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The Greek Monk Maximus Trivolis between Eastern and Western Religious Tradition

The most extensive Russian chronicle, the so-called “Nikon Chronicle”, provides, for the year 1437, the information that the prominent Greek “Metropolitan of Kiev and all Russia”, Isidore, had announced to the Grand Prince of Moscow, Vasilij Vasilevič (1447-1462) the decision of the Patriarch Iosif of Constantinople and Emperor John Palaeologus to take part together with the Romans in the eighth ecumenical council to discuss the differences between the Eastern and the Western Churches. This was the Council of Ferrara-Florence of the years 1438-1442. What followed is well known. In Florence Isidore signed up to the union with the Church of Rome¹ and the Grand Prince expelled him from Russia for good, precisely because he had betrayed the “Greek faith”². In the minds of the Russians, the Greeks had proved themselves traitors to the very faith they themselves had brought to Russia.

Years went by and the same chronicler tells us that, in the spring of 1518, the Athonite monk from Monastery Vatopedi, Maximus Trivolis, or Maxim Grek as the Russians called him, officially arrived in Russia³. Strange though this may seem, the monk of Vatopedi was a child and student of Florence, with the intellectual stamp of the city, the name of which evoked woeful memories in the minds of the Russians as regards issues associated with the Orthodox faith and their relations with the Greek world. Apart from that, Maximus made no secret of the fact that he still hankered after his Florentine spiritual experiences. So the city which years earlier had produced a Greek, Metropolitan Isidore, who reneged on his orthodox faith and caused much damage to Greek-Russian Church relations, had now to restore the spiritual status of the Greek world in Russia and would, indeed, be proclaimed a saint of the Russian Church⁴.

¹ On Isidor’s participation in the Council of Florence and the consequences this initiative had see Golubinskij 1900: 141-468, Ziegler 1938: 76-85, 97-103, Gill 1959: 262-275.

² *Nikonovskaja letopis’* 1862-1910, XII: 23-24.

³ *Ibid.*, XIII: 28.

⁴ On this procedure, see Ikonnikov 1915: 588-589. Cf. *Pomestnyj sobor* 1990: 165-174.

As is well known, Maximus was born in about 1470 in the town of Arta, in Western Greece⁵. At a young age he moved with his family to Corfu, where he lived until he was about twenty. The island of Corfu, which lies in the Ionian Sea, facing Italy, was also drawn towards it in cultural terms. From as early as the years 1386 and 1387, its residents had placed the island under the administration of the Venetians, who guaranteed them privileges and starved off any danger of Turkish occupation. When Constantinople later fell to the Turks and the Byzantine Empire was dismantled once and for all, the family of the distinguished Byzantine scholar Ianos Laskaris also settled on Corfu⁶. Laskaris later moved to Italy and played an important role in the dissemination of Greek learning. So, following a tradition which had become prevalent in the milieu of Greek subjects to the Turks, Maximus arrived in beautiful Florence, where he studied under Laskaris, the most outstanding Greek scholar of the time, whom he had very likely become acquainted with in Corfu or whose activities in Italy he had heard of.

The wave of refugees into Italy, freeing the Greek empire which had been demolished by the Turks, is a subject which has been studied at length, though it cannot be said to have been entirely exhausted⁷. The Turkish conquest sent the intellectual life of the Greek world into a deep decadence, a continuation of the state in which it had languished during the last stage of the life of the empire⁸. With the brilliant spiritual life flowering which had occurred in Byzantium in the 14th century, particularly with the hesychast movement, which revived a deep mysticism that also made itself felt in the Slavic countries, a new vision and perspective had been created for the spiritual life of the Greek world⁹. In the 15th century, however, the return, in particular, to debates about dogmas which had been adopted centuries earlier in long-forgotten Ecumenical Councils —debates which also dominated the sessions of the Council of Florence— were incapable of rekindling interest in spiritual matters. Nor could they satisfy the more profound deliberations of highly cultured people who, while remaining faithful to the dogmas of the Church, saw that the times in which they lived had the features of an intellectual decline. It could be said that Maximus should be placed among people such as these. Much has been written about his studies in Italy and his contacts and activities there, the most important work being that of Denissoff¹⁰, while Podskalsky has pro-

⁵ Bibliography about Maximus is vast. Basic works are those by Ikonnikov 1915 G. Papamichael 1951, Sinicyna 1977. Books and articles about Maximus, published in several languages until the year 1973, have been included in the article “Maksim Grek” by Bulanin 1989. To the works about Maximus mentioned in this article one should add the following: Haney 1973, Langelier 1986, Geanakoplos 1988, Olmstead 1987, Obolensky 1988: 201-219.

