

EASTERN ORTHODOXY THE MYSTICAL TRAP

In recent years interest in the Eastern Orthodox Church among Christians has grown steadily and there have been a number of converts to this religious body. A prime reason for this interest has been the growing fascination with mysticism and ancient tradition which has permeated Western societies. Increasing numbers of Christians are coming into contact with Eastern Orthodox mysticism via the Emergent Church and the writings of the Orthodox “Church Fathers”. There are many strands to Eastern Orthodox mysticism; this paper briefly examines a few significant areas such as Theosis, Hesychasm, the “Jesus Prayer”, Spiritual Fathers and Light Mysticism.

Mysticism

As early as the second century, the East developed a distinct approach to theology which included mysticism. The premise of all mysticism is that experiential knowledge of God takes preference over doctrinal understanding of the character and being of God because of the transcendent nature of God. One of the ways mysticism gained a foothold in Eastern Orthodoxy was by the emphasis of certain Orthodox “Church Fathers” upon the “way of negation” also known as “apophatic”¹ theology. Bishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware, a current well known Orthodox scholar, explains the connection of apophatic theology with mysticism,

“The emphasis on divine unknowability might seem at first sight to exclude any direct experience of God. But in fact many of those who used the apophatic approach saw it, not just as a philosophical device for indicating God’s utter transcendence, but also, and much more fundamentally, as a means for attaining union with Him through prayer. The negations, as well as serving to qualify positive statements about God, acted as a springboard or trampoline whereby the mystical theologian sought to leap up with all the fullness of his or her being into the living mystery of God. This is the case, for example, with Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius and Maximus, all of whom made heavy use of the apophatic approach; for them the ‘way of negation’ was at the same time ‘the way of union’.”²

This “way of negation” emphasizes mystery and yet the Bible says that it is the Holy Spirit that sovereignly reveals “the deep things of God” to us, “*But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.*”³ The Bible teaches us that all we need to know of God we see in the Lord Jesus Christ, “*Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest*

¹ “*God is absolutely transcendent. ‘No single thing of all that is created has or ever will have even the slightest communion with the supreme nature or nearness to it.’ This absolute transcendence Orthodoxy safeguards by its emphatic use of the ‘way of negation’ of ‘apophatic’ theology. Positive or ‘cataphatic’ theology – the ‘way of affirmation’ – must always be balanced and corrected by the employment of negative language. Our positive statements about God – that He is good, wise, just and so on – are true as far as they go, yet they cannot adequately describe the inner nature of deity.... ‘That there is a God is clear: but what He is by essence and nature, this is altogether beyond our comprehension and knowledge.’” Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New Edition (London: Penguin, 1997) pp. 208-209. Timothy Ware is also known as Bishop Kallistos Ware.*

² Ware, pp. 63-64

³ I Corinthians 2:9-10

*thou then, Shew us the Father?*⁴ As the Scripture also says, “*For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*”⁵

A further problem with Orthodox mysticism is that following the “way of negation” can lead to ecstasy seeking. Orthodox mystics find it acceptable to teach the attainment of a state of ecstasy in order to “penetrate the highest spiritual reality.”⁶ An example of ecstasy seeking by prayer is found in the fourteenth century writings of Gregory of Sinai, a recognized saint⁷ in the Orthodox Church,

“Noetic prayer is an activity initiated by the cleansing power of the Spirit and the mystical rites celebrated by the intellect. Similarly, stillness is initiated by attentive waiting upon God, its intermediate stage is characterized by illuminative power and contemplation, and its final goal is ecstasy and the enraptured flight of the intellect towards God.”⁸

These ecstatic states present a problem if their content is not affirmed by, or is contrary to the Scriptures. How are we to know that these ecstatic states achieved by “Noetic Prayer”⁹ (the “Jesus Prayer”) and their often associated visions, Light Mysticism, are true, as opposed to the psychic, unless they are examined in the light of Holy Scripture? Otherwise we fall into the trap described by Scripture as “*intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind...*”¹⁰

