

THE LIFE OF ORDINARY LIFE: HESYCHASM AND IMMANENCE

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Following upon the effects of modernity, the regulation of ordinary life relative to the practicalities of human existence became a sphere of its own with no need of ontological justification. Charles Taylor's monumental works on modern identity and secularisation represent a valuable resource in appreciating a situation that may be Western in inspiration but is, in fact, ultimately global and, thereby, affects the potential of Orthodox thought, and, more particularly that of Saint Gregory Palamas, to make a difference. However, the apparent inability for Western thought to provide an ontology for ordinary life offers an opening for reactivating the potential of Hesychast spirituality to speak of ordinary life in ontological terms. After considering Taylor's contributions, we turn to Saint Gregory's critique of 'Hellenic error' in order to suggest an ontological revalidation of ordinary life through the enhancement of immanence and to point to its permanence in the Orthodox Church.

In the epilogue to his *The Deification of Man: St Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, George Mantzarides briefly raises the issue of the Orthodox Church's effective reception of Palamite teaching on ordinary pastoral life. It seems to him to have been, for all practical purposes, forgotten. In this notable introductory work, he provides a concise presentation of Palamas' doctrine of *theosis*, having gathered into itself the dominantly Christocentric perspective of the Greek Fathers with the mystical, Spirit-centred practices of the Hesychasts. However, in evaluating its posterior fate in the concrete realities of church life, he observes that, 'The vision of uncreated light, which for the Hesychasts and Palamas was the most exalted and mystical form of man's divinising communion with God, soon became neglected to the point of virtual disappearance'.¹ He is aware of the distance between the cultural ambience of the early centuries of Christendom, as well as the hesychastic experiences, and that of secularised contemporary society. Yet, Mantzarides believes that the ideal of deification ought to be more than a 'pious hope'. By this, I take him to mean something more than religious sentiment. What matters truly is its ontological content (i.e., actual participation in a transformative reality), the kind that reflects Christian revelation in its fullest sense as the experience of *theosis*. Just how this is

¹ George Mantzarides, *The Deification of Man: St Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 129.

to be envisaged pastorally is ultimately dependent on practical decisions and on the degree of personal commitment. However, Mantzarides's remarks *en passant* about what should be a concern for Orthodox people strike at an underlying difficulty. Stated simply, following upon the effects of modernity, the regulation of ordinary life relative to the practicalities of human existence became a sphere of its own with no need of ontological justification.

In the last lines of his work, Mantzarides offers a suggestion of how Palamite teaching might become more relevant to contemporary concerns by appealing to the man-as-priest-of-creation tradition that occupies an important place in Orthodox spirituality. For him, the Church could strategically engage contemporary humanity's sovereign authority over the world. In this case, the Church must seek to baptise this aspiration in the spirit of Palamas and the Fathers, and direct attention to the reality of the divine image that they bear and their likeness to the Prototype of humanity 'in order to attain their sovereignty over creation in *theosis*'.² Our approach in this article concerns less the relevance of contemporary issues but rather utilises a corrective critique by Saint Gregory of a philosophical syntax supportive of a problematic tension between ordinary practical life and the kind of sanctified life proposed in ecclesial discourse. We hold that neither Orthodoxy in general nor Hesychasm in particular can be substantially assimilated by the same cultural process that has separated ordinary life from its ontological roots. Moreover, in the midst of his rigorous defence of Hesychasm, Saint Gregory advances a revitalising critical turn to the notion of immanence, giving it a richer ontological sense than the utilitarian and naturalist forms it has taken in modern and contemporary thinking.

In relation to the regulation of ordinary life, Charles Taylor's work on modern identity and Western secularism is especially valuable, particularly for the complicity that he sees between this and the rejection of theistic metaphysics.³ Along with the quality of his genealogical hermeneutics of the Western mind, Taylor's discreet acknowledgement of Eastern Christianity and its difference, most notably in *A Secular Age*, provides a point of reference for what we shall say later about Palamas.⁴ However, it is also the clarity with which he, a Christian philosopher,

² *Ibid.*

³ *Qua* theme, that of ordinary life represents the central section of Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Of five parts that comprise the book, 'The Affirmation of Ordinary Life' constitutes its third and middle. But, more relevantly, it represents a transitional concept that, within the process of modern identity, finds its particular valorisation, 'in some ways too pervasive to be noticed', in conjunction with the moral notions of freedom and benevolence (*Ibid.*, 498).

