

Article

Theology of Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers as a Specific Way of Philosophical Thinking in an Epistemological Context

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Abstract: The article presents the theological ideas and mystical–religious teachings of the Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers, which, at the same time, are philosophical because Byzantine theologians also reflected on human and their life, on the relationship between man and God, on the possibilities of God-cognition and obtaining higher sacred knowledge. Based on the analysis of the anthropological and epistemological ideas of the Greek Church Fathers, we highlight that philosophizing was always at the heart of Byzantine theology. Therefore, the Byzantine tradition of the Church Fathers is considered a unique type of philosophy of religion, which originated in the historical formation of the Christian faith in the era of the Triadic and Christological theological debates of the 4th to 7th centuries. This article reflects the teachings of three of the brightest thinkers-theologians of Byzantium—John Climacus, Maximus the Confessor, and Symeon the New Theologian. Their teachings are the foundation and main source of the mystical–religious tradition of Byzantine theology and philosophy. John Climacus's conception of human self-improvement and self-cognition on the path of theosis is revealed as one of the first philosophical and moral systems of early Byzantium and the source of subsequent Christian concepts of Eastern Christianity. Maximus the Confessor's conception of the logoi—or energies—of God is presented as a system of symbols with profound philosophical and anthropological meaning. The human being in St. Maximus's doctrine is the main and self-sufficient symbol of the universe, connecting the two worlds—the Divine and the earthly ones. The doctrine of Symeon the New Theologian on uncreated light is revealed as a personal comprehension of God in the perception of Divine Light. The transforming power of the Light is demonstrated, which changes the nature of a human being and raises an individual to the height of spiritual unity with God. Finally, conclusions are made about the beginning and formation of the philosophy of religion as a special type of philosophical–religious thinking found already in the period of early Christianity.

Keywords: philosophy of religion; Byzantine Patristics; Christian mysticism; the Divine Ladder; uncreated light; logoi; God-knowing conception



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1. Introduction. Philosophy and Theology: Peculiarities and Unity

Philosophy, in its historical development, has often posed eternal questions to religion regarding the God–human–world relationship. Without these questions, neither philosophy nor religion could exist. A striking example of such a creative union of philosophical–theological knowledge is the legacy of the Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers of both the Nicene and post-Nicene periods. This legacy is rarely referred to by modern thinkers, and therefore, a huge layer of culture and unexplored theological knowledge, especially in philosophical discourse, is overlooked in modern scholarship.

Meanwhile, the writings of the Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers are not only theological but also deeply philosophical. The Church Fathers shaped the very spirit of the

philosophy of religion by posing philosophical questions to the theological development of the doctrine of Christianity. This is evidenced by the range of theoretical problems that were discussed during the theological Triadological¹ (the 4th century) and Christological² (the 5th to the 7th centuries) debates³, and the orientation of the Church Fathers toward the works of Plato and Neoplatonism, the logic of Aristotle and the Peripatetics (Chroust 1947). Of course, the Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers were, above all, committed to the authority of the Sacred Scripture and the preceding sacral theological tradition. However, the Eastern Church Fathers used sufficiently rich content from the legacy of the Greek thinkers to create their philosophy in Byzantium (Osborn 1981) and subsequently transmit it to the regions of Byzantine influence, in particular, to Ancient Rus’.

The Church Fathers’ philosophizing has always been concerned with the development of anthropological concepts and ideas, as well as ways of personal cognition of God and the elevation of the individual to oneness with God. Philosophical and anthropological ideas were theorized in doctrines elaborated by Christian thinkers, each of which became the foundation of the centuries-long tradition that followed. These included Symeon the New Theologian’s theory of the uncreated Divine Light, the concept of the ascetic path of deification through the ascension of an ascetic on the moral steps of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus, the doctrine on communion with God through God’s logoi (energies) by Maximus the Confessor, the apophatic conceptual knowledge of God by Basil of Caesarea, and others. These were complex theological works of the Church Fathers, but in discussing God and the ways of knowing Him, they always spoke of man as a participant and partaker of the divine life. Otherwise, without the appeal of absolute sacral knowledge to humans and its transmission to humanity, this knowledge would be incomplete and un-holistic.

In this context, John Meyendorff stressed: “... the most important aspect of Greek patristic anthropology, which will be taken for granted by the Byzantine theologians throughout the Middle Ages, is the concept that man is not an autonomous being, that his true humanity is realized only when he lives “in God” and possesses divine qualities” (Meyendorff 1974, p. 139).

Since the works of the Byzantine Church Fathers always immanently included reflections on man and their life, it can be affirmed that philosophizing was the center of Greek-Byzantine theology. The works of the holy Fathers were based on anthropological, ethical, and epistemological questions, but they were solved for theological purposes using the logical–conceptual apparatus of ancient Greek doctrines and the preceding traditions, also based on philosophy and the corresponding terminology—Biblical, Origenistic, Platonic (Ramelli 2009), Neoplatonic, Aristotelian—which gave them philosophical depth in various ways (Chadwick 1966; Edwards 2019; Chistyakova and Chistyakov 2023; Karamanolis 2021).

This article focuses on the personal–mystical tradition of Byzantine Patristics as an example of the unique formation of a philosophical–religious discourse of the Middle Ages. The field of consideration includes several of the most important personalities of the Byzantine Middle Ages who were the pillars of this tradition—John Climacus, Maximus the Confessor, and Symeon the New Theologian. Their doctrines are presented not so much as theological but as philosophical to show that the way of Byzantine theology was also the way of philosophy.

