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**A SERMON ABOUT THE ANTI-PALAMITE  
THEOLOGIAN GREGORY  
AKYNDINOS OF PRILEP**

In the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century the religious and mystical movement of Hesychasm appeared afresh in Byzantium. Its spiritual credo was based on the monastic seclusion on the way to attain tranquility (ησυχία) of the mind. The highest prayer of the perfect hesychast was the contemplation on the Almighty alone. Monks used psychosomatic methods and exercises to achieve a state of concentration. The constant contemplative “prayer of the heart” was through the recitation of the formula “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”. It was a spirituality of meditative anchorage, which had its roots in the monastic and patristic tradition of St Gregory and St John Klimakos of Sinai. During the civil war of 1341-47, Hesychasm became a religious and political movement.<sup>1</sup> The most prominent figure of the Hesychast movement in the 14<sup>th</sup> C. was the Archbishop Gregory Palamas. He united the whole tradition as a doctrine under the common name of Palamism and was after an impressive education in Constantinople [Gregory Palamas was a favorite of Andronicus II] and he was inclined towards monastic life and asceticism early. He spends some periods of time on the Holy Athos, in Thessalonica and in the monasteries in Macedonia. His devotion to the Hesychastic asceticism on the Holy Mountain of Athos was interrupted by the quarrels with Barlaam of Calabria.<sup>2</sup>

The triumph of Hesychasm in the Byzantine Empire was manifested by a large number of monasteries, as it was the Holy Athos, and it spread in all the regions of the Byzantine Commonwealth. The victory of the Palamite Hesychasm was connected with the past traditions of iconoclasm, the monastic asceticism and the Art of Palaiologan Renaissance, which contributes towards the exten-

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, (ed. A. Kazhdan et alii), Vol. II, New York, Oxford 1991, 923; L. Clucas, *The Hesychast Controversy in Byzantium in the Fourteenth century: A consideration of the Basic Evidence*, Los Angeles 1975, (PhD Dissertation); A.A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, 324-1453*, vol. II, Madison 1964, 665-667.

<sup>2</sup> J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Hesychasm: historical, theological and social problems*, London 1974, 97-100; N. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, New Brunswick, New Jersey 1957, 456-457; J.M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, Oxford 1986, 257-260; Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, *op. cit.*, vol. III, 1561-1562; D. Stiernon, ‘Bulletin sur le palamisme’, *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* 30 (1974) 231-341.

sion of the Palaiologan Art in the Slavic countries.<sup>3</sup> It was the case with the small spiritual centers in the Pelagonian Valley, concentrated around the towns of Pelagonia/Bitola and Prilep. As an ecclesiastical and spiritual part of the Diocese of Pelagonia, and the Archbishopric of Ohrid, the mediaeval town of Prilep reached one of its most brilliant intellectual and artistic periods in the fourteenth century. The renaissance and revival of learning and culture in Byzantium in the 14<sup>th</sup> century was essentially an urban phenomenon<sup>4</sup> For in the 14<sup>th</sup> century this city was very often the centre of the provincial court or a governor's residence, the city close to Thessalonica, to Ohrid and to the Bishopric See of Pelagonia as well. It was in the time during the reign of the Emperor Andronikos Palaiologos III who appointed his governor from the family of Synadenos and held Prilep until 1330. The medieval town of Prilep was built on the top of a rocky hill later known as "Marko's towers" with Varosh as its suburbia. The Slavo-Byzantine settlement of Varosh was a place of commerce and an important religious centre with its churches and monasteries. They were erected, rebuilt or renewed during the fourteenth century and most of the church buildings are treasure houses of architectural and pictorial monuments. Examples are the monastery of the Holy Archangel Michael from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the church of St Nicholas of 1299 (Fig. 1) the church of St Demetrius from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century, the church of St Peter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the church of Sts Theodore Tironos and Theodore Stratelatos, the church of Sveta Petka of 1343/44, the church of St George, the church of St Athanasius, the church of Sts Cosmas and Damian, the chapel of St Barbara, and the church dedicated to St John the Forerunner in 1343/1344, which was a Metropolitan cathedral church in the period between 1343 and the last decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In addition there were two important Imperial monasteries in vicinity of Prilep: the Dormition of the Virgin or Treskavec (erected before 1230) and the Zrze Monastery dedicated to the Transfiguration (Preobrazhenie).<sup>5</sup> Prilep was an important spiritual and cultural centre within the Diocese of Pelagonia/Bitola. It is a period when the Pelagonian Bishop Theodosios was on the throne as suffragan of the Archbishop Gregorios of Ohrid.<sup>6</sup>

