

Chapter 1

How Do We Enter the Heart?

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Within the heart is an unfathomable depth.

—The Macarian Homilies

Le Point Vierge

In the experience of almost everyone there have surely been certain texts—passages in poetry or prose—which, once heard or read, have never been forgotten. For most of us, these decisive texts are probably few in number; but, rare though they may be, they have permanently altered our lives, and they have helped to make us what we are. One such text, so far as my own life journey is concerned, is a paragraph on *le point vierge*, “the virgin point”, in Thomas Merton’s *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (definitely my firm favorite among his many books):

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak his name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.¹

Here Thomas Merton is seeking to elucidate the moment of disclosure which came to him on 18 March 1958, and which he

1. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 142.

recorded in his journal on the following day: "Yesterday, in Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, suddenly realized that I loved all the people and that none of them were or could be totally alien to me. As if waking from a dream—the dream of my separateness."² It is noteworthy that, when attempting later on in his *Conjectures* to understand what was clearly for him an experience of intense visionary insight, Merton makes use of a term, *le point vierge*, which he had derived from Sufi sources. He had come across this phrase in the writings of the renowned French Orientalist Louis Massignon, with whom he had been in correspondence during the year 1960. Massignon in his turn employed the phrase when expounding the mystical psychology of the tenth-century Muslim saint and martyr al-Hallâj, whose custom it was to say, "Our hearts are a virgin that God's truth alone opens."³

Significantly al-Hallâj refers in this context to the heart. This word does not actually occur in the passage quoted above from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, but Merton is in fact describing precisely what the Christian East has in view when it speaks in its ascetic and mystical theology about the "deep heart" (see Psalm 63:7 [64:6]). By "the virgin point" Massignon, interpreting al-Hallâj, means "the last, irreducible, secret center of the heart", "the latent personality, the deep subconscious, the secret cell walled up [and hidden] to every creature, the 'involute virgin'", which "remains unformed" until visited by God; to discover this virgin point is to return to our origin.⁴ Thus *le point vierge* or the innermost heart is, in the words of Dorothy C. Buck, the place "where God alone has access and human and Divine meet"; it embodies "the sacredness hidden in the depth of every human soul".⁵

This is exactly what is signified by the "deep heart" in the neptic⁶ theology of the Orthodox Church. St Mark the Monk (? fifth cen-

2. *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 124.

3. See Sidney H. Griffith, "Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam", in *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium*, ed. Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999), pp. 63-64.

4. Griffith, p. 65.

5. "Mary and the Virgin Heart: A Reflection on the Writings of Louis Massignon and Hallaj", *Sufi*, 24 (1994-95), p. 8; *Sufi*, 28 (1995-96), p. 8.

6. "Neptic": from the word *nepsis*, meaning sobriety, vigilance, spiritual insight. "Neptic theology", in the Eastern Orthodox Church, includes the realms of both "ascetical theology" and "mystical theology", as these are understood in

tury), for example, speaks of "the innermost, secret and uncontaminated chamber of the heart . . . the innermost and untroubled treasury of the heart, where the winds of evil spirits do not blow". According to Mark the Monk, it is to this hidden *temenos* that Christ is alluding when he states, "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21), and when he talks about "the good treasure of the heart" (Luke 6:45).⁷ A similar understanding of the heart is beautifully expressed by the Roman Catholic Benedictine Henri le Saux, who wrote under the name Swami Abishiktananda, when he terms it "the place of our origin . . . in which the soul is, as it were, coming from the hands of God and waking up to itself".⁸ In the words of another Roman Catholic author, the Dominican Richard Kehoe, "The 'heart' is the very deepest and truest self, not attained except through sacrifice, through death."⁹

It is immediately apparent that St Mark the Monk, al-Hallâj, and Merton share in common an all-important conviction concerning the character of this deep or innermost heart. For all three of them it is something pure, inviolate, inaccessible to evil; and specifically for this reason it can rightly be described as "the virgin point". Thus Mark says of the "secret chamber of the heart" that it is "uncontaminated", "untroubled", a hidden sanctuary "where the winds of evil spirits do not blow". For al-Hallâj it is opened by "God's truth alone". Likewise Merton insists that it is "untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God". While the outer levels of the heart are a battleground between the forces of good and evil, this is not true of the innermost depth of the heart. As "the virgin point" the deep heart belongs only to God. It is pre-eminently the place of Divine immanence, the locus of God's indwelling.

the Roman Catholic tradition. For the importance of the term *nepsis*, note the Greek title of *The Philokalia*, a classic collection of Orthodox spiritual writings from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries: "The Philokalia of the Holy Neptic [Fathers]".

7. Mark the Monk (alias Mark the Ascetic or Marcus Eremita), "On Baptism", §§4, 5, 11 (*Patrologia Graeca* [PG] 65: 996C, 1005 BCD, 1016 D), ed. Georges-Matthieu de Durand, *Sources chrétiennes* 445 (Paris: Cerf, 1999), pp. 322, 342-43, 368.

8. Abishiktananda, *Prayer* (London: SPCK, 1972), p. 54.

9. "The Scriptures as Word of God", in *The Eastern Churches Quarterly*, VII, Supplementary Issue on "Tradition and Scripture" (1947), p. 78.

