



Hesychasm (I)

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HESYCHASM, AS ANY OTHER ESOTERIC way, cannot be restricted by chronology or geography, and it is safe to assume that it appeared at the same time as the Christian tradition, even if modern scholars consider Hesychasm a mystical movement developed mainly on Mount Athos and promoted in the XIV Century by St. Gregory Palamas. It is true that St. Gregory Palamas, in his controversy with Barlaam, unveiled the theoretical essence of Hesychasm, yet the effective realization and spiritual initiation remained further hidden and protected.

The Hesychast doctrine is in full accordance with all the other great world traditions and has as goal the Supreme Identity, the Liberation, expressed as a direct and immediate vision of the Super-luminous Night, that is, of the non-manifestation or of *Brahma nirguna*. The Hesychast initiate is a seer who follows *jnâna-mârga*, “the way of knowledge,” a knowledge identical to the divine vision of the “tenebrous light.” And the physical eye is not the instrument of this vision, but the “eye of the heart,” like in Sufism. Guénon wrote:

On the part of the Orthodox Church, there is Hesychasm, which apparently has preserved all the characteristics of a real initiation, but, in fact, this initiation is almost inaccessible, since it is extremely difficult to find a qualified guide; for that, you have to go to Mount Athos, which is its center, and be admitted to live there for a time, and gain the monks’ trust to obtain from one of them the transmission and the technical instructions.¹

And René Guénon was right. If we expect to find manuals regarding the Hesychast initiation or Hesychast schools with the gates open to everybody, we will be greatly disappointed. For the modern man, the hardest thing to understand is the prohibition on “the right to be informed,” a slogan widely spread by reporters and other forms of medias. “The public has a right to know,” is uttered emphatically. Yet the esoteric domain does not follow this rule; we can give sufficient examples to illustrate that true Gnosis is out of reach for the public. The Eleusinian Mysteries, for instance, remained mysteries and in all these thousands of years they were not betrayed in any way, so today we know almost nothing “technical” about them. Similarly, the Hesychast initiation continued to stay hidden, and even if some individuals could not understand how it

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survived so many years without betrayal (considering rather that, purely and simply, it does not exist²), the Hesychast initiation remained an unbreakable mystery.

Michel Vâlsan strove to gather “evidence” regarding the Hesychast initiation, to answer Marco Pallis’ criticism. At the beginning of his article he mentioned Father John the Stranger (or John the Pilgrim) who came from Russia and revived the Hesychast tradition in Romania, during World War II.³ **The Orthodox Work**, a Californian journal,⁴ mentions also a Father John: the Hesychast monk, John the Desert-Dweller, who at approximately the same period of time wandered in the Agapia Mountains of Moldavia.⁵ Yet before continuing to see how Hesychasm fits into the modern world, let us try to catch a glimpse of the Hesychast doctrine.

The word “hesychasm” derives from Greek and means “stillness,” “quietness” (Gr. *esychia*). In this way the Orthodox esoteric doctrine is related to the other great traditions that all speak about Peace, Silence and Quietness. The “quietness” aimed at by Hesychasm is, evidently, the stillness of the Void, of the Silence, of the super-luminous Night, corresponding to “the straightening of the mountains and valleys” through which, in the microcosmic order, the mental swirls and the waves of the mind are tamed, and a calm and pacific ocean is obtained; this doctrine, going beyond the religious and theological level, touches metaphysics. Hesychasm, as any other esoteric kernel, was not restricted by chronology or geography, being born together with Christianity; there are plenty of examples concerning saints who perfected themselves through Hesychasm, and there is no need to dwell upon them. The fact that the scholars considered Hesychasm a mystical movement, developed mainly on Mount Athos and promoted in the XIV Century by St. Gregory Palamas, is nothing else than a registration of its “public exposure,” exposure related to Palamas’ writings. One of Palamas’ contemporaries, Saint Gregory of Sinai, a Hesychast master, lived a hidden life, rejecting any “publicity” and, it seems, even asking Palamas that he not be mentioned in the dispute with Catholic “rationalism,” which allow us to understand how absurd is any attempt to date such an esoteric doctrine; even today the *sihastrii* (a word derived from *esychia* meaning the more or less Hesychast monks living in solitude) are hostile to any mode of communication and exposure.