Around 1330, a native from the region of Prilep in Macedonia, (εκ της παρεχωρου του Πριλλαπου)<sup>7</sup> named Gregory Akyndinos was involved in the

<sup>3</sup> D. Geanakoplos, *Byzantine East and Latin West: Two worlds of Christendom in middle ages and Renaissance*, *Studies in Ecclesiastical history*, Oxford 1964, 49-51.

<sup>4</sup> D. Nicol, 'Thessalonica as a cultural center in the fourteenth century', *Studies in Late Byzantine History and Prosopography*, London 1986, X/121-122. The Emperor Andronikos II was the greatest of the imperial patrons towards the revival of scholarship.

<sup>5</sup> R. Mihajlovski, *The Development of Spiritual and Intellectual Life in Bitola/Manastir during the Ottoman centuries*, La Trobe University 2003, (PhD Dissertation), 51-52.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, op. cit., 48. Z. Rasolkoska-Nikolovska, "Freski od kalendarot vo manastirov Treskavec-Prilep," *Kulturno nasledstvo* 2, (1961) 45-60; T. Velmans, *La Peinture murale Byzantine a la fin du Moyen Age*, Paris 1977, 242; B. Babic, "Opst pregled na spomenicite od minatoto na Prilep i prilepskiot kraj", *Spomenici za srednovjekovnata i ponovata istorija na Makedonija*, vol. 4, Skopje 1981, 19-35; M. Maksimovic-Gligorijevic, "Slikani kalendar u Treskavcu i stihovi Hristofora Mitilenskog", *Zograf* 8, (1977) 48.

<sup>7</sup> C. Hero, *Letters of Gregory Akyndinos*, Washington 1983, X, n. 6. An excellent study of Akyndinos' biography and work; *Vizantiski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije*, ed. Lj. Maksimovic, I. Djuric, S. Cirkovic et alii, vol. 6, Beograd 1986, 639



Fig. 1 Church St Nicholas at Varosh, Prilep

Сл. 1. Црква Св. Николе у Вароши, Прилеп

controversy over Hesychasm and Palamism. According to the correspondence of Palamas to John Gabras, Akyndinos was of humble Mysian ie. in the other words Bulgarian or Macedonian Slav origin from Prilep.<sup>8</sup> The date and year of his birth are not known. He recognized himself that he originated from the 'rustic race of shepherds', as Moses and David in the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup> Palamas informs us that Gregorios was his monastic name and Akyndinos (Harmless, Humble) was probably his adopted epithet for the reason of piety. He received good education, first in the town of Pelagonia (today Bitola), which was according to Philotheos of Selymbria a center of Hellenistic pagan scholarship, an unusual fact, since it was the Bishop's residence.<sup>10</sup> He continued his studies in Thessalonica under Thomas Magistros and the Archdeacon Bryennios, and probably under Barlaam of Calabria.<sup>11</sup> In that period he also made his early contacts with some fragments of the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>12</sup> While Gregory Palamas was in Beroia in Macedonia, Akyndinos went to him

<sup>8</sup> I. Sevcenko, 'Society and Intellectual Life in the Fourteenth century', *Society and Intellectual Life in Late Byzantium*, London 1981, 74, n. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Hero, *op. cit.* IX.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, *op. cit.*, X, n.6; *Vizantiski izvori za istoriju naroda Jugoslavije*, ed. Lj. Maksimovic, I. Djuric, S. Cirkovic et alii, vol. 6, Beograd 1986, 639; J. Meyendorf, *Introduction a l'etude de Gregoire Palamas*, Paris 1959, 62 n.91.

