

# The Rediscovery of Byzantine Orthodox Mysticism: An Introduction to the Medieval Hesychasts' Theory of Humanity's Deification

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## Abstract

In the present essay, I investigate and elucidate the principles of the Byzantine Orthodox mystics' theory of humanity's deification in a way that helps one to understand the difference between a propositional and a mystical approach to Christianity, as well as to contemplate the significant yet elusive relationship between "Orthodoxy" and "Gnosticism." The Byzantine tradition of "hesychasm" is the focus of this essay. In particular, I use the term "Orthodoxy" in order to refer to a canonical theological system, namely, a theological system approved by a theologically legitimate Church Council. I interpret hesychasm not merely as a medieval monastic practice but as a system of spirituality that can be endorsed by any person who appreciates hesychasm's teachings about the deification of humanity and inner illumination and as a system of philosophical anthropology focused on and underpinned by the thesis that the human being is a potential god. In addition, I use the term "Gnosticism" in order to refer to the following three things: firstly, a language (not a particular religion or sect) that enables people to communicate with each other regarding that which transcends words and concepts by using symbols and allegories; secondly, a poetic approach to the transcendent; and, thirdly, an attitude towards religion whose purpose is the spiritualization of the material world (according to Armann Righ's "The Gospel of the Living,"<sup>1</sup> and Miguel Conner's "A Summary of Gnosticism Both Aeons and Archons Agree On"<sup>2</sup>).

## The Meaning of Hesychasm

Hesychasm, or "nepsis" (Greek: νῆψις), is the hallmark of sanctity, according to the medieval Byzantines' Christian Orthodox (or

"canonical") theology. The term "nepsis" comes from the New Testament (1 Peter 5:8), and it means to be vigilant and of sober mind. Nepsis is a state of watchfulness and sobriety acquired after a period of inner cleansing. The term "hesychasm" (Greek: ἡσυχασμός) comes from the New Testament (Matthew 6:6), and it is a process of retiring inward by quieting (cleansing) the body and the mind in order, ultimately, to achieve an experiential knowledge of God. The emphasis that the hesychasts, or Neptic Fathers, place on inner cleansing as a precondition of true theology and for seeing God is a clear Platonic influence,<sup>3</sup> and it resonates with Gnostic epistemology and Gnostic mystical quests for illumination.<sup>4</sup> In the eighteenth century, the monk, theologian, and philosopher Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and Makarios of Corinth (Bishop of Corinth and theologian) compiled the works of the hesychasts, written between the fourth and the fifteenth centuries, into a collection that is called *The Philokalia*.<sup>5</sup>

## About the Author

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It is important to understand that hesychasm is not merely a medieval monastic practice, nor is it merely confined to the life of Byzantine monks. On the contrary, I interpret hesychasm as a system of mystical theology and especially as a system of philosophical anthropology that highlights and elucidates the potential divinity of the human being and the manner in which the human being can actualize humanity's divine potential. Therefore, I interpret hesychasm in the context of my attempt to endow humanism with ontological underpinnings. In particular, my conception of humanism is underpinned by a creative reinterpretation and "rediscovery" of Platonism, medieval Christian mystics' and scholars' writings, and various "illuminist" systems, from the Orphic mystical cult to the European Enlightenment and thence to the eighteenth-century Illuminati fraternities and beyond (including such schools of mystical belief as Hermeticism, the Kabbalah, alchemy, the Rosicrucian movement, and Freemasonry).<sup>6</sup>

Evagrius Ponticus (345–399 A.D.), Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662 A.D.), and Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022 A.D.), three of the most influential Greek hesychasts, understood hesychasm as a practice of psychic cleansing and inner prayer aimed at achieving union with God in a way that transcends images, concepts, and language (*Philokalia*, vols. 1, 2, and 4). However, Gregory of Sinai (ca. 1260s–1346), another prominent Greek hesychast, pointed out that, even though images and thoughts are to be excluded, hesychasm does not reject all feelings. He asserts that, rightly practised, inner Christocentric prayer leads to a sense of joyful sorrow and to a feeling of spiritual warmth, which, the hesychasts maintain, make the aspirant capable of experiencing the divine illumination that three Apostles, namely Peter, James, son of Zebedee, and John, experienced at the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ on Mount Tabor (Matthew 17: 1–9; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36; 2 Peter 1:16–18). The hesychasts emphasize that the light that shined at the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ is the uncreated light of God's Glory.<sup>7</sup>

Kallistos Katafygiotis,<sup>8</sup> a fourteenth-century hesychast whose treatise *On Union with God*