Tradition of the Fathers

The Orthodox Church rests upon the foundation of its tradition.¹¹ This stance is encapsulated in the view of the fourth century teacher Athanasius, “But our faith is right, and starts from the teaching of the Apostles and tradition of the fathers, being confirmed both by the New Testament and the Old.”¹² The “tradition of the fathers” is viewed as an authoritative part of Orthodox tradition,¹³ and thus the Orthodox Church regularly refers to their writings. There is a problem, however, in that the “Church Fathers” differ among themselves on certain issues, as for example,

⁴ John 14:9

⁵ II Corinthians 4:6

⁶ “Ecstasy is not a passion... It is an energy through which personhood is completely freed from the powers of created nature so it can penetrate the highest spiritual reality.”

http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/christou_partakers_glory.html#_edn30

⁷ G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, *The Philokalia* (London: Faber, 1995) Vol. 4: The Complete Text, Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain & St. Markarios of Corinth (Philokalia), St Gregory of Sinai, “Introductory Note”, p 207.

⁸ Ibid., “On Commandments and Doctrines”, p. 237.

⁹ “The chief manner by which this is achieved is through the grace of God and *noetic* prayer, that is, through the Prayer of the Heart, also known as the Jesus Prayer...” St. Gregory Palamas, Christopher Veniamin, *Mary the Mother of God: Sermons by Saint Gregory Palamas* (South Canaan: Mount Tabor, 2005), Forward, p. xii.

¹⁰ Colossians 2:18

¹¹ “Tradition means something more concrete and specific than this. It means the books of the Bible; it means the Creed; it means the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils and the writings of the Fathers; it means the Canons, the Service Books, the Holy Icons—in fact, the whole system of doctrine, Church government, worship, spirituality and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages.” Ware, p. 196.

¹² Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, Volume 4, (Albany: AGES Software, 1997) “Letter: To Adelphius, Bishop and Confessor: against the Arians”, p. 1324. All citations for Schaff are taken from this software.

¹³ Ware, p. 196

on the number of sacraments.¹⁴ And they also contradict one another.¹⁵ Further complications arise due to translation discrepancies¹⁶ and differing interpretations, for the “Church Fathers” can be difficult to understand. This can lead to a swamp of human opinions and error. All teachings, including the “Church Fathers”, have to be assessed by the only sure rule that we have: the Bible. *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness...”*¹⁷

Theosis

A central part of the Orthodox Church’s theology is the notion of deification,¹⁸ more properly known as theosis.¹⁹ This concept of theosis is a crucial underpinning of Orthodox belief and practice,²⁰ and is integral to Orthodox mysticism. To support this concept of theosis, the Orthodox theologians quote certain “Church Fathers”, such as Irenaeus,²¹ Athanasius of Alexandria,²² and Gregory Nazianzen.²³ Timothy Ware comments,

“Such, according to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, is the final goal at which every Christian must aim: to become god, to attain *theosis*, ‘deification’ or ‘divinization’. For Orthodoxy our salvation and redemption mean our deification.”²⁴

A pertinent question at this point may be: since every member of the Orthodox Church must aim to become god, what happens if he or she fails? But we read in the Scriptures that *“Salvation is of the LORD.”*²⁵ The quest for theosis has the familiar and disturbing echo of the first deception ever perpetrated upon mankind, *“And the serpent said unto the woman, ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”*²⁶ Nevertheless, theosis is sought by different means, including Hesychasm, the Jesus Prayer, and Light Mysticism.

¹⁴ “...the Byzantine Church never committed itself formally to any specific list; many authors accept the standard series of seven sacraments ...while others give a longer list; and still, others emphasize the exclusive and prominent importance of baptism and the Eucharist... Thus, Gregory Palamas proclaims that ‘in these two [sacraments] our whole salvation is rooted since the entire economy of the God-man is recapitulated in them.’”

