Gregory Palamas and Political Hesychasm in the Fourteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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The revival of the Neo-Orthodox movement in the twentieth century can be understood as a continuation of the hesychast movement and controversy started by Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century. The Neo-Orthodox movement, with its teaching about a 'return to the tradition', expresses in our time much more than a simple religious nationalism in Greece. It seeks 'to ignite a universal religious movement rooted in this particular understanding of the Greek identity, which actually transcends nationality' (Daniel P. Payne).This paper will first explore the social and political context of the Byzantine Empire in the fourteenth century, which provided the framework of the hesychast movement, and where hesychasm offered an alternative hope in the midst of political instability. The interaction between political power and hesychasm in Constantinople was a dynamic one, depending on the agendas of the patriarchs and emperors of that time. It is in such a context that we place Palamas' religious, social and political activities, and preaching. From a broader perspective, Palamas' homilies were aimed at a spiritual and religious renewal of the society of his time. While John Meyendorff argues that there is no anti-Western sentiment in Palamas' teaching, Christos Yannaras claims that the hesychast controversy in the fourteenth century presents much more than internal conflict between certain Byzantine humanists and monastics; it is basically a controversy between East and West. This controversy is resurging in our time as political theology, pointing us to the authenticity of human existence. As an alternative to western secularized society, Yannaras proposes a reintroduction of the structure of the Byzantine autonomous communities, centred around the life of the church or monastery. Such communities would continue the ancient patristic ethos of apophatic knowledge and affirm the identity of the *persona qua persona*—that is, not as an individual, but within the context of community. In this new context, the hesychast life provides a model for human society.

Introduction

In order to explain the rise of religiosity in the post-modern world in general, and in particular the Neo-Orthodox movement in Greece, Daniel P. Payne's book, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm in Contemporary Orthodox Thought,* offers a detailed interpretation of this phenomenon. The Neo-Orthodox movement, with its teaching about a 'return to the tradition', suggests much more than a simple religious nationalism in Greece. The Neo-Orthodox movement seeks 'to ignite a

universal religious movement rooted in this particular understanding of the Greek identity, which actually transcends nationality'.[1] The best way to understand this movement would be through 'the lens of social constructivism and globalization theory as a post-modern tribalism that is universal in orientation'.[2] In other words, the Neo-Orthodox movement represents a reaction against the hegemonic spread of western modernity with its theory of secularization and its removal of the influence of religion from society. Payne's claim is based on the theories of social constructivism presented by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Peter Berger states that a deductive response offers the most reasonable interpretation about the rise of religiosity in the post-modern world. This interpretation is based on the assumption that a return to tradition and religion, both in theory and in practice, will provide a new authoritative security and safety to the individual who makes a decision to belong anew to their tradition. Such a return to tradition and religion provides the individual with an original understanding and support against an outside world of globalization that they fail to understand. By returning to tradition and religion, the individual rediscovers a social order and communal society, and through their internalization, a deeper world of meaning. In this context, the Neo-Orthodox movement and its thought seeks to protect Orthodox identity against western globalization, and desires to arrive at a new understanding of one's identity in the globalizing world. Gregory Palamas and the hesychast movement with its spirituality and culture, as it developed in the fourteenth century, presents a platform for the Neo-Orthodox movement in the twentieth century.

What Does 'Political Hesychasm' Mean?

The term *hesychasm* can be traced through different historical contexts, revealing a variety of meanings.[3] From a very broad theological perspective, hesychasm represents a form of religious experience and of self-transcendence. What is then 'political hesychasm'? Apparently, this term was introduced in the 1960s by the

[1] P. Daniel Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm in Contemporary Orthodox Thought* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 1.

[2] Ibid.

[3] According to Kallistos Ware, 'hesychasm', which essentially means 'stillness' or 'quietness', has in the Orthodox tradition at least five meanings (*'Act out of Stillness', The Influence of Fourteenth-Century Hesychasm on Byzantine and Slav Civilization*, The 'Byzantine Heritage' Annual Lecture, ed. Daniel J. Sahas; [Toronto: The Hellenic Canadian Association of Constantinople and the Thessalonikean Society of Metro Toronto, 1995], 4–7). (1) It can refer to the 'solitary life', which certain hermits began living in the fourth century. (2) Hesychasm implies 'the practice of inner prayer, aiming at union with God on a level beyond images, concepts and language'. In this context, St John Climacus writes that the hesychast is the one who struggles to confine his incorporeal self within the house of his body, and who is continuously aware of God's presence, which brings him to a level free from mental images and discursive thinking. (3) Hesychasm refers to the quest for such union through the repetition of the Jesus Prayer that brings the hesychast to a transformation of his whole being, allowing for union with God to occur. (4) Hesychasm describes a particular psychosomatic technique in combination with the Jesus Prayer to attain union with God. (5) The fifth meaning is the 'theology of St Gregory Palamas'.

