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Spinozist Ideas in the Greek Enlightenment**

Abstract: In this paper I discuss the religious ideas and religious criticism voiced by a Greek eighteenth-century philosopher, Christodoulos Efstathiou from Acarnania, also known by the pejorative surname Pamblekis (1730?–1793). He is known in Greek intellectual history on the basis of three works, *Αληθής Πολιτική* (True Politics) published in 1781, *Περί Φιλοσόφου* (On Philosopher), published in 1786, and *Περί Θεοκρατίας* (On Theocracy), published in 1793. The paper presents an analysis of the criticism of the clergy, the Church and organized religion voiced in the latter work. It is argued that Christodoulos's religious ideas were inspired by the historical criticism of religion that emanated from the ideas of Spinoza and thus he could be considered a rare representative of the Radical Enlightenment in the Greek Enlightenment tradition and its broader Southeastern European context.

Keywords: Radical Enlightenment, religious criticism, anticlericalism, Spinozism, Orthodox Church

In the broad debate on the “radical Enlightenment”, which has renewed in substantial ways our understanding of the intellectual history of Europe prior to the French Revolution, it has been suggested that as a consequence of the impact of Spinoza's arguments it became possible to distil from the Dutch philosopher's thought “a complete system of social, moral, and political ideas built on philosophical principles totally incompatible with authority, tradition, and revealed religion, which could be effectively popularized and infiltrated into the consciousness of the non-academic reading public, without readers necessarily even realizing they were imbibing Spinozism.”¹

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¹ Jonathan Israel, *The Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 431.

I do not wish on the present occasion to go into the debate on the character and limits of the radical Enlightenment. I will attempt instead to illustrate the claim concerning the far-reaching, chronologically and geographically speaking, impact of the heritage of Spinozist ideas on continental Europe by drawing attention to the evidence supplied by a totally ignored and until very recently essentially inaccessible text, which registered in substantial ways this heritage without ever mentioning the name of the controversial progenitor of the radical Enlightenment.

I am referring to a work with the characteristic title *On Theocracy*, published anonymously in modern Greek at Leipzig in 1793 but with certainty attributed to one of the few genuine representatives of the radical Enlightenment who wrote in Greek, the encyclopaedic philosopher Christodoulos from Acarnania, known in the sources with the pejorative surname Pamplekis, ascribed to him by his detractors.² Biographical information on Christodoulos is limited but we do know that as a student he was connected with one of the major Enlightenment experiments in Greek culture, the Athonite Academy under Evgenios Voulgaris in the 1750s. We also know that he travelled in Italy and in central Europe where he published two books, one anonymously in Venice in 1781 and another under his name in Vienna in 1786. His first book was a Greek translation of the *La véritable politique des personnes de qualité* by Remond de Cours, a rather conventional text, to which, however, Christodoulos added extensive comments modernizing the arguments put forward by the seventeenth-century courtier author of the original. The second book was much more interesting and openly aligned to the Enlightenment. It appeared under the title *Of philosopher, philosophy, physical, metaphysical, spiritual and divine principles*. It consisted of translations and adaptations of entries on the subjects listed in the title from the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert. In this text Christodoulos talks extensively of Newton and his work in physics and mentions the names of many philosophers, including Wolff, Locke and Descartes. His real philosophical hero appears to be Leibniz because, Christodoulos suggests, through his monadology he managed to harmonize the understanding of the physical phenomena of nature with a conception of the spiritual power that rules the world. In this book Christodoulos refers twice to Spinoza's philosophy of nature only to reject it and call it a frougt, because Spinoza, he claims, makes all things in nature their own cause.³ His objection to Spinoza and his followers, "who are called materialists", is based on their refusal of the existence of spiritual powers and the reduction

² On Christodoulos and his place in the Greek version of the "Radical Enlightenment", see Paschalis M. Kitromilides, *Enlightenment and Revolution. The Making of Modern Greece* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 251–253.

