

ST. GREGORY PALAMAS AND THE OTTOMAN TURKS: PATRISTIC INSIGHTS FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Pavel PAVLOV¹

¹Sofia University „Sv. Kliment Ohridski”, Bulgaria

Abstract: *St. Gregory Palamas, one of the key theologians for, but not only, the theologians of the Russian theological school in Paris as the conceptualizer of a relationship towards Islam. The author examines the proposed method of St. Gregory towards the Ottomans during his time and relates them to the contemporary situation within Europe and beyond. Key points regarding toleration and contemporary attitudes are addressed as well as prejudices, established on uncertain historical facts are brought to light.*

Keywords: St. Gregory Palamas, Ottoman, Empire, Turkey, tolerance, religious tolerance, coexistence, palamism, hesychasm, Florovsky, Meyendorff.

The proposed theme concerns some of the research interests of the ever-memorable Father John Meyendorff, as well as my personal interests during the last couple of years. My first exposure to the works of Fr. John was through his "Byzantine views of Islam"¹ which inspired my research on the intersection between Christianity and Islam, between the Roman and Ottoman empires. Several years ago, I was a part of the team that prepared and published a Bulgarian translation of a collection of texts by Father John Meyendorff focusing on the history of the Byzantine Church, and his text about Christianity and Islam fell quite naturally among the selected ones for the publication.² Another text that discusses the same topic within the context of St. Gregory Palamas is Father John's now famous dissertation,³ which for my generation in the European East, in the former communist countries, was a kind of first opening to the world of the late Byzantine Holy Fathers.

Here I would like to focus your attention on one well known episode in the life of St. Gregory Palamas - his captivity by the Turks. The experience of St. Gregory Palamas during his captivity is not only a good historical example. In my view, it provides a source for a serious

¹ J. Meyendorff, "Byzantine views of Islam" in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18 (1964), pp. 115-132. This text is also published in *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press 2000, pp. 89-114.

² Й. Майендорф, *Византийската Църква. Между небето и земята (Студии върху историята на Църквата във Византия)*. Translated by B. Marinov with the theological edition and preface by P. Pavlov, Sofia, 2007. This publication was made possible with the consent of Mrs. Maria Meyendorff.

³ J. Meyendorff. *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas*, Patristica Sorbonensia, Paris 1959.

theological reflection that could be highly relevant for both our present and future. The violent “Arab spring” and the events in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East are increasingly raising the questions about the Christian co-existence with Islam, about the potential possibilities for the evolution of Islamic communities, etc.

Increasingly, one can hear voices that are trying to convey that we are witnessing a process of modernization of Islam. Is this possible? How would this modernization affect the possibilities for coexistence between Christians and Muslims? Do we have similar analogies in the history of Christianity? As a church historian the natural starting point would be to look at the tradition of the Church. One of the ways of doing this was suggested in the neo-patristic synthesis which Fr. John Meyendorff was part of – following the *way* of the Fathers and not just ideas from their works. According to Father Georges Florovsky a true historical synthesis consists not so much in interpreting the past but rather in the creative envisioning of the future.

The Tradition

Fr. Georges Florovsky defines "Tradition" in the Church not as a continuity of human memory, or a permanence of rites and habits but as a „living tradition - *depositum juvenescens* (St. Irenaeus). Accordingly, it cannot be considered as *inter mortuas regulas* [among dead rules]. Ultimately, our tradition is the continuity of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, a continuity of Divine guidance and illumination.”⁴

Focusing on the captivity of St. Gregory by the Ottoman sultan from March 1354 to the Summer of 1355, we must note that at this time the Byzantine empire as a whole is fairly unstable. On the one hand, this is due to the ongoing civil war which has continued for several decades, and on the other hand, to the external pressure from the Serbian state, led by the Dushans, as well as from Genoa, Venice and the Ottoman Turks. A second reason for the lack of peace, both within the Empire and the Balkans in general, was the theological disputes that continued over a decade and ended with the conciliar recognition of Palamism by

⁴ G. Florovsky, St Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 5 (1959-1960) pp. 119-131. In Bulgarian: Г. Флоровски, Св. Григорий Палама и преданието на св. отци (превод Е. Трайчев), in *Библия, Църква, Предание*, Православно гледанце, София, 2003, с. 139.