<sup>11</sup> J. Meyendorf, *Byzantine Hesychasm: historical, theological and social problems*, London 1974, 1/96.

<sup>12</sup> *The Lives of the Pilars of Orthodoxy*, publ. by Holy Apostles Convent, Colorado 1990, 200.

for spiritual instruction, and in the meantime he taught grammar to the children of the local wealthy people. The Hieromonk Palamas spends a time during the year 1326 and 1331 at a hermitage near Beroia and accepted Akyndinos as a pupil.<sup>13</sup> Following the Serbian invasion on Beroia in 1331 they became separated, but Akyndinos visited Palamas at the hermitage of St Sabbas of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos. Despite Palamas' support Akyndinos was rejected at the monasteries of Philotheou, Iviron and Petra. But, he had an extensive intellectual capacity that included profane studies in sciences such as astronomy. So much that Palamas presented him with a copy of an astronomy text by Nicetas Gregoras. Perhaps as we later learn he was much inclined to philosophy and scholarship than monastic mysticism. Akyndinos claimed to see not only the Divine Light, but also the Christ's face which Palamas explained as demoniacal vision. In his *Antirrhetic* Palamas believed that Akyndinos engaged a heresy by his preoccupation with pagan philosophy and knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

Akyndinos returned to Thessalonica after 1332 where he corresponded with Nicephoras Gregoras concerning his admirations for his writings in astronomy. Gregoras was in debate with Barlaam of Calabria, and soon Akyndinos who was also attracted by it entered into the circle of Barlaam friends, admiring his brilliant knowledge that would later change his fate.

Barlaam (born as Bernardo in 1290, died 1348) from Seminara in Calabria, was an orthodox monk and moved to Constantinople in 1330, where he served as hegoumenos in the Atakaleptos monastery.<sup>15</sup> Bilingual, Barlaam read and wrote texts in Latin and Greek. Under the patronage of Andronikos III served as Orthodox emissary in Union matters and at courts in Italy and France. In Avignon he met the Italian Proto-humanist Francesco Petrarca and influenced his ideas, and also he had some influence on the Proto-Renaissance man Giovanni Boccaccio.<sup>16</sup> He was given an appointment to teach Aristotelian philosophy at Constantinople. He entered in correspondence with Gregory Palamas about the procession of the Holy Spirit, and he maintained that Aristotelian methods of proof were useful for solutions of the theological problems. He mocked the uneducated hesychast monks on Mount Athos, calling them 'omphaloscopoi' (Navel-gazers).<sup>17</sup> Barlaam opposes the hesychast questions such matters as whether the light of Tabor during the Christ prayer was eternal or created. In 1337 before the Synod in Constantinople he accused the hesychast Palamas of Messalian and Bogomil heresy. Akyndinos was asked to mediate stating that the Aristotelian method can be used to satisfy both of their opinions, but the quarrel developed into debate over the conception of knowledge of God and hesychast methods of prayer. In the same time he declared that he remain faithful to the teaching of

<sup>13</sup> *Sveti Grigorije Palama, Gospode prosvetli tamu moju, izabrane besede*, priredio J. Srbulj, Beograd 1999, 21-26.

<sup>14</sup> D. Nicol, 'Thessalonica as a cultural centre in the Fourteenth century' *Studies in Late Byzantine History and Prosopography*, London 1986, 126.

<sup>15</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, 257.

<sup>16</sup> Vasilev, *op. cit.*, vol. II, 714-715.

