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ASSUMPTIONS OF THE BYZANTINE CULTURAL MODEL

Abstract¹

When discussing today about what we call 'Byzantine cultural model' we encounter some difficulties in its characterization, arising from the insufficient understanding the resorts which animated it. There are a number of decisive 'themes', often implicitly present, that influenced the thinking and life of the Byzantines, regardless of age. We can call them 'assumptions': their identification can be revealing in tracing the coordinates of a model that is decisive for the identity of the Eastern European areal of today. And their knowledge allows a more adequate understanding of what is called 'Reality' in this tradition: a notion with much more complex signification than today's usage.

Key words: Presuppositions, Cultural Model, Eastern-Christianity, Body, Soul

When discussing today about what we call 'Byzantine cultural model' we encounter some difficulties in its characterization, arising from the insufficient understanding the resorts which animated it. There are a number of decisive 'themes', often implicitly present, that influenced the thinking and life of the Byzantines, regardless of age. We can call them 'assumptions': their identification can be revealing in tracing the coordinates of a model that is decisive for the identity of the Eastern European areal of today.

One of the most important assumptions is the Byzantines' understanding of the meaning, the method and the training purposes of what they call *paideea*. In the fifth century it was a tension between the Christian understanding and the Neoplatonic understanding of the ultimate meaning of human experience (and also of the human status). The dispute relied not

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so much on the texts and discourses but on the meaning of practical experience of the self, the inner experience of the self beyond the self. The controversy was not between two manners of explaining the world but between two ways of *living* the world. Philosophy in late Antiquity involved a practical path of inner experience of the statements of a paradigm of thought and understanding, which involved asceticism and mysticism. Asceticism had become a practical necessity of philosophy described now as a way of life. Concentration, focus and the strengthening of capacities jointly assured the achievement of the philosophical undertaking, which was not limited to theory. The term *mysticism* covers the content of this type of philosophical practice: although it is commonly associated with religious act (as the goal was *ekstasis*), the coming out of one's self, as mysticism defines it. If, over time, the influence of the Neoplatonic path declined, it was because both in practical terms and in its promise Christian mysticism proved its superiority. That the argument is not over the theoretical and discursive superiority but the motivation offered by the contents of an inner experience. In this manner one can explain the closing down of the Athens Academy by Emperor Justinian in 529. Although certain modern historians have considered it a brutal act of censorship of anything that did not reflect Christian thought, a more thorough evaluation of the context of the decision has proven that the reality was different.

The Platonic Academy from Athens had simply lost following among the Greek aristocracy. The wealthy citizens of Athens and of the Empire in general would send their offspring to attend the courses of the famous school, since it guaranteed the consummate instruction not only of the students' minds but also of their personality. By its very design, the Academy aimed at something different than the acquisition of solid knowledge of philosophy. The Greek philosophical tradition had long been sceptical of a simple accumulation of knowledge, since it viewed this accumulation only as an aide in catalysing an experience, a training of the mind through reasoning. The initiation required at first the mastery of the rules of formal logic. Thus, after the cycle of a *paideia* common to any town school had been passed, the Academy proposed a level called *preparation mysteries*, which focused mostly on the systematic study of Aristotle. The last level consisted of two stages, the first cycle being marked by the ideal of forming what the Greeks would call the *political man*, the individual that understood and practiced civic virtues. The objective was achieved by studying some of the more accessible dialogues of Plato. Yet the goal of this education system was achieved only in the last stage, which involved the

study of the most difficult of Plato's dialogues, such as *Parmenides*, and subsequently the initiation to rigorous ascetic practices and also to Orphic mysticism and Chaldean oracles. This orientation in the training of the individual was sought by Christian *paideia* as well, yet the differences and tension emerged in the last stage of initiation. The path of the union with the One, the Neoplatonic theme, presupposed the doctrine of emanation. The Christian doctrine vigorously emphasised the difference in nature between the created and the uncreated, asserting that there was an absolute difference between the two, whereas the theory of emanation considered that the mystical act of contemplation and *ek-stasis* was possible due to the *shared nature* of the human mind and the Ultimate Reality, the One. It is essential to note that the Byzantines never abandoned the principles of the Greek and Hellenistic-inspired *paideia* and even largely maintained the contents and ranking of this mode of forming the individual. Yet the difference with the historical heritage occurred when the ultimate claims of the old *paideia* were considered: to make man capable to attain unity with the One *by himself*, by his own power, the highest goal of Neoplatonism. This was viewed as impossible from the Christian perspective, so that it was thought that the ultimate experience could not be result of any type of formal instruction but of a different guidance, which could be called practical spiritual guidance. The latter can only be achieved through *spiritual paternity*, an exclusively face to face relationship, yet which did not equate to the passing on of information or techniques, because for the first time the absolute and radical uniqueness of personal experience was acknowledged. For this reason, when Justinian closed down the Athens Academy, he was only acting in response to reality: the lack of interest for the type of education provided had resulted in a drastic reduction of the number of attending students.