Russian medievalist Gelian Prokhorov. One of his students, Vladimir Petrunin, draws in his book, *Political Hesychasm and its Tradition in the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, published in 2009, a parallel between the late-Byzantine and the post-Soviet periods. Petrunin claims that the late-Byzantine period was characterized by the elaboration of the theology of hesychasm in response to the influence of western scholasticism and humanism. In the post-Soviet period, the Russian Orthodox Church formulated anew its Orthodox social teaching, as presented in *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*.[4] Petrunin states that this document—let us call it Social Doctrine—is a response to Western secularism, liberalism, and capitalism. With 'political hesychasm', Petrunin is describing both of these historical periods and their political situation.[5]

In the introduction to his book, Petrunin comments that the Patriarchate of Constantinople's definition of church independence from the state is based on a principle of non-subordination. This principle does not have a primarily theological background; it is based on custom. Toward the end of the Byzantine Empire, Petrunin argues, the Orthodox Church developed an autonomous political standpoint and strategy vis-à-vis the Byzantine rulers, whom it reproached for their collaboration with western powers and the Roman Catholic Church. Petrunin interprets the tension between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Emperor as a manifestation of the principle of non-subordination and political hesychasm in the fourteenth century, which becomes the paradigm for the further understanding of the church-state relationship. Petrunin sees the Russian Orthodox Church's renewal after the fall of communism in general, and in particular the aforementioned Social Doctrine, as a continuation of what started in the fourteenth century.

Petrunin, however, is not the first who uses the term political hesychasm. He takes it from his teacher Gelian Prokhorov, who distinguished three periods of hesychasm in Byzantine history: (1) a *private period*, during which hesychasm was practiced by monks and did not have a larger social impact; (2) a *monastic period* in the mid-fourteenth century, which saw the theological elaboration of hesychasm by Gregory Palamas; and (3) a third period of *political hesychasm* from the mid-fourteenth century until the fall of Constantinople in 1453, during which hesychasm became a social phenomenon.

Petrunin uses Prokhorov's terminology and historical research for his comments and arguments on social doctrine in the Russian Orthodox Church. This was generally perceived as an important step of renewal and self-positioning of the Church after the fall of communism. Petrunin summarizes the elements of political hesychasm

[4] Moscow Patriarchate, 'Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church', Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, accessed August 8, 2016, http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/3/14.aspx.

[5] Kristina Stökl, 'Political Hesychasm? Vladimir Petrunin's Neo-Byzantine Interpretation of the Social Doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church', *Studies in East European Thought* 62 (2010): 125–33; at 126.

from the fourteenth century in nine steps and finally comes to the conclusion that in the year 2000, six hundred years later, these ideas of political hesychasm had found a new embodiment in the *Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, especially in the church-state relationship.

Not all scholars agree with Petrunin's reflection about political hesychasm and his historical reconstruction of the struggles in the fourteenth century. Stökl argues that Petrunin's argumentation about political hesychasm is based on weak historical evidence; in addition, Petrunin's description of political hesychasm is merely a vehicle to build up his thesis that Russian Orthodoxy is once more facing the challenge of fighting off western influence, liberal values, liberal globalism, and that the only means to achieve these goals is again disobedience to the Russian state. The Orthodox Church in Russia is today—just like six hundred years ago in the Byzantine Empire—the only serious and organized opponent to the West. If the Russian government goes down the road of secularization and does not oppose the West and its secular values, then the Church can make use of its right to call the people to civil disobedience.[6]

It seems that there are two arguments present in Petrunin's writing. He starts his argument with the principle of non-subordination or church independence; this principle is not an end in itself, but a means to facilitate the church's opposition to liberal politics. There is no explicit remark in Petrunin's writing about hesychasm or theological literature concerning the renewed interest in hesychasm. Stökl argues, therefore, that Petrunin uses the church document on social doctrine to back up an ideological and domestic political agenda that states that the Orthodox Church is the only institution which represents the interest of the Russian people.