All the reflections of the Church Fathers cited in the article are united by the fundamental theme of *religious gnosis* or *epistemology*. In this respect, the ideas of John Climacus, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Maximus the Confessor are original teachings on the possibilities of human cognition of God and self-knowledge. In this context, the theological problem of the cognition of God is at the same time philosophical–epistemological. Here, philosophy intersects with theology. (For more details on the problems of the interrelation of theology and philosophy in the Church Fathers’ manuscripts please refer to the books of Bolotov 1907). Philosophy, in our opinion, is thinking about eternal existential problems of human existence, including, among many others, ontological, moral, and epistemological

questions. Theology, in turn, aims not only at the doctrinal expression of the religion but also at the search for the spiritual meanings of human life. Philosophy and theology are thus interconnected by anthropological questions, but they also have specificity in the theoretical implementation of these ideas (Rahler 2004).

The philosophical consideration of human in the arena of early medieval Christian culture implies reflection of the ways and possibilities of man's cognition of God as the Absolute, as well as of their inner world, values and norms of morality, etc. In terms of philosophy, it is tightly connected with an understanding of the deeply individual spiritual life of a human being (in particular, that of monks, to whom, e.g., John Climacus and other Church Fathers refer) and an awareness of man's involvement in social life (with society being both the small community in a monastery and the non-religious environment of man). The social context has always been of paramount interest to philosophy, and hence it was taken even by the early Apologetic Fathers to develop their theological concepts. The contemporary thinker G. Karamanolis notes that the pre-Nicaean Fathers included ideas about human social life in their religious reasoning to indicate the formation of a new Christian identity as opposed to a non-Christian one. Particularly, he contends: "The point of most Christian works of the second century, traditionally labeled apologetic, was the consolidation of Christian identity employing criticizing non-Christian identities. In his *Apologeticum*, for instance, Tertullian did precisely this; he set out to explain the distinct way in which the Christians engage in social relations, their strong sense of community, and their particular attitude to politics (*Apol.* 36.3–4, 39.3–39; see further in Chapter 6)" (Karamanolis 2021, p. 5). Philosophy thus seeks to reveal the eternal questions of meaning and human values. Of course, when considering the era of early Christianity or medieval philosophy, questions of the meaning of life and the purpose of man have always been related to God and religion (Gurevich 1985).

From the standpoint of theology, these same issues are considered in unique concepts of comprehension of the Creator, where the Church Fathers conceptualized special (often unique) means and specific ways of attaining knowledge of God. Hence, there was specificity in describing not only *the spiritual ascent* of a human being to the Creator (theosis) but also the culminating point of reaching the covenantal *unity* of man with God. For instance, in Symeon the New Theologian this highest point of the experience of spiritual unity (if not fusion) and thus of the *knowledge* of God occurs in the state of perception of the *uncreated Divine light* and the *transfiguration* of man; according to John Climacus, it happens in the achievement of a special feeling of love for God and another person.

However, it is extremely challenging to separate theology and philosophy in the texts of Eastern patristics. Both are directed toward the individual, who is always self-improving and discovering absolute values, who strives to reach the pinnacle of religious faith and to live by the norms of morality and religious imperatives. Of course, according to Christian theology, a human is weak and contradictory. But here, too, the holy Fathers offered *their vision* of the causes of this contradiction and the possibilities of overcoming it in different ways: Maximus the Confessor—through perceiving the *logoi*, or energies (ἐνέργειαι) of God; Athanasius of Alexandria—through conceiving the universal nature of the Good as such, which he comprehended from Neoplatonism (Chistyakova 2021). John Climacus described this ascension to God as a gradual overcoming of human imperfection—for which he outlined *thirty steps* of movement toward God—and achieving universal and inexplicable Love for God in the process of deification.

Is it possible to divide these existential motives of human life into those that belong to the religious sphere and those that belong only to the philosophical sphere? In our view, no. Humans, as individuals, tie together these two spheres of their existence—religious and secular, and, in theoretical terms, the reflexive identification of their anthropological essence makes possible the creative unity of philosophy and theology.

The article discusses some essential problems of the religious existence of man, which were the subject of both theology, which aimed at developing the dogma of Christianity, and philosophy, which formed an integral conceptual understanding of person in his relations

to the world of the sacred and the mortal, the material and the spiritual, the Divine and the created. We have scrutinized the works of three significant figures in the Byzantine Patristics, and in revealing the *peculiarities* of their vision of man, we have also tried to find common features of their work. They formed an invaluable heritage of mystical–religious and, at the same time, a philosophical–anthropological tradition of early and medieval Christianity, which became the subject of our study.

A crucial methodological means of this study is a comparative analysis of the teachings of Greek Fathers and showing the continuity of their views in the development of orthodox Eastern theology—Triadology and Christology (Wolfson 1970). This continuity of ideas made it possible to form a coherent tradition of Byzantine philosophizing.

More specifically, Section 1 examines John Climacus’s seminal idea of *overcoming the gap* between the human and divine worlds through man’s ascent to God in the process of deification (theosis, *θέωσις*)⁴ and the attainment of spiritual unity with God in Love and absolute morality. We consider this to be an epistemological idea since human, in this regard, comprehends God insofar as one is enabled to do so.

Section 2 reveals Maximus the Confessor’s teaching on *the logoi*, or *energies of God* in the context of man’s capacity to perceive (cognize) absolute logos (*Λόγος*) and the individual’s purpose in the earthly world.

Section 3 presents the epistemological ideas of Symeon the New Theologian on the attainment of God through the perception of the *uncreated Light*, which at the same time belongs to the direction of religious gnosis as they connect human and God.

2. Mystical–Monastic Tradition and John Climacus’s Idea of Deification through *Thirty Steps to God*, as a Way of God-Knowing

The mystical–religious tradition upheld a fundamental place in the teachings of the Greek Fathers of the Church during the medieval and late Byzantine periods. It should be noted that this direction of philosophical–religious thought is called *mystical* only in terms of its emphasis on the purely personal, individual comprehension of God in the movement of man (usually monastic) to spiritual union with God (for further details ref., e.g., Meyendorff 1974). The Greek-Byzantine patristic texts are imbued with ideas of supersensible and super-intelligent cognition of God of the Trinity through the perception of the uncreated Divine Light. The doctrine of the nature of the Divine Light (the Tabor light in Hesychasm) was formed in the context of the solution of theological and philosophical–anthropological questions of Eastern Christianity by many Church Fathers, beginning with classical (Nicene) Patristics and up to Hesychasm of the late Byzantine era. Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Paul of Latrus, Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas, and others, were developing the biblical meanings of the category of *light*. They argued about the inner illumination of a person by the Divine Light and the presence of Divine nature in the inner world of everyone. This determined the special world of the value of the individual in a relationship with the Creator and marked the high purpose of man. The Church Fathers, therefore, within the framework of this tradition, thought and created not only and even not so much from a theological position as from a philosophical–axiological one (Evans 2007).

