

Navigating the Currents: Exploring the Esoteric Threads in the Greek Orthodox Church of the 15th to 18th Centuries

MARKOS LITINAS

Gerhard Podskalsky (1937–2013) was a distinguished theologian and historian focused on academic study of the Greek Orthodox Church. His scholarly endeavors were dedicated to examining its evolution, spanning the four centuries from the fall of Constantinople to the Greek War of Independence. Podskalsky's meticulous analysis portrays the Greek Orthodox Church as a resilient and adaptive institution, profoundly influenced by its interactions with the Catholic Church and Protestant movements¹.

Podskalsky delineates the span of 1453–1821 into four discernible periods, each characterized by its distinct features and external influences. This structured framework forms the basis for our examination of the intricate undercur-

1 G. Podskalsky, *Griechische Theologie in der Zeit der Türkenherrschaft (1453–1821). Die Orthodoxie im Spannungsfeld der nachreformatorischen Konfessionen des Westens* (Munich 1988), tr. as *Η ελληνική θεολογία επί Τουρκοκρατίας 1453–1821* [Greek Theology under Turkish rule, 1453–1821], tr. G. Metallinos (Athens 2008).

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rents within the Greek Orthodox Church throughout this period. The four periods identified by Gerhard Podskalsky are as follows:

- a) Between 1453 and 1581, in what is commonly referred to as the 'Commitment to Tradition' period, the Orthodox Church, reeling from the fall of Constantinople, responded by re-embracing its traditional beliefs and practices. This period was marked by concerted effort to seek stability and continuity in the face of the historic challenge posed by the city's conquest.
- b) The period of 'Religious Humanism' (1581–1629), witnessed a notable convergence of cultures and theological dialogues, coinciding with the Reformation in the West. During this era, there emerged a significant interchange of ideas between the Orthodox Church, Catholics, and Protestants. Western endeavors to gain recognition and endorsement from the "venerable" Orthodox Church fostered theological exploration and facilitated the infusion of Western theological and esoteric currents into Eastern Greek Orthodoxy.
- c) During the 'Orthodox Church in the Conflict of Western Doctrines' period (1629–1723/1727), a significant schism emerged within the Greek-speaking scholarly community. One faction staunchly defended the purity of Orthodox doctrine, resisting Calvinist and Latin influences, while the other faction exhibited a more accommodating attitude toward these Western theological currents. This divergence of perspectives illustrates the intricate theological discourse that characterized Eastern Orthodoxy during this era.
- d) During the period of 'Conflict with Enlightenment: Return to Tradition' (1727–1821), the Orthodox Church grappled with the intellectual challenges posed by the Enlightenment. Opting to revert to its traditional Orthodox doctrine, the Church decisively repudiated Western influences and esoteric currents that had permeated its theology in preceding centuries. This period marked a deliberate effort to reaffirm the Church's doctrinal foundations and maintain continuity with its traditional teachings.

Within the framework established by Gerhard Podskalsky, this paper endeavors to elucidate the emergence and proliferation of esoteric currents, encompassing alchemy, astrology, hermeticism, and Neoplatonism, within the Greek Orthodox Church over a span of four centuries. Central to this inquiry is the exploration of the pivotal role played by esotericism within the Church. It be-

comes apparent that esotericism was not merely an extraneous or incidental influence, but rather an integral component of Orthodox theology. Evolving and adapting in response to the diverse epochs and influences emanating from both Western and Eastern contexts, esotericism became deeply intertwined with the fabric of the Greek Orthodox Church. While steadfastly preserving its foundational traditions, the Church remained receptive to change, actively engaging with the Catholic Church, Protestant movements, and the Ottoman theology. Each interaction left an indelible imprint on the development of esoteric thought, yielding intriguing outcomes.