It is, then, at the level of the deep heart that we experience our human personhood as fashioned in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27); it is at the level of the deep heart that we become "partakers of the Divine Nature" (2 Peter 1:4), that we encounter the Uncreated in a meeting face-to-face, that we are "oned" with the living God in a transforming union of love. When the Fathers of the Christian Church, both Greek and Latin, understand salvation in terms of *theosis* or "deification", they are referring to a process which certainly embraces the totality of our personhood, yet which comes to its ultimate fulfillment only within the "virgin point" of the deep heart.

The heart is in this way a pivotal concept in the spiritual teaching both of Sufism and of Christianity. As Thomas Merton correctly observes, "Sufism looks at man as a heart. . . . The heart is the faculty by which man knows God", and so the supreme aim in Sufism is nothing else than "to develop a heart that knows God".¹⁰ In the words of Rumi, "I have looked into my own heart; it is there that I have seen Him; He was nowhere else."¹¹ This leads Martin Lings to observe in his book *What is Sufism?*, "What indeed is Sufism, subjectively speaking, if not 'heart-wakefulness'?" Illustrating this, he quotes al-Hallâj: "I saw my Lord with the Eye of the Heart."¹² The Hesychast tradition of the Orthodox Church, for its part, speaks repeatedly of "prayer of the heart", of the "discovery of the place of the heart", of the "descent from the head to the heart", and of the "union of the intellect (*nous*) with the heart".

"The heart's a wonder", exclaims J. M. Synge in *The Playboy of the Western World*. But the time has come to ask more specifically what is meant by the heart. Are we speaking literally about the physical organ in our chest, or is the heart a symbol of certain spiritual realities? Is it perhaps both these things at once? Moreover, how do we enter into the deep heart, and what do we find when we have entered?

10. Cited by Rob Baker, "Merton, Marco Pallis, and the Traditionalists", in *Merton and Sufism*, p. 256.

11. Cited by Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1985), p. 89. Schuon goes on to quote the striking words of the Hindu Lalla Yogishwari: "My guru gave me but a single precept. He told me: 'From without, enter into the most inward place'" (p. 91).

12. *What is Sufism?* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), pp. 48-49.

The Fox, Ochwiay Bianco, and the Bible

Some years ago the Duchess of Windsor—Wallace Simpson, the wife of King Edward VIII—issued her memoirs under the title *The Heart has its Reasons*. This was of course a quotation from Pascal: “The heart has its reasons, which the reason knows nothing of.”¹³ What Pascal meant by the heart is a complex question; but it is clear from the memoirs of the Duchess of Windsor that she understood the heart to denote the feelings, emotions, and affections—in her case, I fear, somewhat wayward emotions and affections.

Is this in fact the true and full meaning of the heart, or should we look further? A vital clue is provided by a book much loved by my own spiritual father, a priest of the Russian emigration, Fr George Cheremetiev. He used to repeat the farewell words of the fox in *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: “‘Goodbye,’ said the fox. ‘And now here is my secret. It is very simple. It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.’”¹⁴ *On ne voit bien qu’avec le cœur*: here the heart no longer signifies merely the emotions and affections, but it is regarded as the organ of inner vision, the place of insight and understanding.

Let us turn from France to North America. With the remark of the fox, let us compare the words of an American Indian, Ochwiay Bianco, recorded by C. G. Jung in his book *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*:

“See,” Ochwiay Bianco said, “how cruel the whites look. Their lips are thin, their noses sharp, their faces furrowed and distorted by folds. Their eyes have a staring expression; they are always seeking something. What are they seeking? The whites always want something; they are always uneasy and restless. We do not know what they want. We do not understand them. We think that they are mad.”

I asked him why he thought the whites were all mad.

“They say that they think with their heads,” he replied.

“Why, of course. What do you think with?”, I asked him in surprise.

13. *Pensées*, iv, 277, ed. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), § 423 (p. 154).

14. *Le Petit Prince* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981), p. 72.

"We think here," he said, indicating his heart.¹⁵

Evidently Ochwiay Biano agrees with the fox. In his conception of the human person there is no contrast between head and heart. The heart is not only, and not primarily, the locus of the feelings and emotions, but it is the place where we think, the focal point of wisdom.

Coming now to the Bible, we find that beyond any shadow of doubt it agrees with the fox and with Ochwiay Biano rather than with the Duchess of Windsor. In the Old and New Testaments there is no head/heart dichotomy. In Hebrew anthropology, as in that of the American Indians, the heart is the organ with which we think. For Biblical authors, the heart does not signify the feelings and emotions; for these are located lower down, in the guts and the entrails. The heart designates, on the contrary, the inwardness of our human personhood in its full spiritual depth. The word is to be interpreted in a wide-ranging sense: the heart is the primary center of the total person, the ground of our being, the root and source of all our inner truth. It is in this way a symbol of the unity and wholeness of our personhood in God.

In Ephesians 3:16-17, for example, the "heart" is treated as equivalent to the "inner man" (*ho esô anthropos*) or "inner being": "May God grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." Here "heart", as the inner self in its totality, is manifestly far more than merely the affections and feelings. It denotes the human person viewed as a spiritual subject, as is clear from the often-quoted words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:21). The heart is in this way the place where we formulate our primary hope, where we express our sense of direction, our purpose in life. It is the moral center, the determinant of action, and so it corresponds in part to what we mean today by the conscience. It is the seat of the memory, understood not just as the recollection of things past but as deep self-awareness at the present moment. So it is said of the Holy Virgin, after the birth of Christ, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19; cf.

15. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London & Glasgow: The Fontana Library, Collins, 1967), p. 276.

2:51). The heart, then, is the faculty with which we ponder, the place of reflection and self-knowledge.

Throughout the Bible, the heart is generally understood in an inclusive sense. Just as there is no head/heart contrast in Scripture, so there is no separation between body and soul. The heart does not denote the body to the exclusion of the soul or the soul to the exclusion of the body, but it embraces both of them together. "Cardiac anthropology" is in this way holistic: the human being is envisaged as a psychosomatic totality, an undivided unity. The heart, that is to say, is at one and the same time a physical reality—the bodily organ located in our chest—and also a psychic and spiritual symbol. Above all it signifies integration and relationship: the integration and unification of the total person within itself, and at the same time the centering and focusing of the total person upon God.

Interpreting the heart in this comprehensive sense, we are enabled to give a fuller meaning to many familiar Biblical sayings. When the prophet Ezekiel speaks of the "stony heart" within us that is to be replaced by a "new heart" or a "heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:9, 18:31), he is referring to the conversion of our entire self, to a fundamental spiritual renewal and reorientation. When our Lord exhorts us, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Matthew 22:37; compare Deuteronomy 6:5), he means "with the totality of yourself". When it is said by God, "My son, give me your heart" (Proverbs 23:26), this implies "give me your whole self". Likewise, when we are told, in a text constantly repeated in Orthodox spiritual writings, "Guard your heart with all vigilance" (Proverbs 4:23), this is to be interpreted, "Keep watch over the entirety of your inner life."

Because of our personal sinfulness, and dwelling as we do in a fallen world, the human heart is deeply ambivalent, a battle-field between good and evil forces. The heart is thus the arena in which we come face to face with the power of sin. "Out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander", Christ warns us (Matthew 15:19); and, referring to the contemporary pagan world, St Paul states: "God gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their hearts" (Romans 1: 24). At the same time, however, the heart is the place where we come face to face with the Divine: "God searches the hearts" (Romans 8:27). It is more specifically the locus of the indwelling presence of God the Holy Trinity: "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, cry-

ing, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6; compare Romans 8:15-16). The heart is in this way the point of self-transcendence, where my human personhood is taken up into the Divine life; it is the meeting-place of the created and the Uncreated. It is in and through the heart that the believer is enabled to affirm, not in a sentimental and imaginary fashion but with strict literalness, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

It is now possible for us to appreciate more fully the true dimensions of the saying that we have already quoted from the Psalms, "The heart is deep" (63:7 [64:6]). Along with Proverbs 4:23, this is another key text in Orthodox neptic theology. It means that the human person is a profound mystery, that I understand only a very small part of myself, that my conscious ego-awareness is far from exhausting the total reality of my authentic Self. But it signifies more than that. It implies that in the innermost depths of my heart I transcend the bounds of my created personhood and discover within myself the direct unmediated presence of the living God. Entry into the deep heart means that I experience myself as God-sourced, God-enfolded, God-transfigured. Although sinful and unworthy, I am yet enabled to say with humble confidence, "His life is mine".¹⁶

This brings us back to the theme with which we began, Masignon's and Mertons's "virgin point", *le point vierge*, the "point of nothingness" which "belongs entirely to God" and which is his "pure glory" within us. This is precisely what Orthodox spirituality means by the "deep heart", understood as the place of Divine indwelling. There are two ways in which this indwelling is interpreted in the theology of the Christian East. Some authors, such as St Mark the Monk (already cited),¹⁷ hold that it is specifically through the sacrament of Baptism that Christ and the Holy Spirit come to dwell within "the innermost, secret, and uncontaminated chamber of the heart". This presence, according to Mark, is inalienable: however careless and sinful our subsequent life may be, the baptismal indwelling of Christ and the Spirit continues to remain "secretly" (*mystikôs*) within us,

16. Compare the book of that title by Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), disciple of St Silouan of Mount Athos and founder of the Orthodox Monastery of St John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights, Essex, England: *His Life is Mine* (London & Oxford: Mowbrays, 1977).

17. See note 7.

but if we do not fulfill the Divine commandments we shall not become consciously aware of their presence.¹⁸

There is, however, a second approach, which insists that this secret presence of God in the "deep heart" is to be found in every human person, whether baptized or not, for all alike are created in the Divine image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27); as Merton says, "It is in everybody." Support for this "universalist" standpoint can be found in St Paul's speech to the Athenians on the Areopagus, as recorded by St Luke in the Book of Acts. Speaking to the unbaptized, who as yet know nothing of Christ, Paul affirms: "God is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and in him we exist; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring'" (Acts 17:27-28). It is significant, however, that having affirmed this universal presence of the Divine in every human heart, Paul then goes on at once to speak specifically of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The same "universalism" is expressed in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, which refers to Christ the *Logos* as "the true light that enlightens everyone who comes into the world" (John 1:9). In similar terms, the second-century Apologist Justin Martyr sees Christ as the cosmic Sower who has implanted *logoi spermatikoi*, seeds of the truth, in the hearts of all human persons without exception; thus Socrates is a Christian before Christ.¹⁹ It was this "universalist" vision of Justin which inspired and guided the nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox mission in Alaska under St Innocent (Veniaminov). In his preaching of Christ to the native peoples, he always sought points of contact between the Christian message and their existing beliefs. In so doing he never fell into any syncretistic compromise, but displayed on the contrary a true spirit of catholicity.²⁰

The two approaches can perhaps be combined together. Christian believers may affirm, with Justin Martyr, that Christ the *Logos* is present in every human heart; and then they may go on to maintain, with St Mark the Monk, that this universal indwelling of the

18. See "On Those Who Think That They are Justified by Their Works", §56 (PG 65:937 D); "On Baptism", §4[993 C], ed. de Durand, pp. 146, 316-18.