⁶ On this eminent humanist, see Knös 1945.

⁷ Basic works on this topic, including extensive bibliography, are those by Geanakoplos 1962, 1976.

⁸ See Vakalopoulos 1976.

⁹ Tachiaos 1997.

¹⁰ Denissoff 1943.

vided us with a fully up-to date recent bibliography¹¹. The problem before us, then, is this: How was it possible for a young Greek, who was intensely interested in theological and philosophical matters, to abandon his Orthodox country and move to Roman Italy, to enter a monastery of Dominican monks and then, suddenly, without explanation, to leave that country and settle as a monk on the Holy Mountain, which, from a dogmatic point of view, was conservative? The difficulty with providing an answer to this question lies principally in the fact that nowhere does Maximus touch upon this facet of his life in his autobiographical references. What remains, therefore, is for us to attempt to shed light on it on the basis of information which is already available. What we shall have to say from here on will not reflect any definitive views already reached, but rather an invitation to further research and discussion.

According to Denissoff, Maximus, when living in Corfu, is said to have had for a teacher Ioannis Moschos, an outstanding professor of Greek letters and philosophy, who was, however, a well-known conservative anti-Latin in a town where the prevailing Latin influence was widespread¹². It is not known what dictated Maximus' migration to Italy. If Moschos' ideas had any impact on him, then under their influence he ought to have felt antipathy towards the Latin world and would certainly not have decided to move there. At this point, there arises a question which demands a clear answer: Why did Maximus, who was under the direct influence of a teacher fiercely loyal to Greek religious principles and very anti-Latin, decide to come to study and even live in Italy? We shall take the answer from Denissoff, who has been the most dependable scholar for Maximus' early years. Denissoff considers it certain that Maximus was Moschos' student, though there is no actual proof of this. What is definitely known, on the other hand, is that Maximus was in contact with Moschos' son, George¹³. Given that Maximus demonstrated a particular aptitude for Greek literature and philosophy and that, at that time, there was no other outstanding teacher on Corfu, we must certainly take Denissoff's view as read. The fact that another son of Moschos, Michael, fled to Italy, where he taught Greek in Ferrara and Florence would lead us to conclude that, apart from his obviously Orthodox dogmatic stance, the influence of Ioannis Moschos did not extend to a rejection of the education provided by the Italy of his day.

So Maximus came to Italy and had the opportunity to study at the "Platonic Academy" in Florence, where the great neo-Platonist professor Marsilio Ficino was then at the height of his powers. Apart from the wonderful philological and philosophical education it offered, Florence¹⁴, which Aldo Manutius (Teobaldo Mannucci) had

¹¹ Podskalsky 1988: 89-97.

¹² Denissoff 1943: 140-143.

¹³ *Ibid.* 142, 401-402.

¹⁴ In a treatise written by Maximus, which bears the title *Povest' strašna i dostopametna i o soveršenom inočeskom žitel'stvě*, he is expressing a particular admiration for Florence (Maksim Grek 1859-1862, III: 194).

called “New Athens”, was at that time also under the powerful spiritual influence of the Dominican monk and scholar Girolamo Savonarola, whose fiery sermons etched themselves deeply into the convictions being formed by the young Michael Trivolis. Savonarola, who exercised great spiritual charm over him, was the type of austere, ascetic monk who was severely critical of the corruption of contemporary society and his censure included both the dissolute higher clergy and even the Pope of Rome himself. Savonarola paid for his outspokenness with his life. Michael may not have known Savonarola personally, but he listened to his sermons and, when reworked them in his memory, he became a fervent admirer of the man and never forgot him. Later, in Russia, he wrote his reminiscences of him and wrote his life-story, saying that, had he not been of Latin dogma, he would have had to be ranked among the ancient champions of the faith¹⁵. This means that in the person of Savonarola he recognized characteristics common to the spirituality of both the Eastern and the Western Churches. We have no evidence whatsoever as regards any deviation on the part of Maximus from the Greek religious norm before his arrival in Italy. In his written works he has nothing to say about Orthodox piety in his homeland of Arta. This observation provides the basis for us to suppose that Maximus’ more profound religious positions, which were at odds with the social mores of the day, must have first taken shape under the influence of the sermons of Savonarola.

