

The Edgar Wind Journal



Volume 4

4/2023

ISSN 2785-2903

www.edgarwindjournal.eu

The Edgar Wind Journal

ISSN 2785-2903

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“Perhaps you who pronounce my sentence are in greater fear than I who receive it”: Orthodoxy vs Philosophy: Edgar Wind, Giordano Bruno and Michael Psellos

Giulia Maria Paoletti

Abstract

This paper shall focus on the long-debated relationship between philosophy and orthodoxy in the Medieval world, by discussing two of the most important figures in the history of philosophy, from the Middle Ages to the XVI-XVII century, that is to say Michael Psellos and Giordano Bruno. I will draw attention to some similarities between the two and I will be doing so using a recently published letter by Wind to Yates, in which the two debate on the figure of Giordano Bruno.

Keywords

Byzantine; Michael Psellos; Giordano Bruno; Byzantine Philosophy; Renaissance

Introduction

If the unexpected attacks during the 4th Crusade (1204) brought upon Byzantium much destruction and irreparable damage to the bibliographic heritage of the Byzantines,¹ the 1453 siege, seemingly ended what was left of the Byzantine Empire, though the burning ashes of the Empire gave new impetus to the Western cultural scene. Both these key moments relate to the relationship between East and West, but in different ways: in the first case, the West caused the destruction, in the second one, it instead played the part of the rescuer, on both on practical and intellectual levels. The Ottoman conquest of the city meant some intellectuals needed (or desired) to leave Byzantium to find refuge somewhere else, a necessity that produced an exodus. This intense intellectual movement, however, had already begun in the decades before 1453, when political and intellectual leaders of the West and the East, and eastern representees including intellectuals, met on several occasions to discuss theological matters. Examples include the Greek philosopher Pletho's attendance at the council of Florence (1438-39) or the Western-focused diplomacy of

¹ Silvia Ronchey, 'Bisanzio fino alla quarta crociata', in A. Barbero e S. Carocci (a cura di), *Storia d'Europa e del Mediterraneo*, vol. VIII, Roma, Salerno, 2006, pp. 215-255.

Demetrios Kydones.² Venetian and Byzantine culture were intertwined: through Bessarion's careful plan, the same Venice that brought so many disasters upon the Byzantines in the XIII century, became, in the aftermath of the fall, the natural destination for the refugees, where Byzantine culture was preserved and through which it was conveyed to the rest of Italy.³ Bessarion even refers to Venice as *quasi alterum Byzantium*.⁴

Though an unpopular opinion at the time, Bessarion went as far as to say that 'not only the Empire but Byzantine civilization in itself could only survive in alliance with the West'.⁵ It was a strictly political angle, and ambiguous in both theory and practice, though it was partially realized.⁶ Such profound ambiguity is perfectly mirrored in the figure of Bessarion himself, who was not only a skilled theologian, but also and above all, a genial politician and diplomat. Though initially a supporter of the eastern Church, during the council of Florence, at which the *filioque* addition was discussed, Bessarion decided instead to support the western side, with the real political aim of rescuing Constantinople through the aid of the papacy, probably the only institution at that time that could help.⁷ His realpolitik included many strategies, among them strategical unions and weddings to unite West and East, like that of Ivan III with Zoe Sophia Palaeologina, who was put under the papacy and Bessarion's care after the death of her parents. This union was meant to preserve the heritage of the Empire. Far from being univocal, the political and cultural

² Bodgan Petru - Maleon, 'Byzantine Intellectuals in Italy at the end of Middle Ages. In search of an identity between East and West', in *Medieval and Early Modern Studies for Central and Eastern Europe I* 2009, No 1-4, 23-44, 32-33.

³ *Ivi*, 38.

⁴ Silvia Ronchey, 'Giorgio Gemisto Pletone e i Malatesta', in *Sul ritorno di Pletone (un filosofo a Rimini)* (Ciclo di conferenze – Rimini 22 novembre – 20 dicembre 2000), a c. di M. Neri, Rimini, Raffaelli, 2003, pp. 11-24, 15.

⁵ S. Runciman, *The Wiles Lectures: The Last Byzantine Renaissance* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 2011), 80.

