The Image of the Second Rome through the Prism of the Third

Since the 1920s in various fields of Greek culture (in the rediscovered novels and stories by A. Papadianakis, in the works of Ph. Kontoglou and N. Pentzikis in iconography and painting, of D. Pikionis in architecture, of B. Tatakis, Ch. Yannaras, J. Romanides, J. Zizioulas and others in philosophy and theology) one may see a development of a tendency which may be characterised to a first approximation as "Neo-Byzantinism." In general, the main principle of this movement might be formulated as follows: Greece is not an ordinary nation and cannot build its identity according to the model of a neo-European national state (in spite of the fact that just this process actually occurs in 20th c.). The fundamental principle of Greek culture is recognized in the Byzantine Orthodoxy as supra-territorial and moreover supra-ethnic cultural model.

It is very interesting that many of the mentioned Greek intellectuals find a detailed development of philosophical, theological, artistic aspects of this model in the writings of Russian religious philosophers and byzantinists of 19th and 20th c. – from the early Slavophiles (like I. Kireevsky and A. Khomyakov) up to Russian émigré authors like G. Florovsky, V. Lossky und L. Ouspensky. It seems significant that Greek authors "recognise" in writings created by the representatives of "the Third Rome" the cultural model appropriate for "the Second one," perceive this model as own.

In this paper I’d like to touch several most interesting moments of such perception and – as far as it goes – to describe some key principles of this play of reciprocal reflection of Russian and Greek cultural identities.

I

To some extent "the Neo-Byzantine movement" might be considered as a kind of reaction to the failure of the political and cultural project that had its beginning in the Greek revolution of 1821 and its tragic result in the destruction of Greek communities in Asia Minor in 1923 (afterwards also in Constantinople). From the first steps of the Greek revolution the aim of struggle for independence had a distinctly national character; it was not a restoration of the Byzantine Empire, but a foundation of the state of the Greeks. It was no mere accident that the founders of the Kingdom of Greece called themselves not the Romans (or the Christians), as did the Byzantine Greeks whose identity was established by the awareness of themselves as the Orthodox Christians and heirs of Rome, but the Hellenes. As any political project, the idea of the future Greek national state had its perspective and retrospective aspects. The first, a quasi-Napoleonic Megállη Iéda, "the Great Idea," provided for a reunification in one political whole of all parts of the scattered Greek nation. The new state, with Constantinople as the capital, ought to embrace all territories of the Balkans, the Archipelago, Asia Minor and the northern shore of the Black Sea. The second, "retrospective" aspect of the project presupposed reinterpretation of the Byzantine Empire image which was perceived now not in its real polyethnic and multi-linguistic manifoldness, but first of all as the state of the Greeks. (It’s not wonderful that the development of this nationalistic tendency provoked the split within millet-i Râm, the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire: Bulgarians, for example, began to see in the Orthodox episcopes and in the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople himself ethnic Greeks predominantly). Some key points of the attempts to realise this project are: the establishment of the Kingdom of Greece (1832), "the Bulgarian schism" and the series of Greek-Bulgarian conflicts (from 1860s), the failed intervention in Odessa (1918–1919) and the tragic endpoint – the downfall of the Pontic Greek communities, the massacre in Smyrna and all "the Asia Minor catastrophe" (Μικρασιατική καταστροφή) in 1922–1923.4

Perhaps it is no accident that Fotis Kontoglou (Φώτης Κόντογλου, 1895–1965), in 1922 a young painter and a teacher who was to become one of the most influential figures of "the Neo-Byzantine" movement, was among more than one and a half million Greeks who departed from Asia Minor. By that time F. Kontoglou had gained experience of studying at the Athens School of Fine Art, travelling in Western Europe, working in Paris as a book illustrator. But, as F. Kontoglou’s biographer Nikos Zias writes, "the tragedy of the Greek Asia Minor has a tremendous effect on him, separating him radically from the West, on the one hand, and, on the other, making him feel responsible for the continuation, even in another space, of the long-lived tradition which had withstood the dissolution of the Byzantine Empire and survived for four centuries and was now in danger of being completely lost as it had been uprooted from its own place…" In the spring of 1923 the painter visited Mount Athos, and his artistic career took a new direction: "Experiencing a kind of holy intoxication on Athos, [Kontoglou] set about copying wall-paintings and icons and made it his task to unravel the secrets of Byzantine art, while at the same time he painted the Athos landscape, the monasteries and their monks, and wrote short tales brimming over with life and poetry."5

In the coming years he removes wall paintings and creates numerous frescoes and icons on wood in tens of churches all over Greece, works at the Byzantine Museum of Athens, at the Coptic Museum in Cairo, organizes the Byzantine Museum in Corfu, undertakes the monumental wall painting of the Athenian Municipality, writes numerous works on the hagiographic heritage of Byzantium. By efforts of Fotius Kontoglou and his pupils the "neo-Byzantine" style has become predominant in the contemporary Greek iconography.

