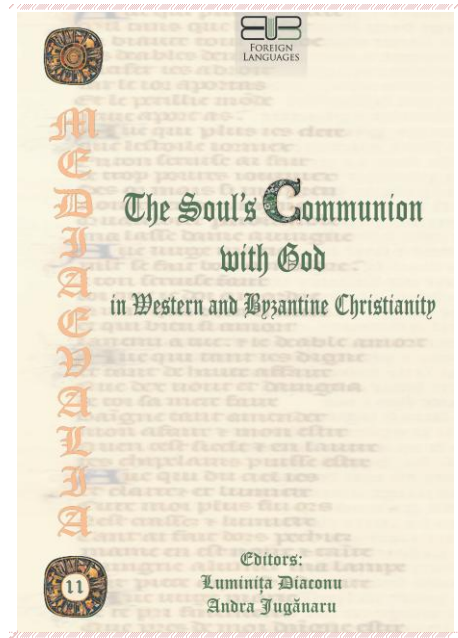


## Book Review

Teodora Popovici\*

Luminița Diaconu, Andra Jugănaru (eds.), *The Soul's Communion with God in Western and Byzantine Christianity*, Bucharest, Bucharest University Press, 2024, 230 p.



This collection of papers explores the various representations of the soul's communion with God in the Latin and Byzantine Christian traditions, drawing upon an array of texts spanning from the early Christianity to the late Middle Ages. It is part of the *Mediævalia* collection, a series of volumes edited by the Center for Medieval Studies (CMS) at the University of Bucharest. The volume is bilingual, featuring articles in English and French, based on the contributions presented at the international conference organized by the CMS in 2022. The material is organized in four sections: a brief introduction, the main body of papers, a *Varia* section, and a segment dedicated to book reviews. Each paper includes an abstract and a bibliography. Articles written in English are accompanied by abstracts in French, while articles in French include abstracts in English.

The **introduction** provides a short overview of the most relevant literature on the subject and presents each paper included in the volume. It touches upon Neoplatonism and the writings of the Church Fathers, making observations about the ways in which thinkers of this period depicted man's aspirations toward spiritual unity with God. The introduction is concise and

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capably written, although it might have benefited from a slightly more detailed description of the main theme of the volume: the soul's communion with God. As noted on page 7, this topic refers to 'the various theological, philosophical, literary, and artistic expressions that depict the soul's journey toward the union with the Divine'. The papers collected in this volume reveal that this concept could encompass a variety of spiritual experiences, such as prayer, contemplating the divine nature, receiving visions from God, witnessing miracles, searching for methods to communicate with God, and partaking in the Christian rites. These elements point to the richness and significance of this volume for several key fields, including cultural, intellectual, and literary history.

The volume features papers from both senior and early-career researchers. One of the contributions that stand out is **Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides'** (Macquarie University) paper about the Christian reinterpretation of Platonic philosophical language in the writings of Clement of Alexandria and Pseudo-Macarius. This study offers an interesting insight into the continuity of ideas between ancient Greek philosophy and Christian thought, illustrating how Platonic metaphors such as *baccheia* and *theoria* could be appropriated to express religious ideas in the works of early theologians. The author argues that these Platonic concepts retained part of their civic meaning as they were reinterpreted in early Christian context. Overall, this study is notable for its well-focused point and engaging use of examples.

**György Geréby** (Central European University) explores the diverging perspectives on prayer within the Byzantine and Western theological traditions, adopting a comparative lens. The author begins by contrasting the views of Evagrius Ponticus with those of Ignatius of Loyola. Although this comparison might seem unusual given that these theologians lived more than a thousand years apart from each other, Geréby adopts Evagrius' ideas as a reference point for the Eastern Orthodox theological tradition because they were perpetuated by later Byzantine authors, such as Gregory of Sinai. Evagrius firmly discouraged the use of visualization and imagination during prayer, arguing that Christians should attempt to remove all sensory images from their minds, while Ignatius encouraged Christians to visualize the words and actions of the holy figures to whom they were praying. The author argues that this contrast stemmed from the different understanding of the soul and intellect within these two theological traditions. The Byzantine line of thought maintained a strong connection to Platonic ideas, whereas Western theologians were influenced by Stoic philosophy. This point is eruditely illustrated with further examples from the works of other authors, such as Plotinus, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Hugh of Balma, William of St. Thierry, Hugh of St. Victor, Thomas Gallus, Ludolph of Saxony, and Gregory of Sinai.

**Andra Jugănaru** (University of Bucharest) discusses Gregory of Nyssa's ideas about the initiation into the divine mysteries and the spiritual progress toward God. The author emphasizes that, in Gregory's view, knowledge of God involved acknowledging His incomprehensibility. The analysis is built on multiple passages selected from Gregory's works, including the *Life of Moses*, the *Life of Saint Macrina*, the *Eulogy to Basil the Great*, *Homilies on the Song of the Songs*, *On Virginity*, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, and his epistles. The paper offers particular attention to Gregory's use of oxymoron such as 'luminous darkness' and 'sober drunkenness', noting that he paradoxically saw the soul's journey to God as a movement from light to darkness. The author is highly familiar with the modern editions and translations of Gregory's writings, quoting them extensively. The discussion of the primary sources is solid and nuanced; however, one potential weak point of the analysis is the limited use of secondary literature. The cited authors (Jean Daniélou, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Sarah Coakley, Anna Silvas) are doubtlessly established in their fields, but the study could have engaged yet more with the existing scholarship on Gregory's theological ideas. For example, when exploring Gregory's metaphors of light and darkness, the paper could have mentioned the works of Martin Laird,<sup>1</sup> Philip Kariatlis,<sup>2</sup> or Ann Conway-Jones.<sup>3</sup>

