

BESSARION (John Basileus)—theologian, philosopher, philologist, humanist, diplomat, cardinal, b. January 2, 1403 in Trebizond (Turkey), d. November 18, 1472 in Ravenna.

When he was thirteen years old, his parents entrusted him to the care of the Metropolitan of Trebizond, Dositheus, to be educated as a cleric. Dositheus entrusted him to a more renowned professor of rhetoric than himself (a copiest and collector, especially of astronomical codices) in Constantinople, Archbishop of Selymbrius, Ignatius Chortasmenos. The archbishop not only introduced Bessarion to philosophical questions, but had a great influence on his ascetical formation. Bessarion remained in Constantinople and entered the Basilians (1423). As a religious, together with Francesco Philelpho, and probably with George Scholarios, he attended a course on rhetoric by George Chrysococces. After priestly ordination (1430) he went to Mistra in the Peloponnesos to listen to the most renowned humanist philosopher of the time, the neo-Platonist George Gemistios Plethon, the so-called Second Plato. Bessarion's two years in Mistra (1431–1433) had a decisive influence on his philosophical formation, since it was there where he became familiar with the whole Pythagorean, Platonic, and neo-Platonic tradition. Like his master Gemistios, and Psellos before him, Bessarion regarded this tradition as one continuum of eternal wisdom, but where Psellos and Bessarion drew on this tradition to confirm Christianity, Gemistios employed it to build and spread a new religion based on neo-Platonism and opposed to the Christian religion. Despite great respect for his teacher Gemistios, Bessarion did not share his pagan, anti-Aristotelian, and anti-reunion tendencies. Demetrius Kydones, a translator of the works of St. Thomas Aquinas into Greek and the spiritual father of unionism developing in Greece would put the idea of ecumenicism into the mind of the young Bessarion through his pupils (Manuel Chrysoloras and Manuel Kalekas). In the further development of his attitude, Bessarion was also influenced by the writings of John Vekkus, the first pro-union Patriarch of Constantinople. In 1437, as Metropolitan of Nicaea, Bessarion took part in the Council in Ferrara and Florence (1438–1439), and as the representative of the Greek he signed the decree of the Florentine Union. In this period he wrote theological treatises on the theoretical and practical aspects of union (including *Oratio dogmatica de unione*, PG 161, 543–612; *De processione Spiritus Sancti contra Palamam pro Becco*, PG 161, 243–310). In 1439 as a cardinal he went to Rome and resided by the Church of the Twelve Apostles and his work was chiefly focussed on the unification of the Churches. He undertook the internal and external reform of the Italian Basilians and this reform was an important factor in this work. He confirmed their way of life and the Roman Rite. He also decried their complete ignorance of the Greek language, and so he founded two chairs of the Greek language in Messina and obliged the monks to attend lectures. To deepen the spiritual renewal of the religious, he published a short presentation of the Rule of St. Basil. After the fall of Constantinople (1453) he tried to persuade successive popes and rulers of Italy, Germany, and France to organize a crusade against the Turks. He sent them his *Speeches (Orationes ad principes Italiae contra Turcos exhortatio*, PG 161, 47–76), and when in 1463 Pope Pius II named him Patriarch of Constantinople, he wrote to his countrymen an *Encyclical Letter (Epistola encyclica ad Graecos*, PG 161, 449–490) in which he exhorted them to union; Bessarion depicted the idea of unification, symbolized by two branches (signifying the Greek and Latin Church), in his coat of arms inscribed on his tomb, which while still alive he ordered to be built in the Church of the Twelve Apostles. Bessarion's theological works are found in PG 161, 1–746.

Bessarion's stay of several months in 1440 in Padua was an important addition to his studies. There under the direction of the canon John Selengia of Crete, the newly created cardinal

developed his knowledge of Latin and Italian, at the same time taking the course of commentary on Aristotle's doctrine intended for professors. This was Aristotle's doctrine adapted and interpreted in light of the truths of the Catholic faith. He returned to Rome and began to organize the first meetings of learned Greeks and Latins in his home. In this way he started the so-called Academy of Bessarion where discussions were held in Greek and Latin at the gatherings and critical versions of texts were developed. Bessarion's first lectures (1441–1444) were intended to be stylistic exercises in the newly learned Latin. These concerned in particular St. Basil the Great's homily *De Nativitate Domini* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* dedicated to Cardinal Cesarini. Bessarion's translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* from between 1447 and 1450 shows that he had then mastered Latin to the highest degree. This is confirmed by Lorenzo Valla's description of him as author of *Elegantiae Latinae Linguae*. Lorenzo called him "*Latinorum Graecissimus, Graecorum Latinissimus*".

