

*THE PALAMITE CONTROVERSY IN POSTMODERN DISCOURSE*

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## *THE PALAMITE CONTROVERSY IN POSTMODERN DISCOURSE*

The Palamite Controversy . . . to the ear it seems to be related to some sort of argument over fossils; for most contemporary people of the West it might as well be. There is perhaps not another more arcane or exotic incidence in Christian history than what unfolded under the guiding banner of Gregory Palamas in 14<sup>th</sup> century Constantinople. Likewise, there is likely no other event in Christian history that has so profoundly grappled with the question of the nature and extent of human knowledge, and the possibility of knowing God.

For Palamas this knowledge was contingent upon the sublime unity of the human person, within a perichoresis of grace which initiated the human subject into participation in the divine nature;<sup>1</sup> this grace or “divine energy” effects the process which is ultimately realised in the telos of human destiny in God – deification. The Palamite Controversy itself has a special relevance to the current trend in postmodern theological discourse which has largely gone unnoticed; though it is certain that there are many angles of perspective that can yield deep criticism at the same time, and likewise great profit.

One of the more important and perhaps less obvious perspectives is that of Post-colonialism. The vast majority of Orthodox Christian lands fell under the yoke of the Ottoman Empire, or in the Slavic lands under the Mongols, and they later came under the pall of communism. For the last 700 years the people of this tradition that conceived and birthed the rarefied concepts of Palamite doctrine have been an occupied, beleaguered people, and even though that time is now past (albeit relatively recently) as a people they still betray the effects of colonisation, and a true sense of independent identity is not yet a part of their ethos. Certainly as much as Greek, Slavic, and Arabic Christians may speak of their ancient cultures

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<sup>1</sup> In this particular context it would be appropriate to indicate that the Divine is making a Self disclosure that is infinite and unconditional, to the human person who is firmly set within a conditioned position which is defined by limitation both in terms of knowledge, capacity for understating, appropriate tools for interpretation, and the awful constricting limitations of language.

and tradition, this is still to some degree wishful thinking on their part, as they all have been alienated at least partially from a full experience and continuity with their tradition. It is for this reason that writings on this last great theological debate are coloured by their author's experience of oppression and the loss and confusion of identity. In fact all of contemporaneous theological writings by Orthodox writers represent a post-colonial perspective and an attempt to shake off the shroud of recent history, though it does seem that the vast majority of these theologians and writers are not conscious of this fact<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly the few writers who are aware of their position as survivors of colonisation, have often swung widely into the camp of political and religious extremism.

The first and most essential fact about the Palamite controversy is that it represents a defining moment in history expressing the final break between the Greek East and the Latin West, in terms of epistemology. Philosophically it was a deciding event of epistemic division, definition, and conflict. The doctrine of the Hesychasts as expounded in the Palamite councils was at its core an issue about the limits of human knowledge, the nature of that knowledge, and the reality of what is known; bearing the aforesaid in mind, the battle for defining knowledge is finally about the capacity to know God and higher realities. By speaking of this event as epistemic definition, separation, and conflict with the West, it must be understood that we are speaking from our 21<sup>st</sup> century context, because epistemology is not actually spoken of as a branch of knowledge before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It may therefore be an attempt at intellectual colonisation to insist too stringently upon imposing all of our epistemic demands on a 14th century event. It remains certain that when the Byzantine figures who were placed on the board of this game played out their roles in history, they did not look upon this debate as an epistemological battle, but as a battle for theological truth.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be remembered that the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople has until the present day suffered continual violation of its religious freedom by the Turkish government. Western Christians would do well not to forget this fact, and to allow a certain tendency of some scholars to describe the Ottoman Empire as "tolerant" when in fact tolerance has continually been in short supply.

The atmosphere of 14<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium was ripe for a debacle, for a confrontation of Greek patristic thought against the burgeoning Renaissance<sup>3</sup> thought of the West. This is to put it simply, but the contemporary positioning of thought was anything but simple. Within the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Constantinople there existed side-by-side proponents of Scholasticism, of renaissance humanism, students and academics of pre-Christian philosophy, and staunch adherents of the newly revised Western Aristotelianism. It can perhaps be considered with great wonderment, just how it was that a small band of monastics with their almost esoteric mystical doctrine were able to champion their perspective and win out in the end, over wealthy, powerful, and noble opponents within the royal court of the Byzantine Emperor, and in the arena of Ecclesiastical council.

In considering further the environment of Constantinople it may be useful to have in mind the fact that the Byzantine Empire never went through a Dark Ages per se. In its day the city of Constantinople was perhaps the greatest and most beautiful city in Europe. A dark age was encroaching upon it with the cutting away of territory a piece at a time over several centuries by the forces of the Turks and other Islamic conquerors. By the time of the Palamite councils, the Byzantine Empire had existed already for over a thousand years. Although after the fourth crusade and the Latin rule of Constantinople,<sup>4</sup> various factions would compete for the throne, and a much destabilised Empire would be embattled by surrounding envious monarchs, such as Bulgaria, Serbia, and various factional interests of the “Latins.” Almost a century later, after the Palamite councils the city of Constantinople would fall to the Ottomans in 1552 and the last vestige of the Byzantine Empire would succumb to the eventual fate of all human endeavours. Though the various political intricacies and byzantine motivations of the West would allow the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire, the results of failed diplomacy and

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<sup>3</sup> Early Renaissance.

<sup>4</sup> 1204 CE, also known as the Fourth Crusade.

disinterest would yield the sweetest of fruits. The Ottoman victory over Εἰς τὴν Πόλιν<sup>5</sup> would disperse vast numbers of Hellenic Scholars who took in their possession Greek manuscripts and Hellenic learning to the great centres of education in the West, and there in the universities of Western Europe their teaching would help ignite the Reformation.<sup>6</sup>

There are several distinct points from the Palamite controversy that are especially relevant to the concerns of Postmodernism in particular. 1) that the whole human person participates in the grace of God via the divine nature; not a division of mind, soul, body, spirit. 2) that this deification is not simply individualistic, but is truly universal as a process of redeeming all of humanity. 3) that Palamite epistemology has soteriological consequences. The “person” is finally reclaimed, redeemed, and restored to the original human estate. 4) the primary purpose of the human person is addressed and fulfilled, i.e. prayer and thanksgiving.

There is a direct ontological implication that is not articulated in this semi-defined epistemology, i.e. that “being” is a verb, it is “be-ing” and that our being-ness is a property of our movement toward and back to the divine by the continual movement of grace into us. While it is true that the late Byzantine Christian tradition was still speaking in the language of Christianised Neoplatonism, it is at this point that it has reached its zenith of extropy,<sup>7</sup> and within that critical mass it erupted as something with altogether new possibilities. I say that the epistemological understanding is semi-defined, but the practical reality is that the Byzantines defined what it was not, in contradistinction to the Latin epistemic position.

Clearly Greek patristic epistemology was not the conclusion of Renaissance humanism, nor

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<sup>5</sup> Constantinople would come to be called “Istanbul” which is a Turkish adaption of the Greek Εἰς τὴν Πόλιν (to the city). The name Istanbul would not become official until 1930.

<sup>6</sup> The obvious first destination of the Hellenic Scholar’s Diaspora where the major cities in Italy. The vast majority of the writings of Greek Classical literature and works of Roman law were preserved through Byzantium. It is probable that the infusion of Roman Law texts helped to ignite new ideas about government and the role of the state, and indirectly provided the material for the conception of such Enlightenment nations as the United States of America.

<sup>7</sup> -- the full extent of an organism’s capacity for growth, intelligence, functionality, vital life energy, life experience, including the drive for excellence, improvement and growth; the full limits of ἀρετή have been exhausted. The term was first coined by Tom Bell and further defined by Max More.

its underlying *a priori*. The lack of positive definition by the Greeks of their epistemic position is truly in keeping with an ongoing commitment to negative theology. By defining what their Christian epistemology was not, the way to a correct epistemic position was safeguarded, while still remaining uncomfortably amorphous, undefined and uncanonised. The Byzantine position against Barlaamite epistemology (and thus Western Scholasticism) had deep and dire political consequences which would be revealed in the next century. An important question to ask is: what were the political interests and powers attempting to accomplish in supporting the activities which would yield the final outcome of Palamite doctrine? Was there even a political goal in view? Whose interests were being served, and how were they being served? The intellectual environment, as has been previously noted, was by majority sympathetic with, or altogether in the camp of renaissance humanism and Scholasticism; how did a hidden minority come to exert such power?

One can argue that many of the primary concepts which are the basis of Palamite language and conceptuality are prime examples of Foundationalism, and further that the entire fabric of Palamite thought is pinioned on the metanarrative of the Byzantine Christian world view. As such the Palamite councils may represent the machinations of Empire, and a semantic formula for political control; after all, it is no coincidence that the Byzantine insignia bears a double-headed eagle, i.e. representing the unity of emperor and patriarch/empire and church. This is a valid criticism that is fully worthy of enquiry. However the arena for most political criticism is generally reserved for capitalistic hegemonic systems of oppression. How has Palamite doctrine enforced the status quo of the Byzantine *Weltanschauung*?

Prominent representatives for Eastern Christianity would argue that the Palamite doctrine does not dogmatise Neoplatonism, and further more that the Christian church has never embraced this philosophical *a priori*. The genuine answer to this is both “yes” and “no.” Historical contexts have necessitated the church’s engagement with the contemporaneous

philosophers and pagan intellectuals, discoursing with society at large using the language of the interlocutor always results in the linguistic osmosis of structural meaning. The chief interest that Postmodernism might find in the events and implications of Palamite doctrine is the fact that it represents a unified defence, if not attack against the early origins of Modernism, taking as a definite position the pre-modern stance of late antiquity.

What does it mean to “see” God? Not as an object, (which is idolatry) but as a subject? Postmodernist<sup>8</sup> idol-smashing demands that the “vision of God” must entail an ontotheological truth that transcends phenomenon, sensorial perception, cognitive functionality, and every other concrete expression. This is fully in keeping with the apophatic theological heritage of Eastern Christendom, and in fact intuits its basic aims quite admirably. For the Byzantines the vision of God was in effect union with the divine, which in its self represents the sole source of supra-mundane knowledge which may only be described through the mechanism of negative theology. William Abrahams comments:

This union leads to a knowledge of God which is of a different order from that which begins with a knowledge of creatures, and from this empirical data moves, by means of analogy, to an inference to the existence of God. In fact, knowledge of God transcends the spiritual intellect. True knowledge of God transcends the faculties, moreover, “this knowledge, which is beyond conception, is common to all who believe in Christ. Even then such knowledge does not pertain to the essence of the divine nature. It reaches only to the action of energies of God, As such, it is made possible through participation in the life of the Spirit who deifies the human subject and thus enable him or her to transcend nature, virtue, and knowledge. Hence, knowledge of God is knowledge of God by grace; it transcends all the normal categories of deployed by philosophers to demarcate mode of knowledge derived from or applied to the created order of things.”<sup>9</sup>

The primary criticism that postmodernism can make of Palamite doctrine is its claim to absolute truth, and the canonization of a defined way to this absolute truth. By contrast, I would suggest that it may not so much be that Eastern Christianity claims a basis of absolute

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<sup>8</sup> This infers an unstated obvious truism of Postmodernism – it is iconoclastic; and Postmodern theological aims all result in the exposing of hidden idols, and their dismantling.