‘Commitment to Tradition (1453–1581)’

Esotericism, encompassing domains such as alchemy, astrology, and magic, thrived during the Byzantine era. Notably, belief in phenomena such as the evil eye, the efficacy of magical talismans, rituals and magical manuscripts were common among the lower Byzantine strata. They were embraced by the general populace, as evidenced by numerous sources of lesser quality.² These sources, geared towards lay readers, provided insights into magical rituals and practices aimed at achieving various objectives. The widespread embrace of esoteric practices is further underscored by the incorporation of numerous Nomocanonical passages addressing magic and astrology.³ Often, these passages prescribed punitive measures against such practices. These legal provisions were designed to offer guidance to the clergy in managing instances of magic and astrology, with the overarching aim of discouraging public engagement in these pursuits.

Nonetheless, it would be remiss to presume that Byzantine scholars and academics avoided esoteric currents. Esteemed figures like Michael Psellos (1018–1078),⁴ Michael Italikos (1090–1157),⁵ and Plethon Gemistos (1355–

2 Many examples of low quality magical manuscripts can be found in A. Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensia* (Liège 1927).

3 Many examples of nomocanonical passages condemning magic and esotericism can be found in N. I. Pantazopoulos and D. S. Gkinis, *Νομοκάνων Μανουήλ Νοταρίου του Μαλαξού του εκ Ναυπλίου της Πελοποννήσου: μετενεχθείς εις λέξιν απλήν δια την των πολλών ωφελείαν* (Thessaloniki 1985), 106, 107, 142, 412, 420, 457–460.

4 J. Bidez, « Michel Psellus, L'Épître sur la Chrysopée », *Catalogue des Manuscrits Alchimiques Grecs*, vol. VI (Brussels 1928).

5 H. Maguire, *Byzantine Magic* (Washington 2009), 83–98.

1453)⁶ exhibited a distinct interest in esoteric subjects, delving into topics such as alchemy (*chrysopeia*), magic, and neoplatonism. The scholarly endeavors of these individuals underscore that esotericism was not confined solely to the lower echelons of society; rather it permeated the realms of scholarly discourse, contributing significantly to the intellectual production of the Byzantine era.

In the wake of the fall of Constantinople, a discernible downturn in academic production pertaining to esotericism ensued, a consequence of the significant exodus of Orthodox academics and scholars who sought sanctuary in Italy and other regions. Despite this scholarly exodus, it is pertinent to highlight that esoteric manuscripts addressing a broader audience did not vanish; rather, they persisted and proliferated. A plethora of magical manuscripts and grimoires emerged within primary sources, continuing to delve into esoterica. Among these, notable examples include the works of Spyridon Miliás⁷ and Theodoros Pelekanos⁸, which encompassed a spectrum of astrological and alchemical themes. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that these works functioned primarily reproductions of earlier Byzantine works, lacking substantial additions or innovations within the domain of esotericism.

Within the realm of Byzantine esotericism, numerous historians and scholars have devoted their research to exploring the various currents within the Byzantine and early Post-Byzantine periods. Henry Maguire's *Byzantine Magic* and the edited volume by Paul Magdalino and Maria Mavroudi's on Byzantine occult sciences⁹ represent significant contributions, offering comprehensive examinations of magical practices prevalent from the early days of the empire through to the fall of Constantinople. Another scholar, Maria Papathanasiou¹⁰ has focused her scholarly endeavors on Byzantine esoteric currents, particularly investigating alchemical and astrological manuscripts within the Byzantine corpus. Within this corpus, Armand Delatte's work in *Anecdota Atheniensia*¹¹ provides a valuable collection encompassing a wide range of astrological, her-

6 N. Siniossoglou, *Radical Platonism in Byzantium: Illumination and Utopia in Gemistos Plethon* (Cambridge 2011), 3.

7 A. Colinet, *Les alchimistes grecs* (Paris 2010), 1–42.

8 Codex Parisinus graecus 2327.

9 Maguire, *Byzantine Magic*; P. Magdalino and M. Mavroudi (eds), *The Occult Sciences in Byzantium* (Geneva 2006).

10 M.K. Papathanasiou, "The Occult Sciences in Byzantium", in S. Lazaris (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantine Science*, c. 400–c. 1500 (Leiden 2020), 464–495.