*and Life of Theoria* is included in the fifth volume of the *Philokalia*, exposes and elucidates the hesychasts' conception of the deification (Greek: "theosis") of humanity and the hesychasts' theses about the operation of the mind (Greek: "nous"). In the aforementioned treatise, Katafygiotis argues that all beings (including the mind) have received their movement and their natural characteristics from the divine Logos, who has created them, and that the movement of the mind, in particular, has as its characteristic the "for ever," which is infinite and unlimited. Therefore, Katafygiotis maintains, it would have been beneath the nature and the value of the mind if it moved in a finite and limited way, namely, if it had its movement in finite and limited things. According to Katafygiotis, due to the mind's logos and nature, the perpetual movement of the mind needs to move towards something eternal and unlimited, and nothing is really (that is, by its nature) infinite and unlimited but God, who by nature is One. Hence, the mind must gaze at and move towards the infinite One, God.

In the aforementioned treatise, Katafygiotis argues that there are only three ways in which the mind ascends to the "theoria" (vision) of God: the self-mobilized way (Greek: "autokinetos"), the other-mobilized way (Greek: "heterokinetos"), and the mixed way. The self-mobilized way is performed with the mind's own will accompanied by imagination, and its conclusion is the "theoria" of things related to God (namely, an indirect and imperfect knowledge of God). The other-mobilized way is performed only with the will and illumination of God, and, therefore, it is supernatural; in such a state, the entire mind is found under divine possession, and it is caught in divine revelations. The mixed way consists partly of both the self-mobilized way and the other-mobilized way: as long as one works with one's own will and imagination, one is in agreement with the self-mobilized way, whereas one partakes of the other-mobilized way as long as one unites with oneself by means of the divine illumination, and sees God ineffably, beyond the mental union with oneself. Moreover, in the same treatise, Katafygiotis makes the following remarks about faith,

divine illumination, and union with God: when the mind uses its imagination in order to contemplate the ineffable, it is guided by faith; when the mind receives the divine illumination of God's grace, it is assured with hope; and, when the divine light takes hold of it, the mind becomes a repository of love towards humanity and much more so towards God. Thus, the triune alignment and movement of the mind, with faith, hope, and love, becomes perfect and deifying.

In Nikiphoros the Hesychast's treatise *On Watchfulness and the Guarding of the Heart* (which is included in the fourth volume of the *Philokalia*) and in Symeon the New Theologian's treatises *The Three Methods of Prayer* and *153 Practical and Theological Texts* (which are also included in the fourth volume of the *Philokalia*), the following physical hesychastic techniques are exposed: the aspirant should sit with his head bowed, with his gaze fixed on the place of the heart or on his navel, he should slow his breathing rhythm, and, at the same time, he should search inwardly for the place of the heart. Moreover, in that prescribed state, the aspirant should recite the "Jesus Prayer," whose standard form is: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," or "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, illuminate my darkness." The significance of the Jesus Prayer has been emphasized by Gregory of Sinai and Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), two of the most influential hesychasts, whose treatises are included in the fifth volume of the *Philokalia*.

The hesychastically observant Christian emerges from a critical and creative synthesis of the best qualities of two human prototypes: "cognitive human being" and "religious human being." On the one hand, there is the intellectual and scientifically aware human being who, in one's quest to explain and master the universe cognitively as well as to understand the meaning of "explaining" and "mastering" the universe cognitively, orders one's existence on the basis of reason, reflection (careful examination and assessment of life), and the empirical knowledge resulting from the autonomous investigation of the world. This is the "cognitive human being." On the other hand, there is the religious personality, who is primarily mo-

tivated by and oriented towards the knowledge of and one's connection with God, namely, the source of the significance of the beings and things that exist in the world. Searching for the ultimate and transcendent Logos of the world, namely, for the effective and the final cause of the world, the religious personality is unsatisfied with beholding this life bound by space and time, and seeks mystically to transcend the limits of the created, material universe. This is the "religious human being."

From the perspective of mysticism, as opposed to propositional religion, the religious human being is primarily motivated by the desire to know God, and is oriented to seeking to realize union with God. Hence, in the context of mysticism, the religious human being's thoughts and actions are directed at knowing God. As the renowned fifth-century A.D. hesychast Mark the Ascetic maintains in his book *On the Spiritual Law* (paragraph 54), "to journey without direction is wasted effort."

Mystical experience is the sense of the presence of the supreme reality (specifically, the deity) all around and within us as well as a desire to hold communion with this supreme reality and, in this way, understand who we really are and what the world really is. To understand this, we must begin with the question of the relation between being and personal identity. "Personhood" is not a quality added to the human being, but it has an ontological weight. Inherent to "personhood" is the claim of absolute being, namely, a metaphysical claim.