Stökl concludes that social doctrine does not compel us to such a reading; its tone is more moderate. The same doctrine might be read as an attempt to modernize the Russian Orthodox Church in its relationship to a modern secular political order, and not as an opposition to the liberalization, democratization and secularization of the Russian Orthodox Church. Petrunin's interpretation of social doctrine, however, marks a shift in his interpretation of hesychasm: a shift from theological discussion and ascetic practices, distant from political involvement, to hesychasm as an institutionalized ideology. From his perspective, the Moscow Patriarchate with its social doctrine becomes the beacon of modern political hesychasm. The church becomes not a player in the public sphere, but the public sphere itself.

Following Stökl's interpretation, Petrunin's writing can be read as an example of neo-Byzantine ideology, an anti-Western and anti-liberal position of some contemporary conservative Orthodox theologians around the journal *Severnij Katekhon*, supporting the idea that the fall of Byzantine empire was due to its inner weakness and harmful western influences. This should be a lesson for contemporary Russia. In

[6] Ibid., 129–30.

other words, Petrunin's writing cannot be read as a study of hesychasm as presented by its main theological interpreters (i.e., as an ascetic and mystical way of life distant from political involvement).[7]

Stökl's presentation and critique of Petrunin's writing on political hesychasm will help us comprehend the so-called political hesychasm of the fourteenth century and Yannaras' interpretation of it in the twentieth century.

'Political Hesychasm' in the Fourteenth Century

The revival of the Neo-Orthodox movement in the twentieth century and its search for Orthodox identity is not something completely new and limited to the Russian Orthodox Church. It is a search for an identity that is universal or transnational, that came from the Enlightenment, and attaining to an identity that is beyond the nation-state, returning to the older hesychast, universal identity of the Byzantine Empire in the fourteenth century.[8] This century is one of the most important periods in the development of hesychasm because it saw the spread of the Jesus Prayer, on the one hand, while, on the other, Palamas formulated a theological *apologia* of hesychasm against false accusations. He thus integrated hesychasm into Orthodox theology as a whole.

What interests us in this section is the question of how to understand Palamas' theological reflections in general, and in particular his reaction against Greek philosophy re-emerging as a new humanism. Why did Palamas, in his efforts for spiritual and cultural revival, go beyond the solutions proposed by the humanists of his time, and immerse himself in hesychasm?

By 'hesychasm' at this point, we refer to Gregory Palamas' theological defence of the spiritual experience of his fellow hesychasts, which is based on the distinction between the transcendent 'essence' of God and the uncreated 'energies' through which God becomes knowable to man in Christ. Palamas' theological reflection was conditioned by a general religious and cultural revival in the Byzantine Empire, a revival that went beyond spiritual renewal, and which also encompassed culture, politics, literature, and the arts. In his historical investigation of the influence of hesychasm on cultural development in the second part of the fourteenth century, Gelian Prokhorov—as mentioned earlier—uses the term 'political hesychasm', claiming that the religious and theological debates in Byzantium had much more than a purely theological significance.[9] 'Political hesychasm' at this point designates a social, cultural, and political ideology, which originated in Byzantium and had a

[7] Ibid., 132.

[8] P. Daniel Payne, 'Orthodoxy, Islam, and the "Problem" of the West: A Comparison of the Liberation Theologies of Christos Yannaras and Sayyid Qutb', *Religion, State, and Society* 36, no. 4 (2008): 435–50.