In this diverse and refined cultural environment, the Christian message established a new and original mode of experience and discursive method. Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great faced the task of describing an existential situation which could not be confined to the classical Greek philosophy understanding of nature (*ousia*). In light of the explicit or implicit presentation of the Trinity in the Gospels, its essential characteristic is the dimension of Person and not it being conditioned on Nature. Man, who is created in God's image, shares this dimension of the person as a privileged mode of existence. Man could no longer be described within the limits that would have imposed the conditioning on nature and a destiny determined by the gods. Christianity was the first to establish the boundaries

that enable the recognition of man's free existence. Freedom, in the proper sense, involves the possibility to overcome any kind of conditioning and predetermined frameworks. The postulation of man's personal dimension (*hypostasis*) marked an essential leap forward compared with the philosophical understanding of man up to that point. The pinnacle of the Greek meditation on man's existential situation was tragedy, which described the individual's for ever unsuccessful attempt to evade the fate that ruled his life.² Tragedy was the limit that Greek meditation could attain in reflecting on man's effort to suspend his conditionings, because there were no arguments in favour of man's capacity to genuinely alter the course of his existence. Christian doctrine did not merely accredit the fact that man is able to make decisions freely and to realize his decisions, it also emphasised the possibility that man can radically change his way of living, in his own existential situation, to be in other words an *open* existence. The only way to express the personal mode of existence is to abandon conceptual language, which frames the object of its description in definitions and details, and to adopt a new understanding of the use of terms, which allude to an apophatic reality rather than identifying it in some way. The word is given the role of *indicator*, signalling a reality that eludes conceptual frameworks and even simple description. This is because it is achieved in an unpredictable manner, as the origin of change is existential freedom. The employing the term *hypostasis* was the outrun of the conceptual dimension of the terms describing man's humanity. Along with Cappadocian Fathers, it became obvious that man, image of God, may no longer be framed in conceptual definitions as he is defined by *exstasis*, the self outrun and the exit from the self into personal communion. Communion with God involves that secret mutation of man's humanity into something beyond it, by *theosis*, by arriving at something superior to it, to divinity. But what becomes essential in this self ascension and overpassing of human nature is humbleness, *kenosis*, according to the teaching of the Gospel. That is self emptiness. Obviously, it is hard to properly speak of edification when the essential act of experience is self emptiness, giving up all that involves one's own will. However, there is no mortification here, but rather stating that there is a will more proper to you than your own subjective one and this will belongs to the One who is with you in a more delicate and deep way, but not as a will ready to annihilate yours. This extremely subtle situation of

² Ioannis Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985, 35.

internal Christian experience was described by Saint Maximus the Confessor when speaking about the two wills of Christ.

The self edification is not consumed within the data and the limits of subjectivity: here is implied the assumption of understanding of man as *mediator*. Statement belonging to Saint Maximus the Confessor³, this understanding of man's role in the world and beyond it involves its description as microcosm and, consequently its symmetry with the Cosmos. As Maximus describes it, mediation is carried out on several plans, starting from mediation between man and woman to mediation between sky and earth, between the sensitive plan and the plan beyond the body.⁴ This mediation that man is called to is possible because the entire creation is under the same Logos, sharing a mutual rationality. Therefore self edification cannot have a finality that exclusively aims at the ego, at the subjectivity but plays an essential role in the evolution and conduct both of the sensitive world and of the whole creation. Self edification equals to generating an objective change in reality, to giving a plus to it in terms of its deepest rationality.

Another assumption of the Byzantine understanding of man that is less known nowadays is related to the theme of the *garment of skin*. It refers to the interpretation of the passage in the book of *Genesis* which describes the state of man after the fall and the fact that God made 'garments of skin' for the first people⁵. This passage has always been of particular interest to Christian authors, starting with Origen, as it has been highly important to clarify the anthropological dimension of this garment added to man not as an outer piece of clothing, but as a part of the self. Origen hesitated between explaining the addition as being the body or a supplementary dimension of it. That was obviously due to his Neoplatonic training, which undervalued the body, regarding it as exterior and unessential to an. Dangerous implications were involved, which would have completely changed the understanding of the path to salvation and the meaning of salvation itself⁶. Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor argued that the "garments"

³ Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Mistagogia. Cosmosul și sufletul. Chipuri ale Bisericii*, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de misiune al B.O.R., București, 2000, 26.