19. See Justin, *1 Apology*, 44, 46; *2 Apology*, 6, 8, 10.

20. See Kallistos Ware, "'The Light that Enlightens Everyone': The Knowledge of God Among Non-Christians according to the Greek Fathers and St Innocent", *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 44:1-4 (1999), pp. 557-64.

Divine is confirmed and deepened through sacramental Baptism in the Church.

Such in brief outline is the Biblical understanding of the heart. It is an all-embracing concept, a symbol of wholeness and integration. The heart includes the body, for it is a physical organ; but it is also the spiritual center of our personhood, the means whereby we think, make moral decisions, and attain wisdom. But this is not all. Advancing inward, penetrating through the many different levels of the heart where good and evil confront each other in conflict, eventually by God's grace and mercy the seeker attains the "deep heart", which is the Divine spark within us, the innermost sanctuary where God the Trinity dwells, the point of encounter between time and eternity, between space and infinity, between the created and the Uncreated.

"All Things are There"

How far is this rich and many-sided Biblical understanding of the heart preserved and developed in the Early Church, especially in the Christian East?²¹ There are certainly many Greek Fathers from whose writings the distinctive Hebraic meaning of the heart is largely absent. Such authors tend to adopt a Platonist scheme, contrasting heart and head. They make little use of the term "heart"; when it does occur, it is either associated with the feelings or else treated as an equivalent to "intellect" (*nous*), but in both cases the fullness of the Biblical usage is lost. This is broadly true of writers such as Origen (d. c. 254), Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399), and St Dionysios the Areopagite (fl. c. 500).

There are, however, other Patristic authors who continue to use the word "heart" in its strong Scriptural sense, as denoting the spiritual center of the total person. This is the case, for example, with St Mark the Monk, St Diadochos of Photiki, and Abba Isaia in the fifth century, with St Barsanuphios and St John of Gaza in the early sixth century, with St John Klimakos and St Isaac of Nineveh in the

21. On the meaning of the heart in the Greek Fathers, the best treatment is still the two articles by André Guillaumont, "Les sens des noms du coeur dans l'antiquité", *Le Coeur*, Études Carmélitaines 29 (Paris, 1950), pp. 41-81; "Le 'coeur' chez les spirituels grecs à l'époque ancienne", *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 2 (1952), cols. 2281-8.

seventh century, and with St Hesychios of Batos in the eighth-ninth century. Typical of the standpoint of this second group of writers is the concise affirmation of St John Klimakos, ascribing to the heart the inclusive significance that it possesses in the Bible: "I cried out with my whole heart," says the Psalmist (Psalm 118 [119]:145): that is to say, with my body, soul, and spirit."²² Typical also is the statement of St Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian), assigning to the heart a focal and mediating position in our personhood: "The heart is placed as the mediator between the soul's senses and those of the body"; it is "in the middle".²³

A particularly eloquent expression of the full meaning of the heart is to be found in the "Spiritual Homilies" of Makarios, a Greek text dating from around 370-390, traditionally attributed to the Coptic monk Makarios of Egypt, but in fact Syriac in background. Here the heart is most emphatically regarded as the axial point and the center of unity within the human person as a whole:

The heart governs and reigns over the whole bodily organism; and when grace possesses the pasturages of the heart, it rules over all the members and the thoughts. For there, in the heart, is the intellect (*nous*), and all the thoughts of the soul and its expectation; and in this way grace penetrates also to all the members of the body.²⁴

Let us try to spell out the implications of this key passage. First of all, when the Macarian Homilies speak here of the "pasturages" or "prairies" (*tas nomas*) of the heart, it has to be kept in mind that the circulation of the blood was not clearly understood in the ancient world. Patristic authors did not think of the heart as a kind of pump, in the way that we might do today, but they viewed it as a container

22. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, § 28 (PG 88:1140 B), trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York/Ramsey/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 281.

23. *Mystic Treatises* 33, trans. A. J. Wensinck (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam Afdeeling Letterkunde, 1923), p. 148; *Ascetical Homilies* 35, trans. Dana Miller (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), p. 158.

24. *Homilies* 15:20, ed. Hermann Dörries, Erich Klostermann, and Matthias Kroeger, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 4 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1964), p. 139, trans. George A. Maloney, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 116. All my quotations from the Macarian Homilies are taken from Collection II, but the same understanding of the heart is to be found in the other collections.

or empty vessel, full of space and air. This needs to be remembered whenever we come across such phrases as “finding the place of the heart” or “entering the heart”.

