
SOULTANA LAMPROU, Ο Μανουήλ Β' Παλαιολόγος ως θεολόγος. Συμβολή στην έρευνα της Παλαιολόγειας γραμματείας (Βυζαντινά κείμενα και μελέτες 67). Thessaloniki: Center for Byzantine Research 2025. 496 pp. – ISBN 978-960-7856-66-1

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Manuel II Palaiologos (1350–1425), one of Byzantium's last rulers, has attracted sustained scholarly attention for his diplomatic and military efforts to defend a shrinking empire. LAMPROU's monograph takes a different tack, examining Manuel as a prolific theologian in the Hesychast tradition. Its central contribution is a systematic reconstruction of his theology, spanning Christian epistemology and Trinitarian doctrine, anthropology, soteriology, and Christian ethics. LAMPROU reads the explicitly theological works alongside texts of a rhetorical and philosophical character. The recently edited treatises *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit* and *On the Trinity*, together with the *Letter to Lord Alexios Iagoupes* (ed. CHARALAMPOS DENDRINOS 2022), receive close scrutiny, as do the *Dialogue with the Persian*, the *Ethico-Political Orations*, the *Foundations of an Imperial Education*, and a range of letters, orations, and homilies. What emerges is a portrait of a thinker who never composed a comprehensive *Summa Theologica* but whose theological vision, as LAMPROU demonstrates, permeates his political-moral meditations, devotional texts, and epistolography alike.

LAMPROU consistently contextualizes Manuel's thought within the broader patristic tradition. Basil, Gregory the Theologian, John of Damascus, and Gregory Palamas are constantly referenced alongside Manuel's texts, which often demonstrated the emperor's constant effort to attain a *consensus patrum*. Another strength is the identification of the Palamite underpinning of Manuel's thought, especially in the defense of the Trinity and the understanding of the sacraments that rely on the distinction between God's essence and energies. This places Manuel firmly in the Hesychast camp, countering earlier scholarly narratives that sometimes downplayed the Palamite convictions of the late Palaiologan rulers. Also significant is the treatment of Manuel's anti-Latin and anti-Muslim polemics where the focus remains on the theological content of the arguments rather than the political animosity of the time.

The first two sections offer a detailed account of the emperor's biography and works. Drawing on previous scholarship, LAMPROU traces the arc of Manuel's life, from familial conflicts to his diplomatic efforts to stave off Byzantium's accelerating decline in the early fifteenth century. Manuel's engagement with Islam, western Christianity, and the question of church union highlights the portrait of a ruler who used his theological expertise to address the urgent political challenges of his day. Equally valuable are the summaries and discussions of manuscript circulation that accompany the texts treated in the volume.

The third section of the volume is the most substantial. The author proceeds from establishing the foundational epistemology of Manuel II. LAMPROU highlights Manuel's distinction between 'divine wisdom' and 'human wisdom' which is often paralleled to secular philosophy. Manuel is portrayed not as an anti-intellectual, for he was, after all, a highly educated scholar, but as a theologian who recognized the limits of the human intellect in grasping the divine essence. It is within this epistemological framework that the author treats Manuel's critique of the Latins (western Scholastics), whom he blames for relying excessively on Aristotelian syllogisms and dialectics to define 'what cannot be defined', the divine essence. It is the 'arrogance' of philosophy that leads to heresy. On the contrary, LAMPROU notes, Manuel subordinated human reason to the authority of the Scriptures, the Ecumenical Councils, and the Church Fathers. A recurring theme is the safety found in the 'boundaries' set by the Fathers; to transgress these boundaries via novel syllogisms is to generate spiritual chaos. In response, Manuel used the apophatic methodology: true theology begins with humility and the recognition that the Divine Essence is beyond human comprehension, accessible only through revelation and the uncreated Energies.

A substantial portion of the theological analysis concerns the defense of the Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, above all the procession of the Holy Spirit. LAMPROU reconstructs Manuel's arguments against the Filioque, the Latin teaching that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, highlighting again his reliance on Gregory Palamas. Central to this discussion is Manuel's rejection of a second cause of the Spirit: positing the Son as such a cause, he contends, would destroy the 'Monarchy of the Father' as the sole source of divinity within the Trinity. If the Son also causes the Holy Spirit, the implication is either two principles in the Godhead or a collapse of the hypostases into one another.

