Between the Imminent End and Eternity: Considerations in the Byzantine theology of time

Prolegomenon

One of the most fundamental questions throughout the ages revolves around what time is. Coherent answers to this question are paramount to any interpretive scheme of the world and answers to this question are as diverse as they are ubiquitous. Aristotle defined time as the measurement of change (Physics 219b), while, Plato had pointed out that time is the movable image of eternity (Timaeus 37d). Ancient Greek philosophy devoted much attention to the issue of time investigating its nature and whether it had a beginning and/or will have an end as well as pondering on its many conceptual paradoxes. Parallel to philosophical discussions Greek historiographers (Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon et al.) recorded and interpreted events using linear and episodic timelines as well as relative dating systems (Wilcox 1987) that were designed to convey moral lessons. While due attention has been paid to ancient Greek notions of time and temporality and their impact on pre-modern and modern ideas of time in the “Western tradition,” there has been done little to no work on understanding the Byzantine adaptation (or rather continuation) of this heritage. In my dissertation I wish to address this desideratum by working out the theological and philosophical presumptions that underlie the Byzantine perception(s) of time.

In Byzantium every answer to the question of what time is necessarily evoked (in some sense or another) the notion of divinity. For this reason, I propose to call the interpretive scheme(s) of temporality that were prevalent throughout the Byzantine millennium the Byzantine theology of time. In my research I am at reconstructing this interpretive superstructure focusing on the source material from the Middle-Byzantine period (c. 867–1204). In particular, I study the concepts of time and eternity and investigate the eschatological dimension of earthly time. As for the latter, I should lay down at the outset that I consider Byzantium, that is, the Christianized Eastern Roman Empire to be, at the core, eschatologically sensitive. I concur with Father Georges Florovsky, who spelt out that “eschatology is not just one particular section of the Christian theological system, but rather its basis and foundation, its guiding and inspiring principle, (...) Christianity is essentially eschatological (...).” (Florovsky 1956, 27). This description perfectly applies to Byzantium.
What is more, one cornerstone of any medieval Christian perception of time was the sense of temporal asymmetry, which resulted from the fact that the incarnation of the Savior together with his anticipated return are two unique historical events that structure any given antecedent and subsequent event in relationship to them. It is the anticipation of the Second Coming that establishes the reference point to which events are evaluated and also measured. This characteristic led to the composition of an irregular historical narrative in which typological reoccurrences as well as anachronisms persistently disrupted the linear structure of world history. In this respect, anachronisms were not seen as violating but rather as affirming the belief in the temporal unity of earthly time (Kemp 1991, 49ff), which was understood as a qualitatively uniform age that is only a transient period between soteriological milestones.

As a result, earthly time is an interlude in which personal shortcomings, especially those of emperors and patriarchs, were tolerated, since it was the institutions (the imperial office and the Church) that shared in the true and everlasting reality of the transcendent realm. Byzantium never produced its Martin Luther, who would challenge this persuasion by condemning the institution of the Episcopal See. While Byzantium saw many attempts to identify the Antichrist with particular individuals, preferably with emperors, there has never been any attempt to identify the Antichrist with the institution of the emperorship or the patriarchate. Thus, the question arises, what precluded such a development from taking place in the Eastern Roman Empire. Comparative questions like this will be discussed in the final analysis.

The bulk of my dissertation, however, I devote to the reconstruction of the Byzantine “architecture” of temporality with particular emphasis on eschatology. There has been done significant progress on Byzantine eschatology especially following the seminal study by Gerhard Podskalsky’s on Byzantinische Reichseschatologie (Podskalsky 1972). Yet, a subtle appreciation of the theologically articulated concepts of time and historicity and their interplay with the eschatological horizon, their wide-ranging implications, as well as the polymorphous deviations from them is still wanting.
Contents

My dissertation consists of four main thematic clusters. First, practical aspects of the Byzantine taxonomy of time will be considered. Technological and functional aspects will be discussed such as how time was reckoned (sundials and clepsydra (Landels 1979), astrological and liturgical calendars, *indiction* cycles or the *Anno Mundi* calendar (Grumel 1958) etc.) and what social requirements they served to meet (Sorokin and Merton 1937).

