

ARISTOTLE VS. PLATO: THE BALKANS' PARADOXICAL ENLIGHTENMENT

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Abstract. As it occurred in West, Aristotle's thought was in Byzantium the main organon of philosophical meditation within the frame of the Christian Faith. Nonetheless, from the ninth century on it was a revival of Platonism that took place – of Neo-Platonism at the beginning and of Platonism itself at the end. The Church, initially indifferent, became suspicious only when, at the turning of the fourteenth to the fifteenth century, the Platonism seemed to engender somewhat a latent paganism; but the Patriarchate was not then able to fight that tendency. So only after the 1453 capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans, Gennadius Scholarius managed to root out from the Greek lands Platonism and its crypto-pagan extension. Be that as it may; the main paradox of the Balkan history is that in the early seventeenth century some leading Greek scholars endorsed the materialist interpretation of Aristotle's thought – as it was taught in the University of Padua by Cesare Cremonini; and as a corollary this materialistic philosophical system began being taught in both Constantinople and Athens. It was that very way that the Enlightenment took birth in the Balkans – and somehow became a State ideology – long before its prevalence in France. And of course all this had as a result a turn toward Physics and Chemistry with far-reaching consequences.

Keywords: Aristotle, Plato, Materialism, Greek Church

Preamble:
Sic et non

*To remain indifferent face to face with the universe is utterly impossible to humans¹⁾. Nonetheless, the main explanation about man and his universe have arisen, as a rule, from religion. This is why the bitter conflicts in History are due mainly to differences of faith – even the revolutions wrought by philosophers, even the *flowering rifles* uprisings of our times which appear to have their origin in disbelief. So the enemy number one of Christianity, during the last stages before it became the State religion of the Roman Empire, was Neo-Platonism; albeit that both Platonism and Neo-Platonism were very close to the Weltanschauung of the Christians.*

In point of fact, though Plato had no symbols, no definite propositions, no fixed principle, he was a religion²⁾; and given that the core of Greek Philosophy was regarded as a product of his genius, it was the whole of Classical Philosophy³⁾ that came under suspicion during the Middle Ages. And so philosophers and scientists fell into oblivion until the time was ripe for humankind once more to realize that salvation (whatever that this may mean) depends upon themselves; for as a rule people remain blind to anything but practical applications.

I

... Veram esse philosophiam veram religionem...

Why was equivocation so universal in the Middle Ages? Because Aristotle was there⁴⁾. Is Christianity responsible for representing life as a matter of no consequence and therefore dissuading man from the idea of improving it? No; for it is necessary that the humans assume the mastership of the material world in order to become ripe for the triumph of the spirit; and the philosophers undertook, once more, this task.

Being a philosopher means to know things; and to instruct accordingly their fellow human beings. For human life is nothing else than the tendency to pass from potentiality to act in order to be all that it is possible to be⁵⁾. And thus emerged Thomas Aquinas, who managed to perform a most difficult intellectual pirouette, namely to reconcile the thought of Aristotle with Christianity.

Thomas, the younger son of the count Landolfo d'Aquino, was born in Italy, in the castle of Roccasecca, near Montecassino, in about 1225. He

was first introduced to the works of Aristotle at the university of Naples, where he studied the Liberal Arts and Philosophy from 1240 to 1244. It was there, moreover, that he entered, in 1243, the Dominican Order. The friars sent him to Paris, where he became the disciple *par excellence* of Albert the Great⁶); and when Albert moved to Cologne, he followed him and he studied there with him for four more years – and was ordained to the priesthood. He quickly became a leading Christian scholar: he began teaching as early as 1252 and continued through the rest of his life. His major work, *Summa theologica*, is considered to be a masterpiece, albeit that he left it unfinished. He died in 1274 after having penned the following statement: „All that I have written seems to me so much straw compared to what I have seen and to what has been revealed to me“. He was called *Doctor Angelicus* – and canonized in 1323⁷).