After a three-year stay in Florence, the young scholar from Arta moved to Venice, where he became associated with Aldo Manutius, the famous publisher of Ancient Greek authors. Thereafter he toured Bologna, Padua and Milan. For four years he lived and worked in Mirandola, where he was associated with the famous Hellenist Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, the nephew of the well-known philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Denissoff is quite right in considering that the reason why Maximus came round seriously to Christian values was the strong influence that Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola exercised over him¹⁶. Without doubt, this contact would have revitalized in his soul what Savonarola had planted with his sermons. In all likelihood, this is why, in 1502, we find Maximus back in Florence, enjoying a lengthy stay at Saint Mark’s Convent. Two questions present themselves here. In the first place, what was he doing there? It has been claimed that he received the monastic habit of the Dominican brotherhood¹⁷, but more recent research by N. V. Sinicyna rules this out, while leaving it

¹⁵ In the treatise of Maximus, mentioned in the above footnote, there are details about Savonarola’s activity in Florence and, after praising him, he describes how he was hanged to a tree and burnt up (*Ibid.* 194-202; cf. Ikonnikov 1915: 560-575).

¹⁶ Denissoff 1943: 220-225.

¹⁷ In the chronicle of Saint Mark’s Convent Denissoff discovered the following notice dating from the 14th of June of the year 1502: “Frater Michel Emmanuelis de civitate Arta, eodem nomine prius in seculo dictus, accepit habitum a venerabili Fratre Mattheo Marei, die quartadecima Iunii circa horam primam noctis anno Domini 1502”. Denissoff 1943: 95 and

open as to whether he entered the convent as a novice¹⁸. Be that as it may, it is still a fact that the Greek Orthodox Maximus had undergone a religious rather than confessional conversion. In the earlier years of his youth, he had lived in conventional acceptance of religious faith in his life, whereas now this had become firmly established deep in his soul, and, moreover, in its Latin version. In Corfu, the presence of the representatives of the Orthodox Church must have been lukewarm, while the personality of Savonarola, in particular his asceticism and combativeness presented a man who embodied precisely the Gospel teachings. Clearly it was this realization that brought Maximus to Saint Mark's Convent. And then, after a hiatus, we suddenly find him back in a Greek milieu, on the Holy Mountain, in fact, where he had actually come to settle in the famous Monastery of Vatopedi, where he gave up his secular name of Michael and took that of Maximus.

The second question to be raised is, what was it that made Maximus abandon the beautiful city of Florence, with its thriving intellectual life, and Saint Mark's Convent, which he never forgot for the rest of his life, and come to the enslaved East, with its myriad problems and a life full of vexations? It is, of course, not easy to provide an answer which sits comfortably with the rules of cold-blooded logic, unless we seek it in the sphere of religious sensibility, or, we might say, in a *crise de conscience*, that is in a realm outside the generally applicable rules of life. The guilty verdict passed on Savonarola, whom he admired, and his disappointment with the tactics of the Roman Catholic Church towards theological and religious thought, certainly reinforced his crisis of conscience, even if belatedly, because his decision to enter the Roman Catholic convent was taken four years after his idol was put to death. It may have been that the more intense study of the Fathers of the Orthodox East and a profound acquaintance with them pointed the way back to his own roots and the world from which he had started out, the world from which he had emerged to go to the West, to the outstanding cultural centres of Italy. It was namely in this country that Greek scholars would feel liberated from the harrowing enslavement to the Turks. Maximus, on the other hand, was to abandon all that and returned to the Orthodox East. The adoption of this new stance on the part of Maximus is an indication of a particular kind of inner maturity and shows him working his way through towards a profound internal, existential, dialectical synthesis, the beginning of a new life.

Having rejected the host of pleasant spiritual experiences he had enjoyed in Florence, Michael Trivolis became a humble Athonite monk at a time when the Holy Mountain was facing difficult times and an enormous crisis, spiritual as well as material, brought about by the harsh measures of the Turkish ruler. Might it have been that this

227-271, where he discusses in detail Maximus' conversion and concludes, as he believes, that this latter was tonsured to a Dominican monk at Saint Mark's monastery. Papamichael 1951: 400-402 unreservedly accepts Denisoff's view.

