

THE HUMANIST QUEST FOR A UNITY OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE ORTHODOX METAPHYSICS OF LIGHT

A Corrective to Father Meyendorff's Misunderstanding of the Theology of St. Gregory Palamas*

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I would like to thank the State University of New York and the Center for Cypriot Studies for inviting me to speak here today, along with my spiritual Father, Bishop Chrysostomos. As a student of the late and much revered Father Georges Florovsky, I have inherited a commitment to the integrity of Orthodox studies and to an apologetic witness of the genuine Byzantine spirit. Part of that commitment to the integrity of Orthodox studies and to things truly Byzantine is a scholarship which seeks to capture and to preserve the message of the Hellenic East in its uniqueness and to convey it to Western thinkers in an unadulterated form. The theme of this scholarly conference is well suited to that purpose, since it juxtaposes a purely Byzantine figure, St. Gregory Palamas, and a preeminently Western thing, humanism. We have an opportunity, in reflecting on this great hesychastic Father and one of the pivotal philosophies of the Western intellectual tradition, to see that while, in essence, Byzantine thought developed largely independently of Western influence, it nonetheless encompasses, in its universalism, many of the major trends and preoccupations of the West. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, this conference provides me with an opportunity to examine the process of distortion by which our particular species of pure Byzantine thought, Palamite theology, has been rendered something that it is *not* by the scholarship of the late Father John Meyendorff; an Orthodox writer, no less, who, though with clearly sincere apologetic intentions, failed to approach the Hellenic East with an eye towards

its uniqueness, succumbed to the temptation of interpreting hesychastic traditions in the foreign and inappropriate categories of Western philosophy and theology, and thus severely distorted it.

Father Meyendorff, in several books¹ and in many of his seminary lectures, argued in particular that the the hesychastic controversy was essentially a clash, not between the Latinized theology of Barlaam the Calabrian and the Greek Patristic tradition, but between Byzantine humanism, influenced as it was by Western ideas (among others, those of William of Occam), and the anti-humanistic tendencies of the Byzantine monastics, represented by the innovative genius of St. Gregory Palamas. Portraying Barlaam primarily as a nominalist and the product of Byzantine humanism, rather than a Western Greek clearly influenced by Latin theology, Meyendorff contends that the Calabrian's neo-Platonic understanding of the theology of St. Dionysios the Areopagite—pseudo-Dionysios in the lexicon of the Western sceptic—was the object of Palamas' corrective argumentation in the name of hesychasm. Aside from the fact that the theology of the Areopagite was not the central issue in the hesychastic controversy, and despite the fact that St. Gregory certainly never saw or sought to correct supposed neo-Platonic elements in St. Dionysios, Meyendorff's convoluted attempt to explain the hesychastic controversy as a clash between a Westernized Byzantine humanism and the innovative theology of Palamas is based on a serious misunderstanding of the history of philosophy and hesychastic theology.

In the first place, one is at a loss to understand the source of Meyendorff's belief that St. Gregory Palamas was an innovative, original thinker. If one were to cite a perfect example of a Church Father arguing strictly from the witness of the Patristic consensus, St. Gregory Palamas would probably be one of the first to come to mind. He was not an innovative thinker, there is nothing *original* about his work, and the hesychastic tradition is nothing but a clear statement of the common practice of Orthodox monks as it reached Palamas from an unbroken chain of very clear development reaching back to the desert Fathers. While a careful study of the development of trends in monastic theology is perhaps a difficult thing to find, Father Meyendorff certainly could not have failed, had he not been under the sway of Western ideas about Byzantine mysticism, to see this continuity between Palamite and earlier Greek Patristic thought. With regard to Meyendorff's attempt to look at the hesychastic controversy from a Western philosophical perspective, we find in this attempt not only a violation of the integrity of Orthodox Byzantium,

but evidence, as we have said, of Meyendorff's limited grasp of Western philosophy itself. Father Romanides has rightly noted that