⁴ Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*. Chicago: Open Court, 1995, 161.

⁵ *Genesis* 3, 21.

⁶ Panayotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*. Trans. Norman Russell. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: 1987, 83.

had a double role, yet they must be viewed from the beginning as an expression of God's mercy, for the two original parents had been banished from Heaven and lived inadequately and suffering on the arid and deserted land. The garments signified their power to survive in the new condition which they incurred due to their disobedience. The interpretation provided by the Church Fathers is that the garment should be viewed as a *thickening* of the original body, an addition of something supplementary that comes from a kind of nature that had previously been unknown to man, namely the non-rational nature. The body then became biological. Biology was not a feature of the original state of humanity for, as the book of Genesis recounts, the two inhabitants of Heaven were not feeding on the fruit of the trees because of hunger, but as a sharing in certain gifts and virtues (this particular interpretation had been emphasised by Philon of Alexandria and his disciples). Yet with the fall into disobedience, human condition passed from *living* to *surviving*. The biological character of the garment of skin has a double role. Besides being God's blessing that enables man to endure the new terrestrial surroundings, this new dimension of the body signified the fulfilment of the warning that said that if the two ate from the tree of knowledge they would know death. There are then on the one hand the blessing and on the other the fulfilment of the warning of punishment. Yet this is not a permanent curse, since biology and its accompanying decay brings the release from the state of fall through death. If biological death did not exist, the improper situation of humanity after the fall would never end. The body become dense and solid and even the functions of the soul become corporeal, along with those of the body⁷. Mortality thus becomes a part of the human nature and signifies that man is in a permanent state of dying so that death itself is the end of dying, the death of death (so that evil cannot be immortal⁸). The separation of the body and the soul at the moment of death is understood by the Church Fathers as the opportunity to restore the human nature, yet not by itself, but only through the redemption in Christ. In this manner the consequences of Adam's fall are reversed for his good and salvation. Patristic anthropology provides a deep and differentiated understanding of the current state of the human nature. Thus the dispute between creationism and evolutionism can thus be overcome, in favour of describing a double dimension of corporality, which while not denying the link with animal biology, does not reduce the body to this dimension only.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 83.

⁸ St Gregory the Theologian, *Discourse 45 on Easter*, 8, PG, 36, 633A.

Gregory of Nyssa and others pointed out that the adding of the garment should be seen as being more than merely biological. Symbolically, the “thickening” stood for all the human capacity of interacting with the world. Therefore biology is not the only way of interacting with the world as there is an additional essential dimension, which may be summed up as *man’s cultural way of being*. The twofold character of the new anthropological dimension is evident: on the one hand, the need for culture means a decrease of certain capabilities, of a different previous state, yet it ensures not only man’s survival but also meaningful existence and the orientation towards what can be termed value. Through culture man is able to survive not only in biological terms and can fulfil an essential need, the need for knowledge. The term in the Scripture refers not only to rational knowledge, but to a broader and more comprehensive meaning of being with and within the world and also beyond it. Something has remained from the dignity of master of creation that Adam had in Heaven. Culture is a garment in the sense that man cannot relate in unmediated manner to the surrounding reality and also *to one’s self*. The latter aspect is vital for understanding man’s current condition. We cannot have access to ourselves in an unmediated way, but must resort to categories that have been established by our cultural environment. Obviously the role of intuition should not be underestimated, as it can be regarded as a radical way of reaching the self or the alterity, but even the outcome of this capacity is filtered by the interpretative and valuing categories of culture. The level that cultural filters operate on even in *mystical experience* is open to debate. What is at stake is not the mindset of a particular era or area, but the need of man to make sense of what he experiences or intuits, which he cannot do without cultural information.

