



## Hesychasm (II)

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In Hesychasm, spiritual realization is “seeing without words” the super-luminous Darkness; the Hesychast knows and realizes within (in the heart) God through a true vision and above all beings. Because That, Saint Gregory Palamas stressed, is always together with Its eternal glory. Therefore, this vision is not knowledge (in a discursive mode, a conceptive knowledge) and so, not only do we not have to consider the “ineffable vision” a partial knowledge, but also we have to consider it much more above any knowledge and any vision through knowledge. We obtain the divine, receiving and seeing within us the glory and the Light of God.<sup>1</sup>

Saint Gregory Palamas is in complete concordance with primitive Christianity, since Saint Paul wrote: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror [in a discursive mode and also in an obscure and ignorant mode]; then we shall see face to face [the effective spiritual realization]. Now I know in part [analytically]; then I shall know fully [synthetically, globally, integrally], even as I am fully known” (1 **Corinthians** 13:12).

This was equally supported by Dionysius the Areopagite who also, according to Saint Palamas, never declared the vision of the eternal light a subject of the senses when he said that it could be seen, because he said that it could be seen only by those similar to Christ. The vision of God is not only above the senses, but also above the mind and discursive knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The seers of this vision do not reason about God because they do not see God like the ones who think about God through negation, but they see with the vision (“the seeing”) itself what is beyond seeing, not rationalizing but suffering the surpassing of everything.<sup>3</sup>

The speculative theology, Father Stăniloae said, either affirmative or negative, is not a theology of the seeing or of the vision. It is born precisely from the not-seeing of God. Those who see God do not need a speculative theology. They also follow an *apophatic* theology (or even better, a theology of not-speaking), but this one is generated not due to the fact that they do not see God, but because through this seeing they know that God is beyond seeing and any word. The vision of God is superior to rational theology, affirmative or negative. It is the “passion” of the divine reality, not its invention or assumption with the rational mind, with the imagination, with the fantasy. It is superior to negative theology because the vanishing of everything is not compulsorily produced by the rational mind, but because all creation, beings and its ideas, are overwhelmed and covered by the real vision of the supernatural light. This *apophasis* is an endless plus, not a minus with regard to the things known by senses and reason. The non-seeing is not purely and simply non-seeing. The non-seeing is seeing; the not-knowing and not-understanding are “experienced” more intensely than the seeing and knowing in the order of creation. It means that only those who have reached the union with God acquire this vision. People who have heard about it from those who possess it, but have

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not accomplished the union, might reach the knowledge of God through affirmative theology or through rational negation.<sup>4</sup>

In Hesychasm, the vision of God is at the same time union with God. We must be careful regarding the meaning of this “union.” Various traditional doctrines use the term in a purely initiatory sense. In Sufism, the perfect spiritual realization, namely, the completion both of the *Lesser* and *Greater Mysteries*, is called the Supreme Identity. In the Hindu tradition, Yoga, that is, the “Union,” refers to Liberation, which, we saw, means the accomplishment of a total initiatory way, including the super-individual states. The Christian mystics often mentioned “union” with God, but in many cases it was about a partial and transitory union, achieved in ecstasy<sup>5</sup>; in other words, this “union” was not always effectively realized. It is interesting that usually Hesychasm is considered to be related to the *apophatic* knowledge, which, in its turn, is compared to the Hindu doctrine of negation (*neti, neti*). Yet, in conformity with Saint Gregory Palamas, negating and eliminating what God is not is not sufficient to realize the unification. The *apophatic* doctrine is, after the example of the divine Dionysius the Areopagite, the removal, from the marble block, of those pieces that hide the statue. And Meister Eckhart said: “When a craftsman carves an image in wood or stone, he does not introduce the image into the wood, but removes the chips that hid and covered the image, he removes the slag; then shines what was hidden within.” Yet to Saint Palamas the union is beyond any affirmation and negation.