⁴ Taylor demonstrates an awareness of *theosis* but his view implicitly suggests that its acceptance is practically impossible with the rise of Providential Deism in the West. In the ancient faith, he states in *A Secular Age*, 'God's intervention in history and in particular the Incarnation, was intended to transform us, through making us partakers of the communion which God already is and lives. It was meant to effect our deification (*theosis*).' (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007], 278). In the same context, he contrasts the loss of theological perspective with dominance of Deism with contributions of Saint Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers in regard to the meaning they gave to the concept of

states the ‘maximal demand’ that motivates and guides his research that is helpful in revealing to us: ‘how to define our highest spiritual or moral expectations for human beings, while showing the path to the transformation involved which does not crush, mutilate, or deny what is essential to our humanity’.⁵ Besides the spirit of compromise that Taylor’s maximal demand expresses, which we shall question below, the larger issue is just why it is that it takes the form that it does. ‘Essential to our humanity’ is, seemingly, taken by Taylor to mean generically ordinary, bodily life and all that which is necessary for its physical and social sustenance. How have we come to the point of conceiving ‘our highest spiritual or moral expectations’ as potentially crushing and mutilating in regard to ordinary life? Would this apply as well to Hesychasm?

The Question about the Place of Ordinary Life, Ontologically Speaking

Nicholas Loudovikos offers an illuminating assessment concerning the state of Western thought in relation to human society: ‘...it never became possible in the West for a social reality to acquire an ontology’.⁶ In the context of this commentary, he is specifically taking aim at Roman Catholic theology and ecclesiology: ‘Communion here is just a sort of historical necessity, it does not refer to any primordial and absolute change of mode of Being of beings, that is to say, it does not refer to their first ontology’.⁷ Such a positioning encourages the setting of the ontological above the ontic (i.e., above the doings of ordinary life in its materiality), and creates a space for will to exercise its power of influence. In other words, it enables the ideologisation of the ecclesial discourse that subordinates human sociality and ordinary life, to transcendent goals, precisely the situation that led to the modern dialectical reversal of the problematic: the absorption of the ontological into the ontic and the endeavour to discover there the proper place for humanity and its aspirations. In other words, it ultimately lays the ground for modern nihilism, the making of nothing (i.e., the idolatrous production of the [self-] will, into something ‘real’), reinforced by a collective agreement about its status as reality.

hypostasis: no longer substance as defined by pagan philosophy, but person. Moreover, at least to Orthodox ears, Taylor appears to be aware of Orthodox language of worship: besides the ‘*hoi aiōnes tōn aiōnōn*’ (*Ibid.*, 195), the propensity to use ‘again and again’ (fifteen times) in the book is also a curious *fait divers*.

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 639.

⁶ Nicholas Loudovikos, *Church in the Making: An Apophatic Ecclesiology of Consubstantiality*, trans. Norman Russell (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016), 161.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 162. Loudovikos has Rahner in mind, whom he considers the greatest of the Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century. Although Loudovikos’s point is generally well taken, many would see Henri de Lubac, for whom Loudovikos expresses some admiration, in that category. In view of his thesis, this is worth mentioning because de Lubac, along with other Jesuits of his generation, were significantly influenced by the Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel, whose ‘method of immanence’, applied to the explication of human action, does appear to ‘ontologise’ social reality. See my ‘Post-Secularity and the Theosis Factor: Blondel and St. Gregory Palamas’, *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 67, no. 1 (2011): 81–102.

Loudovikos deems this to be a ‘shocking fact’, presumably because it is hardly noticed. His observation is, in any event, noteworthy because significant contemporary Catholic-minded authors such as Alasdair MacIntyre, John Milbank, and Taylor himself have written influential works precisely on the damaging effects of the slide into secularism. The gradual transition from nominalism, to the Protestant Reformation, to secularism is, for them, parasitic in relation to its Catholic matrix, a significant part of which became, in varied ways, the object of protest and rejection. An insidious and heretical mode of thought insistent on subjective autonomy and primacy of will thus became normative. In view of this, an appeal by such authors is made on behalf of a half-turn toward pre-modernity in order to recuperate an ontology that still could offer substantive consistency to life as we now live it.