From the perspective of patristic anthropology, man’s need for culture concerns his current state but does not define humanity in absolute terms. The quest for man’s essence, as undertaken by Western metaphysics and anthropology ever since the Renaissance, cannot be valid from a patristic perspective which was explored and expanded in the history of Eastern Christianity. It is not an essence which is absolutely valid, but only relative to a certain condition which was neither the original nor the ultimate one. Only with Wilhelm Dilthey, at the end of the nineteenth century, did

modern hermeneutics counter the claim of describing a human essence⁹. Present-day anthropology owes a great deal to the attempt to view human nature as relating to essence, something that is stable and can be, at least indirectly, observed through research. This presupposition originates both in metaphysics and in science. Metaphysics focused particularly on the essence, underestimating the senses in favour of the exercise of reason. Conversely, when this understanding was accepted through the postulation of the existence of an essence, the attempt to find proof in support of the presupposition involved the recourse to the method and instruments of science. Science cannot obviously aim for the essence and anthropological study viewed as viable the indirect path of validating the thesis of the existence of an essence that defines the human. The proofs provided by the various sciences that researched man related mostly to his biology, yet the very existence of a genetic code could be understood as an argument in favour of a stable human essence.

The patristic anthropologic perspective, which discerns that present-day man is not generic man, but is at an intermediate stage, between a lost condition and one that could be attained, would have a crucial impact on the articulation of the Eastern Christian cultural model. Humanism, as expressed during Renaissance and modernity in the West, did not have an impact on Eastern Europe because in this area the focus was not on man's present state but on the way to restore him. It is worth highlighting then a favourite presupposition of the Byzantine cultural model in general: the *simplicity of the mind*. It may seem strange today, when the goal of the formation of the individual is to build ever more complex mental skills, to state that such a presupposition outlined a European cultural model which lives on, albeit in a less obvious way, in a certain area of the continent. Even from the perspective of our own cultural horizon the idea seems absurd, as it would signify the reduction of man's capacities instead of their development. The theme of the *simplicity of the mind* was formulated by a few authors of the Patristic era, notably St. Maximus the Confessor. Commenting on a fragment from the Discourse on Eastern by St. Gregory the Theologian, Maximus describes Adam before the fall as being bare

⁹ Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Formation of Historical World in the Human Sciences" in *Selected Works*, vol. III., Trans. Rudolf A. Makkreel and John Scanlon. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, 34.

through simplicity¹⁰. Man in the initial state is described as “beyond any quest for being; and through the unsophisticated life, he is free from life that needs any sophistication; and without cover and garment, he is free from the passionate union of the senses and the sensitive”¹¹, adding that “he did not have an inbuilt need to make sense of what he observed through the senses”¹² for the sake of knowledge and “only had the simple ability of virtue and of unitary and simple knowledge”¹³. This interpretation of the powers and nature of present-day reason compared with Adam’s reason established the overtones and outlines of the Byzantine cultural model. In Byzantium, erudition and scholar type were never esteemed because the accumulation of knowledge was simply not viewed as a way to perfect the human person. Gaining knowledge for the sake of knowledge could in fact backfire, distancing man from the goal of culture: orientation towards restoring the state of simplicity of the mind. The path towards restoring the *simple and unitary* attitude in knowledge is reached through culture, yet the aim is to *go beyond culture itself*. The formation that man acquired through culture was viewed as activating the capacity to unify the powers of the soul and the acts of the senses towards a higher level of knowledge of the reasons of the world, of creation, meaning a radical and essential transformation of man. This is a transformation that could not be achieved without the holy grace, without co-working with Christ known as *theandry*. This is the only path towards understanding the literature, the fine arts, the architecture, the social structure of Byzantium and his legacy, the Eastern Christian area of today.

Another very important assumption present behind the Byzantine cultural model was the idea of *hierarchy*. The theme of hierarchy, one of the essential motifs in Dionysius the Areopagite’s writings, was not a novelty to the Byzantine world, as it was a living heritage due to the traditions of Neoplatonic inspiration. Nevertheless, it is a manner of understanding and interpreting that traverses ontology, gnoseology, ethics, but also the social doctrine or the Byzantine ideology. The author known as Dionysius the Areopagite and whose identity and life period are rather controversial is the one to have outlined an hierarchical understanding not only of the way in

¹⁰ Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Ambigua*, ”Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești”, vol. 80, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al B.O.R., București, 1983, 301.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*, 302.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

which the seen and unseen world is organized, but also of the possibilities of knowledge and of many other aspects that were going to be a major preoccupation of the Byzantine philosophical meditation.

