Continuities and Discontinuities in Byzantine Religious Thought

John Meyendorff

Continuities and Discontinuities in Byzantine Religious Thought

John Meyendorff

There is no doubt that the religious legacy of the Byzantine civilization pervades practically all aspects of Byzantine studies, not only because Byzantine thought patterns and aesthetic models survive in the Orthodox church and other branches of Eastern Christendom, but because scholars studying Byzantine society, economic life, or art are also necessarily involved in analyzing religious, or ecclesiastical, documents or monuments, which constitute by far the greatest part of the primary historical evidence. A certain empathy for religious topics is, therefore, a condition for the development of a critical historical approach to Byzantium—an empathy that implies interest and understanding, but also criticism of what Byzantine religion represented historically.

If there was a quality of that religion which the Byzantines themselves liked to emphasize, it would be continuity and consistency. If one reads the decisions of church councils, one is immediately struck by their deliberate rejection of "novelty." In 431, the Council of Ephesus, having condemned Nestorius, does not formulate any new definition but solemnly forbids one "to produce, to write, or to compose another faith beyond the faith of the holy fathers gathered in Nicaea."[1] In spite of this rejection of "novelty" at Ephesus, two decades later in Chalcedon (451) a new statement about the faith is nevertheless approved, but it is preceded by an apologetic preamble: "The wise and salvific symbol of divine grace (i.e., the creed of Nicaea and Constantinople)[2] was sufficient for the knowledge and confirmation of Orthodoxy . . . but since the enemies of truth produced innovations by their heresies," a new statement of faith is made necessary.[3] The Chalcedonian text, however, was seen as a statement, or definition (ὅρος) only, not a "creed" for baptismal or liturgical use. The status of a "creed" remained reserved for the "Nicaean" faith alone. The same apologetic concern for preserving the

---

[1] Ὥρισεν ἡ ἁγία σύνοδος ἑτέραν πίστιν μηδενὶ ἐξεῖναι προφέρειν ἢ γοῦν συγγράφειν ἢ συντιθέναι παρὰ τὴν ὁρισθεῖσαν παρὰ τῶν ἁγίων πατέρων τῶν ἐν τῇ Νικαέων συναχθέντων, *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta*, ed. J. Alberigo et al., 3rd ed. (Bologna, 1973), 65.

[2] At Chalcedon "the faith" included not only the Nicaean statement, but also the creed of Constantinople (381), which, however, had been ignored at Ephesus. There was already a major misunderstanding as to which creed was self-sufficient and could not be added to. The argument, used later against the Latin *filioque* and interpreting the decree of Ephesus as forbidding additions to the creed, had in fact been made irrelevent by the Council of 381, who "added to" the "Nicaean faith."

[3] *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta*, 84.

faith "without novelties" (ἀκαινοτόμητα),[4] "without subtracting or adding" (οὐδὲν ἀφαιροῦμεν, οὐδὲν προστίθεμεν)[5] is emphasized by the councils of Constantinople III (680–81) and Nicaea II (787), not to speak of the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*, introduced for liturgical use in 843 at the end of iconoclasm, and of the many later synods, which took doctrinal decisions.

There is no doubt, therefore, that *continuity* was the major *official* motivation of conciliar decisions. The principle which guided them was the belief that the fullness of revealed truth was contained in the "apostolic" faith, and that later doctrinal statements, including those made by ecumenical councils, were clarifications made necessary by the appearance of false doctrines or heresies. The conciliar definitions were not supposed to be "new" revelations, but restatements of the truth aimed at countering heretical objections. There was an implicit reluctance in making definitions. Even the concept of "doctrinal development," made popular in nineteenth-century Roman Catholic thought by Cardinal Newman, was used only rarely in the Byzantine theological language. It always emphasizes continuity rather than novelty. Such was certainly the intention of the statement of the Council of 1351, defining the doctrines of Palamas on the "energies" of God as a "development" (ἀνάπτυξις) of the decrees of the Sixth Ecumenical Council on the two "energies," or "wills," of Christ.[6]

The concern for preserving the integrity of the "apostolic" faith is, of course, an essential element of the Christian tradition in general, since it is based upon the acceptance of a revelation occurring at a particular point of history. That revelation, seen as an event happening "once for all" (ἅπαξ, 1 Pet. 3:18) with a manifestation, in Christ, of "all the fullness of divinity in the flesh" (Col. 2:9), as witnessed by a single group of people who "saw" and "touched" it (cf. 1 John 1:1), cannot be added to. However, after the revelation occurred human history continued. This is the meaning of what is called the Christian Tradition. But the Byzantine mind, taken as a cultural vision, often tended to see the historical process of change as an imperfect and fallen reflection of a permanent, immovable world of concepts and ideas. Thus, the historical "completeness" of the Christian revelation—which being historical itself did not exclude subsequent history—was frequently, though unconsciously, confused with the Platonic or Neoplatonic vision of an essentially immobile, hierarchical divine world, essentially immune to change.

In this presentation, I will attempt to discuss briefly three issues. The first two belong historically to a period—the sixth and the seventh centuries—when society at large was changing rapidly. These two questions—one doctrinal and one belonging to the area of spirituality—are: (1) what was the nature of "continuity" and "discontinuity" in the christological debates of that period; and (2) what happened to the Byzantine liturgy in the same period?

The third issue belongs historically to the later period: it is the much debated problem of Palamite hesychasm.