“The heart governs and reigns”, state the Macarian Homilies: it is the dominant element in our total human structure, the controlling power. It governs and reigns, more specifically, “over the whole bodily organism”: it is in the first place a corporeal organ, located in the chest, which acts as the physical center of the human being; when our heart stops beating, we die. Yet this is not all. The Homilies go on to say that the heart rules also over the “thoughts”, and that “there in the heart is the intellect”. The heart is not only the physical but the psychic and spiritual center. The Greek word used here for “intellect”, *nous*, signifies not only the reasoning brain but also, more fundamentally, a higher faculty of intuitive insight and mystical vision. Elsewhere in the Macarian Homilies it is stated that the *nous* within the heart is like the eye within the body;²⁵ in other words, through the use of the intellect within the heart we do not merely reach conclusions by means of discursive argumentation, but the intellect enables us to see the truth in a direct and unmediated manner. The heart in which the intellect dwells is thus the faculty with which we think, both in a rational and a suprarational way. It is both the seat of reasoning intelligence and also, on a higher or deeper level, the place of wisdom and spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*).

As the passage that we have quoted from the Macarian Homilies makes clear, the heart is not only the center of the human person considered on a natural plane, not only the point of convergence and union between body, soul, and spirit, but it is also the means whereby the human person is initiated into the Divine realm and enters into communion with God. It is through the heart that we

25. *Homilies* 43:7, ed. Dörries, p. 289, trans. Maloney, p. 222. On the relationship between *nous* and heart, see Kallistos Ware, “*Nous* and *noesis* in Plato, Aristotle, and Evagrius of Pontus”, *Diotima* 13 (Athens, 1985), pp. 158-63; and by the same author, “Prayer in Evagrius of Pontus and the Macarian Homilies”, in *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Ralph Waller and Benedicta Ward (London: SPCK, 1999), pp. 14-30. Some “neptic” writers, following Plato, draw a distinction between *dianoia* and *nous*: the first term denotes discursive reasoning, while the second indicates intuitive insight. But in other Patristic texts this distinction is not found, so that *nous* sometimes includes rational argumentation as well as mystical understanding.

experience uncreated grace “when grace possesses the pasturages of the heart”. The heart in this way fulfils a mediatorial function, transmitting God’s grace not only to the intellect and soul but also to the body: “in this way grace penetrates also to all the members of the body”.

Developing this idea of the heart as the meeting-place between the Divine and the human, the Macarian Homilies continue:

Within the heart is an unfathomable depth. There are reception rooms and bedchambers in it, doors and porches, and many offices and passages. In it is the workshop of righteousness and of wickedness. In it is death, in it is life. . . . The heart is Christ’s palace. . . . There Christ the King comes to take his rest, with the angels and the spirits of the saints, and he dwells there, walking within it and placing his Kingdom there.²⁶

In affirming here that there is within the heart “an unfathomable depth”, the Homilies presumably mean in the first place that the heart includes what we today tend to describe as “the unconscious”. The heart, that is to say, includes those aspects of myself which I do not as yet understand, the potentialities within myself of which I am at present largely or totally unaware. At the same time the Homilies underline the ambivalence that exists in this “depth” of the heart. As the moral center of the human person, it is the battleground between God and Satan, between good and evil; it is “the workshop of righteousness and of wickedness”, containing within itself both “life” and “death”. But, despite the presence of evil within the heart, it remains in its fundamental essence “Christ’s palace”, the place of Divine indwelling. Beyond the battleground there is *le point vierge*, the innermost *temenos*, “where the winds of evil spirits do not blow”: “there Christ the King comes to take his rest”.

Emphasizing the ambivalence of the heart, the Macarian Homilies state in another passage:

The heart is but a small vessel; and yet dragons and lions are there, and there likewise are poisonous creatures and all the treasures of wickedness; rough, uneven paths are there, and gaping chasms. There also is God, there are the angels, there life and the Kingdom, there light and the apostles, the heavenly cities and the treasures of grace: all things are there.²⁷

26. *Homilies* 15:32-33, ed. Dörries, p. 146, trans. Maloney, p. 120.

27. *Homilies* 43:7, ed. Dörries, p. 289, trans. Maloney, p. 222.

"Rough, uneven paths are there, and gaping chasms": here again we may think of the modern concept of the unconscious. "All the treasures of wickedness" are there, but so also are "the treasures of grace": the heart is at the cross-roads, at the storm-center of the cosmic conflict between good and evil; the heart determines our eternal destiny. "There also is God": the heart is the place where created personhood becomes transparent to the Divine, where God the Holy Trinity is at work within me. "All things are there": the heart is all-inclusive, all-embracing, a symbol of wholeness, integration, and totality, signifying the human person as an undivided unity. The standpoint of "cardiac" anthropology, as we have already emphasized, rejects any dichotomy between mind and matter, between soul and body, between head and heart. It views the human being in holistic terms.

Summarizing the Macarian teaching, we may say that the heart is open both below and above: below, to the abyss of the subconscious; above, to the abyss of the mystical supraconscious—below, to the forces of evil; above, to the Divine Light. In the words of the Russian philosopher Boris Vysheslavitsev, it is "the absolute center": "the center not only of consciousness but of the unconscious, not only of the soul but of the spirit, not only of the spirit but of the body, not only of the comprehensible but of the incomprehensible; in one word, it is the absolute center".²⁸ The heart is the point of meeting between human freedom and Divine grace, between image and Archetype, between the created and the Uncreated.