In MacIntyre and Milbank, the balanced and comprehensive synthesis achieved by Aquinas serves as point of reference for what has been lost, but still may hold promise of sanity and wisdom for the current times in the wake of the implosion of modernity’s project of emancipation. In regard to MacIntyre, this would be in the form of rationality, demonstrated in the process of reasoning adopted by Aquinas that, anchored in sacred doctrine, proceeds dialectically to absorb the best accounts from rival traditions into Catholic Truth. For Milbank, post-modernity permits a renewed metanarrative that incorporates the truth as conceived by Aquinas, overcomes the regnant ontological violence through an ontology of pardon, and foresees the Church as ‘Cosmopolis’, as an explicit manifestation of the effects of supernatural charity upon human lives, a trans-organism that brings into the *ordo amoris* humankind’s multifaceted *Lebensformen*.⁸ However, this still begs the question of whether the conceptualisation of a reconciling discourse is sufficient to realise the strong sense of ontological participation that brings people to ‘will communion’ and actually experience, in their lifetime, the consubstantial reality of the self-donating and ever-communicating God, as Loudovikos would expect from his Orthodox perspective. Moreover, there is much in Taylor’s study that confirms Loudovikos’s suspicions about Western Christendom.

To begin with, Taylor shows no particular sympathy for Aquinas. He does, however, write with admiration of the Platonic confidence in the Ideas, pre-eminently the Idea of the Good, as sustaining the cosmic order—the ‘ontic logos,’ as he expresses it in *Sources of the Self*. Yet, for the purposes of his genealogy of moral vision and the secularist mind, Augustine comes under special scrutiny. In a passage from *Sources of the Self*, Taylor notes,

⁸ In regard to MacIntyre, see especially his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1990); for Milbank, especially his already classic, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) and his most recent *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2013).

The Pauline opposition of spirit and flesh is repeatedly being pulled out of its hinges and aligned with the Platonic-derived opposition between the immaterial and the bodily. Augustine is one of the principal offenders in this respect, but lots of others have made similar elisions on their own, most notably Descartes and the whole band of rationalists and empiricists influenced by him.⁹

The older Catholic tradition, that to which Augustine belonged and influenced, maintained an ontology of the good, inherited from Plato onwards, and an eschatology that comprehended the cosmos in its scope. As Taylor puts it, ‘the first millennium Church did not forget that, while God indeed wills human flourishing, there is a difference between “thy will be done” and “let humans flourish”’.¹⁰ The newer tradition, gradually leaving behind the Platonic features that remained in Augustine’s thinking, affirmed more emphatically in its development the latter formulation. Serving God begins to entail the free reordering of public space for the sake of human flourishing. Worshiping God is expressed in daily cares and activities, none of which is relegated to the realm of the profane. The truly desired order is that of economic and familial harmony which is not the work of a spiritual effort toward self-transcendence, to quest after a reality beyond ordinary human flourishing.

With the Reformation, we find a modern, Christian-inspired sense that ordinary life was...the very centre of the good life...the life of the God-fearing was lived out in marriage and their calling. The previous ‘higher’ forms of life were dethroned, as it were.¹¹

...that this affirmation of ordinary life...has become one of the most powerful ideas of modern civilisation. It underlies our contemporary ‘bourgeois’ politics, so much concerned with issues of welfare, and at the same time powers the most revolutionary ideology of our century, Marxism, with its apotheosis of man the producer...Along with the central place given to autonomy, it defines a version of this demand which is peculiar to our civilisation, the modern West.¹²

A decisive aspect of his account of the modern self, Taylor thus sees the affirmation of ordinary life *qua* thesis as intending to accentuate the displacement of the vectors of a good life from higher and more contemplative activities to the pro-

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 220.

¹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 17.

¹¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 12.

¹² Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 13.

duction of goods and reproduction, associated with our lives as sexual beings. The resulting perspective would increasingly see the best form of ordinary life as binding individual freedom to a widened conception of rights and dignity, generally attached to the ideal of reducing, or avoiding, suffering as a finality extended universally to all of humanity. Persistently associated with the quest for freedom, individual rights, and dignity, the promotion of ordinary life signifies the erosion of hierarchy and the progressive annulling of racial, sexual, and social differentiation.