⁶ On this topic, see: Silvia Ronchey, 'Il piano di salvataggio di Bisanzio in Morea', in AA.VV., *L'Europa dopo la caduta di Costantinopoli: 29 maggio 1453. Atti del XLIV Convegno Storico Internazionale del Centro Italiano di Studi sul Basso Medioevo - Accademia Tudertina* (Todi, 7-9 ottobre 2007), Spoleto, Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2008, pp. 517-531; Silvia Ronchey, Piero, Pisanello e i bizantini al concilio di Ferrara-Firenze, in Piero della Francesca e le corti italiane (catalogo della mostra) Milano, Skira, 2007, pp. 13-19; Silvia Ronchey, Un'aristocratica bizantina in fuga: Anna Notaras Paleologina, in S. Winter (a cura di), *Donne a Venezia*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura – Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani, 2004, pp. 23-42; Silvia Ronchey, Il "salvataggio occidentale" di Bisanzio. Una lettera di Enea Silvio Piccolomini e l'allegoria pittorica di Bisanzio nel primo Rinascimento, in C.A. Maltezos e P. Schreiner (a cura di), *Bisanzio, Venezia e il mondo franco-greco (XIII-XV secolo)* (Atti del Colloquio Internazionale organizzato nel centenario della nascita di Raymond-Joseph Loenertz O.P., Venezia, 1-2 dicembre 2000), Venezia, Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini, 2002, pp. 125-150 e 529-544; Silvia Ronchey, L'ultimo bizantino. Bessarione e gli ultimi regnanti di Bisanzio, in G. Benzoni (a cura di), *L'eredità greca e l'ellenismo veneziano* (Atti del XL Corso Internazionale di Alta Cultura della Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia, 31 agosto-12 settembre 1998), Firenze, Olschki, 2002, pp. 75-92.

⁷ Joseph Gill, 'The Sincerity of Bessarion the Unionist', in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, October 1975, New Series, Vol. 26, No. 2 pp. 377-392, 377. See also: S. Ronchey, 'Il piano di salvataggio di Bisanzio in Morea', in AA.VV., *L'Europa dopo la caduta di Costantinopoli: 29 maggio 1453. Atti del XLIV Convegno Storico Internazionale del Centro Italiano di Studi sul Basso Medioevo - Accademia Tudertina* (Todi, 7-9 ottobre 2007), Spoleto, Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2008, pp. 517-531, 522.

exchange between West and East was mutual: ‘the Renaissance literally flourished on the corpses of the last Byzantine scholars.’⁸ Such interchange was made to happen by importing eastern cultural output that was missing in the West, contributing to scholarly areas such as philosophy or theology or making available the teaching of Greek. This ‘process of cultural translation’ was necessary ‘for perpetuating Byzantium’s legacy for posterity’⁹ as much as was Bessarion’s realpolitik was aimed at an actual *translatio imperii*.

Most of the Byzantine scholars active in Italy in the XV century are known for their input on philosophical studies in the West. A case in point is Blemmydes’ tentative reconciliation of nominalism and realism, which, through Bessarion, was inherited by the West.¹⁰ There were Platonists and Aristotelians, but regardless of their individual views, ‘men of the Renaissance learn most of their philosophy from them’.¹¹

In light of this, this paper shall discuss the figure of the philosopher in Byzantium and in the Italian Renaissance, through a discussion of the personalities of Michael Psellos (XI century) and Giordano Bruno (XVI century) and the relationship between ‘Religion’ and ‘Philosophy’. To do so, a letter sent in 1943 by Edgar Wind to Yates on the topic of Giordano Bruno will be used.

1. Orthodoxy vs Philosophy

We cannot stress enough that, throughout the Byzantine millennium, philosophy was pagan *par excellence*, more precisely platonic, and certainly esoteric. It was syncretistic and cohabited with Christianity to a high degree. This cohabitation was not always easy and was most certainly controversial, at least from the Christian viewpoint, which had seen the two in opposition to each other since the very beginning of Christianity; it is also among those things that passed from the east (Byzantium) onto the west (in this case, Italy). Such a dichotomy, before and after Byzantium, might at first seem unproblematic or self-explanatory – i.e. faith and reason are different – but on reflection, this coexistence becomes cumbersome from many perspectives. Philosophy in Byzantium was many things – we may argue that theology, or mysticism, also of Eastern derivation, may not be distinguished from philosophy – and there was a single definition.

⁸ Silvia Ronchey, ‘Giorgio Gemisto Pletone e i Malatesta’, in *Sul ritorno di Pletone (un filosofo a Rimini)* (Ciclo di conferenze – Rimini 22 novembre – 20 dicembre 2000), a c. di M. Neri, Rimini, Raffaelli, 2003, pp. 11- 24, 11.

⁹ Lana Sloutsky, ‘Moving Women and Their Moving Objects: Zoe (Sophia) Palaiologina and Anna Palaiologina Notaras as Cultural Translators’, in *Moving Women Moving Objects (400–1500)*, ed. by Hamilton, Tracy Chapman - Proctor-Tiffany, Mariah - Holladay, Joan A (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2019), 272–292, 273.

¹⁰ Steven Runciman, *The Wiles Lectures: The Last Byzantine Renaissance* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 2011), 94.

¹¹Ibid., 102.