Those who learn from those who see, Palamas said,<sup>6</sup> are in communion only with the light’s mental gift and might ascend to the knowledge of God through negation; but to obtain such a vision, and through it and with it to see the non-seeing of God, is impossible if they do not achieve also the supernatural unification, a spiritual and super-rational union, since the light cannot be seen, says the prophet, by the one who does not look from inside the light.

No one has ever seen God (**John** 1:18),<sup>7</sup> and nobody will ever see Him; neither man nor angel. But this is only because this *nemo*, this “nobody” is an angel or man who sees either sensitively or intelligibly, Saint Palamas argued. When *nemo* becomes spirit and sees into Spirit, how is it possible for him not to see the similar with the similar? Yet even for this seeing into Spirit, the Light of God that is situated beyond everything appears to be hidden because through the communion with the Most High the Hesychasts transform themselves (shifting towards what is the most high) and annihilate any operation of the body and soul, in such a way that through them cannot be seen anything else but That; “so that God may be all in all” (**1 Corinthians** 15:28).<sup>8</sup>

The great Dionysius said: “Since the union of divinized minds with the Light beyond all deity occurs in the cessation of all intelligent activity, the godlike unified minds who imitate these angels as far as possible praise it most appropriately through the denial of all beings.”<sup>9</sup> Yet they learn, not through denial, but through unification, which is supernaturally beyond all, Palamas stressed. Consequently, through this unification with the Light, that is beyond all beings and surpasses everything, those who have realized the union understand how the Light is beyond or surpasses all beings; and, not by the denial of all beings but through union, they see that all are denied and removed. Also this union is beyond and outside of all.<sup>10</sup>

And the one who sees, Saint Gregory Palamas continued, if he does not act in any other way,<sup>11</sup> being outside or without all other things, becomes entirely light, and becomes similar to what he sees; better said, he unites in an unmixed way, being light and seeing light with light. If he looks at himself, he sees light; if he looks to what he sees, that is also light; if he looks toward the instrument of seeing, this is also light.<sup>12</sup> This is the unification: to be all in one, without any possibility of distinction between the seer and what is seen and what the seer sees with; but he knows only that there is a light and he sees a light, different from that of the all beings. That is why the great Paul, Palamas added, says: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the

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body I do not know – God knows” (2 Corinthians 12:2). Saint Paul looked at himself. But how? Sensitively, rationally or intellectually? Yet being caught up, he was without these powers. Therefore, he saw himself through the Spirit, which caught him up. And what was he, if no natural power could encompass him, or, better, if he was freed of any natural power? No doubt, he was that thing he united with, and through which he knew himself and for which he left everything. It was a union with the Light, which even the angels could not reach if they would not surpass themselves through the unifying grace. This Light is the only true Light, eternal, unchangeable, without shadow, permanent, a Light through which we become light and the sons of the perfect light.<sup>13</sup>

Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, taken by Saint Palamas as a traditional authority, said in the Fifth Letter:

The divine darkness is that «unapproachable light» where God is said to live.<sup>14</sup> And if it is invisible because of a superabundant clarity [the super-luminous Darkness, the supernal Night], if it cannot be approached because of the outpouring of its transcendent gift of light, yet it is here that is found everyone worthy to know God and to look upon Him. And such a one, precisely because he neither sees Him nor knows Him, truly arrives at that which is beyond all seeing and all knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

Yet only Moses, and those similar to him, could enter the super-luminous and super-divine darkness. The negative theology is for anybody who loves God. Yet this light and this divine darkness, Saint Gregory Palamas concluded, are something else than the negative theology and surpass it in an incommensurable mode; we should say that in the same way as Moses surpassed in his vision of God the many.<sup>16</sup>

It is not our purpose to intervene in doctrinal disputes like the one between Palamas and Barlaam, regarding the nature of the divine Light; but, we must ask ourselves if there is any glimpse of an initiatory light in the texts quoted previously, even though we should not expect public revelations. The question is that, as a lot of terms and words, carrying nothing of what they should mean, are used (and abused) today, the same the exoteric domain uses notions that have a much more limited significance than the one they have in the esoteric domain. “Union,” “light,” “vision,” “liberation,” “beyond” and others are often deceiving words. Similarly the various mystical or so-called spiritual “experiences” of various traditions could be deceiving.

