

Mysticism (Part III) (Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Eastern Orthodox mysticism

Two great artesian wells of mystical experience, upon which Orthodox Byzantine mysticism drew in its first phase, were Saint Gregory of Nyssa (335/340-394) and the monk Evagrius Pontikos (345-399). The former stressed that the soul can reach Him, Who is beyond any intellectual concept whatsoever, in the “bright darkness” and also defined the mystical experience as union with God in love. Evagrius placed the *nous*, the organ of direct understanding, at the centre of mysticism.



In the 5th century, works attributed to Makarios formed a new source of inspiration for Orthodox Christian mysticism, underlining the concept that the centre of the human person lies *in the heart*. Under the influence of Neo-Platonic philosophy, Evagrius saw the person as a *nous* imprisoned in matter and therefore held that the

body played no part in the spiritual life. The “Makarian” texts, imbued with Biblical thought, view the person as a single whole. The basis of the mysticism which they represent is the incarnation of the Word. So unceasing prayer does not lead to the liberation of the spirit from the bonds of the flesh, but brings people into the eschatological reality of the kingdom of God with the whole of their existence- spirit and body.

The texts that bear the name of Dionysios the Areopagite, with their heavy emphasis on the apophatic in theology, develop the theory of the “vision of God”, of union with God, and urge people to free themselves from emotions and intellectual functions in order to encounter God within the divine darkness and know the joy of seeing Him, even though this will still be vague. The “Areopagite” texts make mention of a ladder of ascent, of a system of “progresses” to which various degrees of illumination correspond. The aim is that a person should be raised up and reach the Unique. In the end, this ascent is a gift from God.

In the mysticism which evolved with the Monastery of Sinai as its centre, the “Jesus prayer” already had a central role by the 7th century, as a prayer of the mind and heart. In the final phase of the first period of Byzantine mysticism, the dominant personalities were Saint John the Sinaite (580-670, or more probably 525-600) and Saint Maximos the Confessor (580-662). The work of the former is directed towards a mysticism which develops according to the will of God. At the peak are placed the three virtues- faith, hope and love- and emphasis is assigned to the “Jesus prayer”, which is set at the heart of hesychast spirituality, in a coordination of the name of the incarnate Word and breathing.

Saint Maximos, who represents an important milestone in Byzantine mysticism, developed the subject of deification, applying Christological dogma to the course of the inner life. He noted the relationship of the individual stages of the mystical experience between themselves and made it clear that until its completion, the “vision” must be accompanied by morality as a whole, with love as the guide. Maximos’ mysticism extends to and embraces the whole, organically. Persons who have been made Christ ascend to God with their body, in combination with the visible world, and even elevate with them the whole of creation, because they are the central link uniting the differentiated parts of the cosmos.

Over the next centuries, the achievements of the mystical tradition of the East were reinforced. At the turn of the millennium, there arose one of the giants of Byzantine mysticism, Saint Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022 or, according to others 957-1035), among whose disciples Niketas Stithatos stands out. Symeon’s mystical experience is marked by intensity, warmth and an entirely personal tone.

He is original, particularly in his teaching on light, describing profound and continual personal experiences. On almost every page of his works, there is a reference to “light”, to “illumination” and other similar words. His mysticism, however, radiates intensely an atmosphere of Christology, the resurrection, the Holy Spirit and eschatology.

A new flowering of Byzantine mysticism occurred from the middle of the 13th until the end of the 14th centuries, with the hesychast movement. In this period, the centre was no longer Sinai and the circles of Constantinople, but Athos and neighbouring Thessaloniki. A characteristic of hesychasm is the attempt to acquire a state of absolute calm and peacefulness, which sets aside hymn-singing, study and any purely intellectual occupation. In this effort, which has the human heart as its centre, contributions are made by the repetition of the Jesus prayer and other practical actions which assist the concentration of the *nous*.

The contribution of Saint Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) was decisive to the theological grounding of hesychasm. He began as a monk on the Holy Mountain and went on to become Archbishop of Thessaloniki. Palamas placed Christian mysticism within a more general divine plan of salvation. The basic distinction is between created and uncreated: the created universe and the uncreated energies of God. “Supra-essential” God cannot be identified with any created concept or idea whatsoever, much less with the philosophical notion of essence. During illumination, people take part in the uncreated energies of God. “Divine and deifying illumination and grace are not the essence but the energies of God” Palamite thought, elevating the authenticity of the Scriptures, restores the value of material, which Greek idealism had tended to deny. The human spirit is really radically different from God, as is the body. And God, by granting His grace, saves the whole person, body and spirit.

In the same geographical area, and at about the same time as Palamas, Nikoloas Kavalas (1322-1391), in developing his teaching on the sacraments, referred to the themes of salvation and union with God. Neither churches nor any other sacred locus is as holy as people, who, with their nature, commune with Christ Himself. Kavalas’ mysticism is characterized by a profound Christological sense and adherence to the ontological reality of the Body of Christ, “which is the Church”.

The Byzantine tradition continued to influence Orthodox countries even when they were under the Turkish yoke. From the end of the 18th century, the *Filokalia* of Saint Nikodimos the Athonite (pub. 1782), has been the manual of Orthodox mysticism, enriching the modern Orthodox ethos*.

Basic themes of Byzantine mysticism

The key terms around which Byzantine mystical texts revolve are: “knowledge”, “quietude”, “vigilance”, “prayer”, “freedom from passion”, “purification of the *nous*”, “asceticism”, “practice”, “contemplation”, “ecstasy”, “illumination”, “remembrance of God”, “seeing God”, “divine light”, “intermingling”, “divine eros” and “deification”. The uniqueness of the mystical experience is also expressed by the oxymora which embrace the Christian experience dialectically: “bright darkness”, “joyful mourning”, “sober inebriation” and so on. Although the attention of many scholars is attracted by the uniqueness of some of the above terms of Orthodox mystical theology, it should not be overlooked that the concepts most often repeated in the Orthodox mystics are the terms: “God”, “Jesus”, “Christ”, “Spirit”, “Holy Trinity”, “grace”, “commandments”, “Cross”, “Resurrection” and “love”.