A champion of Aristotelism, Thomas Aquinas had a major problem to deal with. As a matter of fact, Aristotle's opinion was clear-cut: our world is eternal, ungenerated and indestructible⁸). If so, how is it possible to marry this particular concept with the Christian Medieval belief of the temporal creation of the world by God?⁹) Aquinas' solution of this problem was more than clever, for he successfully focused, at the same time, upon the center of both the intellect and intuition of man – the *physics* and the *metaphysics* of human existence: *mundum incoepisse est credibile, non autem demonstrabile, vel scibile*¹⁰). What does that mean? Simply that the temporal creation of the world is something we believe, albeit that we cannot provide evidence. In other words, Thomas Aquinas managed to give a new meaning to the famous maxim of Albert the Great, his Teacher, according to whom *philosophi enim est, id quod dicit, dicere cum ratione*¹¹). For he, thanks to his intelligence, accomplished what was inconceivable up to then: to bestow upon Religion the authority of Reason. And so, Aristotle's thought and knowledge was successfully integrated within the frame of the Christian Faith.

II

Christianus sum, non academicus

Plato, nonetheless, watched intently. As early as the ninth century, Photius, patriarch of Constantinople (877-886) tried to (re)introduce the ancient Greek Literature into the intellectual life of the Graecized Eastern Roman Empire¹²). It is doubtless that the current so created paved the way to a spiritual return to the ancient Graeco-Roman world; and this culminated in the eleventh-

century ascendancy of a bureaucrats' political party which neutralized the military one and seized the power in Byzantium. It is noteworthy, moreover, that the bureaucrats' party was based on Platonism¹³).

Truth to tell, Plato had great merit. He had asserted that the world had a beginning – in other words, it was created; and its creator, the Demiourge (=Artifice) had made it according to an eternal, unchangeable model¹⁴). Albeit that Plato's opinion had been subject to different and somehow controversial interpretations, it is beyond any doubt that his ideas on both world's creation and Creator were very close to Christian dogma. Nonetheless, it is more than problematic why the Byzantines preferred Plato to Aristotle, given that, as mentioned, the successors and epigones of the former were the bitter foes of Christianity. How was it possible that the Greek Church had forgotten its history? The Western one, on the contrary, never did that; and she opted for Aristotle using Aquinas' intellectual skills as a means of conciliation with the Stagirite. Why the Greek Church followed the quite opposite path?

Be that as it may; the point is that things reached the climax just on the eve of Constantinople's capture by the Ottomans. It was George Pletho, the famous Mystras philosopher, who embarked not on merely an intellectual but also on a political adventure at that time, which –of course- was strongly flavoured with Platonic ideas. Not more or not less he proposed a restructuring of the Byzantine society (the Hellenic one, as he used to call it) mainly along the lines put forward by Plato in his famous work *The Republic*¹⁵). Alas! The nostalgia of Plato's utopia implied (once more) the resurgence of paganism. The Church was initially reluctant to challenge the hellenization/dechristianization of the remnants of Byzantine society; but once Constantinople was seized by Mehmet II, the new Patriarch, Gennadius II Scholarius, banned Pletho's works. (It is said that he ordered some of them to be burnt.) The Patriarch's slogan? I am a Christian – and nothing else.

And Plato was condemned to silence in the Balkans...

III

Philosophi enim est, id quod dicit, dicere cum ratione

Now, it was Aristotle's turn to watch intently. After Thomas Aquinas' achievement the Stagirite was regarded in the West as „Master of those who know“¹⁶). He was, therefore, the most widely read classical thinker in the West. As a corollary, after Ignatius Loyola founded the Society of Jesus in 1534, Aristotle was adopted as the major philosophical authority in Jesuit

schools¹⁷). Nonetheless, things soon began taking a quite unexpected turn: in 1516 Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525) published his famous work *De immortalitate animae*; and doing so he opened the door to materialism – conveyed this time by Aristotelian thought .