René Guénon has heeded Light when he referred to the triad *Verbum, Lux, Vita* (Guénon, **Aperç. sur l’Init.**, pp. 294 ff.). The Word’s act produces the “illumination” that is the origin of the universal manifestation, and the beginning of Saint John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word,” alludes in fact to *In principio erat Verbum*, that is, the Word is the principle of any manifestation. In **Genesis**, the uttered Word was *Fiat Lux*, which links the sound to light, the hearing to seeing; in the Hindu tradition, **Vêda** was heard, yet the word *vêda* derives from a radical meaning “to see.” In the Islamic tradition, Guénon showed, the first creation was that of Light (*En-Nûr*), directly generated by the divine commandment.

In Hesychasm, the Light of which Saint Palamas has spoken is an uncreated light, that is, it has its origins beyond the creatures, beyond the manifestation, and it is *in principio*, and even though it overflows “upon the world” it “is” not. In the Hindu tradition, an initiate that accomplished the spiritual realization is a *jîvan-mukti*, a “liberated while alive.” It is very difficult to understand how a human being can, at the same time, be united with Brahma (be identical, in fact, with Brahma), and continue to exist as an individual. If for a *jîvan-mukti* this problem does not exist anymore, for a neophyte it remains a perplexity. For this reason, Hesychasm solved the problem at a doctrinal level, considering that a union with God’s

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essence is impossible (since then the individual would not exist anymore as such, and would be God); instead, a union takes place with God which is expressed as an identification with His uncreated Light.<sup>17</sup> The uncreated energies, among which is Light, solved also another serious problem, that of One and multiple. Obviously, this whole doctrinal exposé is only for our benefit as individuals, to understand, to some extent, the “not-understandable,” the unfathomable. One generates the multiple with the help of its divine rays that spread into the world starting from the center, these rays being precisely the uncreated energies.<sup>18</sup>

As the Hindu tradition introduced Shakti as Brahma’s partner, to reconcile the Principle’s immutability with its activity, likewise Hesychasm introduced the uncreated energies, comparing them to the solar rays.<sup>19</sup> The uncreated Light is the celestial Ray that, by uttering the Word, generates the whole manifestation, all the beings, yet this Light is also the Hesychastic way to become reunited with God.<sup>20</sup>

We see this Hesychastic way, which Guénon and Vâlsan called “initiatory,” exposed by Saint Gregory Palamas as a doctrine. Yet what interests us most is not the doctrine, but the effective realization, the “technical” part. Or, better yet, we are looking for an answer to the question: Does Hesychasm offers modern man a possibility of initiation?

We have shown that Vâlsan wrote about a John the Stranger, who during World War II came to Romania, revivifying the Hesychastic method.<sup>21</sup> Another source<sup>22</sup> mentioned John the Desert-Dweller, who came from Tighina to the Agapia Mountains, being noticed around the year 1930 as a saintly Hesychast, wandering through the woods followed by one disciple. There is no doubt that the two Johns are very close from a spiritual point of view, and even more, maybe they are one and the same individual. What is remarkable in father confessor’s description is the elusive characteristic of John the Desert-Dweller, the difficulty of placing him in one location or of talking to him, and his final retreat to the Sihla Monastery. We are able to assert that in those days, when the interview was given, thirty years after Father John’s disappearance (1946), Sihla was still a tightly closed monastery, where no outsider had any access, and the monks, when they saw you coming near, ran away and hid. What we want to say is that, if we can have access to the Hesychastic doctrine, to the theoretical knowledge, this is not the same as having access to effective initiation. It is almost impossible to make contact with genuine Hesychasts, and no one will unveil anything about the Hesychastic initiation; on the contrary, they will declare with innocence that Hesychasm does not exist and everything is just fantasy. And this is valid not only for the profane or outsiders, but even for the official exoteric people (priests), because generally even the exoteric priests are not admitted into the Hesychastic mystery, being unqualified. For this reason, some of the priests today consider that Hesychasm is just a memory and they could be right, partially at least, considering the exclusive characteristic and the difficulty of transmitting the Hesychastic initiation (due to the lack of qualified disciples).

