

Using Greek Philosophy in Interpreting the Christian Teachings: The Case of Michael Psellos*

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Abstract. The present article attempts to point out a common practice of Michael Psellos, yet rather unusual for his theological contemporaries, namely that of interpreting the Christian doctrines and teachings by using Greek philosophy, not only its terminology, but also its concepts, whenever they fit in with what the Christian Church and the Fathers of the Church elaborated, starting from the Scriptures. It is worth noting that Psellos does not inaugurate a new tradition of interpretation, when approaching the revealed text or the works of the Fathers prior to him in such a way. On the contrary, he continues a hermeneutical line which includes Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor. The novelty brought by Psellos was that he used Greek philosophy at a scale never used before or after him. The reasons for doing this are to be found in the corpus of the article.

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In his book, *Hellenism in Byzantium. The Transformation of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*, Anthony Kaldellis begins the chapter dedicated to Michael Psellos in an apparently discouraging way (although not entirely unjustified), with a question which reveals the difficulty when approaching the works of “the first Byzantine humanist”:¹

“Where to start with Psellos? The word “unique” is often used lightly by historians, but in this case it is no idle epithet. Psellos’ radical philosophical proposals, his manifold and innovative writings on all subjects, his prestigious and historically impactful career at the court, his importance as a source for the eleventh century, and his decisive influence on Byzantine intellectual life, make him the most amazing figure in Byzantine history. He cannot be “explained,” at least not yet.”²

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¹ Hans Wilhelm Haussig, *A History of Byzantine Civilization* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 323.

² Anthony Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium. The Transformation of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 191.

So, where to start with Psellos? In the present paper, we will focus on the way he uses Greek philosophy in order to explain the teachings of Christian faith. By doing so, Psellos was rather convinced that Greek philosophers were forerunners of Christianity and, therefore, they had access to the truth (even if only partially), that they provided not only proper terminology, but also proper concepts in order to explain the revealed truth, as contained in the Holy Scriptures and interpreted by the Fathers of the Church. Due to this conviction, he can be placed among other great hermeneutic thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor etc.

But let us begin with some biographical data. Michael Psellos was one of the greatest philosophical and theological minds of the eleventh century in Byzantium. The intellectual life in Byzantium in the eleventh century was marked by the foundation of the schools of Law and Philosophy,³ the former led by Ioannes Xiphilinos, later John VII, Patriarch of Constantinople, and the latter led by Michael Psellos, who was appointed ὑπατος τῶν φιλοσόφων (“Consul of the Philosophers”). During the first decade of Konstantinos IX Monomachos’ rule (1042–1055), his career was at its peak. At some point at the beginning of the 1050s, Psellos’ circle lost power at the court. He himself was accused of teaching non-Christian beliefs, so he was required to produce a confession of orthodoxy. When Michael Keroularios became patriarch of Constantinople, Psellos left the city and became a monk in Bithynia (and that is when he took his monk name – Michael). We do not know exactly what the feelings of Psellos for monasticism were, but we do know for sure that a year later he left the monastery and came back to Constantinople, resuming his former activities. At some point during the 1070s, he died.

Apart from being a living encyclopaedia, the tremendous importance of Psellos for the Byzantine culture lies in his attempt to revive Hellenistic philosophy, to bring Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and especially Proclus (as the last representative of Neoplatonism and the greatest interpreter of Plotinus) in the forefront and to give them almost the same importance as to the Christian doctrine. Although we can identify this practice of using Hellenistic philosophy for interpreting biblical texts in the writings of several Church Fathers, we note the fact that it had never been used at such a scale and by someone whose fidelity to the Christian doctrine was doubted to such a degree that, as mentioned before, he was asked to give a confession of faith.

Psellos’ writings that have received the least attention and commentaries are the so-called “theological writings”.⁴ What is very surprising is the fact that many of these *opuscula* deal with what the Byzantines would call “Hellenic material”. The starting point of all these *opuscula* is either a biblical text, or a passage from the works of the Cappadocian Fathers, John of Damascus, Cosmas the Melode, John Climacus,

³ Wanda Wolska-Conus says that these two schools were “often called, even if this is improper, “faculties” of the “University” of Constantinople”. See Wanda Wolska-Conus, “Les Écoles de Psellos et de Xiphilin sous Constantin IX Monomaque” (The Schools of Psellos and Xiphilin under Constantine IX Monomachos), *Travaux et Mémoires* 6 (1976): 223.