The second section treats the heritage from classical and late antique philosophy that pertains to cosmological speculations. From Plato to Maximus Confessor philosophers and theologians (I do not distinguish them sharply) debated what time is and how it relates to the eternity of the transcendent divinity. Particularly, the formative teachings of the Cappadocian Fathers and of Pseudo-Dionysius appear to be paramount for the purpose of my dissertation and thus will receive a reasonably comprehensive overview. For instance, emphasis will be laid on the implications of Pseudo-Dionysius’ teaching that both time and eternity are considered divine processions, that is, articulations of God’s activity (*Divine Names* X.2–3, 937B–940A), in which all creatures partake. Following this synopsis in intellectual history, a suitable case study from historiography (possibly the *Annals* of Nicetas Choniates) might well exemplify how theological principles inform the art of historiography, which continuously weaved specific historical events into the fabric of a universal salvation history and thus went beyond the mere description and the contextualized interpretation of events.

In the third section I will treat the most notorious deviation from the orthodox view of time and eternity, namely the philosophical doctrine of an eternal world. At the beginning it will be necessary to summarize the main stations of the long-standing debate over an eternal world starting with Aristotle and finishing with the sixth-century philosophers Philoponus (ed. Rabe 1899) and Simplicius (ed. Diels 1882–1895). This will be necessary for it appears (but this

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still needs to be proven) that Philoponus served as the authority on the issue of the eternity of the world in the Middle-Byzantine period, which can clearly be seen in the fact that the eleventh-century Byzantine philosopher John Italus heavily relies on the former’s arguments. Ultimately, this section aims at learning how, to what extent (and possibly why) this philosophical debate reemerged in the later eleventh century and what reactions it provoked.

Fourthly and lastly, I plan to reflect upon the apocalyptic tradition in Byzantium by investigating so-called political prophecies (that are to be distinguished from heavenly journeys). These prophecies advance linear “histories of the future” by enumerating and evaluating various series of events that are said to take place until the Second Coming. Most importantly, I will address the question of genre and readership, which are still unsettled issues. I aim at answering questions like: what does a Byzantine apocalypse consist of and who was its intended audience? The main objective of this section will be to devise a methodology of how to read Byzantine prophecies coherently and then to study how this genre was received in order to learn about its subversive as well as potentially unorthodox tendencies.

**Arbeitshypothese**

In order to gain a better understanding of the moderate, one might say the “mainstream”, perception of time I investigate two extreme views that recurrently spread in Byzantium, namely the apocalyptic belief in an imminent end of the world and the Neoplatonic doctrine of an everlasting cosmos. While the former belief derives from “mystic” tendencies that venture beyond canonical Christian eschatology, the latter is a philosophically informed theory that periodically reemerged in intellectual circles. Both views have received relatively little attention and have not yet been considered jointly under the aspect of dissident (although not necessarily unorthodox) theological speculation.

**The two major thematic clusters**

**I. Philosophical**

The debate whether the world is everlasting or not recurrently emerged in intellectual circles stretching back until at least the time of Plato and Aristotle. Following in their footsteps Stoics and Peripatetics (as well as others) continued to advance arguments, many of which were adopted and/or further developed by Patristic authors (such as Justin Martyr and Origen) (Wolfson 1966). The controversy eventually reached its peak in the fifth/sixth-century polemics that raged between pagan and Christian authors (primarily in the works of Proclus, Philoponus and Simplicius) (Sorabji 1983).
Following Philoponus’ eminent refutations and a series of political events (Ammonius’ “agreement” with the Alexandrian Patriarch Peter Mongus (Watts 2006, 222ff); the closure of the Athenian Academy in 529 etc.), open discussions of this heated debate subsided and eventually ceased until its reemergence during the so-called Comnenian Renaissance in the late eleventh and twelve centuries. For it was then, in the eleventh-century, that the Byzantine philosopher John Italus, in an essay transmitted to us (notably the 71st chapter of the Ἀπορίαι καὶ λύσεις, ed. by Joannou 1956), explicitly rejects an eternal world, thus testifying for a renewed interest in this controversy at the Imperial School of Constantinople, at which Italus was employed. In his essay he makes clear that the world cannot be eternal due to metaphysical as well as ethical considerations. On the one hand, Italus borrows heavily from John Philoponus, paraphrasing a number of arguments that can be found in Philoponus’ works Against Proclus and Against Aristotle. On the other hand, Italus goes beyond Philoponus’ exclusively (meta)physical argumentation and asserts the ethical imperative to refute the Neoplatonic view of an everlasting world. For he makes clear that there is no room for Christian ethics in an eternal world, since if there were no end to the world, there could not be a Last Judgment, nor a bodily resurrection, without which there would be no recompense for adhering to Christian maxims. That is to say, for Italus Christian ethics presuppose posthumous reward and punishment.