Mysticism is a form of awareness of one's personhood. Specifically, let us consider the question: "Who am I?" This question includes three elements, namely:

- (i) "Who": the "who" element calls for some sort of definition, and it expresses a desire to articulate knowledge. In mysticism, the "who" question is a call of consciousness, and it leads to higher levels of consciousness. In mysticism, the "who" question arises from an awareness that we are faced with a given world which obliges us to develop our identity through comparison with other beings that already exist in this

world. Thus, in mysticism, self-assertion always is identified with a tendency to transcend ourselves, specifically, depart from the confines of our own entity or ego, in order to meet other beings and, through our communication with them, to become aware of ourselves. In the context of hesychastic mysticism, in particular, that significant Other Being, whose presence and whose interaction with us underpins our self-knowledge is the Absolute, or the good-in-itself, and the place of encounter with the Absolute is the human mind, whose seat is the heart. Emphasizing the importance of the Absolute as the existential mirror in which one can really recognize, assess, and contemplate oneself, the seventh-century A.D. Greek hesychast and leading Orthodox theologian Maximus the Confessor, in his *Ambiguum 10 (Patrologia Graeca, vol. 91, 1113 BC)*, writes that “God and man are examples of each other,” and that “God makes himself man out of love for men as much as man deifies himself out of love for God.”

- (ii) “Am”: the “am” element—which, by the way, is the central issue and the spiritual core of Heidegger’s philosophy of existence—calls for security, in the sense that one inquires into one’s being in the face of the facts that one has not always been here, and one will not always remain here.
- (iii) “I”: the “I” element calls for particularity, or otherness, and, therefore, it expresses some sort of uniqueness.

### A Historical Notice

Hesychasm was called into question and challenged during the decade 1337–47, in what is known as the hesychastic controversy. The attack on hesychasm was launched by a learned Greek from southern Italy, Barlaam the Calabrian (ca. 1290–1348), who was influenced by the fourteenth-century rationalist schools of Western Europe. Barlaam was answered by a learned monk from Mount Athos, Gregory Palamas. Palamas’s famous book *Tri-*

*ads in Defense of the Sacred Hesychasts*, which was probably written between 1338 and 1341, is comprised of nine treatises in the form of questions and answers. After a period of fierce theological controversies, on August 15, 1351, a decree of a Church Council at Constantinople made the hesychastic theological doctrines the exclusive “binding truth for the whole Orthodox Church,” and, in 1368, the Patriarch of Constantinople, Philotheos, convened a new council on hesychasm, which proclaimed Gregory Palamas, the major defender of hesychasm against its critics, a saint.

The fact that, before its vindication by the *Church Councils* of Constantinople in 1347 and 1351, hesychasm was attacked and deemed to be heretical by several members of the Byzantine Orthodox intelligentsia and by Western (Roman Catholic) scholastics (the latter continued to treat hesychasm as a heresy even after its vindication by the *Church Councils* of Constantinople in 1347 and 1351) has urged me to try to restore the conceptual virginity of the term “heresy”—which is derived from the Greek verb “herō” (“αἰρῶ”), meaning to receive, to conquer (e.g., to grasp the inner meaning of something), and to be courageous and bold enough to defend one’s theses and spiritual discoveries—by articulating and proposing an “Orthodox Heresy,” which is underpinned by the research program of “Ur-Illuminism,” which I articulate and elucidate in my book *The Meaning of Being Illuminati* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019).<sup>9</sup> From my perspective, “orthodoxy” means (or should mean) sensitivity to and pursuit of the real truth, and “heresy” means (or should mean) the erection of an illumined mind that is determined and bold enough to communicate its awarenesses and spiritual discoveries to the rest of humanity.

The zenith of hesychasm in medieval Byzantium was followed by the fall of Byzantium to the Ottomans in 1453. Thus, the hesychastic renaissance that took place in Byzantium during the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, primarily due to Gregory Palamas, was violently interrupted by the Ottoman empire. The Ottoman rule inhibited the development of the hesychastic spirituality in the Greek East for

approximately four centuries. However, after the liberation of the Greeks from the Ottoman rule in the 1830s, the development of the hesychastic spirituality was inhibited due to various historical and societal reasons pertaining to the modern Greek State (political instability, cultural and social underdevelopment, underqualified ruling elites, etc.) and due to the flaws of the neohellenic theological establishment, which have been thoroughly analyzed by the distinguished Greek historian and theologian Panagiotis Chrestou.<sup>10</sup> In particular, as Chrestou has argued, the heart of the neohellenic theology was rooted in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, but the neohellenic theology was intellectually fed and conditioned by Protestantism (especially Puritanism and Pietism), and its argumentation derived from medieval scholasticism (rationalist rhetoric).<sup>11</sup> Thus, from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twenty-first century, on several occasions, in the modern Greek State, the defense and the preservation of hesychasm was either formalistic or subconscious (on the part of simple, insufficiently educated people). It often reflected a spiritually puny kind of traditionalism, and it was commonly used as a rhetorical fig leaf in order to conceal the spiritual incompetence of several members of the Greek Orthodox clergy.