We find it hardly certain that what has come to be accepted as givens in democratic and liberal societies necessarily contradicts the 'beyond human flourishing' conviction by which many Christian believers still live. The difficulty lies in the content of the belief to which they hold and in the acceptance of self-renunciation as part of it. A Christian faith, accentuating the experience of the heavenly God 'beyond human flourishing', gave way to one that wished to hallow the practical and sensitive order of ordinary life. This naturally carries with it the implication that the visible Church had become entangled in a dilemma. In aiming so high, with an emphasis on the superiority of the ascetic life, it is purported to harm the dignity of ordinary life; in eventually aiming so 'low', belief in an actively intervening and supposedly philanthropic God became useless in the general endeavour to improve the human condition.

Our own proposal in dealing with Taylor's notion of maximal demand, and eventually the life of the Church, will call upon the perspectival shift provoked by a genuinely Orthodox acceptance of negative theology, assumed in hesychastic practices. These differ, I suggest, from the unorthodox kind, advanced by contemporary authors who exercise apophatic rigour without the cataphatic counterpart of effective ontological participation. Again, the latter will imply what is most contested in the West: the ontological (and not merely institutional) status of the Church as ecclesial and Eucharistic event.¹³ The crushing, mutilating, or denying of what is essential to our humanity, whether this be thought of in terms of disdain of the body and sexuality, or a 'hyper-Augustinian juridical moralism', are out of the question. Moreover, perhaps, at the end of the day, the difficulty does not confine

¹³ On both the kinds of apophaticism and the ontological character of the Church, Christos Yannaras's *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite* (London: T&T Clark, 1985/2005) is an important source for us. The subject of apophaticism is also taken up by him in *Postmodern Metaphysics*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1993). As a brief statement of what he means in his thesis, for Yannaras, Heidegger's version of apophaticism, and that of those who follow him, is an 'apophaticism of essence' limited to the conviction that we might assent to the essence of an entity about whose existence we might have a concept, but whose reality cannot be known and, thereby, cannot be participated in. On the other hand, an Orthodox apophaticism is not a method. It is rather a mental stance and discipline. Expressed philosophically, it refers generically to an 'epistemic gap' between experience and the attempt to know it (i.e., the inability to translate adequately into conceptual terms what one actually knows through participatory belonging to what is effectively experienced). As far as the Church is concerned, she is the objective possibility through which apophatic knowledge of God may be attained. The signifying potential of this knowledge of God resides in the experience of the Eucharistic body, realised by the life-giving Spirit of God and provider of salvation.

itself to Western Christendom and the civilisation it has inspired. Perhaps, it instead results from a prolonged, consequential, and dramatic expression of what afflicts, *tout court*, human nature, namely, the existential inarticulacy of human and divine desiring, namely, the generally suppressed yearning of the synergetic bond in human being, already and always in need of realisation. In any event, and for this reason, what seems to be at issue is the struggle for a conceptual understanding of the Incarnation capable of substantially shaping our understanding of immanence, and which underscores the potential for enhancing ordinary life.

The idea of the immanent frame appears in the later sections of Taylor's *A Secular Age*, coming at a time in the general argument where he most insistently underscores the narrowness and contingency of the secularist project. His treatment of the idea, conceived from his genealogical and descriptive approach to his theme, adopts the usual immanent/transcendent dichotomy. In so doing, the thinking of transcendence is conceived in terms of an ultimate exterior horizon, the world, and the 'ontic logos'. In other words, it will fatally lead him, as Loudovikos intuits, to stop short of ontologising social reality.

The Immanent Frame and Belief Dependence

Among his final considerations about the secularised state of contemporary Western humanity, Taylor concedes that contemporary people live prevalently with the conviction that whatever has import in our lives occurs within an immanent frame. Also, for the most part, they believe that the immanent frame presupposes not a second-tier transcendence like that predicated by the religion that had hitherto shaped the cosmic imagination of the populations, but a 'Closed World Structure'. Yet, this wide consensus that has become literally common sense for them does not, he argues, account by itself for a persistent desiring among human beings to live beyond this double enclosure. There is evidence that a wide range of artistic activity and spectacle, including—we might add—sports, in secularised societies has replaced for its populations institutional religion as the *locus* of 'epiphanic' experiences. In this, Taylor recognises the inner capacity in human beings to will and search for alternative outlets for their projects, to allow different languages and images to resonate and develop in their psyche.¹⁴ The immanent frame, and thereby the secularist narrative, is not immune to challenge by an alternative sense of selfhood that may not ultimately conceive of the frame as closed. It can potentially be open to the experience of more, of overcoming, worked, 'spun' by symbols and narratives that