the Synods in 1341, 1347 and 1351.⁵ It will be after these councils that Palamism becomes an officially confessed teaching of the Church of Constantinople. A third reason for the challenges of that time is the plague that overtook the Empire in the period 1347 – 1351. Until now historiography paid very little attention to this fact, but the size of the epidemic does not permit neglecting it. The “Black Death” kills 30% of the Balkan population, and most affected are the southern regions of the peninsula.⁶ The existing reports about the city of Constantinople claim that the plague affected eight ninths of the population.⁷

Despite the efforts of Emperor Ioannis VI Kantakuzin, after 1352 the situation becomes uncontrollable. The Empire is defeated by Genoa, which completely controls the trade in the Black Sea. Orhan, who is the son-in-law of Kantakuzin, finally steps in Europe. The Venetians also support the opposing party - that of Ioannis V Paleologos. The Serbians and the Bulgarians are also part of this camp. With the help of the Ottoman Turks at the end of 1352, Kantakuzin defeats the united forces. The next step of the emperor is to declare his son Matthew Kantakuzin as his successor and co-emperor. As a result the legitimate emperor Ioannis V is removed even from the church diptychs. The protesting Patriarch Kalistos is dethroned, and a new Patriarch is elected – Philotheos Kokkinos, who crowns Matthew as co-emperor at the beginning of 1354. But the triumph of Kantakuzin proves to be a "Pyrrhic victory" because, after the conquest of Gallipoli⁸ by the Turks, the capital of the Empire – Constantinople is threatened. Ioannis V Paleologos is isolated in Thessaloniki, where also his mother Anne of Savoy is.

In these circumstances, there was an obvious need of negotiations between the two sides. The most suitable person for this purpose is the competent Archbishop of Thessaloniki. On the one hand, he is a spiritual mentor of both patriarchs – Kalistos and Philotheos, and on the other - St. Gregory is considered as being close to Ioannis Kantakuzin since the time of the controversies. We should not also miss the fact that he is the diocesan bishop of Thessaloniki, where most of the supporters of Ioannis Paleologos live. Also, we should not

⁵ V. Hristoforides, *Oi isihastikes erides kata to 14o aiona*, Thessaliniki 1993, p. 24.

⁶ On this matter see X. Маманов, „Чумни пандемии и история,” In: *Civitas Divino Numana*, София 2004, pp. 339-346.

⁷ Cf. Г. Острогорски, *История на Византийската държава*, София, 1998, p. 663.

⁸ It happened after the earthquake on March 2nd 1354 when a great portion of the Christian population left the region, feared by the destructions.

underestimate the origin of the hierarch, as well as his perfect education in the humanitarian sciences, which he received from his teacher the great logothetus Theodore Metochit. Even though he left the world to become a monk, St. Gregory Palamas is not only highly knowledgeable, but also has a great talent that could be used in secular social interactions. We can say that in him there is an incredible combination of asceticism, theological erudition, and talent, including a distinctive ability in discerning the vital impulses of his time. So, although still unrecovered from a serious illness, the hierarch must go on a diplomatic mission.

The capturing of the Archbishop by the Turks happens on the road from Thessaloniki to Constantinople, where he has to mediate between Ioannis Kantakuzin and Ioannis V Paleologos. His capture lasts no later than the summer of 1355 since in a decision of the Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from the 17th of August one can find his signature.⁹ The main literary source of information about his captivity is the "*Epistle to my Church*". (It should be mentioned that there are two preserved letters written by St Gregory during this period: the first is addressed to the physician Taronitis and contains information about the dispute of St. Gregory with the chionits;¹⁰ the second is addressed to an unknown person and is almost identical to the "*Epistle to my Church*".)¹¹

Our attention will be concentrated not so much on the apologetic or polemic character of the "*Epistle*", but on the available information that shows his view of the relationship between the Roman Empire and the Christians, and between the Ottoman Empire and the Muslims?.

In the beginning the "*Epistle to my Church*" starts exclusively in the

⁹ CFHB, 19/3. Das Register des Patriarchats von Konstantinopel, 3, Wien, 2001, p. 546.