For the purpose of this paper it is very important that the "methodological horizon" for Kontoglou’s views on the phenomenon of the Orthodox icon was formed to a large extent by the writings of Leonid Ouspensky – Kontoglou’s friend, a Russian icon-painter, historian of icon and a teacher in iconography in the Orthodox institute of St Dionysius in Paris. In

4 S.W. Sowards, Twenty-five lectures on modern Balkan history, Lectures 6 and 14.
1948 Kontoglou supervised the Greek translation of Ouspensky's brochure L'icone, Vision du Monde Spirituel, which was published twice (in 1948 and 1952) in Athens. Some scholars note the influence of Ouspensky's works on Kontoglou and emphasise that "the bulk of Kontoglou's writings were published after this encounter with the writings of Ouspensky." It is noteworthy that through Ouspensky's writings Kontoglou was affected by the whole tradition of Russian philosophy and theology of icon, elaborated in the writings of Eugene Trubetskoy, Sergei Bulgakov and Paul Florensky.

Actually, a reader of Kontoglou's writings on iconography encounters the concepts familiar to him from P. Florensky's Iconostasis (though some of these concepts are treated in a simplified and strictly polemic mode). Both Florensky and Kontoglou suggest that the Byzantine iconography was not a stepping-stone on the way to the innovations of the Italian Renaissance, but the highest point in the development of religious art. Its essence is symbolic realism. The Renaissance art has an immanent, naturalistic and illusionistic character (which expresses itself, for example, in the use of a "direct," linear perspective that makes the spectator the central point of the world; in the use of natural phenomena such as clouds and sunrays for the presentation of the divine, etc.), and developed in close connection with the philosophical, rationalistic immanentism of its time. Unlike the "modern," Renaissance art, Byzantine iconography intends to present the transcendent spiritual world (and the icon as a visible image of the invisible; it is "a window" in this world); it has liturgical and analogical character. The absence of linear perspective and shadows, transformed

proportions of human bodies do not mean lack of skill of icon-painters. These stylistic features of hagiography (along with all the other means and forms of the Orthodox liturgical art) lead a human to experience the living reality which is not a continuation of this immanent space (hence the absence of direct perspective), the world where shadows don't exist and where each creature undergoes "beautiful transformation."

As a moment not of conceptual dependency but rather of congeniality of Kontoglou's and Florensky's positions we may note a specific relation of these authors to art of the avant-garde. Both authors find a kind of similarity between the traditional Christian art and avant-garde artistic searching in negation of naturalism and aspiration to the invisible.

II

Another point of the specific Greek reception of Russian intellectual tradition as a modus of the Byzantine one (and hence, in turn the reason for the declaration about "the vital force of the Byzantine spirit") we find in the last chapter of the famous Byzantine Philosophy of Basil Tatakis (Βασίλης Ν. Τατάκης, 1897–1986). The book of Tatakis was published at first in 1949 in French as a supplement volume of Émile Breher’s series "Histoire de la philosophie." In his work Tatakis undertook a pioneering attempt to study the history of Byzantine philosophy in its entirety over some one thousand years. Before that Byzantine philosophy was considered by professional historians of philosophy a far periphery in relation to the mainstream of philosophical movement, "an aberrant offshoot of Western philosophy, a storehouse for the treasures of Hellenism, which from the 13th through the 15th century, would, when needed, nourish Western thought." An enormous number of philosophical sources were not

---

1 E. Freeman, Redefining the Icon. The Problem of Innovation in the Writings of Florensky, Ouspensky and Kontoglou, New York 2009, p. 33.
3 Kontoglou explores the terms "modern" and "naturalistic" as synonymous. So, he may speak about "Hellenistic modernism" and "modernism" of Baroque icons as relative phenomena.
7 C. the paraphrase of Plato's *Phaedrus*, 247b-c in Florensky's *Iconostasis* (II. Флоренский, Иконостас, p. 352) regarding both forms of non-naturalistic art, church and avant-garde. It was no accident that the recent conference devoted to Florensky (Venice, Universita Ca' Foscari di Venezia, 3-4.02.2012) was named "Paul Florensky – between icon and avant-garde." On the other hand, some signs of the "avant-garde past" may be traced in Kontoglou's paintings. As N. Zias claims, some features characteristic of the "Byzantine" style of Kontoglou ("lack of perspective and consequently the lack of a third dimension, (...the absence of a single light source, and the use not of tonal gradation, but of color contrasts that often serve to complement one another)" were acquired by the painter during "his exposure to Modern Art in Paris" (N. Zias, Physis Kontoglou: Reflections of Byzantium in the 20th century, p. 16).
published and awaited research in manuscript libraries all over the world. Thanks to Tatakis use a large number of almost unknown texts entered the research spotlight. He succeeded in presenting Byzantine philosophy as an autonomous discipline, distinct from Christian theology. He initiated an approach in which theories and arguments of Byzantine thinkers began to be taken philosophically seriously; their writings were no longer simply studied as works of the past of mainly antiquarian or historical interest, but were studied rather as philosophical works on their own merit. As a brilliant historian of ancient philosophy, Tatakis showed the ways, different from the Western ones, in which the classical heritage of Platonism and Aristotelianism was accepted and interpreted by medieval Byzantine authors.