In Eastern Christianity, the idea of human perfection related to epistemological possibilities since the way of God-cognition was thought of simultaneously as personal self-knowledge, purification (Russell 2004), and acquisition of spiritual knowledge, at the top of which the individual is expected to meet God in a special state of love for the Lord. Yet, the elevation of the individual to this high stage of unity with God the Trinity was prescribed by the Church Fathers only through the attainment of love for another person, one’s neighbor, even a stranger. A human being must overcome their separation from God, the opposition to the world of the Divine, and, in the difficult feat of monasticism, reach the high stage of unity with the Creator. This is vividly expressed, for example, by John Climacus in his famous work *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. It refers to monasticism,

the unique Christian trend that made “a special contribution to mystical theology in the patristic period. It is precisely in the monastic tradition itself that we find a pronounced anti-mystical strand: an insistence that man is utterly remote from God, and in this world must live a life of repentance and ceaseless struggle against the powers of evil” (Louth 1981, p. 98).

John Climacus describes in *The Ladder* the thirty mental and practical steps of the monastic exploit on the way of the monk’s struggle against the passions and temptations of the mortal world, which at the same time is the way of spiritual perfection and man’s elevation to God. St. John presented the way of deification, coinciding with the process of God-knowledge and the attempt to regain the lost Godlikeness. It should be noted that St. John wrote this book only for monks, describing the monastic conditions of life and always stressing that such complex moral attitudes are only overcome by very few monastics.

The spiritual life of the monk and the ascent up the moral steps of the Ladder leading to God begins with *conversion*—with the striving of the will, turning to the Lord, and renouncing the mundane world. Therefore, *the first step is the renunciation of all carnal things* (John Climacus 1908, I). In John Climacus’s work, the idea of the Nicene Fathers of the 4th to the 5th centuries is clearly traced: man, to whom freedom of choice was given, as a result of their sinfulness, departed from God, fell into wickedness, corruption, and death. Now, to “ascend” to God, one must perform ascetic deeds, *consciously* turn to Christ, imitate him, and go through all the stages of refusal of sensuality and acquisition of spiritual life. Voluntary *renunciation of the world* is the entering of the soul into itself, the revival of that spiritual essence of human, which allows us to speak about the restoration of the lost likeness to God. The conversion of the will must be done quite freely, just as the original sin, which separated man from God, was once done. Thus, a specific style of thinking and behavior of the ascetics (the so-called “mental doing”) was formed, consisting of particular, conscious human activity to overcome the negative traits of worldly life.

According to John Climacus, deification—the union of the individual with God—occurs as early as on the 28–29th steps, when the ascetic achieves complete *impassivity*, and immersed in prayer, is “reconciled to God” (John Climacus 1908, XXVIII–XXIX). Impassivity is the totality of all the virtues which become the foundation of the ascetic’s life and through which one can attain a state of absolute morality. According to the Byzantine Father, at this stage of the *concordance of silence, prayer, and impassivity* (John Climacus 1908, XXIX), the ascetic can recover the *likeness* of God lost as a result of sin and to approach the Creator to the greatest extent, since one “has subdued all the feelings to the mind and presented his soul to the Lord’s face” (John Climacus 1908, § 3, XXIX, p. 242). At the same time, John Climacus asserts that impassivity (the 29th step) is the summit of the Ladder as the moral self-improvement and ascent to God, and as the *knowledge* of God. Deification is found there, that is, the absolute erasure of the boundary between the human and the divine in the personality of the monk: for they who have reached this summit is practically *likened* to God. Religious Gnosis coincides here with the absolute purity and sinlessness of man. Climacus calls this state “the resurrection of the soul.” He writes: “... impassivity is the resurrection of the soul before the resurrection of the body; ...it is the perfect knowledge of God, which we can have after the angels” (John Climacus 1908, XXIX, § 4, p. 242). This step is precisely the open door to God, “the heavenly chamber of the Heavenly King” (John Climacus 1908, XXIX, §14, p. 245), where one must enter, in Climacus’s thought, “before dying.” We shall emphasize that John Climacus, like other Church Fathers, described deification as a process that ascetics must undergo while still alive. Reaching the pinnacle of theosis—encountering God and union with Him—makes sense only during the monk’s lifetime, not from an eschatological perspective. Therefore, the concepts of deification within the mystical-religious Byzantine tradition refer to anthropological and epistemological teachings, as they describe the life and purpose of man.

John, however, prescribes another criterion for an individual’s entrance into the abode of the beyond world and deification. To attain the highest degree of Love and union with God on the 30th step, one must attain the highest gift—love for the neighbor, another

human being. Love is a divine gift invested in every human being from birth to perfect his or her nature. It is love that helps one reach the heights of the Ladder and the summit of the knowledge of God. *Love for another person*, however, is a sign of acquiring a true love for God and a prerequisite for attaining deification in the spiritual unity of the ascetic and God. John writes: “He who loves the Lord has, first of all, loved his brother; for the latter is the proof of the former” (John Climacus 1908, XXX, § 25, p. 249). The image of God is preserved and manifested, especially in a human, so love for people is the surest means of learning to love God. “Love in its quality is the likening to God as much as men can attain” (John Climacus 1908, XXX, § 7, p. 246).