¹⁰ In the literature there are several opinions about this group: sailors, who engage in religious activity; Islamic teachers, Jews, or Christians Jews converted to Islam. Most probably it is the last. The name "chionits" probably is incorrectly pronounced – in fact it is "sionists." For more details on this subject see Г. Прохоров, Прение Григория Паламы с "хионы и турки" и проблема жидовская мудрствующих, *ТОДА*, 1972, pp. 334-337; St. Gregory calls them "Hebrews" and does not want to dispute with them, turning his attention mostly to the Muslims.

¹¹ The texts of „*Epistle to my Church*” and of the other two letters are published in the critical edition of Anna Lilipidis – Braat in *Travaux et memories* 7, Paris 1979, in Greek these letters are published in *Gregorion tou Palama. Singrammata*, V. 1, Thessaloniki, 1988; the English translation: Daniel Sahas, "Captivity and dialogue: Gregory Palamas and the muslims," in *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 25, 1980, pp. 409-436; the Russian translation was done by Fr. Igor Ekonomtsev in *Православие, Византия, Россия*, Paris 1989, pp. 277-297.

tradition of the church epistolary style like the epistles of St. Paul. Then it moves on to discuss the greatness of God's mercy to everyone. Further the Saint continues his story of how Christians and Muslims live together and contradict each other, how they govern together and how they submit to the authorities.¹² In this part the holy hierarch calls the Ottoman Turks "the greatest of all barbarians,"¹³ and that they are allowed by God as a minor penalty, because of the multitude of sins of Christians, but if the Ottomans do not repent, they are to expect the unquenchable fire.¹⁴

In the next part St. Gregory talks about the reasons for leaving the city of Thessaloniki, about the earthquake that occurred on March 2 1354, and destroyed the town of Gallipoli, which made it easy prey for the Ottomans. Next, the story continues with the way of capturing the ship and with the beginning of the captivity in the town of Lampsak, as well as the opportunity for St. Gregory to be ransomed.¹⁵ He resents the fact that the Ottomans, though knowing about Christ, do not accept Him as God and Savior, but worship Mohammed, who is a mortal man.¹⁶

Then the Saint, together with the accompanying monks,¹⁷ is taken to Piga, where he is threatened by the Turks in order for them to get the ransom quicker. When this doesn't happen, they allow him to go to the Christians, who, despite their difficult life, freely confess Christ and quietly perform their religious duties.¹⁸

The story continues in the Sultan's residence near Bursa, where

¹² Epistle 3.

¹³ This opinion of St. Gregory Palamas concerning the Muslims leads the researchers to talk about a new stage in the attitude of the Church of Constantinople to Islam. The traditional Byzantine understanding of Mohammedan faith is that it is an apostasy from the true teachings of God, i.e. a heresy. Cf. И. Майендорф, "Византийски представи за исляма," in *Богословска мисъл* 2 (2002) pp. 18-40. In the attitude of the Archbishop of Thessaloniki Islam is now treated as a faith very different from Christianity, as a new religion. Cf. D. Sahas, "Captivity and dialogue: Gregory Palamas and the muslims," in *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 25, 1980, p. 432.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ransom money was demanded for the freedom of the Saint, which, according to the author of the panegyric – Philoteos Kokkinos, was paid after a year by Serbian merchants. It is noteworthy that neither of the two opposed parties, for whose reconciliation St. Gregory left his diocese, did not show interest and concern for his release.

¹⁶ Epistle, 8.

¹⁷ During his diplomatic mission St. Gregory was accompanied by two monks – Josef and Gerasimos. See Epistle 19.

¹⁸ Epistle 10.

the Saint meets one of the grandsons of Orhan - Ishmael. The conversation between them is calm and even friendly. The questions concern practical issues: the alms, the Incarnation of God, the death on the Cross of the Savior, the meaning of the Cross itself, etc. The story mentions the Saint's dispute with the group of chionits.

Then the Saint is moved to Nicaea, where he visits the monastery of "St. Yakint", which is described as a wonderful place for spiritual life. The Saint is allowed to remain there. The author describes the beautiful church, the beautiful trees and flowers in the monastery yard and the well with fresh water.

