize: this was the place par excellence in which the emperor was *present* and then it was the place from which the emperor *exercised* his power, and therefore this is about two sets of symbols that marked Byzantine’s consciousness. A symbolic code of the imperial institution took shape which was firstly expressed in the ceremonial of audiences, then in the ritual that always accompanied the emperor in each official trip. The other symbolic code was related to emperor’s administration, which beyond its strictly practical function, always had the role of the emperor’s icon, meaning of the way in which a Christian emperor had to appear. David T. Koyzis presents a theory according to which culture, society and the political

order in Byzantium could be understood in the terms of what we could call “iconic” ethics<sup>18</sup>.

Everything around the emperor, even his clothes, should represent an emblem of the one who represented God’s power on earth. One thing was certain: there could not really exist but one Christian state and one Christian emperor, because there was only one terrestrial authority. It is interesting to mention that this assertion circulated for a while in the Christian world and there are some examples to illustrate it. If a Christian monarch wanted to legitimate his authority in front of his subjects he resorted to marriage with a Byzantine princess or he received certain signs of imperial recognition, this implying that as there was only one God in heavens, on earth there could be only one emperor and by this any authority was legitimated.

An important part in the Byzantine model of propaganda was played by the imperial ceremonial of audiences, because this is where are concentrated the characteristic elements of the Byzantine ideology. Everything regarding the ritual of audiences was carefully chosen so that each thing would have a symbolic significance. There are some strangers’ narrations who met the Emperor of Byzantium and their impression is not dissimulated in the preserved texts. The one who was to be presented to the emperor could not arrive directly to him, but he had to cross long corridors and when he arrived in the throne hall the view laid in front of his eyes could mark him for life. Although we cannot minutely reconstruct this ceremonial, we do know that the decoration of the throne hall was very special, that there were representations of certain animals and birds that sounded in certain ways, or that the throne was lifted at some point – all these were presented to them at once when they lifted the curtain which separated the emperor from the one who came in audience. The emperor was dressed in colours reserved only for him (purple) and held in his hand the symbols of his power as God’s representative on earth. All these were there not only to produce a vivid emotion (although this was good too), but they were firstly *symbols*. There are texts written in Byzantium which demonstrate that all these details were founded on precise theories because the ceremonial from the court had very precise purposes too. The emperor was thought to be the image of God and he was alike God. This theory suggests to us the meaning of certain gestures that were meant to be done in the emperor’s presence, and especially the *proskynesis*, the prostration gesture originated from the Persian tradition, but which now received a new sense: there is no need for someone to bow to a man that simply has the power, but rather to an *image* of a transcendental reality. There was a clear distinction between the emperor and the man, because a man could have weaknesses and falls, but when he becomes the emperor he is above those because he is a *hypostasis of God*. In *Epanagoge*, Basil I describes in detail the theoretical background, the ideology that justified the imperial institution: “The emperor embodies the

Good and the Beautiful". The court ceremonial must be regarded from the angle of symbols, because the search for all the elements that could refer to the transcendental presence within the emperor's concrete symbol was very important – therefore, this ceremonial was meant to offer to the unfaithful a vague image of the idea of God, and to the faithful a mediation between heavens and earth<sup>19</sup>.

But other aspects of the role the emperor had to play offer us a different image from the autocrat's one, that of the sovereign who has absolute power. If he did not carry out his role of *euergetos*, of benefactor, his monarch quality was jeopardized. If he is to be an image of Christ on earth then he has to follow His deeds. It was surprising for the modern imaginary regarding the medieval imperial institution to see the Emperor of Byzantium, the one surrounded by all the glory this world could offer, serving at the needy men's table, giving charities periodically from his own fortune, or – even more – serving the lepers. Moreover, one could address familiarly to the emperor, because as the image of God, he had to be accessible to anyone. The ideology outlined around the emperor's figure did not manifest itself as an up to down propaganda, but became an ideological up to down behaviour. When battles were lost, and cataclysms happened, or poverty spread, all these were thought to be generated by the emperor's incapacity to fulfil his vocation as an icon of Good, his loss of the divine charisma and therefore the people simply chased him away from the throne. And any Christian considered his obligation not to submit to a heretic sovereign.

An important dimension of the emperor's part was his quality of *interpreter*, because he was the only one who could judge a matter when the assignations of the Byzantine law corpus were not clear enough. Although, he had this exclusive right, exercising it depended on a fundamental condition, meaning it would have to be used in the spirit of protecting and consolidating the commandments from the Bible. We observe here a feature that generally marks the Byzantine spirituality, but regarding the imperial institution it becomes contradictory. On one hand, there was a supreme liberty for decision, though severely limited by the *spirit* according to which a certain decision must be taken. When the Emperor, impersonation of the law, took a decision which was not in the spirit of the Biblical laws, although he consider himself a servant of the emperor, the Byzantine man was not obliged to obey. Legislation played an important part in keeping the unity of a centralized state and therefore the emperors were mainly interested in the existence of a well defined and efficient legislative background. As Ostrogorsky affirms, with the law corpus of Roman inspiration, but Christian in form and spirit beginning with Justinian's time, all the aspects of public and private life, of state's, person's and family's life were adjusted. *Corpus Juris Civilis* was not a mechanical repetition and a faithful reproduction of the ancient Roman laws. Justinian's jurists were the ones to adapt the Roman law to the Christian

spirit, thus bringing it closer to a moral based on the importance of the individual and of the family<sup>20</sup>.