---

[4] Ibid., 125.
[5] Ibid., 134.
[6] *Synodal Tome*, PG 151, col. 722B.

I.

It was once common among historians to explain the christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries as an expression of the cultural and national opposition of non-Greeks to Byzantium and the cultural dominance of Hellenism in the imperial Orthodox church. Thus, the rejection of the Council of Chalcedon in Egypt is sometimes explained, in a simplistic way, "as the outward expression of the growing nationalistic trends in that province against the gradual intensification of Byzantine imperialism, soon to reach its consummation during the reign of Justinian."[7]

There is no doubt, of course, that eventually social, political, and cultural factors contributed greatly to the permanence of the schism, and that, in the case of the Armenians, living under Persian rule, such factors may have been decisive already in the fifth century.[8] But this was not the case in Egypt and Syria. The entire christological debate began with the controversy between Cyril and Nestorius in 428–431. It continued for a century and a half following Chalcedon. It was taking place between Greeks, using, on both sides, Greek philosophical terms and terminology.[9] The opponents of the Council of Chalcedon were neither anti-Greek, nor disloyal to the empire. They were rather attempting to bring about imperial policies which would support their christological position, that is, to gain the empire to their side. This was true of all the anti-Chalcedonian archbishops of Alexandria, successors of Cyril, until the seventh century. The popular Coptic element took full control of the patriarchate only after the Arab conquest. In Syria in the sixth century, the great figure of Patriarch Severus, whose Greek intellectual upbringing was, in every way, similar to that of the great Cappadocian Fathers, dominated the Monophysite camp. Syriac-speaking theologians like Philoxenus (or Xenaia) of Mabbugh played a supportive role only.

What may be true, however, is that the Syrian and Coptic masses felt estranged by the refinement of theological debates between Greeks. For them, Greek philosophy was, indeed, an alien medium. Once driven into schism by Dioscorus, Timothy Aelurus, and Severus, and violently victimized for the support they gave to these leaders, Copts and Syrians began gradually to interpret their religious tradition as a sort of stubborn fundamentalism, best expressed in their own languages and customs.

Indeed, Monophysitism was essentially a conservative movement. The Chalcedonian definition was rejected because it was seen as a departure from the "faith of Nicaea" and from the christology of Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria. Indeed, the creed of Nicaea affirmed that the Son was "consubstantial (ὁμοούσιος) to the Father," but did not say that Christ, in his humanity, was *also* "consubstantial to us" (as proclaimed at Chalcedon). Nicaea specifically affirmed "Theopaschism": Christ, being "true God of true God" had "suffered under Pontius Pilate," whereas Chalcedon was silent on this point,

---

[7] A. S. Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1968), 69.

[8] Cf. N. G. Garsoian, "Secular Jurisdiction over the Armenian Church (Fourth–Seventh Centuries)," in *Okeanos: Essays Presented to Ihor Ševčenko on his Sixtieth Birthday* (*Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7) (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 220–50.

[9] Quite important in showing this point was an article published three decades ago by A. H. M. Jones, "Were Ancient Heresies National or Social Movements in Disguise?" *JTS*, n.s. 11 (1959), 280–98.

and was supported by Antiochian theologians (former friends of Nestorius) who specifically and decidedly denied that the Son of God himself could be the subject of "suffering." Only the "Son of Mary" could "suffer," they said, because he was a man. Finally, Nicaea used synonymously the terms οὐσία ("essence") and ὑπόστασις (the term designating the "person" of Christ in the Chalcedonian text),[10] whereas the Chalcedonian definition specifically distinguished between them, introducing a christology which understood Christ as one *hypostasis* in two natures (φύσεις), or essences (οὐσίαι).

The debate between the Chalcedonians and the Monophysites was therefore very much a debate about continuity, in which the anti-Chalcedonian side seemed, for a long time, to have the upper hand. It is precisely in the name of continuity that the conservative instinct of Eastern Christian masses would oppose the well-balanced Chalcedonian formula—that "committee document"—which departed from strict Nicaean and Cyrillian terminology not only in order to counteract the extreme Monophysites, like Eutyches, but also in order to preserve unity between the two Romes, therefore giving credit to Latin Christology, as it had been expressed in the famous Tome of Leo.

The debate about continuity would also be pursued during the period which determined all the later developments of Byzantine theology and spirituality: the age of Justinian. Indeed, the imperial court of the sixth century had no other goal than to convince the Monophysites that continuity had *not* been broken at Chalcedon, and that both Cyril's stand against Nestorius and the Chalcedonian definition were expressing the same Orthodox christology. Since the well-known works of Joseph Lebon on Severus of Antioch, that position, which was endorsed by the official church under Justinian, is labeled "neo-Chalcedonianism."[11] The prefix "neo-" is used by many authors in a somewhat pejorative sense: in their view, Justinian, for essentially political reasons, capitulated to the Monophysite opposition, when, at the Council of Constantinople of 553, he forced upon the Byzantine church the condemnation of the "Three Chapters"—that is, the person of Theodore of Mopsuestia and the anti-Cyrillian writings of Theodoret of Cyrrhus and Ibas of Edessa. Since Theodoret and Ibas had been defenders of Chalcedon, their condemnation by "neo-Chalcedonians" made it appear that Chalcedon itself had been betrayed. This negative judgment on "neo-Chalcedonianism" is connected with the trend which prevailed among many historians of early Christianity since the nineteenth century: a trend which shows preference for Antioch over Alexandria, both in exegesis and in christology. Furthermore on ethical grounds, neither Cyril—who was hardly a promoter of democracy and Robert's Rules of Order at ecclesiastical meetings—nor Justinian, with his episodic and wavering policies of repression, are seen as appealing personalities. In the light of this preference for the Antiochenes, Nestorius appears as an innocent victim of Alexandrian bullying—as John Chrysostom was before him—and the policies of Justinian seem as nothing but a *de facto* surrender to Mono-

---

[10] Τοὺς δὲ λέγοντας [τὸν υἱόν] ἐξ ἑτέρας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας ἀναθεματίζει ἡ καθολικὴ καὶ ἀποστολικὴ ἐκκλησία, *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta*, 5.