<sup>9</sup> William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 71-72.

truth in the vision of the uncreated light of being, and in the process of theosis, as it maintains an orthopractic progressive “way” toward it, without defining the end goal (and certainly by defining what it is not). This is indeed postmodern to its core; Postmodernism need not declare that absolute truth does not exist, but that the claim to possessing it is both dangerous, prone to oppression, and an act of violence toward those who are outside of the control system engendered by the structures of that truth claim. The Hesychastic tradition presents a tried and true path of ascent toward that “truth” without definitively defining what that “truth” is, or who it is that possesses this truth. Likewise, the Palamite doctrine does not declare to provide, nor does it claim to possess some infallible access to absolute truth. The very nature of an ecclesiastical council somewhat belies the commitments of Postmodernism, since the postmodern ethos is staunchly opposed to systems of pre-modern authoritarianism. There is however another way to view the role of the Palamite councils – they do in fact represent a conciliar, and even democratic approach to attaining a consensus, not unlike Habermas’ *consensus theory of truth*. An ecumenical council outplays the best hope of an *ideal speech situation* as Habermas describes it.

As the dogmatic teaching of historical Christianity affirms, the Logos of God, being very God of very God, emptied Self out of the innate divine glory and power to become fully human. So then kenosis is the basis of incarnation theology, and the basis of the apophatic way, which is anticipated interestingly by Postmodernism in its emphasis on the negative way, and the end of rational capacity. Truth is not to be found in the rational discursive mind, not in the summation of all intellectualizations by semantic means, but in transcending the rational, to noetic experiential truth – gnosis. Postmodernism consistently affirms that reason, and the human universe of reason is an artificial construct, built out of language, and social conditioning which flow in the long and deep river of human culture. Good philosophy, and certainly good theology, asks deeply pertinent questions about the meaning of human

existence, our place in the universe, our origins, and our destiny. The problem with questions is that often they are answered, or at least an answer is attempted and sometimes dogmatised. Postmodernism, whether it be philosophy or theology (there is little difference in the end) must be propelled and guided by questions, but in the case of the postmodern agenda the answer is often more limiting and dangerous than the question. It is for this reason that apophatic theology (via negativa) is irreducible to postmodern concern; it is not so much in the answers to the questions as it is the direction that the questions take us. In the end there may be no real answers, and if the basic assumption of Postmodernism is valid, then there really are no ultimate truths . . . at least that can be communicated in human language and culture. But . . . there is indeed ultimate truth, and it is to be experienced in the journey toward becoming, in the long path that is a journey made up of step after step. The immanent practicality of negative theology for Postmodern concern is not the arriving at answers, but in arriving at the end of reason, and the collapse of human language, and thus of human constructs of reality. If human reality is made up of language which has been “traditioned” through countless generations, with subtle shades of meaning in each lexeme transferred through osmosis, then it is this very synthetic reality that must be exhausted in order to come into a genuine experiential knowledge of reality/truth. Perhaps without fully realising it, or giving voice to it, postmodern theologians by embracing negative theology have taken upon themselves, not an endless series of questions without answers leading to a meaningless miasma, but true and vital mysticism. For the Byzantine Christian tradition, and certainly in the spirit of Palamas, the apophatic way inevitably leads to fire and darkness upon the mount of God, and an ontological participation in God’s divine nature which transcends words or human modes of knowledge and rationality.

## *An Historical Background*

In the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century of Constantinople a controversial clash arose between a primordial Christian tradition of mysticism, and the newly burgeoning presence of renaissance humanism represented in the person of Barlaam of Calabria. The forces and influences, which would finally congeal in the Reformation and later in the deistic Enlightenment, would pit themselves against an anachronistic and otherworldly phenomenon known as *hesychasm*<sup>10</sup>. The hesychastic tradition represents a hidden but powerful stream of mystical interior prayer in the Greek East that is reputed to have existed within the Christian Church since apostolic days<sup>11</sup>. As romantic as this may sound it is nonetheless somewhat unlikely to have existed in such a developed form, although there does appear to be evidence of the infancy of this tradition and its primary constituents prior to the Nicene period.<sup>12</sup> The central enclave of the hesychastic tradition for all of Eastern Christendom was and is Mount Athos, the *Agion Oros*<sup>13</sup>, with its hoary past reaching back well before the 9<sup>th</sup> century, although other important centres of monastic tradition have had an important formative role in the development such as Egypt (particularly Sinai), Syria, and Palestine, together with foundational figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Evagrius of Ponticus, Maximos the Confessor, Gregory of Sinai, and Simeon the New Theologian. A monk by the name of Gregory Palamas was called upon by his monastic brethren and thrown into the fray to defend their *raison d'être*, and their keen perception of practical theology as defining the basis of the Church's soteriology, and *ipso facto* its Christocentric anthropology. The most

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<sup>10</sup> ἠσυχία -- Hesychia: having the basic meaning of 'silence' or "stillness". In the prayer tradition of hesychia, indicating the general way of progress, and also the psycho-spiritual state of silence.

<sup>11</sup> This is the common claim of adherents and defenders of Hesychasm, although it is unlikely to be true, at least in its current form. There are however, antecedents to Hesychasm that do lead back to the period of the early church such as Jewish mysticism (Merkabah meditation) and Hermetic and Platonic theurgy methods.

<sup>12</sup> The origin of the hesychastic way of prayer is concretely based on Jewish mysticism, and the idea of the "name" of God transmitting God's power, characteristics, and tangible and eminent presence.

<sup>13</sup> Ἅγιον Ὄρος -- the "Holy Mountain"

essential point of this protracted doctrinal struggle was the issue of epistemology: can the human person “know” God? If so, to what extent, and how is this possible? What constitutes the union of the individual person with God? Each of these questions was confronted from the bases of very different innate and underlying philosophies. William Abraham speaks of these differing philosophies:

As the fascinating debate between Palamas and Barlaam the Calabrian shows, the East canonized a way of reaching knowledge of God which is suspicious of deductive reasoning, is essentially rooted in a spiritual life crowned by intimate union with the divine, and is genuinely open to those who have not been initiated into the skills of the philosophers. Whereas in the West, theology moved into the university, where it becomes a specialized science open only to those who are appropriately founded in philosophy, in the East, theology remained in the monasteries, where it is grounded on a disciplined spiritual life within the Church and is construed as much as a healing art as an academic discipline. Buried in these alternatives are competing accounts of the mystery of God, the relation between reason and revelation, the role of the Holy Spirit in knowledge of God, and the place of philosophical data at the foundation of theology.<sup>14</sup>

As has almost always been the case, the exact formulation of doctrinal expression has been initiated by the activities or teachings of groups or individuals, which were recognized as heretical by the representatives of “tradition.” Heterodox teachings of one form or another have necessitated all of the seven great ecumenical councils with their resultant doctrinal definitions and exact semantic formulae. This fact also comes to bear in the crystallization of the Palamite Controversy in the person of Barlaam, a man who would come to be remembered among the Byzantine church as a notable heteroclit.

Barlaam came to Constantinople in 1330;<sup>15</sup> he was an Italian “monk and philosopher, who originated from Seminara in Calabria,<sup>16</sup> a Greek by language and sentiment, but western

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<sup>14</sup> William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p 69.

<sup>15</sup>Romanides states that “he went East to study Aristotle further in the original [language], even though he was already a master of the Aristotelian Categories and Physics (having studied them in Latin translation).” Previously in 1326 he had travelled to the Greek peninsula where he converted to Orthodoxy and became a monk staying in the vicinity of Thessalonica for around 4 years, and there gained the reputation as a philosopher.

educated and imbued with the spirit of the Italian renaissance, [who] sought above all a closer knowledge of the ancient Hellas, the land of Plato and Aristotle.”<sup>17</sup> “The humanist circles in which he had moved<sup>18</sup> were seeking to free themselves from the intellectual discipline established in the Middle Ages and which is symbolized and embodied in the Thomist school of theology”.<sup>19</sup> Upon reaching Constantinople, Barlaam quickly gained the patronage of the Great Domestic John Catacuzene,<sup>20</sup> by whom he was chiefly employed in producing commentaries on the writings of St. Dionysius, the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius). Curiously, it was the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius that formed the foundation to the *apophatic way*, and thus provided the conceptual framework for the development of the Hesychastic tradition. It was primarily due to Barlaam’s interpretation of the apophatic way of the Areopagite as expressed in his writings that finally brought him into conflict with the powerful monastic tradition, which during this time held considerable power in political circles.

Though Barlaam originally came to the capital of Byzantium to further his studies of the Greek philosophers, he apparently was already a highly skilled expert of Aristotelian thought and methodology within the Latin tradition; though Meyendorff does not hesitate to label him a Platonist it is perhaps more factual to understand that he was primarily an adherent of

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<sup>16</sup> Calabria is a region of Italy to the south most point; in that area that is the “toes” of the boot. Calabria is known to have been a region of Italy that remained Greek speaking, and observing the Byzantine liturgy and *typicon*, even though often formally under the *omophorion* of the bishop of Rome.

<sup>17</sup> John Meyendorff. *A Study of Gregory Palamas*. (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Press, 1998), 42.

<sup>18</sup> Meyendorff here refers to the intellectual circle of Barlaam in Italy.

<sup>19</sup> John Meyendorff. *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*. (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Press, 1998), 82.

<sup>20</sup> He was the Emperor-Regent of Byzantium.

Aristotelianism,<sup>21</sup> who like his colleagues of Italy insisted upon rationalistic thought, with its incumbent epistemic limitations.

Barlaam quickly made his mark on the scene of the Constantinopolitan intelligentsia making rapid progress beyond many of the prominent scholars who were his peers, and likewise incurred the wrath and jealousy of many. The fact of his commitment to an intellectual ethos that was tangibly detectable as diverging from the *status quo* of the prevailing theological and intellectual environment did no favours for him in the long run for his tenure there. In his early career in Constantinople, Barlaam produced prodigious writings, which were widely circulated, and had great popularity. He was widely sought as an eminent expert in a sundry of subjects as far afield as astronomy and statesmanship, which did nothing but elevate his rank as a person of importance and prestige.<sup>22</sup>

For his part, Barlaam is perhaps more responsible for the tragic detour that his career would take than his dubious doctrinal writings and opposition to the Athonite tradition that he would come to vilify; the man is remembered as “temperamentally flamboyant and ambitious, he treated them [the prominent Byzantine humanist scholars] with disdain, which only increased their jealousy at his success.”<sup>23</sup> The literary and historical record of Barlaam the man, indicates he was proud, disdainful, boastful, argumentative and belligerent. For this reason “the Calabrian philosopher never got on to good terms with his colleagues, the Byzantine humanists.”<sup>24</sup>

The Calabrian’s unfortunate personality traits would soon land him into a theological and political calamity from which he would not successfully extricate himself without powerful

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<sup>21</sup> In Meyendorff’s assertion we can see traces of his Post-colonial perspective, rather than the interpretation of a Byzantine; since Meyendorff was of the Russian émigré community of France.

