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THE INVOLVEMENT OF SCIENCE IN THE DEBATE ON HESYCHASM

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Abstract

Barlaam of Calabria's (c. 1300-1350) involvement in the discussions over the Eastern and Western churches became the pretext for the controversy that opposed the Calabrian scholar and the hermit monk Gregory Palamas, leader of the Hesychast movement in the Byzantine 14th century. Palamas argued that the only worthwhile knowledge was theosophy, which could be attained only by purging oneself of secular wisdom while Barlaam was a follower of Ancient Greek philosophy of nature.

It would be however a mistake to see the Hesychast movement (especially its leader Palamas) as hostile to secular learning as such. Palamas was interested in secular knowledge, notably that which described and explained Creation; he proceeded by deductive reasoning based on sense perception. But this method was not sufficient for him because it was likely to lead to erroneous conclusions. In order for knowledge based on experience to be valid, it must follow the interpretation of Creation given by the church fathers, especially Basil. But-- and this is particular to the Hesychast movement--the world in which we are living is not composed for Palamas of physical reality alone. According to Palamas, to limit man to perceiving merely the created world would be to condemn him to spiritual misery. A Christian is open to another world that was not created by the imagination of Hellenic philosophers--namely, the uncreated world of spiritual powers. On another hand, Palamas uses Aristotle and presents a theory on the position of the element water based on the ideas on physics of the Ancient Greek philosopher.

In this paper we will present the main themes about science involved in the Hesychast debate which divided the Byzantine society during the 14th century. We will notably try to seek the consequences of this debate on scientific knowledge during the second Byzantine Humanism (14th-15th c.). Did this debate have influenced the Byzantine society in order to accept or not scientific knowledge?