Even though the Ottoman rule in Byzantium marked the end of the hesychastic renaissance in the Greek East, and even though hesychasm could not be easily transplanted in Western soil due to the hesychasts' opposition to scholasticism and Western rationalism, hesychasm found fertile land in Russia, and it blossomed there after the fall of Byzantium. The Russian hesychastic tradition is contained in the six volumes of the *Little Russian Philokalia*, which has been published by the St. Herman of

Alaska Brotherhood. The six volumes of the previous book are devoted to the following Russian hesychasts: Vol. 1: Seraphim of Sarov; Vol. 2: Abbott Nazarius of Valaam; Vol. 3: Herman of Alaska; Vol. 4: Paisius Velichkovsky; Vol. 5: Elder Theodore of Sanaxor; and Vol. 6: Elder Zosima of Siberia.

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However, in the Middle Ages, Slavic peoples, including Russians, adopted Byzantine Orthodox Christianity without having previously become partakers of Greek philosophy, on which the Greek Church Fathers had been based in order to form Orthodox Christian theology. The fact that many Slavic peoples, including Russians, adopted Byzantine Orthodox Christianity, specifically, the theology of the Greek Church Fathers, without having assimilated the genuine content of clas-

sical Greek philosophy, which played a key role in the formation of Byzantine Orthodox Christianity, did not allow the medieval Russian Orthodox to articulate a Russian philosophical and social discourse that would be in agreement with Byzantine Orthodox Christianity, especially with hesychasm, and would provide a philosophically rigorous and attractive alternative to rationalist theological systems (such as scholasticism) and legalistic and formalistic religious attitudes (such as Puritanism and Pietism).

In general, the Russian civilization is marked by an inner, psychic conflict between the following three spiritual forces: (i) the Byzantine Orthodox religious identity and heritage of the Russian people, (ii) particular, medieval and modern Western "schools" of thought that have influenced the development of philosophy and political thought in Russia and conflict with the spiritual core of Russia's Byzantine Orthodox religious identity and heritage, and

(iii) Eurasian Pagan mystical traditions. In the nineteenth century, through his novels, Fyodor M. Dostoevsky indirectly yet clearly pointed out that the Russian people (“narod”) still had not made its final, conscious choice for the orthodox Christ and that it, therefore, still was capable of “throwing itself—while staying and seeking for its [historical destiny]—into the most monstrous deviations and experimentations.”<sup>12</sup> In modern, pre-Soviet Russia, the major center of hesychastic theology was the Optina Hermitage (or Pustinia). Paisius Velichkovsky (1722–94) was very influential in reviving hesychasm in Russia, and his hesychastic work found in Optina Monastery a “headquarters” from which hesychasm spread throughout Russia.

### **The Three Levels of God’s Existence**

**I**n the era of the early Church Councils, there was much confusion concerning the meaning of the Trinitarian formula. The Cappadocian Fathers—namely, Basil the Great (330–379), who was Bishop of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 332–395), who was Bishop of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389), who became Patriarch of Constantinople—made major contributions to the definition of the Holy Trinity finalized at the Second Ecumenical Council (convened in Constantinople, in 381 A.D.). In the final version of the Nicene Creed, finalized there, they clarified the three levels of God’s existence, namely: God’s uncreated essence, God’s uncreated hypostases (Holy Trinity), and God’s uncreated energies (e.g., God’s omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence, goodness, provision, creativity, etc.).

Gregory of Nyssa emphasized the difference between the terms “ousia” (essence) and “hypostasis.” The distinction between essence and hypostasis corresponds to the distinction between what is common (Greek: “koinon”) and what is particular and proper (Greek: “idion”). Essence is related to hypostasis as the common is to the particular. Following the same reasoning, in his Epistle 236, Basil the Great writes that “there is the same difference between essence and hypostasis as between what is com-

mon and what is particular, for example, between animal and a certain man.” In summary, the Cappadocian Fathers developed the following conceptual correspondences:

Essence = common = species (according to Aristotle’s terminology: universal or secondary substance)

Hypostasis = proper = individual (according to Aristotle’s terminology: primary substance).

According to hesychasm, God’s essence is totally transcendent, totally inconceivable, and totally unknowable. Many hesychasts used to refer to God’s essence as the “inconceivable nothing,” in the sense that, from the perspective of the human mind, God’s essence is the positive void from which the ultimate significance of every being and thing in the world derives. However, God’s essence exists hypostatically (specifically, as a communion of three persons), and manifests itself through its uncreated energies.