The Platonic current was the hardest to conciliate with faith, but was not the only troublesome idea, even among those of classical derivation: there was at least also a strong Aristotelian component, as well as revivals of scepticism etc. Moreover, these revivals were almost never ‘pure’ but continually influenced each other. In a brilliant contribution, Trizio goes as far as to say ‘that in Byzantium there are no Platonists or Aristotelians, if by these expressions one refers to a kind of militancy. There are, on the other hand, thinkers who quote, for example, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, as well as intellectuals who quote and discuss Proclus’.¹² Trizio means that if we wish to analyse and work on Byzantine philosophy, we ought to look at how these kind of sources are quoted inside a text and how they relate to the whole text and the author who produced it: ‘it cannot be useful simply to divide thinkers (Neo)Platonists and Aristotelians, as if every Byzantine had to decide, during their education, to partake in one current rather than in another — or, even worse, as if they are merely part of the *Zeitgeist*’.¹³

A few words on the nature of Byzantine philosophy are needed. Scholars have recently questioned the term ‘Byzantine philosophy’ whether it is a useful phrase.¹⁴ In Byzantine textual culture the term *philosophia* has different meanings, sometimes opposed to each other. One usage condemns ancient philosophy as immoral and unable to compete with Orthodoxy; another saw that the ‘true *philosophia*’ is the one corresponding to mystical and ascetic version of Orthodoxy¹⁵, and a third relates the use of Greek philosophy to the school curricula.¹⁶ But there was also, as we shall see, the *philosophia* of the so-called ancestral tradition which the Platonic schools drew from, not only Greek but also Persian, Jewish, Islamic, understood as *prisca theologia* – a Ficinian term – hermetic, mystical, which in the name of a neo-Pythagorizing Neoplatonism absorbed the religious sphere into a higher sphere, properly philosophical, transcending the confessional or dogmatic differences.

In the most widespread Byzantine view, however, famous philosophers like Plato and Aristotle were sometimes praised for their ideas but more frequently strongly judged for the same, though we only have two official condemnations of philosophy: those of John Italos and Pletho. Examples of such an attitude are scattered all through Byzantine literature. This strand of thought started from the very beginning of the Late Antique period and stretched to the end of the Byzantine Empire, although ‘philosophy schools’ were shut down by Justinian in the 5th century. I would like to offer an example of this ambivalent attitude through two extracts from two paraenetic chapter collections of the XIV century, the *Chapters in Four Ways* and *The Chapters in Political Verse*, which seem to be

¹² Michele Trizio, ‘Byzantine Philosophy as a Contemporary Historiographical Project’, *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 74/1 (2007), 247-294, 262.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See: Dimitris Gutas and N. Siniosoglou, ‘Philosophy and ‘Byzantine Philosophy’, in *The Cambridge Intellectual History of Byzantium*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 2018), 271-296.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

related to each other but were written by different authors.¹⁷ In the concluding passage of the first collection, the so-called *Chapters in Four Ways*, the author deems Aristotle’s and Plato’s work as examples of what an author should aim for as for the quality of their work. Discussing the value of his works, and highlighting the role that readers have in making the text vivid and useful for their own lives, the author states: “Just as writings remain unnoticed if we do not engage with them, even if these are the works of Aristotle and Plato, so too if they are honoured by your labour, they will be illustrious and famous”. The scholiast, who most probably belonged to a monastic environment, felt the need to justify the author’s appreciation for Greek philosophy, turning it into something more religious: “[the author] gives precedence to these philosophers [i.e. Aristotle and Plato] because they said sensible things about God and the angels and our souls and the apparent movement of the four elements”. The only way he could justify such an appreciation of ‘Hellenic philosophy’ in a monastic environment was to turn it into something that rather reinforced orthodoxy rather than contrasting with it, which confirms what has been argued by Gutas and Siniossoglou: that Hellenic philosophy was, for the monastic contexts of Byzantium, ‘an ancillary scholarly pursuit that sometimes reinforced those intellectual correlates of Orthodoxy but was roundly condemned when it did not, which was often’.¹⁸ Using Trizio’s words: ‘according to Symeon “philosophy” means on the one hand, the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, and on the other, it refers to the ascetic life of the monks, described as mediation on the self and on death. [...] Symeon the New Theologian would have called himself a philosopher only insofar as this denomination refers to the peculiarity of the monastic life’.¹⁹ This was true for monastic contexts, but it would not be proper to extend such consideration to the Byzantine world in general. Monastic life is in itself a form of philosophy, the true philosophy, ‘the monks being the sectatores Christi’.²⁰ Oddly enough, the view of philosophy and orthodoxy as being complementary concepts, with the former enhancing and strengthening the latter, has been inherited by contemporary philosophy itself, in a sort of continuity with the tradition of theologians drawing on Neoplatonism. William Desmond developed a philosophical approach according to which ‘philosophy and theology can relate to each other intimately, constructively – complementing and completing each other – that indeed theology and philosophy are better off for their interrelation’.²¹

In the collection that follows the *Chapters in Four Ways* in the two mss., the Par.gr. 2750A and the Vat. gr. 1898, the *Chapters in Political Verse*, however, the author, regarding not only Aristotle but probably Greek philosophy as a whole, lashes out against all those who refuse to believe in divine providence: those ‘pseudo-philosophers’ and their ‘empty

¹⁷ Giulia M. Paoletti, *The Multifarious Muse: two Palaeologan Collections of Chapter Literature*, PhD thesis (Oxford, 2020).