Italus’ rejection of an everlasting world needs to be read together with his account on time (60th chapter of the Ἀπορίαι καὶ λύσεις, discussed in Niarchos 1978, 259ff), in order to fully grasp what time and its counterpart, eternity, signified to a Middle-Byzantine philosopher. In the case of Italus this matter is of particular interest, because he was condemned (arguably falsely) for holding heretical views on these very issues.

Furthermore, it needs to be investigated if Italus’ students, notably Eustratius of Nicaea (fl. ca.1100) and Michael of Ephesus (fl. ca.1100.), as well as Italus’ successor as head of the school of philosophy, Theodore of Smyrna (d. after 1112), reacted in some way or another to Italus’ treatment and refutation of an eternal world. Moreover, I expect to find much material in Nicholas of Methone (d. ca. 1166), who wrote an industrious refutation of Proclus’ Elements of Theology (ed. by Angelou 1984), in which time and eternity play key roles. Moreover, it needs to be considered if Philoponean arguments appear also in other authors apart from Italus. It would be most indicative to learn if Philoponus was considered an eminent authority on cosmology in the Middle-Byzantine period despite his anathematization in 680 (which happened, however, on theological grounds).
II. Apocalyptic

The other potentially dissident dimension in the domain of the Byzantine theology of time lies with apocalypticism, that is, with the expectation and promotion of an imminent eschaton. There has been made some progress over the last decades in the study of Byzantine apocalyptic literature. However, apart from a few distinguished individual attempts (such as by Paul Alexander 1985 and more recently by Lorenzo DiTommaso 2005) a proper methodology for reading apocalyptic narratives is still wanting. For that reason I am currently revisiting a number of Pseudo-Danielic prophecies in order to better comprehend how such literary productions could be read coherently.

More precisely, I investigate the manuscript tradition and the text variations of a specific set of apocryphal Daniel apocalypses including unedited as well as yet unidentified material that I accessed at the monastic libraries of Mt. Athos and Meteora. This allows me to re-read and to emend wanting editions, most of which have been based exclusively on manuscripts from Western libraries (Venice, Rome, Oxford etc.). For instance, I am currently working on the transcription, translation, and interpretation of the probably ninth-century Discourses of John Chrysostom Concerning the Vision of Daniel that is contained in the manuscript Moni Varlaam 156 (fol.148v–152v) as well as on the unedited and undated prophecy that is entitled The Vision of Daniel the Prophet on the Blond Race, which is contained in two Mt. Athos manuscripts, notably in Moni Vatopediou 754 (fol.181v) and Moni Koutloumousion 220 (fol.201v). I also investigate the following apocalyptic narratives:

- Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius (Greek recensions) (ca. 717 and later) [ed. by Aerts and Kortekaas 1998]
- Diegesis Danielis (probably an 8th c. production) [ed. by Berger 1976]
- The Vision of Daniel on the Last Times and the End of the World (ca. 869) [ed. by Schmoldt 1972]
- The Andreas Salos Apocalypse (probably a 9th–10th c. production) [ed. by Rydén 1974]
- The Visions of Daniel and Other Holy Men (possibly 12th c.) [ed. by Pertusi 1988]
- Apocalypse of Leo of Constantinople (1st recension: 9th c., 2nd recension 12th c.) [ed. by Maisano 1975]
- Oracles of Leo the Wise (of which the first six oracles can be dated around the year 815, and the subsequent four oracles (i.e., 7–10) to the eve of the Fourth Crusade (1203/4) [ed. by Brokkaar 2002]
- Pseudo-Daniel or Pseudo-Leo the Wise on the Island Cyprus (unedited, undated) [Ms. Barocci 170 (fol.10r)]
- The Vision of the Prophet Daniel (unidentified, unedited, undated) [Ms. Moni Iveron 686 (fol.14r–17v)]
The dating of these pseudonymous narratives is crucial. As guidelines for their dating I use three methodological principles. First, I use the principle of *ultimum vaticinium ex eventu* according to which, “every apocalypse must have been written not long after the latest event to which it alludes” (Alexander 1978, 999). In other words, the last *vaticinium ex eventu*, which an apocalypse provides, indicates the estimated date of composition. The problem, of course, is how to identify genuine *vaticinia*. As a rule of thumb I define my second principle, the *principle of particularity*, which is based on the presumption that historical reviews tend to be more detailed than prophetic narratives (DiTommaso 2005, 107). Thus, if a *topos* is particularly rich in detail, then one has good reason to assume that it had a historical background. Third, I will make use of what I call the principle of *lectio brevior*, which I define as follows: a complex, unitary motif predates an assembly of multiple *topoi* that portray strong resemblance to the complex motif. Here, I presuppose that complex literary motifs have a tendency to fragment.

