

GEORGE AMIROUTZES, *THE PHILOSOPHER, OR ON FAITH*, EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY JOHN MONFASANI, HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE, MA 2021 (GRAPHAI, 1), 256 PP., ISBN: 9780884024859.

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A FIFTEENTH CENTURY BYZANTINE PHILOSOPHER ON HIS CHRISTIAN FAITH:
GEORGE AMIROUTZES' DIALOGUE *THE PHILOSOPHER, OR ON FAITH*.

NOTES ON A NEW EDITION

John Monfasani gives us in this beautifully produced book¹ the *editio princeps* of the Greek text of a dialogue on matters of Christian faith purportedly held between the author, George Amiroutzes (the 'philosopher') and Mehmet II ('the Conqueror'), written when Amiroutzes had become a member of Mehmet's court. Amiroutzes (henceforth: 'A') had enjoyed a high reputation as a leading Byzantine intellectual: he was part of the Byzantine delegation (with Pletho and Scholarius) which went to attend the Council of Ferrara and Florence in 1437. He was highly regarded by Italian humanists and became a leading dignitary of the Byzantine enclave of Trebizond before it fell in Turkish hands in 1461. A. tells the terrible story of this fall in a letter of supplication addressed in 1461 to Cardinal Bessarion, with whom A. had close ties (the letter is reproduced in part by Monfasani as Appendix I).² After a period of captivity and misery, A.'s intellectual qualities were recognized by Mehmet II, who made him part of his court, a time reflected in A.'s dialogue *The Philosopher, or On faith*.

Monfasani describes in his Introduction how he discovered the sole manuscript which preserves the original Greek text of this work (Toledo Biblioteca Capitolar Cod. 96-37), of which only a Latin translation had hitherto been available. Thanks to the present publication, together with some other much shorter philosophical

¹ GEORGE AMIROUTZES, *The Philosopher, or On Faith*, edited and translated by JOHN MONFASANI, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2021 (Graphai, 1) [henceforth, MONFASANI]. I am grateful for helpful comments and information received in Leuven and from John Demetracopoulos.

² A. describes there how the Turks swept up the Comneni in Trebizond as if with a dragnet (σαγήνη), recalling what the Persians had done to the Eretrians in 490 B.C. (PLATO, *Laws* 498d).

texts already published by Monfasani from the same manuscript,³ we now can read a considerable body of A.'s philosophical work. In the following I would like to comment briefly on matters concerning the edition and translation of the Greek text, the content and purpose of A.'s dialogue, concentrating my remarks on the methodological and epistemological issues raised in the dialogue, as well as on questions involving A.'s sources of inspiration.

Monfasani distinguishes between two hands in the Greek manuscript, the copyist (**T**) and a corrector (**T¹**), both hands of the late fifteenth/early sixteenth century. Since this is a *codex unicus*, Monfasani quite rightly provides a very full report in the apparatus of all details concerning the text as given and as corrected by the two hands, including matters of accentuation, from which emerges some information about **T¹**, who accuses A., for example, of having converted to Islam, an accusation which, as Monfasani convincingly argues (p. 4–5), is unlikely to be justified. The Greek text given by the manuscript seems to be in good order, and Monfasani, also using **T¹**, prints a very clean and well-articulated edition. I have only a few small textual improvements to suggest:

- p. 36, 5: typographical error (correct to ἀνόητος);
- p. 62, 18: στιγμήν] I would correct this to στιγμή (see below);
- p. 62, 27: τοῖς ἄλλοις] read ταῖς ἄλλαις (as in the translation);
- p. 120, 22: εὐθάνομεν] this word is not found in TLG, as Monfasani notes; I would correct it to εὐθύνομεν;
- p. 146, 4: τοῦ τε] I think the correction by **T¹** (τό δε) is preferable;
- p. 172, 15: ἀλήθεια καὶ ἀληθές] Monfasani marks these words as corrupt, but I think they are correct. Both 'truth' and 'the true' are predicated of God in this way at p. 172, 1; p. 176, 11; p. 180, 1.