The most typical elements of Byzantine mysticism are:

- a) Peaceful ecstasy, to which unceasing prayer and the *nous* contribute, with the participation of the virtues. Byzantine mysticism does not recognize those types of ecstasy we encounter in other religions (Shamanism, African spiritualism, Dionysic ecstasy, dervishes and so on), which are identified with artificial psychosomatic stimulation, dancing, drugs etc. Nor is it to be identified with the ecstasy of the mystery religions or the so-called philosophical ecstasy of the Platonists and Neo-Platonists, that is, the exodus of the *nous* from the body, from time, in order to function, supposedly, purely.
- b) Knowledge-ignorance. The better that people come to know God, the more they realize that His essence is inconceivable. Most common are the apophatic formulations, such as “supra-essential indistinctness” (Dionysios the Areiopagite), “beyond ineffable” and “beyond unknown” (Maximos).
- c) Illumination and warmth. The multi-dimensional experience of light has direct Christological, Pneumatological and eschatological functions. Mystical contemplation extends to an eschatological vision, an exodus from history towards the eternal light of the Second Coming. Despite the frequency and importance of the light, however, weight was never given to external phenomena. These were held to be merely one side of the vision of God. The essential aim remained an encounter with the person of Christ.
- d) Divine eros. Although the word “eros” recurs in the texts of Byzantine mystics, the erotic descriptions are spare and clearly different from corresponding pages in

Muslim or Hindu mysticism. Even in relation to Western mystics, who often use romantic and realistic descriptions, the Byzantines differ when they talk about the love of God- much as the de-spiritualized Byzantine icons differ from the statues of Western Christianity. "Divine eros", or "blessed eros" is not to be understood as an emotional stimulation. It is directly linked to love in its universal form, to which precedence is always given.

e) Byzantine mysticism is dominated by a dialectical tendency between "to have" and "not to have", between immobility and continuous movement, continuous fresh experiences, "from glory to glory". This advancement is combined with profound humility, grateful dependence on divine grace and an open awareness to the historical and eschatological perspective.

f) "Deification". Byzantine theologians, grounded experientially in the theology of the incarnation, were brought steadily towards a theology of deification. Saint Maximos, who particularly insists on this teaching, stresses that the vision of God in the darkness is already participation in God. Participation and mingling in the energies of God ultimately lead to deification. We become "gods by grace"; gods, but "without identity in essence". This is a bold vision, full of confidence in the power of divine grace, faithful to the ontological alteration which was achieved in the world by the incarnation of Christ and the continuous action of the Holy Spirit, imbued with inexpressible optimism concerning the final goal of humankind.

In general, Orthodox mysticism presents a calm sobriety and elevation, in stark contrast to mysticising theosophical or apocryphal theories and psychosomatic techniques. Everything is a gift of the grace of God. People contribute by being well disposed, which is essentially all they can do. Special external signs, such as the stigmata which are so common among mystics in the West, are not mentioned among those of the East. Many of the latter warn against the dangers of bodily visions and imaginings, because both destroy the unity of the person, which Christ came to rebuild.

The mystical experience in the Eastern Church shapes its ethos, its spirituality in general and its liturgical life. The influence of the mystical experience is so widespread that one might justly talk about the mystical theology and spirituality of the Orthodox Church more generally.

In closing, we must underline that each type of mysticism is in organic relationship with the broader context, the beliefs and fundamental principles of the religion in which it has evolved. It is influenced by its initial religious concepts and general orientation, and redefines and shapes them correspondingly.

Select bibliography

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* Russian mysticism. Two currents of mysticism evolved in Orthodox Russia. One was a direct continuation of the Byzantine tradition and that of Orthodoxy in general. It was fed steadily by the liturgical life and by translations of Byzantine mystics, such as those in the *Filokalia*, which circulated at first in Slavonic and later (1894) in Russian. Ascetic figures such as Païsy Velichkovsky (1722-1794), Serafim of Sarov (1754-1833) and many others had vivid mystical experiences in their lives.

The other came from translations of various known and unknown mystical writers of Western Christendom, usually with pietistic tendencies, and occurred in dangerous outbreaks with heretical aberrations. Typical figures of this second current were G. S. Skovoroda (1722-1794), N. I. Novikov, and A. F. Lapshin. Various mystico-ecstatic groups appeared in the 19th century in Russia, led by such figures as Tatarinova, A. P. Dubovisky and Kotelnikov (whose adherents were known as “vehicles of the Spirit”- духоносци) and these provoked a reaction on the part of the Church.

The most important representative of Russian mysticism was Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900). Solovyov himself had intense mystical experiences and was influenced by Neo-Platonism and mystics of the West, such as Eriugena, Böhme and others. He developed views concerning a mystical faith, *sobornost'*, the integration of God with the cosmic and historical universe, and so on. Initially a Slavophile, he became a Roman Catholic four years before his death. Somewhat closer to the Orthodox tradition, the theologian and philosopher, A. S. Khomiakov (1804-1860) enriched Russian mystical thinking. Starting with the mystical experience of the Church and centred around it, he developed a mysticism of

completion and brotherhood, focused on the Spirit of Christ. His work had a great influence on later Russian theological thought.

Source. Archbishop Anastasios (Yannopoulos) of Albania, *Ίχνη από την αναζήτηση του υπερβατικού*, Akritas publications, pp. 319-355.