In order to understand God’s hypostatic way of existence (that is, the Trinitarian doctrine), let us consider the poet T. S. Eliot. The poetry of T. S. Eliot is his “logos,” or word, it is begotten from Eliot’s “nous” (mind), and it provides those who read it with Eliot’s “spirit,” specifically, with a special culture and a special feeling of participation in Eliot’s personal world. Eliot’s spirit remains with the readers of Eliot’s poetry (his “logos”) even when they do not have his poems in front of them. By analogy, God the Father is the Nous (Mind) of God, God the Son is the Logos (Word) of God, and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God. However, in the case of the Holy Trinity, the Nous of God (Father), the Logos of God (Son), and the Holy Spirit are not attributes or functions of a being, but they are distinct Persons (hypostases) of the same divine nature/essence. Therefore, God is a communion of three hypostases.

According to the Nicene Creed, the relationship between the Father and the Son is called begottenness/generation: the Logos (God the Son) of God is begotten from the divine Nous (God the Father) “before all ages,” that is, before creation, before the commencement of time, in an eternally timeless existence without

beginning or end. Moreover, according to the Nicene Creed, the relationship between the Father and the Holy Spirit is called procession. Gregory of Nazianzus is the first to use the idea of procession to describe the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Father/Godhead. In his *Fifth Theological Oration*, Gregory of Nazianzus writes that “the Holy Spirit is truly Spirit, coming forth from the Father indeed but not after the manner of the Son, for it is not by generation but by procession, since I must coin a word for the sake of clearness.”

John of Damascus (ca. 675/676–749), a Syrian monk and priest, and one of the most influential Fathers of the Eastern Orthodox Church, in his essay entitled *The Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, defines “nature” as the principle of motion and repose, and, on this ground, he identifies “nature” with “substance.” However, he endorses the Aristotelian distinction between primary substance and secondary substance. The distinction (central to Aristotle’s *Categories*) between primary and secondary substances is reformulated by John of Damascus with the help of the non-Aristotelian concept of “hypostasis.” His originality with regard to Gregory of Nyssa lies in the priority given to the “hypostasis.” John of Damascus reinterprets the Cappadocian Fathers’ distinction between essence and hypostasis from the perspective of the priority of primary substances in Aristotle’s *Categories*. In other words, according to John of Damascus, reality is fundamentally hypostatic: everything exists as, or in relation to, hypostases.

Hypostasis signifies an existential otherness (and, hence, individuality), and John of Damascus defines individuality as numerical difference. He defines hypostasis and, hence, individuality by following Porphyry’s *Isagoge* (7, 19–27), according to which one individual is distinct from other individuals of the same species due to one’s unique bundle of properties; these properties are not essential, and, thus, John of Damascus calls them “accidental.”

John of Damascus emphasizes that hypostasis not only possesses common as well as individ-

ual characteristics of the subject, but also exists in itself, whereas nature does not exist in itself, but is to be found in hypostasis. Through the distinction between hypostasis and nature/essence, the Church Fathers managed to explain how God can assume the human nature without losing or degrading His divinity. In particular, in the case of Jesus Christ, the same hypostasis of the Logos (Word) became the hypostasis of divine and human natures.

The early Greek Church Fathers, such as the Cappadocian Fathers, emphasize the ontology of particularity and freedom. The hypostatic way of God’s existence implies that God is not constrained by His nature, and that God’s mode of being is freedom. In the second book of his *Answer to Eunomius*, Gregory of Nyssa wrote that “God has created everything by His will and without any difficulty and pain the divine will became nature” (*Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 46, 124B). In other words, God’s action does not admit any mediation, and the only “raw material” that God used in order to create the world was His own free will. Hence, God is free from every logical determination, and the cosmos is an actualization of God’s will, and not an emanation of God’s nature (the nature of the cosmos is created, whereas God’s nature is uncreated). The aforementioned thesis has been systematically elucidated by Maximus the Confessor.<sup>13</sup>

In his *Ambiguum* 7, Maximus the Confessor writes that the act of bringing being out of non-being, which only a sovereign God can do, can only be understood in terms of a common “arche” (beginning) and a common “telos” (end) of being in God, and, therefore, as the source and the ultimate purpose of all being, the divine Logos is in the particular logoi of His creation (“logoi” is the plural form of “logos”). Moreover, in his *Ad Thalassium* 64, Maximus the Confessor adds that both creation and Scripture contain the fullness of the Logos in their logoi, and, therefore, they function together, and they are mirror images of one another (*ibid*, 167). However, in his *Ambiguum* 7, Maximus makes an important clarification: the particular logoi of a creature is not a substance, and, therefore, it does not subsist in itself, but it only exists potentially in the crea-

tive divine Logos as a yet unmanifested possibility. Furthermore, in his *Ambiguum* 7, following Dionysius the Areopagite,<sup>14</sup> Maximus the Confessor names the logoi (of the beings and things that exist in the world) divine “wills” (Greek: “thelemata,” which is the plural form of “thelema”). Hence, God knows and treats the beings and things in the world as actualizations of His will, and He relates to them through love, and not according to any logical/natural necessity (since God’s mode of being is freedom).

