

ABSTRACT

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The main purpose of this study is to examine the genesis and development of the theology of the Byzantine theologian and mystic Gregory Palamas in his dispute with the humanist and monk Barlaam the Calabrian.

The dispute took place in the years c. 1335–1341, in the wake of renewed discussions of a reunion of the Western and Eastern Churches in the early 1330s. Barlaam had written treatises explicating the Orthodox view on the *filioque* and criticising the methodology applied by the Catholics to defend it. Palamas was alarmed by what he considered to be excessive reliance by Barlaam on philosophical arguments, with frequent references to Aristotelian syllogistic. This prompted an exchange of letters between Palamas and Barlaam, which centred on the general question of the epistemological status of theological truth and in particular on whether theological statements may be used in the construction of apodictic syllogisms. The discussion eventually focused on the concept of *illumination*, denoting both the natural acquisition of knowledge and the supernatural imparting of theological truth to the Christian. The argument over illumination culminated in the treatises by Palamas, named the *Triads*, where he defends, against Barlaam, the notion embraced by some mystics (i.e. the ‘hesychasts’) that it is possible to see God with one’s corporeal eyes.

The principal part of this thesis offers an analysis of Palamas’ attempt to formulate a theology of mystical experience, situating it within the context of mediaeval hesychasm and giving special attention to its epistemological aspects. The analysis closely follows the text of Palamas’ works, while highlighting key issues of the dispute between him and Barlaam.

It is argued that Gregory Palamas’ objective indeed was to provide a cogent epistemological theory of mystical experience within the bounds of the Orthodox tradition, but that the great problem in this respect was the pronounced *realism* inherited from contemporary hesychasm.

Two introductory chapters focus respectively on (1) the hesychastic tradition (in its broad sense) with its notions of impassibility and methods of prayer, which played such a great part in the discussion between Barlaam and Palamas, and (2) the context of education and the study of philosophy in mediaeval Byzantium, which constitute the background of the rivalling positions.

Key words: Gregory Palamas, Barlaam the Calabrian / Barlaam of Calabria, Byzantine theology, mystical experience, hesychasm, impassibility, epistemology, syllogistic, logic, Aristotle.