¹⁴ Taylor's general approach has a family resemblance to the understanding/explanation distinction that Paul Ricoeur identified as the 'hermeneutical problem', derived from Wilhelm Dilthey's situating human-lived experience as different quantifiable natural sciences. Taylor's own *Explanation and Behaviour* also insists on the purposiveness of human agency as opposed to explanatory theory. For his sympathy with the 'retrieval of the lived experience' and phenomenology see, *Sources of the Self*, 470–71.

resist enclosure. Taylor qualifies this as the 'Jamesian open space' (i.e., the recognition that any construal of reality may be open to contestation and is largely determined by a mode of belief). The picture of the world that seems to hold us captive may be seen as such (i.e., as one potentially among many, some more meaningful than others). At the end of the day, a decision lies therein and it effectively touches on the direction of belief and personal context.

What pushes us one way or the other is what we might describe as our over-all take on human life, and its cosmic and (if any) spiritual surroundings. People's stance on the issue of belief in God, or an open versus closed understanding of the immanent frame, usually emerge out of our general sense of things.¹⁵

Surely reasons will be sought to sustain one version or the other. They have, however, an affective context-contingent beginning from which the rational process moves on; rationality does not operate without a cultural matrix that does indeed provide 'our general sense of things'. The immanent frame, then, is hardly neutral when seen thus from the perspective of human action; it is the result of persistent practices and speculative insights that precede theoretical constructs. So, it is that the 'closed world structure' that has undergirded secularism and has justified laicism in governance does so 'not primarily...[as] a conscious theoretical move, but rather [conceived] through certain deep pictures, which give further specificity to the pictures which underline the frame itself'.¹⁶ This, however, begs the question that will need some response about those 'certain deep pictures' which eventually feed into frames that articulate specific kinds of goods. However, for now, let us allow for its contingency and potential reworking of the ingredients that ultimately configure the 'picture', or discourse, and how they are punctuated.

Taylor himself raises this kind of interrogation in the context of the dilemmas that haunt contemporary life, namely, violence and death, advancing the notion that the secular mind ought not close itself off from the transformative potential the Christian faith might provide in regard to both of these dilemmas. The immanent frame may be affected and broadened from within the lived experience of human subjects toward other possibilities.

In societies where the general equilibrium point is firmly within immanence, where many people even have trouble understanding how a sane person could believe in God, the dominant secularisation narrative, which tends to blame our religious past for many of the woes of our world, will become less plausible over time...At the same time, this heavy concentration will

¹⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 550.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 557.

intensify a sense of living in a 'waste land' for subsequent generations, and many young people will begin to explore beyond boundaries.¹⁷

Taylor's prognostics in this passage for the world under the spell of secularism is telling for the sequence that it expresses and how it may apply to ordinary life. Facets of our current social reality seem to be simultaneously turning upon themselves and projecting themselves in different directions. In paraphrase, the sense of simultaneity and open-ended sequence may be formulated as follows:

- a) The time will come, or perhaps has already come, where theism turns out to be psychologically questionable option in the context where mental soundness is equated with acceptance of the secularist narrative; ordinary life is decidedly this-worldly, values efficiency, seeks productivity, and constitutes the ambit of reasonable and sharable values.
- b) The time will come, or perhaps has already come, when the secularist narrative, grounded in opposition to its own religious origins, is deemed noxious to human development; its turn toward a more utilitarian and naturalist project is no longer entirely convincing or satisfying (i.e., its own belief system and dogmas merit critical appraisal of its criteria for mental soundness). The instrumental stance taken as the measure of rationality is challenged by broader considerations of human subjectivity, encouraged by Romanticism and the increasing role of art in provoking epiphanic experiences; regulated ordinary life needs intensive moments of rupture, or rapture.
- c) The time will come, or perhaps has already come, when, for the most critical and dissatisfied, the kind of immanence postulated by secularism will appear to be empty of life and promise, will provoke a quest for something more; new languages, or revived older ones, will influence how people think, act, and conceive the worth and scope of ordinary life.