⁴ There are two volumes which have been published in the *Bibliotheca Teubneriana*: Paul Gautier, ed. *Michaelis Pselli Theologica I* (Leipzig: Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1989), and L. G. Westerink † and J. M. Duffy, eds. *Michaelis Pselli Theologica II* (München und Leipzig: K. G. Saur Verlag, 2002), but until now there is no translation of them in any modern language.

Maximus the Confessor. By far, the most important Father of the Church whose texts need, in Psellos' view, continuous interpretation in order to be properly understood, is Gregory of Nazianzus. According to his standpoint, Gregory provided a Christian model for the combination of philosophy, rhetoric and theology and was, of the Church Fathers, the most open to Greek *paideia*. Amazingly or not, all these Christian texts mentioned above, either biblical or patristic, are interpreted with the help of ancient philosophy.

John Duffy, in his study on "Hellenic Philosophy in Byzantium and the Lonely Mission of Michael Psellos" rightly wonders:

"What is it that Psellos had in mind when introducing at every conceivable opportunity the ideas of pagan philosophy and mysticism? The question would seem to be particularly appropriate when raised in conjunction with his teaching activity; obviously in Byzantium at almost any period it was at least a delicate matter to consort with the likes of Plato and Proclus, not to speak of the Chaldean Oracles and other occult writings – but in front of students and in the context of the sacred documents of Orthodox Christianity?"⁵

We leave the answer aside for the moment and we now turn our attention to two examples of Psellian interpretation of biblical and patristic texts.

The first example is taken, although not *tale quale*, from the study of John Duffy quoted above:⁶ the text to be interpreted is from the Gospel according to Mark, where Jesus does not agree with the designation "good" (ἀγαθός) which was granted to Him: τί με λέγεις ἀγαθόν; οὐδεὶς ἀγαθὸς εἰ μὴ εἷς ὁ θεός ("Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone"). If Psellos had interpreted this passage in a traditional Christian way, he would have said that Jesus' question is an indirect reference to his divine nature, to the fact that He Himself is God, the Son of God. Instead, Psellos refers to philosophical sources in his attempt to explain Jesus' question, namely to *On Providence* of Proclus, with the clear purpose to demonstrate, with the help of a Greek philosopher, that Jesus is God. It is in this treatise that Proclus states that "the Good" (τὸ ἀγαθόν) is equivalent to "the One" (τὸ ἓν):

"In addition to all the others, there is the philosopher Proclus too, both in his Platonic exegesis and in his work *On Providence*; it is in the third chapter in particular, I think, that he makes the statement 'the Good is identical with the One, as we have said numerous times' ".⁷

Can Jesus be equivalent to the Plotinian "One," in the way that He Himself is God? Is such a statement congruous with the traditional Christian discourse? If we turn to our second example, a text from the works of a patristic author who is interpreted by Psellos in the same manner, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, perhaps we can have an answer.

⁵ John Duffy, "Hellenic Philosophy in Byzantium and the Lonely Mission of Michael Psellos" in *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, ed. Katerina Ierodiakonou (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 148.

⁶ Ibid., 147.

⁷ *Theologica II*, op. 18, 98: ἐπὶ πᾶσι δὲ τοῖς εἰρημένους καὶ ὁ φιλόσοφος Πρόκλος ἐν οἷς τεστοιχειοῖ τὸν φιλόσοφον καὶ ἐν τοῖς Περὶ προνοίας αὐτοῦ λόγοις, ἐν τῷ τρίτῳ καὶ μάλιστα κεφαλῇ, ὥς οἶμαι, ταῦτόν' φησὶ τὰ ἀγαθὸν τῷ ἑνί, τοῦτο δὴ τὸ μυριόλεκτον

⁸ The translation of the Greek text into English belongs to John Duffy.

