ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΕΙΖΟΝΟΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΥ

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Summary :

During the Palaiologan period there was a renewed significance of religious and ecclesiastical debates, which had faded somewhat in the previous periods of Byzantine history, after the end of the Iconoclastic dispute. These religious and ecclesiastical controversies became major political issues and extended to political correlations and conflicts. The three most significant of them, in the order of appearance, are: the Arsenite schism, the issue of the Union with the Roman Catholic Church and the issue of Hesychasm.

Date

13th-15th century

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1. Introduction

During the Palaiologan period there was a renewed interest on religious and ecclesiastical debates, which had faded somewhat in the previous periods of Byzantine history, after the end of the Iconoclastic controversy. The significance that the intellectuals of the period attributed to these issues in their writings indicates that the religious and ecclesiastical controversies of the period were major political problems, correlating to social aspects and debates. They can be considered as the result of distinct and sometimes conflicting ideological pursuits in a period very much characterised by its political uncertainty and fluidity; this fluidity is expressed in Byzantium in a widespread manner through the conflict of two opposing sides: the barricade around Orthodoxy on one hand and the turn towards the West on the other.

The three most important religious debates of this period, in the order in which they emerged, are: the Arsenite schism, the issue of the Union with the Roman Catholic Church and the issue of Hesychasm. In the attempt to determine a typology of these conflicts, we detect two distinct types: there are controversies emerging from the ranks of ecclesiastical hierarchy, who were challenging the legitimacy of the people in charge of the highest positions within the Church. On the other hand there were also conflicts that were based on dogmatic issues and differences. The Arsenite schism falls into the first category, while the debates concerning the Union of the Churches and Hesycasm belong to the second group; however, even in the second category the challenging of people of higher authority within the Church hierarchy is also evident.

2. The Arsenite schism

This conflict was defined by the central role played by the Patriarch Arsenios Autoreianos and by his discord with Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos. This conflict erupted when the patriarch strongly opposed Michael Palaiologos' act of blinding and thus permanently dethroning the legitimate heir to the throne, John IV Laskaris; in fact, the long antagonism between Palaiologos and the house of the Laskarids was evident in the background of this debate. This antagonism existed already from the reign of John III Vatatzes, manifesting itself even more in the years of Theodore II Laskaris (1254-1258); the Laskarids were extremely suspicious and sceptical towards Palaiologos, a renowned aristocrat with high political ambitions. The complicated situation involving the succession of Theodore II Laskaris by his underage son John IV (1258-1261) allowed Michael Palaiologos to put into action his aspirations for the throne. His first act in this direction was to eliminate the Mouzalon brothers, appointed guardians of the young emperor. Palaiologos managed to be crowned co-emperor, even though the patriarch extracted from him an oath that he would respect the legitimate heir.

After the recapture of Constantinople (1261), Michael Palaiologos felt powerful enough in his position to remove John IV from power by blinding him. This act caused the intense reaction of Patriarch Arsenios in an unprecedented controversy between the political and ecclesiastical leaders, with the patriarch excommunicating the emperor. It was obvious that the rulers of political and ecclesiastical power could not co-exist, and this inability to collaborate drove Michael VIII to exile Arsenios and appoint a new patriarch. However, part of the clergy remained faithful to Arsenios, not recognising the new ecclesiastical authorities and performing their duties independently from them.

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Apart from the direct political context of this controversy, the deepest root of this crisis is thought to lie in the existing issue concerning the limits of the Church's independence from imperial rule (the well known issue of caesaropapism). The schism that erupted within the Church also affected society in general, but also became a political problem, since several aristocrats or members of the public sided with the arsenite clergy. The conflict even spread inside the house of the Palaiologoi with Michael's sister Eirene and a very influential nun Eulogia supporting the arsenites; the latter was sent to exile by the emperor.