We seem to be at the point where the original goals of instrumental reason, namely, efficiency and controlled production, that created the space for ordinary life over against theistic metaphysics, have not exactly been lost but have been substantially altered, precisely under the pressure of subjective freedom and its 'feeling' of nature (i.e., its impulses) from within. Expressivity becomes an ingredient of ordinary life. In the place of disenchanted nature, a consequence of modernity's rejection of divine action in the physical cosmos, the poetics of subjective life engenders an enchantment of its own derived from its own inner depths. No longer the inwardness that Taylor noted as beginning with Augustine and culminating with Descartes's disengaged self, it now becomes the interiority of expressivity and its own epiphanic potential, closely identified with the nature and situation of the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 700.

self-creating artist *qua* artist. As a general definition, 'The epiphany is our achieving contact with something where this contact either fosters and/or itself constitutes a spiritually significant fulfilment of wholeness'.¹⁸ But, in the contemporary environment, it emerges exemplarily within the actual working of the artist who cannot be separate from it.

Impacted by Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's grounding of individual will within the impersonal Will and power inscribed in the cosmos, fuller affirmation of self translates into empowerment, resulting in the release of nature and desire from the constraints of religion and whatever metaphysics still remained residually in it. 'The source of unity and wholeness which Augustine found only in God is now to be found within the self'¹⁹—that is, what is good corresponds to the sentiments that appear to one as authentic; the source of moral vision is internalised. The occurrence of the epiphanic as part of the flow of the experience, though still conceived within the immanent frame as 'genuinely mysterious and possibly contains the key—or a key—to what is to be human', constitutes a moment of transcendence supported by the regularity that ordinary life, though affected by it, still represents its counterpoint.

In both of Taylor's works with which we have been dealing, we note concluding recommendations that suggest that we are, at the end of the day, left with the need to negotiate between the two ultimately disjointed dimensions of human being. In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor resigns himself to the situation in which, 'Human life is irreducibly multileveled. The epiphanic and the ordinary but indispensable real can never be fully aligned, and we are condemned to live on more than one level—or else suffer the impoverishment of repression'.²⁰ In sum, the maximal demand for morality remains unresolved. In *A Secular Age*, the onus of repression lies with the Church and its legacy, but his expression of what is hoped for accentuates still further the power of the immanent to dictate the terms of the negotiation: 'And one needs today to explore again the profound interpenetration of eros and the spiritual life. This terribly fraught area in Western Christendom, where the sexual meets the spiritual, urgently awaits the discovery of new paths to God'.²¹ Speaking then for himself, Taylor envisages a release of the Church from that 'hyper-Augustinian juridical-penal framework', to a fuller embracing of divine *agape*, a non-power of self-donation and source of those epiphanies that are salvific. The picture of the Gospel as counter-violence, as response of healing forgiveness, can be conceived within the immanence of Jamesian open-space. Citing conversions (principally Catholic examples) and the literature that they have produced, disruption of the

¹⁸ Taylor, *Sources of Self*, 425.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 362.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 480.

²¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 767.

immanent order is possible by a creative appropriation of the spirit of tradition, the still fertile forms from a deeper past.

However, the question of discovering ‘new paths to God’ that he associates with new and more subtle languages still involves the matter of the content of experience and a certain arbitrariness in how it is conceived. It is arguable that the aggravated dichotomisation, the inarticulacy, in Western-inspired secularism lies in its propensity to create the semantic frameworks that it finds most accommodating to its project of emancipation, lending to it a provisional content, and ultimately an expression of ‘will to power’. It is also an issue that Saint Gregory Palamas seems, *avant la lettre*, to have seen in his crucial commentary on the possibilities and limits of philosophy in the first part of the *Triads*.

The Hellenic Error and Beyond

In the midst of his defence of the Holy Hesychasts, Palamas defined what he called ‘the Hellenic error’ at the root of Barlaam’s apology for the usefulness of pagan philosophy in the formation of the Athonite monks:

...to make the mind ‘go out’ not only from fleshly thoughts, but out of the body itself, with the aim of contemplating intelligible visions—that is the greatest of the Hellenic errors, the root and source of all heresies, an invention of demons, a doctrine which engenders fully and is itself the product of madness. As for us, we recollect the mind not only within the body and heart, but also within itself.²²

For Palamas, it is one thing to see the use of thought for ascetic purposes—to control the passions and the effects they might have on our mind (i.e., ‘fleshly thoughts’)—for the acquisition of virtue requires rational examination. It is quite another for thinking to separate itself from the very organism from which it is derived to establish in the mind’s eye a realm of ideas that it takes for the reality that sustains the cosmos. To have fallen into this temptation is tantamount to an ancestral sin of sorts, affecting the practice of philosophy in general, namely, to overly accentuate knowing as seeing and creating concepts and placing them before us as if they were objects to be examined. The psychosomatic factor in the experiential knowledge of God and His uncreated energies brings with it a concomitant transformation of subjective life and divine illumination within bodily life that can be taken to be ordinary (i.e., ‘human, too human’) and, indeed, to be an index of what is most true about that life.

²² Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, trans. John Meyendorff (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1983), 44.

Palamas' accusation consists thus in the following: making the 'mind "go out" of the body', of 'contemplating intelligible visions' for their own sake is not only an error but the root cause of unsound thinking: 'doctrine and source of all heresies, an invention of demons, a doctrine which engenders fully and is itself the product of madness.' This position would strongly suggest that something unreal—namely and eventually, the secularist narrative inspired by the instrumental stance—was gradually asserted and vigorously promoted against a more grounded sense of a mind that searches for the source of illumination and of bodily transformation from within the body.

Part of the defence of the Holy Hesychasts deals with the recognition, generally accepted in Orthodox spirituality as understood by the Athonite monks in their prayer life, that the noetic process is bodily and anchored in the heart. It is an invisible and incorporeal activity that is conjoined to the incensive centre of human being that we call the heart (i.e., 'that "body" most interior to the body').²³ The upshot of this usage of the 'heart', especially as governing under grace through prayer both the thinking faculty and the affections, is to postulate a transcendental activity within immanence. The cosmos is surely lived and known, but it is a result of the exercise of the whole human organism, set within the dynamics of self-giving Life that transmits to it power, or the energy, to do so. The illuminating *Logos* is the measure of reality made intelligible in Christ, who is unceasingly communicable to living human beings who believe and, thereby, see. This would surely be the work of grace apt to be lived, and most fully so, in ecclesial terms as liturgical and sacramental participation in the Body of Christ. That is, it is apophatic knowledge beyond the exercise of human reason but effectively experienced and capable of assuming, without violence or distortion, the practical order of ordinary life. Rather, the ontological participation and the consequent praxis that it encourages thereby renders to it the consistence that it is meant to have.²⁴

Philosophically speaking, Saint Gregory's 'de-constructive' observation about pagan philosophy merits special attention. Besides the support that it lends to the legitimacy of Hesychast spirituality as lived in the Orthodox Church, it suggestively points towards a fuller sense of the ontological weight of immanence. In a curious way, and at least on this point, it engages modernity's rejection of metaphysical realism as conceived in the scholastic tradition. The shift in focus becomes fixed on the inner-workings of subject life as the transcendental source of the conditions for

²³ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁴ From within the polemics with Barlaam over the use of Greek philosophical culture to acquire 'the wisdom of God, or even human wisdom in general', Saint Gregory sees the whole enterprise as destined for failure. In the spirit of apophaticism, he recommends a radical reduction of any good that could come from philosophy by comparing it to what good might come from a snake: you must begin to cut off its head, or 'wrong opinions concerning things intelligible and divine and primordial', and then proceed to sever the tail, 'the fabulous stories concerning created things'. The body that is left may, at most, have some therapeutic value, 'a gift of nature, and not of grace' (*Ibid.*, 29).

right thinking and right practice. However, for modernity and its sense of self, this movement inward resulted in a notion of immanence that became naturalised and, indeed, a frame assumed by secularised humanity as universally normative. As Taylor recognises, subjective life, immanent by definition, rests uneasily in enclosure: the exterior world may be disenchanted, but even in the process of secularisation and the loss of an all-defining religious reference, the sources of the modern self gradually discovered motives of enchantment in the arts and disciplines, like psychoanalysis. The symbolising of reality stems from the structuring of inner-life and the power of will. The human subject becomes a vehicle of transformation through his inner-powers, the success of which depends on the stance taken in regard to self and the world. Impinging on ordinary life, challenges to the immanent frame takes the form of retrieval of lived experience as a sign of rejection of the disengaged reason and the instrumental stance that it encouraged. Or, still within the terms of Taylor's long reflection on the genesis and character of the modern secularised world, there is a significant portion of this world that seeks openings in the Jamesian-space. They do so in desiring to see their ordinary life inspired by some kind of epiphanic experience that speaks to and from their subjective adherence to Life in a grander ontological sense that is also ecclesial. This may imply the adoption of a liturgical manner of living impelled by Eucharistic yearning. It is precisely here that we might recognise the contemporary pertinence of Hesychasm as magnifying the dimensions of transcendental immanence: we are always already *within* the self-giving reality of triadic divine reality operative in creation; every aspect of our bodily and spiritual life is, or is called to be, consubstantial, envisioning while actualising communion beyond the dichotomies of the ages.