We must add another important observation. Remembering the turbulent history of the foundation of the Christian Church and its struggle against division and sectarianism, the Orthodox (exoteric) Church never agreed with an esoteric initiation in its ranks. Therefore, even Saint Gregory Palamas, if he followed a Hesychastic initiatory line, it was kept hidden not only from the public eye, but also from the Church’s eyes. Today, as yesterday, a genuine Hesychast will never talk about his initiation; quite the opposite, he will strongly deny the existence of any initiation, and so, it is impossible to know for sure, from outside, the real situation of the Hesychastic initiation.

On the other hand, we witness today an explosion of pseudo-Hesychasm in the profane world. It started in the Far and Middle-West, when in the Near-West the atheistic doctrine officially ruled; yet now it is everywhere.

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In modern times, the antitraditional world and what Guénon would have called “the counter-initiatory forces” strove to undermine the authentic traditional doctrines, adopting them in a profanatory mode. One after another, Yoga, Zen and Sufism were commercialized in the Occident. Many dubious books and articles were written on this subject, these spiritual orthodox ways being altered and contaminated with modernism and scientism, and presented to the public as some sort of “psycho-physical” experiences. Hesychasm was the target of a similar attack. It started to be unveiled to the profane world, to be distributed throughout the Occident, to be analyzed, to attract disciples who were converted to Orthodoxy for the sake of novelty and the mirage of a facile Hesychastic initiation.<sup>23</sup> As we indicated above, genuine Hesychasm is so exclusive that any attempt at popularization and vulgarization is impossible. What is scattered in the modern world is a pseudo-Hesychasm which gives many the illusion that they obtain an initiation by repeating the Prayer of the Heart or practicing other techniques made public.<sup>24</sup>

The Near-West is in no better position. After the pseudo-Hesychasm was embraced by the Far and Middle-West, and Hesychastic texts were published, a “hesychastic” explosion happened in Eastern Europe when the regime change took place. The term “hesychasm” became a fashion and it was extremely abused. Conferences were held with “hesychastic” subjects and a dangerous syncretism between the Hesychastic prayer and some Oriental techniques was recommended; also, there are now a lot of modern works about Hesychasm. We see a desecration and a counterfeit, not exactly of the Hesychastic doctrine, but of the Hesychastic spiritual realization. Even if some of the published texts are valid and orthodox, they cannot replace the effective Hesychastic initiation. And this initiation is undercover more than ever. In fact, those who write about it, in the majority of the cases have no idea what they are talking about, and many have an antitraditional mentality. From what we know, if there still are true Hesychasts, these, due to the present situation of the modern world, reject any contact with this world. We may say, symbolically, that they withdrew within the immutable “Oriental” core of Hesychasm. And the conclusion we can draw is that, for the moment, the Hesychastic initiation doesn’t seem to be the way to straighten and revivify the Occident which is in need; it could be an Ark, but this is beyond our subject.

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<sup>1</sup> pp. 284-5.

<sup>2</sup> p. 295.

<sup>3</sup> Here the “suffering” has to be understood as Christian “passion.” The word “passion” derives from the Greek *pascho*, and Latin *patior*, “to suffer.”

<sup>4</sup> pp. 296-297.

<sup>5</sup> For the Hesychasts, the vision of the uncreated Light is not a transitory religious ecstasy, but a “consciously life into the light.”

<sup>6</sup> pp. 297-8.