Cardinal Bessarion's work was marked by three great concerns, corresponding to his three great desires. The first is concern about forging religious union, and then making that union permanent. The second was his desire for the political consolidation of the Christian states of Europe into one common front against Islam. The third concern was his desire to join Byzantine culture with the culture of the west. He was convinced that only in this way could it survive. In this light we should interpret his whole body of work in theology, translating, and especially philosophy, and his work as a Maecenas and learned humanist who tried to rescue and protect if possible the entire literary heritage, especially the Greek heritage. For this reason he donated his own library, which contained the greatest collection of manuscripts in Europe at the time (around 900 codices, many of which were written by his own hand), to the Library of St. Mark in Venice, with the condition that all Greeks should have access to it. Professors of the University of Padua also used the library. Aldus Manutius's famous edition was based on these collections, and this greatly accelerated the development of humanism in the west.

Having spent many years in the Latin milieu, Bessarion stated not only that Plato's philosophy was little known among the people of the west, but he also thought that the Latin translations and interpretations of Aristotle's doctrine were very far from the Stagyrite's original thought. Therefore with his friends and collaborators (including John Argyropoulos and Theodore Gaza) he made new and more critical translations of Aristotle's writings, and as an adviser to Pope Nicholas V, who knew and followed Aristotle, Bessarion became an inspirer and promoter of an Aristotelian renewal in the universities of Europe, and around 1452 a program of modern Christian Aristotelianism began (Swieżawski DF III 58–84). In many questions the program had to verify earlier interpretations of the Stagyrite's philosophy, such as Thomism, Averroism, and Alexandrianism. As a result of this verification, Bessarion became convinced that the philosophical foundation of Christian thought, which had been Aristotelianism, had to be supplemented by Platonism, since Platonism is closer to the faith and could be better defended on the plane of reason. Furthermore, Bessarion held to the principle: "I honor and respect Aristotle, I love Plato" (*colo et veneror Aristotelem, amo Platonem*) and he thought that Platonic thought would have the right of citizenship equal to Aristotelian thought in the Latin world only when it appeared in an irenic interpretation to Aristotelianism and as not in contradiction with Christianity, since only such an interpretation of Platonism could succeed at that time. Thus all Bessarion's philosophical writings are an unrelenting search for the best possible harmony between the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle (e.g., in the conception of substance or in the conception of nature and art), and he battled all radical interpretations (e.g., those in the version of Gemistios Plethon or George of Trebizond). His minor sketches and short

polemical and apologetic writings: *Adversus Plethonem in Aristotelem de substantia* (ed. L. Mohler, *Kardinal B.*, III 149–150); *De erroribus interpretis legum Platonis* (R 1469); *De natura et arte contra Georgium Trapezuntium* (ed. L. Mohler, *Kardinal B.*, III 92–147); *Quod natura consulto agit* (ed. L. Mohler, *Kardinal B.*, III 89–90)—were used to the full again by Bessarion in his greatest philosophical work *In calumniatorem Platonis libri IV*, published in a Greek-Latin version and printed in Rome in 1469 (ed. L. Mohler, *Kardinal B.*, II, Pd 1927); it was intended mainly for Latin readers. The immediate occasion for his writing *In calumniatorem* was the publication around 1458 of George of Trebizond's *Comparationes philosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis* [*Porównania filozofów Platona i Arystoteles*] [Comparisons of the philosophers Plato and Aristotle]. It was not, however, a comparison, but an antithetical presentation of the two greatest ancient philosophers, and the final measure of both doctrines was the truth of the Christian faith. As a result it was a sharp invective and a malicious lampoon of Plato and neo-Platonism as a whole, as well as an exaggerated and excessive apotheosis of Aristotle and a fully “Christianized” Aristotelianism.

Bessarion's response, although polemical and apologetic in character, was a profound and broad presentation of Platonic thought which was presented as irenic with regard to Aristotelianism as properly understood and in relation to Christianity. Bessarion's Plato was the “vehicle” and transmitter of all ancient and pre-revelation wisdom. Plato presented the *sermo sapientiae* (wisdom), while Aristotle was the transmitter of the *sermo scientiae* (scientific knowledge). There was no contradiction, nor could there be, between them, but only agreement which not only did not exclude, but even presupposed certain differences. In distinguishing between sapiential knowledge (Plato) and scientific knowledge (Aristotle), Bessarion did not present them as opposed, nor did he subordinate one to the other as if one were the final stage toward the other's achievement, as St. Bonaventure had done earlier, and Ficino would do later. As opposed to Pico della Mirandola he did not reduce the differences between these philosophers to merely verbal divergence. If we may use here Descartes' image of the true of knowledge to understand this relation, then Aristotle's knowledge may be presented as an enormous and integral bough, but only a bough of Plato's wisdom. Bessarion's work had a great influence on the profile of renaissance Platonism, chiefly through Ficino's work. His work also influenced Pomponazzi's and Cajetan's Aristotelianism. It clearly presented the difference between Alexandrianism and Averroism, and between Thomism and historical Aristotelianism. It supported Scotism within the current of Christian Aristotelianism. It also served as an essential support for syncretic and concordist thought in the philosophical polemics of the sixteenth century. *In calumniatorem Platonis* also was an inspirational influence on Nicholas Copernicus' heliocentric conception.

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