<sup>17</sup> D. Nicol, *Byzantium: its ecclesiastical history and relations with the Western world*, London 1972, XII/47; *A Chronology of the Byzantine Empire*, ed. T. Vening, New York 2006, 656.

the Fathers, disregarding the theological disputes between his two friends. Later Akyndinos' theological dispute was directed primarily against what he considers to be a perversion of Patristic sources in the theology of Palamas. For him God was identical with his essence and the vision of God was a vision of itself or otherwise was a created one.<sup>18</sup> The question of whether the light of the Transfiguration was created or not was hardly a fundamental one, and it was the result of a long standing dispute between the mystics and intellectuals.

The Hesychast controversy was transferred from Macedonia to the capital, where it was decided to convoke a council. John Cantacuzenus organized with Patriarch John XIV Kalekas, Emperor Andronicos III, and the Holy Synod a Council in June 1341 and again in August at St Sophia in Constantinople. Despite being friendly with both Palamas and Barlaam, Cantacuzenus supported the Council's decision to affirm Palamas and condemn Akyndinos, because he was aware that compromises on theology had almost always failed in the past.<sup>19</sup> Barlaam was condemned and almost as soon returned to Italy in 1341 joining the Roman Church, Palamas was declared orthodox, but Akyndinos who was deeply versed in the pagan scholasticism with patristic theology became the main target of the Hesychast. The whole Hesychast controversy had a typical Byzantine political background: because Cantacuzenus preferred Hesychasts and Palamas, patriarch Kalekas opposes Cantacuzenus and supports Akyndinos.<sup>20</sup> In 1343 Kalekas deposed Palamas and excommunicated him and proposed preference for Akyndinos, though he had been previously condemned as a heretic. In 1344 Patriarch Kalekas resolved to elevate him to the episcopal rank after the first ordained him to the diaconate and then as a presbyter.<sup>21</sup> Akyndinos wrote his 'Report' with his version of facts and submitted it to the Patriarch and Synod.

Since the synod in 1341 Akyndinos stayed at the Monastery of Christ Philantropos where he had the strong patronage of the former Princess Eulogia Choumnaina-Palaiologina, daughter of Nikephoros Choumnos and later an abbess of the Convent of Christ Philantropos. After the death of her husband despot John Palaiologos, son of Andronicos II,<sup>22</sup> she stayed politically active and anti-Cantacuzenist. Akyndinos praised her knowledge and her financial support remaining at her monastery until 1344.

In the meantime Palamas expanded his polemical text against Akyndinos and wrote a set of *Three Antirrhetic Against Akyndinos* and another set of *Seven Discourses Against Akyndinos*. Other Palamists such as Joseph Kalothetos, Dyspathos and Philotheos wrote some works against Akyndinos as well.

On the other side, Akyndinos theological criticism against Palamas' was attributed to his misinterpretation of the Patristic sources and therefore he composed a chief work called *Seven Antirrhetic*. In his discourses Akyndinos reveals himself as highly theological exegete and he shows that Palamas altered and deliberately

<sup>18</sup> Gregory Palamas: B *The Triads*, ed. J. Meyendorff, London 1983, 7.

<sup>19</sup> W. Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, Stanford 1997, 765.

<sup>20</sup> J.J. Norwich, *Byzantium, the decline and fall*, New York 1996, 304-305.

<sup>21</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, op. cit., I, 45-46.

<sup>22</sup> Hero, op. cit., XIII.



Fig. 2 27 May 1351 Blachernae Synod Paris Bibl. nationale

Сл. 2. 27. мај 1351

falsified interpretations of the Patristic texts.<sup>23</sup> Finally the dispute as to whether the Divine Light around Jesus on the Mountain Tabor (Transfiguration) was created or not became a widening gap between the church intellectuals and mystics.

<sup>23</sup> Clucas, *op. cit.*, 302-311. 'God transcends the essence of all things which are conceived and named'; J.S. Nadal, 'La critique par Akyndinos de l'hermenentique patristique de Plamas' *Istina* 19 (1974) 297-328.