...perhaps the most amazing and most revolutionary claim of Father Meyendorff is that Barlaam was both a nominalist and Neo-Platonist or Platonist. Until now the histories of philosophy and theology have been presenting these traditions as mutually exclusive. It was commonly agreed that William of Occam destroyed the Platonic basis of medieval scholasticism by his denial of the objective existence of universals both in the essence of God and in creation. ...Had Father Meyendorff explained how it is possible for one and the same person to be both a nominalist and a Platonist, he would have revolutionized our knowledge of the intellectual history of Europe.²

In my own mind, it is essentially Father Meyendorff's enduring desire to see the hesychastic controversy from a Western perspective which blinds him to a genuine parallel between St. Gregory Palamas' thought, or his synthesis of an important aspect of the Greek Patristic tradition, and Western humanism. This parallel is a simple and compelling one. We often forget, in assessing the revolutionary aspects of humanism in the context of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, that humanism had a higher goal than that of simply establishing the centrality of man, over and against God, in human pursuits. It also involved a return to the philosophical aims of the classical world and a search for universal aesthetic standards and values. Indeed, it was first the classicist, not the intellectual iconoclast, who was called a humanist in European universities. In the classical world, the humanists sought a unity of knowledge, a unifying principle of wisdom to rival the "arid dialectic of the Scholastic doctors" of the Middle Ages.³ It is this quest, though one of a spiritual kind, that also marks the development of the Greek Patristic Tradition. As much as anything else, the Greek Fathers brought together from their common spiritual experience and the tomes of Christian revelation a universal metaphysics: a statement about man and cosmology that for them embodied the fullness of wisdom, or *sophia*. Concentrated on a process of human transformation, or deification, the composite revelation of Christian truth was for the Byzantine nothing less than a search for universal wisdom derived from the ascendancy of God but focused on the uniqueness of man. Herein we find a close conceptual parallel, however different in focus, between the Greek Fathers and Western humanism.

St. Gregory Palamas brings the Greek Patristic search for a universal metaphysics to its highest expression in his synthesis of the experience and thought of the Fathers before him on the subject of

light. In his metaphysics of light, he finds a unifying principle of Greek thought. Jostein Børtnes, a Norwegian scholar studying early Russian Orthodox hagiography, has written of the Orthodox metaphysics of light some interesting remarks that will help us, in correcting and elaborating on his remarks, to understand better this unifying principle. Børtnes approaches the idea of light metaphysics from the aesthetic of the Icon:

The origins of Orthodox light metaphysics are to be found in Dionysius the Areopagite's synthesis of Neo-Platonist philosophy and the light theology of the Fourth Gospel [of St. John]. The metaphysics of light...is grounded on the idea that material light is an image of the pure, unintelligible Light, which is God in His transcendent glory. The light we perceive through our senses is the self-revelation of the transcendent godhead. Therefore, according to [the] Neo-Platonist aesthetics [of the Areopagite], light is the highest and most perfect manifestation of beauty, the reflection of divine beauty, truth, and goodness, which never reveals itself directly to man, but which 'sends forth a ray, incessantly and continuously produced in itself, and transforms this ray through its goodness into natural radiance, which corresponds to individual finite beings. It raises those who are hit by the Holy Spirit up to itself according to their possibilities, lets them behold its reflection and partake of it, and teaches them to resemble itself as much as possible.'

The experience of God underlying this aesthetics of light is difficult to apprehend from a modern angle. It presupposes the medieval concept of analogy, implying that all things have been created in the image and likeness of the Creator, being in various degrees 'manifestations of God, images, vestiges, or shadows of the Creator....'

