

Cloud or smoke	4
Cross or triangle of light	2
Unconsuming flame	2
Angel	2
Dove	2

$n = 45$

Table B  
Effects Associated with the Holy Fire

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Number of Reports</i>
Miraculous lighting of lamps	13
Miraculous lighting of candles	3
Loud noise or whistle	2
Earthquake	1

$n = 19$

In both of these tables, aside from specific supernatural manifestations and effects also contained in the *corpus* of Christian Scripture and the Patristic witness, as we will subsequently see, there is in general a remarkable frequency of reports of light imagery, which holds such a pivotal place in the Orthodox theological scheme. In Table A, the Holy Fire appears as a manifestation of light (including lightning and fire) thirty-three times, or, where  $n$  is the total number of reports entered, 73% of the time. In Table B, where  $n = 19$ , 84% of the effects associated with the Holy Fire are also associated with the production of light or a flame. In the first instance, accounting for the uneven and low frequency of non-light-related manifestations of the Holy Fire, a statistic of 73% actually deflates the power of our observation, since a light-related manifestation occurs more than eight times more frequently than the largest number of other reports taken separately and eleven times more frequently than the mean frequency of these reports together.

With regard to the Eastern Church's understanding of the

vision of God and light imagery, Jostein Børtnes provides a summary of what he calls the “light metaphysics of Christian Neo–Platonism...developed in the early Fathers of the Eastern Church,” a metaphysics which he approaches from the æsthetic 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 Saint 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,<sup>301</sup> 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,<sup>302</sup> implying that all things have been

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<sup>301</sup> We might point out that Saint Dionysios (†96) is not putting forth a theory of neo–Platonic emanationism with this imagery. As Father John Romanides contends: “It is the uncreated Logos Himself Who is sent and not a created imitation, and the relationship established between God and creation is real both ways and not mediated by subordinate creature–gods”; see the Rev. John S. Romanides, “H. A. Wolfson’s Philosophy of the Church Fathers,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 5 (1959), p. 72.

<sup>302</sup> The idea of an analogy of being between God and man is, of course, foreign to the Greek Fathers. Thus, Father Florovsky writes that: “...there is no similarity between that which comes forth from nothing and the Creator Who verily *is*; Who brings creatures out of nothing”; see [Protopresbyter] Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption* (Belmont, ma: Nordland Publishing Co., 1976), p. 48.

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.<sup>303</sup>

There are some serious theological problems in Børtnes' statements, and, though they are not our specific concern in this chapter, we are obliged to comment briefly on them before drawing on his correct understanding of the rôle of light in Orthodox theology. In the first place, while he is correct in associating the Areopagite's theological understanding of light with a general Orthodox metaphysics of light, he is led into error by his assumption that Dionysian theology, if not the *corpus* of Orthodox thought, is neo–Platonic in origin. A number of scholars have challenged this assumption and argue that neo–Platonic concepts of God and the cosmos are at odds with Dionysian theology and the consensus of the Eastern Fathers, to which he belongs. For example, Andrew Louth has pointed out, with regard to Saint Dionysios and other Fathers, that

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<sup>303</sup> Jostein Børtnes, *Visions of Glory: Studies in Early Russian Historiography*, trans. Jostein Børtnes and Paul L. Nielsen (Oslo: Solum Forlag a/s, 1988), pp. 82–84.

...though we can see Patristic mysticism taking its cue from Platonist mysticism when it tries to achieve intellectual expression—and such is hardly surprising, it seems to me that at several points this intellectual background is modified.<sup>304</sup>

Louth goes on to consider three very important issues, namely, the concept of God, the soul's relationship to God, and the moral virtues, in which the Greek Fathers and the neo-Platonists are quite distant from one another in their thinking. In effect, he says, "...the Fathers...readily use Platonist language but it is transfigured by the context in which they use it."<sup>305</sup> 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."<sup>306</sup>

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 return of the image to its prototype, of the "thing to its logos." The anthropology and soteriology of the Eastern Fathers are far more complex than this. The *Logos*, or Christ, as a

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<sup>304</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition, From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 194; cf. Vladimir Lossky's chap. "The Divine Darkness," in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge and London: James Clarke & Co., 1973), pp. 23–43, where he argues vehemently against the idea that Saint Dionysios, in particular, was a neo-Platonist.

