

1-1-2016

Review of *The Career and Writings of Demetrius Kydones: A study of Fourteenth-Century Byzantine Politics, Religion and Society*

Marcus Plested

Marquette University, [marcus.plested@marquette.edu](mailto:marcus.plested@marquette.edu)

Book Review of  
*The Career and Writings of Demetrius Kydones: A study of Fourteenth-Century Byzantine Politics, Religion and Society,*  
by Judith Ryder, *The Medieval Mediterranean* 85. Leiden and Boston:  
Brill, 2010. Pp. xv, 295. ISBN: 9789004185654

Marcus Plested  
*Theology, Marquette University*  
*Milwaukee, WI*

Demetrios Kydones (c.1324 - c.1397) amply warrants further scholarly attention. While hardly neglected in modern scholarship – with fine work done by Loenertz, Tinnefeld, Rackl, Kianka, and many others – this pre-eminent Byzantine statesman of the fourteenth century is an endlessly fascinating figure. Kydones served as chief minister to three emperors: John VI, John V, and Manuel II (in that order: Byzantine dynastic politics can throw up some strange anomalies!). In his long career, Demetrios worked tirelessly for rapprochement with the Christian West and against accommodation

with the Ottoman Turks. The nadir of his career came in 1354 with the loss of Gallipoli to the Turks, giving the Ottomans a vital strategic foothold on the European side of the Dardanelles. But 1354 was also the year in which Demetrios put the final touches to his translation of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa contra gentiles*. Demetrios had despaired of the mediocre Latin interpreters available to him in Constantinople and undertook to learn Latin himself. His shrewd Dominican teacher gave him Aquinas as a text for study. Demetrios was immediately enamoured of the angelic doctor and made it his life's mission to make this sublime treasure of theological and philosophical learning available in Greek for the benefit of his fellow Romans (or Byzantines as we often call them, neglecting their own self-designation). Demetrios went on to translate much of the *Summa theologiae* and many other of Thomas' theological works. His love for Thomas also contributed to his conversion to the Roman Catholic Church. It should be acknowledged, however, that Kydones valued Thomas not as the expression of a superior Latin culture but as a testament to the eternal verities of Christian Hellenism. Kydones' sympathies with the Latins earned him enemies among those in Byzantium who viewed Western Christians with suspicion on both political and theological grounds. It is one of the great merits of this book to show that Kydones was far from alone in favouring closer ties with the West. For all the loathing of the Latins evident in many quarters of Byzantine society, Kydones' pro-Latin agenda appealed to more than a marginal constituency.

Judith Ryder deserves commendation for producing a thorough treatment of many aspects of this great man's life and thought in a book based on her doctoral thesis. It must be admitted that more could have been done to assure the transition and transformation of the thesis into book form. One encounters a few too many caveats and self-denying ordinances, for instance leaving out of consideration some of Kydones' key works (e.g. the *Defence of Thomas Aquinas*) and eschewing any attempt at comparison with other Byzantine authors – hints of a slightly nervous caution that belongs more naturally, if anywhere, in a thesis rather than a book. The work is even referred to as 'this thesis' at least one occasion. While being picky, the overuse of inverted commas that serve only to obfuscate meaning is something that should have been picked up on at a much earlier stage of composition. On a similarly pedantic note, the rendition of Nilus/Neilos

as 'Nil' is rather peculiar, being closer to the Slavonic/Russian form of the name than either the Greek or Latin versions.

But to turn to more substantive matters, the book begins with two sections on Kydones' intellectual background and chief ideas. This labour is undertaken with a certain dutifulness, matters intellectual and theological evidently not being the author's favourite stamping ground. It is, however, comforting (at least for this reviewer, as an academic theologian) to read that, in respect of late Byzantine culture, 'a somewhat greater emphasis on theology is not necessarily a sign of degeneration'. The book really gets into its stride in section three dealing with the historical hinterland, socio-political background, and Orthodox context of Demetrios' life and work. Here the author puts up a spirited and persuasive defence of the sheer credibility of Kydones' pro-Western agenda, quite rightly rejecting the notion that absolute and instinctive anti-Westernism was the only significant current of opinion in the late Byzantine world. She is not of course the first to make this point, but it is a point worth re-stating – and she adds much of value in that process of re-statement. Dr Ryder, in short, does an effective job of underling the complexity of the late Byzantine world, a complexity that helps makes sense of a political career that might appear inexplicable in its longevity were anti-Westernism the only horse in the Byzantine political race. Dr Ryder deserves considerable credit for painting Kydones as no mere maverick or fringe element but a properly Byzantine figure – or, as Demetrios himself would have had it, a true Roman.