Another Council presided by Cantacuzene was held on February 1347. (Fig.2) Yet definitive in the Orthodoxy synod was held in 1351 in the Blachernae palace. Palamite teaching was reaffirmed and anathemas against Barlaam, Akyndinos and Gregoras were added to the Synodicon of Orthodoxy. Akyndinos fell into disgrace, then fled from Constantinople in 1437 and died in exile soon afterwards. According to Meyendorff his death must have occurred before May 1348.<sup>24</sup> The opposition was taken up against the scholars Nicephorus Gregoras who died in prison and Demetrios Kydones, though both were politically pro-Cantacuzenus.

John Meyendorff noted that on the spiritual plane 'Palamisme turned his back to the Renaissance' and on the political plane it prolonged the Byzantine ideal for the monarchy, confronted by the Western scholastic theology, which brought equality between the theology and philosophy.<sup>25</sup> In some ways Gregory Akyndinos was a Byzantine monastic intellectual inclined towards scholarship, philosophy and scholastic theology close to the future Renaissance ideal. His concerns were less with Hesychasm than with Palama's insistence on the superiority of mystical knowledge to philosophical argument.<sup>26</sup> Even the Hesychast movement despite its religious conservatives and mysticism had some cultural influence on the Italian Renaissance as well. It was the period of Paleologan Renaissance, which influenced the emerging Italian Renaissance.<sup>27</sup>

His opponent and former friend Gregory Palamas was canonized in 1368 and venerated since among the Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Palamism became a weapon against Latinophones and a touchstone of Orthodoxy to a degree that the names of the opponents Barlaam and Akyndinos had been added to the list of heresiarchs anathemised on the Sunday of Orthodoxy.<sup>28</sup>

Роберт Михајловски

СЛОВО ЗА ГРИГОРИЈ АКИНДИН ОД ОД ПРИЛЕП И НЕГОВИОТ  
АНТИ-ПАЛАМИТИЗАМ

Средновековниот Прилеп како духовен и црковен дел од Пелагониската епархија го достигна својот интелектуален и творечки зенит во 14-ти век. Околу 1330 богословот Григориј Акиндин роден (околу 1300) во Прилеп беше вовлечен во полемиката помеѓу Хезихазмот и Паламизмот. Според писмата на Григориј Палама тој бил по потекло од Прилеп, а Филотеј од Селиврија го опишал неговото понатамошно школување во Пелагонија (денешна Битола) од каде заминал за Солун, каде ги завршил студиите.

<sup>24</sup> D. Nicol, *The Last centuries of Byzantium*, 219-222: Hero, *op. cit.*, XXXIII, n. 142.

<sup>25</sup> T. Theoteoi, 'L'Hesychasme – valeurs sociales d'un ideal asocial' Proceedings of 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London 21-26 August, 2006, 205-206.

<sup>26</sup> Treadgold, *op. cit.* 764.

<sup>27</sup> D. J. Geanakoplos, *Constantinople and the West, essays on the Late Byzantine (Palaeologan) and Italian Renaissances and the Byzantine and Ottoman Churches* Madison, London, 1989, 3-37.

<sup>28</sup> J. Gill, *Church Union: Rome and Byzantium (1204-1453)* London 1979, XIII/380-381.

Имал намера да се повлече во манастирите на Света Гора, но бил одбиен од непознати причини. Неговото право име е непознато, Григориј му е монашкото име, а Акиндинос му е прекарот.

Околу 1337 Акиндин престојувал во Цариград каде имал улога на посредник во расправиите помеѓу Григориј Палама и Варлаам од Калабрија. Околу 1341 тој ја преиспитувал ортодоксијата на Паламовата доктрина подржувајќи го Варлаам. Треба да се спомене дека Акиндин всушност и не бил симпатизер на латинската мисла, ниту пак бил под влијанието на грчката филозофија. Недоволно разбран тој бил екскомунициран на Цариградскиот собор во 1347 и испратен во прогонство каде починал во 1348.