(http://www.holytrinitymission.org/books/english/byzantine_theology_j_meyendorf.htm#_Toc26430281)

¹⁵ “But as with the local councils, so with the Fathers, the judgement of the Church is selective: individual writers have at times fallen into error and at times contradict one another.”¹⁵ Ware, p. 204

¹⁶ For example, compare the translations of “The Three Methods Of Prayer” online at http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/symeon_threeways.html and contained in the book, *The Philokalia*, Footnote 7.

¹⁷ II Timothy 3:16

¹⁸ Ware, p. 231

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “The primary work of the Church is to lead man to theosis, to communion and union with God.” (http://www.pelagia.org/htm/b15.en.orthodox_spirituality.01.htm#or1)

²¹ “...who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.” A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, Book 5 (Albany: AGES Software, 1997), p. 1052.

²² “For therefore did He assume the body originate and human, that having renewed it as its Framer, He might deify it in Himself, and thus might introduce us all into the kingdom of heaven after His likeness.” Schaff, Volume 4, p. 946.

²³ “...and be associated, as far as man’s nature can attain, with the purest Light, blessed is he, both from his ascent from hence, and for his deification there...” Schaff, Volume 7, p. 522

²⁴ Ware, p. 231

²⁵ Jonah 2:9

²⁶ Genesis 3:4-5

Hesychasm

The term Hesychasm,²⁷ as used by the Orthodox Church, originates from the Greek term meaning inner stillness.²⁸ Timothy Ware notes, “The Hesychast is one who devotes himself to the prayer of silence—to prayer that is stripped, so far as possible, of all images, words and discursive thinking.”²⁹ Though it differs in some respects to the mystical practices of the Eastern religions, it also has much in common with them. As Ware acknowledges “There are interesting parallels between the Hesychast ‘method’ and Hindu *Yoga*...”³⁰ The originator of Hesychasm is traditionally held to be John Climacus³¹ through his influential work, “Ladder of Perfection”. Official Orthodox Church recognition of Hesychasm occurred in the fourteenth century largely through the efforts of Gregory Palamas.³²

For an examination of the Hesychast method, the writings of Symeon the New Theologian are instructive. Symeon offers the following instructions for the practice of mystic meditation:

“Rest your beard on your chest, and focus your physical gaze, together with the whole of your intellect, upon the centre of your belly or your navel. Restrain the drawing-in of breath through your nostrils, so as not to breathe easily, and search inside yourself with your intellect so as to find the place of the heart, where all the powers of the soul reside. To start with, you will find there darkness and an impenetrable density. Later, when you persist and practice this task day and night, you will find, as though miraculously, an unceasing joy. For as soon as the intellect attains the place of the heart, at once it sees things of which it previously knew nothing. It sees the open space within the heart and it beholds itself entirely luminous and full of discrimination.”³³

This method, however, presents a problem: where do we find this approach in the Scripture? Rather than try to “find the place of the heart” the Scriptures instruct us to “look out” (ἀφοράω)³⁴ to Jesus who is in heaven above: “*Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.*”³⁵

²⁷ “ἡσυχάζω *hesychazo*: to keep quiet”, Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), p. 281.

²⁸ Ware, p. 64

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 65

³¹ “John is remembered not only as the author of the masterful ‘Ladder of Perfection,’ but also as the originator of hesychasm...” (http://www.antiochian.org/saint_john_climacus)

³² “For the next fourteen years he became involved in what is often termed the hesychast controversy. Initially his main opponent was... Barlaam the Calabrian... Gregory’s standpoint was vindicated at the Council of Constantinople in 1341... The doctrinal position upheld by Gregory was eventually reaffirmed at two further councils held in Constantinople in 1347 and 1351, and since then it has remained the official teaching of the Orthodox Church.” Palmer *et al.*, “Introductory Note”, p. 288. See also: http://www.antiochian.org/saint_john_climacus