[11] Cf. J. Lebon, *Le Monophysitisme sévérien: Étude historique, littéraire et théologique sur la résistance monophysite au concile de Chalcédoine jusqu' à la constitution de l'Eglise jacobite* (Louvain, 1909); also, by the same author, "La christologie du monophysitisme syrien," in *Das Konzil von Chalkedon*, I, ed. A. Grillmeier and H. Bacht (Würzburg, 1954), 425–580.

physitism. Furthermore, since these policies were not even successful in reconciling the Monophysites with the imperial church, their only result is said to be a crypto-Monophysitism, characteristic of Eastern Christianity ever since.[12]

The theological issue which stands behind this judgment on Eastern Christianity—and Byzantine Orthodox Christianity in particular—is the issue of deification, or θέωσις, as a key reality in conceiving salvation and spirituality. Indeed, it was discarded by many nineteenth-century historians of dogma (well-represented by Adolf Harnack) as a dangerous, essentially "Greek" Neoplatonic idea, totally irreconcilable with "pure" biblical Christianity. Indeed, the theology of Cyril, based upon the hypostatic unity of the Incarnate Logos, is precisely giving the doctrine of theosis its christological basis. Divinity and humanity are not existentially incompatible: it is when humanity achieves communion with God that it becomes most authentically human; on the contrary, its separation from God is dehumanizing. This basic understanding of "deification" was central to the thought not only of Athanasius, but also of the Cappadocian Fathers: between them and Cyril there is certainly direct continuity.

The problem arose, however, when deification implied absorption of humanity: this was the essence of "Eutychian" Monophysitism. It is that interpretation, exemplified by the Constantinopolitan abbot Eutyches, that made the Chalcedonian definition crucially important. The two natures of Christ—the divine and the human—though united, had to remain distinct. The distinction, formulated in the Tome of Leo, which affirmed that the two natures of Christ always preserve their respective characteristics, expressed in respectively appropriate actions (tenet enim sine defectu proprietatem suam utraque natura),[13] was reaffirmed at Chalcedon: "the distinction of natures being in no way abolished because of the union, but rather the characteristic property of each nature being preserved."[14]

To express both the unity and the distinction Chalcedon introduced a new terminology: one *hypostasis* in two natures. The terminology was not Cyrillian, because Cyril (as also the Antiochenes) used the terms ὑπόστασις and φύσις interchangeably, and spoke of "one incarnate nature of God the Word" (μία φύσις Θεοῦ λόγου σε-

---

[12] One could give a long list of authors who adopt this view. It would include J. F. Bethune-Baker, *Nestorius and His Teaching* (Cambridge, 1908); R. Devreesse, *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste* (ST 141) (Vatican City, 1948); M. V. Anastos, "The Immutability of Christ and Justinian's Condemnation of Theodore of Mopsuestia," *DOP* 6 (1951), 125–60; idem, "Nestorius was Orthodox," *DOP* 16 (1962), 119–40; A. Kartashev, *Vselenskie Sobory* (Paris, 1963), and, particularly, Ch. Moeller, "Le Chalcédonisme et le Néo-Chalcédonisme en Orient de 451 à la fin du VIᵉ siècle," in *Das Konzil von Chalkedon*, I, 637–720, which influenced several more recent studies on Maximus the Confessor (for instance, A. Riou, *Le monde et l'église selon Maxime le Confesseur* [Paris, 1973], and J. M. Guarrigues, *Maxime le Confesseur. La charité, avenir divin de l'homme* [Paris, 1976]. However, there are also defenders of "Cyrillian" christology in the name of "neo-thomism"; for instance, H. M. Diepen, *Les Trois-Chapitres au Concile de Chalcédoine. Une étude de christologie de l'Anatolie ancienne* (Oosterhout, 1953), and F. A. Sullivan, *The Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia (Analecta Gregoriana* 82) (Rome, 1956). For a more historically sophisticated approach, see also A. Grillmeier, "Der Neu-Chalkedonismus. Um die Berechtigung eines neuen Kapitals in der Dogmengeschichte," *HJ* 77 (1958), 151–66, repr. in *Mit ihm und im ihm: Christologische Forschungen und Perspektiven* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1975).

[13] *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta*, 78.

[14] Οὐδαμοῦ τῆς τῶν φύσεων διαφορᾶς ἀνῃρημένης διὰ τὴν ἕνωσιν, σωζομένης δὲ μᾶλλον τῆς ἰδιότητος ἑκατέρας φύσεως, Ibid., 86.