[9] John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 148–49.

decisive impact on cultural and artistic development among the Southern Slavs and Russians.[10]

In the fourteenth century, the Byzantines—the librarians of the Middle Ages[11]—were increasingly aware of their Hellenic cultural background, which also represented a way of opposing the threat they experienced from the West. One group of intellectuals—let us call them humanists—were more and more inclined to Greek philosophy and humanism in general, which represented for them a way to a new cultural, intellectual, and spiritual rebirth, as well as a new identity: Hellenic identity. They believed in the autonomy of human reason and its independence in relation to God. God for them was an impenetrable and inaccessible essence. The union of God and man, realized in the person of Christ, played no decisive part in their thought. If it had been free to develop—Meyendorff believes—this humanism would probably have carried Byzantine culture in the same direction as that followed by Italian and Western European culture.[12]

The position of these humanists was strong enough to challenge the monastic and ecclesial teaching of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, represented by the hesychast movement. Nonetheless, the demarcation line between these two groups was not so clear; many of the hesychasts were also humanists, including Gregory Palamas, who had a positive understanding of secular writing.[13] Even though hesychasm was victorious over humanism as the guiding philosophy, it was not completely opposed to secular humanism. Secular humanism and philosophy as a human form of knowledge are very useful, but they should be kept within their proper boundaries, especially regarding theological matters. Philosophy can prepare or introduce us to the truth, and, as such, it has a propaedeutic function; nonetheless, because of its inadequacy, it cannot open the final doors to the inner wisdom and knowledge of God.[14] As the flesh of serpents can become a useful medicine, if properly separated from the serpent's poison, so profane philosophy can prepare us for our final goal, as Palamas claims in his *Triads*.[15]

Following Payne's interpretation, Palamas seems to be deeply rooted in the traditional understanding of Orthodox monasticism which recognizes two kinds of knowledge: philosophical and theological (i.e., true knowledge). Philosophical knowledge prepares the person for the reception of the Gospel, but cannot, in itself, lead one to the Gospel. Since God is transcendent, and the human mind is limited by its createdness, philosophical knowledge cannot grasp God's essence. Only when

[10] Id., *Byzantine Hesychasm: Historical, Theological and Social Problems* (London: Variorum, 1974), iii-iv.

[11] Donald M. Nicol, *Church and Society in the Last Centuries of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 34.

[12] John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, trans. George Lawrence (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 27.

[13] Id., *Byzantine Legacy*, 133–39.

[14] Nicol, *Church and Society*, 35–36.

[15] *The Triads* I.28, ed. John Meyendorff and trans. Nicholas Gendle (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 28.

the human mind is transformed, can it contemplate the beauty of God and comprehend God's primordial beauty, which goes beyond sense perception or an intellectual understanding of the Scriptures. Such transformation of the mind occurs through mystical union with God, 'After the stripping away of everything from here below which imprints itself on the mind, or after the cessation of all intellectual activity'.[16] At this point, Meyendorff concludes that Palamas transcends any conceptualization of God, both apophatic and cataphatic, and liberates theological methodology from its philosophical mooring. Palamas frees the notion of God from philosophical conceptions; God transcends them all.[17] This opens the door to one real experience: 'the complete and unadulterated existence in us of Jesus'.[18] In this way, Palamas creates a theology based on personal experience, which excludes all definition of divine Being, and at the same time includes the goodness of the human body or the creation in general.

Such a connection of philosophy with theology was unacceptable for Barlaam, who argued that natural knowledge is equal to theological knowledge; both are confined to the human intellect, and thus, unable to ascend to knowledge of God, which can be experienced only by revelation through the human senses.[19]

The theological reflections of Palamas and his defence of the hesychast monks involve a broad discussion on the very nature of the Christian faith, by affirming the possibility of direct knowledge of God and the primacy of incarnational, eschatological, and sacramental values over secular concerns. This is much more than the 'humanist' concern of how to promote the study of Greek antiquity.[20] There are at least two differing conclusions about Palamas' reaction to the humanists of his time and about the place of philosophy in his reflection.

Meyendorff states that Palamas' intention was not to revive the teaching of the ancient authorities, but to 'turn his contemporaries away from them. His thought, taken as a whole, certainly marked a step forward in the progressive liberation of Eastern Christian theology from Platonic Hellenism…to a refusal of the new humanist civilization which the West was in process of adopting'.[21] This opposition to profane philosophy, supported by the advocates of humanism in his time, led Palamas to theological reflection within the hesychast movement aimed at a

[16] Ibid., 34–35.

[17] 'The human mind also, and not only the angelic, transcends itself, and by victory over the passions acquires an angelic form. It, too, will attain to that light and will become worthy of a supernatural vision of God, not seeing the divine essence, but seeing God by a revelation appropriate and analogous to Him. One sees, not in a negative way—for one does see something—but in a manner superior to negation. For God is not only beyond knowledge, but also beyond unknowing; His revelation itself is also truly a mystery of a most divine and extraordinary kind, since the divine manifestations, even if symbolic, remain unknowable by reason of their transcendence', Ibid., 32.