<sup>22</sup> John Meyendorff. *A Study of Gregory Palamas*. (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Press, 1998), 42.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

help, and in the end it would result in his exodus from the *oikoumenikos*<sup>25</sup> of Byzantium. Curiously, Barlaam originally brought notoriety to himself in being a defender of the Greek Church against the Latins, and even went to impressive measures in writing diatribes against the *filioque*<sup>26</sup> clause, canonized by Rome. His service to the empire was enlisted in representing the Greek position to visiting Papal legates from Rome in 1333-1344. In his written response Barlaam indicated that the use of the *filioque* by Rome was unfounded for several reasons: “1) God being unknowable, the Latins should give up their claim to demonstrate their doctrine of the Procession of the Holy Spirit; for they cannot demonstrate a reality that is outside of all human perception and reasoning. 2) Both Latins and Greeks should be content to refer to the Patristic writers to whom God had given special illumination, but that “moderns” no longer were privy to.”<sup>27</sup> “Thus Barlaam’s theological agnosticism ended in dogmatic relativism.”<sup>28</sup> While applying the confession of the “unknowable reality of God” that he gleaned from the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, he had actually gone so far as to eliminate the sovereign intervention of the Deity in illumining the whole human person,<sup>29</sup> enabling and granting them the grace to come into participation into the eternal mysteries of

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<sup>25</sup> -- The whole inhabited world; suggesting the limits of the empire as the boundaries of the civilized world, beyond which only the barbarians dwelt.

<sup>26</sup> Filioque – Latin for “and the Son,” first inserted into the Nicene Creed at the Third Council of Toledo in 589, but finally imposed upon the Latin sector of the Church by Charlemagne. The Latin inclusion of this clause, which precipitated the Photian schism, lead directly to the Great Schism of 1054. *Credo in Spiritum Sanctum qui ex patre filioque procedit.*

<sup>27</sup> Romanides writes in criticism of Meyendorff: “The *Filioque* question, for Barlaam, cannot be settled by demonstration, because the arguments of both sides cannot be deduced from any principle given by God either in philosophy or revelation. Therefore such a question as the Procession of the Holy Spirit transcends human reason and cannot be demonstrated. If it were revealed, there would be no need of demonstration, since it would be a first principle, and it would not transcend human reason. Father John makes the mistake of deducing from Barlaam’s specific scepticism regarding demonstrative proof on the question of *Filioque* a universal scepticism concerning the knowability of God.” –

Romanides, John. “Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics: Part 1.” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*. Volume VI, Number 2 Winter, Brookline, Massachusetts; 1960-61. p 4.

<sup>28</sup> John Meyendorff. *A Study of Gregory Palamas*. (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Press, 1998), 43.

<sup>29</sup> The important concept in this statement is that the entire human person, body, mind, and spirit, were to be involved in the revelation of God. God would elevate even the body to participate in the vision of divine light, thus even the human eyes would be a part in the Hesychast’s experience.

God's being. Barlaam had thus unwittingly fallen prey to contemporary humanistic thinking in his understanding of the implications of the Pseudo-Dionysian text. While Barlaam was most definitely making a real attempt to defend and define Orthodox doctrine to the Papal ambassadors, he unwittingly fell for the very same philosophical *a priori(s)* of the church tradition which the Papal legates represented. Barlaam's apologetical texts would soon be brought into the hands of Gregory Palamas, who had at the same time also been writing a defence against the Latins addressing the same issue of the *filioque*. Romanides comments on Barlaam thusly:

Barlaam's starting-point makes it possible for him to contend that in the patristic tradition there is a third position on the *Filioque* question which is not that of the mediaeval Franco-Latins or East Romans. He maintains that this third position, which puts the issue beyond the reaches of reason and therefore of demonstrative proof, is the key to union. Barlaam's starting-point also explains why Palamas accuses him of reducing what in Patristic theology are the suprarational experiences of faith to the level of rational inquiry. For Barlaam, knowledge of God is rational, and only things not known of God are suprarational. For Palamas, knowledge of God is based on the suprarational experience of the prophets, apostles, and saints; it transcends all rational knowledge and cannot, therefore, be understood or defined in rational categories, or dealt with dialectically and syllogistically, taking non-existent universals as a starting-point. These observations indicate strongly that in the persons of Barlaam and Palamas one is confronted with a real clash between the *credo ut intelligam* tradition of the post-Augustinian West and the apophatic theology of the East Roman Fathers. One cannot doubt the sincerity with which Barlaam believed himself to be Orthodox. Yet this sincerity in no way proves that upon coming East he left his Franco-Latin presuppositions in the West, or simply came, as Father John [Meyendorff] contends, as a non-Latin Byzantine theologian and philosopher.<sup>30</sup>

The associates of Palamas asked him if there was not some conflict between Barlaam's writings and his, but at first Palamas merely replied that each position was "Orthodox." Palamas, however, began to have his own personal doubts, though being a man who was not quarrelsome he let the issue rest as long as he could. Soon after, Palamas obtained a copy of the *Anti-Latin* writings of Barlaam, which he had written under the patronage of the Emperor as the official response and rebuttal to the papal legates during 1334. It would be while

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<sup>30</sup> John Romanides. "Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics: Part 1." *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*. Volume VI, Number 2 Winter, Brookline, Massachusetts; 1960-61. p 5.

reading the Anti-Latin texts that Gregory would begin to see the depth of Barlaam's agnosticism, and how his positions ultimately undermined the Orthodox position. "Did not the unknowable God of Dionysius reveal himself? If he revealed himself to the Fathers, why should he not reveal himself to-day to the Church through the theologians called to elucidate the mystery of the Trinity with the aid of the Holy Spirit?"<sup>31</sup>

While Barlaam was very willing to affirm that special revelation of God had occurred in the times of the early Church Fathers, and that God had indeed willed to be personally known, the fact nevertheless was that this privilege was no longer a reality in the Christian faith, which was now bereft of all intercourse with the divine sphere, but left to merely depend on the concrete revelations of the past. For Barlaam the ascendancy of renaissance thinking had eclipsed the vital and always-contemporary experience of the early patristic period, God was in all practical reality "dead," and humanity was left with the mere bulk of castings from an earlier time. The church's experience of Pentecost had ceased, the revelation of the Spirit was withdrawn, and the light of the Mount of Transfiguration had dimmed to the point of being merely an historical event. The beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,"<sup>32</sup> had become only a pious saying.

Gregory's first conciliatory effort toward Barlaam was the writing of a letter to him, which expressed his concern over the seeming incongruity of his own writings and those of Barlaam's. This letter was used as the forum for the first interchange between Palamas and Barlaam, which would be orchestrated through his friend and former disciple Gregory Akindynos, who set up the initial meeting in Thessalonica. In this meeting Akindynos, representing the interest of Palamas, would read extracts from Palamas' text *Apodictic Treatises* in all those points which seemed to contradict the Calabrian's writings, and asking

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<sup>31</sup> John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Press, 1998), 44.

<sup>32</sup> Mat 5:8. *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, Edited by Walter J. Harrelson, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), p 1754.

Barlaam's explanation for the seeming disparity. Though Akindynos tried earnestly to ameliorate the mounting conflict by bringing into question the commonality of "demonstration"<sup>33</sup> which the two parties had fundamentally different understandings of, ultimately Akindynos' efforts came to naught. Barlaam's pride had been offended, and he responded in regard to Palamas' dialogue,

'I will humiliate that man,' his answer is full of sarcasm at Palamas who pretended to 'demonstrate' divine things. Like Akindynos, he distinguishes between the various meanings of the word 'demonstration,' but he specifically accepts the authority of pagan philosophers as providing, on a par with the Fathers of the Church, sure premises for 'dialectic' reasoning which, in matters concerning God, can never be 'apodictic.'<sup>34</sup>

This interchange, and the resultant outburst from Barlaam, would be the catalyst that would determine a long running feud between the two men, and ultimately yield profound results in the life of the whole church.<sup>35</sup> Gregory responded by composing and having delivered, from the hermitage of St. Sabbas, to Barlaam a long treatise against Plato, Aristotle, and the Greek philosophers whom he (Barlaam) had proclaimed, along with a thorough denunciation of

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<sup>33</sup> Referring to *apodictic* – the demonstration, manifestation, or expression of truth; or absolute certainty.

<sup>34</sup> John Meyendorff. *A Study of Gregory Palamas*. (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Press, 1998), 44.

<sup>35</sup> Barlaam would bring charges against the monastic party of *Messelianism* to the authorities which would result in the first Palamite Council held on June 10, 1341 of which Palamas and his supporters would be exonerated post haste, and Barlaam would publicly admit his error and ask for forgiveness from Palamas. Barlaam after this point returned to Italy, where he would be formally received into the Roman Church, and later become a bishop. In the second Palamite Council of 1347, Gregory's old friend Akindynos would turn against him under the duress of political allegiances when the Imperial throne was vacated at the death of Adronicus III, which would spark a civil war in Byzantium for the opposing parties' possession of the throne, and a theological controversy became a political clash, fodder for allegiances and a banner for campaigns. Though the Palamite controversy actually covers three separate and distinct councils, these three councils are customarily referred to in the singular. 1<sup>st</sup> Council of Sophia of 1341, 2<sup>nd</sup> Council of Sophia in 1347, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Council of Blachernae 1351.

By making appeal against the Palamites, Akindynos obtained the allegiance of the former anti-Palamite party and would be consecrated as a bishop by them. He would then obtain the excommunication of Gregory with the changing political allegiances of the Byzantine court, and for a short time Palamas would be "in asylum" at Agia Sophia and at various other monasteries (Chora being one of them), and finally in the palace prison until the common cause of the monastic tradition would receive another chance at reprieve before the throne. During the span of the three councils, the fortunes of Gregory Palamas would go up, and down, and then up again; he would be imprisoned, then excommunicated, then the excommunication would be declared void by the new patriarch in charge, and Gregory would spend the last decade (nine years) of his life writing and living the life of a hermit at St. Savva on Athos when he wasn't presiding as the bishop of Thessalonica. Ten years later after his death in 1359 Gregory Palamas would be canonized as a saint in the Byzantine Church.

profane Hellenism.<sup>36</sup> The contest over semantics concerning the meaning of *demonstration* had not,

convinced Palamas: it was not enough in his view, to change the premises of a syllogism in order to transform its value and give it an apodictic sense; it is the process of human thought itself which must be basically transformed by the action of the Holy Spirit in order to receive a sure knowledge of God. Barlaam not only refused to accept the transformation, but preferred to consider the profane philosophers as ‘enlightened by God,’ that is to say to reduce grace to a natural gift and thus lessen its scope.<sup>37</sup>

Gregory did not wait on Barlaam’s response but wrote another letter immediately, which put the cause of the Hesychasts on the battlefield of Barlaam’s assaults.

During this same time of the apologetic clash between these two, Barlaam became aware of a particular form of spirituality that was en vogue within the monastic movement known as Hesychasm, which was and is a highly technical system of prayer, aimed at super-mundane experience with the end goal of “seeing God.” The Calabrian philosopher heard that the monastic enclaves which perpetuated this tradition of noetic prayer, openly claimed to see the very light of God, and therefore to see God with direct apprehension of the noetic realities. His first encounters with representatives of this spiritual tradition were men who were neither impressive, nor educated enough to give satisfactory answers to the questions of the “intellectual sceptic who had just denied, in his argument with Palamas all effective action of grace over human reasoning. Barlaam’s proud temperament and also his spiritualising convictions, inspired by Platonic philosophy, roused him to the greatest indignation, when he was told that the human body could itself participate in prayer and feel the action of divine grace.”<sup>38</sup> Meyendorff comments on Barlaam’s preconception of mystical knowledge:

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<sup>36</sup> This denunciation of the classical philosophers from the pagan era would be a curious hallmark of the Greek Christian world, which would never embrace their ethos, or allow the innate ideas of these writings, to steer the course of Christian theological thought.