The text to be analyzed can be found in *Oratio* 29, 2: “Unity having been moved/moving from the beginning to Duality, found its rest in Trinity”.⁸

Needless to say, the terminology used here by Gregory is Plotinian.⁹ Plotinus, in *Enneads* V, 1, discusses the issue of how the transition from unity (the One) to multiplicity (the Multiple) is possible. The fundamental distinction between Gregory and Plotinus is that, while Gregory speaks of the movement of the Unity (the One to Plotinus), Plotinus asserts that the One remains fixed and motionless. Moreover, in *Ennead* V, 1, 6, motion is explicitly denied in what concerns the One:

“origin from the Supreme (i.e. the One) must not be taken to imply any movement in it: that would make the Being resulting from the movement not a second principle, but a third: the Movement would be the second hypostasis”.¹⁰

Instead of the movement mentioned by Gregory, Plotinus speaks of an “overflow of goodness” (goodness being equivalent to the One) in *Ennead* V, 2, 1:

“Seeking nothing, possessing nothing, lacking nothing, the One is perfect and, in our metaphor, has overflowed, and its exuberance has produced the new”.¹¹

To this idea, Gregory reacts promptly:

“For we shall not venture to speak of *an overflow of goodness*, as one of the Greek Philosophers dared to say, as if it were a bowl overflowing ... Let us not ever look on this Generation as involuntary, like some natural overflow, hard to be retained, and by no means befitting our conception of Deity”.¹²

What Gregory wants to do here is to deny in an explicit way the Plotinian emanation process: the Generation of the Son is not the result of the Father’s overflow of goodness. This overflow of goodness has effects only *ad extra*, that is, outside divinity. We find this idea in Gregory’s 38th Oration:

“But since the movement of self-contemplation alone could not satisfy Goodness, but Good must be poured out and go forth beyond Itself to multiply

⁸ Gregorius Theologus, *Oratio* 29, 2 (PG XXXVI, 76): μονὰς ἀπ’ἀρχῆς εἰς δυάδα κινηθεῖσα μέχρι τριάδος ἔστη. Another translation would be: “The Monad from the beginning having been moved into a Dyad stands at the Triad”. See the article of Arnis Redovičs, “Gregory of Nazianzus (*Or.* 29.2) in Maximus the Confessor’s *Ambigua*”, in M. F. Wiles and E. J. Yarnold, eds., *Studia Patristica* XXXVII (2001): 250.

⁹ See the whole discussion in Claudio Moreschini, *Istoria filosofiei patristice* (The History of Patristic Philosophy) (Iași: Polirom, 2009), 561–562.

¹⁰ Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, ebook, translated by Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Library, s.a). See this book at this website: <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plotinus/p72e/> (accessed November 9, 2015). Plotin, *Eneade III-V* (Bucharest: Editura Iri, 2005), 492: Τὸ οὖν γινόμενον ἐκείθεν τοῦ κινηθέντος φατέον γίγνεσθαι. Εἰ γὰρ κινηθέντος αὐτοῦ τιγίγνοιτο, τρίτον ἀπ’ ἐκείνου τὸ γινόμενον μετὰ τὴν κίνησιν ἂν γίγνοιτο καὶ οὐ δεύτερον.

¹¹ Ibid. For the Greek text, Ibid., 508: Ὅν γὰρ τέλειον τῷ μηδὲν ζητεῖν μηδὲ ἔχειν, μηδὲ δεῖσθαι, οἷον ὑπερεβρύη, καὶ τὸ ὑπερπλήρες αὐτοῦ πεποίηκεν ἄλλο.