In a number of places some changes in punctuation would be desirable; I give some examples:

- p. 40, 5–6: move the comma in 5 to follow ἐπαγόμενα and remove the comma in 6;
- p. 50, 7: replace interrogative semi-colon with a full stop (also in p. 64,10);
- p. 76, 9: transfer interrogative semi-colon to 8 as following πεπλασμένη;
- p. 134, 17: this line continues the sentence on the previous line.

The English translation which faces the Greek text is on the whole clear and very readable. Of course, no translator's work is ever finished and so, in the present

³ JOHN MONFASANI, *George Amiroutzes. The Philosopher and His Tractates* [henceforth, *Tractates*], Peeters, Leuven 2011.

case, I would propose changes to the translation in various places. However, it would be fastidious to do this here and I will limit myself to making some modifications in translations of passages which I quote below.

Taking up then a tradition of dialogues between philosophers and rulers beginning with Solon and Croesus (Herodotus I, 30–33), A. presents us with a dialogue between himself and Mehmet II on matters of Christian faith. How plausible is it that such dialogue really took place? Monfasani attributes some verisimilitude to the dialogue (p. 24), but sometimes Mehmet speaks very much like a Greek (see for example p. 170, 12–14). It seems that some such discussions did take place, A. then giving Mehmed's interventions a strong Greek expression when composing the written text. But why write such a text? A. refers (p. 36) to the apparent vanity of such an enterprise, given the present desperate condition of the Greeks conquered by the Turks which allows for no such literary luxury. He contrasts the situation with the conquest of the Greeks by the Macedonians and the Romans, claiming that Greek culture reached a high point under Roman rule. (If, however, the Romans became Hellenized, one should add, it was when their religion was still polytheistic and assimilable to that of the Greeks). What is different today, A. indicates, is that the Turks are warlike and of a different religion and reduce the Greeks to slavery. But why then this book and for whom is it written? A. indicates that Mehmet II enjoyed discussing philosophy with him, as well as his Christian faith (p. 40, 1), which certainly gave an impulse to the work. But A. is writing for Greeks, providing them with ways to answer objections to their faith such as those made by Mehmet (p. 40, 8–9). The work is thus on the defensive (as were the Greeks), repelling Muslim criticisms of Christian faith, rather than offensive, attacking Islam. Monfasani describes A.'s book as an *Apologia pro fide sua* (p. 25).

The objections made by Mehmet to Christian faith in the dialogue concern principally the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation, the Trinity and the resurrection of the body, as well as Christian use of the Hebrew prophets and further matters (Monfasani provides an overview of the contents on p. 15–21). But on what grounds are these objections made and according to what principles can the Philosopher answer them, as a philosopher? What methodology does A. follow? The principles (or articles) of faith (both Muslim and Christian) are taken as given and not subject to challenge. A. presents Mehmet's objections as consequences (ἐπαγόμενα) supposedly derived from the principles of Christian faith, consequences taken to be absurd, contradictory or impossible. Thus, for example, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation would entail that divine nature is changed, which is impossible (p. 44, 11). What A. seeks to show, then, is that no such consequences arise from Christian principles, thus defending these

principles.⁴ So the doctrine of Incarnation does not entail that divine nature be changed. On the subject of the doctrine of the resurrection of bodies, A. says:

This is what we have to teach concerning the resurrection. We have not come to it from philosophy. For it is the teaching of my first Lord, Jesus [...] We demonstrate its consequences, though, from philosophy, and we would accept nothing with which she does not agree on the basis of our principles. For those who disagree with this philosophy and our premises do not hold anything sound. We ought to be consistent with our premises and not « say things which contradict them and good reasoning, as in the case in Simonides' 'long story' » [Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1091a7–9]. For the sign that principles are true is that nothing of what comes from them is found to be irrational, which is the opposite of falsity (p. 198, 11–19).

The philosopher will then show that no absurd, contradictory or impossible consequences derive from his principles of faith, and thereby not only defend his faith, but support its truth.