¹⁸ Dimitris Gutas – Niketas Siniossoglou, *Philosophy and Byzantine Philosophy*, 274.

¹⁹ Michele Trizio, *Byzantine Philosophy*, 250-251.

²⁰ Ibid. 270.

²¹ Christopher Ben Simpson, ‘Theology, Philosophy, God and the Between’, in *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, Vol. 1, Numbers 1 & 2 (August 2012), 262-79, 262.

writings', particularly Plato, Plotinus, Lucian (!) and Aristotle. Though Plato and Platonists, such as Plotinus, were generally appreciated, their philosophical doctrines remained controversial in certain circles, mostly, if not exclusively, monastic. Though most Byzantines loved to read him, Arethas and others thought that Lucian deserved to burn in hell for being an atheist and a mocker. But in the eyes of *Chapters in Political Verse's* author, the worst of all was Aristotle: 'the great Aristotle who stupidly reduced the all-mighty power [of God] to the stars and zealously attempted to contain the infinite One: what an error!' (65.28-30).²² This was especially true in monastic circles. Many intellectuals, on the other hand, while always fearing a pre-emptive defence against the contents of non-Christian philosophers, then quietly made wide use of them, even with regard to the more 'dangerous' doctrines. The relationship between what we now perceive as Byzantine philosophy – which is an umbrella term that includes heterogeneous positions – and Christianity in Byzantium is not as easy as it seems to define. We should not generalize; yet we could say that it was as Platonism that was mainly perceived as 'dangerous': to quote Kaldellis: "the way in which the Byzantines themselves conceived philosophy as contested ideal, one version of which was perceived to be not only independent but hostile to Christian Orthodoxy".²³

The indistinguishability of philosophy and theology at the level of the science of being was just as widespread in Byzantium, albeit at an esoteric level. In a famous epigram, John Mauropos, an intellectual of the XI century and teacher of Psellos, and a man of letters as much as religion, asks God to release Plutarch and Plato from his threat, since, though they were 'heathens', they however proved themselves 'to have 'clung tightly' to his laws.²⁴ In this short epigram we see *in nuce* what later would be a key argument of those trying to combine and reunite philosophy with orthodoxy, that is to say arguing – at an esoteric level, that is, even without revealing the syncretistic vision that at an esoteric level marked the Platonic *betaireiai* – that although pagan philosophers lived in a non-Christian

²² On the relationship of the byzantines with Aristotle, see: David Brashaw, 'The presence of Aristotle in Byzantine Theology', in *The Cambridge Intellectual History of Byzantium*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 2018), 281-297.

²³Anthony Kaldellis, 'Byzantine philosophy inside and out: Orthodoxy and dissidence in counterpoint', in Börje Bydén and Katerina Ierodiakonou (eds) *The Many Faces of Byzantine Philosophy*, Papers and monographs from the Norwegian Institute at Athens, series 4, 1 (Athens: Norwegian Institute at Athens, 2012), 29-152, 130.

²⁴ For the translation of this poem see Floris Bernard and Cristopher Livanos, *The Poems of Christopher of Mytilene and John Mauropos* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

world, some of their actions and words seemed to follow (or, improbably, know already) God’s precepts.²⁵ Such a belief was widely widespread in the Renaissance.²⁶

Patrizi, an XVI century philosopher contemporary to Giordano Bruno, went as far as trying to persuade the pope to adopt his peculiar method of reconciling philosophy and religion. He argues that the reason why a philosopher is considered one who does not believe in God is that the only philosophy studied is the Aristotelian one, particularly those parts of Aristotle’s thought that are hostile to God.²⁷ A strong supporter of Hermetism, which had a strong revival in the XVI century, Patrizi was trying to persuade the Pope that the only way forward to confute the assumption that a philosopher does not believe in God was to study more philosophers like Plato, Plotinus and Proclus, and less of those who were part of the scholastic tradition, which was to be considered dangerous.²⁸ The search for an explicit reconciliation of Plato with Christianity is mainly Western (see especially Ficino and Cusanus).

