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The GREEK ORTHODOX TRADITION

INTRODUCTION:

the eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology; between personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogma affirmed by the church.

in the Eastern Orthodox church the attitude is that one must live the dogma or it makes no sense.

one should look for a profound change, an inner transformation of spirit enabling one to experience what is believed mystically. far from being mutually opposed, theology and mysticism support and complete each other, one is impossible without the other.

theology is an expression, for the profit of all, of that which can be experienced by everyone.

the teaching of the Church would have no hold on souls if it did not in some degree express an inner experience of truth. there is therefore no theology without mysticism.

unlike gnosticism, in which knowledge for its own sake constitutes the aim of the gnostic, Christian theology is always in the last resort a means: a unity of knowledge subserving an end which transcends all knowledge.

this ultimate end is union with God or deification, the "Theosis" of the Greek fathers.

the church constantly struggled against the gnostics in defense of the idea that all Christians could attain mystical union, ie deification, as the universal end.

"God became man that men might become god" she affirmed, against the Arians, the dogma of the consubstantial Trinity; for it is the Word, the Logos, who opens to us the way to union with the Godhead; and if the Incarnate Word has not the same substance with the Father, if he be not truly God, then deification is impossible.

all the history of Christian dogma unfolds itself about this mystical centre, guarded by different weapons against its many and diverse assailants in the course of successive ages.

down to 1054 the traditions of east and west were one. however with the Schism these separated. there was not total agreement even up to this time about what was good theology

for example, one major dispute was whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from only the Father (Greek) or from the father and the son (roman).

this goes back to the Nicean creed, ratified in 451 at Chalcedon.

Spiritual life

there is a great richness of forms of the spiritual life to be found within the bounds of Orthodoxy, but monasticism remains the most classical of all.

unlike western monasticism, that of the East does not include a multiplicity of different orders. This fact is explained by the conception of monastic life, the aim of which can only be union with God in a complete renunciation of the life of this present world.

tho the secular clergy (married priests and deacons) occupy themselves with social work, or other activities, it is not so with the monks who take the habit above all to apply themselves to prayer, to the interior life or hermitage.

Between a monastery of the common life and the solitude of an anchorite who carries on the traditions of the Desert Fathers there are many intermediate types of monastic institution.

one could broadly say that eastern monasticism is exclusively contemplative.

to attain to union with God, in the measure in which it is realizable here on Earth, requires continual effort, or, more precisely, an unceasing vigil that the integrity of the inward person, "the union of heart and spirit" withstand

all the assaults of the enemy: ever irrational movement of ones fallen nature.

Human nature must undergo a change; it must be more and more transfigured by grace in the way of sanctification (holiness), which is not only spiritual but also bodily and hence cosmic.

the spiritual work of a monk living in community or a hermit withdrawn from the world retains all its worth for the entire universe even tho it remain hidden from the sight of all.

this is why monastic institutions have always enjoyed great veneration in every country of the Orthodox world.

There are several great monasteries of which I will name a few: St. Catherine's near Mt. Sinai, Studion, near Constantinople (Istanbul); and the monastic republic of Mount Athos are three great ones.

the way of union with God may be pursued outside the cloister, amid all the circumstances of human life

Eastern hagiography, which is extremely rich, shows beside the holy monks many examples of spiritual perfection acquired by simple people and married people living in the world.

there are strange paths to holiness such as the 'fools for Christ' committing extravagant acts that their spiritual gifts might remain hidden from the eyes of those about them under the hideous aspect of madness;

Union with God sometimes manifests itself thru charismatic gifts as, for example, in that of spiritual direction exercised by the Startz or elder, these people are most frequently monks who, having passed many years of their life in prayer and secluded from all contact with the world, toward the end of their life throw open to all comers the door of their cell.

they possess the gift of being able to penetrate to the depths of human conscience, or revealing sins and inner difficulties which normally remain unknown to us, or of raising up melancholy people, directing people on

not only a spiritual course, but also in all the problems of life in the world.

the individual experiences of the greatest mystics of the Orthodox Church usually remain unknown. apart from a few rare exceptions the spiritual literature of the East possesses scarcely any autobiographical account dealing with the interior life, such as we have of Teresa in the West.

the way of mystical union is nearly always a secret between God and the soul concerned, which is never confided to others unless, it may be, to a confessor (stazz) or a few disciples.

what is published is the fruit of this union": wisdom, understanding of the divine mysteries, expressing itself in theological or moral teaching or in advice for the edification of ones' brethren.

as to the inward and personal aspect of the mystical experience, it remains hidden from the eyes of all.

unlike the west in the 13th and 14th century, when mystical individualism entered the west, mystical individualism has remained alien to the spirituality of the Eastern church.