<sup>37</sup> John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Press, 1998), 45.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

Barlaam based his position on two Postulates: 1.) The Aristotelian postulate that all knowledge, including knowledge of God, is derived from perception of sense “experience.” 2.) A Neoplatonic postulate, based also on Christian writers, especially the Pseudo-Dionysius, according to which God is beyond sense experience and therefore unknowable. Barlaam held that all knowledge of God must be indirect, passing always “through beings” perceptible to sense. Therefore mystical knowledge itself can have only a “symbolic” reality.<sup>39</sup>

Within the context of Byzantine thought, Barlaam’s God was ultimately unknowable, thus “The unknowable God of Barlaam, in fact, can have no true existence, and, in any case, would Christ have come if God is always to remain beyond the reach of man?”<sup>40</sup> The Palamite party held that by the action of the divine energies the human eye was physically enabled to see the light along with the perceptive attributes of the noetic faculties. One of the most famous and interesting derisive phrases of western culture was derived from Barlaam’s response to this encounter: *navel gazers*. When he wrote a series of treatises opposing the Hesychasts whom he referred to as *omphalopsychoi*<sup>41</sup> in response to the initial reaction that he had in learning about the psychosomatic techniques used in the noetic prayer of the Hesychasts.

From the progressive and complimentary bodily positions assumed by the aspiring Hesychasts, one of these involved placing the chin of the head upon the breast bone while sitting on a low stool, and fixing the eyes either into the heart area or just above the solar plexus. Other techniques used by Hesychasts involved the regulation of the breath, the synchronization of the verbal prayer with the breath in particular rhythms, and finally the uniting of the silent noetic prayer to the flow of the breath. Other particular approaches sometimes involved the retention of the breath for periods of time, although it may be that

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<sup>39</sup> John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 102.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>41</sup> (Men-with-their-souls-in- the-navel) ομφαλοψυχοι. This nomenclature refers to the bodily posture taken by the Hesychasts during their prayer discipline. The posture in this context is the one in which the contemplative places their chin upon their breastbone and fixes the eye upon the heart area, or around the solar plexus, in the effort to bring the “mind into the heart.”

this is a common misunderstanding due to the fact that the hesychastic adept may indeed, and is known to, enter into an ecstatic state that involves an unexplainable suspension of breath and heartbeat. The heartbeat is also sometimes used as an anchor on which to fix the Jesus Prayer (Ιησου ευχη) or just simply the intoning of the divine name to the regulated beating of the heart within a cycle of the breath. Hesychastic tradition bears more than a striking resemblance to yoga, and other forms of eastern meditation. It is replete with psychosomatic techniques, and appears to progress through identifiable steps of thought-control, and higher states of consciousness that are quite similar to what is described in the classic Hindu text, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. These cursory facts of the psychosomatic methods of the Hesychasts were lampooned by the Calabrian, however it would be the overall goal of these methods that would spark the rancor of Barlaam. That the Hesychasts claimed to have attained the vision of God through the path of “silence, or stillness,” and to have actually seen the “uncreated light of Being” which conferred super-rational knowledge, and conscious mystical union with God -- this was completely unacceptable to him, and he would wage a bitter campaign against this mystical tradition, because he saw it as a fundamental challenge to every basis of truth that he understood.

Firstly, Barlaam would not allow that these monks actually did have a vision of the uncreated divine glory, and secondly he would claim that the “light” that they beheld in their vision was merely a product of the mind or imagination.<sup>42</sup> Barlaam’s underlying assumptions

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<sup>42</sup> Romanides comments in “Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics: Part 1.” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*. Volume VI, Number 2 Winter, Brookline, Massachusetts; 1960-61:

Following the Augustinian tradition of the West, Barlaam took it for granted and passionately argued that the glory of God revealed in this life to the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles was a created glory, and that in each separate case of revelation this glory came into existence and passed out of existence, being of only a short duration. Having been theologically formed by such works as Augustine’s *De Trinitate*,<sup>42</sup> the Calabrian knew quite well that it was not the uncreated Divinity itself which was revealed in the Old and New Testaments, but temporarily-existing creatures which symbolized divinity, and thereby elevated the minds of those who were the objects of revelation to various levels of the comprehension of ultimate truth. Only later in his life did St. Augustine make what became the classical Latin exception of an ecstatic vision of the divine essence in this life in the cases of Moses and St. Paul. The fact that Barlaam was shocked when he realized that heretics similar to those fought by

about the revelation of God, is that all analogues of revelation were through the medium of created things, whether light, glory, beings, or intellections.

A further proof of Barlaam's [. . .] provenance is his claim that one definition of a contemplative man is a person who thinks he has visions of the divine essence. He goes to much trouble to explain why such people believe they see the divine essence, and to interpret the possible alternative experiences they do have, whereby they actually see created reflections of the uncreated. Palamas ridicules the very idea that a contemplative could be defined as a man who has any kind of visions of the divine essence.<sup>43</sup>

Simply put, Barlaam concluded that the Hesychasts were merely seeing a representational thought/image of their own creation, within their own minds, but certainly not the actual uncreated glory of the Deity. The Palamite party categorically rejected this *revelation by created symbols* of the Divine Essence, on the Calabrian's part. Gregory instantly replied that the *vision of the uncreated light of Being*<sup>44</sup> was certainly not a vision of the Divine Essence, since to behold in a vision the essence of God, is to participate in that essence which according to all the theological traditions of Eastern Christendom is altogether impossible.<sup>45</sup>

“Palamas is [was] amazed at the idea that the Hesychast's claims to visions of the uncreated

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Augustine were tolerated by the Byzantine Church, points directly to his Latin formation. It was quite to be expected that, being ignorant of East Roman Church life, he very confidently accused the monks of heresy and of having not divine, but satanic, visions and experiences.

<sup>43</sup> John Romanides. “Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics: Part 1.” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*. Volume VI, Number 2 Winter, Brookline, Massachusetts; 1960-61. p 11.

<sup>44</sup> The distinction of “uncreated” in the statement of the identity of the light was in response to Barlaam's claim that the light seen by the Hesychasts was a product of their own minds, or a created intermediary whose purpose was to draw the mind of the mystic to the vision of the essence of God. The uncreated light of Being (God) is the very glory of God, and the revelation of God is of boundless light which imbues the noetic faculty of the “seer.” The light is actually the very person of God, revealed in the distinction of the Divine Nature that is *energia*.

<sup>45</sup> John Romanides notes in his: “Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics: Part 1.” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*. Volume VI, Number 2 Winter, Brookline, Massachusetts; 1960-61. p 11.

Palamas believed that the Old and New Testament visions of the glory of God were real visions of the uncreated God, in which visions the body participated; whereas Barlaam excluded not only the body, but also the intellect itself from any such vision, and claimed that this glory revealed was in each case a creature which only symbolized divinity. In this view, the whole question of Macarian and Evagrian anthropologies is not so fundamental to the issues in question as Meyendorff thinks. Allowing, for a moment, this distinction within the East Roman Patristic tradition, - Which of the ‘Platonising.’

*glory* of God should in any way be distorted into immediate or mediated visions of the divine *essence*.”<sup>46</sup>

Although the political and theological debacle went on after this discovery of the Hesychasts’ experiential mysticism by Barlaam, the essence of the entire controversy was finally arrived at. The monastic party, figure-headed by Gregory Palamas would be forced to offer an exact definition of the particulars of what the individual hesychast did indeed “see” in the vision of the light of God. The Palamites adamantly held that what they saw was not a product of their own minds, but a direct revelation of the very person and glory of God. The question that most expressed the central issues of this was: Did the Hesychasts *see* the essence of God, and therefore enter into a participation in the divine essence, as was already thought by the Thomist school of the west? To this question the Palamites responded that what the light of God was, which the mystic saw, was not the essence of God, but was truly the very presence of God, in the divine *energia*. Thus there was the formal adoption of two knowable distinctions in God: essence (ουσια) and energy (ενεργια).<sup>47</sup>

Gregory Palamas.... devoted a dialogue entitled *Theophanes* to the question of the incommunicable and yet communicable deity. When he is considering the meaning of St. Peter's words, ‘partakers of the divine nature,’ St. Gregory of Thessalonica affirms that this statement has an antinomic character analogous to the dogma of the Trinity. Just as God is at the same time both one and three, ‘the divine nature must be said to be at the same time both exclusive of, and, in some sense, open to participation. We attain to participation in the divine nature, and yet at the same time it remains totally inaccessible. We need to affirm both at the same time and to preserve the antinomy as a criterion of right devotion.’<sup>48</sup>

Though the expression of these two distinctions of the Divine Nature was not a new revelation, it had been expressed by Pseudo-Dionysius and first recorded by Philo of Alexandria during the first century; this is the first time in Christendom that this distinction

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<sup>46</sup> “Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics: Part 1.” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*. Volume VI, Number 2 Winter, Brookline, Massachusetts; 1960-61. p 11.

<sup>47</sup> ουσια and ενεργια.

<sup>48</sup> Vladimir Lossky. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. (Crestwood, NY Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 69.

would be canonized as sacred doctrine. Intimately united to the concerns of the Byzantine Hesychasts and the *vision of the uncreated light of God*, is that of the doctrine of *theosis* (or deification), and its supreme archetype the Incarnation of God the Word, as understood in the *communicatio idiomatum*<sup>49</sup> of the theandric hypostasis. It is in union with this theandric hypostasis that it is understood that humankind may come to enjoy being recipients of the *divine energy*.

Gregory Palamas, teaches that three modes of union and communion are observed to exist in God: that which is “according to substance (essence),” that which is according to hypostasis,” and that which is according to energy”. Only the three persons of the most Holy Trinity are united “according to substance (essence)”. The hypostatic union was effected by the Logos when He assumed our flesh. And what I have said above shows that the union “according to energy” was granted to man with his creation “in the image.” But this third union--and this point is crucial for our theme--is clearly not complete because it does not abolish the great gulf between the divine and the human natures; we would say that it simply bridges it. Its entire significance lies in the fact that it prepares for and leads to the hypostatic union, which is complete and perfect because, since the divine and the human natures possess in Christ the same person. The common hypostasis “destroys the gulf between divinity and humanity since it is a term common to both natures and so could not be common to what is separated.<sup>50</sup> [Parenthetical words inserted by writer]

For the Hesychasts the glory of God that they saw in their mystical vision, was the eternal light of God, it was the Divine Energy, and the very grace of God which is actually *very God of very God*.<sup>51</sup> The God who is *omnipraesentia*, throughout all of creation both visible and invisible, and simultaneously throughout the full spectrum of time and space, is the “energy” of the Divine Nature, which is both eminently personal and active while remaining

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<sup>49</sup> This term signifies the manner of correspondence and interplay between the two natures of the *theandric hypostasis* of Jesus Christ, as being fully the nature of God and fully the nature of humankind united into one Person (hypostasis). By the same schema, mortals who are grafted into the mystical body of Christ also conform to the pattern of Christ’s Person in the inter-relatedness of the Divine Energies within the hypostasis.