Hesychasm came into the public eye due to the dispute between Saint Gregory Palamas and the Western monk Barlaam, an unequal dispute, since the former was talking from a metaphysical perspective, that of the Light of the super-luminous Darkness, and the latter proved to be the exponent of the rational light, and therefore limited to the individual domain; and despite how much the Catholic historians blamed Saint Gregory Palamas up to the present time, it is obvious that the doctrine he defended was the doctrine of the absolute Truth.

Hesychasm is, first of all, an initiatory way of seeing the super-luminous Light,⁶ a way of perfection, awakening and illumination, the eye of the heart being the spiritual instrument with which divine Knowledge is realized, and the “prayer of the heart” is the method of opening this eye. The Prayer of the Heart allows the concentration of the individuality and the ego in the center of the being, in the heart, and establishes a beginning (*initio*) to the awakening of the spiritual eye, relating this meditation with the control of the vital “spirit” – the breath.⁷ Nikephor the Solitary advised that, at the same time with inspiration (breathing in) we should pronounce “Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” and

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with expiration, “have mercy of me, the sinner”; in this way, the “uninterrupted prayer” (and this one has to be indeed uninterrupted) is accompanied by a respiratory procedure, comparable to *prânayama*, a well-known Hindu “technique,” which has the double spiral as symbolic support.⁸

The vision of the Light in the Heart is similar to the Supreme Identity of Sufism, and Saint Gregory Palamas stressed that this vision of the super-intelligible Light implies a union with God. Spiritual realization means, in Hesychasm, a “unifying perfection” and a “divine communion of One” as a spiritual vision (in the sense of “seeing” as a seer) with the inner spiritual Eye, that is, with the “eye of the heart.”⁹ In the Hindu tradition, liberating Knowledge means an absolute identity of the knower, what is known and the act of knowing. Accordingly, the Hesychast who has surpassed individuality reaching the super-luminous Night and realizing the unconceivable union with God – Saint Gregory Palamas says – is himself light and sees light with light. If the Hesychast initiate looks to himself, he sees light; if he looks at an object of his vision, he also sees light; and the instrument of his vision is the light. That is the perfect union and vision.¹⁰

The spiritual influence, which Guénon compared to the seed sown in the center of the being, is not enough to accomplish a spiritual realization. Like the seed, it is only an *initium*. For the “new plant” (the *neophyte*) to become perfect, an intense effort is necessary, and it also needs authorized initiatory supports and guides that will be abandoned along the ascension. For this reason Dante, when he passed beyond Purgatory, ascending to Heaven (the super-individual spheres), got another guide, Beatrice (Buddhi, Shekinah), who replaced Virgil (spiritual influence operating only in the individual domain); and then, to see the eternal Light, Dante left Beatrice (the intellectual ray), passing beyond her and getting a new guide, Saint Bernard (the spiritual master of the Templars), and, even more, getting as absolute guide the Blessed Virgin, as only Saint Mary was capable of unveiling to him the Light of the Principle, the “vision” of the absolute Light being immediately (and not mediated). That is why even the intellectual ray as instrument, as an intermediary, had to be abandoned in order to realize direct “contact” with the Principle.¹¹

This is what not too many understood: I don’t see, in fact, Brahma with *Buddhi*, but Brahma sees Brahma with Brahma; this is what some theologians did not understand, after the collapse of the Christian traditional society (marked by the Templars’ trial). And this is what started the polemic between the Catholic monk Barlaam and Saint Gregory Palamas (a few years after the Templars’ trial). Saint Gregory Palamas’ tough reaction in order to defend Hesychasm was, actually, the last attempt in the Christian tradition to save esotericism from a more and more obtuse exotericism, an attempt to maintain a somehow “official” initiatory way, which after that will hide deeper and deeper.