¹² Gregorius Theologus, *Oratio* 29, 2 (PG XXXVI, 76): Οὐ γὰρ δὴ ὑπέρχουσιν ἀγαθότητος εἰπεῖν θαρρήσομεν ὃ τῶν παρ’ Ἑλλησι φιλοσοφῶσαντων εἰπεῖν τις ἐτόλμησεν, *Οἷον κρατὴρ τις ὑπεβρύη*... μήποτε ἀκούσιον τὴν γέννησιν εἰσαγάγωμεν καὶ οἷον περίττωμά τι φυσικὸν καὶ δυσκάθεκτον, ἥμιστα ταῖς περὶ θεότητος ὑπονοοῖαις πρέπον.

the objects of Its beneficence (for this was essential to the highest Goodness), He first conceived the Heavenly and Angelic Powers...”¹³

Therefore, even if Gregory uses Plotinus to interpret the way the Son and the Holy Spirit were generated by the Father and the way Goodness is creating the “intelligible world,” in fact he reinterprets Plotinus in a Christian way: while for the pagan philosopher, the One, due to his perfection and his exuberance of being, created the Intellect and the intelligible world, for Gregory, God created, due to his exuberance of being, not the Son and the Holy Spirit, but the Heavenly and Angelic Powers which are defined, too, as “intelligible world”. As for the movement of the Monad to Dyad and its rest in Triad, Gregory uses this term – “movement” – to imply the Generation of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, through Birth and Procession.

How does Psellos interpret this assertion of Gregory from *Oratio* 29, 2? He starts by reaffirming what Plotinus said about the motionless of the One:

“If what is moved and generated is [so] because of a cause that moves it and generates it, it is obvious that everything which does not exist because of a cause is not generated and not moved. For it is not moved that which has no cause at all of its existence. And if it is something altogether without a cause and motionless, then God/ the Divine is motionless, because he has no cause of his existence and he is the cause of all that exists”.¹⁴

Why, then – asks Psellos – is Gregory introducing the movement in God? If, as Psellos puts it, Gregory admits a motionless God “according to his *ousia* and *physis*,” because He is “infinite, unconditioned and limitless,”¹⁵ he nevertheless speaks of a moving God in the way that “He moves providentially all the beings according to the *logos* which moves naturally”.¹⁶ This, we presume, is a reference to the theology of St. Maximus the Confessor, who speaks of the *logoi* of all creatures. What are these *logoi*? They are, at the same time, their principle or reason of being, that is, the very thing that defines them fundamentally, but also their existential purpose, the purpose they were created for from the very beginning.¹⁷

¹³ Gregorius Theologus, *Oratio* 38, 9 (PG XXXVI, 320): Ἐπεὶ δὲ οὐκ ἤρκει τῇ ἀγαθότητι τοῦτο, τὸ κινεῖσθαι μόνον τῇ ἑαυτῆς θεωρίᾳ, ἀλλ’ ἔδειχεθῆναι τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ ὁδεῦσαι, ὥς πλείονα εἶναι τὰ εὐεργετούμενα (τοῦτο γὰρ τῆς ἄρκας ἦν ἀγαθότητος), πρῶτον μὲν ἐννοεῖ τὰς ἀγγελικὰς δυνάμεις καὶ οὐρανίους.

¹⁴ *Theologica II*, op. 27, 116: εἰ δὲ τὸ κινούμενον καὶ γεννητὸν δι’ αἰτίαν ἔστι τε καὶ κινεῖται καὶ γεγέννηται, πᾶν ὃ μὴ δι’ αἰτίαν ἔστιν οὐδὲ ποιητὸν ἔστιν οὐδὲ κινητὸν δηλονότι. οὐ γὰρ κινεῖται τὸ παντάπασιν μὴ ἔχον τοῦ εἶναι αἰτίαν. εἰ δὲ τὸ ἀνάτιον πάντως καὶ ἀκίνητον, ἀκίνητον ἄρα τὸ θεῖον ὡς τοῦ εἶναι μηδεμίαν ἔχον αἰτίαν καὶ πάντων τῶν ὄντων ὑπάρχον αἰτία. My translation.

¹⁵ *Theologica II*, op. 27, 116: οὕτως καὶ τὸ θεῖον, ἀκίνητον πάντῃ κατ’ οὐσίαν καὶ φύσιν ὑπάρχον, ὥς ἀπειρον καὶ ἄσχετον καὶ ἀόριστον.