³³ Palmer *et al.*, “The Three Methods Of Prayer”, pp. 72-73

³⁴ ἀφοράω (*aphoraō*), Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent Word Studies in the New Testament*, Vol. IV (Peabody: Hendrickson) pp. 537-538

³⁵ Hebrews 12:2

A question arises: why would practice of “this task day and night” cause us to go from darkness to light? Rather than persistent mystical practices, it is God’s grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that takes us out of the darkness. As the Lord Jesus says in Scripture, “*I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness.*”³⁶ Instead of looking into our “old” heart to find something luminous, the Lord tells us that we need Him to give us a new heart, “*A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.*”³⁷

Orthodox mystics recognize that Symeon used a “psychosomatic technique”³⁸ in conjunction with the “Jesus Prayer.” They also recognize that this technique “...can inflict grave damage on a person’s physical and mental health.”³⁹ Is the Orthodox Church being responsible when it allows the promotion of Eastern style meditation practices—practices that not only lack a Scriptural basis, but can inflict grave damage upon a person? If a person imitates the Hesychast and comes under psychic and demonic oppression it is because they have ignored the Scripture, “*Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.*”⁴⁰

The Jesus Prayer

A core part of Hesychasm is the “Jesus Prayer.”⁴¹ This noetic breath prayer was thought to have originated with John Climacus, “Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with your every breath. Then indeed you will appreciate the value of stillness.”⁴² Orthodox mystics interpreted this passage to mean a repetitious heart prayer which has come to be known as the “Jesus Prayer”. For example, Nikiphoros the monk, a thirteenth century Hesychast, writes, “You know that everyone’s discursive faculty is centered in his breast...Banish, then, all thoughts from this faculty...and in their place put the prayer ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me,’ and compel it to repeat this prayer ceaselessly.”⁴³ Does the Bible instruct us to banish all thoughts? As we see from the Scriptures, we are shown that thinking is normal and we are encouraged to think on good things, “*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*”⁴⁴

³⁶ John 12:46

³⁷ Ezekiel 36:26

³⁸ “...the author of the Three Methods proposes a psychosomatic technique involving three features: first a particular bodily posture, with the chin resting on the chest and the gaze directed towards the navel...secondly, control over the breathing, so that its pace is slowed down; thirdly, inner exploration by the intellect, which searches for the place of the heart. All of this, so it seems, is meant to precede rather than accompany the recitation of the Jesus Prayer...” Palmer *et al.*, “The Three Methods Of Prayer,” p. 65

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Galatians 6:7

⁴¹ “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” Ware, p. 65 For an online text dealing with the “Jesus Prayer”, see Symeon the New Theologian at:

(http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/symeon_threeways.html)

⁴² John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Tr. by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russel in *Classics of Western Spirituality* series (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 270

⁴³ Palmer *et al.*, “On Watchfulness and Guarding of the Heart”, p. 206

⁴⁴ Philippians 4:8

Eastern Orthodox teachers refer to the Scripture, “*Pray without ceasing*,”⁴⁵ to confirm the practice of continuous repetitive prayer.⁴⁶ For example, in an Orthodox devotional work, “*The Way of the Pilgrim*,”⁴⁷ a pilgrim describes his use of the “Jesus Prayer”, “And that is how I go about now, and ceaselessly repeat the prayer of Jesus... I thank God that I now understand the meaning of those words I heard in the Epistle, ‘Pray without ceasing.’”⁴⁸ The context of the passage in which the Scripture is found does not support the practice of the repetitive “Jesus Prayer”. For example, Paul in I Thessalonians 5:18 says: “*In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*” Are we supposed to mentally and continuously say “I give thanks” to God without ceasing? Clearly not. Does the Orthodox Church recommend this? Probably not. What does the Word of God say on this matter? Scripture warns us not to repeat prayers repetitiously, “*But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.*”⁴⁹ The Lord Jesus instructed us to pray to our Father, not with fixed phrase, but in a personal manner “*After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven...*”⁵⁰