Next, there is an episode where at the gates of Nicaea the hierarch disputes with one representative of the Islamic cult. This happens after St. Gregory became an unwilling witness to a Muslim funeral rite. Through an interpreter he asks the mullah what the meaning of this ritual is. The Muslim replies that this way they pray God for forgiveness of the sins of the deceased. An interesting conversation about the persons of Christ and Mohammed starts. After listening to the arguments by St. Gregory, the Turks are irritated. The Saint smiles as a sign of reconciliation and says that if we fully agree with the words of the other, then we would confess the same truth, but "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it" (Matt. 19:12). One of the Muslims says that a time will come when we will reach agreement. St. Gregory agrees with him and expresses hope that this will happen soon.

On this occasion, in his "*Epistle to his Church*," he explains that Muslims, although not living according to Christ's law now, eventually will become followers of Christ, recalling the words of the Apostle, that every knee will bend before the name of Christ and every tongue will confess, that he is God for the glory of the Father (Phil. 2: 10-11; Rom. 14: 11). If this does not happen soon, it will take place at the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁹

The story of what happened during the captivity stops here and in the spirit of St. Paul's epistles the real pastoral instruction of the Thessalonian Christians begins. First, he uses the occasion to talk about the living faith, which reveals itself in deeds, otherwise "we remain demons and enemies of God because we resist God with our deeds." Immediately the Saint gives an example from the real life: the Ottoman Muslims also believe in the virginity of the Theotokos and in the conception of Christ by the Holy Spirit, i.e. that He is Theanthropos,

¹⁹ Epistle 29.

but in their insanity they flee from Him and deny His divinity²⁰ (cf. Rome. 1: 21-23). "Keep yourself not falling in the position of calling the virtues and the Divine commandments - fair and kind, but in your deeds turning away from them. Tell me, whether anyone from the unfaithful would believe when you say you believe in Him Who is Virgin, born from a virgin Father before the ages, and then - in the present times born from the Virgin Mary, but at the same time you do not keep virginity or even observe prudence, not restraining your passions to others' women and indulging yourself to lechery?"²¹

In this question there are two key moments.

- 1) There is no situation that can not be used to witness the Christian faith.
- 2) Every Christian bears a great responsibility for helping the unfaithful to get closer to the true Faith.

Further on, the Saint points out how Christ acts in such cases. Finally, in the patristic spirit of realism, he shows us the way to a victory over the passions - namely with the grace of the Holy Spirit, because he who unites himself with God by his virtues becomes one spirit with God (1 Cor. 6:17). This is how the deification of man occurs.

At the same time there are some political developments in the Empire. In the summer of 1354 Ioannis V Palaeologos enters into an alliance with the Genoese, who help him to take Constantinople. In November, the same year Ioannis Kantakuzin is forced to abdicate. Withdrawing from the throne, he retires to a monastery – he becomes a monk named Joasaf, but not fully renouncing the world. In the next 30 years (he dies on June 15th, 1383 in Peloponnese) he does not stop being interested, to write, to persuade and intervene in the affairs of the Empire.

Since the summer of 1354 Venice is also manifesting a clear intention to participate in the distribution of the remnants of the dying Empire. The end of the Roman Empire, or as we usually call it Byzantium, is imminent. In this difficult situation, in December 1355, Ioannis V rather naively turns to the Pope in Avignon asking for military aid and in exchange he promises to subdue his people to the Pope in six months. No real action takes place in this direction, but the Unia remains as an alternative in the minds of the governing elite until the end of the Empire in 1453. This in turn deprives the Orthodox people of their

²⁰ More on the Islam Christology see in С. Симић, *Учење Корана о Исусу Христу*, Београд, 2002

²¹ Epistle 34.

loyalty to the emperor's authority. This additionally weakens the military machine and the spirit within the Empire. There is no trace of the famous Roman superiority and the understanding of being chosen, the catholicity and the providential purpose of the State.