It is this all-absorbing way of moving upward toward the Creator in constant love, not only for God but also for a person that can lead the monk to a state of spiritual unity with God. These ideas would later be shared by, for instance, Symeon the New Theologian in the 11th century. However, already John Climacus provides the ideological basis for this tradition—love and exaltation to the Creator are inseparable from knowledge of God, self-improvement, and self-knowledge. Asceticism without cognition and one’s conscious striving to the top of the spiritual *Ladder* is irrelevant. Personal consciousness and knowledge of the Divinity grow as one becomes more and more perfect, entering union with the adoring grace of God. These ideas, elaborated by John Climacus for monks, were most fully and rationally developed by Maximus the Confessor, addressing already to all people united by Christian ideals.

3. Maximus the Confessor: The *Logoi* Epistemological Conception and Understanding of Perception of God’s Energies

In Greek-Byzantine Patristics, Maximus the Confessor (6th–7th centuries) can be called the founder of the integral Christological doctrine. He completes and systematizes the earlier teachings of the Nicene Fathers and highlights the meaning and purpose of a human in the created world in personal perception of the *uncreated light*⁵ through the *energies* and *logoi* of God. St. Maximus theorized a special image of human existence that correlated directly with the absolute moral norms and spiritual values of society. According to the Greek Father, a special spiritual light, as a glimpse of the Divine uncreated light, is immanent from creation inherent in every person. In the context of the development of anthropological and epistemological ideas, Maximus focuses on the significance of the Divine Light. The mystical uncreated light unites man and the Creator, giving hope of comprehending God to the extent possible for an individual (Greek Manuscripts 1837). The sublime idea of God-given luminosity connects everyone with the potential achievement of the highest state of perception of the divine *logoi* (or energies of God) in incredible love for the Creator, and thus an awareness of one’s belonging to His divine nature.

In his teaching, Maximus the Confessor develops the idea of the relatedness of a person and God through theosis, stating that in the state of union with God, humans, by the grace of God, possess all that God possesses in his essence. Moreover, Maximus “can rightfully be seen as the culmination of the Greek patristic development of theosis” (Haynes 2011, p. 661). As for John Climacus and other Eastern Church Fathers, God’s *Incarnation* was a central phenomenon of his theology and his unique understanding of deification (theosis). The understanding of deification, or the apprehension of God by grace (but not by essence), and the perception of God’s energies are interrelated in Maximus’s doctrine. These theological concepts bind man and God invisibly and inseparably and give philosophical and anthropological meaning to his teaching. As Haynes contends, “God grants the creature a triad of being, well-being, and ever-being through adoption and participation by grace in the divine Being (not in essence). Deification for Maximus is not based upon any work of the human being, though divinization could not be understood without it, but divinization is given to the creature by supernatural power” (Haynes 2011, p. 662).

In comprehending God by *grace*, a person remains created, just as Christ does not lose his Divine essence in the phenomenon of the Incarnation. Therefore, the divine energies

are the *relationship* between God and the creaturely being. From the philosophical point of view, this idea of St. Maximus can be interpreted as justifying the manifestation of the transcendent essence of God, hidden from the limited perception of a human. Yet the uncreated light makes possible the cognition of God and pushes apart the sphere of ignorance of every individual. In *Chapters on Theology and the Economy*, Maximus writes: “The Lord is called Light, Life, Resurrection, and Truth (John 8:12, 11:25, 14:6). Light as the illumination of souls, as the persecutor of the darkness of ignorance, as enlightening the mind to comprehend unspeakable [mysteries], as revealing mysteries visible only to the pure [heart].” The mystery reveals mysteries accessible to the sight only of the pure [heart]” (Maximus the Confessor 1993a, § 70, p. 248).

How are these energies known, how are they contemplated, and how are their awareness and perception possible? Addressing these most important questions, Maximus the Confessor develops his famous doctrine of the *logoi* of God as an outpouring of His energies and the perception of these energies symbolically. The symbolism of comprehending the *logoi* relates to the understanding of a human as a microcosm and the main symbol of the universe (Thunberg 1995). As scholars J. Zozulák and M. Valčo underline—“Byzantine thinkers had no problem to admire the ancient Greeks who called the human being a microcosm with which they are saying that the human being includes the whole world in himself” (Zozulák and Valčo 2018, p. 1041). Thus, a human is at the intersection of the divine and carnal worlds and collects in the inner world all the symbolism of the universe, all the images of spiritual and mortal existence. Therefore, the purpose is to comprehend and explain the created world as a system of divine meanings and symbols, thereby uniting the two worlds.

However, to perceive the energies of God and to comprehend His *logoi* is only possible for a person who leads an absolutely moral way of life. This enables individuals to enter into unity with God, which, however, does not mean cognition or fusion with the essence of God. It is impossible for human to comprehend the *essence* of the Creator; through divine grace, one can know only the manifestations of God. The Scandinavian scholar J. Pulkkanen notes in this regard: “Thus when the Spirit helps the disciples to contemplate God’s essence and when he helps them to unite with his *energeiai* by practicing the virtues they will also develop ‘an inward relationship (*ἐνέργειαι*) to the truth and the good, that is to God’ (Maximus the Confessor 1993b, V, p. 165) . . . This inward relationship means that the disciples participate in God’s nature without however, uniting with him essentially” (Pulkkanen 2009, pp. 137–38). Maximus the Confessor emphasizes that the result of this unity with God is man’s (usually a monk’s) knowledge of the mysteries of theology (in descriptions of this highest spiritual state, God often speaks to the ascetic and gives them instructions). This sacred knowledge is then passed on to disciples-monks and ordinary people through teaching and preaching. Through the pursuit of God-knowledge, the conciliar nature of the people involved in the process of attaining and perceiving the *logoi* as manifestations of Divine knowledge, is also achieved. Pulkkanen rightly stresses: “Through their participation in the divine *energeiai* they are now able to contemplate the Trinity, which amounts to saying that they have reached the state of pure prayer. In this state they also see all things through their unity with the one with whom they have become united and they see something of the “expected universal consummation” of the divine plan. As a consequence, they also see themselves as more united to each other than to themselves” (Pulkkanen 2009, p. 138).