<sup>7</sup> *Nemo Deum vidit*. See about the ambiguity of *Nemo*, our **The Everlasting Sacred Kernel**, Rose-Cross Books, 2002, p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> pp. 303-304.

<sup>9</sup> Pseudo-Dionysus, **The Divine Names**, I, 5.

<sup>10</sup> p. 305.

<sup>11</sup> This non-acting corresponds to *wu-wei* of the Far-Eastern tradition, representing, as the non-speaking, an expression of non-manifestation.

- <sup>12</sup> Saint Symeon the New Theologian said: “God is Light and those considered by Him worthy to see Him will see Him as Light; those who received Him, they received Him as Light”; Saint Symeon declared that he is not talking about something he does not know, but about something he himself found out (Vladimir Lossky, **Essai sur la Théologie Mystique de L’Église d’Orient**, Aubier, 1944, p. 216). We could assume that, like Saint Bernard, Saint Symeon was a genuine initiate.
- <sup>13</sup> pp. 311, 313. We should heed the expression “the sons of light.” “Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light,” Jesus said (**John** 12:36). And Saint Paul stressed: “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness” (**1 Thessalonians** 5:5). It is interesting that Saint Paul opposed light to wrath: “But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet [the three theologian virtues]. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (**1 Thessalonians** 5:8-9). The expression “the sons of light” is present in the Qumran manuscripts and it will take a “Gnostic” garment, but the great danger is to get stuck in an irreconcilable dualism “light-darkness,” inadmissible from a metaphysical point of view. Saint Symeon the New Theologian said: “for those who became the sons of light and the sons of the last day, for those who walk permanently into the light, the Day of God will never come, since they are always with God and into God” (Lossky 231).
- <sup>14</sup> “Who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light,” Saint Paul wrote (**1 Timothy** 6:16).
- <sup>15</sup> About the super-luminous Darkness and the apophatic theology in Saint Dionysius’ writings see Lossky, pp. 23 ff.
- <sup>16</sup> p. 329. Father Stăniloae added: “Palamas declares that there is a rational knowledge of God, which belongs to the affirmative theology of the beings; and one above the mind, negating all the beings. Eventually, there is a third one, superior, through union.”
- <sup>17</sup> This is different from the Western *visio beatifica* (see Paul Evdokimov, **L’Orthodoxie**, Desclée de Brouwer, 1979, p. 27).
- <sup>18</sup> About the uncreated energies see Lossky, pp. 65 ff. Lossky showed that the Fathers of the Church, previous to the Council of Nicaea, called the Word (*Logos*) either “force” or divine “energy” manifested into creation (p. 69). Saint Dionysius named the uncreated energies “divine rays,” and Saint Palamas “uncreated light.”
- <sup>19</sup> It does not matter if the creatures exist or not, God manifests “outwards” through the uncreated energies, in the same way the sun manifests through its rays, even if there are or not beings to receive them (Lossky 72).
- <sup>20</sup> About the celestial Ray see René Guénon, **Le Symbolisme de la Croix**, Guy Trédaniel, 1984, pp. 125 ff.
- <sup>21</sup> The work of John the Stranger is related to the Cernica and Antim Monasteries (see André Scrima, **Timpul Rugului Aprins. Maestrul spiritual în tradiția răsăriteană**, Humanitas, 1996, pp. 158-160, in Romanian; about Cernica see also **Agarttha, the Invisible Center**, p. 57).
- <sup>22</sup> We refer to the father confessor of the Monastery Agapia, whose interview published in Romania was reprinted in **The Orthodox Work**.
- <sup>23</sup> Of course, we don’t have in mind here the honest believer who is attached to the Greek-Orthodox Church.
- <sup>24</sup> Ferdinand Ossendowski registered in one of his books a technique for the “Jesus’ Prayer,” practiced by an Orthodox Russian and which is considered by Michel Vâlsan as having an initiatory characteristic. (Michel Vâlsan, **Notes diverses**, Ét. Traditionnelles, no. 411, 1969, p. 29).