In the case of Byzantium, the real issue, however, was that ‘studying Hellenic Philosophy was not per se a threat to one’s own faith, but “it could make one less certain of various Christian doctrines”’.²⁹ The question of the relationship between Byzantine orthodoxy and Hellenic philosophy is undoubtedly one of particular concern. Blindly believing in Orthodoxy meant living without any personal freedom of thought or philosophical freedom – though individuality is a concept rather alien to medieval societies – as philosophy was useful in as much as it confirmed or strengthened orthodox dogmas. We should not however indulge in believing that the orthodox opposition to (secular) philosophy meant Byzantines lacked the chance to explore such discipline. On the contrary, Byzantium was one of the most renowned centres of philosophical studies, as figures like Hypatia, Psellos, Italos, and later Pletho and Bessarion, show. Freedom of thought was more of a problem for Renaissance men: for example, Whittaker argues that ‘if it had been possible for Catholicism to grant philosophical freedom, Giordano Bruno would have

²⁵ The idea of Plato expressing views and concepts similar to those of the Bible, for example, started out in the Late Antique period but can also be found in the work of late Renaissance scholars. An example of such thinking is Paolo Beni da Gubbio, a strong supporter of Platonism, who suggested that, though it is impossible that Plato read the Old Testament – if only for lack of understanding of the language – and that there unconceivable differences between Moses’ and Timaeus’ considerations, he was ‘ready to admit a certain similarity between some Platonic positions and some doctrines in Genesis’, see Maria Mucillo, ‘Philosophy and Orthodoxy: Valuation and Devaluation of the Platonic Tradition in the Late Renaissance’, in A. J. Johnston – M. Rouse and W. Schmidt-Biggemann (eds), *Transforming Topoi, The Exigencies and Impositions of Tradition* (Berliner Mittelalter- und Frühneuezeitforschung. - Band 023, 2018), 89-117, 105.

²⁶ Few and far between were those who opposed this belief, among whom is worth mentioning Giovanni Battista Crispo di Gallipoli, who after a thorough reading of platonic texts, came to the conclusion that ‘philosophy was totally alien to, and radically different from, Christian thought’ and the only way to show this was to read pagan texts not to find them agreeing with or supporting orthodoxy but to rather ‘discover the errors in them’ see: ‘Philosophy and Orthodoxy: Valuation and Devaluation, 108.

²⁷ Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 202.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

²⁹ Anthony Kaldellis, *Byzantine Philosophy Inside and Out*, 134.

regarded it almost as the philosophers of antiquity regarded the religion of the State'.³⁰ Studying philosophy meant asking questions and putting into question those things that were not rooted in rationality but purely in blind faith.

2. Michael Psellos and Giordano Bruno

After discussing the theoretical framework of the relationship between orthodoxy and philosophy, we will now see how such a dichotomy affected those who found themselves torn between them. We may put into dialogue, so to speak, two personalities, one belonging to the Byzantine period and the other to the Renaissance: Michael Psellos (XI century) and Giordano Bruno (XVI century). A caveat must be borne in mind: although these two personalities indeed show similar features, it would be anachronistic to ignore the differences in period.

Let us start by summarizing their lives. Michael Psellos was born in 1018 and died in 1078. In 1054, he was forced for political reasons to become a monk under the name of Michael but left the cloisters a year later, a choice followed by quite a hard reaction by the monastery itself. Religious convictions of monasticism by Psellos have been abundantly discussed by scholarship – and, as always, opposite views have been showed by each of those scholars who attempted to define Psellos' attitude towards the monastic institution, though this is not the place nor the time to explore such a lively querelle. It must suffice to say that the provocative spirit of Psellos, as defined by Jeffreys, probably did not help in this regard.³¹ Psellos had quite an important position inside the cultural and political environment of XI century Byzantium. He was not only a prominent scholar but also given important political roles: first secretary of Constantine Monomachus, then consul of the philosophers and then head of the faculty of philosophy of the Constantinopolitan university founded or refounded by this emperor (and of whose faculty of law John Xiphilinus was head), then prime minister and de facto head of the government alongside Eudocia, whose lover he was, when Roman IV Diogenes was captured at Manzikert. He was part of a close-knit circle of intellectuals interested in philosophy among other topics, such as Constantine Licoudis and John Italos. Psellos frequently alluded to the fact that the 'philosophical' knowledge he gained did not come from others' teaching, as there were 'no worthwhile' ones, and that during his time no city was 'flourishing with regard to logoi'.³² If one think at previous centuries, however, the attention to Platonism never ceased, as with the work of Aretas or Photios; and if one looks at Psellos' own times, 'it is well know that Psellos himself wrote a funeral oration for a man whom he describes as his teacher (*didaskalos*): this man was John Mauropous. Thus, the period before Psellos could not have

³⁰ Thomas Whittaker, 'Giordano Bruno', in *Mind* (1884), Vol. 9, No. 34, 236-264, 239.

³¹ Michael Jeffreys, 'Michael Psellos and the Monastery', in M. Jeffreys- M. Lauxtermann (eds) *The Letters of Psellos: Cultural Networks and Historical Realities* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 42-58, 42.