¹⁸ Sinicyna 2006. See also her article in the present volume.

return was self-inflicted punishment for his previous defection, that is his entry into the Dominican convent as a novice? Maximus never referred to his personal acquiescence in entering a Latin convent and never expressed remorse over it. There is a real gap in the research on Maximus at this point, which might lead to a conclusion that was far from the truth. Another question arises here, however: what was it that made Maximus choose the particular Monastery of Vatopedi as his new home? We may suppose that one reason was the magnificence of this monastery, which the Emperor John Cantacuzene had entered in the 14th century and which had imposing buildings, was itself a source of attraction. Another reason, without question, was the rich collection of manuscripts in the monastery library, which contained writings by Ancient Greek authors and the Great Fathers of the Church¹⁹. These had been provided by personal donations from the Emperors John Cantacuzene, Andronicus and Manuel Palaeologus and other outstanding personalities. Maximus would certainly have heard of the rich library from persons who had visited and admired it, one of these being his actual teacher, Ianos Lascaris²⁰. This library, then, would certainly have proved a great comfort to him and would have made up for the loss of the cultural wealth he had left behind in Florence. And at the same time it would have given him the opportunity to pore over the wealth of knowledge and spirituality which was stored there.

The new phase in Maximus' life after the Holy Mountain was his move to and sojourn in Russia. At that time, there was a totally theocratic regime in the country and spiritual life was dominated by two trends related to monasticism, which was a very powerful force in Russian society. One, the main proponents of which were the monks of Monastery of Volokolamsk, headed by their erudite abbot, Iosif Sanin²¹, was the bastion of the ideology of the theocratic regime and cultivated the idea that the monasteries had the right to own large land holdings, including villages and serfs. The exact opposite view was represented by monastic circles which had grown up in the Russian North, on the far side of the River Volga. These retained the Byzantine hesychast tradition and spirituality which had been transferred there from Mount Athos by the holy monk Nil Sorskij, a true representative of the Byzantine spiritual tradition²². The forerunner of this movement, in the 14th century, was the Bulgarian-born Metropolitan of Russia, Cyprian, who had been a student of Patriarch Philotheus of Constantinople. In contrast to what the circles of the Monastery of Volokolamsk promulgated, Nil main-

¹⁹ See the recent catalogue of these manuscripts by Lamberg 2006.

²⁰ About Lascaris' library see the bibliography given in the article by Speranzi 2005.

²¹ See Lur'e 1988, where one finds a rich bibliography about Iosif. His letters have been published in Zimin, Lur'e 1959. As far as the literary activity deplored in Iosif' monastery is concerned see Lichačev 1991.

²² See Prochorov 1989. To the bibliography given in this article one should add: Kologrivof 1953: 187-213, Fedotov 1975: 302-315. One of the best studies about this prominent figure of the Russian monasticism is that of Von Lilienfeld 1963. A collection of Byzantine ascetic works written by Nil himself was recently published by Lénngren 2000-2006.

tained that monks should not hold property, that they should not become embroiled to the cares of life, nor should they enter into disputes with the villagers over material matters²³. Apart from this position, the supporters of Nil were also against heretics being condemned to death at the stake, which they considered entirely anti-Christian, since it robbed the heretic of any opportunity to repent and return to the Orthodox faith. It goes without saying that Maximus aligned himself with the latter views. Death at the stake remind him of the tragic end of Savonarola. Maximus found a close friend who shared his ideas in the person of the prince and monk Vassian Patrikeev²⁴, a man of outstanding erudition and moral standing, who had formerly been a general and diplomat. Another great admirer of Maximus' was the general, Prince Andrej Kurbskij, who had left Russia in disgust at the cruelty of Tsar Ivan the Terrible and had sought refuge in Lithuania²⁵. So in the official ecclesiastical and political expression of Russia, Maximus found a situation analogous to that of Florence, which had condemned Savonarola to death. And, on the other hand, in the circles of the God-fearing intellectuals, whom one might describe as dissidents, and among the strict Russian monks, he found an Orthodox equivalent of the Convent of Saint Mark, in Florence.