On a wider lever, the centre of support for the arsenite movement could be traced in Asia Minor, which had represented the empire 'in exile' during the Laskarids, and still retained the momeries of prosperity and security the Laskarid government had brought to the area. This sentimental attachment of the people of Asia Minor to the Laskarids was also combined with a sense of neglect that spread throughout that area, after the reconquest of Constantinople by Michael Palaiologos; Michael VIII's political priorities were clearly focused on incorporating the Greek and Latin political entities of the Greek peninsula, and on avoiding the danger of a new Crusade that would turn against Byzantium. It is indicative of the situation that in response to the blinding of John IV the army of Bithynia rebelled against Palaiologos; after their elimination the defence in the area was visibly weakened.

The issue of the Union of the Churches was quickly added to the confict caused by the Arsenite schism, thus making ecclesiastical issues the biggest problem of Michael VIII Palaiologos' reign. The Arsenite schism lasted for a large period of time, even after the death of the two protagonists, Michael Palaiologos and Arsenios. Despite the efforts of Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos to restore peace – including a proposal to symbolically recognise the 'unlawful acts' of his predecessor – the separation within the clergy and part of the society, with the existance of a distinct arsenite group, continuted to exist for a long time, even into Andronikos' reign (1282-1328), until ca. 1310.[1]

3. The Hesychast controversy

The Hesychast controversy was a conflict involving issues of doctrine. It was one of the most important issues in the mid-14th century, largely occupying the discussions of the intellectuals of the time; it also evolved into a political matter, relating to the civil strife between the contenders of the throne. The origins of this practice, and of the theological ideology of hesychasm, are somewhat obscure; they could probably be traced in Mount Athos in the first decades of the 14th century. Hesychasm was a mystic practice and idea, teaching that through ascetic life and concentration in a completely quiet environment (hesychia = quiet, thus the name hesychasm), and through the constant repetition of a specific prayer, the one who prays can finally experience the Holy Light of Mount Tabor.

The faith and practice of some part of the monastic community could have remained an insignificant detail of monastic life; however, it was elevated into a crucial subject of public debate by the reaction towards the teachings of Barlaam of Calabria. Barlaam was a renowned theologist and cleric, a Greek from southern Italy in origin, who lived in Constantinople in the end of the 1330s and had managed to become very popular. Barlaam believed in a logical theological theory, greatly influenced by western theological thought, according to which the essence of God could be interpreted in a logical manner. There were many reactions to Barlaam's theories, headed mainly by the monk Gregory Palamas. Palamas, in the effort to refute Barlaam's theories, invoked the hesychast ideas, bringing them to the forefront; thus he became the main representative of hesychasm.[2]

The strife between hesychasts and their opponents reached such high significance, that Emperor Andronikos III, in 1341, was forced to summon a Council of state and ecclesiastic officials, in order to reach a solution. This Council did not reach a conclusion, but managed to bring forth the positive or negative attitudes towards each side; John Kantakouzenos declared his support of Hesychasm, while the Patriarch John Kalekas was clearly opposed to it. It was at that time that Barlaam left for Italy and joined the Roman Catholic Church. The final solution to this problem was transferred to another Council that never took place, because of the emperor's death and the civil war that broke out, concerning his succession, between John Kantakouzenos and the guardians of the underage heir John V (Empress Anna, Patriarch John Kalekas, Alexios Apokaukos). The Council of 1351, summoned by the Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (1347-1354), recognised Hesychasm as an official doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church (it remains one until today). After its official recognition, Hesychasm was transmitted to the other orthodox people of the Balkans and Russia, where it played a very significant role in theological thinking and monastic practices.

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The fact that the peak of this issue coincided with the civil war of the period 1341-1347 could lead to the impression that the two opposing sides also had contrary views concerning the issue of Hesychasm. It is true that the leaders of the two sides, John Kantakouzenos and John Kalekas, did represent the two opposite opinions on this issue. What is more, Gregory Palamas was imprisoned during the civil war, while after his appointment as bishop of Thessalonike by Kantakouzenos, the zelots, who controlled the city at the time, refused to accept his position.