A further problem with this mystical technique is that it reduces the name of our Lord to a formula which is supposed to ward off difficulties, as a quote from Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain shows, “And though it seem difficult in the beginning, be certain and assured, as if from the person of God Almighty, that this very name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, when we invoke it constantly every day, will make all the difficulties easier.”⁵¹

Another difficulty arises when the Orthodox Hesychast Monk Nikiphoros states that the “Jesus Prayer” is supposed to increase the intellect’s “...love and desire for God.”⁵² How can repetitive prayer help us to love God more; since that love is given to every child of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, “... *the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.*”⁵³

That Orthodox mystics are aware of the hypnotic quality of the ceaseless “Jesus Prayer” is apparent from the following quote from the “*The Way of the Pilgrim*”,

“I am aware only of the fact that I am saying my prayer. When the bitter cold pierces me, I begin to say my prayer more earnestly, and I quickly get warm all over. ... I have become a

⁴⁵ I Thessalonians 5:17

⁴⁶ See Ware, p. 306

⁴⁷ “... ‘*The Way of the Pilgrim*,’ which describes the experiences of a Russian peasant who tramped from place to place practicing the Jesus Prayer. This is a most attractive little work...” Ware, p. 121

⁴⁸ R.M. French, *The Way of the Pilgrim: And the Pilgrim Continues His Way* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 17-18

⁴⁹ Matthew 6:7

⁵⁰ “*After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.*” Matthew 6:9-13

⁵¹ From the Saint Gregory Palamas Greek Orthodox Monastery Web Site (<http://sgpm.goarch.org/Monastery/index.php?p=2>)

⁵² Palmer *et al.*, “On Watchfulness and Guarding of the Heart,” p. 206

⁵³ Romans 5:5

sort of half-conscious person. Of course, all this is sensuous, or as my departing starets said, an artificial state that follows naturally upon routine.”⁵⁴

The “Jesus Prayer” seems to be a mechanistic way of inducing hypnotic mental states. Psychic phenomena seem to be present, as for example, the reference to unnatural warmth. A valid question is: does the mystical practice of the “Jesus Prayer” genuinely encourage a person to look to God for comfort and provision? Or do these experiences come from another source? A further question arises: why would a Christian want to imitate the Orthodox mystics by filling their mind with “the uninterrupted mantra-like invocation of the Name of Jesus”?⁵⁵ The following quote from Orthodox theologian, Dr. Christopher Veniamin,⁵⁶ highlights what may be the most alarming aspect of the Orthodox mystic’s use of the noetic “Jesus Prayer”,

“The teaching of Saint Gregory and his fellow Hesychasts was based on the understanding that man, the greatest of all God’s creatures, had been called to enter into direct and unmediated communion with God even from this present life. The chief manner by which this is achieved is through the grace of God and *noetic* prayer, that is, through the Prayer of the Heart, also known as the Jesus Prayer...”⁵⁷

Here is the heart of Orthodox mysticism: “unmediated communion with God.” This mysticism denies the Scripture which says, “*For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...*”⁵⁸ Furthermore, our Lord Jesus Christ emphasizes that it is only through Him that we can have communion with God, “*Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.*”⁵⁹ It may be pertinent to ask: are the Orthodox mystics really communing with God? And if not, then to whom are they really going?

Submission to the “Fathers”

There is a tradition within the Orthodox Church of submission to a monastic “spiritual father”⁶⁰ figure. He is supposed to be spiritually gifted to see what the will of God is for those who come to him, monks and lay people included.⁶¹ For most people who are living “regular” lives this may not be overly intrusive but for the Orthodox monk things can be very different. The role of the spiritual father in a mystic’s life is central. Details of this relationship can be found in the writings of the tenth century “Church Father” Symeon the New Theologian.⁶² Various works of

⁵⁴ French, pp. 17-18

⁵⁵ Ibid., back cover of book.