Pomponazzi dealt in his book with the centuries-long question whether the immortality of the soul can be proved by rational arguments; and given that Aristotle was a universally acclaimed intellectual Master, he tried to provide arguments for his theses along Aristotelian lines. To begin with, he disagreed with Aquinas, who had managed to espouse Aristotle with the Christian Faith, for he asserted that the adoption of Aristotle's Weltanschauung did not necessarily imply the acceptance of immortality of the soul¹⁸.

As a matter of fact, the key of the issue was whether Aristotelian entelechy, i.e. the *energeia* (>energy) as contrasted to merely potential existence, was compatible with the Christian concept of afterlife. And the solution given to this problem by the University of Padua scholars led to the so-called materialistic Aristotelianism. Truth to tell, when Pomponazzi published his book, was a professor at the University of Bologna; but he had taught before at the University of Padua. And Paduan scholars were enjoying a great privilege: as early as 1405 Venice had annexed Padua. As a corollary, the University, though attacked on religious grounds for the theories taught there, was practically given immunity against sanctions of the Church. Giacomo Zabarella (1532-1589), professor there, became the leader of the New Aristotelianism¹⁹. Nonetheless, things reached a climax when Cesare Cremonini, his successor, began teaching at that same university in 1591²⁰.

Cremonini is known today for having been at odds with Galileo Galilei on intellectual grounds²¹). It was with good reason that the latter was regarded by the former as a virtual champion of Platonism, who was latently trying to challenge the almighty Aristotelianism. Truth to tell, it was impossible for Galileo not to do so; for Plato was the first to trumpet the roundness of the earth (and the existence of twelve tectonic plates as well)²²), the rotating movement of the planets as well as the very notion of time being closely related to the planets' movement²³) – somehow a prelude to the genesis of Einstein's theories. Nonetheless, it was not Cremonini's disagreement with Galileo Galilei but the admiration in which two Greek students were lost for Cremonini that had far reaching consequences in the intellectual history of Europe. The two Greeks were Constantine Lucar, the future Patriarch of Constantinople Cyril I, and Theophilus Corydalleus, an Athenian. The former studied at the University of Padua from 1589 until 1595²⁴); and the latter from 1606 up to 1613²⁵); and albeit that they were not class mates,

they knew each other – and they became friends. So, when Cyril Lucar became Patriarch of Constantinople appointed Th. Corydalleus director of the Patriarchal Academy at Phanar.

Both of them are well-known in the Balkans: Cyril Lucar was the famous ‘Calvinist Patriarch’²⁶⁾; and Corydalleus was regarded as the ‘Teacher of the Balkans’²⁷⁾. The latter was born in Athens ca. 1570; and his family name was Skordalos (= lark in medieval and modern Greek); but he changed it to *Corydalleus*, a derivation of the word *corydallos* (= lark in classical Greek), for it sounded better²⁸⁾ and it was nobler for a teacher²⁹⁾. He began studying in Rome; but his stay there led him to strongly dislike the Roman Papacy. As a corollary, he continued his studies at the University of Padua, where he enlisted among the neo-Aristotelians. It is almost certain that he counted among Cesare Cremonini’s beloved disciples³⁰⁾; and after seven years studies he received his doctorate in Philosophy and Medicine with distinction. Afterwards he used to teach in Constantinople, in Zante island and, of course, in Athens. He died in 1646 in his native place, having been before archbishop of Naupactus and Arta³¹⁾.