Gregory Palamas' hardships, in this particular instance, could be explained by his personal friendship with Kantakouzenos, rather than his hesychast views. Therefore, we should avoid generalisations when it comes to the idea that the hesychast idea fully determined the two opposing sides of the civil war. There are several examples that do not permit this generalisation, such as the scholar and historian Nikephoros Gregoras. He was an avid anti-hesycast and a supporter of Kantakousenos during the civil war (Gregoras turned against Kantakouzenos after the Council of 1351 for reasons concerning the hesycast issue). Another example comes from the case of Irene Choumnaina Palaiologina, a scholar and noble woman, who had opposed Kantakouzenos during the civil war, even though she, herself, supported Hesychasm.[3] In addition, Kantakouzenos' closest associate, holding the office of *mesazon*, was Demetrios Kydones, an anti-hesychast (Kantakouzenos even exchanged letters with Prochoros Kydones, brother of Demetrios, debating the issue of Hesychasm).

Behind the hesycast controversy, we can detect the antagonism of two different cultural ideals, that define the late Byzantine society: on one hand, we see the turn towards the West, and the discussions with the ideologies developed there; one the other hand there is the barricade to a particular tradition, characterised by a non-logical theological approach, upon which eastery orthodoxy was trying to establish itself.[4] It is not a coincidence that one of the opponents of Hesychasm was Demetrios Kydones, the main advocate for western influence.

4. The conflict between unionists and anti-unionists

The schism of 1054 between the Churches took place during a period when the evolution of Western societies showed clear characteristics that placed a form of pressure on Byzantium. This pressure had an economic nature, through the infiltration of Italian merchants in Byzantine economy, but also a political and military character in the form of the Norman invasions, crusades etc. (the highest point being the capture of Constantinople in 1204 and the Latin rule). The Byzantines' mistrust towards the West was clearly indicated in the sphere of ecclesiastical debate and the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches.

Nevertheless, during the Palaiologan period, the issue of the union of the Churches was put forward by the Byzantine authorities, as part of their political objectives. However, because of the balance of power and the political conditions in Byzantium, any union between the Churches could only be achieved with results favourable to the Western Church. The Byzantines had to recognise the primacy of the pope in Rome over the Byzantine church and accept the western versions of doctrine; these included the addition of the *filioque* in the Creed and the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist. On these terms, the pope would bestow upon the Eastern Church the right to use Greek during Mass and to retain the Byzantine ecclesiastical and ceremonial traditions.

A long line of emperors examined the issue of the union. However, this problem evolved into a conflict among the circles of the Byzantine church and society in the two cases of Byzantine emperors who proclaimed the union: in 1274 in the Council of Lyon (Michael VIII Palaiologos) and in 1438-1439 in the Council of Ferrara-Florence (John VIII Palaiologos). In both cases, the subject of the union was employed in order to repel significant external dangers for the empire. The violent reactions that followed could be justified by the fact that, in Byzantine thological thought, the doctrinal differences with the West were considered heretic. The opponents of the union believed that they could accept the primacy of the Roman church, but they could not tolerate the incorporation of western doctrine within the orthodox one. In reality, the negative reactions to the union expressed the wariness and dislike towards the West, for all the reasons mentioned above; this explains the popularity of the anti-unionist views.

Michael VIII agreed to submit to the Papal Church, in order to prevent a Crusade against Byzantium, organised by the King of Naples, Charles of Anjou. The emperor was successful in this aspect, since after the proclamation of the union in the Council of Lyon

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(1274), the pope refused to sanction Charles' expedition and prevented other European powers from participating. On a practical level, however, the Council' decisions were not implemented by the Byzantine Church. The price Michael Palaiologos had to pay was very high, since his policy caused a wide range of reactions, placing him opposite the largest part of the clergy, the aristocracy and the people, at a time when he was already facing the consequences of the Arsenite schism. The rulers of Epiros and Thessaly grasped this opportunity to portray themselves as the defenders of Orthodoxy.[5]

Michael VIII Palaiologos' heir, Andronikos II, invalidated the union that his father had signed, since Byzantium was no longer facing the danger of an anti-Byzantine Crusade. Later emperors – Andronikos III, John VI Kantakouzenos, John V Palaiologos – re-evaluated the issue, without actually proclaiming union with the West (in fact, John V visited the papal court and proceded to personally embrace the union). In all these cases, the prospect of the union was considered as a tool that would incite a western crusade against the Turks, since Turkish expansion was viewed as the most crucial threat to the Byzantine Empire.[6]