⁵⁶ http://www.stots.edu/news_051031_1.html

⁵⁷ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, Tr. by John Meyendorff and Nicholas Gendle in *Classics of Western Spirituality* series (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1983), “Forward”, p xii

⁵⁸ I Timothy 2:5

⁵⁹ John 14:6

⁶⁰ “A characteristic figure in Orthodox monasticism is the ‘elder’ or ‘old man’ (Greek *geron*; Russian *starets*, plural *starsy*). The elder is a monk of spiritual discernment and wisdom, whom others - either monks or people in the world - adopt as their guide and spiritual director. He is sometimes a priest, but often a lay monk; he receives no special ordination or appointment to the work of eldership, but is guided to it by the direct inspiration of the Spirit. A woman as well as a man may be called to this ministry, for Orthodoxy has its ‘spiritual mothers’ as well as its ‘spiritual fathers’. The elder sees in a concrete and practical way what the will of God is in relation to each person who comes to consult him: this is the elder’s special gift or charisma.” Ware, p. 39

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² “Among the Greek Fathers there are few if any who are better known to us than St Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022)... His life story illustrates the central significance of spiritual fatherhood within the Orthodox mystical tradition.” Palmer *et al.*, “Practical and Theological Texts, St Symeon The New Theologian”, Introductory Note, p.

Symeon can be found in the popular anthology of Orthodox mystical texts called the *Philokalia*.⁶³ In his writing Symeon shows the exacting nature of a mystic monk's submission to a spiritual father, for example, "With respect to your spiritual father do everything he tells you to do, neither more nor less and be guided by his purpose and will."⁶⁴ The following quote shows how intense this can be,

"The person who from fear of punishment hereafter has placed himself as a slave in the hands of his spiritual fathers will not choose, even if commanded to do so, relief for his heart's suffering or deliverance from the bonds of fear."⁶⁵

This kind of teaching raises serious concerns. Our complete submission is towards God alone, "*Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.*"⁶⁶ Paul the Apostle, in writing to the Corinthians, shows us that he is a fellow helper and not an exacting slave master, "*Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand.*"⁶⁷ Has the Orthodox mystic who does not want "deliverance from the bonds of fear" understood the Gospel? "*The scriptures say For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.*"⁶⁸

The importance of the quality of the spiritual father, in an Orthodox mystic's life, is shown by Symeon's statement that he must be an "unerring guide."⁶⁹ This qualification presents the mystic with a problem, for it is plainly impossible to find an error-free man, as the Scripture makes plain, "*My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all.*"⁷⁰ In practice Symeon demonstrates the level of obedience which he expects mystic monks to achieve. The following quote is from his "Discourses" and refers to a monastic father, such as an abbot,

"...refuse to set yourself in opposition to the father who has tonsured you, even if you should see him commit fornication or be drunk and, in your opinion, badly conducting the affairs of the monastery ...Endure him to the end, without curiously inquiring into his faults. Whatever good you see him do, put your mind on that, and seek to remember that alone. Whatever you see him do or speak that is unsuitable evil, blame it on yourself and regard it as your own fault and repent in tears. Treat him as a holy man and ask for his prayers."

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ said, "*For a good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit; neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.*"⁷¹ Paul the Apostle instructed us,

"*Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample. (For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping,*

⁶³ "...whilst its importance and popularity made it an obvious choice for the standard anthology of Orthodox mysticism, called the 'Philokalia'"

(http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/symeon_threeways.html)

⁶⁴ Palmer *et al.*, "The Three Methods of Prayer", p. 70.