Insights for the present

Besides the purely theological dimensions of St. Gregory's discussions with the Ottoman Turks, his story reveals his views on the Ottoman state. Unlike the Roman humanists (Demetrius Cydones, for example), who for the sake of saving the empire are ready to sacrifice almost everything, including their orthodox faith, the leader of the hesychasts does not believe that the victory over the Ottoman Turks will put an end to the decline. He describes the life of the Christians in the conquered territories pointing out and praising the religious tolerance of the conquerors. In a sense, this is understandable since the tolerance of the Ottomans greatly contrasts the persecutions of the Orthodox people in Cyprus by the Latins.

St. Gregory is treated respectfully; he is allowed to preach, to meet the Christians and the rest of the prisoners, to live in a monastery and probably – to serve liturgies. He describes Ishmael – the grandson of Orhan, in a very sympathetic way. He had multiple occasions to talk with representatives of the Ottoman elite, pointing out that those who rule over numerous nations are obliged to know all the doctrines and find the true ones. This line of thought provides a continuous motivation for the Saint to talk openly about his faith in front of the Ottoman elite. Despite the development of events in Asia Minor (and soon after this in the Balkan Peninsula as well) which is not in favor of Christianity and the Christians, the Saint does not accept the situation and believes that it will change for good. Maybe this is the hope that held and kept the Balkans Orthodox. (It is a fact that in its early years, the Ottoman state is characterized by extreme religious tolerance, which decreased since the sixteenth century onwards, when the Empire gradually turns into a caliphate, assuming the role of a protector of Islam.)

The Saint's whole attitude towards the Ottoman state convinces us, that in the dilemma – the West or the Turks - there is a third resolution: a unity of the Orthodox with a spiritual center on Mount Athos, within the boundaries of a religiously tolerant empire. The hesychasts really create a spiritual foundation for the unity of the Balkan world as an opposition to the hostility between the East and the

West.²² This unity continued to live in the monasteries of Mount Athos, in the Rila Monastery, in the monasteries Ravanitsa and Manassia, in the Moldavian monasteries, in Russia etc., by keeping the spirituality that will raise the Balkan peoples for a new life in the 19th century.

Today in Europe, there is an understanding that was vocalized by the first federal president of Germany Theodor Hoys, that there are three hills providing the beginnings of Europe: Golgotha, the Acropolis and Capitola. This is a good starting point for building Europe's future. However, is it sufficient? Christian Wulff, Germany's president between 2010 and 2012 affirmed that Islam has become part of Germany's culture. We see the efforts of Turkey, which also, from purely geographical reasons, is a European country. For decades, Turkey had adopted an utterly secular policy, which has an analogue only within the Soviet system of undervaluing and marginalizing religion. Both Christians and Muslims had been equally affected by this secular policy. The government of the current Prime Minister Redjep Erdogan leads a policy related to values, which is more typical for Europe, than for Asia. The religious freedoms become more and more guaranteed and the impound estates of some of the non-Islamic religious communities will be returned, the services at the monastery Sumela were now made possible. The ruling circles are trying to control the Parliament in order to guarantee the freedom of the major institutions and of the civil rights that were broken by the utterly secular arbitrariness and the political influence of the General Staff of the Army. The secular nationalism of Ataturk seems to give up its place to a more conservatively oriented society. One could already hear voices identifying this policy as a Muslim democracy, a Turkish version of the Christian democracy, although the democratic part is up for debate.

Conclusion

As theologians, we do not have the right to tolerate intellectual negligence and to disregard the reality that we live in. We cannot change the reality - it is imperfect, but it is our reality, given by God, in which we live, and we do not have to dream up a different imaginary one. That is why I think we should clearly delimit what our present reality takes from us in comparison to preceding epochs and what it inarguably offers us.

²² Very interesting interpretation about the supremacy of the Balkans over the East and the West has St. Nickolay of Serbia in *Изнад Истока и Запада*, Цветник, Београд, 2002, pp. 5-30.