With the same expectations in mind, the union was finally proclaimed in the Council of Ferrara-Florence (considered by the Western Church to be the Eighth Ecumenical Council); the Byzantine side was represented by the Emperor John VIII, the Patriarch Joseph and the most prominent civil and ecclesiastic officials. The only delegate that refused to sign the document of the union was the bishop of Ephesos Mark Eugenikos. This act elevated him to the spiritual leader of the anti-unionist faction until his death ten years later. The fierce reaction against the Byzantine delegation upon their return, instigated by monks and the lower levels of the clergy, led many of the delegates to withdraw their support and embrace anti-unionist ideas (e.g., George Scholarios, Sylvester Syropoulos and others).

The eve of the final Turkish attack found Byzantine society deeply divided. The dead end that this situation had reached is indicated by the fact that the last patriarch before the Fall, the unionist Gregory Mammes, was forced to flee to Italy; he was not replaced because no one was willing to take upon the responsibilities of this office at such an intense period of time. John VIII's successor, Constantine XI Palaiologos (1448-1453), is not considered to have been a great supporter of the union. However, facing the upcoming Turkish attack, he consented to a unionist Mass in St Sophia, on 12 December 1452, upon which presided the cardinal Isidore (former Orthodox bishop of Kiev). This historically significant event further aggravated the situation, leading to complete mistrust between the two sides, abusive confrontations and desecration for religious symbols.

The division between unionist and anti-unionists was evident in all social groups, even though the lower levels of the clergy and the people identified with the anti-unionists. Among the most prominent supporters of the unionist side are the cardinals Bessarion and Isidore (former Orthodox bishops of Nicaea and Kiev, respectively), the scholar Michael Apostoles, the despotes Thomas Palaiologos, the emperor's relative Theophilos Palaiologos and the historian Doukas. The anti-unionist side was represented by personalities such as George Scholarios – Gennariod, John Eugenikos, Loukas Notaras, the despot Dimitrios Palaiologos, Sylvestros Syropoulos (the future Patriarch Sophronios) and the historian Sphrantzes.

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1. On the Arsenite schism see Γουναρίδης, Π., *Το κίνημα των Αρσενιατών (1261-1310). Ιδεολογικές διαμάχες την εποχή των πρώτων Παλαιολόγων* (Αθήνα 1999). Cf. also the older study of Sykoutres, I., "Περί το σχίσμα των Αρσενιατών", *Ελληνικά* 11 (1929), pp. 267-332.

2. Nicol, D. M., *Church and Society in the Last Centuries of Byzantium* (Cambridge 1979), pp. 36-40.

3. Nicol, D. M., *The Last Centuries of Byzantium 1261-1453*² (Cambridge 1993), pp. 213-214.

4. Nicol, D. M., *Church and Society in the Last Centuries of Byzantium* (Cambridge 1979), pp. 80-85.

5. Nicol, D. M., *The Last Centuries of Byzantium 1261-1453*² (Cambridge 1993), pp. 48-57, 63, 77-79; Geanakoplos, D. J., *Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus and the West, 1258-1282. A Study in Late Byzantine-Latin Relations* (Cambridge MA 1959), esp. pp. 237-245, 258-264.

6. Nicol, D. M., *Church and Society in the Last Centuries of Byzantium* (Cambridge 1979), pp. 85-86; Nicol, D. M., *The Last Centuries of Byzantium 1261-1453*² (Cambridge 1993), pp. 174, 256-261, 266-272; Halecki, O., *Un empereur de Byzance à Rome* (Warsaw 1930), passim.

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- Politics in Late Byzantine Period - Policy towards the anti-unionists

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Glossary :

despotes

Title introduced in the 12th century. In administrative hierarchy, the office of despotes was under the emperor and the co-emperor. From the 14th century onwards, the title was given to the governors of the Byzantine Peloponnese.