

ELISABETH BEHR-SIGEL, *The Place of the Heart: An Introduction to Orthodox Spirituality*. Trans. Father Stephen Bigham. Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1992. Pp. 179.

The Abbot of the St. Gregory Palamas Monastery (located near us, in Etna) some time ago visited our Skete on Mt. Athos, where he was asked by one of the Fathers to accompany him to the “university.” Father Akakios, perplexed, followed the monk. When they reached the cemetery, the monk pointed at a grave and said: “Here.

This will teach you all that you need to know.” Spiritual knowledge, indeed, lies hidden out of sight, in the dark caverns of spiritual asceticism. I am thus by very nature suspicious of a book which proposes to tell us about Orthodox spirituality, its roots, and its flower: hesychasm or prayer of the heart. Such books strike me as something similar to a layman’s introduction to neuro-surgery and usually have the tone of those texts on psychology written by college and seminary students who, having found a way to get an easy “A” by enrolling in a course in group dynamics, later fancy themselves not only psychologists, but able critics of the “psychological sciences.”

This book is not amateurish. It discusses the history of Orthodox spirituality with uneven accuracy, but with sophistication. The spirit of the inchoate ruminations of “a monk of the Eastern Church,” so humbly put forth in anonymity (read: “Father Lev Gillet”), but so unwisely marked by idle talk about a profound subject, has too often affected the author, while the careful observations of the like of St. Ignaty (Brianchaninov) are given historical limitations which they do not deserve. I am not impressed with references to Palamas, Paul, and Maximos—they smack of the same familiarity by which the New Skete nun who created the coverpiece for the book distorted an important iconographic prototype of the *Theotokos* (so much have we forgotten the creative power of imitation!)—, but certainly this book tries to philosophize from, and not over and above, the Fathers about prayer.

With specific regard to hesychasm, the book is fraught with danger. Hesychasm is not understood in the vague language of a philosophy adapted to the rubrics of apophatic expressions or in cute (albeit ultimately blasphemous) phrases like “gnostic martyrdom” applied to ascetic struggle. Hesychasm does not begin with *contemplation*, which neither the author nor the translator understands from an Orthodox viewpoint: on p. 63, we learn that contemplation supposedly involves a “sensible” experience of God! Not only does Orthodox spirituality contain no such idea, but the language used here is so alien to the hesychastic lexicon that it conjures up visions of the very spiritual distortions to which St. Gregory Palamas dedicated no small part of his voluminous writings. Finally, prayer of the heart begins with obedience and with an absolute, unwavering dedication to Orthodoxy as the single way to enlightenment, the criterion of spiritual growth, and the narrow gate. Such humility is impossible to the man or woman of this age who thinks (using the word in its limited contemporary sense) that exclusivity precludes tolerance, that humil-

ity disallows righteous indignation, or that commitment to the truth obviates the human desire to reach out and to correct those who are wrong. In short, Orthodox spirituality begins with that kind of rupture with things intellectual that would cause all but the most accomplished spiritual guides to shudder at the thought of writing about "Orthodox spirituality."

In his "Meditation," *The Power of the Holy Name*, Bishop Kallistos Ware tells us about hesychasm in Patristic language that is both exalted and accurate. But he also tells us that Sufi mysticism and hesychasm are very similar. And while he cautiously tells us that we must not overstate similarities, we are left with that subtle bacterium of Darwinian spirituality (a product of ecumenism) that makes us wonder if monkey hands are not, in fact, just another, though perhaps more primitive (at least for those of us who have not succumbed to the world of political correctness, in which social comparison and words like "primitive" have disappeared), form of human hands. Talk about Truth that begins with reflections on its derivatives and distortions seldom leads to a real experience of the unique Truth which lies beyond its derivatives and distortions. And so, Bishop Kallistos' comments, like this book, take us high up on a distant mountain. Oh, we may see the truth in its splendor. We may see its mighty face. But standing high on that mountain, we fail to take the one important step in the flat desert below which transports us to a high place that is lowly in its loftiness and to a mountain that unfolds before us as a peaceful valley. As a recent Greek Saint once said, "Let us see where their words take them and where our sweat takes us." Or, as a much older Orthodox Father once observed, not every tree with beautiful leaves bears fruit.

I highly recommend this book as an introduction to what it is that should not be written about in such a way and which one can learn well only from those whom the contemporary Church would relegate to the garbage-heaps of "fanaticism" and "extremism," the hated zealots for the Faith. Lower your head, accept chastisement, come to know your ignorance, make yourself obedient, and then you can benefit from many of the Patristic passages quoted in Ms. Behr-Sigel's book and protect yourself from much of its stale philosophy and high-sounding, poetic "beauty."

MOTHER ELIZABETH

Convent of St. Elizabeth the  
Grand Duchess of Russia