See also http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/symeon_threeways.html

⁶⁵ Palmer *et al.*, "Philip, Practical and Theological Texts", p. 37

⁶⁶ Acts 5:29

⁶⁷ II Corinthians 1:24

⁶⁸ Romans 8:15

⁶⁹ Palmer *et al.*, "The Three Methods of Prayer", p. 69

⁷⁰ James 3:2-3

⁷¹ Luke 6:43

that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.)”⁷²

And John the Apostle instructs us not to follow those that commit evil but those that are good leaders, “*Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God. Demetrius hath good report of all men...*”⁷³ Since Symeon the New Theologian is regarded by the Orthodox Church as one of its “three great Fathers,”⁷⁴ then the gravity of his errors can be readily appreciated. Where does this leave the Orthodox tradition of spiritual fathers?

Light Mysticism

“For the Hesychasts of Byzantium, the culmination of mystical experience was the vision of Divine and Uncreated Light... The Hesychasts believed that this light which they experienced was identical with the Uncreated Light which the three disciples saw surrounding Jesus at His Transfiguration on Mount Tabor.”⁷⁵ So writes Bishop Kalistos Ware. This type of mysticism has been called “Light Mysticism”,⁷⁶ of which Symeon the New Theologian was a notable exponent. When this teaching was attacked by other members of the Orthodox Church, Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica, defended the Hesychasts. He asserted that the Hesychasts did indeed experience the “Divine and Uncreated Light of Tabor.”⁷⁷

Gregory Palamas was proclaimed a saint by the Orthodox Church in 1368⁷⁸ and his ecstatic⁷⁹ Hesychastic teachings are influential. The following quotes from his work, *The Triads*, shows the visions of light gained by the Hesychasts,

“This is why every believer has to separate off God from all His creatures, for the cessation of all intellectual activity and the resulting union with the light from on high is an experience and a divinizing end, granted solely to those who have purified their hearts and received grace. And what am I to say of this union, when the brief vision itself is manifested only to chosen disciples, disengaged by ecstasy from all perception of the senses or intellect, admitted to the true vision because they have ceased to see, and endowed with supernatural senses by their submission to the unknowing?”⁸⁰

When the three disciples saw the Lord transfigured,⁸¹ there is no indication of them engaging in mystical practices in order to see this light. It was the sovereign will of the Lord to manifest His glory to them. Nevertheless, further on in *The Triads*, Gregory shows us how to see the light,

⁷² Philippians 3:17-19

⁷³ III John 1:11-12

⁷⁴ “One of the most beloved Holy Fathers is St. Symeon the New Theologian, who was the abbot of St. Mamas in Constantinople. He is one of three great Fathers whom the Orthodox Church has granted the title of “Theologian” because he is one of a few, in the history of Christianity, to ‘know’ God. The other two Theologians are St. John the Evangelist, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus (390 AD).” (<http://home.it.net.au/~jgrapsas/pages/symeon.htm>)

⁷⁵ Ware, p. 66

⁷⁶ “The works of St Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), the greatest of the Byzantine Mystics, are full of this ‘Light Mysticism’.” Ware, p. 66

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 67

⁷⁸ <http://www.antiochian.org/gregory-palamas>

⁷⁹ ...the spiritual ecstasy that we find especially [in], Gregory Palamas...” (http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/christou_partakers_glory.html)

⁸⁰ Palamas, p. 35

⁸¹ Mark 9:2

“...and let us seek how to acquire this glory and see it. How? By keeping the divine commandments. For the Lord has promised to manifest Himself to the man who keeps them, a manifestation He calls His own indwelling and that of the Father saying “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and will make our abode with him” and “I will manifest Myself to him.”⁸²

The passage to which Gregory is referring is John 14:23. To give the context, in the same passage in verse 16, the Lord Jesus says, “*And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever...*” In verse 26 the Lord explains that the “Comforter” is the Holy Spirit. So the Lord “manifests” Himself to the apostles by the Holy Spirit. Now previously in John 3:5, the Lord Jesus says, “*Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*” So the Scripture to which Gregory is referring is about a person being “born again”; thus the Scripture is talking about salvation. This indwelling of the Holy Spirit is for all Christians, as Paul the Apostle said in Ephesians, “*In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise...*”⁸³ It is clear from this passage that the Gospel has to be heard and believed for a person to receive the Holy Spirit.