At the end of the Byzantine era, the great Hesychast master St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) sums up the earlier Patristic teaching on the heart in words that directly recall the teaching of the Macarian Homilies, written nearly a thousand years earlier. The heart, says Palamas, is "the innermost body within the body . . . the shrine of the intelligence and the chief intellectual organ of the body". The intellect (*nous*), the visionary faculty whereby we apprehend the Transcendent and the Eternal, is located within the heart, although in an incorporeal and non-spatial sense. When we pray, our aim is precisely to "collect our intellect, outwardly dispersed

28. Quoted in John B. Dunlop, *Staretz Amvrosy: Model for Dostoevsky's Staretz Zossima* (Belmont, Massachusetts: Nordland, 1972), p. 22.

through the senses, and bring it back within ourselves—back to the heart itself, the shrine of the thoughts”.²⁹

Such is the wealth of meaning, the complexity of content, that the term “heart” possesses in Scripture and in many of the Fathers. Once the word is interpreted in this inclusive way, many key phrases in the Hesychast tradition suddenly acquire a much more profound meaning. The phrase “prayer of the heart”, for example, when used in an Orthodox source such as *The Philokalia*, does not signify solely “affective prayer” in the modern Western sense, that is to say, prayer of the feelings and emotions, but it denotes prayer of the total person. Since the heart is a bodily organ it means prayer in which the body participates, as well as the soul and spirit.³⁰ But, since the heart is also the place of Divine indwelling, “prayer of the heart” indicates at the same time those levels at which it is not merely I who pray, but at which Christ and the Holy Spirit are praying within me. It signifies the experience of being “prayed in”: “not I, but Christ in me”. The Hesychast injunctions: “discover the place of the heart”, “descend into the heart”, “unite your intellect with your heart”, are to be interpreted in a similar way. They mean: enter into relationship with your deep self, find God in the profundity of your being, discover the true dimensions of your personhood in God, realize yourself as created in the Divine image and likeness.

The Heart and the Jesus Prayer

If this is what is meant by the heart, and if this is what we discover when we enter, then we may well feel both encouraged and daunted. How, we ask, is such an entry possible? What shall we do to find the pathway into the deep heart? What is the key that opens the door?

Among human beings there is an inexhaustible variety. Because we are each endowed with free will, we are all of us different; each

29. *Triads in Defence of the Holy Hesychasts*, 1:2:3, ed. Jean Meyendorff, Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense 30-31 (Louvain: Université Catholique, 1959), p. 80, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, *The Philokalia*, Vol. 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 334.

30. On the physical techniques used by the Byzantine Hesychasts and on the parallels in yoga and Sufism, see Jacques-Albert Cuttat, *The Encounter of Religions: A Dialogue between the West and the Orient, with an Essay on the Prayer of Jesus* (New York/Tournai: Desclée, 1960), especially pp. 89-97; Kallistos Ware, “Praying with the Body: The Hesychast Method and Non-Christian Parallels”, *Sobornost*, incorporating *Eastern Churches Review*, 14:2 (1992), pp. 6-35.

is unique, and each expresses the Divine image in his or her distinctive and unrepeatable way. This is emphasized in a saying by the Hasidic master Rabbi Zusya: at the Last Judgment, he insisted, I shall not be asked, "Why were you not Moses?" I shall be asked, "Why were you not Zusya?"³¹ Such is the question of all questions that will be put by God to each one of us at the *Parousia*: Why did you not become your own true self? Such is exactly the purpose of obedience to a spiritual guide: his or her aim is to enable us to discover who we truly are.

By virtue of this inexhaustible human variety, it follows that there is no single, uniform way of praying that is automatically imposed upon all. Since we each possess free will, there is within prayer a wide-ranging freedom. As a personal dialogue with the personal God, prayer has as many different forms as there are human persons. Yet, while allowing full scope for this freedom in prayer, most Orthodox teachers—when asked, "How may I enter the heart?"—would give the same answer: through the use of the Jesus Prayer.³² By the "Jesus Prayer" is meant a short invocation to Christ, frequently repeated, most commonly in the form "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me". But there are many variants. It is possible to say only "Lord Jesus", "My Jesus", or even nothing more than the one word "Jesus", although in the Christian East it is not usual to invoke the Holy Name entirely on its own.

The Jesus Prayer may be used in two complementary ways. First, it may be said in a "free" manner, as we go about our daily tasks, when we are performing some piece of repetitive work, or during the passing moments of time when we are not doing anything spe-

31. Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, Vol. 1, *The Early Masters* (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 251.

32. For a brief and practical introduction to the Jesus Prayer, see Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality*, Fairacres Publication 43 (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, Convent of the Incarnation, revised edition, 1986). For the historical background, see "A Monk of the Eastern Church" [Archimandrite Lev Gillet], *The Jesus Prayer*, new edition revised by Kallistos Ware (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987); and Irénée Hausherr, S.J., *Noms du Christ et voies d'oraison*, in the series *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 157 (Rome, 1960); English translation, *The Name of Jesus*, in *Cistercian Studies Series* 44 (Kalamazoo, 1978). The works of Gillet and Hausherr are both in need of updating. On the Western usage see Rama Coomaraswamy, *The Invocation of the Name of Jesus as Practiced in the Western Church* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999).