...Whereas in the Areopagite the opposition between the noetic reality of the divine and the world perceived by our senses is absolute, this is no longer so in post-iconoclastic aesthetics. Here, Christ through His Incarnation has become mediator between the two spheres. This Christocentric reinterpretation of Dionysian light mysticism was carried through by Saint Maximus the Confessor, the seventh-century theologian, according to which Christ is the prototype transforming each individual believer into his image and filling him with his energy, thus assimilating him to Himself. This process of assimilation, the return of the image to its prototype, of the thing to its logos, is what is meant by the term theosis, or deification[:] determined by the conception that light is the highest perceptible expression of the transcendent God in whom everything has its origin, a visible symbol of Christ. ...By becoming light, all men, indeed all things are transformed into images, or icons, of the Uncreated light which is God himself.⁴

There are, despite his insight into the Orthodox metaphysics of light, some serious theological problems in Børtnes' statements. In the first place, Dionysian theology, if not the corpus of Orthodox

thought, is by no means neo-Platonic in origin. Andrew Louth has pointed out that the Greek Fathers and the neo-Platonists are quite distant from one another in their thinking about God, man, and the moral virtues. He argues that, “the Fathers...readily use Platonist language but it is transfigured by the context in which they use it.”⁵ Similarly, in very strong language, Louis Bouyer dismisses unqualified accusations of neo-Platonism against the Fathers, tracing these accusations to an “unjustifiable prejudice,” wherein “...it...[has]...to be shown at any cost that any thinking in Christianity and also in Judaism, must necessarily be a foreign importation.”⁶ Børtnes, basing his understanding of Orthodox anthropology and soteriology on the aesthetics of the Icon, also overstates the idea of human salvation as an appropriation of the image of Christ. The restoration of the image of God in man is not one of identity, a union of image and prototype, but of imitation and participation. Thus, *θέωσις*, or deification, is not a “return” of the human person to the *Logos* (to some “prototype” of Christ), but an appropriation of God’s energies in man. Deification is a participation in the Grace, but not the essence, of God, as Father Florovsky observes: “The source and power of human theosis is not the Divine essence [which the *Logos* is], but the ‘Grace of God.’ ...*Χάρις* is not identical with the *οὐσία*. It is *θεία καὶ ἄκτιστος χάρις καὶ ἐνέργεια* [Divine and uncreated Grace and energy].”⁷

In describing the process of deification, Børtnes also makes a directional error. Divinization, again, is not simply a return to some lost image; nor is it an “assimilation” by God: “the soul is not absorbed into...[God]...,” as Professor Cavarnos observes. Rather, divinization entails the restoration of human nature in its encounter with God, by which the pre-Lapsarian image of God is restored and renewed in the human person, whose “individuality is not only retained but enhanced.”⁸ Børtnes is also wrong in his idea that in becoming light, the image being assimilated by its prototype, images are transformed into the Uncreated Light which is God Himself. The relationship between an image and its prototype is hypostatic in nature, not one of mutual “absorption.” The Icon does not become a holy object by virtue of being literally “drawn into” the holiness of what it represents; instead, as St. Theodore the Studite argues, every object having an hypostasis or an objective identity which is defined by its purpose, the objective hypostasis of a material Icon allows it to participate hypostatically in the holiness of what it represents, its prototype, simply because this participation is the natural intention of an Icon.⁹ Bishop Chrysostomos, Father James Thornton, and I

have explained this principle as follows:

...An icon, while material and while a mere image in some limited sense, nonetheless also exists in objective hypostasis, the image being joined to its prototype, participating in the holiness of that which it depicts. One must not be presumptuous here and find neo-Platonic parallels in this iconic theory, as Western observers are wont to do. The theory stems from pure Christological theology. St. Theodore clearly argues that an icon cannot participate in the very essence of its prototype. There is thus no emanationism to be found in his argument. He simply points out that the hypostatic nature of an object allows for the material icon to participate in the holiness of its prototype, since this is the natural intention of an icon (intentionality, we should emphasize, being foreign to symbols but natural to perceived images), part of its very identity. The veneration offered up to an icon reaches up to its prototype because it is implicit in the intrinsic character, in the hypostatic identity, of an icon, that the veneration of the image should reach up to its prototype.¹⁰

Moreover, uncreated light is not “God Himself” essentially, but is a manifestation of God’s energies. Thus, an Icon does not become light, anymore than a person who experiences *theosis* literally becomes light; rather such a person is transformed by Grace and perceives even in a sensible way the Divine or uncreated light attendant to and inseparable from Divine Grace. And finally, the objective hypostasis of an Icon cannot be equated with the hypostatic reality of the human person, who is not only transformed by Grace, but participates in it in a way that an inanimate object does not.