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THE HESYCHAST TRADITION.

solitary life in the Egyptian or the Palistinian deserts was the original form of Christian monasticism.

already in the 4th century it was adopted by St. Anthony, who according to his biographer, St. Athanasius the Great, was the founder of the monastic movement, and became the model of all latter anchorites.

St. Pachomius who in egypt founded the first disciplined communities of monks, both types of monasticism developed throughout the early Christian centuries and the Middle ages.

the term HESychast was used to designate a "hermit" or an anchorite from the very beginnings of monastic history of all the early teachers of monastic spirituality, EVAGRIUS PONTICUS formulated, better than any other, the fundamental doctrine on prayer which would inspire the hesychasts in all later centuries.

according to Evagrius, prayer is "the highest act of the mind" the activity "appropriate to the dignity of the mind, an ascent of the mind to God."

"the state of prayer," he wrote "can be aptly described as a habitual state of undisturbed calm. It matches to the heights of intelligible reality the mind which loves wisdom and which is truly spiritualized by the most intense love."

according to Evagrius, a permanent "prayer of the mind" or "mental" prayer is the goal, the content and the justification of the hesychastic, eremitic life.

he sees it as "natural" to the human mind. In prayer, humans become truly themselves by reestablishing the right and natural relationship with God.

he was neoplatonic believing the the "mind" was naturally divine (following Origen) and was formally condemned by the ecumenical council of 553 because of his "Origenism."

in the mainstream of the Eastern Spiritual tradition, the mental prayer of Evagrius began to be understood and practiced in the context of a Christocentric (Christ centered) spirituality.

the 'mind' ceased to be opposed to matter, because Christian monasticism fully accepted the implications of the Incarnation. thus 'mental prayer', addressed by Evagrius to the Deity, which he understood in a Neoplatonic and spiritualized sense, became the "prayer of Jesus."

the Jesus prayer of the Eastern Church

This prayer developed very early in the Eastern Orthodox church where, by the third century, the words of the prayer were set.

the basis of this prayer lies in the idea that God is both transcendent and immanent in Jesus Christ. As Father George Maloney, a Jesuit comments.

"Any true christian religious experience must first of all place a strong accent on the awesomeness and complete transcendence of Jesus Christ. He is Lord, He is God, creator and redeemer of us all. we must first recognize this terrifying fact. He is more than just a good man, more even than a superstar He is God."

this transendence has to be recognized, according to the Eastern Church, before we can realize Christ's immanance. True devotional life lives with this tension.

The most important means towards a life of prayer is the name of God invoked in prayer.

in the Hebrew Scriptures Jews knew God as YHWH and the high priest pronounced that name only once a year at passover.

The Jew believed that God's name pronounced with reverence meant He was present.

thus the eastern church believed that Jesus is God's name indicating both His human and divine nature. it is not magic, but from the earliest church onward there was the deep conviction that Jesus was true God and true man.

by pronouncing His name with deep reverence and Faith, one brings his presence and power into ones life, and call down his mercy upon the world.

the long form of the prayer of Jesus, established by the 3rd century, was : "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner." This is connected with breating in and out and is really a Christian mantra.

this can be shortened to "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." which is the form given in the book The Way of a Pilgrim , or shortened to just the name "Jesus" which is the oldest form.

I want to quote from the book The Way of a Pilgrim concerning this prayer, since it is this book that brought the prayer to the west.

"My whole desire was fixed on one thing alone; to say the prayer of Jesus and, as soon as I devoted myself to it, I was filled with joy and consolation. It was as though my lips and my tongue pronounced the words by themselves w/o any effort on my part.

". . .then I felt something like a slight burning sensation in my heart and such love for Jesus Christ in my thoughts that I imagined that I was casting myself at his feet--if if only I could see him--and holding him in my embrace thanking him to find in his name such great consolation.

Sometimes my heart would burst in some way with joy, so light was it and full of freedom and consolation. Sometimes I would feel a burning love towards Jesus Christ and all of God's creatures. . sometimes, by invoking the name of Jesus, I was overcome with happiness, and from then on I knew the

meaning of these words: "The kingdom of God is within you."

(Way p. 14 & 20)

England has given closer attention to the Jesus prayer more than any other than the countries where the Greek Orthodox Church is prominent. Evelyn Underhill writes:

"This technique is so simple that it is within the reach of the most humble worshippers and yet it penetrates so far that it can introduce those who make use of it with faith into the most profound mysteries of contemplation. It expresses the devout peasants childlike, simple appeal to God as well as the great contemplative's endless yearning."