But in relation to what criteria can consequences be shown to irrational, impossible, contradictory, or the reverse? A. frequently refers to 'common notions' in this regard.⁵ A consequence derived from an article of faith which conflicts with a common notion can be judged to be false. It seems to me that in A.'s arguments common notions can be of various types: certain positions are shared in common by A. and Mehmet (p. 108, 5–6; p. 138, 16), for example the Avicennian idea of God as necessary being (p. 42, 10–15);⁶ other common notions seem to have a much wider extension, recalling the original Stoic common notions which were thought to be common to humanity in general (p. 58; 2–3; p. 60, 11). A. mentions furthermore common principles accepted in physics (p. 66, 5; p. 154, 18) and common arguments (p. 44, 6). By using such common notions as a touchstone, A. can show that consequences which derive from the articles of Christian faith are not irrational, absurd, impossible, thereby defending these articles against criticism.

A further issue, underlying this methodology, is the question of A.'s epistemological stance: what is good reasoning, what is the basis of common notions (in their various types) and whence do they derive their truth, if we except divine revelation? A. seems to take in general an Aristotelian stance. Indeed

⁴ The practice of measuring premises by their consequences (are these absurd or contradictory?) goes back of course to Plato's Socrates. The idea that revelation provides unquestionable premises (articles of faith) from which consequences can be logically demonstrated underpins Thomas Aquinas' concept of theology.

⁵ On these see MONFASANI, p. 27 and p. 41, footnote 7.

⁶ Avicenna is the only Islamic philosopher mentioned by name ('Apoales') in the text; see MONFASANI's note 36, p. 71, who thinks that Thomas Aquinas must have been A.'s source of information. On A. and Thomas Aquinas see MONFASANI, *Tractates*, p. 30–38.

Aristotle is the only philosopher actually quoted by A., and quoted extensively. Sometimes his Aristotle seems to be quite narrow. Thus A. recognizes only one type of priority, priority in time, in his argument that what is created can only be temporal (p. 140, 17–18), even if Aristotle himself allows (*Metaphysics* IV, 11) for other types of priority, including priority in substance (οὐσία).⁷ A. distinguishes, following Aristotle, between different levels of proof: geometric proofs have a necessary and universal force not possible in relation to contingent particulars, so that it is not appropriate to demand a demonstration in physics, such as can be made in geometry, for things which are contingent particulars (p. 64, 18–66; p. 106, 20–22). Mehmed accuses A. of not basing his argument on sense-perception, and thus on the understanding on which physics depends and from which it develops its demonstrations (p. 68, 7–18). But A. does not reject physics and its basis in sense-perception (see p. 192, 16–20), just as he seeks to adhere to the rigour of Aristotelian syllogisms in his arguments. The problem arises because A. argues for matters which cannot be demonstrated on the basis of the principles of physics and logical argument (p. 66, 5–6; p. 156, 3–4). These matters include the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity, subjects which transcend nature and what we know from nature (p. 52, 11–19). God is not part of the order of nature: we know only that God exists, not how (p. 54, 10–12). Indeed in this regard, A. argues, Aristotle practices a sort of negative theology (note p. 156, 2: ἀφαίρεσις; on this term see also p. 54, 13)⁸ in saying that God is un-moved, un-divided, with no magnitude (p. 54, 13–16). Mehmed agrees and, speaking the language of Late Antique Platonists and Platonizing Church Fathers, says that God is ineffable, inconceivable, unnamable, spoken only in terms of his activities (ἐνεργεῖαι), which, however, say nothing about God's substance (p. 170, 12–27). How then can A. be so dogmatic in saying, with Aristotle, that God is mind, the best mind, thinking itself, which, for A., also means thinking all things as the creator of them, and furthermore a Trinity?

In answer, A. accepts that God's substance is ineffable, inconceivable and ungraspable (p. 176, 6–7). God is absolutely simple (non-composite), and one itself (p. 176, 10–11).