Because of his failure to understand the Orthodox notion of the nature of God and because of his misunderstanding of the hypostatic uniqueness of the human person, Børtnes wrongly summarizes the hesychastic doctrine of St. Gregory Palamas, rendering it anti-humanistic in intent. He does rightly portray Palamite theology as an exemplary expression of the unifying principle of a metaphysics of light in the Eastern Fathers. And he correctly observes that St. Gregory Palamas’ ascetic and spiritual tradition is a synthesis of ancient traditions and that the teaching of Palamas’ mentor, St. Gregory of Sinai, “in essence goes back to the traditional mysticism of the fifth-century Orthodox ascetics.”¹¹ But in his faulty grasp of the essence-energy distinction which underlies St. Gregory’s ascetic theology (a distinction with equally ancient precedents), Børtnes’ limited understanding of Orthodox theology and anthropology comes to light. He fails to understand that the essence-energy distinction serves not only to explain how the simplicity of God is maintained in an apparent separation of His energies (which can be perceived) from His es-

sence (which is transcendent and unknowable), but defines the limits and scope of the ascetic efforts by which the hesychasts achieved a vision of God.

Following directly the work of Father John Meyendorff, Børtnes suggests that there must have been “several points of contact between Hesychasm and the [Bogomil] heretics,” and thus attributes much of the ascetic theology of the hesychasts to a disdain for the body.¹² There is, however, no historical evidence whatever to support Meyendorff’s claim that the hesychasts and Bogomils may have had “traits of spirituality common to both of them.”¹³ If anything, contacts between the two groups resulted in the condemnation of the spiritual precepts and practices of the Bogomil heretics and their negative attitudes toward the body by the hesychasts. Nonetheless, Børtnes, under the influence of Meyendorff, sees the ascetic tradition of the hesychasts in the light of a kind of neo-Platonic mysticism and fails to understand this tradition as an expression of the Greek Patristic consensus and its respect for the human person as such. Speaking of Palamas, Børtnes says that:

Many of the ideas he took up and developed can be traced to the Areopagite, especially the latter’s teaching about the Divine Light that illuminates the universe; further to Symeon the New Theologian and his light mysticism, to the apophatic theology which was developed by the Neo-Platonists in fifth-century Athens—the transcendent essence of the phenomena defined as silence and absence—and finally to the Patristic doctrine of theosis, man’s deification and union with God through imitation of Christ and participation in His body in the mystery of the Eucharist and in the contemplation of His passion.¹⁴

We have already commented on the issue of neo-Platonism in the Greek Fathers. The idea that hesychasm entails a primarily sacramental and contemplative attempt to participate in Christ—let alone in “His passions”—simply further obscures Palamas’ ascetic theology and reflects Meyendorff’s basic misunderstanding of the nature of Orthodox mysticism.

It is through a series of mistranslations and critical misinterpretations that Meyendorff first came to the conclusion that Palamite mysticism rests in contemplation and sacramentalism, a conclusion which, as we noted above, also led Børtnes to his faulty assumptions about the hesychastic vision of God. What Romanides says of Meyendorff’s error, therefore, likewise applies to Børtnes:

Whereas in the West a distinction is made between the contemplative and the active states of the Christian life, in the East there is no such distinction. The quest for and the gift of uninterrupted prayer [“mysti-

cism"] is not a life of contemplation and is not a seeking after ecstatic experiences....¹⁵