The Jesus prayer is more than a prayer of ejaculation. It is a way of life for those who use it.. The idea is that one makes it so much a part of them that, like breathing, it becomes part of one.

for the eastern church this is the way one comes to union with God for God's presence is no longer an object but grows in one so that one is created in the image of his son

the idea is that the words eventually disappear and a silent speechless vigil with profound peace of heart and mind is sustained even on the busiest day--the act of prayer has become a state of prayer, the prayer w/o ceasing.

the name of Jesus may become a mystical key to the world, an instrument of the hidden offering of everything and everyone, setting the divine seal on the world.

This prayer sums up the heart of the gospel, the mystery of Jesus, which is the relationship between the Father and the Son. To utter Jesus name is to utter the word which "was in the beginning" and in fact is God.

to utter the name of Jesus is to draw near the Father, to contemplate the love and gift of the Father which centers upon Jesus.

to utter his name is to join in some way the Son to the Father and catch sight of some reflection of the mystery of their unity. thus, Jesus gives the power to become children of God (John 1:12)

a moment comes when, for the practitioner, the name of Jesus means all these things: salvation, pardon, union, transfiguration, unity in the church universal, communion and eucharist, the Spirit, the Father, simultaneously--in other words, his name becomes the bearer of the whole Christ.

whoever has attained to this presence has no longer any need of the name for it has truly become the prayer of the mind in the heart. the name is only the support of his presence and at the end of the road, one must become free of the name itself, free from everything, except from Jesus who is in constant union with the person.

Before moving onto the greatest synthesizer of Greek thought, Gregory palamas, I want to briefly mention a few more important mystics of the Greek Orthodox Church.

MACARIUS (c. 300-390)

quoted often by Gregory, he was an Egyptian monk celebrated for his sanctity and miracles. some 50 homilies are attributed to him but are of uncertain origin.

they smack of Constantinople, not Egypt and incorporate non=christian ideas and experiences as well as Christain.

"If you seek God in the dpth, you find Him there; if you seek in the water, there you find Him, if you seek Him in the fire, you will find Him ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ THERE also. He is everywhere."

the homilies use the familiar images of fire working on metal, of Light within light, of the heavenly Bridegroom and the perfected Bride.

of Macarius himælf it was said that "he was at all times in a state of wonder at some divine Vision, and he used to become like a drunken man because of some hidden vision, and his mind was more often exalted to God than it was concerned with ea~~tt~~hly and sublunary things."

GREGORY OF NYSSA (c.335-95)

gregory's brother, Basil revolutionized Christian monasticism. Gregory is the most mystical of the Greek fathers. his mysticism there are four main features.

first, his insistance that the outward universe is a symbol of the unseen; that the visible world is the garment and drapery of God.

he is a Christian Platonist and is trying to express an aspect of platonic thought in Christian terms. but there are practical conclusions for the contemplative who seeks to find God thru the world.

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second, also following Plato, he has a chapter on the ascent to spiritual beauty. The object is 'to become oneself as beautiful as the Beauty which one has touched and entered, and to be made bright and luminous oneself in communion with the real Light', to be changed into something better than we are, and so with clearer vision to see God, the archetype of all Beauty.

third the human's essential being is like God. This is associated with an ancient Greek notion that like perceives like and attracts like. The soul is by a strict necessity attracted to the Deity who is its kin and God grapples to Himself the soul which belongs to Him and drags it out of the material and the irrational.

fourth and finally Gregory gives his Platonism a Christian content in linking the ultimate mystical experience with the sacrament of communion; the divine bread and wine nourish the divine life, so that by communion with Deity humankind may be deified.

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SYMEON OF STUDION (949-1022) 'the new theologian'

Symeon began training for the Imperial service at Constantinople, but early turned to the life of a monk.

After a period at the Studion he was for a quarter of a century abbot of St. Mamas in Constantinople, and won such a reputation that he was known as the New Theologian or the Younger Theologian, second only to Gregory Nazianzen, who was the Theologian.

Symeon was perhaps the greatest of the mediaeval Orthodox mystics. The center of his mystical faith was that deification, the sharing of the divine Essence through grace, was the highest point of the spiritual life.

He uses continually the symbolism of Light and Fire and calls the divine Light, as he himself experiences it, "fire uncreated and invisible, without beginning and immaterial."