¹⁶ *Theologica II*, op. 27, 116: λέγεται κινεῖσθαι τῷ κινεῖν προνοητικῶς ἐκάστην τῶν ὄντων καθ’ ὃν κινεῖσθαι πέφυκε λόγον.

¹⁷ For a thorough discussion of Maximus’ *logoi* see Jean-Claude Larchet, *Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul. O introducecere* (Saint Maximus the Confessor. An Introduction) (Iași: Doxologia, 2013), 186–188, 191–194, 197–199 and Lars Thunberg, *Antropologia teologică a Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul. Microcosmos și mediator* (Microcosm and Mediator. The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor) (Bucharest: Sophia, 2005), 89–97.

Relying on a patristic tradition which reinterprets some ideas of the Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy, Psellos then refers to Pseudo-Dionysius:

“But why speak the Sacred Writers of God sometimes as Eros and Love, sometimes as the Object of these emotions? In the one case He is the Cause and Producer and Begetter of the thing signified, in the other He is the Thing signified Itself. Now the reason why He is Himself on the one hand moved by the quality signified, and on the other causes motion by it, is that He moves and leads onward Himself unto Himself. Therefore on the one hand they call Him the Object of Love and Eros as being Beautiful and Good, and on the other they call Him Eros and Love as being a Motive-Power leading all things to Himself, Who is the only ultimate Beautiful and Good”.¹⁸

As Eros and Love, God moves Himself, and as the Object of Eros and Love, He moves all capable of Eros and Love toward Himself. The movement belongs to the created beings, it pertains to their natural condition.¹⁹ Psellos concludes the Pseudo-Dionysius passage referred to in this way:

“[God] moves Himself in the way that He introduces a disposition of Eros and love in those who are capable of them, and He moves as He attracts naturally the desire of those who move toward Him”.²⁰

So, if there is movement in God, it is rather from the standpoint of the rational beings (either angelic or human) who are taught that there is no division in God – the first cause, on one side, but that this first cause is not “unproductive” (ἄγονος), but gives birth to Logos and Wisdom, who are ὁμοουσίων τε καὶ ἐνυποστάτων (*of the same essence and enhypostatic*). Furthermore, the movement in God must be understood as the progressive revelation of the Trinity:

“And it is said again that He moves Himself (i.e. God) because of the progressive revelation of a more and more perfect discourse about Himself as contained in the Holy Scripture, starting from the acknowledgement of the Father, continuing with the acknowledgement of the Son together with the Father and leading those who teach to the receiving and worshipping the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son, a perfect Trinity in perfect Unity, that is, one substance and divinity and power and energy in three hypostases”.²¹

¹⁸ Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, translated by C. E. Rolt (Montana: Kessinger Publishing Company, 1920), 57.

¹⁹ Following Platonic philosophy, Origen considered movement as a sign of the Fall. On the contrary, St. Maximus the Confessor considered movement as a providential gift of God, granted to the rational beings for their fulfillment, which is accomplished in God alone, according to each rational being's *logos*.

²⁰ *Theologica II*, op. 27, 117: κινεῖται μὲν ὡς σχέσιν ἐμποιοῦν ἔρωτος καὶ ἀγάπης τοῖς τούτων δεκτικοῖς, κινεῖ δὲ ὡς ἑλκτικὸν φύσει τῆς τῶν ἐπ' αὐτὸ κινουμένων ἐφέσεως. My translation.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 117: λέγεται δὲ κινεῖσθαι πάλιν καὶ διὰ τὴν κατὰ μέρος φανέρωσιν τοῦ περὶ αὐτῆς τελειώτερου λόγου κατὰ τὴν ἁγίαν γραφήν, ἀπὸ τοῦ πατέρα ὁμολογεῖν ἀρχομένου καὶ εἰς τὸν υἱὸν συνομολογεῖν πατρὶ προβαίνοντος καὶ πατρὶ καὶ υἱῷ συμπαραδέχεσθαι τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον καὶ συμπροσκυνεῖν τοὺς διδασκάλους ἀνάγοντος τριάδα τελείαν ἐν μονάδι τελείᾳ, ἥγουν μίαν οὐσίαν καὶ θεότητα καὶ δύναμιν καὶ ἐνέργειαν ἐν τρισὶν ὑποστάσεσιν. My translation.

