

THEOSEBEIA IN PLETHON'S WORK: A CONCEPT IN TRANSITION*

Plethon is generally regarded today as a link between medieval and modern Greek philosophy¹. He is the last philosopher of the Byzantine period but also the first thinker of modern Greece to have formulated the questions that arose before a degenerating hellenism². As we have already pointed out in a previous paper, Plethon's work remained unknown as such to the Greek thinkers up to 18th century³. At the beginning of the 19th century is broadly known the *De Virtutibus* and some other minor works of Plethon in Greece; he is then considered more as a Renaissance platonist than as the first Greek thinker of modern times, although he shares many common points with the thought of the Enlightenment—which at that time was spread in the Greek territories—and is considered as its forerunner with his anticlerical and antischolastic attitude⁴, his preference for the «bourgeois» ideology and his attempt to establish a natural religion⁵.

The concept of theosebeia has in Plethon's work several meanings and persists throughout the 19th century in Greece. Though the Greek thinkers of the 19th century never mention their debt to Plethon and refer generally to «the inheritance of their ancestors»⁶, a comparison is necessary between the

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1. ROXANE D. ARGYROPOULOS, «Georges Gémistos Pléthon et la pensée néohellénique du 18e siècle». XVI. Internationaler Byzantinistenkongress Akten 11/6, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32/6, pp. 207-212.

2. C. BARGELIOTES, «Plethon as a Forerunner of Neo-hellenic and Modern European Consciousness». *Diotima* I (1973), pp. 34-45. J. N. THEODORACOPOULOS, «The Place of Plethon in the History of Philosophy» (in Greek). *Lakonikai Spoudai* 2 (1975), pp. 63-76.

3. ROXANE D. ARGYROPOULOS, op. cit.

4. FR. SCHULTZE, *Georgios Gemistos Plethon und seine reformatorische Bestrebungen*, Jena 1874 (reedition Leipzig 1975), passim. ANNA KELESSIDOU, «Critique de la sophistique par Pléthon», *Revue de Philosophie ancienne*, n° 2, 1984, pp. 29-37.

5. D. ZAKYTHINOS, *Le despotat Crec de Morée*, Athènes 1953, v. II, p. 349. B. TATAKIS, *La Philosophie Byzantine*, Paris 1959², p. 288.

6. CONSTANTINE COUMAS, *Syntagma Philosophias* (in Greek), Vienna 1818, v.l., p. CI.

notion of theosebeia as it appears on the one hand in the *Laws* and in *De Virtutibus* and on the other in the texts of Greek thinkers of the 19th century, such as Constantine Coumas (1777-1836), Theophilos Caïris (1784-1853) and George Cozakis-Typaldos (1790-1867) who played an important role in establishing the ideology of modern Greek state. Although four centuries separated them, they had in common the same historical goal, which was the reclamation of hellenism in order to restore the Greek nation politically. In these two different moments of the history of hellenism we have attempts of reapproaching christianism for the sake of hellenism: in the first time with Plethon, when the Greek nation was losing its political character and in a second time with Coumas, Caïris, Cozakis-Typaldos, when the Greek nation was restoring its political dimensions as a national modern state. This restoration for all of them was to take place with the transfer of the religious element from Christianity to hellenism, element which acts both as a social and moral stimulus.

Plethon in the *Laws* identifies theosebeia with what he calls «Greek theology» or with all aspects of religion⁷. It is a key notion in the reforms that Plethon had in mind for the revival of hellenism; for he thinks that correct religious ideas about the divine determine a good form of political government⁸. In the *De Virtutibus*, Plethon utilises theosebeia in its classical meaning⁹ as we find it in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Iamblicus, Xenophon and the neoplatonists, that is God's knowledge and worship¹⁰. It is important to mention that in the *Laws*, Plethon himself acknowledges these philosophers as his masters¹¹.