³ Περὶ Φιλοσόφου, φιλοσοφίας, φυσικῶν, μεταφυσικῶν, πνευματικῶν καὶ θεῶν ἀρχῶν (Vienna 1786), 301.

of everything to material nature, which, however, following the scholastics, they endow with mind.⁴

Christodoulos's philosophical views brought him into conflict with professional and ideological antagonists, who were more philosophically conventional and obviously found insufficient his condemnation of Spinozist materialism. The ideological and personal confrontation that ensued in the environment of the Greek and Balkan Orthodox community of Vienna, where Christodoulos had settled as a private tutor and proofreader in printing establishments, pushed things to extremes. His enemies circulated a hostile satire in the guise of a religious service attacking Christodoulos for heresy and atheism. He replied in kind with his treatise *On Theocracy*, which is a vehement denunciation of the clergy, the Church and the fundamentals of Christian belief, without, however, espousing atheism.⁵

What I propose to do in what follows is to outline his religious criticism and try to appraise the relation of his arguments to Spinozist ideas in order to illustrate the variety of religious radicalism espoused and articulated by Christodoulos in the context of late Enlightenment religious thought. Although in November 1793 he was condemned posthumously by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, the highest authority in the Orthodox Church, as a follower of the doctrines of Spinoza, the affinity of his ideas with those of Spinoza can only hypothetically be perceived in his text. The name of the Dutch renegade is never mentioned in this text, although Christodoulos's definition of God (= God is a necessary and infinite substance, independent of any other external cause, subject to its own natural necessity [...], having as equally necessary and infinite predicates extent and intellect)⁶ recalls that of Spinoza in the *Ethics*. It is impossible, however, to document any form of intertextuality between Christodoulos's text and the work of Spinoza.

It would be more historically relevant to suggest that all that Christodoulos writes on religion derives from the heritage of religious criticism, which had its distant origin in the philosophy of Spinoza, but a century later had become more diffused as an almost commonplace questioning of conventional religious orthodoxy. Thus in Christodoulos's texts, especially in *On Theocracy*, we encounter formulations, definitions and arguments which reflect the intellectual climate associated with Spinoza's religious thought, in the form it had been ren-

⁴ Ibid. 333–334.

⁵ Christodoulos from Acarnania, *Απάντησις ἀνωνύμου πρὸς τοὺς αὐτοῦ ἄφρονες κατηγοροῦς ἐπονομασθεῖσα περὶ θεοκρατίας*, [A Response by Anonymous to His Foolish Detractors Entitled On Theocracy], 2nd ed., ed. P. M. Kitromilides (Athens: Cultura, 2013; hereafter cited as *On Theocracy*). The new edition contains an extensive introductory study on the broader significance of the Pamphlektis case, 9–56.

⁶ *On Theocracy*, 214–215.

dered as a shared substratum of religious dissent during the later phases of the age of the Enlightenment.

Let us examine the textual evidence more closely. Christodoulos himself rejects categorically the charges of his enemies for atheism and pantheism. As it had also been the case in his earlier work *On philosopher*, his critical religious attitude does not derive from the espousal of atheism but from a conception of a rationalized religious belief as an element of a broader critical epistemological position. At this philosophical level his conception of God as an “infinite and necessary substance” could not of course be identified with the conception of a personal God as understood in Judaism or Christianity.

The decisive element which defines the religious attitude that pervades *On Theocracy* is an unconditional and uncompromising anticlericalism. The criticism of the clergy to which Christodoulos resorts, nevertheless, is not limited to the denunciation of the excesses of the clergy in matters of personal morality, economic behaviour, misguidance and deception of the simpler masses of the Christian people through the cultivation of superstition and the exercise, through the manipulation of fears abetted by superstition, of tyrannical power over them. All of these issues are extensively and mercilessly treated in his pages and from many points of view set the background and produce the critical vocabulary of anticlericalism that will be voiced by the radical strand in the Greek Enlightenment in the following decades.

Christodoulos, however, does not stop at this vociferous version of social criticism. He goes several steps further beyond the denunciation of the moral and pastoral failures of the clergy to the questioning and refutation of many central and fundamental theses of the sacred tradition of the church, especially teachings concerning the communion of the Saints and the place of the prophets in the plan of Divine Providence for the salvation of humanity. At this point Spinoza’s historical criticism of the Bible in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* can be detected in the distant background. Christodoulos, however, is much more violent in his expressions and does not spare words and denigratory adjectives in characterizing all these holy presences in the make-up of the religious world of the traditional Churches of Christian Europe, Orthodox and Roman Catholic. His most biting argument that prophets and saints were impostors and were used only as a mechanism for the imposition of “theocracy” upon the simple-minded believers place him unquestionably outside the community of the faithful of the Orthodox Church.