³² *Chronographia*, 6.42-43.

been a complete intellectual wasteland’.³³ As a brilliant scholar he dabbled in many branches of knowledge, ranging from grammar and rhetoric to philosophy and theology and theurgy. This same curiosity and knowledge put him in a controversial position. Scholarship has devoted much attention to Psellos and his relationship with the Orthodox tradition and Greek Philosophy. His position as ‘consul of the Philosopher’ implied an obligation ‘to represent pre-Christian, Hellenic learning in a Christian society’. In those times, adhering to the strictures of Orthodoxy was a *conditio sine qua non*. It is not a coincidence, then, that one of the attributes most given to holy and blessed men was ‘pillar of orthodoxy’; interestingly, however, such an appellation was given by John Mauropodes to Theodoret of Cyruss, who was excommunicated following the Nestorian controversy, and even reinforced by the adjective ‘unshakable’.³⁴ Any activity that would threaten to subvert the power of Orthodoxy, which was not only religious but also political, as the emperor represented both political and spiritual power, was to be shut down. To counterbalance his ambivalent attitude towards philosophy, Psellos had to produce statements of Orthodox beliefs: he needed to explain the relationship between his affiliation with Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy and Christian faith.³⁵ In 1054 he was accused of forsaking Christ for Plato, but unlike his pupil Italos, he did not end up being excommunicated.

It is now time to turn our attention to Giordano Bruno.³⁶ Born in Naples, Giordano Bruno entered a Dominican convent in 1565, but was soon after accused of heresy. Although completing his course in theology, he was again accused of heresy, which finally brought him to leave the order in 1576. Forced by a likely trial for heresy he wandered around Europe for many decades, working in places like Oxford or Paris, where he was about to become an ordinary professor but had to refuse due to the compulsory attendance at Mass. Oxford was not welcoming for him and he encounters several issues with Oxonian scholars, in particular grammarians.³⁷ After returning to Italy to teach his mnemonic technique to Giovanni Mocenigo, he was betrayed by the latter to the inquisition and died at the stake in 1600. Bruno’s work, like Psellos’, offers quite a few insights into his personality, which at times reflects the ‘vicissitudes of his life’, though such

³³ Michele Trizio, *Byzantine Philosophy*, 139-56.

³⁴ see Mauropodes, poem 49, line 4: ‘ὡς ἀκράδαντον ὀρθοδοξίας στύλον’ in reference to Theodoret.

³⁵ Gill Miles, ‘Psellos and his traditions’ in S. Mariev (ed.) *Byzantine Perspectives on Neoplatonism* (De Gruyter 2017), 79-102, 80-82.

³⁶ The bibliography on Giordano Bruno is quite extensive. See: Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964); Frances Yates, ‘The Religious Policy of Giordano Bruno’, in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 3.3-4 (Oct. 1939-Jan. 1940), pp. 181-207; Frances Yates, ‘Bruno, Giordano, 1548-1600’, in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967), vol. 1/2; Michele Ciliberto, *Giordano Bruno* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005); L. Firpo, *Il Processo a Giordano Bruno* (Roma: Salerno, 1993); Ingrid D. Rowland, *Giordano Bruno, Philosopher and Heretic* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³⁷ Frances Yates, ‘Giordano Bruno’s Conflict with Oxford’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 2.3 (1939) (London: Kraus Reprint Vaduz, 1970), pp. 227-42; E. McMullin, ‘Giordano Bruno at Oxford’, in *Isis*, vol. 77, no. 1, 1986, pp. 85-94.

an important philosopher cannot easily be fully understood only through his writings.³⁸ Both Psellos and Bruno were prolific writers, both wrote in an obscure way and had a strong tendency to mock. They both played with double meanings, writing texts on double levels and including frequent allusions and sub-texts. Both joined a monastic order, only to leave it shortly; both developed idiosyncratic attitudes towards the monastic life, but in different ways. Bruno led his battle against the pedant grammarians of Oxford, and Psellos against rhetoricians, though one of them himself. Both Psellos and Bruno lived during a time in which culture and knowledge flourished, each struggled with his period's contemporary issues, and as such both were authors with multifarious interests and attitudes.³⁹ Their attempts to justify their ideas, by at times refusing them (or being forced to) and at others attempting to explain them, might explain why they were propelled to insert autobiographical elements in their works, either subtly or directly.

3. Edgar Wind and Giordano Bruno: the letter addressed to Yates

Edgar Wind was an interdisciplinary art historian and a prominent personality of the Warburg Institute.⁴⁰ Among his many interests was the relationship between philosophy and Christianity, which is to say, between paganism and religion, which he worked on through the analysis of Pico della Mirandola's writings.