cific and which would otherwise be wasted. It may be the first words that we speak as we wake in the morning and our last words as we fall asleep at night. We can say it, once or many times, as we clean our room, as we do the washing-up, as we walk from place to place, as we wait for the bus or are delayed in a traffic jam. It is particularly valuable at moments of temptation, tension, and anxiety, or at times of acute physical pain, when more complex forms of prayer are all but impossible. The aim of this "free" use is to break down the false dichotomy between "sacred" and "secular", and to bring the Divine presence into every aspect of our daily life. Through the frequent Invocation of the Name we are enabled, wherever we look, to see Christ everywhere and to rejoice in him. The whole world becomes a sacrament. In the words of the Gospel of Thomas, "Split a piece of wood, and there am I; lift up the stone, and you will find Me there."³³

In the second place, there is what may be termed the "fixed" use of the Jesus Prayer, when it is recited during the periods of time that we have set aside exclusively for the remembrance of God, and when we endeavor to pray without doing anything else. Usually in the Orthodox practice on these occasions the Prayer is said seated, although it may also be said standing, accompanied by deep bows or prostrations. Normally it is said alone, although occasionally it is recited in groups, in which case it is the practice for one person at a time to say the Prayer aloud, while the others invoke the Name inwardly. When we say the Prayer alone, the words may be recited aloud, or else they may be expressed silently but with a definite inner articulation. A prayer rope (*komvoschoinion*) of knotted wool or twine may be employed, to enhance the unbroken regularity of the Invocation. It is also possible to co-ordinate the rhythm of the Prayer with the tempo of the breathing; there are various ways of doing this, but they should only be attempted under the personal guidance of an experienced spiritual father or mother. In general, whether or not someone intends to use the physical technique, the Orthodox tradition insists upon the need for direct spiritual direction, person to person, if we wish to journey in a seriously committed manner upon the Way of the Name.

The primary aim of this second or "fixed" use of the Jesus Prayer is to establish within ourselves, through the Divine mercy, the inner

33. Gospel of Thomas, logion 77.

stillness and creative silence that is known in Orthodoxy as *hesychia* (hence the term “hesychast”, meaning one who practices interior prayer). In itself, the Jesus Prayer is an oral prayer, a prayer in words. But because the words are exceedingly simple, because they are repeated over and over again in the same form, it is a prayer which leads us through words into silence; or, more precisely, which enables us to discover the dimension of silence that is hidden within the words. We speak, but at the same time we listen. Silence in this context should be understood not in negative but in supremely positive terms. It is not merely a cessation of sound, a pause between words, but an attitude of openness, receptivity, of attentive waiting upon God. It is not isolation but relationship, not emptiness but fullness, not an absence but a presence: at the core of it is God. Significantly the Psalmist says, not just “Be still”, but “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 45:11 [46:10]). True silence is nothing else than God-awareness. Thus the one who seeks to be silent, in this affirmative sense, is actually saying to God, in the words of the child Samuel: “Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears” (1 Kingdoms [I Samuel] 3:9).

The Jesus Prayer—understood in this manner as a means of entry into silent communion with God—is at the same time precisely a means of entry into the deep heart. If we say, “Silence is a presence: at the core of it is God”, what we are in fact talking about is nothing else than the heart. For, as we have found both in Scripture and in the Greek Fathers, the heart is the meeting-point between God and the human person, the place of Divine indwelling and of loving union between Creator and creature. To encounter God in silence is therefore to encounter God in the heart.

Here, then, in simple terms is the beginning of an answer to the question: How do we enter the heart? One way of entry—certainly not the only way, but a way which many Orthodox Christians follow with gratitude and joy—is through the Invocation of the Holy Name of Jesus. This will lead us to the place of inner stillness and of God-awareness, which is also the place of the heart.

What does the Hesychast find when, by God’s grace, he has in this way entered the heart? The practice of the Jesus Prayer, so it is affirmed in works such as *The Philokalia*, leads to a vision of Divine Light. The saints in prayer behold the Light that shone from Christ at his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor (see Matthew 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36), and that we shall all of us behold, whether righteous or

sinner, at the Last Day when Christ comes again in glory. This Taboric and eschatological splendor is not a created, physical light of the senses, but it is a revelation of the eternal and uncreated Energies of God. Gazing upon the Light and entering into union with it, the saints become that which they contemplate, and are themselves transformed into Light—on most occasions inwardly, but sometimes also in a visible and bodily fashion. Without losing their created identity, they undergo “deification” (*theosis*) and are “oned” with God the Holy Trinity in a union without confusion. In the words of the Macarian Homilies, “The soul becomes all light, all face, all eye. . . . Peter is still Peter, Paul is Paul, Philip is Philip. Each one retains his own unique nature and personality, but they are all filled with the Spirit.”³⁴ Such is the journey’s end on the pilgrimage of the Jesus Prayer; to quote Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The invoker becomes the invocation and the invocation, the invoked.”³⁵

Parallels and Differences

Enough has been said about the Hesychast understanding of the heart and about the practice of the Jesus Prayer to suggest many parallels between Eastern Orthodoxy and Sufism. In particular there are striking similarities between the physical techniques of the Byzantine Hesychasts, with the regulation of breathing, and the bodily exercises that accompany *dhikr* among the Sufis. So close are the points of resemblance as to render it highly probable that there has been some direct contact between the two traditions. But, to the best of my knowledge, no one has so far discovered specific evidence indicating when and where this contact took place. Has Sufism influenced Hesychasm, or vice-versa? Or was the influence mutual? Here is a challenging area for future research.