<sup>50</sup> Panayiotis Nellas. *Deification in Christ*. (Crestwood, NY; Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1977), 32.

<sup>51</sup> One modern Orthodox bishop, Dmitri (Royster) says of the grace of God, “Grace may be defined as God’s loving gift of transforming power.” This “grace” is finally the very person of God in the aspect of Divine Energy, for there is no created thing capable of bestowing salvation, as the Psalmist says: “Put not your trust in princes, [nor] in the son of man, in whom [there is] no salvation.” Ps. 146:3. “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.” *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha*. Edited by Walter J. Harrelson, Nashville, TN. Abingdon Press, 2003.

transcendent, eternal, and beyond being its self; God is the Divine Energy. The “essence” of God corresponds to the absolute transcendence of the Divine Nature, which is simply defined by Byzantine theology as being the reality of God’s *uncreated-ness*, as there is nothing else that may be said about it; a fact which no created being can ever participate in.<sup>52</sup> Though for the Palamite party the participation in the Divine Essence was a theological impossibility, the participation in the Divine Energy was not only possible but of prime necessity, and the very road upon which they trod their way. No created thing could be the source of divine gnosis, nor justly an intermediary, so the way of negation was the only way, for the apophatic doorway was the divine name itself. Through the “power of the Name” (the name of Jesus) *hesychia*<sup>53</sup> could be entered into, the silence of the passions and the elimination of all mortal thoughts; the body, soul, and mind (united from the “fallen” state of fragmentation) could be brought into synergy with the Divine Energy so as to participate in the Divine Nature.<sup>54</sup> The *nous* would come to rest within the *kardia*;<sup>55</sup> the warming energy of the Spirit would then fill the *kardia* and establish “self acting prayer,” i.e. that is *noetic prayer*. After the *nous* has descended into the heart, and the Spirit begins to pray “ceaselessly” then is acquired that first hallmark of the hesychastic way “silence,” i.e. the stilling of the mind of all thoughts, and finally what Archimandrite Sophronie calls “the divesting of the mind”<sup>56</sup> after entering into a

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<sup>52</sup> If it were possible for any created being to participate in the Divine Essence then that one would become a 4<sup>th</sup> member of the Holy Trinity.

<sup>53</sup> Silence.

<sup>54</sup> 2 Pet 1:3-5. “According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that [pertain] unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be *partakers of the divine nature*, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

<sup>55</sup> Καρδία means “heart” by literal translation, but possessing the notion in patristic usage of the centre or foundation of the human being, the place where the “*nous*” rested before the “primordial fall.” When it is said that the “*nous*” descends into the heart, this concept ought not to be understood in literal fashion, but as an analogue for the “pure, unqualified awareness” to be redirected into the core-being.

<sup>56</sup> The Staretz Silouan of early 20<sup>th</sup> century, refers to the “darkness of divestiture” to indicate the phenomenon that occurs when the mind is stripped of all thoughts, images and intellectual concepts, just prior to the dawning

state of divine darkness. When the mind is divested, by the accounts of modern adherents of the hesychastic tradition, then the *nous* is elevated beyond all limited awareness and consciousness of this present life to behold an infinite light, which is of such great brilliance as to darken the very sun itself. As the Byzantine hymn which is taken from the Psalms is sung, “In thy light, shall we see light,”<sup>57</sup> so too does the individual come into union with that light which is God. A modern paraphrase of the *Tabula Smaragdina of Hermes* indicates, “You become what you behold”<sup>58</sup> so too, does the visionary of the uncreated light become pure light. Gregory writes of this:

For it is in light that the light is seen, and that which sees operates in a similar light, since this faculty has no other way in which to work. Having separated itself from all other beings, it becomes itself all light and is assimilated to what it sees, or rather, it is united to it without mingling, being itself light and seeing light through light. If it sees itself, it sees light; if it beholds the object of its vision, that too is light; and if it looks at the means by which it sees, again it is light. For such is the character of the union, that all is one, so that he who sees can distinguish neither the means nor the object nor its nature, but simply has the awareness of being light and of seeing a light distinct from every creature.<sup>59</sup>

The *nous* when divested of all activity and involvement with temporal form, awareness, and identity, transported by the infused activity of the divine energies is elevated to behold the uncreated light of Being by the power of the light itself, possessing only awareness of this light, forgetting all temporal connections (even forgetting this present mortal life), being united in consciousness and being with the light, which is pure consciousness and the very being of the Deity. According to Hesychast tradition, the uncreated light of Being communicates pure knowledge on the ontological level. The *ontos* is pure knowledge, and the

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of the Divine Light which illuminates the whole person. Archimandrite Sophrony recounts this teaching of Silouan (now St. Silouan) in: Archimandrite Sophrony. *The Monk of Mount Athos*. (Crestwood, NY; St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press: 1989), 111-112.

<sup>57</sup> Psalm 36:9.

<sup>58</sup> Author’s own paraphrase from the *Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*.

<sup>59</sup> Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, Edited by John Meyendorff, translated by Nicholas Grendle, (NY: Paulist Press, 1983), 65-66.

only possibility of true knowledge lies not in the external information derived from sensory perception by the fleshly subsistency, but in a return of pure awareness to original being. This original being, or core-being, may be understood as the *imago dei* and at the same time as the *kardia*. The human person was created in the image of God, and now must clear away the debris which covers that image and then volitionally express its likeness in objective existence.

Integral to the whole schema of the Hesychast tradition is a dual and intermarried aspect called the Neptic tradition, *Nepsis* referring to the system of “watchfulness” of the mind and heart, and acquiring/developing the facility to root out certain types of thoughts/impulses, and to carefully discover the origin and nature of those thoughts. It might be said that Hesychia and *Nepsis* are two sides of one coin, as they are inseparable;<sup>60</sup> this is clearly revealed in the primary source of Neptic/Hesychastic writings, the *Philokalia*. “Just as a man blind from birth does not see the sun’s light, so one who fails to pursue watchfulness does not see the rich radiance of divine grace.”<sup>61</sup> In this passage is seen the key to attaining the vision of the uncreated light, through neptic cultivation of the mind and heart. *Nepsis*, not only as the faculty of watchfulness of thoughts and *prosvoli*,<sup>62</sup> but also of the very consciousness itself is the mechanism of transport to the transcendental experience of unity with Deity. *Nepsis* has as its aim the purification of the whole person, but specifically the “heart,”<sup>63</sup> with the end

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<sup>60</sup> Lk 21:36

<sup>61</sup> Hesychios, the Priest. “On Watchfulness and Holiness: Written for Theodoulos.” *The Philokalia: The Complete Text; Vol. 1*. Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth. translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. Faber & Faber Ltd: London; 1979.

<sup>62</sup> Προσβολή -Provocation to wilful corruption, as an impulse acting within the heart, before it is vested in an image, and before communion with the object of temptation within the heart.

<sup>63</sup> Mt 23:26 The purpose of Neptic practice is deeply oriented toward catharsis of the heart (*kardia*) with the immediate goal of *apathia*. *Apathia* pertains only to those unnatural impulses, drives, desires, and thoughts, so that when *apathia* reigns in the human heart, silence then may be said to have been attained.

goal that “the pure in heart shall see God.”<sup>64</sup> Palamas writes of the essence of the neptic approach:

The mind operates in part according to its function of external observation: This is what the great Denys [Pseudo-Dionysius] calls the movement of the mind “along a straight line”; and on the other hand, it returns upon itself, when it beholds itself; this movement the same Father calls “circular”. This last in the most excellent and most appropriate activity of the mind, by which it comes to transcend itself and be united to God. “For the mind, says St. Basil, “which is not dispersed abroad” (notice how he says “dispersed”? what is dispersed, then, needs to be recollected), “returns to itself, and through itself mounts towards God as by an infallible road.”<sup>65</sup>

What Palamas indicated within this passage is the obvious discipline of training the awareness through attention to focus consciousness upon itself, thereby following the flow of consciousness to its source, thus the transcendence involved in this operation<sup>66</sup>. That those who have attained catharsis of mind and heart shall indeed truly see God has never been in question in the religious tradition of Eastern Christendom. Even the *telos* of neptic and hesychastic discipline is accomplished by the divine energy:

“Do not deceive yourself,” says Saint Symeon the New Theologian, “God is fire and when He came into the world, and became man, He sent fire on the earth, as He Himself says; this fire turns about searching to find material — that is a disposition and an intention that is good — to fall into and to kindle; and for those in whom this fire will ignite, it becomes a great flame, which reaches Heaven.... this flame at first purifies us from the pollution of passions and then it becomes in us food and drink and light and joy, and renders us light ourselves because we participate in His light” (*Discourse 78*). [. . .] Paradise and hell are one and the same River of God, a loving fire which embraces and covers all with the same beneficial will, without any difference or discrimination. The same vivifying water is life eternal for the faithful and death eternal for the infidels; for the first it is their element of life, for the second it is the instrument of their eternal suffocation; paradise for the one is hell for the other. Do not consider this strange. The son who loves his father will feel happy in his father's arms, but if he does not love him, his father's loving embrace will be a

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<sup>64</sup> Mt 5:8

<sup>65</sup> Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, Edited by John Meyendorff, translated by Nicholas Grendle, (NY: Paulist Press, 1983), p 44.

<sup>66</sup> This basic idea is very close to the root principle of Advaita Vedanta meditation, which is called the radical “non-dual” way of union with Brahman (Supreme Being).

torment to him. This also is why when we love the man who hates us, it is likened to pouring lighted coals and hot embers on his head.”<sup>67</sup>

The Palamite distinction of essence and energy in the divine nature, and the role of the divine energy in the individual’s deification enter in heavily into the Eastern Christian understanding of eschatology, of the destiny of the human being, and of the possibility of eternal damnation. A paraphrase of Maximos the Confessor could be: “Hell is staffed by volunteers, and those who remain there do so willingly.” This same doctrinal definition would be represented at the Council of Florence (1438 – 1439) nearly a century later, where the Orthodox representatives would encounter the Latin presentiments of Purgatory, and of Hell, and categorically reject them. Interestingly, it was the Latin definition of the nature of the purging fire of Purgatory as a “created fire” that would meet with complete rejection by the Greeks. Likewise the nature of the fire of Hell would similarly be defined; to the Byzantine Church the fire of Hell and of Purgatory (though they do not admit of the existence of Purgatory) is uncreated, and therefore the very love of God Himself/Herself.

The political and ideological nature of the Palamite councils would not go unnoticed further afield. The basic ideas and theological position of the Hesychasts would be weighed by proponents of Scholasticism, and the position of the Byzantine Church would be found wanting. “Latin theology on the whole was too deeply impregnated with the Aristotelian Scholastic system to tolerate a theory that opposed its very foundation.”<sup>68</sup> The term “navel gazers” would become a by-word, though most would not know its source, and the primary tenets of the Hesychasts would be ridiculed for centuries in the West.

The other element of fourteenth-century Hesychasm was the famous real distinction between *essence* and *attributes* (specifically one attribute -- energy) in God. This theory, fundamentally opposed to the whole conception of God in the Western Scholastic system, had also been prepared by Eastern Fathers and theologians. Remotely it may be traced back to neo-Platonism. [ . . . ] From one point of view, then,

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<sup>67</sup> Kalomiros, Alexandre. *The River of Fire*. (Seattle, WA: St. Nectarios Press, 1995), 121.