The views by means of which Christodoulos articulates his religious criticism do not represent a conversion to Protestantism, which Christodoulos explicitly rejects denying that he was a follower of Luther.⁷ We cannot furthermore detect a straightforward espousal of the views of Spinoza, which as we saw are

⁷ *On Theocracy*, 122.

only critically referred to in Pamplekis's earlier work. The historical criticism of the Bible and of the Christian Church, reflect with reasonable clarity relevant views and ideas of the religious thought of the Enlightenment. To this kind of argumentation Christodoulos had been obviously exposed by studying the relevant entries in the *Encyclopédie*, on which he had also drawn in composing his earlier work. That had been an apprenticeship in the "enlightenment", which means "virtue and philosophy", as Christodoulos himself explicitly mentions in the opening sentence of his proemium to the work *On Theocracy*.⁸

The broader appraisal that Christodoulos articulates in this light in considering the practice of the Church and its ministers turns out to be deeply radical and subversive of the established order of things in the ecclesiastical space of the Orthodox East, an order of things he calls *theocracy*.

Theocracy is the continuous and persistent will of the clergy to exercise total power upon the minds of the laity by means of the manipulation of religious feelings and metaphysical fears.⁹ On these issues "enlightenment", in whose pursuit Christodoulos feels existentially committed, leads him to frontal collision with the entire structure of power and exploitation, which he perceives, as an independent and emancipated observer, to be integrated at the heart of the ecclesiastical polity. His enemies and detractors were the closest and most familiar representatives of that awesome, as he understands it, product of darkness and corruption.

The term *theocracy*, which Christodoulos uses as a characterization and at the same denunciation of the system of thought and practice of his enemies, is used in modern Greek for the first time by Christodoulos. Obviously the term is not modern Greek. Its authorship belongs to the first-century A.D. Hellenizing Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, who coined the term in order to describe the polity of the ancient Hebrews. Christodoulos must with certainty have encountered the term, if not in the editions, of Josephus's works in the Greek original that had been available since the early sixteenth century, at least in the pages of the *Encyclopédie*, from which he had gleaned the material of his book *On philosopher* in the mid-1780s. In the relevant entry in the *Encyclopédie*, volume XVI, pp. 210–212, the careful reader can notice the origins of all the ideas and interpretations that Christodoulos would transfer to the Greek vocabulary of philosophical and religious criticism. In the *Encyclopédie* entry "théocratie", we find the definition that was going to be employed by Pamplekis: "theocracy is a government of a nation directly by God, who exercises his sovereignty over it and announces his will through the medium of prophets and clergy". It is also pointed out that the unique example of a "true theocracy" was that of the ancient Hebrews. Accordingly Christodoulos in explaining the term theocracy cites ex-

⁸ Ibid. 141.

⁹ Ibid. 179–184.

tensively the example of the Hebrews (“first theocracy”).¹⁰ He goes on to offer other examples of theocratic regimes, citing Islamic and Christian models, but insists on the more purely theocratic organization of the Jewish people (second theocracy).¹¹

The broader question that arises from the consideration of the “Pamblekis case” concerns the relevance of the evidence of the particular case to the understanding, in more general terms, of the religious thought of the Enlightenment and of the contribution of religious criticism to intellectual change in early modern European culture. On this level of analysis the fragments of the historical picture supplied by the Pamblekis case might be fitted into a more general tapestry of ideological conflict and intellectual problematization.

Beyond its significance for understanding issues involved in the interplay of religious criticism and intellectual change in the culture of the Greek Enlightenment, placed in the wider comparative framework of the evolution of religious ideas and criticism in the intellectual history of early modern Europe, Pamblekis’s *On Theocracy* could be seen as a Greek offshoot, as an expression in the Greek language, of the problems and soul-searching provoked by the propagation of Spinoza’s ideas and by the consequences of these ideas for the formation of moral conscience. On the evidence of his work Christodoulos could be seen to move in the orbit of religious skepticism and of the criticism of the sacred, which emanated from what has been described, by the great Italian historian of religious ideas Antonio Rotondò, “the centrality of doubt”.¹² Pamblekis’s ideas and personal tragedy, which resonates painfully in his last work, could and should be interpreted and appreciated in connection and as part of living through the doubt of religious belief as a personal struggle of intellectual liberation. This is precisely how the connection between religious criticism and intellectual change works in the actual flow of historical experience through the drama, most of the time, of the personal life of individuals who feel they cannot compromise with injustice, hypocrisy and obscurantism.

¹⁰ Ibid. 175–178.

¹¹ Ibid. 179–184.

¹² See *La centralità del dubbio. Un progetto di Antonio Rotondò*, eds. Camilla Hermanin and Luisa Simonutti (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2011).

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