σαρκωμένη).[15] Neither was it Latin, since the Latin equivalent of ὑπόστασις would be *substantia,* also a rough equivalent of *natura.* However, at Chalcedon, the blatant admission of terminological discontinuity was neither explained, nor philosophically justified. Thus, the decree faced the opposition of terminological conservatives. The intention of the council, however, was certainly not to disavow Cyril or discard his theology. This can be shown in many ways. As examples, two episodes of the conciliar procedures themselves will be sufficient.

During the third session of the council, the text of the Tome of Pope Leo provoked so much criticism on the part of Illyrian and Palestinian bishops that the imperial commissioners had to close the session and arrange for Anatolius of Constantinople—an avowed Cyrillian and former friend of Dioscorus of Alexandria—to privately alleviate the fears of the opposition that the council was abandoning the faith of Cyril. At the fourth session, the bishops gave their approval to the Tome, by declaring, one by one, that it was in agreement with Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, *and Cyril.*[16] In the mind of the council Cyril was and always remained the criterion of Orthodoxy, whereas Leo could be suspect.

The second characteristic episode occurred in connection with the deposition of Dioscorus, which was a deposition in absentia, since Dioscorus had refused to appear personally. Anatolius made sure to make a formal statement that the deposition did not involve the Cyrillian doctrine, held by Dioscorus, but only disciplinary misdeeds of the Alexandrian archbishop.[17] This incident alone can serve as a preamble to the theological developments, sponsored in the sixth century by the court of Justinian to prove to the anti-Chalcedonian opposition that Cyril had not been disavowed at Chalcedon. Thus, I would argue that there is no real difference in substance between Chalcedon and neo-Chalcedonianism.[18] Where there was a difference, however, is in the vocabulary used, and particularly in the newly refined, philosophically developed meaning which was found for the term *hypostasis,* as distinct from "nature" (φύσις).

This meaning and its implications would be worked out by a group of theologians around Justinian. The rather obscure, academic style of their writing failed to make a significant impact on the Monophysite masses, who preferred to follow people who, like Severus of Antioch, represented for them the conservative trend of the "great" Cyrillian tradition. The "grammarians" of the imperial court of Constantinople, supported as they were by the might of the state, had only a limited appeal for the average churchman. And yet, they actually made a substantial contribution to a philosophy of the per-

[15] This particular—and famously controversial—formula was thought by Cyril to have been used by St. Athanasius, although, in fact, it was coming from a letter of Apollinaris of Laodicea, "To Jovian." (Cf. H. Lietzmann, *Apollinaris von Laodicea und seine Schule* [Tübingen, 1904], 251.) However, it is noteworthy that Cyril did *not* use this "Monophysite" formula in his most solemn christological formulations, such as the *Twelve Anathemas,* or the *Formula of Union* (433). It can be argued, therefore, that his terminological inconsistencies do not imply "Monophysitism."

[16] *ACO,* II, 1, 2, pp. 102–3 (298–99).

[17] Ibid., p. 124 (320); cf. other and rich evidence of the "Cyrillian" convictions of the council in J. Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church, 450–680 A.D.* (Crestwood, N.Y., 1989), 168–76; cf. also J. S. Romanides, "St. Cyril's 'One Physis or Hypostasis of God the Logos Incarnate,' and Chalcedon," *GOTR* 10 (1965–66), 82–107.

[18] Cf. also the pertinent comments by H. M. Diepen in "Les douze anathématismes au concile d'Ephèse et jusqu'en 519," *Revue Thomiste* 55 (1955), 300–338.

son. The Logos, as *hypostasis,* while remaining a possessor of the divine nature, could *be born* as a man, could *die* on the cross, could suffer and be ignorant, and thus be the *subject* of the fullness of humanity, which he was called first to assume, then to save and "deify," placing it, with himself, at the right hand of the Father. A divine *hypostasis* was therefore conceived as the "someone," the subject, able to reach out beyond divine nature and "become flesh." The divine nature would remain immutable and impassible, but the *hypostasis* would be open to "change" and passibility. This general philosophical, and certainly "new," definition of *hypostasis* (which did not exist in Aristotle) was also applicable to human persons, reaching *beyond human nature* to God himself, in "deification." [19] The *who,* therefore, is seen independently of the *what.* The whole content of the Christian faith is personalized. The immutable and unchangeable God is seen as "becoming" man and "suffering death," and each human person, as person, becomes able to transcend the limitations of created human nature.

Obviously, these theological points could be developed much further, but this cannot be done in this paper. What can be asserted, however, is that the age of Justinian saw and defined a legitimate continuity between Cyril and Chalcedon, although terminologically and philosophically there has been obvious discontinuity. This discontinuity is even formally admitted in the decree of the Fifth Council of 553, which allowed the use of the inadequate terminology of St. Cyril ("one nature incarnate"), provided one did not reject the Chalcedonian decree:[20] there were several ways in which Christ could be spoken of. These were not mutually exclusive, and Orthodoxy was not attached to a single terminological system. In fact, beyond its clumsiness, political inconsistency, and repressiveness, the religious policy of Justinian had an "ecumenical" aspect which deserves to be noted, even if it still proved inadequate in sustaining the emperor's attempts at healing the schism of Eastern Christendom.[21]

II.