In a 1938 letter addressed to Yates, which is preserved at the Bodleian Library, Wind responded to some queries she had in regard to Bruno's relationship with modern science.⁴¹ Yates proposes to invert the idea that the medieval man should be the antithesis of the Renaissance man, in as much as the medieval man is a 'reactionary' and his successor 'a progressive one', into the opposite, that is to say 'the "progressive" becomes [...] an orthodox Catholic whose fight against the "reactionary" Protestants consists in an attempt to revise the Medieval philosophy'.⁴² Following this, Yates sees in the death of Bruno a mistake made by the Inquisition, who believed him to be a heretic rather than someone fighting for the same cause.⁴³ Addressing Yates' argument about Bruno's death,

³⁸ Giovanni Aquilecchia, 'Giordano Bruno as a Philosopher of the Renaissance', in *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher of the Renaissance*, ed. by Gatti, Hilary, (Routledge, 2016), 1-12, 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁰ There is a long list of publications on the figure of Edgar Wind. To mention a few: Bernardino Branca, *Edgar Wind filosofo delle immagini: La biografia intellettuale di un discepolo di Aby Warburg* (Milan: Mimesis, 2019); Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019), pp. 13-14; Ben Thomas, 'Edgar Wind: A Short Biography', in *Stanrzczy*, 1(8) (2015), 117-137; Gianni Carlo Sciolla, *La critica d'arte del Novecento* (Turin: UTET, 2006), pp.118-127, 142, 278-283; Creighton Gilbert, 'Edgar Wind as Man and Thinker', in *New Criterion Reader*, 3 (1984), 36-41; and Hugh Lloyd-Jones, 'A Biographical Memoir', in *Edgar Wind, The Eloquence of Symbols: Studies in Humanist Art*, ed. by Jaynie Anderson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press and Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. xiii-xxxvi.

⁴¹ Bernardino Branca, 'The Giordano Bruno Problem?: Edgar Wind's 1938 Letter to Frances Yates', in *The Edgar Wind Journal*, n.1 (2021), 12-38.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 36.

Wind believes it happened for the ‘cause of Catholicism’, which Yates believes to have had its roots in medieval times. Those medieval times in which we find the roots of such phenomenon are undoubtedly not just the western ones but also the Byzantine, which, as we said before, was exported from the East in the XV century. This consideration of Bruno, as someone who was not going against religious beliefs but rather tried to make them stronger through his own philosophical, theological and spiritual views, squares well with the western medieval attempt to reconcile outside and inside wisdom. More than ‘conciliating’ them, they considered Philosophy and Theology – the science of the divine – to be the same thing from an exoterical, hermetic and pantheistic point of view, quintessentially ‘Byzantine’. However, if by acting as a reactionary Bruno was attempting to revise medieval Western philosophy, does this make the medieval byzantine man a reactionary too? Although it would be anachronistic to use the term ‘reactionary’ – it only entered the English vocabulary after the French Revolution – what could be argued, however, is that if the term reactionary indicates someone who goes against a political state or society with the aim of changing it or returning to a *status quo ante*, the term might not be easily applied to Byzantines, who, except in a few cases (like Hypatia) for example, were not even granted the possibility of doing so, if not sometimes for a lack of trying. As aforementioned, one of the few occasions in which Byzantines could become ‘subversive’ was exactly in the exercising of philosophy, as ‘there was tension between an Orthodox “literal” mode of existence and the potentially subverting effects of secular (*thyrathen*) philosophy, as well as heresy’.⁴⁴

In disagreement with Yates, though probably sharing a similar view in regard to Bruno’s personal orthodoxy, Wind proposes a different approach, arguing that the philosophy and theology were split in two camps, the mystical and the rational:

But it is certain that the medieval philosophy and theology was always split in two camps which one might call the mystical and the rational. The mystical tradition beginning with St. Augustine and continuing through St. Bonaventura to Scotus was strongly Platonic; the rational tradition (culminating in Thomas Aquinas) was strictly Aristotelian; and there was always a tendency on the part of the rational theology to suspect the mystical one of heresy.⁴⁵

For Wind, ‘if two people ‘believe in opposite creeds, and both take their creed “literally”, that is “rationally”, it is impossible to reconcile them’.⁴⁶ He suggests that the only way to reconcile opposite creeds is to interpret them not literally but allegorically, a way of thinking that would give the mystical Christian have a ‘more tolerant attitude’ to those doctrines conceived as heresies.⁴⁷ The only way to do this would be for the mystical ones to teach their language but at the same time learn theirs. Wind definitely attributes the birth

⁴⁴ Dimitris Gutas – Niketas Sinissoglou, *Philosophy and Byzantine Philosophy*, 282.