<sup>305</sup> Louth, *Origins*, p. 198. This is not to say, however, that the human being cannot approach God, for the soul is, according to Saint Gregory the Theologian (Nazianzus, †390), also "...deified by its inclination to God"; see his "Oration xlv: The Second Oration on Easter," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Phillip Schaff, Vol. 7, 2nd ser. (Grand Rapids, mi: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 425.

<sup>306</sup> Louis Bouyer, Dom Jean Leclercq, Dom François Vandenbroucke, and Louis Cognet, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, trans. Mary P. Ryan (New York: Seabury Press, 1963), p. 259.

manifestation of the transcendent God, of the Hypostasis of the Father, is not in Orthodox theology a mere “prototype.” Børtnes uses this word in too imprecise a way. 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, θεώσις, or deification, is not a “return” of the human person to the *Logos* (or simply to some “prototype” of Christ, for that matter), but an appropriation of God’s Energies in man—Grace—, which is contained in, but does not encompass or fully define, the Divine Person and *Logos* of Christ. Deification is a participation in the Grace, but not the Essence, of God, as Father Georges 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 ἀκτιστος χάρις καὶ ἐνέργεια [Divine and Uncreated Grace and Energy].<sup>307</sup>

In describing the process of deification, Børtnes also makes a directional error. He speaks of man returning to his image. This is true only figuratively, for in actuality, as Florovsky avers, “...in his ‘energies’ the Unapproachable God mysteriously *approaches man*. And this Divine move effects encounter: πρόοδος εἰς τὰ ἔξω, in the phrase of St. Maximus.”<sup>308</sup> 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.<sup>309</sup> 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<sup>310</sup> in the hu-

<sup>307</sup> Florovsky, *Bible*, p. 117.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>309</sup> Constantine Cavarnos, *Byzantine Thought and Art* (Belmont, ma: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1968), p. 28.

<sup>310</sup> As an incidental note, 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 Telepneff,

man person, whose "...individuality is not only retained but enhanced."<sup>311</sup>

With specific regard to iconographic aesthetics, Børtnes' observations are in want of further critical treatment. He is 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. This is a completely muddled statement of the basic theology of Icons. First, the relationship between an image and its prototype is hypostatic in nature, not one of mutual "absorption," as it were. That is, the Icon does not become a holy object by virtue of being literally "drawn into" the holiness of what it represents; rather, as Saint Theodore the Studite (†826) 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.<sup>312</sup> Commenting on the iconographic theology of Saint Theodore, Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, 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 be-

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"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. He bases his argument on the thought of Saint Irenæus of Lyons († ca. 202), Saint Gregory the Theologian, and Saint Maximos the Confessor (†662). One must not, of course, overstate the theme of renewal, since we are speaking here of "degrees" of spiritual glory. Thus Saint Gregory Palamas (†1359) 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" (Saint Gregory Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, trans. R. E. Sinkewicz, c.s.b. [Toronto, on: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1988], p. 161).

<sup>311</sup> Cavarnos, *Byzantine Thought*, p. 28.

<sup>312</sup> See Saint Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. Catherine Roth (Crestwood, ny: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), esp. pp. 102-108.

ing 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.<sup>313</sup>

Second, 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, as we shall see, 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.<sup>314</sup>

Because of his failure to understand the Orthodox notion of the nature of God and because of his misunderstanding of the

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<sup>313</sup> Hieromonk [Bishop] Auxentios, Bishop [Archbishop] 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*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1990), p. 96.

<sup>314</sup> We should probably also note that the Icon is by nature subservient to the human person; it *serves* human spiritual development. Its intended purpose is to arouse “...our moral and spiritual zeal...and...[reinforce] our efforts to imitate the sacred persons and live in the light of religious truth” (Cavarnos, *Byzantine Thought*, p. 72).

hypostatic uniqueness of the human person, Børtnes wrongly summarizes the hesychastic doctrine of Saint Gregory Palamas. 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 Saint Gregory Palamas' ascetic and spiritual tradition is a synthesis of ancient traditions, and that the teaching of Palamas' mentor, Saint Gregory of Sinai (†1346), "...in essence goes back to the traditional mysticism of the fifth-century Orthodox ascetics."<sup>315</sup> But in his faulty grasp of the Essence–Energy distinction which underlies Saint Gregory's ascetic *theology* (a distinction with equally ancient precedents<sup>316</sup>), Børtnes' limited understanding of Orthodox theology and anthropology comes to light. He thus 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 Essence (which is transcendent and unknowable), but defines the limits and scope of the ascetic efforts by which the hesychasts achieved a vision of God.