<sup>68</sup> A. Fortescue, (1910). “Hesychasm” In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07301a.htm> Retrieved April 9, 2009

the Hesychast controversy may be conceived as an issue between Greek Platonist philosophy and Latin rationalist Aristotelianism. It is significant that the Hesychasts were all vehemently Byzantine and bitter opponents of the West, while their opponents were all latinizers, eager for reunion.<sup>69</sup>

A fundamental charge that would be made against the Hesychasts is that of “pantheism,” that the distinction between God and humankind was somehow abolished or threatened in the view of the Palamites. Fortescue writing for “The Catholic Encyclopaedia” states:

For the union with God in contemplation (which is the highest object of our life) he [Simeon the New Theologian] required a regular system of spiritual education beginning with baptism and passing through regulated exercises of penance and asceticism under the guidance of a director. But he had not conceived the grossly magic practices of the later Hesychasts; his ideal is still enormously more philosophical than theirs. There seems also to have been a strong element of the pantheism that so often accompanies mysticism in the fully developed Hesychast system. By contemplating the uncreated light one became united with God so intimately that one became absorbed in Him. This suspicion of pantheism (never very remote from neo-Platonic theories) is constantly insisted on by the opponents of the system.<sup>70</sup>

The differences of *a priori(s)* between Greek and Latin thought immediately evoke the suspicion of pantheism, or their notion of ditheism. In Latin traditional perspective the distinction between Creator and creation is blurred (in the mind of Aristotelian thinking) in the Hesychastic vision of union with God, and Latin thinking instantly sees the “uncreated light” as an intermediary between the individual and the essence of God. The Hesychasts maintain that this “uncreated light” is indeed God’s own self being revealed. “To the philosophical objection that he was introducing a “second” and “lower” God beside the unique Godhead, Palamas replied over and over again that no multiplicity of divine manifestation could affect the unity of God, for God is beyond the categories of whole and parts and, while in His essence always remaining unknowable, reveals Himself wholly in

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<sup>69</sup> Anthony M. Coniaris, “Achieving Your Potential in Christ”  
<http://www.geocities.com/verseoftheday/theosis.html> Website accessed April 19, 2009

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

each energy as the Living God.”<sup>71</sup> The other charge of “grossly magic practices” refers to a body of certain highly guarded practices that may definitely be described as theurgic in nature, but are not any more so than any of the sacramental forms within the liturgical and priestly ministry of the Church. These practices, which form the whole body of hesychastic tradition, are jealously guarded, and only transmitted to the qualified candidate who is fully prepared by an Elder, and for the most part are only available to monastics. In this sense, it might be thought that the social dynamic of Hesychasm reflects something of the Hindu notion of the guru and chela relationship, since the *gerontos*<sup>72</sup> and the disciple’s relationship is very similar.

For the most part, the vast majority of Hesychast practitioners merely depend on the traditional lore of the neptic writings and the practice of the Jesus Prayer, since this is the real heart and soul of Hesychasm. Palamas makes it clear that anything in addition to these essentials is not absolutely necessary, and the operative essential in the experience of the athlete of noetic prayer is the Divine Energy itself. The contemporary criticism of the hesychastic tradition is that it represents nothing more than “Christianized yoga,” yet there is no historical connection or intermingling with Hindu yoga traditions that can be traced. What is more, is that anyone who is moderately acquainted with Hinduism and the yoga traditions of Vedanta, immediately recognizes that while there are exterior similarities between the techniques of both, the aim, purpose, and underlying theology is absolutely incongruent. “Even today this method [hesychasm] seems too like a kind of Christian yoga, automatically causing contact with God, making grace depend on a technique that is natural, gross, and, in

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<sup>71</sup> John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 121.

<sup>72</sup> Spiritual elder or director.

any case, purely human.”<sup>73</sup> Even admitting the mechanical nature of the psychosomatic practices of Hesychasm, it is nonetheless peripheral, as the development of the Christian mystic on the path of neptic-hesychasm is initiated by God alone, and God as the divine energy affects the transformation, and purification of the heart that paves the way for the vision of the light of Tabor.

Related to the primary means of the Hesychasts, that is the “power of the Name,” is a recurrent phenomenon/movement and spiritual environment, which last reared its head in 1913. This particular cameo in history is not new or even unique because it has emerged from time to time throughout Christian history and is of special relevance to postmodern theological concerns and Process Theology. The *Imyabozhnik* heresy<sup>74</sup> appeared in the Russian monastery of St. Panteleimon on Mount Athos. These monks held to the idea that the name of God (Jesus) was itself God in presence; that the name of God conveyed all the attributes, nature and power of God, and that in the name of God, God was fully present and operative. In this awareness of the divine name, these “fathers of the name” would ceaselessly repeat the divine name in their prayers, and they believed themselves to participate in the “power of the name.” Like the general criticism of the west against Hesychasm, so too these adherents of the *Imyabozhnik* were also deemed to have entered into pantheism by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. Curiously, while the members of the various monasteries to which this doctrine spread were hardily persecuted, others who held to the underlying concepts of the *power of the name* were not persecuted but even celebrated, and one of them canonized as a saint.<sup>75</sup> It must be recognized that the raw

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<sup>73</sup> John Meyendorff. *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 105.

<sup>74</sup> “The name of God is God himself.”

<sup>75</sup> John of Kronstadt, now celebrated as a saint of the Russian Orthodox Church, clearly held to the basic premises of the *Imyabozhnik* doctrine. He wrote in his autobiography *My Life in Christ*, “In the name of Jesus

components of this “heresy” have existed throughout Christian history, that it might be dubbed Neoplatonic, or even Hermetic. Pseudo-Dionysius refers to similar concepts in *On the Divine Names*, and most interestingly the tradition of Jewish mysticism, the Kabala, also presents a cogent system of applying “the power of the Name”. According to the *Imyabozhnik* the divine name was the one greatest sacrament, which superseded all sacraments; to engage in the prayer of the divine name was to receive and participate in the grace and power of all the sacraments. This phenomenon was censured by the Russian Church and every effort was made to silence it, even going so far as the deployment of the Russian army by Czar Nicholas to enforce the rulings of the Holy Synod in several of the monasteries which were strongholds of this view.<sup>76</sup> On this occasion the Orthodox Church herself would evaluate and proclaim an aberration of the Hesychast doctrine to be pantheistic. In earlier times, and up to the present day, the West would make the same pronouncement on the Byzantine Church, and her embracing of the Palamite doctrine. This pronouncement is not without merit and cautionary wisdom.

This centrepiece of Hesychasm, the intoning of the divine name, is the engine that drives the vehicle of deification. The mystical tradition of Eastern Christianity considers Hesychasm to be the exalted way to humanity’s theosis. Within the hesychastic tradition that was bolstered by the Palamite party, the entire spectrum of Hesychasm from the 4<sup>th</sup> century to the 14<sup>th</sup> century is seen to be present, recapitulated and harmoniously articulated in an integrated form. The epistemology of profane Hellenism as expressed in the Renaissance and cultural ethos of the West had been categorically rejected.

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Christ dwells Christ himself, wholly, his soul and body, united to the Godhead.” [This quote is taken from an icon of St. John of Kronstadt, in which he holds in his left hand an open book that displays this quote.]

<sup>76</sup> This military enforcement ordered by the Czar would result in the death of many consecrated monastics. In the Great Lavra of St. Panteleimon nearly 900 monastics were evicted, and soon thereafter became refuges fleeing Mt. Athos.

This Palamite doctrinal corpus would clash with the West later in the council of Florence in 1439, while emissaries of Byzantium would fervently attempt to weld some sort of accord with Rome in the hope of obtaining aid against the Ottomans. This compromise would be rejected by the bulk of the Byzantines, resulting in the excommunication of the emissaries. Largely due to the West's refusal to render aid to the flagging Byzantine Empire,<sup>77</sup> the Ottomans would lay siege to Constantinople and fourteen years later in 1453 the Byzantine Empire would fall under the yoke of Muslim rule and Dhimmitude. "By approving Palamas' thought, the Byzantine Church resolutely turned its back on the spirit of the Renaissance,"<sup>78</sup> and the west returned the favour politically. In light of the political implications of theological doctrine, either the Byzantine power structure grossly misinterpreted their stance, or political events beyond their anticipation resulted in their being abandoned by the West. There is one thing that is certain in this, and that is that a deep and abiding animosity toward the Latins for their sacking of Constantinople helped to fortify the Byzantines in their final departure from an accord in understanding.

The hesychastic tradition and its cumulative experience represents an anticipation of the life of the age to come, and beholding of the light of the New Jerusalem that exists in archetypal fashion beyond the Eschaton. The light of Tabor, which the hesychast sees, initiates a type of personal epiphany, and an individual spiritual resurrection, which elevates the *nous* above corruption to experience the resurrection while yet in this visible life. This vision of the *uncreated light of Being* bestows a union between the perceiver and the perceived, which eludes simple definition, while excluding the possibility of an "essential" union. Meyendorff comments:

The Jesus Prayer thus is found at the centre of all Hesychast spirituality, The Name [of] The Incarnate Word is bound up in the essential functions of being: it is present in

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<sup>77</sup> It merits mention that the Republic of Venice and many powerful naval mercenaries fought valiantly on behalf of Constantinople.

<sup>78</sup> John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 239.

the “heart,” it is linked to the breath. [this prayer is never allowed to take on the nature of imagination, nor the recollection of any of the events of the life of Christ, the Hesychast is never allowed to imagine any image or to commune with images exterior to themselves] Instead the monk [individual] is called to become conscious of the actual presence of Jesus in the interior of his own being, a presence given full and existential reality by the life of the sacraments, without images. The luminous vision that may then be experienced will not be a mere symbol or an effect of imagination, but a theophany as true as that on Mount Tabor since it is a manifestation of the same deified Body of Christ. That is why the spiritual life of the monks of the desert is so closely bound up with the theology of deification that we find in the Greek Fathers.<sup>79</sup>

The doctrinal formulation of the Palamite councils represents a definitive break with Western doctrine, and a consolidation and integration of Eastern Christian theological perspectives into a platform that harmoniously united their christology, soteriology, eschatological Christian humanism and existentialism, into a unified systematic doctrine of mysticism with deification of the human person as the all-pervading bond which held the doctrine together (all the while furthering the political aims of those Byzantines who were zealously anti-Latin). Hesychasm would come to represent the totality of the life in Christ as defined and made possible through the Church, the mystical body of Christ. The centrality of the sacraments, metanoia, the liturgical life of corporate prayer, asceticism, nepsis and the hesychastic devotion to the name of Jesus, in the ongoing effort to achieve unceasing prayer, would become hallmarks of the Palamite movement. The monastic movement in Eastern Christendom would come to be dominated by the Hesychast tradition (and indeed would be the sole form of mysticism within the entire Church) as defined and harmonized by Palamas, and the monastic sector would play a dominant role in the promulgation of hesychastic piety among the laity of the Church.

Central to all resurgences and revival in the various sectors of Eastern Christendom is the influence of Hesychasm. The ebb and flow of vitality in the Eastern Church since the fall of Constantinople is intimately connected to the prevalence of the neptic/hesychastic influence.