Plethon is even characterized as «theosebēs» by his contemporaries, friends and enemies. Michael Apostolis in his letter to John Argyropoulos writes about Plethon as «θεοσεβῆς ἡμᾶς διδέξεται Πλήθων»¹² and an

7. D. DEDES, «Die Handschriften und das Werk des Georgios Gemistos (Plethon). Forschungen und Funde in Venedig», *Hellenika* 33 (1981), p. 67. Also, D. DEDES, «Religion and Politics in George Gemistos Plethon's Work» (in Greek), *Philosophia* 5-6 (1975-1976), pp. 424-441. About the relationship between Neoplatonism and Christian thought and especially about Plethon, see the volume *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara, New York 1982, pp. 85, 145, 158; for its importance in Byzantine philosophy cf. LINOS BENAKIS, «The Problem of General Concepts in Neoplatonism and Byzantine Thought», pp. 75-88.

8. D. DEDES, «Religion and Politics in Georges Gemistos Plethon's Work», op. cit., p. 434.

9. FRANÇOIS MASAI, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra*, Paris 1956, p. 252.

10. H. G. LIDDELL - R. SCOTT, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford 1968, p. 791. See also ARISTOTLE, *Eudemian Ethics*, VIII, 1249 b 13 ff.

11. PLÉTHON, *Traité des Lois*, ed. Alexandre - Pellissier, Amsterdam 1966, p. 32.

12. Ibid., p. 373.

anonymous writer mentions him for his theosebeia and justice¹³. What is equally important to mention, is that Gennadius Scholarius criticizes Plethon in order to preserve «τὴν πατριὸν ἡμῶν θεοσέβειαν»¹⁴.

However, there are several differences between Pletho's use of the word and its ancient meaning. First of all, Plethon does not accept the neoplatonic use of theosebeia as an immanent knowledge of God. For Plethon theosebeia is a specific virtue which belongs to a more general virtue, phronesis. Theosebeia is the highest virtue in Plethon's scale of virtues; its role is to assimilate man to the highest beings and introduces him to God's knowledge¹⁵. For Plethon, theosebeia corresponds to man's need for communication with God in worshiping him while facing the religious problem in a rational way.

In the 19th century, Constantine Coumas writes that «the philosophy of our ancestors urges us to venerate the "Theon sevou"»¹⁶. Coumas, as a little later Caïris, sees God not only as truth but as a person, for whom one must have a determined type of worship¹⁷. Coumas, more than Caïris, points out the rational element of God's worship because he believes that we should love the commandments dictated by God's word, toward ourselves and toward the other members of society. «Each human act should begin from God and finish in God. The realization of this is what we call theosebeia, which is the first and greatest honour of man»¹⁸.

For Coumas, theosebeia derives from Christian thought and the obligations that theosebeia implies are to be found in the love of God and of our neighbor, a precept which characterises Christianity. Coumas stays away from the natural religion, the rational conception of the divine and believes in a God, who has not lost his personal substance and is identified with the supreme word of beings¹⁹. But the harmony, that is needed in man's practical and moral actions is impossible, if there is not a Being, that can realize the

13. Ibid., p. 411.

14. Ibid., p. 313. See also C. M. WOODHOUSE, *Gemistos Plethon. The last of the Hellenes*, Oxford 1986, p. 13.

15. PLÉTHON, *De Virtutibus*, p. 60. (*Patrologia Graeca*, éd. J.-P. Migne, vol. 160, 277 D-280 A).

16. C. COUMAS, *Syntagma Philosophias*, Vienna 1818, vol. I., p. 61. In a paper «Theosebeia from C. Coumas to Th. Caïris» to be published in *Acts of the Symposium «Theophilos Caïris»*, Andros 1984, I discuss the meaning of theosebeia in 19th-century Greece in Coumas and Caïris.

17. C. COUMAS, *Syntagma Philosophias*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. CII.

18. Ibid., p. 291.

19. Ibid., vol. 4, p. 289.

idea of good and that can last indefinitely. Coumas places theosebeia in this eternity of man's existence, when he writes, that morality makes us happy during this life and theosebeia promises us the benefits of future beatitude²⁰. On this point, Coumas' attitude toward theosebeia agrees with that of Caïris, when Coumas states that the tendency of man for eternal life, the «apeirotatikon» as he calls it, is connected with theosebeia²¹. Thus theosebeia serves both Coumas and Caïris, in a teleological way, as an argument for the justification of the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. The difference between Coumas and Caïris is that theosebeia for Caïris has a universal sense and becomes the center of a religious reform in 19th-century Greece with political implication, whereas for Coumas theosebeia is not regarded outside Christian morality. The meaning that theosebeia has for Coumas and Caïris is the same with the use of this concept by Plethon, in whom we find theosebeia as a source for religious reform and as a Christian virtue.