Again one should not be ignorant of the fact and deny that He is properly speaking (κυρίως) the good and being and the true and life, and, even more so, goodness and

⁷ See p. 156, 19–158, 2 (Platonists; see ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* IV, 11, 1019a3–4 and Porphyry as quoted by MONFASANI, p. 159 footnote 109). But A. does concede (p. 142, 11) a priority in respect to the final end (τέλος) and elsewhere himself uses priority according to substance in his argument (p. 158, 9–13).

⁸ I do not think that the term should be translated as meaning to 'eliminate'; to 'abstract' would be better.

substance and truth and life itself, but the other [predicates] not in a proper sense, but by participation or in an analogous way (p. 176, 11–14).

In answer to Mehmed's charge that A. attributes an excessive number of predicates to God, A. responds by distinguishing between two kind of predications: that which is properly said of God (and by implication derivatively of others); and predication operating by participation and analogy.⁹ This distinction recalls one made by Thomas Aquinas between what is said *proprie* of God and what is said by analogy.¹⁰ The point of reserving a special (proper) predication for God is obviously to privilege certain statements in Christian revelation. This will allow A. to make positive claims about God. And both types of predication are to be retained (p. 176, 16–21).

A little later A. speaks in more detail of the second type of predication, predication by participation and analogy. Since all perfections in created beings come from God, these perfections are in the First Cause as causes or paradigmatically (ἀρχικῶς ἢ παραδειγματικῶς) and analogously and in an inferior way (ἀναλογικῶς καὶ ὑφειμένως) in the created (p. 178, 11–12). « For what in the caused (αἰτιατοῖς) comes from the cause must necessarily exist first in the cause » (p. 178, 10). This language and the ideas recall the *Elements of Theology* of Proclus (himself, like A., an aficionado of syllogistry).¹¹ A few lines later A. says similar things which again recall Proclus: « In beings, images and likenesses are found. In the caused things they exist in a divided way (διηρημένως), but in the first cause in a unitary way (ἐνιαίως) » (p. 178, 15–16).¹² Further investigation might reveal if A. read Proclus directly, or found Proclean ideas in an intermediate source.

Regarding Platonists A. shows little sympathy.¹³ However, Proclus' Aristotelizing Neoplatonism might have been more acceptable to him in certain respects. And thanks to Monfasani, we know that A. read at least some texts of Plotinus.¹⁴ But perhaps he read more. In discussing the Incarnation Mehmed asks

⁹ The distinction is somewhat obscured in Monfasani's translation.

¹⁰ *ST I*, q. 13, a. 3 and a. 5–6. In Cydones' Greek translation, Aquinas' *proprie* is translated as ἰδίως; see the passages published by JOHN DEMETRACOPOULOS, « Palamas Transformed. Palamite Interpretations of the Distinction between God's 'Essence' and 'Energies' in late Byzantium », in MARTIN HINTERBERGER, CHRIS SCHABEL (eds.), *Greek, Latins and Intellectual History 1204–1500*, Peeters, Leuven 2011, p. 298.

¹¹ See, for example, PROCLUS, *Elements of Theology*, edited by ERIC R. DODDS, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1992, Prop. 28, p. 32, 21.

¹² See PROCLUS, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 118, p. 104, 5–15. But see also THOMAS AQUINAS, *ST I*, q. 13, a. 4 resp. (Cydones' Greek version can be found in DEMETRACOPOULOS, « Palamas Transformed », p. 303).

¹³ On A.'s anti-Platonism see MONFASANI, *Tractates*, p. 24.

¹⁴ *Enneads V*, 1, 3, 6–10 and 4, 20–22, excerpts published by MONFASANI, *Tractates*, p. 106; and see p. 132 for A.'s polemic with Plotinus on Plotinus' theory of time in *Ennead III*, 7.

if the incarnate god was wholly in Mary's womb or only in part, in which case God would be divided, although being indivisible (p. 56, 16–58, 2). However, A. argues that God is present as a whole everywhere:

Necessarily, therefore, God would be present as a whole¹⁵ in a particular place and also everywhere, by virtue of his substance and power. That accords with common conceptions and the words of the prophets (p. 60, 10–11).