**Liviu Damian** (University of Bucharest) focuses on Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, highlighting several key themes: the problem of evil, the relation between reason and dignity, the ontological argument, and the nature of knowledge. Although the philosophical ideas discussed in this paper have generally been known to Boethian scholarship for some time, they remain worthy of renewed discussion and tend to be frequently revisited by researchers.<sup>4</sup> Boethius' *Consolation* has been widely influential throughout the Middle Ages and the modern period, undergoing many translations over the centuries.<sup>5</sup> The author opted for the English translation of David R.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Laird, "Gregory of Nyssa and the Mysticism of Darkness: A Reconsideration", in "The Journal of Religion", 79 (1999), no. 4, pp. 592-616; *idem*, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence*, New York/Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, especially the chapter "The Luminous Dark Revisited", pp. 175-204; *idem*, "Darkness", in Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, Giulio Maspero (eds.), *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, transl. Seth Cherney, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2010, pp. 203-205.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Kariatlis, "'Dazzling Darkness': The Mystical or Theophanic Theology of St Gregory of Nyssa", in "Phronema", 27 (2012), no. 2, pp. 99-123.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Conway-Jones, *Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery in its Jewish and Christian Contexts*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see one of the latest contributions on the *Consolation*: Michael Wiitala (ed.), *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Noel Harold Kaylor, "The English and German Translation Traditions of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*", in "Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis", 10 (2015), no. 2, pp. 121-129.

Slavitt (2008),<sup>6</sup> but also references the anonymous early modern translation by “I.T.” (1609), edited and revised by H.F. Stewart.<sup>7</sup> The article examines various passages of Boethius’ work and compares his philosophical views with those of other authors, such as Apostle Paul, Augustine, Anselm, Descartes, and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet.

**Clelia Attanasio** (University of Bonn) examines the concept of *excessus mentis* as understood by the 12th-century theologian Richard of St. Victor in his work *Benjamin Major*. The *excessus mentis* can be described as a state of ecstasy that occurs after surpassing six levels of deep contemplation, and it cannot be fully comprehended without having experienced it. Attanasio argues that, in Richard’s view, the *excessus mentis* is similar to a state of deification (*deificatio*), in the sense that this contemplative peak results in the union between the intellectual faculty of the human mind and God’s grace; thus, at the moment of *excessus mentis*, the mind unites and identifies itself with the Divine. The author also highlights the Neoplatonic elements in Richard’s thought, which are primarily derived from the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Overall, this paper is well-constructed and presents a new contribution to understanding Richard’s theological views.

Another merit of this volume is the inclusion of papers written by junior researchers. **David-Gabriel Carpen** (University of Bucharest) proposes a close reading of Severus of Antioch’s eulogy to Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus, delivered in Antioch in 515. This study is well-documented and stands out for its useful synthesis of the most relevant literature on Severus’ life. The author presents Severus’ arguments for celebrating the memory of the two saints and points to the inspiration which Severus took from the funeral oration composed by Gregory of Nazianzus himself at the death of Basil the Great. As this paper demonstrates, Severus’ encomium was more than a laudation to the two Cappadocian Fathers; it also had substantial pedagogical value and served as an occasion for mystical reflection.

**The *Varia* section** reflects the editors’ commitment to showcasing the broader intellectual life of the CMS, apart from the collected papers of its annual conferences. Although the articles featured in this section may not strictly fit within the main theme of the volume, they generally explore related topics within the area of cultural studies. This section similarly encourages contributions from masteral and doctoral students. **Mihaela Boboșilă** (University of Bucharest) explores the relation between the soul

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<sup>6</sup> Ancius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, transl. David R. Slavitt, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Boethius, *The Theological Tractates*, transl. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and *The Consolation of Philosophy*, revised by H.F. Stewart, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press/William Heinemann Ltd, 1968 (first published 1918).

and the body in the *Golden Legend*, a 13th-century collection of hagiographies compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, which was read extensively in the West during the late medieval period. Meanwhile, **Cătălina Nistor** (University of Bucharest) focuses on the beauty practices and ideals described in the early 14th-century medical treatise of Henri de Mondeville, highlighting their significance for the cultural history of the body.

**Aleksandar Anđelović** (University of Vienna) discusses one of Michael Psellos' polemical letters to ex-patriarch Michael Keroullarios (letter Π111, dated c. 1058-1059). The main focus of this study is the concept of *paideia* (understood as cultural capital or broad cultural education), which was central to Psellos' criticism of Keroullarios. Psellos condemned the dethroned patriarch not only for his questionable morality, but also for his lack of classical education, which was considered essential for a theologian of his time. In his analysis of Psellos' letter, Anđelović uncovers a complex and fascinating network of references to ancient Greek texts, including Homer's *Iliad*, Euripides' *Helen*, Plutarch's *Life of Phokion*, and Lucian of Samosata's *Downward Journey* and *On Salaried Posts in Great Houses*. The second part of the paper explores Psellos' affirmation of loyalty toward Emperor Isaac I Komnenos, as well as his program of political philosophy, to which the concept of *paideia* was essential. To conclude, this article presents an engaging new contribution to the study of the mid-11th-century intellectual debates in Constantinople.

The volume closes with a book review section discussing recent publications in the area of cultural and literary history. As a general conclusion, this collection of papers makes a valuable addition to the *Mediaevalia* series, now on its eleventh volume since its initiation in 2011. The articles featured here address significant questions within their fields, and the editors are to be commended for curating a cohesive and engaging volume.