11 Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensia*.

metical, magical, demonological, and alchemical manuscripts spanning from the early empire to the 18th century. Additionally, the contributions of Richard Greenfield¹² merit attention, particularly his thorough exploration of Paleologian magic and the post-Byzantine esoteric currents within Greek Orthodoxy during the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

‘Religious Humanism (1581–1629)’

The second period, spanning from the 16th to the early 17th centuries, emerges as a pivotal era marked by two significant factors. Firstly, there was a resurgence of Neoplatonism and Neo-Aristotelianism within Western Catholicism and Protestantism across Europe, particularly in Italy. This revival sparked renewed interest in the realms of astrology, alchemy, and hermeticism. Consequently, Western academics were incentivized to reengage with these esoteric subjects.

The second influential factor can be attributed to the emergence of Protestantism, which prompted both the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations to seek recognition and endorsement from the venerated Orthodox Church. This outreach resulted in an exchange of ideas between Orthodoxy and the Western world, reigniting interest in esotericism in the Orthodox circles. Furthermore, Greek Orthodox scholars and clergy found themselves pursuing higher education in Greek-speaking universities, primarily in Italy. These individuals acquired firsthand knowledge of esoteric topics and brought this newfound wisdom back to their Orthodox communities. This exchange led to a revival of scholarly Greek Orthodox esotericism, characterized by a proliferation of erudite scholars and clergy producing numerous manuscripts. These manuscripts delved deeply into the topics of hermeticism, alchemy, and magic, interwoven with Neo-Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophies. Notable examples include the works of Theophilos Corydalleus (1563–1646)¹³, who exhibited a profound interest in astrological divination and the manuscript

12 R. P. Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief in Late Byzantine Demonology* (Amsterdam 1988).

13 V. Tsiotras, «Κλαύδιος Πτολεμαίος και Θεόφιλος Κορυδαλλεύς: Τα αστρολογικά κείμενα» [Claudius Ptolemy and Theophilos Korydalleas: the astrological texts], *Συναϊτικά Ανάλεκτα*, vol. 1 (Athens 2002), 171–208; idem, *Η εξηγητική παράδοση της γεωγραφικής υφηγησεως του Κλαύδιου Πτολεμαίου. Οι επώνυμοι σχολιαστές* [The exegetical tradition of Claudius Ptolemy’s geographical introduction] (Athens 2006).

*Meteorologica*¹⁴ by Gerasimos Vlachos (1607–1685), which entwined Neo-Aristotelian philosophies with hermetic astrology.

Authored by erudite scholars who had ascended to high ranks within the clerical hierarchy, these works represent a distinctive period marked by original creations rather than mere reproductions of Western or historical works, as observed in preceding eras. They expand upon the topics of alchemy and astrology while integrating them with established Orthodox doctrine and theology.

While the focus on the post-Byzantine centuries remains comparatively underdeveloped within academic and historical circles, there are dedicated scholars and historians committed to this period. Their contributions, though fewer in number, carry significant weight. Particularly, historians of science have embarked on studies concerning alchemy and iatrochemistry in the Greek Orthodox world under Ottoman and Venetian rule.¹⁵ Among the notable scholars who have ventured into this field is Remi Franckowiak, whose research uncovered the interests of Athanasios Rhetor in alchemy.¹⁶ Franckowiak provided insights into Rhetor's involvement in 17th-century Greek chemistry within the Ottoman Empire, thrusting these two alchemical manuscripts to the forefront of academic research. Despite these revelations, Rhetor's alchemical manuscripts remain relatively unexplored, lacking in-depth exploration within the broader context of Greek Orthodox esotericism. Georgios Koutzakiotis is an

14 Σχολαστικά ζητήματα εἰς τὸ Α', Β' καὶ Γ' Βιβλίον τῶν Ἀριστοτέλους Μετεωρολογικῶν. Library of the Greek Parliament 49. Cf. M. Litinas, "The Views of Gerasimos Vlachos on Astral Influences: Aristotelic, Hermetic, and Astrological Approaches to the Heavenly Bodies", *Aca'ib: Occasional papers on the Ottoman perceptions of the supernatural* 2 (2021), 147–168. <https://doi.org/10.26225/2mpd-7x13>

15 See E. Nicolaidis (ed.), *Greek Alchemy from Late Antiquity to Early Modernity* (Turnhout 2018). On Ottoman Muslim alchemy and iatrochemistry in the same period, see F. Günergun, "Convergences in and around Bursa: Sufism, Alchemy, Iatrochemistry in Turkey, 1500–1750", in P. H. Smith (ed.), *Entangled Itineraries: Materials, Practices, and Knowledge across Eurasia* (Pittsburgh 2019), 227–257. On Ottoman alchemy see also T. Artun, "Hearts of Gold and Silver: The Production of Alchemical Knowledge in the Early Modern Ottoman World", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2013.