According to Maximus, in purpose to obtain unity with God, the human mind, freed from sensual captivity, must ascend to divine foundations. This is attainable at the level of “contemplation,” the highest step on the ladder of God-knowledge, after which the soul and mind grasp the triune mystery. At the level of contemplation, the mental world is cognized through the sensual. In his most symbolic work, *Mystagogy*⁶, Maximus writes: “To those who have [spiritual] vision, the whole mental world appears mysteriously imprinted in the whole sensual world by employing symbolic images. And the whole sensual world in the spiritual mind appears to be contained in the whole mental world, being known [there]

through its logoi. The sensual world exists in the mental world utilizing its logoi, and the mental world in the sensual world through its imprints (Maximus the Confessor 1993b, II, p. 159).

The essence of the created world is concealed in the Divine logoi, which pour out of the deity and reassemble in it. The interpenetration of the two worlds manifests in humans. The sensual world is permeated by “spiritual logoi” and energies, and so it is communicated to God by the Word. The invisible, Maximus the Confessor believes, is comprehended by the visible. An individual’s destiny is to be the mediator between the otherworldly and the transcendent being, for one “reproduces all nature... and is at the center of the universe” (Bicilli 1992, p. 55). Human connects the Divine and the earthly worlds and assumes responsibility for this unity.

The understanding of man as a symbol of the universe takes on a truly sacred meaning in Maximus, which was then translated into the anthropological thinking of all Eastern Christianity. In *Mystagogy*, the Greek Father reveals the meanings of this symbol through the sacred images of the Holy Church and Scripture. In metaphorical, philosophical language, Maximus reveals the depth of man through the image of the Church, and the Church through man: “The Holy Church of God is man; the altar in it represents the soul, the sacrificial altar—the mind, and the temple—the body. For the Church is the image and likeness of man, created in the image and likeness of God... man is in a mysterious sense the Church, for, with his body, like a temple, he virtuously adorns the active capacity of the soul, carrying out the commandments following moral philosophy; with the soul, like an altar, he offers to God, through the mediation of reason and per natural contemplation, the logoi of sensual things...; with the mind, like an altar, he calls... for Silence in the sanctum sanctorum. And, as far as it is possible for man, he unites in sacramental theology with this Silence, becoming what one who has been graced to be with God truly ought to be” (Maximus the Confessor 1993b, IV, pp. 160–61).

These symbolic images underscore how highly man was seen in the teaching of Maximus the Confessor, and—later—in the whole Byzantine sacred tradition. According to Maximus and the Greek Fathers, by revealing these symbols and their deep philosophical meaning, human rises to the heights of Divine economy, to the highest religious Gnosis with knowledge of God (Eirini and Terezis 2019), the world, and his own soul.

Maximus argues that the moral person can perceive and comprehend the logoi of God. However, in the spirit of the emerging orthodox tradition of Byzantine theology, they associate this knowledge with the process of deification (theosis), thus philosophically deepening and extending the ideas of John Climacus. The perception of logoi is the God-knowing process, but he identifies “the knowledge of God with deification” (Meyendorff 1974, p. 140). Deification becomes the main theme for St. Maximus and succeeding Greek Church Fathers who participated in the development of the doctrine of Christology from the 5th to the 7th centuries.

Thus, the rapprochement and mixing of the spiritual and the bodily, the sublime and the inferior, life and death, and the divine and the human is a descriptive feature of Byzantine thinking of that era. Maximus the Confessor,⁷ as we have witnessed, contributed much to the formation of such theorizing. Symbolism and the attempt to bridge the gap between the two worlds—human and divine—are vividly inherent in him. Of course, Maximus’s most critical merit is that he saw human as the center of the symbolic and symbolized worlds, uniting them in integrity. This makes him not only one of the most Christological but also one of the most philosophical Fathers of the Byzantine area of Christianity.

4. Symeon the New Theologian’s Philosophy of *Transfiguration*: Man in Light and the Light in Man

The philosophical and anthropological ideas of Maximus the Confessor in the medieval period are deepened by Symeon the New Theologian (11th century), adding the mysticism of light and describing the possibilities of the individual in achieving a light-bearing

state and dialogical communion with the Creator. The mystical–religious tradition of Eastern Christianity of the Middle Ages was created primarily by Symeon, the New Theologian, and was later developed in the 14th century by Gregory Palamas. These two theologians continued the ideas of John Climacus’s *The Ladder* and enlarged its content with a description of the possibilities of man’s spiritual union with God, illuminated by the Divine Light. The two Byzantine mystics substantiated the state of the individual’s unity with God as a conscious life in uncreated light and unceasing communion with the Creator. This tradition is characterized because the summit of religious Gnosis is the knowledge of God, who appears to a person in uncreated light. The individual, through the light manifestations of the essence of God, contemplates the Creator and feels His divine nature. The very perception of light is also light because it fills the inner world of the ascetic, which also, like the Light itself, becomes light-bearing. However, all of this occurs in the personal, mystical experience of the monk or ascetic.