The hesychastic vision of God, the product of uninterrupted prayer, involves not in essence an attempt at literal union with Christ—whether sacramentally or through the contemplation of and participation in His passions—, but an ontological purification of the senses (if not the whole person) by active spiritual pursuits, through which one comes into communion with God's Grace. The subtle conceptual contrast of the essence-energies distinction finds its counterpart in ascetic theology in the efforts of the human being to attain, through purification, invulnerability to the consequences of sin, while still acknowledging the potential dominance of sin over the flesh and the fallen world and his or her own essential imperfection. With ascetic labor and the acquisition of human virtue, one comes, by Grace, to union with God, *theosis*, and the vision of God as uncreated or Divine light through purified or spiritually transformed human sensation. It is this ontological purification in the active acquisition of virtues that the Greek Fathers consider asceticism, not a withdrawal to the life of contemplation and "sacramentalism." And it is the vision of God's glory in the uncreated light of His energies (or *theosis*), not (at least as an end in itself) beatific ecstasy or a sharing in Christ's passions, which is the aim and goal of the ascetic life. When the Eastern Fathers speak of participation in the passions of the Cross of Christ, they mean by this not the vision of God, but the therapeutic, purifying path of *ascesis*, a way of access to the vision of God.

With regard to *theosis* and the vision of uncreated light specifically, Børtnes makes an informative observation:

To the light mystics the highest form of enjoyment is the contemplation of things in order to discover their 'light' and thus behold the divine Logos, the Uncreated Light of Orthodox mystics, as it is reflected in matter. This contemplation was an act of salvation, a restitution of wholeness in 'disintegrated nature.'¹⁶

While it is true that the highest state in Orthodox spiritual life is the vision of God as uncreated light, this state should not, again, be carelessly equated with the beatific contemplation to which Børtnes here refers. Børtnes is quite correct, however, in placing *theosis* and the vision of uncreated light, the vision of God, in the context of human salvation. Thus, according to St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite (b. 1749): "Know that if your mind is not deified by the Holy Spirit, it is impossible for you to be saved."¹⁷ This is an important point, since the vision of God must not be understood as some strange and exotic ex-

perience appropriate to an elite class of “mystics,” but as an element of a universal metaphysics of light that impinges on the life of every Christian striving for salvation.

Finally, it behooves us to say something about uncreated light itself, which Børtnes does not adequately describe or define. According to Cavarnos,

...through the opening of the heart (kardiakon anoigma) [or hesychastic practices] the Divine light enters us. ...Illumination is ‘an ineffable energy, which is seen invisibly and known unknowably,’ according to Callistos and Ignatios. Palamas, who deals most extensively with illumination, says: ‘The Divine and deifying effulgence and grace is not the essence of God, but His uncreated energy.’ ...Illumination, as a vision of, and union with, the Divine Light, is a union with God, Who is light.¹⁸

In essence, when we behold God as light, we do not see Him in His essence or as He is reflected in created things; we see him as “uncreated” light. Nor do we see God as simple light and come to know Him in precisely the same way that we see and comprehend material things. Rather, through *theosis* and the purification of the person and the senses, “the mind enters into the heart” and we come to see and know God noetically, through a spiritual faculty (the *νοῦς*) and our restored senses, in a vision that is not vision and in a knowing that is not knowing (apophatic expressions of spiritual sight and knowledge). Referring to St. Gregory Palamas, Romanides notes that he did not believe that

uncreated light should be seen by the senses alone, and argues that this vision is proper neither to the senses nor to the intellect, but rather transcends both, being at the same time a knowing and an unknowing in which the whole man participates, having thus been divinized in body and soul by this same light of grace. ...Palamas climaxes his arguments by pointing out that it is not by any created means that the apostles saw the glory of Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration, but by the power of the omnipotent spirit. Thus the elect apostles saw the light on Mt. Thabor, ‘not only flashing from the flesh bearing within itself the Son, but also from the Cloud bearing within itself the Father of Christ.’ This is in keeping with the basic epistemological principle of the Greek Patristic tradition that only when within the uncreated light (in this case called cloud) can one see the uncreated light. ...The body of Christ illumined the apostles from without only because the same illuminating light of the body was already illuminating them from within.¹⁹

Since God is invisible to the senses and the intellect, only a person whose intellect and senses are transformed by the working of Grace can attain to a vision of God, seeing God within God by means of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

