

GEORGI KAPRIEV, *Byzantine Philosophy: A Systematic Perspective* (Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 138). Leiden – Boston: Brill 2025. 410 pp. – ISBN 978-90-04-72896-7

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Often dismissed by both Byzantinists and specialists in Medieval Latin and Arabic philosophy as a chimaera, Byzantine philosophy remains underexplored within Byzantine literature. This scepticism stems from a traditional bias that views the Byzantines as primarily engaged in unproductive theological debates lacking philosophical significance. The reviewed book makes a significant contribution by challenging this misconception. Few would deny that GEORGI KAPRIEV has passionately championed the legitimacy of Byzantine philosophy as a contemporary academic field, standing alongside others in defending its importance to Byzantinists and medievalists. His *Byzantine Philosophy: A Systematic Perspective* demonstrates that Christian scholars of the Eastern Roman Empire regularly studied ancient philosophical texts and ideas in order to develop what can be described as a new Christian metaphysics. Although it relies on classical philosophical concepts and methods, this metaphysics is fundamentally innovative. In this regard, KAPRIEV’s study pairs with JOHANNES ZACHHUBER’s consequential *The Rise of Christian Theology and the End of Ancient Metaphysics* (2017).

The word ‘theology’ in ZACHHUBER’s book could once more suggest a bias, viewing Byzantine philosophy as solely theological. However, in the initial section of the book (pp. 1–83), KAPRIEV extensively discusses how one of the key issues in modern debates on Byzantine philosophy is the use of outdated labels such as ‘theology’ and ‘speculative theology’. These terms originate from a Westernised perspective that persistently examines Byzantine material in search for similarities with medieval scholasticism. Because Byzantine philosophy differs fundamentally from Western developments of the same era, applying Western categories and labels often leads to misunderstandings of what was considered philosophy in the Eastern Roman Empire. By contrast, KAPRIEV urges readers to dismiss labels from other periods or traditions and to adopt the specific terminology found in Byzantine sources. According to these, the term ‘philosophy’ encompasses a particular form of knowledge of earthly and divine matters

rooted in God's self-revelation to human beings. Within this setting, Byzantine philosophers develop their worldview in different ways, which can be distinguished as what KAPRIEV calls the anthropocentric and the Theocentric tendencies. The distinction comes from JOHN MEYENDORFF and carries negative connotations regarding the anthropocentric tendency. KAPRIEV clarifies the distinction by avoiding MEYENDORFF's negative view of what he mistakenly calls 'Byzantine humanism'. The Bulgarian scholar argues that both approaches, the anthropocentric and the Theocentric, aim for the same goal but use different methods. The connection between them is based on a shared understanding of philosophy as a divine gift to humans, meant to aid in understanding and contemplating the universe and the divine. Although KAPRIEV does not elaborate at length on this aspect, his choice of material clearly supports this idea.

After clarifying the many nuances involved in the Byzantine understanding of the term 'philosophy', KAPRIEV, in the second part of the book, engages with its main themes. These are 1) The teaching on the energies (pp. 87–166); 2) The principles/*logoi* of being (pp. 167–195); 3) Nature and *hypostasis* (pp. 196–223); 4) The human being (pp. 224–258); 5) Human knowledge (pp. 259–291); 6) Will and freedom (pp. 292–308); 7) Time, Aeon, Eternity (pp. 309–328); 8) History and metaphysics (pp. 329–426). Since it is not possible to delve into KAPRIEV's specific discussion of these themes here, I will concentrate instead on his general approach to them. To start with, since the book promises a systematic approach, it focuses more on topics than on textual tradition. Scholars interested, for instance, in Byzantine commentaries on Aristotle may find the lack of information on this topic disappointing. This relates to KAPRIEV's methodology in the book rather than a lack of knowledge about the subject. KAPRIEV outlines the general framework of the universe and knowledge as understood by most Byzantine scholars and philosophers. His approach emphasises doctrines over historical progression. This, however, does not imply that KAPRIEV thinks those themes were fully formed in early Christianity. On the contrary, he clearly demonstrates that although the Cappadocians presented the core elements of these themes, they were later developed and debated by Byzantine thinkers. This becomes clear when one looks, for instance, at the heated topic of the essence-energies distinction. In this context, KAPRIEV argues that the main features of the distinction were accepted by all Byzantine thinkers and authors, but the doctrine's underpinnings were subject to debate. In short, the fact that, in the 14th century, the debate over the status of the divine energies erupted into controversy means that orthodoxy

should be understood as an open-access system that was constantly negotiated and debated. Whereas its foundations were clear, the way Byzantine thinkers articulated this basic knowledge led to very different results and assumptions. I found this approach very useful and historically sound.

Regrettably, I encountered several typos in the volume, perhaps too many for a book published by Brill. Moreover, the book would have benefited from further revision by a native speaker, as KAPRIEV's English is at times hard to read and too close in syntax to Bulgarian. Adding a final chapter summarising the book's conclusions and achievements would have also been helpful to readers. I also believe that it would have been better to fully cite and discuss certain key passages the author considered in the main text, rather than just summarising their content. Lastly, the authors of the so-called anthropocentric tendency are underrepresented, since KAPRIEV refers primarily to Michael Psellos (d. after 1076) as its sole representative. Despite these limitations, KAPRIEV must be praised for undertaking such a Promethean task. His book will be extremely useful to students of Byzantine philosophy and, more generally, to anyone interested in the intellectual history of Byzantium.

Keywords

Byzantine philosophy; Byzantine intellectual history; medieval philosophy