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<sup>79</sup> John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 31-32. Bracketed words are inserted by author to provide specific context.

Such works as the *Philokalia* (1782),<sup>80</sup> compiled and edited by Nikodemus the Agiorite, and the famous book by the Venetian priest Lorenzo Scupoli (1589), “Unseen Warfare,” which Nikodemus translated and emended for the purposes of the Greeks (18<sup>th</sup> Century), and was later translated and emended with further interpolations by Theophan the Recluse of Russia (19<sup>th</sup> century), have been central in the propagation of the neptic/hesychastic tradition. For the Eastern Orthodox world, the *Agion Oros* of Mt. Athos, with its assortment of ancient monasteries and innumerable hermitages and cave anchorites, exists as the very spiritual heart of the Eastern Church, and the heart and soul of the Holy Mountain is the tradition and doctrine of Hesychasm. The Hesychasts have sparked the revival of the Russian Church in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, have revived the flagging Greek church in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and presently the Great Lavra of Simon Petra is exporting its “elders” to bring the Athonite tradition of monasticism and spiritual direction to North America.<sup>81</sup> At the present, there is a renaissance of the monastic and hesychastic life developing on Mount Athos, after a null period of nearly 100 years. Much of the revival is through the aegis of surviving disciples of the famous elder Joseph the Cave Dweller. Today there are scores of men with graduate degrees who are coming to Athos and entering into that age-old world to learn the path of spiritual warfare and inner silence.

Hesychasm today represents an ancient and eminently Christian tradition of meditation, and mystical experience that is starkly alien to those of us who are children of modernity standing upon the cusp of postmodernity. It is a balm to those who are deeply engraved by the hurried and frazzled drives of international corporate capitalism, who are acutely etched

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<sup>80</sup> Originally published in Venice, as was customary at the time, since virtually all Greek religious books were published in Venice due to the policy of the Turks forbidding the printing of any Christian publication.

<sup>81</sup> In the early 1990s Elder Ephraim of the monastery of Simon Petra, in response to a spiritual vision, began to raise funds for the building of monasteries in the U.S. and to transplant well-trained monastics from Athos to North America. To the present Elder Ephraim has built at least 14 monasteries at a combined value of nearly 100 million dollars, and resides for part of the year in the monastery built in Arizona. His intention is that the full tradition of Athonite monasticism and eldership will be transferred to America within this generation.

by the “acids of modernity.”<sup>82</sup> This neptic/hesychastic tradition presents access to a path of dynamic inner transformation, and a real therapy for the soul. This “way of silence” which can be learned and practiced opens up whole new dimensions of being for each practitioner, and permits a glimpse through the cracks of this life, of a vista of the age to come.

This writer sees the tradition of Hesychasm and the Palamite doctrines as playing a fundamental role in the future of global Christianity, and a bulwark against the insipid forces of nihilistic secularism that are draining away the very life energies that make Christianity a distinct and viable way of life. The allure and fascination of a systematic and safe tradition of mystical experience is one that may aid in the ecumenical quest for Christian unity, and which brought into postmodern discourse may yield an approach to divine knowledge and union with God that has been anticipated in the thought of Heidegger and certainly of Tillich. It does provide the potential for the one needful thing which is so often missing in modern expressions of Christianity, and that is experiential transformation through conscious union with God.

#### *Habermas’ Consensus Theory of Truth and the Palamite Councils*

Looking at the events of the Palamite controversy from a postmodern perspective, perhaps one of the most striking examples of consensus truth is observable in the events surrounding the three ecclesiastic councils convened by the Byzantine church. A challenge against age old traditions in terms of normative truth statements was initiated by Barlaam, which was then introduced into an arena that provided for an ideal speech situation, i.e. the formation of an ecclesiastical council. In the long history of ecumenical and ecclesiastical councils in Byzantium, the finest traditions of Hellenic culture were maintained, allowing for generous debate, interrogation, presentation of evidences and testimony, with a large synod of judging

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<sup>82</sup> In fact it seems that the “acids of modernity” have begun to eat away at modernity itself; thus the appearance of many perspectives of Postmodern thought.

authorities. The hierarchs who sat in the synod of the councils were well educated and informed people, capable of understanding and appreciating both sides of the debate.

Constantinople, as mentioned earlier, was a truly cosmopolitan city with many powerful and influential advocates of renaissance humanism within her precincts, who were staunchly on the side of Barlaam. Barlaam was received as a fellow Hellene and not treated with bias for his Calabrian birthplace. In any case a level field of discourse was provided, and if anything the favour was in the court of Barlaam at the beginning. Clearly the differentiated types of discourse coming from each party shared many points in their interrelation, and it was these interrelated points that posited the potentiality for political dissonance. Clearly the political fall-out in Byzantium was serious and even life-threatening for Palamas, and others who sided with him; meaning that the long-term political ramifications possessed the potentiality for culture changing effects. Despite political dangers the potentiality, even the actuality of genuine intersubjective communication<sup>83</sup> between the opposing parties was a practical reality. Commonality of language, semantic usage, and shared context provided a sufficient arena of commonality, so that a consensus of truth<sup>84</sup> might finally be arrived at, even if that was accomplished through long and tortuous means. In this sense Habermas' concept of an ideal speech situation was realised.<sup>85</sup>

Within the setting of ecclesiastic council a certain protocol of Hellenic largesse and courtesy made for a meeting ground of the minds, and an environment for discourse deployed in mutual contexts of understanding. The role of tradition figures prominently in such proceedings, and this is to infer several strata of artefacts that are considered mutual and inter-related parts of tradition. The first and perhaps most influential part of tradition among

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<sup>83</sup> Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p 22.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

the Byzantines was holy scripture; the gospel books first, then the epistles, then the various books of the Septuagint all in their own order of importance as witnesses to the Apostolic Tradition. The next most authoritative aspect of tradition was the liturgical life of the church, with all of the church's hymns, ordering of prayers, litanies, and the entire system of the divine mysteries. The third order of witnesses are the patristic writings, but more specifically that which is known as the *consensus patrum*, being the ongoing continuity of consensus in matters of doctrine and praxis, among the theological leaders and writers of the centuries. Lastly is the artefact of living experience as witnessed by those mystics of the church, who testified of their own experiential knowledge of the holy tradition, and the practical and personal meaning of it in their mystical life in Christ.

All four of these sources comprise the stratum of church tradition which are carefully considered in situations of ecclesiastical council in which an asserted doctrine is considered for determination of heresy (in the postmodern context heresy might be understood as being something that is merely untrue). If there is a careful harmony between these four aspects of tradition, and the subject in question is obviously compatible with the witness of tradition and can be shown to have ancient attribution, then it was likely to be validated. By this process the Byzantine church arrived at their consensus of truth, through the ideal speech situation, and according to Byzantine Christian thought in general, the church councils were filled and guided by the Holy Spirit infallibly, through the agency of human beings, and finally ratified by the consensus of the entire church, meaning all of the laity. If a church council determines a thing in unison and the entire church embraces it, then the *sign and the seal* of the Spirit is declared. The truth has been disclosed within the community of faith and in unison that truth is lived out. The pragmatism of Eastern Christianity is that everything that is true can be participated in in tangible fashion and demonstrated in personal life; if it works, it is true –

conversely, if it does not work, it cannot be true. This pragmatism anticipates American pragmatic philosophy by 600 years.

### *Summation*

Certainly the doctrine of Theosis which remains central to Palamite concern has a special appeal and significance to Process Theology. Each conscious being is like a worm-hole which from the perspective of our current life participates in the process of the universe, but on the other side of this worm-hole is the mystery of God. While the perspectives of Process Theology are many, like Postmodernism, the mystery of human existence is seen as an ongoing relationship with the ultimate mystery, through the process of the universe. God may even be thought of as the innate intelligence of the universe, or as the cabalistic writings hint at, God is the soul of the universe. Gregory Palamas would likely disagree in a very direct and vehement way to this assertion; for him, and all the many others in history that he gave voice to, God transcends everything that created beings can think or know. God even transcends “being” itself; and this is very suggestive of post-theism. So too, humans by genetic inheritance from their creator possess this nature of self-transcendence which drives so many desires and motives in human life as to dazzle the mind. God as the “ground of Being” continuously pours out the substance of “being” that the divine image may become living and active as creatures – human beings. For intelligible created beings the “ultimate concern” drives all motivation and desires, which it is possible, may take a direction away from authentic being.

That being said, Palamite doctrine has a special relevance to Liberal Protestantism, because it addresses all those deep interior concerns that progressive Christians long to address. The distinction of energy and essence in the being of God, and the divine energy as deifying agent in the process of human salvation, presents a viable and ancient alternative to many of the more troubling aspects of Reformation theology. Some of these troubling

matters that are put to rest are juridical semantics and understanding of salvation, messianic and royal attributions of Jesus of Nazareth, the nature of vicarious atonement, and the most troubling issues of all: human sacrifice in the person of Jesus, whose blood is required to wash away sins and to pay a price (to whom this price is paid is of central importance) for our redemption.

At first glance it appears that the Palamite controversy is an argument over whether or not monks can actually see the light of God.<sup>86</sup> On further examination an entire universe of depth and complexity opens up, into an abyss of theological design, which ultimately contains within itself the *raison d'être* of human existence. The definition of what is “knowable” to humankind, together with the “telos” of human destiny is already contained in potential within Palamite doctrine. This *telos* is not merely about knowledge, and what the human being can know, it is “not simply a knowledge of God {γνῶσις}, but a union with God {ενωσις}.”<sup>87</sup> As such, this union is synonymous with salvation, which is the completed process of *deification*<sup>88</sup> in Byzantine thought. For Palamas interpreted “salvation as immortality, as the gift of humility, and the disclosure of authentic humanity, as purification, as the conjunction of divine and human, and above all, as deification—patristic ideas all, but synthesized into what must be called a ‘new theology.’”<sup>89</sup> Palamite doctrine eloquently echoes a continuum of Greek patristic thought (particularly in the vein of the ascetical treatises) that views the church as the hospital for the souls of wounded and sick human

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<sup>86</sup> The “light of God” may be considered both as a divine radiance, and at the same time as transcendental knowledge which is union with Divinity.

<sup>87</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. 2, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600 – 1700)*, (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1971), 263.

<sup>88</sup> Θεωσις

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

beings. This therapeutic concept of the mission of Christianity is at the heart of the ascetical method, and the way of mystical prayer.<sup>90</sup>

“The question of the possibility of any real union with God, and, indeed, of mystical experience in general, thus poses for Christian theology the antinomy of the accessibility of the inaccessible nature. How is it possible that the Holy Trinity should be the object of union and of mystical experience in general?”<sup>91</sup> The object of this union, the light of Mount Tabor has continued to shine throughout the centuries in the hearts and minds of Christian believers; always guiding and directing the course of Christian history. It is this light of Mt. Tabor that the entire Palamite controversy pertained, as the pericope of the Transfiguration<sup>92</sup> has long been held to be the key to the Christian understanding of the vision of God, and of humanity’s destiny and role in seeing God, in this light. The importance of the doctrine of the Hesychasts that was canonized by the Palamite councils is that it solidifies into a cogent unitive dogma, the entire Byzantine Christian understanding of mystical knowledge, union with God, deification, and human destiny, tightly wrapped up in an amalgamated parcel of Christocentric anthropology.