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ST. GREGORY PALAMAS (1296-1359)

born in Constantinople to a noble family close to the emperor, he lost his father at age 7 but continued his education at imperial expense.

the usual Byzantine curriculum included a thorough study of Aristotle, at which he excelled. but at age 20 he decided to adopt the monastic life, persuading all the other living members of his family__mother, 2 brothers and two sisters--to follow his example.

On Mt. Athos he joined a community of the oldest and remotest of all the Athonite monasteries.

he was ordained to the priest hood at age 30 in 1326 and lived with a few monks following the pattern of the hesychast life.

each week, for five days, he practised the ideally uninterrupted "prayer of Jesus in his hermitage, rejoining his community on Sat and Sun. x x for Eucharistic and human fellowship.

he got into a debate with a greek Italian "philosopher", Barlaam the Calabrian over the possibility of seeing God, particularly the claim that the human body, and not only the mind, could be transfigured by divine light and contribute to the knowledge of God.

after a civil war in Greece, in 1351 new councils endorsed the theology of Palamas, against the objections of the others

this victory of hesychasm influenced Eastern Orthodoxy as a whole both in Greece and throughout eastern Europe.

a generation of spiritual zealots came to positions of leadership and contributed to the survival of orthodox Christianity during the hard years of the Ottoman rule in the Balkans and the middle east. the spiritual legacy of hesychasm was also transmitted to Russia.

THE TRIADS FOR THE DEFENCE OF THE HOLY HESYCHASTS

these were written as a polemical work directed against Barlaam but it represents a major witness to the content and meaning of Christian experience.

Palamas intention was to formulate an objective theological foundation justifying his brothers, the hesychast monks, in their understanding of prayer and in the pursuit of their avowed goal: the deification of theosis of man in Christ.

the main concern of Palamas is to affirm that this goal is not reserved to isolated "mystics" but is, in fact, identical with the Christian faith itself and therefore offered to all the members of the church in virtue of their baptism.

unlike the west, Byzantines had never forgotten Plato and Aristotle, who represented their own Greek cultural past. however they had always been looked at with suspicion by conservative, particularly monastic, circles, of the Greek church

palamas approached the ancient Greek philosophical tradition as requiring the need for a baptismal rebirth--a death and resurrection--as a condition for their integration into the tradition of the church.

KNOWLEDGE BEYOND KNOWLEDGE

palamas argues that "God is not only beyond knowledge, but also beyond unknowing:" he was the via negativa of Dionysius as an expression of God's transcendence but the major point made by Palamas is precisely that the darkness of the cloud surrounding God is not an empty darkness.

while eliminating all perceptions of the senses, or of the mind, it nevertheless places humans before a Presence, revealed to a transfigured mind and a purified body.

thus, divine "unknowability" does not mean agnosticism, or refusal to know God", but is a preliminary step for a "change of heart and mind enabling us to
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attain to the contemplation of the reality which reveals itself to us as it raises us to God.

in other words, true knowledge of God implies a transfiguration of the human by the Spirit of God, and the negations of apophatic theology signify only the inability of reaching God w/o such a transfiguration by the Spirit.

Palamas has two presuppositions he makes here:

1. anthropological, is that man is capable of transcending his own nature, that, being created according to the image of God, he possess an "organ of vision that is neither the senses nor the intellect

this capacity to transcend oneself is always understood personalistically: the person in virtue of its freedom possesses an openness, a capacity to love the other and therefore particularly, to love God and to know Him in love.

2. the theological principle presupposes is that God, even when He communicates Himself to the purified body and mind remains transcendent in His essence. Communion with God never becomes exhaustion or saturation, but implies the revelation that greater things are always to come.

the model of the Song of Songs inspires the mystics in describing union with God as a limitless ascent "from glory to glory", similar to a perfect form of erotic love, in which true joy is, at the same time, fulfillment and further expectation.

thus, apophatic theology for Palamas is much more than a simple device to ascertain the transcendence of God in terms of human logic.

it describes a state, beyond the conceptual process, where God reveals himself positively to the "spiritual senses", without losing anything of His transcendence as "light" as "source of deification" while remaining more than God, and "more than principle.

this is what leads Palamas to his distinction between the ultimately transcendent and unknowable essence of God on the one hand, and, on the other, the deifying and uncreated energies through which man enters in communion with the Unknowable.