Thanks to Th. Corydalleus, Aristotelianism fully became the battle horse of the Greek Orthodox Church: the process initiated almost two centuries before, with Gennadius Scholarius banning the books of George Pletho culminated now in the Corydalleus’ intellectual influence extending over the Balkans – and their Moslem élites as well³²⁾. This time, nonetheless, the champions of the Stagirite’s thought were not merely Christians who disliked and were afraid of philosophical matters. As a matter of fact, both Corydalleus and his protector, Patriarch Cyril I Lucar, endorsed ideologies and followed policies having the odour not only of Protestantism but of pure Calvinism. It is well-known the tragic end of Cyril Lucar: he was put to death by the Ottoman authorities after having been accused by the Jesuits of machinations against the Sublime Porte³³⁾. It is doubtful whether the accusation was based on facts: it is with good reason, therefore, that one may regard them as calumnies intending to destroy an outstanding foe of the Roman Papacy. But it is true, on the other hand, that Cyril I Lucar was a crypto-Calvinist, for he had written and signed a document of adhesion to the ‘radical Protestantism’³⁴⁾. It is said that doing so he was trying to pave the way for the uprising of the Balkan Christian population against the Porte’s sovereignty; and as a matter of fact, he was doing his utmost to spread education among his miserable subjugated flock. Nonetheless, opting for Calvinism, he followed the wrong path; and all his efforts led to nothing.

His friend, Th. Corydalleus, made a parallel effort; his aim was to separate Philosophy (Sciences included) from Theology. According to him, *scientia* was no more *ancilla theologiae*. His way of thinking was in principle right; but he committed a similar mistake: having adopted the Paduan neo-Aristotelianism, which was in practice Materialism, he opened the door of the Greek Church to pantheism and even paganism³⁵. He had been an archbishop; and he had been in trouble not for his ideas, which he was free to teach and propagate, but for his loyalty vis-à-vis Cyril Lucar. His disciples and successors used to teach in the major institutions of Higher Education in the Balkans; and when the Phanariots, i.e. the graecized wealthy people who lived in Phanar (the Istanbul area where the Patriarchate's headquarters are to be found), were given by the Porte, in the early eighteenth century, the administration of the Danubian Principalities, namely Walachia and Moldavia, Materialism became somewhat a State ideology in the Romanian Lands. And all this under cover of the Church...

It is beyond any doubt, of course, that all this intellectual turmoil had a positive impact on scientific education. Some decades before the outbreak of the 1821 Revolution in Greece, in several schools Experimental Physics and Chemistry were taught pretty well – under the benignant supervision of the Ottoman authorities. It was a real scientific blossoming that was taking place in *Graecia capta*; this blossoming nonetheless had poor effects on the preparation of the 1821 uprising. And after Greece achieved her independence, a new spirit, a classicist one, prevailed in education. But this is another story... beyond the scope of the present paper.

Conclusion: *Quaestio de veritate*

Truth to tell, only one problem worries always human beings: What about the afterlife? Is the death the end of everything or, on the contrary, the beginning of the true life? Cyril Lucar and Th. Corydalleus provided –even involuntarily- a negative answer: Do not expect too much from death, for *finis vitae* is *finis vitae*; and they conveyed their answer thanks to Aristotelianism.

Was the Stagirite materialist? In point of fact, he was hailed mainly by Left-wing scientists as a „titanic mind“ who established the primacy of Nature...³⁶. Nevertheless, it is not certain that Aristotle rejected the immortality of the soul, for in one of his works he describes death as the soul's

dismissal (*apolysis*) by the body³⁷). In other words, Aristotle established a way of thinking and not a religion as Plato did. The Church of *Graecia capta* considered him as being the counterbalance of Platonism; and this way of studying the Stagirite's works led to major misunderstandings which have serious impact even in our time.

Notes

¹ See Ernest Renan, *The Future of Science. Ideas of 1848*. Translated from the French by Albert D. Vandam and C. B. Pitman (London: Chapman and Hall, 1891), p.12.

² *Ibidem*, p. 46.