According to Maximus the Confessor, the incarnation of the divine Logos in Jesus Christ reveals the “telos,” namely, the ultimate scope, of the cosmos. In his *Ad Thalassium* 60, Maximus the Confessor argues that “the Logos, by essence God, became a messenger of this plan when he became a man and . . . established himself as the innermost depth of the Father’s goodness while also displaying in himself the very goal for which his creatures manifestly received the beginning of their existence” (ibid, 125). Moreover, in his *Ambiguum* 7, Maximus the Confessor writes that the Logos of God, who is God, wills always and in all His creatures to accomplish the mystery of His embodiment (ibid, 60).

According to the Greek Church Fathers, apart from the levels of His divine essence and His divine hypostases, God exists also at the level of His divine energies, which disclose His mode of being. In other words, the will of God is manifested through the energies of God. From the aforementioned perspective, the uncreated energies of God should be differentiated from God’s creatures, or acts, which are created results of God’s uncreated energies.

Since the essence of the human being is created, the human being cannot be united with God at the level of God’s essence (in other words, the “essential union” between deity and humanity is ontologically impossible). The union between humanity and God at the level of God’s hypostases (namely, the “hypostatic union” between the divine and the human natures) took place only once, that is, in the case of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Logos of God, who is the incarnate channel of God’s love in

history. Therefore, apart from Jesus Christ, human beings cannot be united with God at the level of God’s hypostases, either. However, each human being can participate in God’s uncreated energies since, according to hesychasm, the human mind is the repository of God’s uncreated energies, and the Incarnation of the divine Logos restored human nature’s ability to carry the uncreated grace of the Holy Spirit, sent by the divine Nous in the name of the divine Logos (John 14:26). Therefore, according to the hesychasts’ theory of humanity’s deification, the human being can be deified without negating one’s humanity (human essence) since the union between humanity and deity takes place at the level of God’s uncreated energies (without calling for the negation of the human essence). In addition, according to the hesychasts, humanity’s participation in God’s uncreated energies, that is, the union between humanity and deity at the level of God’s uncreated energies, is the essence of pure theology and the kind of theoria that the Greek philosophers had been seeking before Christ.

### **The Distinctions between “Essence” and “Energies” and between the “Mind” and the “Intellect” according to Hesychasm**

The Greek Church Fathers in general and the hesychasts in particular emphasize that God alone is uncreated, and everything else, including the human soul, is created. In chapters 5 and 6 of his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Philosopher and Martyr puts forward the following arguments: “if the world is begotten, souls also are necessarily begotten,” and, if the soul were life, “it would cause something else, and not itself, to live, even as motion would move something else than itself”; even though the soul lives, “it lives not as being life, but as the partaker of life . . . the soul partakes of life, since God wills it to live.” According to hesychasm, the human soul and the body are united into a psycho-somatic nexus, and the soul should be understood as the hypostatic (“personal”) carrier of the impersonal life-force,

namely, it is what makes a human being a hypostasis (or “person”).

In the first triad of his treatises *In Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, Gregory Palamas<sup>15</sup> argues that the heart is the essence of the mind, and the mind is a power of the heart: “the heart is the secret chamber of the mind and the prime physical organ of mental power.” Additionally, in the same triad, he attacks the idea that the human being must drive one’s mind out of one’s body in order to attain spiritual visions as an erroneous belief, and he argues as follows: “We who carry as in vessels of clay, that is in our bodies, the light of the Father, in the person of Jesus Christ, in which we know the glory of the Holy Spirit—how can it dishonor our mind to dwell in the inner sanctuary of the body?” Furthermore, in the second triad of his treatises *In Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, Gregory Palamas adds the following: “When spiritual joy comes to the body from the mind, it suffers no diminution by this communion with the body, but rather transfigures the body, spiritualizing it. For then, rejecting all evil desires of the flesh, it no longer weighs down the soul that rises up with it, the whole man becoming spirit.”