This way, in a few words and following Saint Palamas’ teachings, is¹²: the knowledge of the Light of God comprises three steps. The first step is the knowledge of the divine reasons in the world and in the beings, through which God is known indirectly (and analytically), as cause and support of the universal manifestation; it is more a knowledge of erudition, not rejected by Saint Palamas, but who says: “And Saint Gregory of Nyssa teaches that the wisdom from outside is barren and imperfect and he asks us to reject immediately this stepmother”; it is a knowledge of an affirmative type. The second step is the knowledge of God through negation, that is, the *apophatic* theology, but the light of

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the negative theology is after all also a reasoning in which the mind (as Father Stăniloae stressed, in his commentary of Palamas' work) unfolds, denying one after another the various attributes wrongly ascribed to God. Eventually, the third step is the vision of God in the super-luminous Darkness. The Hesychasts see, when they operate the Prayer of the Heart, this super-light and not a corporeal, material light; it is a Light beyond the corporeal and individual light, a super-individual and so, an intelligible light, yet, in fact, it is a super-intelligible Light.

The Hesychasts, Saint Gregory Palamas explained, consider the light of grace as intelligible, but not even this in a proper sense, because they define it as being beyond the mind, and descending into the mind only through the power of the Spirit, when any other work of the mind ceases. To say [like Barlaam] about the Hesychasts, who declare this light not only beyond the senses, but also beyond the mind, that they consider this light as corporeal and visible, is it not more than a calumny? It is, indeed, more than a calumny, since God is not only above the Existence, but He is Super-god (*hyper-theos*); and the height of That who is beyond and surpasses the whole height which can be conceived with the mind is not only above any affirmation, but also above any negation. It is a light and a grace non-corporeal and divine, a light seen in an unseen way and known in an unknown way.

The Being of God, Father Stăniloae explained, is not only invisible and inaccessible to our senses, but It is above this invisibility and inaccessibility. It is a peak beyond all the sensitive and rational peaks. It is not only beyond all the affirmative sayings, but also beyond all the negative sayings about It. It is above the meaning of the words: being, existence, and goodness, but also above the meaning of the opposite words. It is neither being nor non-being; It is beyond any word.¹³

¹ René Guénon, *Le Dossiers H*, L'Age d'Homme, 1997, p. 283.

² Which, by the way, is exactly what the Hesychasts want.

³ Michel Vâlsan, *Études et documents d'Hésychasme*, Ét. Trad., no. 406-407-408, 1968.

⁴ *The Orthodox Work*, St. Herman Press, no. 162, 1992. We owe this information to Alvin Moore Jr.

⁵ About Moldavia and its perception in the West, see our *Agarttha, the Invisible Center*, Rose-Cross Books, 2003.

⁶ This "seeing" as "vision" should be related to the meaning of the English "seer."

⁷ It is difficult to translate into English some of the Hesychast subtleties, but we may say as an example that in Latin *spiritus* means both "breath" and "spirit"; similarly, in Romanian, *suflu* = breath and *suflet* = soul.

⁸ The word "spiral" is related to "spirit," "inspiration," and "expiration."

⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, who had links with some Hesychast circles, wrote a famous book, *The Vision of God*, in which he said that we see God "not with the corporeal eyes, but with intellectual eyes, the eyes of understanding" (Cusa, *The Vision of God*, The Book Tree, 1999, p. 23).

¹⁰ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Hesychasm*, Variorum Reprints, London, 1974, p. 202.

¹¹ Regarding Saint Bernard, it is interesting to note that René Guénon, in a letter of November 1936, confessed to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: "for me, this character is indeed an initiate and not only a simple mystic."

¹² We follow closely Saint Gregory Palamas' teachings, such as they were registered in the Romanian Philocaly (*Filocalia*, vol. VII, Ed. Instit. Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1977, trad. și note de Dumitru Stăniloae).

¹³ p. 273.