Do all Christians, during new birth see a light? The Scriptures do not say that they do. It is notable that in this passage of *The Triads*, Gregory does not mention the crucial word “faith”. It would seem to the reader that to have a relationship with God via this light he must labor in works, “keeping the divine commandments.” But what saith the Scripture? “*This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?... But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.*”⁸⁴

So what is Gregory looking for in his mystical ecstasy? He says in *The Triads*, “As to him who mysteriously possesses and sees this light, he knows and possesses God in himself...”⁸⁵ And what is this light that Gregory and the Orthodox mystics seek? A further quote from his *Triads* is interesting,

“This hypostatic light, seen spiritually by the saints, they know by experience to exist, as they tell us, and to exist not symbolically only, as do manifestations produced by fortuitous events; but it is an illumination immaterial and divine, a grace invisibly seen and ignorantly known. *What it is, they do not pretend to know.*”⁸⁶

It is quite concerning that the mystics encourage people to seek this light and yet they do not know what it is. Yet the martyr, Stephen, knew the glory of God when he saw it, “*But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God...*”⁸⁷ Significantly, Stephen was full of the Holy Ghost; he

⁸² Palamas, p. 61

⁸³ Ephesians 1:13

⁸⁴ Galatians 3:2, 11

⁸⁵ Palamas, p. 61

⁸⁶ Ibid., “Deification in Christ”, p. 57

⁸⁷ Acts 7:55

had true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, he was indwelt by the Holy Spirit. As the Scriptures in John 3:7 tell us, “*Ye must be born again.*”

Surely we should read the Scriptures and not theorize and engage in mystical seeking. The Lord Jesus said to the disciples: “...*Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven...*”⁸⁸ And the Apostles wrote all that we needed to know of these matters in the Scriptures. Because the Scriptures are the Christian’s sure guide, “*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path,*”⁸⁹ it is important to know what Gregory’s attitude toward Scripture was. He states,

“Indeed, this light of contemplation even differs from the light that comes from the holy Scriptures, whose light may be compared to ‘a lamp that shines in an obscure place’, whereas the light of mystical contemplation is compared to the star of the morning which shines in full daylight, that is to say, to the sun.”⁹⁰

Earlier on in the same passage Gregory says that this mystical light “...is superior to the light of knowledge.”⁹¹ It is highly regrettable that the Orthodox Church allows such teaching. And it is truly heartbreaking that many people are putting their trust in certain of its beliefs and practices which have no basis in the Scriptures. The Christian ought to imitate the Bereans who were “*more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.*”⁹²

Sadly, Gregory’s search for mystical ecstasies is not an isolated example. Other Orthodox “Church Fathers” also seek “spiritual ecstasy.”⁹³ The mystical search for the perfection via ecstasies and visions leads people in the wrong direction; but the Holy Scripture plainly tells of its own sufficiency: “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*”⁹⁴ We need not, as the mystics, to try to ascend to God because the Holy Spirit has come down to dwell in us by faith, to reveal the Lord Jesus Christ to us. This is crucial because “...*ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.*”⁹⁵ John the Apostle also assures us that we have no need to seek unknowable knowledge, for he says, “*For the truth’s sake, which dwelleth in us, and shall be with us for ever.*”⁹⁶ ♦

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⁸⁸ Matthew 13:11

⁸⁹ Psalms 119:105

⁹⁰ Palamas, p. 63

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Acts 17:11

⁹³ “... the spiritual ecstasy that we find in Gregory of Nyssa , Maximos the Confessor , some other Fathers , and especially, Gregory Palamas...”

(http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/christou_partakers_glory.html)

⁹⁴ II Timothy 3:16-17

⁹⁵ Romans 8:9

⁹⁶ II John 1:2