[18] Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 210.

[19] Payne, 'Orthodoxy, Islam, and the 'Problem' of the West', 93.

[20] John Meyendorff, *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 97.

[21] Id., *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 133.

spiritual and religious renewal. For Meyendorff, there is no anti-western sentiment in Palamas' reflection, since the debate was an internal Byzantine philosophical argument and not a larger debate between the eastern and western understanding of metaphysics.

This is not, however, the position of John Romanides, who claims that the hesychast controversy is much more than an internal conflict between certain Byzantine humanists and Byzantine monastics; it is basically a controversy between East and West. Romanides argues that Barlaam was influenced by the thought of Augustine and, as such, he introduced into Byzantine thought Augustinian Neo-Platonism. Consequently, the hesychast controversy is a controversy between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Augustinianism.

In agreement with Kallistos Ware, hesychasm and the hesychast movement in the fourteenth century was much more than a monastic discipline reserved only for some specific groups; it was a universal vocation for all people regardless of ecclesiastical position.[22] Obolensky states that Greek and Slavic monks, as well as highly educated men, came to learn from the master of hesychasm: Gregory of Sinai. His teaching radiated from his monastery in Paroria to the entire Byzantine Commonwealth. Thanks to a network of prominent hesychast intellectuals, different parts of the Byzantine Commonwealth in the last hundred years of its existence were perhaps more connected to each other and to its centre than ever before.[23] In the fourteenth century, hesychasm spread throughout Bulgaria, the Kingdom of Serbia, Romania, and Russia on one side, and to the region of Thebaid in Egypt on the other. As Meyendorff states: 'Their essential motivation went certainly beyond "Hesychasm" as a technique of spirituality, and was rather aiming at maintaining the values and structures of the Orthodox faith in the Middle East and Eastern Europe'.[24] The theology behind hesychasm enabled Oriental Christianity to survive under the Turkish yoke, and it remains a stranger to the great crisis of secularism brought on by the Renaissance in the West.[25]

Hesychasm represented a spiritual movement and a reform in literature, art, architecture, and also language. This was particularly important for the Slavic churches because they were united by a common ecclesiastical language and liturgy. In other words, the hesychast movement, and Palamas' role within it, is much more than an opposition to the humanist effort to revive Greek antiquity in Palamas' time. The growing interest in the study of Greek antiquity was not something new in Palamas' time, but had been a permanent element in the intellectual life of Byzantium since the ninth century. The conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204 pushed

[22] Ware, *Act out of Stillness*, 9–11.

[23] Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe 500–1453* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1971), 389–90.

[24] Meyendorff, *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia*, 97.

[25] Id., *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 25.

the Byzantine intellectuals—humanists—to a new search for their cultural identity, which found a way out in 'Hellenism' as the ultimate value to be maintained at all costs. As a result of their set of priorities and their concept of the very nature of Byzantine civilization, humanists saw the growing influence of monasticism as a national disaster.

Meyendorff states that the Byzantine humanism of the fourteenth century was primarily limited to Constantinople, Thessalonica, and Mistra, appealing only to a group among the educated elite, while the hesychast movement had a much broader appeal among believers inside and outside the Byzantine Empire. At a time of political instability and weakness within the Byzantine Empire, hesychasm was offering an alternative sense of new hope. When the Empire finally collapsed in 1453, in part due to hesychasm, the church was able to survive by its international and universal character, which went beyond the political structures of Byzantium. It does not follow, however, that the Byzantine Church was completely separated and independent from political power; it continued to promote the ideal of a Christian *oikouménē*, centred in Constantinople and controlled by the emperor. This was not the case with the humanists, whose primary concern was the preservation of Greek civilization.