We see, thus, that even though Psellos uses Hellenistic philosophy to explain theological texts, he does so without venturing beyond Christian Tradition; on the contrary, he continues a Tradition with a long history before Him, a tradition which uses philosophical language to explain the Christian faith and dogmas.²² In doing so, he gives credit to those Hellenistic philosophers who sought the truth and who were rewarded by God with some illuminations, although incomplete and later mixed with certain errors. As Basile Tatakis puts it: “The human thinking is in a progression oriented, by the nature of the spirit, to perfection”.²³ Therefore, not only Christians, but also ancient philosophers were on their way to the truth.

It is John Duffy who pointed out a text of Psellos in which the latter speaks of the usefulness of Hellenic philosophy for a better understanding of Christian theology:

“Having to explain whether ‘being’ (ὄν) is self-subsistent and trying to do so by introducing an account of Being, One, and Soul in terms taken from Neoplatonism and Plato’s *Timaeus*, he brings the discussion to a close with the following paragraph: ‘I have enumerated all these things both to bring you to a state of broad learning and to make you familiar with Hellenic doctrines. Now I realize that our Christian teaching will clash with some of those doctrines, but it was not my intention to have you exchange the one for the other – that would be madness on my part; rather, I wanted you to become devoted to the former and merely take cognizance of the latter. And if they somehow stand a chance of helping you towards the truth, then make use of them’”.²⁴

²² A rather different opinion has Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, 201: “If Plato ‘mystically reveals our theology’ and Proklos can be quoted in the exegesis of Christian doctrine, Christian texts and symbols can conversely be ‘translated’ into a Platonic idiom. ‘Sinai – that I may philosophize to you about this as well,’ Psellos wrote to Xiphilinos, ‘did not, like some physical mountain, lead Moses up and God down, but rather symbolizes the rise of the soul up from matter’ (*Theologica I*, 78.108). With few exceptions, Psellos’ theological lectures are a vast exercise of this sort. Not that this kind of exegesis was foreign to the Christian tradition, but here it is practiced on an unparalleled scale and in the absence of credible signs of the exegete’s Christian piety. We need detailed studies of these lectures. Based on a preliminary reading, I suspect that the outcome will be startling. Psellos is not trying to ‘buttress’ Christian doctrine with philosophy or ‘enrich’ it with Greek eloquence. He is abolishing its autonomy by fusing it with Platonic thought and making the two interpenetrate each other. Despite programmatic statements that ascribe primacy to Christian doctrine, in practice Psellos treats both it and Greek myth as coded versions of the same Platonic doctrines. He is effectively trying to make it impossible for Christians – at least those Christians taught by him – to expound their beliefs without first talking about Proklos. This is subversion, not reconciliation, and it is very cleverly done at that”.

²³ Basile Tatakis, *Filosofia bizantină* (The Byzantine Philosophy) (Bucharest: Nemira, 2010), 222.

²⁴ Duffy, “Hellenic Philosophy in Byzantium and the Lonely Mission of Michael Psellos”, 149. The text of Psellos is taken from *Philosophica minora I*, op. 7, 26: Ταῦτα δὲ πάντα διηριθμησάμην ὁμοῦ μὲν ὑμᾶς εἰς πολυμάθειαν ἄγων, ὁμοῦ δὲ καὶ ταῖς ἑλληνικαῖς δόξαις ποιοῦμενος ἐντριβεῖς. Καὶ οἶδα ὡς ἐνίαισι γετούτων ἀντιπρὸς εἶται τὰ ἡμέτερα δόγματα. ἔγω γὰρ οὐχ ὥστε γετούτων ἐκεῖνα ἀνταλλάξασθαι διανοοῦμαι πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐμαιοῖ μνηστῶν ἄν – ἀλλ’ ἵνα τοῖς μὲν ἡτε προσκείμενοι, ἐκείνων δὲ μόνον τὴν εἰδῆσιν ἔχητε. Εἰ δὲ πῃ καὶ συνεργῶεν ὑμῖν πρὸς τὸν ἀληθῆ λόγον διακινδυνεύοντα, καὶ χρήσασθαι.