The second aspect of my discussion of continuity and discontinuity concerns the Byzantine liturgy, and I would propose to consider the liturgy of the age of Justinian as a starting point. Attempts at relating its forms and its character to the christological debates, which we have just discussed, are, in my opinion, unsuccessful.[22] Except in the appearance of some special hymns (like 'Ο μονογενὴς υἱός) and some specific rituals

---

[19] On this use of *hypostasis,* see M. Richard, "L'introduction du mot 'hypostase' dans la théologie de l'incarnation," *Mélanges de science religieuse* 2 (1945), 5–32, 243–70; and particularly, K. P. Wesche, "The Christology of Leontius of Jerusalem: Monophysite or Chalcedonian?" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 31 (1987), 65–95; cf. also J. Meyendorff, "Christ as Savior in the East," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century,* ed. B. McGinn and J. Meyendorff (New York, 1985), 231–51; and *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (repr. Crestwood, N.Y., 1975), 69–90. If David Evans is correct in his identifications and hypotheses, there may have been a substantial contribution to the debate by the group of Origenists, who played a role at Justinian's court, particularly Leontius of Byzantium (Cf. D. B. Evans, *Leontius of Byzantium: An Origenist Christology* [Washington, D.C., 1970]). The substance of the debate is also well described in P. T. R. Gray, *The Defense of Chalcedon in the East (451–553)* (Leiden, 1979).

[20] Cf. Anathema 8, in *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta,* 117.

[21] Cf. J. Meyendorff, "Emperor Justinian, the Empire and the Church," *DOP* 22 (1968), 45–60, repr. in *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, N.Y., 1982), 43–66.

[22] Cf. H. J. Schulz, *The Byzantine Liturgy: Symbolic Structure and Faith Expression,* trans. by M. J. O'Connell (New York, 1986), 29–31.

(like the *zeon*), the theological debates made little impact upon popular religiosity of either the Chalcedonians or the non-Chalcedonians. And yet both the liturgy itself and the people's attitudes *toward* the liturgy were undergoing spectacular changes since the fourth century: the age of Justinian was, in many ways, the culmination of that process.

On the one hand, the changes were determined by external factors: the basic liturgical forms of the Christian sacraments (e.g., baptism and the Eucharist) go back to the pre-Constantinian period, when Christianity was a minority religion and its worship was taking place within relatively small congregations. By contrast, at Hagia Sophia of Constantinople, attendance at a festal Eucharistic liturgy could include tens of thousands. Since there was no sound system, the *words* of prayer (and of preaching) could not carry the attention of the crowd, so that the congregation could not be united by words any more, but by the *spectacle of ceremony*. The prayer of the Eucharistic *anaphora*—which by nature and intent can only be said in the first person plural, uniting celebrant and congregation before the common meal—could not be heard by anyone, especially when pronounced by aging patriarchs. Thus it began to be said silently with disjointed sentences proclaimed aloud, while chanters, or deacons, were exhorting the people to pray in less elaborate, and sometimes more aesthetically oriented hymns or petitions. Of the celebrant, who now stood within a sanctuary protected by a barrier from the crowd's access, people saw gestures, blessings, and ceremonial actions which increasingly lost their obvious meaning and had to be interpreted symbolically. This evolution of the liturgy was not welcomed by all. Justinian himself tried to reverse the trend and formally prescribed that "all bishops and priests pronounce the prayers of oblation and of the holy baptism not silently but aloud. . . . How otherwise the ranks of simple people will be able to answer Amen to the Eucharist?"[23] But even the imperial will could not prevail over physical conditions, which since the fourth century had begun to radically modify the character of worship, as imperial patronage and general church wealth created immense basilicas in all major urban centers.

But the evolution of the original, communal liturgy into spectacular ceremonial was not occurring in an intellectual void. It corresponded to an evolution of ideas, which can be followed in the texts. Not that this evolution started from nothing: the element of liturgical and ceremonial *mystery* was present in the Eucharist from its Jewish beginnings, but the *emphasis* placed upon the mysterious and the symbolic developed more and more, as the church endeavored to protect the sacrament from casualness and profanation by crowds of nominal Christians filling the basilicas. Thus, Chrysostom still insists in his sermons on the relationship between the liturgical action and the historical Jesus: "He who waited on that table of old also waits on this one now. . . . A priest stands at the altar and speaks the words spoken of old, but the power and the grace are from God."[24] Soon, symbolic interpretations began to dominate liturgical thinking. For Theodore of Mopsuestia—Chrysostom's contemporary—the deacons should be seen as angels,[25] and Isidore of Pelusium extends symbolism further: "the pure linen that is

[23] Novel 137, 6, in *CIC Nov.*, p. 699; see many other texts quoted in P. Trembelas, "L'audition de l'anaphore eucharistique par le peuple," in *L'Eglise et les églises: Etudes et travaux offerts à Dom Lambert Beauduin* II (Chevetogne, 1955), 207–20.

[24] De prod. Iudae, hom. 1, 6 (PG 49, col. 380).

[25] Hom cat. 15, 25, *Les homélies catéchétiques de Théodore de Mopsuestia*, ed. R. Tonneau and R. Devreesse (ST 145) (Vatican City, 1949), 503–5.

spread [on the altar] for the sake of the sacrificial gifts represents the liturgical service of Joseph of Arimathea."[26] Finally, at the time of Justinian, this trend toward symbolism finds its consistent and, in some respects, revolutionary expression in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius.