In Conclusion

Taking him at his word, St Gregory noted a fault line in pagan philosophy that would affect the intellectual history of the West long after his lifetime. Moreover, it is one that escaped Nietzsche and Heidegger, authors of highly influential readings of Western civilisation. Both also sought to read the destiny of the West as intimately related to mutations occurring within Greek philosophising, and as having lasting repercussions. But Palamas' remark about the Hellenic error ought to appear to contemporary eyes as even more radical, that is, more literally at the root of *a* mode of conceptualising the human quest for self-understanding. This Hellenic error would eventually affect both Nietzsche and Heidegger, along with their considerable post-modern and poststructuralist progeny. For the most part, these were convinced of the generalised malaise of European-inspired civilisation, and that this pathology somehow relates to the Christian religion. Most of these were also intent on a soteriological mission to reconceptualise the human condition and bring it to a modicum of health, and were locked into the conviction that the intelligibility of their concep-

tualisations and arguments in support thereof is at least necessary, if not sufficient, to improve things.

However, though largely unbelieving, the modernist celebrating of subjectivity and the desire to retrieve the immediacy of experience, with its possible epiphanic dimension against instrumental reason, does, after all, resist the pervasive levelling of differences through its appeal to interiority as an instance of solace in relation to a closed world system. Yet the view of this interiority is severely truncated, coming as it does from within the process of secularisation. Thus, self-limited, it remains uncomprehending of the true reach the noetic process at work in the embodied existence of human being. As signalled in the Incarnation, the human body is *capax Dei* and, as a consequence, the human mind is enabled to participate in divine reality. The attaining of mental soundness entails the full synergetic involvement of the bodily powers with the *nous*, rooted in the economy of self-giving Life that descends, as it were, transcendently into human praxis, into ordinary life. It is the Life of ordinary life.

If tenable (i.e., actually liveable), it gives Spinoza's radical question about what the body can do an entirely renovated sense, with respect to late modernity's fixation on liberating the body's potential from the restraints of religious morality and vitality for the sake of personal expressivity in the name of authenticity. And it is precisely in the name of authenticity that Saint Gregory, following the Apostle, asserts the fundamental principle of the body's flesh as good. What is 'evil' is the 'law' of sin that occupies and persistently accuses it. Guided by Pauline doctrine, Palamas declares, 'there is nothing evil in the fact that the mind indwells the body; what is evil is "the law which is in our members", which fights against the law of the mind'.²⁵ Complicit with the law of sin is the law imposed from without, as in Pharisaic law, that sets out to formulate a rational procedure, making the mind go out of the body, to dictate the contours of the acceptable. Put otherwise, truncated interiority goes together with a truncated conception of the mind—or the 'buffered self', as Taylor describes it in *A Secular Age*. The Palamite response is decidedly ontological in relation to the law of the mind, the power of the soul: crucially, 'we recollect the mind not only within the body and heart, but within itself',²⁶ as exemplified by the hesychast, who aims to conform 'to the inner movement he seeks for his mind; [recalling] into the interior of the heart a power which is ever flowing outwards through the faculty of sight'.²⁷ Passions purified, mind illumined, the world is seen aright.

Being in *theosis*, the intention of both mind and flesh are transformed from within, and immanence is enhanced by the divine energies. The ascetic practices and prayer that make spiritual progress possible cultivate sensations that result from the struggle to dominate the passions and engage with the permanent energy

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

of the grace rooted in the soul/self. These 'blessed' practices and the intensity of their spiritual attainment provide the concrete context for manifestations of divine action that are incomprehensible to onlookers. '...it is through the mediation of [the Hesychasts'] souls and bodies that God effects things supernatural, mysterious and incomprehensible to the wise of this world'.²⁸

What we should like to retain here from the circular and self-transcending noetic movement is its engagement with self-giving divine life; together they are ontologically constitutive of subjective life that is transcendental and unitive. The acquired power is always already a gift for greater life and the ground for goods and rights that are not conquered against but attained with and within the absolutely eternal, apophatic in essence but liveable as all-embracing immanence and Life itself for all things, unto social reality.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.