Nevertheless, he was not affected by this climate, nor did his courage fail. He made no concession to the state of decline in order to reap personal benefits, although he could have done so. He never hesitated to speak of the magnificence of Western monasticism, its order and discipline and to contrast the lack of possessions on the part of the Latin monks with the Russians' love of possessions. He had no hesitation, in his written works²⁶, in praising Florence and its brilliant luminaries and in praising Paris as a centre of learning and studies. Without the least hesitation, Maximus presented to the Russians a laudatory essay in which he highlighted the virtues of Latin monasticism in Paris and Florence and also wrote of the drama of the virtuous Savonarola. The person who was engaged in defending Orthodox dogma was, at the same time, teaching his Russian environment that, whatever the dogmatic positions, the high degree of asceticism and spirituality of the Latin Franciscans and Dominicans was admirable and instructive²⁷. He spoke also to the Russians about European progress and the maritime explorations of the Spanish and Portuguese, which had led to the discovery of Cuba

²³ About the different spiritual directions of Iosif Sanin and Nil Sorskij see Smolitsch 1953: 101-118. For a more detailed exposition of the views of the monastic leaders mentioned above see the books by Lur'e 1960 and Pliguzov 2002.

²⁴ For the biography and literary activity of this friend of Maximus' see Kazakova 1960, 1988.

²⁵ See Gladkij, Cechanovič 1988.

²⁶ A complete list of Maximus' works has been compiled by Ivanov 1969. The works of Maximus, as stated in previous footnotes, were first published by the Theological Academy of Kazan: Maksim Grek 1859-1862. A new, critical edition of his works has recently been undertaken, and what has come out to this moment covers the period from 1498 to 1525: Sinicyna 2008.

²⁷ Maksim Grek 1859-1862, III: 178-205.

and the Indies. All of this did not demonstrate any retreat from Orthodoxy, but rather a spirit of free thought and acumen. In addressing the Russian people, his aim was to deliver them from the spiritual inertia to which they had been condemned by the dignitaries of the Church, who persisted in their arid ritual observances and who lacked the capacity either for depth or for ascending to higher degrees of religious experience. The Slavic-Orthodox world had been extremely slow to acquaint itself with the writings of Greek Church Fathers, who thought in terms of categories of Neo-Platonic philosophy, which offered the basis for a new interpretation of Christian theological principles²⁸. This delay, in conjunction with the arrogance and self-assertion which were fostered in Russia by a thriving economy and the growth of power, made any further apprenticeship in following the path of the thought of Greek theologians and spiritual masters redundant in the eyes of the Russian hierarchy. So Maximus undertook a battle against the formalism, gullibility and superstition, the astrology and magic which pervaded illiterate Russian society and, to a large extent, plagued it, from the nobility to the ingenuous peasantry.

The fate of Maximus thereafter is well-known. He was persecuted, as Savonarola had been, though Maximus survived while the other lost his life. Concerning this, D. Obolensky writes: "There may, indeed, be something symbolic in Maxim's Russian destiny. The rejection of a man who, in the depth of his spirituality and scholarship typified what was best in the culture of post-Byzantine Greece marked in one sense Russia's turning away from the ancient heritage of Byzantium"²⁹. G. Florovskij, too, in his important work on the ways of Russian theology, writes about Maximus in a chapter entitled: "The Crisis of Russian Byzantinism"³⁰. So, what Maximus had found repugnant in Italy, that is theological scholasticism and a Godless philosophy influenced by Aristotelism, he now found gaining ground rapidly in Orthodox Russia and ousting the genuine Byzantine tradition which had nourished the country for centuries. At the same time, he saw that what he had loved in Florence, i. e. the pure expression of a Latin spirituality, he now saw under persecution in its Orthodox expression. This was the reason behind his repeated requests to be allowed to return to the Holy Mountain, where he would be able to live the austere life of Orthodox monasticism, at the same time studying ancient Greek thought, freely but with a critical disposition, since this would allow him to broaden his spiritual horizons, as it had done the great Fathers of the Church. As all the known facts demonstrate, Maximus never became acquainted in depth with the hesychast theology and tradition of Byzantium, his thought being restricted to the spirit of Orthodox theological teaching as set out in the works of Saint John of Damascus. In the end, we must agree with Florovskij, who calls Maximus a "Byzantine humanist", and I would add that he was also the last of the Byzantines in Russia.

²⁸ Cf. Tachiaos 1977: 21-22.

²⁹ Obolensky 1988: 217.

³⁰ Florovskij 1937: 22-24.

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