Hesychasm does not fight against the body, but it aims at liberating the body from the law of sin (specifically, from impersonal, uncontrolled impulses and instincts and from selfishness), and at establishing there the mind as an overseer. The hesychasts lay down laws for every power of the soul and for every member of the body: they dictate to the senses what they have to receive and in what measure, thus achieving self-mastery; they purify the desiring part of the soul through love; and they improve the intellectual part of the soul by eliminating everything that prevents the mind from soaring to God, thus achieving “nepsis.”

According to hesychasm, through its participation in the uncreated energies of God, the human soul can be deified, and, thus, it can be existentially fulfilled and filled with the uncreated light of God’s glory. In the language of ancient mystics, a soul that is a partaker of God’s uncreated energies is called a standing soul. Such a soul is truly immortal. On the oth-

er hand, a soul that is submerged in the lower and the animalistic nature cannot reach immortality, but it will instead perish with the animalistic part, as it is written in Ecclesiastes (3:19); this is the meaning of “spiritual death” (Romans 6:23; Colossians 2:13; Ephesians 2:1–3, 5:8; 1 John 5:12).

Gregory Palamas argues that, through the soul, God’s grace is extended throughout the body, and that God’s gifts to humanity are actualized through the body. According to Gregory Palamas, apathy does not consist in the deadening of the passionate part of the soul, but it consists in the re-orientation of the passionate part of the soul from evil to good. Instead of condemning and rejecting the passionate part of the soul, Gregory Palamas points out that we love through the passionate part of the soul, and, therefore, if we deaden the passionate part of the soul, we are unable to fulfill Christ’s Law, which is to love God and one’s fellow humans (Mark 12:28–31).

It is very important to clarify that, for the hesychasts, the three aspects of the human soul, which are mentioned in the fourth book of Plato’s *Republic*—namely, the appetitive aspect of the soul (which is responsible for the human being’s base desires), the high-spirited, or hot-blooded, aspect of the soul (namely, the part of us that loves to face and overcome great challenges, and that loves victory, winning, challenge, and honor), and the rational aspect of the soul—are not organic, or essential parts of the soul, but they are only consequences of the human being’s exercise of free will. Thus, according to hesychasm, the human being is responsible for one’s psychological contents and states, and the essence of “psychological illness” consists in the dispersion of humanity’s mental energy upon sensibilia (the sensible realm) and in an injury to the sociality of the human soul (which underpins the communion between humanity and God). From the perspective of hesychasm, the phrase “sociality of the human soul” refers to the soul’s receptiveness to God’s uncreated grace and the soul’s openness to one’s fellow humans. Therefore, as I explain in my book *The Meaning of Being Illuminati*, hesychastic psychotherapy is inextricably linked to a radical and, indeed, liberat-

ing form of unselfishness and mental nobility. In my aforementioned book, I maintain that, “by losing the link between God’s Spirit and the human mind, that is, by losing the power of participating in God, human life and human behavior are determined by the egocentric powers of self-gratification and self-vindication, whose nature may be either rational or emotional,” and I explain why neither emotion nor reason (“ratio”) has the power of communion.<sup>16</sup>

Hesychasm emphasizes that the mind does not have any organs, but it is an image of God, and, therefore, it is not essentially determined to succumb to corporeal passions, nor is it essentially attracted to the sensible realm. Whereas the intellect (the rational faculty of the soul), desire, and passion are powers of the soul, and are natural channels of knowledge, the mind is the inner region of supra-natural wisdom.

According to the hesychasts, the intellect is naturally oriented towards and concerned with the world of the senses, and it organizes sense-data into a rational whole, whereas the mind is naturally oriented towards and concerned with the divine Logos. Hence, the mind should not be mingled with the intellect. As a result of the hesychasts’ distinction between the mind and the intellect, it is the mind, and not the intellect, that must be detached from the world of the senses. The intellect cannot function without processing sense-data, and, therefore, if the intellect is detached from the world of the senses, it enters into a sleep state, such as the yogic sleep, which is irrelevant to the hesychasts’ notion of mental stillness. According to the terminology of hesychasm, the intellect is the rational faculty (“power”) of the human soul, whereas the mind (Greek: “nous”) is the vessel or repository of God’s uncreated energies (uncreated grace) within the human being.

The intellect, being concerned with sense-data and their rational organization, does not have free will. The mind alone has free will, since it loves and seeks the supra-rational, absolute good (the good-in-itself), namely, it seeks to participate in the deity. It is exactly due to the distinction between the mind and the intellect that hesychasm leads to the conclusion that the human soul is something more than the nerv-

ous system. The mind can be united with the supra-rational, absolute good only if it is cleansed from the passions of the senses, and this can be achieved through repentance, namely, through the return of the mind to the heart. By being detached from the world of the senses and by returning to the heart, where it remains exclusively oriented towards the divine Logos, the mind experiences God’s freedom, because then it is capable of making passionless choices, namely, choices that are independent from natural determinism.