It is, in the last analysis, in the transformation of the human person within Divine light, in the encompassing metaphysics of light of Eastern Christian theology, that we discover the true dimensions of the unified notion of the universe and the interaction of God and man which links Palamite thought with the anthropocentric concerns of the humanists. Indeed, it is in human action, not in neo-Platonic vision or in some muddled theory of contemplative sacramentalism, that human transformation reaches full expression. Properly understood in its uniqueness and liberated from the distortions imposed on it by fruitless attempts to accommodate it to the trends of Western intellectualism, Palamite thought truly achieves a unified knowledge of things, a comprehensive vision of man and God in a universe ordered by a complex interaction between Creator and creature. St. Gregory Palamas and the whole of the Greek Patristic tradition which he represents address the issue of human epistemology in a profound and challenging way, linking Divine wisdom to human insight in a universe striving towards the restoration of a balance between God and man that makes of man something far beyond even the fondest expectations of the secular or religious humanist of the West. This hesychastic man is as close as our ability to free ourselves from Western misconceptions and as distant from us as the arrogance which impedes that effort is from perfect humility.

* From a lecture originally given at the State University of New York at Albany in the autumn of 1992.

Notes

1. See, for example, John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, tr. George Lawrence (London: The Faith Press, 1975).
2. The Rev. John S. Romanides, "Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 6 (Winter 1959-60):187-188.
3. Mircea Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), s.v. "Humanism" (p. 512).
4. Jostein Børtnes, *Visions of Glory: Studies in Early Russian Historiography*, tr. Jostein Børtnes and Paul L. Nielsen (Oslo: Solum Forlag A/S, 1988), pp. 82-84.
5. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition, From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 198. Cf. Lossky's chapter, "The Divine Darkness," in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge and London: James Clarke and Company, 1973), pp. 23-43, where he argues vehemently against the idea that St. Dionysios, in particular, was a neo-Platonist.
6. Louis Bouyer, Dom Jean Leclercq, Dom François Vandenbroucke, and Louis Cognet, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, tr. Mary P. Ryan (New York: Seabury Press, 1963), p. 259.
7. Protospyter Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Co., 1972), p. 117.
8. Constantine Cavarnos, *Byzantine Thought and Art* (Belmont, MA: Institute for

Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1968), p. 28. We should note that this idea of “renewal” is not just rhetorical; rather, the restoration of the human person to a proper, pre-Lapsarian relationship with God involves a new and fuller communion with God, rooted in the light of the Resurrection. Thus, divinization is both a restoration and a literal “renewal.” This point is clearly made in an essay by Father Gregory Telpneff, “The Concept of the Person in the Christian Hellenism of the Greek Church Fathers: A Study of Origen, St. Gregory the Theologian, and St. Maximos the Confessor” (doctoral dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 1991), pp. 152-154, 295-297, 355-360. St. Gregory Palamas also assures us that before the Fall, “Adam too participated in this divine illumination and radiance [τῆς θείας ἐλλάμψεως τε καὶ λαμπρότητος], and he was truly clothed in a garment of glory” (St. Gregory Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, tr. R.E. Sinkewicz, C.S.B. [Toronto, Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1988], p. 161).

9. See St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, tr. C. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981), pp. 102-108 esp.

10. Hieromonk [Bishop] Auxentios, Bishop Chrysostomos of Oreoi [Etna], and the Reverend James Thornton, “Notions of Reality and the Resolution of Dualism in the Phenomenological Precepts of Merleau-Ponty and the Orthodox Responses to Iconoclasm,” *The American Benedictine Review*, 41, no. 1 (1990): 96.

11. Børtnes, *Visions of Glory*, p. 110.

12. Ibid.

13. Meyendorff, *Study*, p. 33.

14. Børtnes, *Visions of Glory*, p. 116.

15. The Rev. John S. Romanides, “Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics—II,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 9 (Winter 1963-64):238ff esp.

16. Børtnes, *Visions of Glory*, p. 84.

17. Constantine Cavarnos, *Modern Greek Saints*, Vol. 3, *St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1954), p. 139.

18. Cavarnos, *Byzantine Thought*, pp. 56-57.

19. Romanides, “Palamite Controversy—II,” pp. 240-41.