THE TRANSFIGURED BODY

there were many books out promoting the reestablishing of the unity of spirit and body, as a single psychosomatic organism, in the act of prayer.

this included breathing in and out using the Jesus prayer

the reaction of Palamas is to refer to the human body as a natural temple of the Holy spirit which is in us" (ICor 6:19)

he is unconcerned with the various physiological views about the location of the mind in the brain or the heart, but tends to prefer the concept of the heart as the main "instrument" of the Spirit.

since baptism and Eucharistic communion sanctify the whole person, why not accept and encourage the participation of the body in prayer?

God transcends creatures as such, not the human body or mind in particular. Thus, His revelation of His presence and of His sanctifying Spirit touches both the spiritual and physical sides of humans.

without this presence and this sanctification no real communion with God is possible.

UNCREATED GLORY OF CHRIST AND DEIFICATION

"Thabori light" is that uncreated light that surrounded Christ at his transfiguration on Mount Thabor (hence the name) known as the Shekeniah in Jewish mysticism.

this light is seen spiritually by the saints and is an illumination immaterial and divine, a grace invisibly seen and ignorantly known.

the Logos, second person of the trinity, by assuming the fulness of humanity became in His body the source or locus of deification.

being "deified" means "being in Him", that is, participation of His body, which is penetrated with divine life or "energy". The Eucharistic communion is the deified humanity of Christ, in the form of Bread and Wine, has precisely this meaning: Here is an excellent passage of Palamas on this issue.:

Since the Son of God, in this incomparable love for man, did not only unite His divine person with our nature, by clothing Himself in a living body and a soul gifted with intelligence. . . but also united himself. . . with the human persons themselves, in mingling himself with each of the faithful by communion with his Holy Body, and since he becomes one single body with us (Eph 3:6) and makes us a temple of the undivided Divinity, for in the very body of Christ dwells the fulness of the Godhead bodily (Col 2:9), how should he not illuminate those who commune worthily with the divine ray of His Body which is within us, lightening their souls, as He illumined the very bodies of the disciples on Mount Tabor? For, on the day of the Transfiguration, that Body, source of the light of grace, was not yet united with our bodies; it illuminated from outside those who worthily approached it, and sent the illumination into the soul by the intermediary of the physical eyes; but now, since it is mingled with us and exists in us, it illuminated the soul from within.

He insists on the uncreated character of divine light: the uncreated light is the very divinity of Christ shining through his humanity.

If Christ is truly God, this light is authentically divine.

Real deification that is not by essence but by energy, the Logos penetrated by divine energy, so Christ's body becomes the source of divine light and deification.

ESSENCE AND ENERGIES OF GOD

The distinction in God between "essence" and "energy" is nothing but a way of saying that the transcendent God remains transcendent, as He also communicates Himself to humanity.

With the coming of Christ, God enters into immediate communion with humanity. This communion with God in Christ is real and immediate and is not pantheistic absorption into the Divine. The human being is in "God" or rather in "Christ",

preserves his full humanity, his freedom (he is required to "keep the commandments") and he participates in the process that knows no end, because God, in his transcendent essence, is always "above" any given experience of Him.

but the humans communion is not with "created grace" only, but with God himself. This is the meaning of the doctrine of the "uncreated energies", which as we have seen earlier is rooted in the Christological doctrine of God becoming a person as it was formulated in the East after the council of Chalcedon

the only concern of Palamas was to affirm simultaneously the transcendence of God and His immanence in the free gift of communion in the body of Christ.

in maintaining it he is neither an innovator nor a blind conservative but, as an authentic spokesman for the Greek patristic tradition, he never lost sense of the tension and the polarity between Greek thought and the Christian gospel.

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SERAPHIM OF SAROV (1759-1833)

To show what following the hesychast tradition can do, Seraphim was a Russian Christian mystic who spent 15 years in a monastic community, withdrew for 30 years as a hermit, and returned in 1825 to human society, making his spiritual sensitivity and practical service available to all in need.

His life is a classical pattern of withdrawal and return. Seraphim was an ascetic, but through his asceticism the note of joy rings loud and clear.

He used the Jesus Prayer to help his contemplative life and enjoyed the mystical vision of the divine uncreated (Thaboric) light.

More, he received the Light into his own person, so that he became transfigured

One of his disciples, Nicholas Motovilov, was asking him how a person could be sure of being in the Spirit of God. Seraphim told him that they were both at that moment in the Spirit of God.

the disciple found the light from Seraphim blinding. Seraphim testified that the disciple too was shining with splendour.

Motovilov perceived the others voice coming as from the sun, and the light spreading through the trees of the forest and the falling snow, and himself felt an immeasurable well-being, peace of soul and infinite joy in all his heart.

Motovilov's account is one of the most impressive direct testimonies to spiritual experience that we have.