Børtnes, following, among other scholars, the work of Father John Meyendorff,<sup>317</sup> suggests that there must have been "...several points of contact between Hesychasm and the [Bogomil] heretics,"<sup>318</sup> and thus attributes much of the ascetic theology of

<sup>315</sup> Børtnes, *Visions of Glory*, p. 110. This affirmation is supported by Father Florovsky's study, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth Century*, trans. Raymond Miller, Anne-Marie Döllinger–Labriolle, and Helmut Wilhelm Schmiedel (Belmont, ma: Notable and Academic Books, 1987), though Father Florovsky goes on to say that these Fathers represent a theological tradition, a unity of thought, which reaches back to Scripture itself (p. 16).

<sup>316</sup> In a very persuasive manner, Florovsky has pointed out that the Essence–Energy distinction can be traced back at least to Saint Athanasios the Great (†373) and his distinction between God's absolute Essence and his "power and bounty," and clearly to the Cappadocian concept of God in "essence" and "action," as well as to other earlier Greek Fathers; see Florovsky, *Bible*, pp. 116–117.

<sup>317</sup> See John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, trans. George Lawrence (London: The Faith Press, 1975), esp. pp. 32–33.



the hesychasts to a disdain for the body. There is, however, no historical evidence whatsoever to support Meyendorff's claim that the hesychasts and Bogomils may have had "...traits of spirituality common to both of them."<sup>319</sup> 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.<sup>320</sup> Meyendorff's view of hesychastic spirituality is also compromised by a general philosophical misunderstanding of Palamite thought<sup>321</sup> and by certain misapprehensions and misstatements of Saint Gregory Palamas' theological positions. Thus, Børtnes, presumably influenced by 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. 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 ab-

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<sup>318</sup> Børtnes, *Visions of Glory*, p. 110.

<sup>319</sup> Meyendorff, *Study*, p. 33.

<sup>320</sup> Regarding the hesychasts' positive view of the human body, see Archimandrite [Archbishop] Chrysostomos, Hieromonk [Bishop] Auxentios, and Hierodeacon [Archimandrite] Akakios, *Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Thought: The Traditionalist Voice* (Belmont, ma: Nordland House Publishers, 1982), pp. 52–55.

<sup>321</sup> In a biting review of Father Meyendorff's study of Saint Gregory, Father John Romanides makes mention of the philosophical weaknesses in Meyendorff's arguments, citing, for example, his "...revolutionary claim...that Barlaam is both a nominalist and a Neo-Platonist or Platonist. ...Had Father Meyendorff," he continues, "explained how it is possible for one and the same person to be both a nominalist and a Platonist, he would have revolutionized our intellectual knowledge of the history of Europe"; see the Rev. John S. Romanides, "Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 6 (Winter 1960–1961), pp. 187–188.

sence—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.<sup>322</sup>

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 passion”—simply further obscures Palamas' ascetic theology.

It is through a series of mistranslations and critical misinterpretations<sup>323</sup> that Meyendorff comes to the conclusion that Palamite mysticism rests in contemplation and sacramentalism, a conclusion which apparently led Børtnes to his faulty assumptions about the hesychastic vision of God. What Father John Romanides says of Meyendorff's error also 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 is not a life of contemplation and is not a seeking after ecstatic experiences....<sup>324</sup>

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 Passion—, but an ontological purifica-

<sup>322</sup> We shall say more about the notion of “contemplation” and “meditation” below. At this point, however, we should point out that spiritual concentration in the Eastern Christian Tradition rarely involves an envisioning of the “passion” of Christ or a conjuring-up of religious images in general. “Φαντασία,” or the imagination, as Cavarinos remarks, is for the Eastern Fathers “one of the lower faculties of man.” It is properly applied with great precision, as an accessory to meditation, and is usually concentrated on the remembrance of death and the Last Judgment; see Cavarinos, *Byzantine Thought*, p. 52.