Symeon the New Theologian, a disciple of Symeon the Studite, was the most significant and original thinker among the Byzantine mystics of the 10th and 11th centuries. Following autobiographical descriptions of his life, Symeon often had a mystical vision of light. However, the mysticism of this theologian, like that of the Greek Fathers, is not confined to the contemplation of light. The latter is very important to them, but it is not the latter that forms the central moment and summit of the mystical life, but the *personal encounter and communion with Christ*, who appears in the Light and represents the simultaneous appearance of God the Trinity. Symeon emphasized this sense of simultaneous unity with the Son of God and the Trinity. In his most mystical *Hymns of Divine Eros*, he writes about disciples of Christ that:

“They have the Spirit as their teacher;
they don’t need education from human beings,
but, enlightened by the light of this Spirit,
they look at the Son, they see the Father (Jn, 14.9)
and they fall down and worship the Trinity in Three persons,
the One God inexplicably united in nature.
They are again initiated into the mystery from the Father,
That the Son is begotten indivisible”. (Symeon the New Theologian 2010)

He emphasizes the impossibility of human comprehending the essence of this unity of the Trinity:

“and if you have counted the sand of the sea,
and if you have discerned your own nature,
and interpret the work of wisdom,
then you shall perceive the Creator himself,
how in the Trinity is the Unity without confusion,
and the Unity is the undivided Trinity”. (Symeon the New Theologian 2010, Hymn 21)

The attainment of the high spiritual state—the vision of the uncreated Divine Light—meant the comprehension by the individual of a special sacral knowledge connected with the realization and sensation of the unity of human and Divine nature. Symeon repeatedly notes this in *Hymns of Divine Eros*:

“And so when I participate in your flesh I participate in your nature,
And I truly partake of your essence,
Having a share in divinity, but I am also
made an heir in body, I suppose that I am greater than
incorporeal beings. I am made a son of God, as You have said,

not to the angels, but to us, calling us gods: . . .

And You made me God, though I am mortal by nature.

God by adoption and by your grace, through your Spirit,

as God, incredibly You have united these two extremes". (Symeon the New Theologian 2010, Hymn 7)

The knowledge of Christ, who came in the Light, is higher than the rational and even more so the sensual. It is superknowledge that cannot be explained categorically and is inexpressible in images. It reveals the essence of human nature and indicates the way of deification of the individual, who has reached an unprecedented height of interconnection with God. Russian philosopher S.S. Horuzhii noted in this respect that the personal-spiritual path of deification reflects a human's coactivity with God in "attaining the Holy Spirit." The philosopher in his definition of individual-mystical cognition emphasized precisely this co-laboring, the interaction of the individual and the Creator: "the existential content characterizes the energy-synergetic dynamics of the personal relationship between God and man—the dynamics of the inner process" (Horuzhiy 1991, p. 510).

In the teaching of Symeon the New Theologian, the unity of man and God was explained in such a way that at the summit of Gnosis, Christ begins to *speak* to the ascetic "through his heart," and then the latter acquires personal knowledge of God. Symeon's understanding of the conciliar nature of the human being and the Son of God has its origins in earlier patristic writings, particularly Gregory of Nyssa's concepts of "the sense of the heart" or the "eyes of the soul" and coincides with Maximus's identification of the knowledge of God with "deification" (Meyendorff 1974, p. 140).

Byzantine Patristics, including Symeon the New Theologian, took a philosophical approach to questions of religious epistemology. The Greek Fathers believed that "knowledge of God implies "participation" in God—i.e., not only intellectual knowledge, but a state of the entire human being, transformed by grace, and freely cooperating with it by the efforts of both will and mind" (Meyendorff 1974, p. 140). To this general idea, Symeon the New Theologian adds his understanding of the interaction between a person and God, where the basic principle is "participation in God." This is how human freedom and consciousness of will are realized. Man is bound to God by freedom and reason—only on these foundations is true interaction possible, including the light one.

Symeon emphasizes in Hymns of Divine Eros that a single vision of light does not produce dialogue with God but can cause "intense longing" and emotional dissatisfaction in a person. Only after many visions of light and the monk's constant conscious virtuous life, the meaningful moment comes when Christ commences speaking. Man's earthly journey must become a monastic ascetic adherence to Christ's commandments, and then the Divine Light will open to people to know God the Trinity. In his analysis of St. Symeon's texts, hegumen Hilarion (secular name Alfeev) emphasizes that "salvation is not forced: it is given to those who consciously choose Christ as their Savior and God. God never forces man to do anything against his will: He wants people to serve Him according to their free will" (Alfeyev 2001, p. 309). Because of constant "participating in God" (cooperation and complicity with God), the incomprehensible God *reveals Himself* to the ascetics in the Light, becomes open to conversation (Christ spoke to Symeon more than once), without, however, losing the mystery and incognizability of His being.

The Inconsistency in the knowledge of God in the teachings of Symeon reflects the antinomianism of Eastern Patristics. Symeon explains the impossibility of knowing the essence of God because God is supersubstantial, and the human mind is limited in its knowledge. God sends people a glimpse of His glory, a ray of light, and energies (*logoi* in Maximus the Confessor), through which the ascetics, monks, and monks can know the *manifestations* of God. A person can perceive the visibility of God through the light sent, or through His energies. This can be understood as Symeon's philosophical, even dialectical, reference to the incognizability of God's essence and the visibility, the comprehensibility of His phenomena, the energies of light. A human being leading a righteous life, with a

pure heart, mind, and eyes of the soul, fully penetrates the Light and is within the Light, simultaneously letting Him in. The Byzantine Church Father writes:

“When I say many prayers and many psalmodies
with only my tongue, and perhaps also my heart, (Eph 5.19)
because of these I believe that I have the summit of faith,
because of these I imagine that I have received
all knowledge of truth and need nothing more, (Titus 1.1)
and because of these I say that I see You, the light of the world,
Savior, (Jn 8.12) . . .
and I have a share of your body, and I suppose that I partake of You,
and I am considered holy, my Christ,
and an heir of God, and of your co-heir, (Rom. 8.17)
and your brother, and a participant in eternal glory”. (Symeon the New Theologian 2010, Hymn 26)

Symeon’s experience of perceiving Light and comprehending God is conveyed through personal experience. He described being able to abide in light-bearing perception of the Divine Light for up to three days without leaving this incredible spiritual state. In all his descriptions, one feels God and His openness to people in earthly space and historical time. But even here, Symeon emphasizes the contradictory nature of the appearance of Light—He comes *into* the earthly world, but He Himself is *outside* the world and the mystery of His being hides in the transcendent divinity. Knowledge of the Light belongs to the realm of the mystical. Speaking in terms of logic, this knowledge turns out to be *non-knowledge*,⁸ turning out to be higher than any other knowledge since it belongs to the sphere of the Divine.