The axiom *Lex orandi est les credendi et agenda*,<sup>93</sup> attributed to Pope Coelestinus in the 5<sup>th</sup> century is a verity that has remained a continuous fixture in the experience of the Christian church. The innate traditions of prayer have moulded the understanding of faith and theology far more than what is generally considered; and certainly more than most recipients of scholastic theology commonly deem. The role of liturgy in shaping the church’s

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<sup>90</sup> When “prayer” is spoken of throughout this paper, it should be understood to connote something very different than the current understanding of intercessory or petitionary prayer through the medium of language. In the concern of the Hesychasts genuine prayer transcends images (this includes language) and is the pure movement of the core-being toward the Divine. In Greek “proseuche” means: to draw near.

<sup>91</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), p 69.

<sup>92</sup> Matt 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-36.

<sup>93</sup> “The rule of prayer is the rule of belief and action” -- Coelestinus I (422 – 432 A.D.)

understanding and articulation of doctrine, together with the transmission of private prayer methodologies, have imposed a profound effect upon the course of the various churches.

To the unacquainted outsider the intricacies of late Byzantine Christian thought are an impenetrable mystery, and the purview of the quasi-esoteric metaphysical concerns embroiled within the Palamite controversy seem strikingly bizarre, not to mention the unsavoury political setting in which it emerged. The very pre-eminence of the role of personal private prayer and an experiential spirituality as a determining factor in the doctrine of the whole church, with the titanic clash that it would make with emerging European humanism, have provided a liberal source of fodder for a good deal of lampooning in the last 600 years.

It should be borne in mind that the resultant effects of the *hesychastic*<sup>94</sup> revolution that received the imprimatur of the Byzantine Greek church through the aegis of Gregory Palamas has had far-reaching consequences within Eastern Christianity in general. More specifically, it has been the fuel of revival, restoration, and reformation in the “Third Rome,” who in turn has been the primary representative of a non-Caesaro-Papal orthodox catholicism to the occident. When the Lutheran movement was entering into its *pietistic* phase, so too were the various sectors of the Orthodox Christian world; especially among the *Rus*.<sup>95</sup> This ferment of the hesychastic way of practical systematic mysticism possesses the potentiality of spreading like a leaven throughout the entire Christian world in due course, and may have far reaching implications for emerging postmodern Christianity.

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<sup>94</sup> Though the term “hesychast” has been used in the West to specifically indicate the parties of the dispute of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the term itself has been in use in the East since the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Meyendorff writes in the Introduction to *The Triads*: “The term *hesychast* was used to designate a ‘hermit’ or an anchorite from the very beginning of Christian monasticism.” Palamas, Gregory. *The Triads*. Edited by John Meyendorff, translated by Nicholas Grendle. (NY; Paulist Press, 1983), p 2.

<sup>95</sup> The Slavic lands, specifically Russian.

Today, it is not so uncommon to encounter various modern interpretations or applications of Hesychasm, or to see the offer of prayer retreats that form their core basis on the “Jesus Prayer.”<sup>96</sup> Since the 1970’s there has arisen the movement among Catholic and Anglican sectors of what is known as “The Centering Prayer” which was founded by Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington, as a means of providing a Christian alternative to yoga and Transcendental Meditation. This technique was developed by Keating, based on Vipassana<sup>97</sup> technique, from Henayana Buddhism since the founders were unaware of the hesychastic way.<sup>98</sup> Catholicism “on the whole was too deeply impregnated with the Aristotelian Scholastic system to tolerate a theory that opposed its very foundation”<sup>99</sup> since well before the time of Palamas, thus explaining the absence of Hesychasm in the West. However, recent proponents of the “Centering Prayer” have begun to encounter the vast arena of Hesychasm, and have also started to incorporate aspects of it in their practice. The primary exposure in the West to the hesychastic way has been through the famous book written by an anonymous Russian pilgrim of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century *The Way of a Pilgrim*,<sup>100</sup> and secondarily through the novel by J.D. Salinger *Franny and Zoe* which makes copious reference to this book as a

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<sup>96</sup> Ἰησοῦ εὐφχῆ

<sup>97</sup> Vipassana means insight, and is a Buddhist meditation technique that aims at a complete understanding of suffering, impermanence, and the not-self (anatta); this is accomplished through skilful application of conscious awareness.

<sup>98</sup> The absolute absence of knowledge on the part of Catholics concerning a 2,000-year-old tradition of mystical contemplative prayer is not accidental in the slightest. It is the product of animosity on the part of an exclusivist political mindset, and the collision of two entirely incompatible philosophies. “There was a very faint echo of Hesychasm in the West. Latin theology on the whole was too deeply impregnated with the Aristotelian Scholastic system to tolerate a theory that opposed its very foundation. That all created beings are composed of *actus* and *potentia*, that God alone is *actus purus*, simple as He is infinite -- this is the root of all Scholastic natural theology.”

A. Fortescue, (1910). “Hesychasm” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07301a.htm> Retrieved April 9, 2009

<sup>99</sup> A. Fortescue, (1910). “Hesychasm” In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07301a.htm> Retrieved April 9, 2009

<sup>100</sup> *The Way of a Pilgrim*. Translated by R. M. French. (NY; Seabury Press, 1965).

central prop in the story. Finally, an edited edition of the most important hesychastic writers of the Christian East dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century was collated and edited into a volume known as the *Philokalia*,<sup>101</sup> which is the most read and most influential book aside from the Bible in the entire Eastern Orthodox World. Perhaps more than any other book this has been the engine in acquainting people with the mystical way of Eastern Christianity, and of finding guidance into the ascetical/mystical practices of Christian antiquity.

What a dynamic and even disturbing idea, that the individual Christian might come to participate in the divine nature of God through Christ; the implications are beyond belief. It can only be hoped that as the worldwide ecumenical Christian movement progresses in this next millennium that this scriptural precept (2 Pet 1:4-6) may come to the fore as an antidote to the malaise of modern life, and as an affirmation of a positive and dynamic spiritual life based on action and the practical/mystical realities of life in Christ.

What is the end of humanity's deification? "The deification or theosis of the creation will be realized in its fullness only in the age to come, after the resurrection of the dead. This deifying union has, nevertheless, to be fulfilled ever more and more even in this present life, through the transformation of our corruptible and depraved nature and by its adaptation to eternal life."<sup>102</sup> Gregory Palamas further comments on the path of deification, "Clearly it will develop infinitely... The saints, communing in the grace of God and rendered through that communion more and more able to contain the divine radiance, will receive grace upon grace

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<sup>101</sup> *The Philokalia: The Complete Text; Vol. 1 - 4.* Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth. Translated by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. (London; Faber & Faber Ltd, 1979)

<sup>102</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), p 69.

from God Himself, its infinite and unfailing source.”<sup>103</sup> Perhaps the best answer to that question, is that there is no end to man’s deification, because there is no end to God.

What are the postmodern implications for theosis, essence and energy in God (both of which are uncreated and truly God), and human participation in the Divine Nature? The Christian Palamite doctrine of theosis is really a fulfilment of an eon of human hope and aspiration, which began with the appearance of the first city-states and the religio-political apotheosis of their early rulers. Political apotheosis of pharaohs, emperors and kings would become the framework of most religions in the Graeco-Roman world at the time of the early Jesus Movement and this cultural and intellectual context would not fail to make its impression on early Christian writers and their expectations. The early church, being the populist movement that it was, re-appropriated this apotheosis for common people, rather than merely the elite ruling class. As the early church encountered its own internal challenges and formulated canonical doctrine, the hope of theosis was unveiled more fully. What theosis represents is a type of personal sovereignty that was unheard of among the masses, and a sense of liberation that could empower them to defy the world. The prospect of personal divinity radically changes the perspective of life in this world, and is ultimately subversive within the context of social structures. Certainly the possibility of obtaining personal ontological knowledge which catalyses personal transformation liberates the individual from the spiritual and intellectual oppression coming from society at large, and from special interest socio-religious structures. No more is there dealt the choiceless hand of institutional knowledge, which as Foucault calls it . . . is a form of terrorism. Instead the human person is restored to wholeness as a hypostatic noetic being, who in successive degrees ascends the rungs of the ladder of being, where the criterion of truth and knowledge have now become

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<sup>103</sup> Anthony M. Coniaris. *Achieving Your Potential in Christ*.  
<http://www.geocities.com/verseoftheday/theosis.html> Website accessed April 19, 2009

ontological. The principalities and powers of oppression are unseated from their thrones, as the human person ascends through the realm of the air to sit in the throne of God with Jesus.

Now, through deifying divine energy, each person becomes a participator in God's nature. This aspect of participation becomes the nexus for all of Christian doctrine and praxis. Now everyone participates in a dynamic fashion in Christ in all those salvation events, which are unveilings of divine mystery. Now has arrived the life of the age to come, the Eschaton which exists always outside of, and beyond time, has now been entered and is the resurrection from the dead. The consummation of the ages, the *apocatastasis* of Origen and the Cappadocians, is realised by the one who is deified and who enters into the true human estate – the vision of the uncreated light of Being. We have been hypostatically united to the God-man, and now actively participate in the Incarnation, and are co-workers in our own salvation – a salvation which is none other than our deification. We are participating in the life of God, and are a part of the divine perichoresis through grace, a grace which is none other than God's divine energy. This is the mystery of the body of Christ, the church, of all those who are united hypostatically to the Saviour, and it is a mystical body that like the God-man exists within, through, and beyond time and space. The mystery of the Trinity has now become our personal story, as we participate in the life of God, being conformed to the divine image as that likeness is restored – *the ground of being* has continued to eternally and beyond time beget the Logos, and eternally the Spirit proceeds from out of God into the present moment. We are continually begotten and forever proceed out of God too, it is in this that we live, move and have our being as we continuously return to God, and become God without ever becoming uncreated.

It is in the participation in the divine nature, receiving and possessing being within the very life of God, and our deification that the tyranny of limited human knowledge is destroyed, that the power of human society to enslave is dismantled, and that sovereign free

*aletheiaphouroi*<sup>104</sup> come into being, like glistening sunlight upon the waters. Likewise is the tyranny of death destroyed, because those who know God supra-rationally share in the life of God, which is infinitely more than biological life. Postmodern concerns are fully and finally realised in the participatory gnosis within theosis, because this knowledge is immediate and practical to present life. It produces the fruit of real transformation which is tangible in human experience, and which destroys existential angst, along with the fear of death and limitation.

The metanarratives of human construct which have over the millennia been used to oppress and enslave are dissolved by the ontological transformation of those who are mystically in the life of Christ. Being and Knowledge as categories of truth, have been redeemed from corrupt usage and association, and renewed as modes of the divine. Like the admonition of Paul to the Romans (Rom12:2) participation in the divine nature will provide us a way in which we will not be conformed to the pattern of this Aeon, but will allow for us to be completely transfigured by the renovation of our nous. That renovation of the nous is Metanoia, the radical redirectioning of our inner-most awareness away from created things, to the creator of all things. On the societal scale this same process is required of those who are being deified; rather than destroy enslaving metanarratives, and breaking down Foundationalism, these human constructs must have their destructive and oppressive elements dismantled, and then a reconstruction can be completed which will transform all of society into a corporate participatory movement toward liberation, justice, and lasting peace.

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<sup>104</sup> Truth-bearers

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