<sup>323</sup> See, for example, Romanides' comments in “Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics—ii,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 9 (Winter 1963–1964), esp. pp. 238ff.

tion of the senses (if not the whole person) by active spiritual pursuits, through which one comes into communion with God's Grace.<sup>325</sup> 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.<sup>326</sup> With ascetic labor and the acquisition of human virtue,<sup>327</sup> one comes, by Grace, to union with God, *theosis*, and the vision of God as Uncreated or Divine Light through the purified or spiritually transformed senses.<sup>328</sup> It is this ontological purification in the active

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>325</sup> Cavarnos says of uninterrupted prayer, or “Prayer of the Heart,” as it is often called in Patristic texts, that it “...first...is pleasant warmth (*therme*) of the heart, which purifies man of passions, effecting a state of passionlessness. This warmth is a manifestation of God...” (*Byzantine Thought*, p. 56).

<sup>326</sup> See Chrysostomos, *Contemporary Thought*, pp. 54–56.

<sup>327</sup> The virtues, according to the Greek Fathers, are closely linked to asceticism, which is thus something active, involving as it does *ἄσκησις* towards the acquisition of the virtues. As Cavarnos remarks: “This ascetic way of looking at the virtues appears frequently in the writings of Christian writers of the Hellenic East, from the early centuries of the Christian era to the present”; see Constantine Cavarnos, *The Hellenic–Christian Philosophical Tradition* (Belmont, ma: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1989), p. 32.

<sup>328</sup> Telepneff, “Concept of the Person,” pp. 282–284, 345–348; cf. Cavarnos, who writes: “Through prayer and meditation, exemplary men and women, living an impeccable Christian life, ...[can] be transformed by the grace of the Holy Spirit and...achieve ‘theosis’ or ‘deification’—what the Latins equated with the ‘Vision of God’ or the *Summum Bonum*” (*Hellenic–Christian Tradition*, p. 4). Let us point out, again, that Cavarnos means by “an impeccable Christian life” a virtuous life (cf. p. 19). As well, the term “meditation” needs clarification. It should not be equated with the Western notion of “contemplation,” as it so often is. Cavarnos is referring here to the Greek word “μελέτη,” or a specific exercise in mental attention by which the mind prepares for prayer. It cannot be separated from the virtue of “ἀπροσπάθεια,” or detachment from worldly things, the effect of an essentially spiritual exercise with its roots in noetic activity rather than the activities of the discursive intellect or the imagination. (See further

acquisition of virtues that the Greek Fathers consider asceticism, not a withdrawal to the life of contemplation and what Romaniides calls “sacramentalism” (by which he apparently means a kind of “sacramental ritualism”).<sup>329</sup> And it is the vision of God’s

comments in Cavarnos, *Byzantine Thought*, pp. 52–53, 55.) Finally, it is essential to note that Cavarnos, in his reference to the “Vision of God,” does not himself equate the Western notion of “beatific vision” with the vision of God as Uncreated Light in the Tradition of the Eastern Church; rather, he simply assigns this equation to the West. In other places, he speaks specifically about the traditional Orthodox notion of “the vision of God” (e.g., *Hellenic-Christian Tradition*, p. 47); cf. Romanides, “Remarks of an Orthodox Christian on Religious Freedom,” *infra*.

<sup>329</sup> In fact, the life of the Mysteries is, in Orthodox spirituality, not an end in and of itself, but a means to an end (see Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pp. 196–197). This is especially true in hesychastic thought. Baptism, for example, while it constitutes a form of “enlightenment,” is not a ritual of *theosis*, or ultimate enlightenment, for the hesychasts. It simply entails an activation of the spiritual (or noetic) faculty through which one eventually comes to attain, through a life of active striving towards virtue, enlightenment in the latter sense of divinization and the vision of God. Thus one must be cautious in applying the imagery of light to the Mysteries *per se*. Father Robert Taft, for example, contends that the “...the light Christ gives is salvation and it is received in baptism” (Robert Taft, s.j., *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding* [Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1984], p. 138). This statement is true only when understood in a qualified way. The illumination or *photisma* of Baptism, again, as the seventh-century(?) writer Saint Theodoros the Ascetic points out in his *Theoretikon*, is a preparation for ultimate purification and the final ascent to Divine Light, which are acquired in a life marked by spiritual “effort” (see *The Philokalia*, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Phillip Sherard, and [Bishop] Kallistos Ware [London: Faber & Faber, 1981], Vol. 2, p. 39). The Eucharist, likewise, is not, according to hesychastic theology, the very source of perfect union with God. Rather, the Body and Blood of Christ, the “medicine of immortality,” are a *means* by which the human person, through a sacramental encounter with Christ, is purified and made worthy of the vision of God (see Chrysostomos, *Contemporary Thought*, pp. 44–45). Again, this vision, *theosis*, is, according to Saint Gregory Palamas, the product of “self-mastery” (a life dedicated to the acquisition of virtue) and the interaction between human will and Divine Grace, the latter, in part, as It is imparted through the life of the Mysteries (Saint Gregory Palamas, “On the Blessed Hesychasts,” in *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, trans. E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer [London: Faber & Faber, 1969], p. 409).