16 R. Franckowiak, "Athanasios Rhetor: a Greek in Paris, a Priest in Alchemy", in G. Katsiampoura (ed.), *Scientific Cosmopolitanism and Local Cultures: Religions, Ideologies, Societies Proceedings. 5th International Conference of the European Society for the History of Science (Athens, 1–3 November 2012)* (Athens 2014), 95–100; Idem, "Athanasios Rhetor and the Greek Chemistry in the 17th Century Ottoman Empire", in Nicolaidis (ed.), *Greek Alchemy*, 131–148.

other historian who has directed his academic focus towards esoteric currents in the Greek Orthodox context. His research has illuminated the perceptions and beliefs of Greek Orthodox laity and scholars regarding celestial phenomena, particularly comets. By delving into historical records, Koutzakiotis has uncovered valuable insights into the role of astrology and celestial events in shaping the esoteric worldview within the Greek Orthodox tradition.¹⁷

‘Orthodox Church in the Conflict of Western Doctrines (1629–1723/1727)’

The third period, catalyzed by the Calvinistic “Confessio” of Patriarch Cyril Lucaris, marked the zenith of the theological conflict within Greek-speaking Orthodox communities. This schism was characterized by one faction staunchly defending the purity of Orthodox doctrine, rejecting Calvinistic and Latin influences, while the other faction adopted a more receptive stance toward Western theological currents, often intertwined with esoteric matters.

Amidst this turbulent era of discord, notable scholars distinctly aligned themselves in the theological confrontation. Theophilos Corydalleus pursued his studies in Padova under the tutelage of Neo-Aristotelian professor Cesare Cremonini, a figure renowned for his interests in astrology and esotericism. Concurrently, Gerasimos Vlachos spent a significant portion of his life in Venice and Rome, immersing himself in academic circles and being exposed to various esoteric currents prevalent in Western Europe.

It is plausible that such Greek-speaking scholars, given their substantial exposure to Western European esoteric trends, would demonstrate a greater receptivity to their influence. Nonetheless, despite facing accusations of Western-

17 G. Koutzakiotis, *Αναμένοντας το τέλος του κόσμου τον 17ο αιώνα. Ο εβραϊός Μεσσίας και ο Μέγας Διερμηνέας* [Awaiting the End of the World in the 17th Century. The Jewish Messiah and the Great Interpreter] (Athens 2011); French translation by D. Morichon, *Attendre la fin du monde au XVIIe siècle. Le messie juif et le grand drogman* (Paris 2014); idem, “La kabbale et l’érudition grecque (XVIIe–XIXe siècles)”, unpublished paper presented in “Jewish and Non-Jewish Cultures in Contact: New Research Perspectives”, Xth Congress of the European Association of Jewish Studies, European Association for Jewish Studies (Paris, 20–24 July 2014); idem, “Μηνύματα στον ουρανό: ελληνική «κομητογραφία» (15ος–19ος αιώνες)” [Messages in the Sky: Greek ‘Cometography’ (15th – 19th c.)], in K. Dede – D. Dimitropoulos – T. Sakellaropoulos (eds), *Φόβοι και ελπίδες στα νεότερα χρόνια* [Fears and Hopes in Modern Times] (Athens 2017), 13–28.

ization and even Calvinism from Orthodox scholars and theologians, notably directed at figures such as Theophilos Corydalleus, these scholars persisted in their commitment to Orthodox doctrinal principles. They adeptly integrated Hermetic and alchemical esoteric currents into Orthodox theological discourse while upholding their fundamental beliefs.