Of course the intention of the famous, though unknown, author is not to be a spiritual revolutionary. Quite to the contrary: he is fully aware of the link between the Eucharist and the historical Jesus, and refers to that connection in his own peculiar way. Furthermore, his pseudonym must be interpreted as a confession of conservatism, or at least as a desire to be interpreted "within the tradition." And yet, even in his style and in the selection of gestures and liturgical actions which he chooses to comment upon in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, he always projects that which is seen, the spectacle, with the *words* being largely ignored and practically never quoted. Pseudo-Dionysius writes for those who contemplate the liturgy, as witnesses of a mystery, becoming recipients of spiritual graces, accessible to their "minds."

> We must look attentively upon the beauty which gives it so divine a form and we must turn a reverent glance to the double movement of the hierarch when he goes first from the divine altar to the far edges of the sacred place spreading the fragrance and then returns to the altar. For the blessed divinity, which transcends all being, while proceeding gradually outward because of goodness to commune with those who partake of him, never actually departs from his essential stability and immobility. . . . The divine sacrament of the synaxis remains what it is, unique, simple, and indivisible and yet, out of love for humanity, it is pluralized in a sacred variegation of symbols. . . . [The divine hierarch] generously hands down to his inferiors that unique hierarchic understanding which is especially his own. He resorts to a multitude of sacred enigmas. Then, freely and untrammeled by anything beneath him, he returns to his own starting point without having any loss. In his mind he journeys toward the One. . . .[27]

There are certainly Christian antecedents for such a vision, borrowed from Neoplatonism, of a hierarchic world, with a movement of "procession and return."[28] These are to be found particularly in Origen and Origenism. But nobody, before Pseudo-Dionysius, applied such a vision to the very details of the Christian liturgy, interpreting it in terms of a gnostic initiation, a symbolic involvement in the contemplation of a divine hierarchical presence *above* us, and not—as implied in the early Christian liturgy—a common prayer with Christ revealed by the Holy Spirit as a presence "within" the community.

The Dionysian conception of the liturgy, and his view of the relationship between God and creatures in general, has been connected with the history of architecture. Of course, there is no evidence of a direct relationship between Pseudo-Dionysius and Hagia Sophia, but it has been said that the dome of Byzantine churches "was not chosen for practical reasons, but as an expression of Neoplatonic Christianity; Byzantine domed churches are Dionysius the Areopagite translated into stone and brick, marble and gold, mosaic and gem."[29]

Thus, the way Christian liturgy was celebrated in the sixth century and interpreted

[26] Epist. i, 123 (PG 78, cols. 264D–265A).

[27] Eccl. Hier. III, 3 (PG 3, col. 428D–429B; tr. by Colm Luibheid [New York, 1987], 212–13).

[28] Cf. particularly the detailed study by P. Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (Toronto, 1984).

[29] C. Schneider, *Geistesgeschichte der antikes Christentums* (Munich, 1954), 100.

by Pseudo-Dionysius was, indeed, a major sign of *discontinuity,* if compared to the earlier period. However, within Byzantine Orthodoxy, there were also two decisive elements of *continuity:* one, the texts of the most central sacramental prayers—particularly baptism and the Eucharistic canons—remained the same, and were never rewritten in the Dionysian style or in order to reflect his theology; two, the fundamental and hotly debated christological doctrine was still based on interpreting the *historical Incarnation.* And although some Dionysian ideas were used by both sides during the iconoclastic debates, it is still the person of Jesus of Nazareth—historical and representable—which served as the decisive argument of the iconodules to affirm the legitimacy of holy images.

Dionysian ideas remained very strong among some Byzantine interpreters of the liturgy and they also influenced popular piety, but there was also, among most interpreters, a christological corrective to those ideas. The Alexandrian, contemplative, and "vertical" approach is complemented by an "Antiochian" search for a liturgy which is, typologically, connected with the historical events described in the Bible and also anticipating the eschatological fulfillment. In the past two decades, several scholars have begun a study of the Byzantine liturgy, which distinguishes its contents—where its continuity lies—from interpretations which vary greatly, and reflect often quite important changes in culture and piety.[30] This is a fruitful methodology, which should be encouraged.

Actually, the liturgy could be used much more systematically by Byzantinists interested—as all historians necessarily are—in the problem of continuity and discontinuity. As a whole, the liturgy, by definition, expresses the identity of the Christian community both in time and in space. In order to understand the Byzantines, it is important to remember that all of them spent long hours in church—weekly, or even daily—singing, memorizing texts, and integrating theological concepts almost routinely within daily language and daily life. Following the age of Justinian, the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius and the iconoclastic crisis, the church of Constantinople acquired a set of liturgical forms and liturgical hymnography which would remain rather stable for the rest of the medieval period, and even until today. Translated into Slavic, Arabic, Georgian, and other languages, these forms gave a spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic shape to the whole of the Byzantine Orthodox world and served as a powerful instrument of continuity and unity. And yet, if one considers not only the texts, but also their interpretation, their ordering, their use, as they appear in changing *Typika,* or in the commentaries of the liturgy, in architectural form, in style and iconography, the elements of variety and discontinuity immediately become apparent.

III.

Considering briefly the late Byzantine period, we discover some parallelism with the situation of preiconoclastic times. Doctrinal disputes between Palamites and anti-

---

[30] Cf. particularly R. Bornert, *Les commentaires byzantins de la divine liturgie de VIIe au XVe siècles* (Paris, 1966); also R. Taft, "The Liturgy of the Great Church: An Initial Synthesis of Structure and Interpretation on the Eve of Iconoclasm," *DOP* 34–35 (1980–81), 45–76; P. Meyendorff, *St. Germanus of Constantinople on the Divine Liturgy: The Greek Text with Translation, Introduction and Commentary* (Crestwood, N.Y., 1984); H. J. Schulz, *Byzantine Liturgy,* 22–99.