A way through which the Byzantine ideology found itself an efficient expression, which we could name with a certain reserve – connected to some aspects of the modern meaning of the term – *propaganda*, is the way in which the secular power was exercised through a well organized administration. What mattered in this efficient administration was the fact that it had at any level to reflect its only source of authority – the emperor, who had to be seen as a sun visible by its rays (the ancient solar myth represented an important source of inspiration for outlining the imperial ideology). In time, the role of administration increased, even if the territory of the empire dramatically decreased, but its importance obviously shifted towards symbolism. The ranks and the ceremonials of different members of the administration were continuously redefined and gradated, and such situation reflects rather the concern for the symbol represented by an official, especially when he represented the emperor's power in one of the themes of the empire. But the most significant element in this depiction of the administration is the fact that, like the imperial institution, it was based upon a precise ideological justification, what we could essentially include in the concept of *hierarchy*. But for the Byzantine the hierarchy had a different sense than for the modernist and we could understand the Eastern definition of the concept by identifying the texts that founded it. In fact, this is the way to find the main theoretical support of what we call Byzantine ideology. Dionysios the Aeropagites, the author who first mentions the hierarchy theme within the Christian background, understood it as a way to *perfect oneself through participation*<sup>21</sup>. The superior-inferior diagram is not appropriated to this description: no matter on what level you are, adopting and participating to a hierarchy could lead you to perfection. The ones who find themselves on superior levels of the hierarchy have to properly *mediate* the transmission of good. Irrespective of the level of a person, if the hierarchy he adopted is one that transmits the good, he will maximally fulfil his potentiality, he could reach *perfection*. This display of the senses of a hierarchy is based on a fundamental supposition of the Byzantine spirituality: the existence of man as a person, which means absolute identity, uniqueness, non-repeatability. The hierarchy is understood as an existential dynamics which includes in a chain the movement of the persons towards their perfection as good people. At least this was the ideal that animated the organization of the Byzantine social structures, and of course the historic reality reflected more or less its completion.

A series of Dionysian terms offer the direction in which we should understand the social activity of the hierarchy, like *imitation, impartation, participation, measure, unification*. The central idea is that no one could directly unite with God and therefore mediation is needed. Secularly speaking, mediation is equally necessary, because for the Byzantine the



social good means nothing but the possibility to participate in transcendence through the best way possible. The emperor is not the ultimate term of the state because he is only a mediator, although at the highest level within the immanence area. The levels of the administrative hierarchy are especially the degrees of participation on Good and at the same time they are manifestations of it towards the ones who find themselves at an inferior level. But we have to mention that the difference between levels is not one between something better and something worse, it is rather of different capacity of participation. In this way, the hierarchy is not voluntarily established, but it is dictated precisely by the possibility and the measure in which a person could receive the Truth and at the same time could communicate it to others. Specifically, the organization of the administration always respected this ideal and always made the distinction between the human weaknesses of the imperial official and the symbol his function represented, so that any type of excesses never questioned the viability of the way the Byzantine state's structure was organized.

Therefore, in Byzantium, ideology did not mean a masses manipulation project according to the ideative construction (more or less utopian) of a certain group, because it was actively sustained precisely by the masses, by the many, who saw the maximal completion of their earthly existential senses in adherence to the earthly hierarchy, led by the Emperor, the one who had to imitate Christ in everything he did.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael McCormick, „Emperors”, in *The Byzantines* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 239.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of person, according to Patristics, is based on redefining two terms that played different parts in the vocabulary of the classic period, *hypostasis* and *prosopon*. The notion of *hypostasis* (υποστασις) was used during the Greek classic philosophy period and during the Hellenism as equivalent of *ousia* (ουσια), but in time it received different shades that consolidated a certain understanding of the essence of reality. In the first centuries after Christ the term receives more and more the meaning of a real and concrete being as opposed to the seeming and evanescent being, and this evolution is probably due to the Stoics. Besides this, the Capadocians will make a real and significant change of meaning in the usage of the term. Beginning with the IVth century, in the Byzantine mentality the reality could only have a hypostatic dimension, there is no pure essence. But what represents a major difference is the identification of *hypostasis* (υποστασις) with *prosopon* (προσωπον).