However, to “see” the uncreated light in the future age (in the soteriological context) and to comprehend the truth of the Light, an individual must comprehend it in the earthly life, otherwise being unable to contemplate Christ in eternity, in the kingdom of God. A person (monk, ascetic) must lead such a way of life so that already in life, Christ makes it possible to perceive Him, to have a dialogue with Him, and to be united in the Light. This is a grace sent by God but entirely deserved by man. Furthermore, the purified soul of the ascetic is united to Christ in life, then the Divine Light will teach everything and reveal the highest sacred knowledge:

“For if you have been united to the light,
the light itself shall teach you all things, (Jn 14.26)
and shall reveal all,
and shall give a glimpse,
as much as is fitting for you to learn”. (Symeon the New Theologian 2010, Hymn 30)

Symeon’s most important idea is that any righteous person can perceive Light, and the Divine Light necessarily comes to those people who strive for this sacred knowledge:

“so do not say that one can possess Him without knowing!
Do not say that God is not seen by humans.
Do not say: “Human beings do not see divine light”,
or that it is impossible in the present times!
This is never impossible, friends,
But it is very possible for those who wish it,
But only for as many as life has provided with purification of the
Passions,

and has made pure the eye of their intellect.
 But for others, true blindness, the filth of sins,
 Shall deprive them of divine light, both here and hereafter,
 And don't be misled, it will send them away to the fire and
 Darkness (Mt 8.12)". (Symeon the New Theologian 2010, Hymn 27)

The Divine Light, according to the Byzantine mystic, serves as the *basis of individual consciousness*—in it, the individual knows the Almighty and themselves. Light penetrates the depths of the human being, seeking dialogue with God. Unity with God is also the sphere of apophatic thinking since it denies all imperfection on the way to God. But the state of absoluteness and perfection attained reflects man's changed nature, which has *become* Light, and thus has been *transformed and deified*. The human soul and body turn out to be radically changed by the light and make up a spiritual light-bearing unity, like Christ Himself.

"I tell you the awesome things of the double God,
 and the things that happened to me as to a double person!
 He took up my flesh, and gave to me his Spirit,
 and even I myself have become God by divine grace,
 moreover I am a son of God by adoption . . .
 So, on the one hand as a human I know that I see nothing of the
 divine,
 since I am completely separated from invisible things,
 but by the adoption I have become God,
 and I perceive, and I become a participant in sacred realities". (Symeon the New Theologian 2010, Hymn 25)

In Symeon's interpretation, the spiritual immaterial Light, distinct from the light of the sun, fire, and the radiance of the stars, takes ontological meaning. It is the life and reason for the existence of all things since it existed before all created things as God the Trinity. That is why God presented His commandments so that people would purify the immaterial mind flooded with the "darkness of crimes" and "behold the uncreated light." The light remains God even when He appears to man, because He is beyond light, darkness, air, beyond every sensual object. Because He is "outside everything" (Symeon the New Theologian 2010, Hymn 30) and is immaterial, it is cognized in a supersensible (mystical) way. In the perception of the Light, one becomes a possessor of higher knowledge and is inwardly filled with Light.

Symeon describes his experience of reaching the summit of God-knowledge as a personal, intimate, direct encounter with Christ in the Light, which ends in a dialogue between himself and the Son of God. Christ, speaking to Symeon through his heart, makes his human nature luminous, filled with Light. Christ instructs Symeon to preach and teach sacred and moral knowledge to ordinary sinful laypeople. This culmination of the union with God is described sublimely by the Byzantine Church Father using symbolic and mystical interpretations. Here is one of the descriptions:

"the Creator led me into
 a perceptible and bodily tent, (2 Cor 5.4)
 and He enclosed me in it, . . .
 and having led me down into
 the perceptible and visible world,
 and He determined that I should live
 and be with those in darkness,
 I who had been released from darkness, . . .

I mean those who are in the mud.
 Moreover, I am to teach them
 And lead them to a knowledge
 of the wounds that cover them,
 and the chains that restrain them.
 Having thus commanded, He went away . . .
 He had completely restored me,
 Made me completely immortal,
 Made me completely divine
 And rendered me Christ". (Symeon the New Theologian 2010, Hymn 30)

Let us note, however, that in some of his descriptions of the personal perception of the Light, the theologian finds himself almost on the verge of going beyond orthodox doctrine although he adheres to the tradition of the early Church and the Nicene tradition. Symeon's idea of the early Church Fathers that God, through the sacrament of communion, likens people to Himself, becomes one of the major topics of his work and grows into an almost real sense of his divinity. He describes the peak of unity with God of the transformed human nature in the categories of *unity* with Christ (remember that the appearance of Christ in the Light was also interpreted by Symeon as the appearance of the Trinity).

"I and He
 To Whom I was united, have become one,
 So what shall I call myself?
 The God Who is double in nature,
 Who is one in hypostasis,
 has rendered me double, . . .
 See the distinction!
 I am a human being by nature,
 and God by grace
 I myself become God
 By this ineffable union
 See the mystery!". (Symeon the New Theologian 2010, Hymn 30)

Interestingly, the *coactivity* of man and God discussed above, in Symeon's works, acquires unity based on the orthodox Homoousion understanding of the *essence* of God. Human nature merges with the Divine and is united by the Divine essence, the *bearer* of which is the uncreated light.

"Therefore body and soul are one and two
 partaking of Christ . . .
 they become God by participation,
 and they are called by the same name,
 by this name,
 they have participated in God's essence". (Symeon the New Theologian 2010, Hymn 30)

Such reflections also suggest a certain departure of Symeon from the orthodoxy of Christian doctrine, for the established tradition asserted the impossibility of knowing God in *essence*—only the *manifestations* (logoi, energies) of the Creator could be comprehended. However, Symeon the New Theologian's mysticism had such an elevated and deeply personal character that it was probably the culmination point of the Byzantine mystic's philosophical thinking.