Theosebeia remains a dynamic concept of the ideology of hellenism and still is associated with its revival. For George Cozakis-Typaldos in his *Philosophical Essay on the Progress and Fall of Old Greece*, theosebeia is the religious sentiment «par excellence»²²; theosebeia along with philosophy and law define a national culture²³. G. Cozakis-Typaldos combines theosebeia with justice and morals. It is good laws, good manners and God's veneration (theion sevas) that gave glory and progress to the Greek nation and it is the lack of them that brought it bondage. Therefore theosebeia for Cozakis-Typaldos brings about strength in social ties and abolishes corruption and anarchy; it is theosebeia with its social and dynamic sense that brings hellenism to its highest point.

One other aspect of the theory of theosebeia in Plethon's work is the connection of the concept of theosebeia with that of Divine Providence. Without divine Providence there cannot be any theosebeia for Plethon as for the Greek thinkers of the 19th century. If for Plethon divine Providence is associated to heimarmene (είμαρμένη²⁴), for Coumas, Caïris and Cozakis-Typaldos divine Providence is explicitly present throughout their works.

20. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 291.

21. THÉOPHILOS CAÏRIS, *Elements of Philosophy* (in Greek), Athens 1851, p. 101-102.

22. GEORGE COZAKIS-TYPALDOS, *Philosophical Essay on the Progress and Fall of Ancient Greece* (in Greek), Athens 1939, p. 230. Cf. ROXANE D. ARGYROPOULOS, «George Cozakis-Typaldos between Enlightenment and Romanticism» (in Greek) *Acts of the Fifth International Panionian Congress*, Cephalonia 1986 (in Print).

23. GEORGE COZAKIS-TYPALDOS, op. cit., p. 509.

24. PLÉTHON, *Traité des Lois*, ed. Alexandre-Pellissier, op. cit., p. 4.



In this discussion we have tried to demonstrate that the concept of theosebeia as it appears in Plethon's work is in reality a concept in transition between its ancient Greek origins and modern Greek thought; theosebeia is one more point that unites Plethon's philosophy to modern Greek thought, which as we saw retains the dynamic sense of the concept of theosebeia given to it by Plethon. In other way of considering this problem, we may assert that by accepting Plethon's views, the Greek thinkers of the 19th century also justified him. Plethon saw correctly the role that religion and God's veneration could play in a hellenism in bondage and his vision was appreciated four centuries later, when hellenism had won its own battle against time and political misfortune.

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Η ΘΕΟΣΕΒΕΙΑ ΣΤΟ ΕΡΓΟ ΤΟΥ ΠΛΗΘΩΝΑ: ΜΙΑ ΜΕΤΑΒΑΤΙΚΗ ΕΝΝΟΙΑ

Περίληψη

Ο Πλήθων θεωρείται σήμερα σύνδεσμος ανάμεσα στην βυζαντινή και νεότερη ελληνική φιλοσοφία· είναι ο τελευταίος βυζαντινός φιλόσοφος και ο πρώτος νεοέλληνας που διατύπωσε τα προβλήματα ενός φθίνοντος ελληνισμού. Η έννοια της θεοσέβειας παρουσιάζεται στο έργο του Πλήθωνα σαν μία μεταβατική έννοια ανάμεσα στην αρχαιότητα και τον νεότερο ελληνισμό του 19ου αιώνα, κατά τον οποίο διανοητές όπως ο Κ. Κούμας, ο Γ. Κοζάκης-Τυπάλδος, ο Θ. Καίρης καθόρισαν την έννοια της θεοσέβειας σε σχέση με τη λατρεία του Θεού και τον άνθρωπο, την άθανασία της ψυχής και τη Θεία Πρόνοια. Ακόμη οι στοχαστές αυτοί έπαλήθευσαν τη θεωρία του Πλήθωνα για το ρόλο που παίζει ή θρησκεία και ή θεοσέβεια στις τύχες του ελληνισμού.

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