Hierarchy, perceived as analogical participation to knowledge and more radically as participation to being, implied an extensive use of the explanatory paradigms that define analogy in Platonic writings. Plato asserts the analogical possibility of man's participation in the truth that can be found only by ascending to the non-topical world of Ideas through knowing the logos of beings. It is a contemplation signifying participating in the Good, which man can partake in analogically. In the same way in which seeing the sun is not the sun itself, but the sense that is the most similar to the sun, the intellect participates in the good in an analogous way. The intellect is not the good, but is similar to it, as it stands for the ability to "contemplate" the Good. At the same time analogy is a sign of the *measure*, of the degree in which the intellect is becoming able to recognize the Good. The value Plato gives to analogy has nothing to do with comparing quantities or sizes and is not an analogy of the relationships between numbers either, but is endowed with the dimension of a representation relationship, a relationship between the image and the object that is represented. Therefore, knowing this relationship is a dynamic fact that presupposes the ability of the mind to partake in the represented object through the agency of its image¹⁴. The conceptual frame of the hierarchical model of interpreting reality is rooted in the procession-return pattern, which crosses over the Greek tradition from Plato to the late Neo-platonism. This frame whose diagrammatic aspect had been adopted wholly by Dionysius contains the terms procession and return as part of a triad including also the term 'remanence', or remaining within oneself. The best Neo-Platonist expression of this pattern is to be found in Proclus's *Elements of Theology*. He gives a synthetic phrasing of it by stating that "Every effect remains within its cause, proceeds from it and returns to it"¹⁵. The Neo-Platonists asserted the existence of several levels of reality and of causing starting from the One as supreme cause of all towards the multiplicity of the sensitive world.

It is a different understanding of the purpose of hierarchical steps from the Byzantine point of view. An inferior step does not mean a greater

¹⁴ Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*. Trans. Norman Russell. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007, 215.

¹⁵ Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1963, 39.

remoteness from God, but a different positioning in relation to Him. If we take into account the absolutely unrepeatable character of each human being, the uniqueness of his identity, it becomes easy for us to understand that we cannot talk about an identical partaking of the divine goodness. The essential purpose of the steps is to *intermediate*. In other words, the purpose of the “higher” steps is to facilitate a deeper participation in the Good: it is a continual taking over and passing on of the divine light *in a personal way* (each being adding in fact to the transmission his own personal way of experiencing the light he has received and transmitting, or communicating, it to the others in this particular way). Even the highest step, that of cherubs, does not refer to an identical partaking of the gifts of the divine communication, because, as Dionysius declares, the cherubs run to one another burning with the desire of sharing the experiencing of the divine works. Sharing with the others the gifts you have received means in fact reproducing God’s way of working, imitating His goodness, and what we call hierarchy is finally nothing but what takes place as a consequence of this universal desire to commune and impart. Hierarchies are essentially a vehicle of theophany, and more than that an *active* transmitting of the divine light¹⁶. At the same time this imparting of gifts means also a threefold working, because each step does not only communicate, but also makes communication possible in its particular way, and this requires a *preparation*, making the receivers fit for the communicating of the divine brightness. That is why this threefold working is at the same time *purification, enlightenment and union*. If there is an order in the transmitting typical of the logic presented by the hierarchy, this is for Dionysius the result of the *measure*, of the way in which each personal existence rises analogically, as much as it can, towards imitating God. From a human perspective, you “place” yourself within the hierarchy according to the way in which you establish your inner attitude, therefore the hierarchy should not be perceived as an immutable and fixed order, but as the existential dynamics of the act of receiving and communicating. Hierarchy should not be seen as a rational-methodological form of graduating the quantitative differences of knowledge, but as the expression and signifying of an existential reality, knowledge understood as empiric-universal participation to this reality. The knowledge mediated by the hierarchy must be perceived as going beyond the static-rational understanding of the objectively signified essences and as referring to dynamic-universal conscious knowledge of the

¹⁶ Andrew Louh, *Dionisie Areopagitul.O introducecere*, Deisis, Sibiu, 1997, 73.

otherness of persons and things¹⁷. Equally important is the fact that hierarchy means more than a hierarchical transmitting of the truth; it means a *transmitting of being* as well. Although identical to itself in what the personal aspect is concerned, each rational creature is always different, always enriched, as part of a dynamics that never allows it to stand still. The Byzantine space was influenced by the theme of the hierarchy not only in respect of the theological justification or the philosophical exercise aiming at explaining the world in terms of a Christian *cosmos*, but also with regard to implicating Dionysius's model of the hierarchical participation in the social articulation of the Byzantine Empire.

These assumptions can be counted as elements that concurred in made of the Byzantine cultural model identity and in the same time they count as a way to understand why the descriptions of the man and of the world have such particularities in this tradition. Highlighting the impact of these assumptions on what we call 'the Byzantine Cultural Model' make also possible to understand why the Eastern European area maintains cultural differences from the West.

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¹⁷ Christos Yannaras, *op.cit.*, 228.

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