⁴⁵ Bernardino Branca, *The Giordano Bruno Problem*, 36.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

of the Renaissance to mysticism: “I think I can make that this mystical approach to Christianity was one of the strongest forces in the revival interest in Paganism, which is called Renaissance”.⁴⁸ This last sentence aligns with what Pletho put forward during the Council of Florence. While trying to mend the at least the political relationship between the churches of east and west by putting forward the idea that the two opponents will come to share the same religion in the near future, as well as the Islamic one, Pletho argued that the only way in which they could obtain one and only creed was to put their faith in pagan text and rituals and forget about Mohammed and Christ.⁴⁹

Could Wind’s reasoning be applied to the relationship between Philosophy and Orthodoxy in medieval times, as well as pre-modern ones, with the caveat of distinguishing between the medieval Byzantine man and the western one, and not confusing orthodoxy with theology. In fact, ‘philosophical discourse may be used ‘to analyse the validity of opposed arguments from different perspectives, while respecting those who set them out’.⁵⁰ Even though one can also find dogmatic, not necessarily conciliatory currents of thought in Byzantium, there was also ample room for theological debate within Orthodoxy (think of Palamas), even though heretical condemnations were quite frequent.

Browning, discussing Psellos’ attitude towards both philosophy and religion, claims that Psellos’ attitude to faith was essentially a rational and intellectual one, in direct opposition to the mystical and anti-intellectual tendencies of his age.⁵¹ Psellos was firmly convinced that the pagan heritage of antiquity did not contradict faith but, provided that both were understood correctly, if put in dialogue with each other, faith would emerge stronger and confirmed from interaction with philosophy, rather than defeated.⁵² His best ability was finding middle ground between opposite poles and apparent contradictions such as those we discuss here.⁵³ His use of Neoplatonism as a hermeneutic means falls in this category, as well as the ‘practice of allegorical reading’ which he inherited from both Platonic and Christian tradition:⁵⁴ Psellos’ most characteristic strategy in approaching scriptural and patristic topics was the use of Neoplatonic thought, especially Proclus, to illuminate the Christian objects of his interpretation.⁵⁵ However, in this using this hermeneutical means, we must stress that ‘[Psellos] seems always keen to stress the differences between Christian theology and ancient Greek, constantly reminding his pupils

⁴⁸ Bernardino Branca, *The Giordano Bruno Problem*, 39.

⁴⁹ Silvia Ronchey, *Giorgio Gemisto Pletone e i Malatesta*, 17.

⁵⁰ Dimitris Gutas – N. Siniosoglou, *Philosophy and Byzantine Philosophy*, 277.

⁵¹ Robert Browning, ‘Enlightenment and repression in Byzantium in the eleventh and twelfth centuries’, *Past and Present* 69: 3–23, 1975, 10.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Gill Miles, ‘Psellos and his traditions’ in S. Mariev (ed.) *Byzantine Perspectives on Neoplatonism* (De Gruyter 2017), 79-102, 87.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

that only the former can be a source of truth, the latter being useful to reach the state of polimatheia and to achieve a full and complete education?⁵⁶

Philosophical reasoning, thus, would provide Orthodoxy with a rational grounding, giving it stronger roots than faith alone. This point of view, with roots in patristics, can, in addition, also be found in western medieval philosophy: think, for example, of the debate between dialecticians and anti-dialecticians. Although Wind believes that the right approach to this anthesis would be the mystical one (and not the rational as Psellos seemed to believe), this squares well with his understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Pagan mysteries. This consideration is oddly similar to Psellos’ belief that the only way for them to understand each other was to apply ‘the weapons of dialectic developed by the philosophers of antiquity’ to Christian revelation.⁵⁷

A last consideration: those who depart from usual or accepted standards, who live their life in accordance with principles other than those imposed by society, are usually considered as having ‘deviant’ personalities. In recent times this adjective has referred to outcasts or marginalized people, e. g. those belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, psychiatric patients, prisoners. This is considered by Foucault to be a crisis of heterotopia, and more specifically, heterotopias of deviation, whose definition is: a place ‘in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed’. One might wonder that if one replaces deviancy, which is a modern construct and cannot be applied to medieval times, with ‘alternative’, with the original meaning of someone looking for alternatives to a constituted norm or exploring different approaches, and transfers and adopt it to the medieval society, the concept may be applied, with a pinch of salt, to Psellos, who lived in dogmatic times and was less free to pursue alternatives to the established truth.

Conclusions

The relationship between Christianity – orthodoxy – and philosophy has always been controversial and, above all, ambiguous, unspoken if not clandestine, addressed to an elite who was able to read between the lines. It was and is difficult not only to analyse but also to clearly define, and every era and culture has tried to find its own way of coping with this ‘issue’. This same tension was inherited and proceeded further in the following generations and centuries, continuing into the Renaissance – part of which was fuelled by the Byzantines, especially with regard to the teaching of Greek and ancient works forgotten by the Western Middle Ages. That said, the reasons for the historical phenomenon of

⁵⁶ Michele Trizio, *Byzantine Philosophy*, 255.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

humanism and the subsequent Renaissance all lie in Western society, in which, as Winds points out, ‘this mystical approach to Christianity was one of the strongest forces.’⁵⁸

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⁵⁸ Bernardino Branca, ‘The Giordano Bruno Problem’, 22.

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