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 Passion, which is the aim and goal of the ascetic life. When the Eastern Fathers speak of participation in the Passion 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.<sup>330</sup>

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.'<sup>331</sup>

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.<sup>332</sup> Børtnes is quite correct, however,

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<sup>330</sup> See Archimandrite Ierotheos Vlachos, 'Ορθόδοξη Ψυχοθεραπεία· Πατερική θεραπευτική άγωγή (Edessa, Greece: Hiera Mone Timiou Stavrou, 1986), pp. 34–39.

<sup>331</sup> Børtnes, *Visions of Glory*, p. 84.

<sup>332</sup> As Father Romanides observes: "The doctrine of beatific vision, borrowed by St. Augustine from the Neo-Platonists, whereby man's destiny is to become completely happy in the possession of the vision of the divine essence, is unknown to the Greek patristic Tradition. Man's desire is rather the transformation of the desire for happiness into a non-utilitarian love which does not seek its own. Whereas in Neo-Platonic Christian theologies the reward of the just will be or is the vision of God, in the Orthodox Tradition both the just and the unjust will have the vision of God in His uncreated glory, with the difference that for the unjust this same uncreated glory of God will be the eternal fires of hell. God is light for those who learn to love Him and a consuming fire for those who will not. The reason for this is not that God has any positive intent in punishing, but that for those who are not prepared properly, to see God is a cleansing experience, but one which does not lead to the eternal process of perfection. This understanding of the vision of God does not belong to the rewards and punishment structure of theologies geared to transcendental happi-

in placing *theosis* and the vision of Uncreated Light, the vision of God, in the context of human salvation. Thus, according to Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite (†1809): “Know that if your mind is not deified by the Holy Spirit, it is impossible for you to be saved.”<sup>333</sup> This is an important point, since the vision of God must not be understood as some strange and exotic experience 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.<sup>334</sup> 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.<sup>335</sup>

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ness and therefore overcomes the dualistic distinction between an inferior world of change and frustration and a superior world of immutable realities and happiness” (The Rev. John S. Romanides, “Remarks of an Orthodox Christian on Religious Freedom,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 8 [1962–1963], pp. 130–131). Despite Romanides’ words on this subject, even Orthodox writers are at times either careless in their language or, because of Western influence, unfaithful to the strict doctrines of the vision of God put forth in Orthodox theology; see, for example, Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, 2nd ed. (Bedfordshire, England: The Faith Press, 1973), who writes that such vision is “...the ultimate felicity of man” (p. 21).

<sup>333</sup> Constantine Cavarnos, *St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite*, Vol. 3 of *Modern Orthodox Saints* (Belmont, ma: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1974), p. 139.

<sup>334</sup> Like Saint Gregory Palamas, Saints Callistos ii of Constantinople and Ignatios of Xanthopoulos were celebrated Byzantine mystics of the fourteenth century.

<sup>335</sup> Cavarnos, *Byzantine Thought*, pp. 56–57.

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”<sup>336</sup> 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 Saint 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. Tabor, ‘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.<sup>337</sup>

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.

The foregoing critique of Jostein Børtnes’ comments on the

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<sup>336</sup> Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “The Light of Christ,” in Vol. 1 of *Little Russian Philokalia* (Platina, ca: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1980), p. 50.

<sup>337</sup> Romanides, “Palamite Controversy—ii,” pp. 240–241.