‘Conflict with Enlightenment: Return to Tradition (1727–1821)’

In the last period examined by Gerhard Podskalsky, it became apparent that Orthodoxy adopted a confrontational stance towards scholars and intellectuals espousing “modernist” viewpoints aligned with Renaissance ideals. Rather than engaging in scholarly dialogue with the burgeoning Renaissance movement, Greek Orthodoxy opted for outright rejection, retreating to traditional Patristic teachings. Consequently, avenues for discussions and exchanges of ideas with Western churches were effectively severed.

Within the realm of scientific discourse, the Orthodox Church maintained allegiance to a worldview rooted in Aristotelian philosophy. The introduction of novel scientific paradigms from Europe posed a formidable challenge to this entrenched worldview. Considered a cornerstone of Orthodox tradition, any attempt to revise it was regarded not merely as a scientific matter by the Church but also as a threat, jeopardizing the very foundations of Orthodoxy itself. In response to this challenge, the ecclesiastical authorities assumed a stance characterized by scientific obscurantism, firmly opposing the encroachment of innovative ideas. The Church, as the primary authority in doctrinal matters, reacted assertively to what it perceived as not only a scientific inquiry but also an existential threat to the foundational principles of Orthodoxy.¹⁸

This rejection of Renaissance ideals had significant implications for the fields of astrology, alchemy, and hermeticism within Orthodox theological discourse. Given the categorical rejection of magic and astrology in Patristic teachings, manuscripts produced during this period reflect a wholesale dismissal of these fields. Scholars of the era often characterized astrology and alchemy as diabolical pursuits aimed at leading the faithful away from orthodox doctrine. Notably, Nicodemus Hagiorite emerges as a central figure in this pro-

18 V.N. Makrides, “Science and the Orthodox Church in 18th and Early 19th Century Greece: Sociological Considerations”, *Balkan Studies: A Biannual Publication of the Institute for Balkan Studies*, 29 (1988), 265–282.

cess of “demonization” of esotericism. His seminal work, “Against the various sorts of magic”,¹⁹ places alchemy and astrology within the broader category of magic or math, disavowing their efficacy and attributing their study to the devil’s machinations to mislead the faithful. Parallels can be drawn between Nicodemus Hagiorite’s stance on esotericism and the perspectives espoused in the Nomocanonical manuscripts from the initial period under investigation. Another contributing factor to the decline of Orthodox esoteric manuscripts lies in the nature of the Renaissance itself. Scholars redirected their focus towards alternative subjects or embraced more empirical and scientific research methodologies, leading to either the rejection or transformation of esotericism. Notably, there was a shift from astrology to astronomy and from alchemy to chemistry. Consequently, the production of academic esoteric manuscripts experienced a decline during the period spanning 1727–1821. While lower-quality astrological and magical manuscripts intended for the lay and lower social strata persisted in popularity until the early 20th century, scholarly inquiry into alchemy, astrology, and hermeticism reached a standstill.

Conclusion

The framework established by Gerhard Podskalsky provides a comprehensive overview of the theological trajectory of the Orthodox Church the four centuries under examination. This framework adeptly navigates the internal dynamics of Orthodoxy while also acknowledging the manifold external influences that have contributed to the evolution of Greek Orthodoxy. We have employed this framework to illustrate how the study of esotericism within the Greek-speaking world parallels the theological shifts delineated by Podskalsky. Greek Orthodox esotericism, far from existing in isolation, emerges as a distinct subfield offering a unique lens through which to explore knowledge within the broader spectrum of Greek Orthodoxy. It is imperative to note that Greek Orthodox esotericism diverges from its Western counterpart. While Western ideas undoubtedly left their mark on Greek esotericism, and conversely, Greek Orthodoxy garnered interest from Western esoteric circles during periods of flourishing esoteric studies, Greek Orthodox esotericism maintained its distinct identity. This differentiation was achieved through a process of adaptation and evolution firmly

19 Nicodemus the Hagiorite, *Χρηστοθήδεια των Χριστιανών* [Good morals for Christians] (Ioannina 1803), 160–195.

rooted within the context of Orthodox theology, thereby establishing itself as a separate and autonomous entity from its Western counterpart.

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