Palamites, as fierce as the christological controversies of the earlier period, end with
doctrinal statements issued by councils. The difference is that the debates occur on a
much smaller scale within the exiguous confines of the shrinking state of the Palaiologi.
But the church of Constantinople still exercises administrative control and strong spir-
itual and intellectual influence over Eastern Europe, so that theological options taken
in Byzantium have an impact on a wide range of cultural and political events.

Both sides of the theological debate of the fourteenth century were accusing their
opponents of being "innovators" and were claiming to be themselves alone the guardi-
ans of doctrinal continuity. One of the issues was, indeed, to ascertain whether Palamite
distinction between divine essence and the divine uncreated energies was based on the
theology of the Cappadocian Fathers and St. Maximus the Confessor or, on the con-
trary, contradicted that tradition. Furthermore, both sides were invoking the authority
of Pseudo-Dionysius. Without going into detail, it can be said here that the Palamite
theology, which triumphed in late Byzantium, was concerned primarily (as was also the
christological settlement of the Justinianic era) with preserving the idea that God and
humanity could interpenetrate each other while remaining distinct; that the Christian
faith was to be expressed in terms of communion with God (or "deification," *theosis*) and
not in terms of external gifts of divine grace bestowed upon a created *habitus;* that, while
giving himself to humanity, God remains transcendent, but fully existing both in his
essential transcendence and in the gift of himself to creatures.

It is fortunate that the confessionally charged and voluminous literature which has
appeared on the subject in the past few decades seems to be reaching irenic conclusions,
generally favorable to Palamas, even in the writings of Western theologians. "Entirely
faithful to the biblical and traditional perspective," writes André de Halleux, "Palamism
places the uncreated energies within God himself, and considers that they proceed
freely from God, within the economy of the Word's incarnation, through which they
reach the baptized, in order to deify him, not without his collaboration."[31] One can
conclude, therefore, that the definitions of the Palamite councils of the fourteenth cen-
tury (1341, 1347, 1351) witness doctrinal continuity in the Byzantine church, even if

---

[31] "Entièrement fidèle à la perspective biblique et traditionnelle, le palamisme situe les énergies incréées
en Dieu luimême, d'où il les voit procéder librement, dans l'économie de l'incarnation du Verbe, à travers
laquelle elles atteignent le baptisé, pour le déifier, et non sans sa collaboration," *Irénikon* 48 (1975), 486,
repr. in *Patrologie et oecuménisme* (= Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium XCIII) (Leu-
ven, 1990), 823. For the writings of Palamas see P. Khrestuo, Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ συγγράμματα, 4 vols
(Thessaloniki, 1962–88); also J. Meyendorff, *Grégoire Palamas: Défense des saints hésychastes*, 2 vols. (2nd ed;
Louvain, 1973); Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, ed. with an introduction by John Meyendorff, trans. by Nich-
olas Gendle (New York, 1983); R. E. Sinkewicz, *Saint Gregory Palamas, The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters:
A Critical Edition, Translation and Study* (Toronto, 1988). There are also modern editions of contemporary
Byzantine theologians, either defending the Palamite view (for instance, Ἰωσὴφ Καλοθέτου συγγράμματα,
ed. D. G. Tsames [Thessaloniki, 1980]; Φιλοθέου κοκκίνου δογματικὰ ἔργα, ed. D. V. Klimakes [Thessalon-
iki, 1983]; *Johannis Cantacuzeni Refutationes due Prochori Cydonii et Disputatio cum Paulo*, ed. E. Voordeckers
and F. Tinnefeld [Turnhout-Leuven, 1987]), or opposing it (*Letters of Gregory Akindynos*, Greek text and
English trans. by A. C. Hero [Washington, D.C., 1983]; *Nikephoros Gregoras Antirrhetika I. Einleitung, Text-
ausgabe, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen*, ed. H.-V. Beyer [Wien, 1976]). For secondary literature, see D. Stier-
non, "Bulletin sur le palamisme," *REB* 30 (1972), 231–341 (303 titles published beween 1959 and 1970),
and J. Meyendorff, "Palamas," in *DSp* 12, 1 (Paris, 1984), col. 81–107; see further bibliography in the works
of A. de Halleux and R. E. Sinkewicz, quoted above.

some of the terminology was considered by Palamas himself not as a repetition of earlier statements, but their "development" (ἀνάπτυξις).[32]

But the victory of Palamism also had results other than doctrinal. It was a victory of monastics who practically took over much of the administration of the church and imposed their priorities on much of its religious and cultural policies. This take-over, which was actually in the making since the late thirteenth century, can be discovered even visually in the representation of the church councils of the period, where one sees the entire ecclesiastical attendance of those assemblies—including bishops and patriarchs—wearing the black monastic veil.[33] The full monastic set of priorities cannot be discussed again here. I will only point out the changes which occurred in the liturgy and which determined liturgical piety in the following century, both in Turkish-dominated areas and in Russia.