By reevaluating earlier editions and by introducing new source material I hope to improve upon our understanding of the Byzantine apocalyptic tradition. What is more, it is imperative to also pay due attention to the commentary tradition on the *Revelation of John*, most notably to the commentary by Andrew of Caesarea (d. 614), which is a key text for unraveling the dynamics of Byzantine prophecies (ed. by Schmid 1955).

After having established a coherent methodology of how to read Byzantine apocalypses I should be able to deduce the particular perception of time that underlies this prophetic genre and thus to arrive at a coherent understanding of the apocalyptist’s theology of time. Research questions in this regard will consist of: what are the generic characteristics of *political apocalypses*? Of which common themes and motifs do these apocalypses consist (last emperor, Gog and Magog, Antichrist etc.)? Which typologies are evoked and what purpose do they serve? How does history writing and prophecy telling relate to one another? What narratological patterns can be observed (episodic, linear, circular etc.)? Moreover, it is a great desideratum to identify the readership of such prophecies. In essence, I will argue for a wide audience that stretches from the common populace and from within monastic walls all the way to the imperial palace.

Based on a subtle understanding of the apocalyptic genre, its functions and limitations, I plan to investigate the aspect of its use and abuse. Based primarily on historiographical accounts I plan to reconstruct types for the reception of apocalyptic prophecies that stretch from blind endorsement all the way to censorship and persecution. It has to be kept in mind that precisely because eschatological sensitivity was so popular it served the Byzantines as a preferred means to express one’s *Kaiserkritik*. Byzantine apocalyptic prophecies are loaded with defaming as well as with exalting portrayals of particular rulers; a fact that caused (sporadic?) censorship. Particularly Pseudo-Danielic and Pseudo-Leonine prophecies served as literary vessels to express one’s civil disobedience, which was, at times, persecuted as treason.
Methodological requirements

The apocalyptic source material demands adept skills in palaeography and in the editing of text, in historical analysis and in working intertextually. Moreover, it demands a good command of Modern Greek, since Byzantine prophecies were written in a demotic or “vulgar” Greek language register that is closer to Modern Greek than to Attic Greek.

The philosophical source material equally demands able skills in working intertextually, in tracing the provenance of key concepts and to develop their implications, and in placing the discourses into their proper historical settings. One of the hardest tasks is to competently discern where an author is advancing his own genuine doctrine and where he is merely presenting an apologetic _alibi_, which is designed to ward off exoteric readers.

Moreover, it is methodologically crucial to grant that the working hypothesis is viable. This research project rests on the presumption that one can best understand the normative by looking at the deviations. Hence, I have identified two “dissident” standpoints, the apocalyptic and the eternalist, which potentially deviate from the mainstream Byzantine theology of time. While they do rest on different theological presumptions, they converge on implications that were, at times, judged subversive to the political (i.e., imperial and/or ecclesiastical) establishment. It appears that for this very reason apocalyptic literature was (occasionally?) censored by the imperial government. Similarly, philosophers could be condemned for teaching divergent doctrines on matters of the world’s eternity, as was the case with John Italus. Although his writings acquit him from having held such a divergent doctrine, his condemnation in 1082 well illustrates the significance that was attributed to theological matters of time, for their implications reach to the very core of Orthodoxy.

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General


Philosophy


Apocalyptic


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