LAMPROU then turns to another distinction in Manuel's use of the Palamite

concepts of eternal existence of God and *oikonomia* or God's manifestation in time. She shows that Manuel offered a new exegesis of biblical passages used by Latins, especially in the argument that while the Spirit may be 'sent' or 'manifested' through the Son in time (economy), the Spirit's eternal hypostatic existence proceeds solely from the Father. With these distinctions established, the analysis moves from the idea of the uncreated God to the created order, detailing Manuel's cosmology and anthropology. The author presents Manuel's view of creation as an act of divine good will, brought forth from non-existence. The analysis of the hierarchy of the angels draws heavily on Pseudo-Dionysius, describing angels as 'secondary lights' reflecting the glory of the Trinity.

In the section on anthropology, LAMPROU outlines Manuel's vision of the human person as a 'microcosm', a composite of the intelligible (soul) and the sensible (body). She first takes up his understanding of the 'image and likeness' of God in humanity, locating the 'image' in the intellect and free will (*proairesis*) and the 'likeness' in the capacity for virtue and theosis. She then turns to Manuel's treatment of the Fall as an ontological catastrophe that introduced death, corruption, and the darkening of the nous, showing how the misuse of free will enslaves the person to the passions. The accompanying discussion of the loss of the 'garment of light' situates Manuel firmly within the mainstream of patristic anthropology.

The hinge of Manuel's theology, according to LAMPROU, remains the mystery of the divine economy. The author argues that Manuel's Christology emphasizes the hypostatic union: Christ is fully God and fully man, without confusion or division. Along these lines, the Christ's suffering emerges as a voluntary act of love to heal the human nature. LAMPROU also devotes sustained attention to Mariology. Manuel presents the Virgin not as a passive vessel but as an active co-worker with God, whose purity and obedience furnished the necessary conditions for the Incarnation. As LAMPROU interprets him, Manuel exalts Mary above the Seraphim, casting her as the 'bridge' between the created and the uncreated. His use of typological exegesis, the Burning Bush, for instance, to illuminate the mystery of the virgin birth is equally striking.

Since, as LAMPROU observes, Manuel's theology was connected to the liturgical life of the Church, the book also provides an overview of the emperor's theology of the sacraments, specifically the Baptism, the Chrismation, and the Eucharist. The author argues that Manuel's theology in the discussion of the sacraments was intended to have therapeutic goals: the

Church is a hospital, and the sacraments are the medicines. Baptism is presented as a regeneration and restoration of the image of God, washing away the ancestral sin and granting the potential for immortality. Chrismation is viewed as the seal of the Spirit, imparting the energies and gifts necessary for the spiritual life, whereas the Eucharist stands as the ‘medicine of immortality’. With these ideas, LAMPROU writes, Manuel pointed to Christ’s real presence in one’s life and the necessity of preparation (repentance, humility) before communion.

The final section of the study deals with Christian ethics and ascetic struggle. LAMPROU demonstrates that Manuel’s ethical system was virtue-based, with influences from Aristotelian ethics but centering on the alignment of the human will (*proairesis*) with the Divine Will. The three themes which the author identifies, the nature of evil, pleasure and pain, and humility versus pride, receive extensive treatment. Following the patristic consensus, Manuel defines evil not as an essence but as a privation of the good, a ‘parasite’ on existence caused by the misuse of free will. The author also notes Manuel’s nuanced view of pleasure: he distinguishes between natural/necessary pleasures (which preserve life) and unnatural/sinful pleasures (which destroy the soul), while identifying pride as the root of all sin (the error of the devil and Adam) and humility as the foundation of all virtue.

To conclude, LAMPROU’s monograph is a fine example of historical theology. It presents Manuel II not as a political figure captive in troubled times, but as an erudite theologian in his own right. As a general observation, while the study covers the doctrinal core, the social application of Manuel’s ethics (given his role as Emperor) is less prominent, though hinted at in the discussion of ‘political life’ versus ‘monastic life’. Additionally, the interaction with Islamic theology (central to Manuel’s *Dialogues*) is mentioned only in passing, as the focus persists on internal Christian dogmatics and the controversy with the Latins. These limitations notwithstanding, the present volume constitutes a useful resource for understanding the intellectual and spiritual climate of the twilight of Byzantium. It portrays Manuel II Palaiologos as a high-profile guardian of Orthodoxy who, amidst the turbulences of the late Middle Ages, cultivated his interests in both ancient philosophy and the Fathers of the Church.

Keywords

Manuel II Palaiologos, late Byzantine theology, Hesychasm, Orthodoxy, Latins