The problem of God's integral omnipresence, of how God can be present as a whole everywhere, and not divided (as if a quantity) into parts present in different places, was discussed by Plotinus in *Enneads* VI, 4–5.¹⁶ Thus we read at the beginning of VI, 5:

That the one and the same in number [i.e. God] is present everywhere simultaneously as a whole is what is said by a common conception (1, 1–2).

Plotinus argues – to say things *in nuce* – that God has no magnitude and no quantitatively divisible parts. God is *wholly* present everywhere, in each part of material reality, in the sense that everything is held¹⁷ in God's power. It is not that God is in things, but things are in God as depending on God's power. A. proposes the same solution to the problem of integral omnipresence:

What is left? That God holds (συνέχων) them, or that they will be in something. If they are not in their principle (if they have been deprived of it), they will not be able to exist in any way whatsoever (p. 58, 12–14).¹⁸

A little later (p. 62, 17–18), A. affirms that:

God is everywhere as he is. For he is not extended by distances (συνεκτείνεται τοῖς διαστήμασι), but encompasses the universe like a point (στιγμή).

A.'s language here is close to that of Plotinus (VI, 4, 1, 14: συνεκτείνεσθαι; VI, 5, 4, 22–23: διαστήμασι). I take it that in this passage God (and not the universe) is being compared to a (geometrical) point and I therefore read *στιγμή*, whereas Monfasani prints *στιγμῆν* and thus translates the passages as if it is the universe

¹⁵ Monfasani translates ὅλον as 'a concrete whole', here and in the following pages, which I think is mistaken; he is misled by a passage in Aristotle's *Physics* (p. 59, n. 28).

¹⁶ On this I may be permitted to refer to an old paper of mine: DOMINIC O'MEARA, « The Problem of Omnipresence in Plotinus *Ennead* VI, 4–5: A Reply », *Dionysius*, 4 (1980), p. 61–74.

¹⁷ Among other verbs Plotinus use the word συνέχειν (VI, 4, 2, 11)

¹⁸ Compare also PLOTINUS, *Ennead* VI, 4, 2, 4–5 : « But that which comes after it [i.e. true intelligible being] must necessarily exist in total Being, if it is to be at all ».

which is being compared to a point (a « dot » in Monfasani's translation). However, in Neoplatonic authors the geometrical point was often taken to contain within itself all the geometrical forms which would flow out from it. And so God can encompass everything, as if a geometrical point, in being the source of everything. The geometrical image is indeed used by Plotinus, both in VI, 5, 5 and in a Plotinian treatise certainly read by A., III, 7, 3, 19–23.¹⁹ Further work might show if A. came across these ideas in an intermediate source,²⁰ or if he remembered them from his reading of Plotinus.

Finally, towards the end of the dialogue, on the question of the resurrection of the body, A. introduces the notion of a « vehicle » (ὄχημα) of the soul (p. 194, 10), for which Monfasani refers us (p. 195, n. 134) to the Neoplatonic conception of the vehicle of the soul. However, the colourful series of vehicles which accrue to soul in its adventurous descent to the body in Late Antique Neoplatonism survives in A. as a body no longer having its natural functions and whose single purpose (albeit its being glorified) is to carry soul.

Monfasani is to be congratulated on his discovery of the Greek text of A.'s dialogue and for his work in giving us a very good edition of the Greek and a translation which makes the text easily accessible. He has provided a solid foundation for future work on an impressive and moving episode in the transition of the late Byzantine intellectual tradition to the Italian Renaissance and to some sort of survival in the Ottoman empire.

¹⁹ See also, for example, PROCLUS, *In Primum Euclidis Elementorum Librum Commentarii*, edited by GOTTFRIED FRIEDLEIN, Teubner, Leipzig 1873, p. 88, 2–17, and above footnote 14. Plotinus uses the terms κέντρον and σημειῶν, whereas A. writes στιγμή: is he here covering his tracks?

²⁰ See for example THOMAS AQUINAS, *ST I*, q. 8.