Yet, having noted the parallels, it would not be honest for me as a Christian to pass over what I am bound to regard as a crucial point of difference. The Jesus Prayer is an invocation, not simply of God, but specifically of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity. We are not calling upon the Supreme Being in general terms, but we are speaking precisely to God incarnate, the Son of the eternal

34. *Homilies* 1:2 and 15:10, ed. Dörries, pp. 2, 132-33, trans. Maloney, pp. 37, 112.

35. Quoted by Bonnie Thurston, “Thomas Merton’s Interest in Islam: the Example of *Dhikr*”, in *Merton and Sufism*, p. 45.

Father who is also Son of Mary. Without overlooking the universality of Christ the *Logos*, "the true light that enlightens everyone who comes into the world" (John 1:9), we cannot but emphasize the historicity of the Jesus Prayer. We are invoking Christ by the human name "Jesus", which was given to him by his Mother and his foster-father Joseph at his earthly birth in Bethlehem (see Matthew 1:21).

Here I would like to recall an analogy that I have used elsewhere.³⁶ Most pictures have frames, and all picture-frames have certain characteristics in common; yet the pictures within the frames may be altogether diverse. What has primary significance is the picture, not the frame. In the case of the Jesus Prayer, the use of physical techniques—as an optional aid, not as an indispensable part of the Prayer—along with the discipline of repetition represents as it were the frame, while the Name of Jesus Christ constitutes the picture within the frame. The "frame" of the Jesus Prayer undoubtedly resembles various non-Christian "frames", but this should not lead us to underestimate the uniqueness of the picture within, that is to say, the distinctively Christian content of the actual Prayer itself. The essential point of the Jesus Prayer is not how we pray, not the exterior techniques, but to whom we are speaking. In the case of the Jesus Prayer, our words are addressed unambiguously to the Incarnate Savior Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary.

If it seems that I am placing undue emphasis upon the contrast between the Hesychast use of the Jesus Prayer and the Sufi use of *dhikr*, then I ask your forgiveness; but I cannot in conscience speak otherwise. There can be no true dialogue that does not acknowledge the distinctiveness of each side in the interchange. Let me add, however, a story told by the Desert Fathers of fourth-century Christian Egypt, which applies to all of us, whatever our religious affiliation. A monk came to see Abba Joseph of Panepho and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I observe my little fast, I pray and meditate and maintain stillness, and as far as I can I keep my thoughts pure. What more can I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched out his hands towards heaven, and his fingers became like ten burning lamps of fire. "If you wish," he said, "you can become all flame."³⁷

36. Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name* (see n. 32), p. 23.

37. *Apophthegmata Patrum*, alphabetical collection, Joseph of Panepho, 7 (PG 65:229 CD).

That is what this suffering and broken world needs most of all: not people who say prayers from time to time but people who are prayer all the time—a living flame of adoration.

This brings us to a final question that we cannot afford to neglect. Is it not selfish, it may be objected, to close the door of our room, to pray in solitude, to say repeatedly with our eyes closed “have mercy on me”, and so to seek a way of entry into the hidden sanctuary of our own heart? Is not such prayer anti-social and world-denying? Are we not turning our back upon the anguish of a despairing and tormented humanity? What relationship does inward-looking prayer of this kind have with, for instance, the aftermath of the tragedy on 11 September 2001 or the deadly crisis existing at present in the Holy Land?

By way of answer, I would like to recall two sayings. The first is from a Russian *starets* (“elder”) of the nineteenth century, St Seraphim of Sarov: “Acquire inner peace and thousands around you will find salvation.”³⁸ The second is from the one-time Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld (d. 1961): “Understand—through the stillness, act—out of the stillness, conquer—in the stillness.”³⁹ “Acquire inner peace”: the aim of the Jesus Prayer, and equally of all forms of contemplative prayer that seek the path of entry into the heart, is exactly to acquire inner peace. But this is in no way selfish or anti-social, for such prayer makes us, under the Divine mercy, into an instrument of peace for others. The impetus for social healing has always to be, in the direction of its movement, from within outwards. As Professor Nasr has reminded us, we cannot do good unless we are good. We cannot bring peace to the sorrowful world around us unless there is peace in our own hearts. Because we have prayed alone, with the door shut, “in secret” (Matthew 6:6)—perhaps for no more than fifteen or thirty minutes each day—then, throughout all the other minutes and hours of the day, we shall be available to others, open to their concerns, Christ-like, lovingly compassionate, in a way that would otherwise be impossible. True prayer of the heart turns each one of us into a man or woman for others, in a way that nothing else can.

38. See Archimandrite Lazarus (Moore), *St Seraphim of Sarov: A Spiritual Biography* (Blanco, Texas: New Sarov Press, 1994), p. 126.

39. *Markings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 127.

“Understand—through the stillness”: the aim of all forms of contemplative prayer is indeed to enable us to understand through the stillness, so that we can then act out of the stillness and conquer in the stillness. St Ignatios of Antioch (d. c. 107), in a pregnant phrase, describes Jesus Christ as “the Word that came forth from silence”.⁴⁰ Unless, by God’s grace, our words and acts in some measure come forth from *hesychia*, silence of the heart, then they will remain superficial and ineffective. But if they do indeed have their source in creative silence, then they will prove words of fire and light, acts of healing and transfiguration.

“Beauty will save the world”, said Dostoevsky. With equal and indeed greater truth it may be said: Prayer of the heart will save the world.

40. “To the Magnesians”, 8:2.