Now Byzantine Philosophy of Tatakis is considered by specialists a classical book on the subject; it opens the chronological lists of historiographic surveys of contemporary studies in Byzantine philosophy and in many aspects preserves its academic value. But within the framework of our paper the last chapter of the monograph – “Byzantium after Byzantium” – is of main interest.

Summing up all the previous chapters, Tatakis concludes that he has been able to demonstrate that the traditional-for-European-history-of-philosophy estimation of the role of Byzantium as only a mediator in transition of scientific and philosophical ideas in diachronic (from Antiquity to Renaissance) and synchronic (from the Persians, Arabs and the Chinese to the western Europeans) plans is incorrect. In the realm of thought Byzantium created a special type of intelligence that contributed to the formation of Arabic philosophy and western Scholasticism. It played an important role in the blossoming of Italian Renaissance.

But the historical role of Byzantine intellectual tradition is not limited to the active influence on the Western and Eastern neighbours during the Middle Ages. Tatakis' most interesting statement is that Byzantine philosophy outlived the fall of the Byzantine Empire; Byzantium "has continued to exist in our time." The cultural model framed by Byzantium was preserved by the Greek Church and affected the Turks themselves, who patterned their own empire on this model. Moreover, as a cultural and spiritual structure it may be transmitted through any spatial borders and really became the inner basis of many national cultures of the Slavic and Eastern world: so, “Czarist Russia, molded by Byzantium, remained, in all facets of its life, the true image of fallen Byzantium until the dawn of the 20th century.”

Tatakis asserts that without the study of Byzantium “it is totally impossible for one to delve into the intimate and most essential aspirations of the Neo-hellenic and Slavic spirit, the spirit of all Orthodox people.” He recognizes the “brilliant description” of tragedies of these (Slavonic? Neo-hellenic? Byzantine?) souls in the works of Dostoevsky; he emphasizes the statement of Ivan Kirejevsij, an early Slavophile of 19th century, that the future Russian philosophy will be based upon the ecclesiastical writers of Byzantium. He finds, at last, the expression of the same spiritual intention in Nikolai Berdyaev's philosophical quest. Having recognized Russian philosophers of 20th century as rightful heirs of their Byzantine ancestors, Tatakis optimistically concludes: “we can safely maintain, therefore, that the philosophy, or rather the spirituality, of Byzantium has not yet uttered its final word.”

III

In the conclusion of this paper I’d like to discuss some Russian connotations of “the Byzantine idea” in works of the group of eminent Greek theologians and religious philosophers belonging to the “generation of the 60s” – Christos Yanaras (Χρήστος Γιαννάρας, b. 1935), John Romanidis (Ιωάννης Ρωμανίδης, 1927–2001), John Zizioulas (Ιωάννης Ζηζούλας, b. 1931) and Nellas Panagiotis (Νέλλας Παναγιώτης, 1936–1986). These authors (sometimes referred to as “the neo-Orthodox”) perhaps may be considered among the most interesting representatives of contemporary Christian thought. High philosophical level, theological boldness, fusion of intellectualism with strict emphasis on practical, living character of
Christian κήρυγμα are those features of their works which helped the Orthodox tradition in Greece in the 2nd half of the last century become attractive for many young people. Michel Stavrou mentions, among the factors that determined the intellectual formation of these theologians, the publishing of numerous modern-Greek translations of the works created by representatives of a movement called “the neo-patristic synthesis” (Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, John Meyendorf). Ch. Yannaras also mentions in his autobiographical notes that in 1968 he arrived in Paris, already being familiar with the writings of Russian emigrant theologians and religious philosophers. Yannaras met and conversed with Paul Evdokimov (the last representative of the first generation of Russian emigrants in Paris), was friendly with L. Ouspensky, N. Lossky (Jr.), P. Struve, O. Clément. But the most significant and important event experienced by while in communication with members of the Russian Orthodox community in Paris (at the end of 1960s already mainly francophone) was not connected with some doctrines or theoretical constructions; the discovery which changed his life was that of a social kind; it was a special type of community united by the Eucharist – the Orthodox parish.

This ecclesiastical reality of the Christian parish that can be realised in any place and among any people becomes the main object of Yannaras’ philosophical research and theological care. Here, by the way, we again meet the image of ideal Byzantium found by a Greek among the Russians.

---

Bibliography


Freeman E., Redefining the Icon. The Problem of Innovation in the Writings of Florovsky, Ouspensky and Kontoglou, New York 2009.


Romanidis J., Romiosini, Romania, Roumeli (in Greek), Thessaloniki 1975.

Sowards S.W., Twenty-five lectures on modern Balkan history (the Balkans in the age of Nationalism), Lecture 6: East-Lansing, Michigan State University, 1996–2012, <http://staff.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balkan/>


Γυναφάκις Χ., Ορθοδοξία και Ανανέωση Νεώτερης Ελλάδος, Αθήνα 1999 [Ch. Yannaras, Orthodox and the West in New Greece, Athens 1999].


Иванов И.А., Византийская философия в современных зарубежных исследованиях, <http://www.academia.edu/11524117>.