In the Byzantine Empire, Symeon's doctrine of the *uncreated light* would have numerous admirers and disciples. The mystical experience of the Byzantine Church Father in its theoretical expression did not run counter to traditional Eastern theology, and St. Symeon is still rightly considered one of the most Christocentric representatives of Eastern Patristics. With his ideas about the knowledge of the Divine Light with the spiritual eyes of the heart and the perception of the Divine Light that transforms human nature, Symeon the New Theologian continued the preceding tradition of the Greek Church Fathers and became the source of the teaching of Hesychasm (14th century) in its culminating expression in Gregory Palamas's doctrine of the Tabor Light. His theology is not-systematic, and his individual mystical experience of perceiving the Light occupies a large place in his texts, but he is clearly very philosophical because his thought is about the human, existing in God-knowing and self-knowing process simultaneously. He, as did the previous Church Fathers under consideration, taught about the human being who is striving at conciliar nature with God and ascents to God by the fervor of faith and constant self-purifying and self-improving. Thus, Symeon's philosophical ideas are expressed in his epistemological and anthropological questions, in enthusiastic descriptions of love for God and his sense of oneness with Him. Christ's teaching and dialogues with Him are shown as a model of the high morality asserted in Christianity and in formation throughout the long centuries of Byzantium. The philosophy and theology of Symeon the New Theologian are, therefore, quite relevant in the 21st century, one millennium after his death.

5. Conclusions

The origin and formation of the mystical–religious tradition within the Greek-Byzantine Patristics allow us to say that at the same time, there was the formation of a philosophy of religion as a particular type of philosophical thinking of the Middle Ages (for further details, please refer to [Osborn, 1981](#) and [1993](#)). The article deduces the main philosophical ideas of Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers, which shows that the theological doctrines of the Greek Fathers were not only theological but also deeply philosophical. They revealed the anthropological and epistemological issues of Christianity since they were directed to man and their relationship with God. The following most important philosophical ideas of the holy Fathers John Climacus, Maximus the Confessor, and Symeon the New Theologian have been identified:

- The possibility and necessity of self-perfection and self-knowledge coinciding with the process of God-knowledge.
- The moral elevation of human to God in the process of struggle against temptations and passions, sensual vices.
- God-knowledge as perception of the logoi—or energies—of God.
- Man as a microcosm and the main symbol, including all the symbolism of the universe.
- Human luminosity, as associated with the transformation of human nature by analogy with the Transfiguration of Christ. The cooperation and interrelation of God and man in a state of mutual luminosity, transforming and elevating the individual to the heights of the Creator.
- Love for God and the other person as a process of purification and attainment of covenantal unity with the Creator.

All these ideas were incorporated in the theological works of the Church Fathers, but in one way or another, they had a different conceptual context and substantive features in each of the Fathers. The specificity in understanding and explaining these ideas, in our opinion, led to the appearance of philosophical views within the patristic framework, closely connected with the tasks of Christian doctrine. Nevertheless, the common religious–theoretical basis of all these ideas is the concept of *deification* as the spiritual purification of the human being, self-improvement, and the desire to reach the height of unity with God. The idea of deification (theosis) becomes the philosophical foundation of Byzantine theology since it reveals the diversity of human experience on the way to the Creator. In the considered mystical–religious tradition, the summit of theosis is the perception of the

uncreated Divine Light, coinciding with the knowledge of God and human's attainment of the highest point of purification and self-improvement.

The preceding ancient philosophy, in particular Plato and the Neoplatonists, addressed many of these questions and provided Christian thinkers with a developed conceptual categorical apparatus, virtually ready-made thought formulas (e.g., Plotinus's triad of the One, the Intellect, and the Soul), and the very spirit and style of philosophizing. The philosophy of religion created by the Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers was a special type of philosophy of the Middle Ages, based on anthropology and ethical–moral norms. For this reason, it is still relevant in the present.

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Notes

- ¹ Triadology—the Christian dogma on the Triune God, which was elaborated on by the Church Fathers in the IVth century in theological disputes in Byzantium.
- ² Christology—the Christian dogma about Jesus Christ that was elaborated on by the Church Fathers in the V–VIIth centuries in theological disputes in Byzantium.
- ³ For more details on the elaboration of the Trinity and Christology doctrines in the Early Christian period and a particular contribution to the Christological and Triadological theological discussions of some Church Fathers, please refer to: (Chadwick 1967; Karamanolis 2021; Evans 2007; Lyman 1993; Ramelli 2011; Kelly 1988; Osborn 1993).
- ⁴ Deification (or, theosis, *θέωσις* in Greek)—Christian doctrine about the unit of the human and God, the communion of man to the Divine life through the moral efforts of human and the Divine grace. Theosis was considered by the Eastern Church Fathers as a process of a person's comprehending the Deity while simultaneously purifying and spiritualizing himself.
- ⁵ Uncreated Light, or the Divine Light—according to the mystical tradition of Early and medieval Christianity, the Divine Light is a phenomenon of the Triune God. Epiphany of God Trinity to the human being occurred as appearance of the uncreated (i.e., God's) Light.
- ⁶ Mystagogy—*mystagogy* is the Christian teaching of the mysteries of the faith. The word “mystagogy” translates from Ancient Greek as “mystery-guiding.” It originated in Ancient Greece and meant acquaintance with a sacrament, an account of it. Here we use the title of the book of the same name by Maximus the Confessor, who uses the term to interpret the teaching of Dionysius the Areopagite on the sacraments of the Church.
- ⁷ Maximus the Confessor's works in Ancient Greek language are presented in the manuscript: Greek Manuscripts 1837. Maximus the Confessor. Language: Greek, Ancient to 1453, [Online]. The manuscript is a collection of ancient works by the Byzantine Church Fathers.
- ⁸ Non-knowledge—*non-knowledge* is the true knowledge of God that is neither logical nor rational.

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