## Conclusion

This study has examined a mystical aspect and tradition of Orthodox Christianity. In particular, this study has provided a synopsis of the spiritual content of hesychasm. In this way, it paves a new way for a spiritually fruitful and significant rediscovery of the relationship between “Orthodoxy” and “Gnosticism,” and even between “Orthodoxy” and “Heresy,” through and within the context of a new research program of humanity’s illumination, which I have articulated and called “Ur-Illuminism.” I have coined the term “Ur-Illuminati” in order to refer to an ontologically grounded conception of illumination, specifically, to one that is underpinned by Plato’s theory of ideas and the hesychasts’ teachings about humanity’s real (that is, ontological) deification. Thus, in order to distinguish my conception of illumination/Illuminism from other conceptions of illumination/illuminism, I have used the term “Ur,” which denotes that something/someone embodies the basic or essentially deepest qualities of a particular class or type. As I have argued in this study, the essentially deepest quality of humanity’s illumination is humanity’s participation in God’s uncreated energies, namely, humanity’s deification.

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<sup>1</sup> Armunn Righ, “The Gospel of the Living,” The Aeon Byte Gnostic Radio; online at: <https://thegodabovegod.cp/the-gospeal-of-the-living> (Last accessed June 9, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Miguel Conner, “A Summary of Gnosticism Both Aeons and Archons Agree On,” The Aeon Byte Gnostic Radio; online at:

[https://thegodabovegod.com/a-summary-of-  
gnosticism-both-aeons-and-archons-agree-on/](https://thegodabovegod.com/a-summary-of-gnosticism-both-aeons-and-archons-agree-on/)  
(Last accessed July 24, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> In his *Republic* (443d–e), Plato writes that the just person has cured one’s soul by keeping the three elements (namely, reason, the emotions, and the appetites) that make up one’s inward self “in tune, like the notes of a scale,” by setting one’s house to rights, by attaining “self-mastery and order,” and by living “on good terms with oneself,” thus bounding “these elements into a disciplined and harmonious whole.” Moreover, in his *Phaedo* (67b), Plato argues that psychic cleansing is a key presupposition of our transformation into the real good, because “it cannot be that the impure attain the pure.” Hence, according to Plato, the knowledge of the real good presupposes not only the ability to give an account, but also a psychic cleansing or cure.

<sup>4</sup> See: Miguel Conner, *Voices of Gnosticism*, Dublin: Bardic Press, 2011; Miguel Conner, *Other Voices of Gnosticism*, Dublin: Bardic Press, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> In Greek, the word “philokalia” means love of the beautiful and good.

<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Laos, Interview by Miguel Conner, The Aeon Byte Gnostic Radio; online: <https://thegodabovegod.com/the-quest-for-inner-illumination/> (Last accessed August 26, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> See: Nicolas Laos, *The Meaning of Being Illuminati* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 2.2.2.

<sup>8</sup> “Kallistos Katafygiotis” is the pen name of an anonymous hesychast. Upon ordination, many hesychasts were given the name “Kallistos.”

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Laos, Interview by Ryan Burns, HEROparanormal podcast; online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xP0hLwF e1Yg> (Last accessed August 23, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Panagiotes K. Chrestou, “Neohellenic Theology at the Crossroads,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, vol. XXVIII, 1983, 39–54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in: Irene Masing-Delic, *Exotic Moscow under Western Eyes* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 99; Dostoevsky as quoted in: Boris Vysheslavtsev, “Russkaia stikhiia u Dostoevskogo,” in *F. M. Dostoevskii 1881–100–1981* (London: Overseas Publications Interchange Limited, 1981), 119.

<sup>13</sup> Initially, Maximus the Confessor was an aide to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius. However, he gave up his career as a senior civil servant in order to become a monk. He moved to Carthage, where he studied Greek philosophy and especially Neoplatonism, and he became a prominent author

<sup>14</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite was a judge of the Areopagus who, as related in the Acts of the Apostles (17:34), was converted to Christianity by the preaching of the Apostle Paul during the Areopagus Sermon. According to Dionysius of Corinth (Bishop of Corinth; died in 171 A.D.), quoted by the Roman historian and exegete Eusebius of Caesarea, Dionysius the Areopagite then became the first Bishop of Athens. In the early sixth century A.D., a series of famous writings, employing Neoplatonic and Gnostic language to elucidate Christian theology, was ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite

<sup>15</sup> For a systematic study of Gregory Palamas’s theology and anthropology, see: Nicolas Laos, *The Meaning of Being Illuminati* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 2.2.

<sup>16</sup> Laos, *The Meaning of Being Illuminati*, 95.