We do not have the right to ignore its lessons, even if we do get more experienced and wiser. We do not have the right to pretend that we live in some imaginary world. We must be Christ's disciples here and now, not somewhere else. This is what St. Gregory Palamas and the whole Tradition of the holy Fathers teaches us. This is what was most beautifully expressed by St. Philaret of Moscow in his sermon on the feast of St Alexis in 1841: *“Was not the Lord Himself called Master, and did He not call His followers disciples? Christians, before they assumed this title, bore the name of disciples. Would these terms be vain or meaningless? And why did the Lord send Apostles into the world? It was first and foremost to teach all nations... If you refuse to teach or to learn within Christianity, you are not disciples of Christ and you do not follow Him; the Apostles were not sent for you; you are not what all Christians were from the very beginning of Christianity. I do not know what you are, nor what shall become of you.”*²³

The necessity of such realism puts up the inevitable question about the active Christian, theological witness. Are we capable of proposing an authentically theological approach in addressing the issue of multi-religious co-existence in a united Europe? We owe an answer to this question. We owe it not only to our students. We owe it to the secular society in which we live in. We owe it to the teachers, journalists, and politicians. Fr. George Florovsky calls the theology of St. Gregory Palamas a “theology of action” and a “theology of events.”²⁴ The focus on the practical aspects of theology appears to be essential for our present situation at least for two reasons:

1. In modern times, whether because of the advances in information and communication technologies or due to a mere loss of the ascetic tradition, our theology becomes most often a private effort, an occupation for the “chosen” few. This leads to a loss of understanding of Orthodox theology as the crown of knowledge, as universal knowledge which bears the cross of the responsibility for the salvation of man and the world, as “the faith of the Apostles, the faith of the Fathers, the faith of the Orthodox, the faith that sustains the

²³ It is not by accident that Fr. G. Florovsky is referring to this sermon in the afterward of his *Ways of Russian theology*. Cf. G. Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology*, Nordland Publishing Int., 1979

²⁴ Г. Флоровски, “Св. Григорий Палама и преданието на св. Отци,” in *Библия, Църква, Предание*, Православно гледанце, София 2003, p. 158. An interesting opinion, which I do not fully agree with, is that of V. Lurie, who says that this text of Florovski (1960) is provoked by the dissertation of J. Meyendorff (1959). Cf. И. Мейендорф. *Жизнь и труды святителя Григория Паламы. Введение в изучение*, Byzantinorossica 1997, pp. 347-348.

universe.”²⁵

2. “Theology does not end in itself, it is more like a way”,²⁶ says Fr. Florovsky. In the global world where the borders, the distances, the language, and cultural barriers are being overcome in milliseconds by the capabilities of our electronics, the need for the practical dimension of theology increases significantly. The increasing speed of movement, access, information, etc., forces us to look for more dynamic forms of Christian witness. It may sound surprising but secularized traditions appear to provide better opportunities for personal encounters.

Can we speak today to others in the way St. Gregory spoke during his captivity in the 14th century, in the way the venerable Fathers, as well as the honorable professors, including Fr. John Meyendorff, spoke during the 20th century?

As a way of conclusion, I would like to remind the words of Fr. John Meyendorff from his last lecture in Minsk, 1992, *The Orthodox witness in the contemporary world*: “In its essence, Orthodox Christianity is a faith that saves the entire world and not only one specific category of people. A true Orthodox Christian has a special charisma and grace that makes him able to witness the truth in any given situation.” We incessantly stress the fundamentalism of others. What about our inability to meet, to talk and coexist? Our academic overconfidence has long passed the limits and today it could hardly be accepted by someone as a gospel. Our main task as theologians today is no less than getting out of the ghetto of the comfort zone by taking responsibility of saving Europe and the world. The journalists, the teachers and most of all, the politicians, especially from the post-communist countries, face enormous difficulties in grasping our faith. They have a great need to learn, and we need to find the proper forms and ways of helping them.

As Jean-Luc Marion said: “The truth is that when it comes to religion, faith and theology, our politicians have no idea what this is all about. And this is particularly illustrated by their reactions to Muslims. The fact is that their ignorance regarding Christianity is just as striking, but it has been around for a very long and, in this respect, they feel quite comfortable in their ignorance.”²⁷

²⁵

Успенский,

Θ.

Синодикъ

66

Неделяю Православия. Сводный текст съ приложениями, Одесса 1893, с. 9.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 142.

²⁷ Private communication from Stoyan Tanev referring to the question period of an open lecture “L’homme doit-il se connaître” given by Jean-Luc Marion and organized by Cohérence Paris on June 10th 2010, at the Société d’Encouragement, 4, place St-Germain des Prés, Paris 6-ème.