³ As a matter of fact, the Romans of the republican era were very suspicious toward Philosophy; but afterwards they endorsed mainly the Greek doctrines. It is why the major philosophers of the Ancient Times were Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. Cf. Muammer İskenderoğlu, *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Thomas Aquinas on the question of the eternity of the world* (Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill, 2002), p. 8; see also Étienne Gilson, *La philosophie au Moyen Âge*, vol. I (Paris: Payot, 1922), p. 5: ...*le moyen âge est pénétré et comme imprégné d'hellénisme*.

⁴ Ernest Renan, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 462 (note 5).

⁶ Cf. Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia. Paradiso, X. 97-99: Questi che m'è a destra piú vicino, (frate e maestro fummi; ed esso Alberto) è di Cologna, e io Thomas d'Aquino*.

⁷ Étienne Gilson, *op.cit.*, vol. II (Paris: Payot, 1922), pp. 13–14; M. İskenderoğlu, *op. cit.*, pp. 125–127.

⁸ M. İskenderoğlu, *op. cit.*, p. 10ff.

⁹ This belief was declared in 1215 an article of Faith by the Fourth Lateran Council (*ibidem*, p. 131).

¹⁰ Étienne Gilson, *op.cit.*, vol. II, p. 27.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹² On Photius see Karl Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Literatur*. Translated into Greek by G. Soteriades, vol. III (Athens: Papyros, 1964), p. 522ff.; T. C. Lounghis, *Les ambassades byzantines en Occident depuis la fondation des États barbares jusqu'aux Croisades (407–1096)*, Athens, 1980, p. 189ff. *passim*.

¹³ K. Krumbacher, *op. cit.*, vol. II (Athens: Papyros, 1964), p. 445.

¹⁴ Plato's *Timaeus*, 28–29; cf. M. İskenderoğlu, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁵ See Louis Bréhier, *Vie et mort de Byzance* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1969²), p. 392; Georges Ostrogorsky, *Histoire de l'empire byzantin*. French translation by J. Gouillard (Paris: Payot, 1969), p. 580.

- ¹⁶ See Stillman Drake, *Galileo* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 8.
- ¹⁷ *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁸ See mainly J. R. Hale (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), entry „Pomponazzi, Pietro“, p. 262.
- ¹⁹ St. Drake, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- ²⁰ On Cesare Cremonini see mainly Cléobule Tsourkas, *Les débuts de l'enseignement philosophique et de la libre pensée dans les Balkans. La vie et l'œuvre de Théophile Corydalée (1570–1646)*, Salonika: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1967², p. 191ff.
- ²¹ St. Drake, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–18.
- ²² Plato's *Phaedo*, 110b.
- ²³ Plato's *Timaeus*, 37c–39c.
- ²⁴ Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in captivity*. Translated into Greek by Nicholas K. Paparrhodu (Athens: Bergades, 1979), pp. 476–477; Chrysostomus, Archbishop of Athens, entry „Cyril Lucar“ (in Greek), *The Great Greek Encyclopaedia*, vol. XV (Athens: Pyrsos, 1931), p. 487.
- ²⁵ Cl. Tsourkas, *op. cit.*, pp. 34–38.
- ²⁶ St. Runciman, *op. cit.*, p. 475ff.
- ²⁷ Cl. Tsourkas, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–24.
- ²⁸ *Skordo* = garlic (in modern Greek).
- ²⁹ It is noteworthy, however, that today a Piraeus suburb, near Athens, is called after his very name (*Korydallos*).
- ³⁰ Cl. Tsourkas, *op. cit.*, pp. 44.
- ³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 114.
- ³² *Ibidem*, p. 214.
- ³³ See mainly St. Runciman, *op. cit.*, pp. 507–508.
- ³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 495ff.
- ³⁵ Cl. Tsourkas, *op. cit.*, pp. 248, 283, 307–309.
- ³⁶ See Ariadna Camariano-Cioran, *Les académies princières de Bucarest et Jassy et leurs professeurs* (Salonika: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1974), p. 181
- ³⁷ Aristotle's *Parva naturalia*, 479a.

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