The philosophical and theological short treatises written by Psellos are very numerous and they have been collected in critical editions only recently.²⁵ In a short treatise *On Intellect*,²⁶ Psellos indicates that he is summarizing the philosophical opinions of the Greeks and names his source, Proclus' *Elements of Theology*.²⁷ In another treatise of this kind, *On Soul*,²⁸ Psellos adds that some of these Greek doctrines agree with "our oracles" (i.e. Christian teachings), but there is more that is bitter in them than is sweet.²⁹ The bitter is identified in the second half of this treatise as the "most ridiculous things," nothing else than extracts from Proclus' propositions 196, 198-211 concerning soul's astral vehicle, cosmic soul, and the divine souls which accompany the gods. It is exactly this kind of things which must be avoided by a Christian theologian, in order to preserve a pure Christian doctrine. On the other side, what is acceptable from the philosophy of the Greeks is reused in a metaphysical system which, as Psellos claims, harmonizes with Christian theology and often facilitates a better understanding of it.³⁰

Did Michael Psellos conceive Greek philosophy as being superior to Christian doctrines of faith? Did he conceive it only as an instrument for a better understanding of them? It is hard to identify Psellos' own beliefs in the hundreds of pages of commentaries and lectures that he devoted to philosophical and theological topics, since most of them are not translated yet. It is safer to conclude with a hypothesis launched by John Duffy:³¹ according to Psellos, a good theologian must be πολυμαθής ("very learned," "knowing many things"), so he must be skilled in many languages that can be understood either by theologians or by philosophers.³² It is not a betrayal of the Christian faith if a theologian uses a language that is, in some way, strange and unusual for many; it is rather a sign of wisdom to be able to transmit Christian dogmas and teachings in varied forms. And, as a teacher of philosophy, this was exactly what Psellos wanted for his students.

²⁵ For *Theologica I* and *Theologica II* see note 4. There have been published two volumes of Psellos' philosophical short treatises as well: J. M. Duffy, ed., *Michaelis Pselli Philosophica minora I* (Leipzig: Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1992) and D. J. O'Meara, ed., *Michaelis Pselli Philosophica minora II* (Leipzig: Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1989).

²⁶ *Philosophica minora II*, 10 (Περὶ νοῦ).

²⁷ Ibid., 21: Ταῦτά ἐστι τὰ τῷ φιλοσόφῳ Πρόκλῳ πεφιλοσοφημένα περὶ νοῦ ἐν τῇ θεολογικῇ αὐτοῦ στοιχειώσει ("These are those philosophized on intellect by the philosopher Proclus in his theological exposition"). My translation.

²⁸ *Philosophica minora II*, 11 (Περὶ ψυχῆς).

²⁹ Ibid., 22: Ἰδοὺ σοικαὶ τὰ περὶ ψυχῆς παρατίθημι Ἑλληνικὰ δόγματα, ὧν ἔνια καὶ τοῖς ἡμετέροις λογίοις συνᾶδει, ἀλλὰ πλεον παρ' αὐτοῖς τοῦ ποτίμου τὸ ἀλμυρὸν ("Look! I lay before you the Greek teachings on soul, some of which agree to our oracles, but to them that which is bitter is more than that which is sweet"). My translation.

³⁰ For a more comprehensive discussion see Dominic O'Meara, "Michael Psellos", in Stephen Gersh, ed., *Interpreting Proclus. From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 168–174.

³¹ Duffy, "Hellenic Philosophy in Byzantium and the Lonely Mission of Michael Psellos", 148–155.

³² On a homily of Gregory of Nazianzus (*Theologica I*, 68), Psellos says about the wise man (the philosopher? the theologian?) that he must be a man of all sorts (δεῖ γὰρ τὸν σοφὸν παντοδαπὸν εἶναι). The Greek word παντοδαπός is a synonym for πολυμαθής.