The term *prosopon* was found in the vocabulary of the ancient Greek language and meant that part beneath the forehead, what we today call face. But its major usage bore the meaning of *mask*, which was an accessory used by the actors of the ancient Greek theatre. According to Ioannis Zizioulas, the theatre and especially the tragedy is the place where the human liberty meets the necessity of the world, as seen by the ancient Greeks<sup>9</sup>. From the Greek philosophy perspective there cannot be found a reason for argumentation of a real existence of a human free act because for the mentality of the antic Greek world the dominant were the order and the harmony of a world that was by excellence *cosmos*. The order of the world is necessary under the power of an order determinist as perspective, an order that does not allow any deviation from the laws of the harmony of the whole. The Greek tragedy is the one which exploited the conflict between man's efforts to act according to his will, to go around destiny and to disregard the will of gods, although this attitude is necessary destined to failure, the end of the antic tragedy always recording the fulfilling of the necessity. This is what we would call a *limited liberty*, an expression which actually represents a logic contradiction. But the important thing is that the actor of the tragedy feels the significance of this state of liberty, he makes his way, even if limited and unsuccessfully, towards the assuming the state of *person*, with the characteristics of liberty, uniqueness and non-repeatability. According to antic tragedy the mask proves to be an over-added element and not something belonging to its true being. Nevertheless, this dimension of *προσωπον* has been exploited by the Cappadocian Fathers in order to give the wanted dimension to understanding the personal way of existence of God as Trinity and of men.

The turning point was the identification of *υποστασις* with *προσωπον*, by this giving an ontological dimension to “face” which was until then only a simple mask. In this way it is made a double and mutual specification of the meanings that those two terms should have in the new spiritual horizon. Moreover, there is also a semantic enrichment which transforms almost entirely the functions of *υποστασις* and *προσωπον*. The Byzantine thought will deepen and give a new meaning to *προσωπον* by emphasizing the etymological implications of this term. Because in Greek *προσωπον* is formed by *προσ*, which means *towards, to, in a certain direction*, and *ωψ*, which means *look, eye, appearance, face*. As Yannaras indicates, the term that appears is *I have my eye, my face looking at something or someone, I am face to face with something or someone*. We find here the dimension of direct, immediate reference, the relation. From this point of view, as it is reinterpreted, *prosopon* excludes the possibility of understanding the person as individuality beyond and outside what we call relation. The depth of the personal existence way is indicated precisely by the *relation* as a specific difference, excluding any effort to static understanding of the human individuality. In its most characteristic definition, the sense of *hypostasis* (υποστασις) is *extasis* (εξτασις) meaning leaving oneself. We can understand the hypostatic dimension of the human individual or God's only as a permanent leaving and reference to another. It is

characteristic to a person to always be outside herself, to constantly make her way towards something. As Yannaras says, the ontological patristic content of the person is represented by the absolute alterity as an existential difference regarding the essence. The person is characterized by the absolute alterity, by uniqueness and non-repeatability, but this alterity cannot be expressed and integrated as a concept, the only way possible is the living of alterity as a concrete fact, as a non-recurring relation. The *other's* experience in the face to face relation is the only and exclusive way to knowing himself in what is most specific to him.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy E. Gregory, *A History of Byzantium* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire, The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 25.

<sup>6</sup> McCormick, 232.

<sup>7</sup> Nikos Matsoukas, *Introducere în gnoseologia teologică*, Translated by Maricel Popa (București: Ed. Bizantină, 1997), 124.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *După chipul și asemănarea lui Dumnezeu*, Translated by Anca Manolache (București: Humanitas, 1998), 109.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways of God*, Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh, 1974/76, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Constantine Cavarnos, *Byzantine Thought and Art* (Massachusetts: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1968), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Steven Runciman, *The Last Byzantine Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 85.

<sup>12</sup> Runciman, 117.

<sup>13</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Tradiția creștină. O istorie a dezvoltării doctrinei*, vol. II, Translated by Nicolai Buga (Iași: Polirom, 2005), 270.

<sup>14</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture. The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in Christian encounter with Hellenism* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Endre von Ivanka, *Hellenisches und Christliches im frühbyzantinischen Geistesleben* (Vienna: Herder, 1948), 25.

<sup>16</sup> Norman H. Baynes, *Byzantine Studies and other Essays* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1955), 32.

<sup>17</sup> A. A. Vasilev, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, Vol. I, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1952), 621.

<sup>18</sup> David T. Koyzis, „Imaging God and His Kingdom: Eastern Orthodoxy's Iconic Political Ethic”, *The Review of Politics*, 55, no. 2 (Spring, 1993): 270.

<sup>19</sup> Alain Ducelier, *Bizantinii*, Translated by Simona Nicolae (București: Teora, 1997), 78.

<sup>20</sup> George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, Rutgers (New Jersey: University Press, 1969), 76.

<sup>21</sup> Dionisie Areopagitul, *Opere Complete*. Translated by Dumitru Stăniloae (București: Paideia, 1996), 19.