Philotheos Kokkinos, *hegoumenos,* or abbot of Lavra, on Mt. Athos, a friend, disciple, and later biographer of Gregory Palamas, was one of the major promoters of the new monastic rule in the church. Twice he occupied the patriarchal throne (1353–54, 1364–76) and was the author of a liturgical codification, composed while he was still on Athos. Through him the reform was accepted as a pattern in the entire church (including the Slavic churches).[34] During the same period, in a process also undoubtedly initiated by the new monastic leadership, the monastic *Typikon* of St. Sabas of Palestine was accepted everywhere except southern Italy.[35] Within the framework of that process one can better understand the architecture and internal arrangement of many churches built in this period: smaller in size and more congenial to intimate monastic forms of worship. However, this intimacy did not seem to have restored to the liturgy the more communal character it possessed during the Early Christian period. It is in the late fourteenth century that the sanctuary barrier was transformed into a solid wall covered with icons.[36] Consequently, the liturgy, more than ever, continued to be seen as a mystery being *contemplated* with the celebrant making appearances, then disappearing behind the screen and the curtain, with the vision and perspective of Pseudo-Dionysius being confirmed in the legitimacy it received in the sixth century.

There can be no real doubt that the monastic influence contributed to these developments in Byzantium and to their transmission to the Balkans and to Russia. And yet,

---

[32] Cf. supra, note 6.

[33] See particularly the miniature representing the council of 1351 in the Paris gr. 1242, fol. 5v, and the almost contemporary Mosq. Syn. Gr. 429, fol. 28v (cf. identifications and commentary in G. M. Prokhorov, "A Codicological Analysis of the Illuminated *Akathistos* of the Virgin, Moscow, State Historical Museum, Synodal Gr. 429," *DOP* 26 (1972), 237–54.

[34] Διάταξις τῆς ἱεροδιακονίας, ed. J. Goar, Εὐχολόγιον, *sive rituale graecorum* (Venice, 1730), 1–3; Διάταξις τῆς θείας λειτουργίας, ed. P. N. Trempelas, Αἱ τρεῖς λειτουργίαι κατὰ τοὺς ἐν Ἀθήναις κώδικας (Athens, 1935), 1–16.

[35] Cf. the description of the process in R. Taft, "Mount Athos: A Late Chapter in the History of the Byzantine Rite," *DOP* 42 (1988), 190–94.

[36] Cf. C. Walter, "The Origins of the Iconostasis," in *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1973), 251–67; A. W. Epstein, "Middle Byzantine Sanctuary Barrier: Templon or Iconostasis?" *JBAA* 134 (1981), 1–25; Maria Cheremeteff, "The Transformation of the Russian Sanctuary Barrier and the Role of Theophanes the Greek," in A. Leong, *The Millennium: Christianity and Russia, 988–1988* (Crestwood, N.Y., 1990), 107–24. This last study seems to imply that the "solid" iconostasis was a Russian phenomenon, brought about by Theophanes and the "hesychast" influence; in fact, the Byzantine origin of the phenomenon is certain (cf. R. Taft, *The Great Entrance* [Rome, 1975], 413) and the "hesychast" influence rather conjectural.

in this case as in the case of Palaiologan style and iconography, one should be careful not to reduce this monastic influence to a stereotype. In the late fourteenth century there appears a new interpretation of the liturgy, that of Nicholas Cabasilas. Both in style and in his overall interpretation of the liturgy, Cabasilas, being certainly a Palamite, departs from Dionysian models, or at least marginalizes them.[37] He is a lay theologian who succeeded in reestablishing a balance between the various dimensions of the Eucharist, as a memorial of an historical event, as an initiatory mystery and as a *locus* of communion of people with God. Thus, the monastic take-over of the Byzantine church in the fourteenth century did not determine a simplified and uniform religious vision. Conservative popular piety, more than theological ideas, continued to reflect the Dionysian model of liturgical interpretation, which at the time of its appearance had been a revolution. The christocentric and realistic theology expressed by people like Palamas and Cabasilas stems really not from Dionysius, but from the fundamental vision, found in the sacramental texts themselves.

My considerations on continuities and discontinuities in Byzantine religious thought can be concluded with the following, very general, but perhaps surprising, comment: there was in Byzantine Christianity unquestionable continuity in doctrine, and quite some discontinuities in liturgy. One recent French scholar could even write: "No rite in our Christian churches has known such dynamism and so many changes as the Byzantine. The Roman rite through all its history, even after the reform of Vatican II, has remained a rite singularly archaic in its structure and theology. The Byzantine rite, on the contrary, has undergone multiple influences of place, persons, theological currents."[38]

In studying and understanding those changes, one has to refer not only to the texts themselves but also to the commentaries, which reveal various phenomenologies of the liturgical action and help to understand not only internal processes within the Byzantine church, but also its flexibility and ability to assume cultural changes and different phenomenologies. Perhaps this flexibility contributed to its expansion beyond the Greek-speaking world.

St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary

---

[37] Besides the Migne text (PG 150, cols. 368–492), there is a critical edition of Cabasilas' *Interpretation* ('Ερμηνεία) of the divine liturgy by R. Bornert, J. Gouillard, and P. Périchon (SC 4, bis) (Paris, 1967), an an English tr. by J. M. Hussey and P. A. Nulty (London, 1960). On Cabasilas, see the comments by H.-J. Schulz, *Byzantine Liturgy*, 124–32.

[38] N. Egender in the introduction to *La prière des heures:* 'Ωρολόγιον, *La prière des églises de rite byzantin,* I (Chevetogne, 1975), 88–89.