The interaction between the political power and hesychasm in Constantinople was a dynamic one, depending on the agendas of the patriarchs and the emperors of the time. Patriarch Athanasius I (1289–93, 1303–09) tried to reinvigorate the Church with different reforms: defending the poor, reorganizing the Church by endorsing monastic ideals of spirituality, and strengthening moral principles in social behaviour. While he accepted the Byzantine political ideology of Emperor Andronicus II, he also demanded from the emperor a strict adherence to the faith and ethics of Orthodoxy. The emperor had to promise to keep the Church fully independent and free, and to practice towards the Church a servant's obedience, submitting to her every just and God-pleasing demand.[26] The emperor was to be obeyed insofar as he followed the teachings and doctrine of the Orthodox Church; otherwise, the Church was not beholden to the state. Once the hesychast movement occupied the patriarchate in 1347, the patriarchs—inspired by patriarch Athanasius I—were zealous to reform society as a whole. For example, under the patriarchs Kallistos (1350–53, 1354–63) and Philotheos (1353–54, 1364–76), their power was understood as the *universal solicitude*.[27] As patriarchs, they had full authority over their jurisdiction, and could also intervene in other churches throughout the entire Orthodox *oikouménē*. The role of the ecumenical patriarch was not defined in terms of his sacramental functions, but rather in his political and social responsibilities. At this point, Meyendorff states that the basis of such authority was not theological but legal, 'representing Byzantine political ideology'. The Church became the

[26] Id., *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia*, 113.
[27] Ibid., 115.

guardian of the *oikouménē* and of the ideology that sustained it.[28] The patriarchate had a greater impact on society than the imperial throne, and this impact inevitably carried with it economic and political consequences.

According to Prokhorov and Petrunin, this is the period when hesychasm turns political and becomes a political factor with Eastern European dimensions. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the struggle between hesychasts and rulers grew deeper. The key issue in this struggle was the option of union with the Roman Catholic Church, through the preparation at the councils of Basel, Ferrara, and Florence (1438–39). Petrunin describes this struggle as a clash between the forces of rationalism and secular humanism against Orthodoxy. Stökl disagrees with Petrunin's interpretation because Petrunin uses modern terms (rationalism, secular humanism) and imposes them on philosophical, theological, and political debates from the fourteenth century.[29]

With this rather superficial overview of some intellectual, political, and social issues of the fourteenth century, we can better comprehend Palamas' theological reflection, his role in the hesychast movement, and his reaction against humanism. Palamas, as bishop of Thessalonica, was primarily concerned about the spiritual, sacramental, moral, and cultural revival of the Orthodox Church, while being exposed to the challenges of humanism, Barlaam's teaching, and the social and political issues of his time. It is in this context we must understand Palamas' homilies and his theology developing the existential living experience of the deifying energy of the Holy Spirit, which culminates in the complete union of man with God. For example, after his final arrival in Thessalonica in 1350, he preached on the subject of peace with one another (*Homily 1*);[30] in *Homily 45,*[31] he preaches against usury. In other homilies, he sees human passion as 'senseless', and as impulses and actions against the natural life of man. He repeatedly emphasizes the importance of repentance (*Homily 3, 28, 30, 31)*[32] and so on.

Palamas' role and place within the controversies of the fourteenth century calls for further research, which will most probably lead to different interpretations and conclusions about Palamas' position. Various emphases notwithstanding, the spiritual and theological dimensions of hesychasm as such should always remain the key guidelines for an adequate understanding of Palamas' position.

[28] Ibid., 117.

[29] Stökl, *Political Hesychasm?*, 128.

[30] *Saint Gregory Palamas: The Homilies,* ed. Christopher Veniamin (Essex: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2016), 1–5.

[31] Ibid. 353–58.

[32] See *Saint Gregory Palamas: The Homilies.*

The Political Hesychasm of Christos Yannaras[33]

Christos Yannaras, born in 1935, is probably one of the most important theologians of the Neo-Orthodox movement. Unfortunately, he is not well studied because many of his books have yet to be translated. He studied in Germany and France and became very familiar with the existentialism of Martin Heidegger. With his help, Yannaras provides in his theological reflection a critique of Western thought from within; he analyses the Western understanding of individualism, religion, and pietism. He seeks a new theology which stands apart from the Western scholastic and pietistic categories of theology and closer to the hesychastic tradition of the East—especially to the thought of Palamas. By following the patristic tradition of hesychasm, Yannaras offers political hesychasm as an alternative to the modern, liberal, secular state of Greece, an alternative similar to that of fourteenth century Byzantium.[34] Andrew Louth states that Yannaras seeks with his Neo-Orthodoxy to transcend the split between 'Romaic' and 'Hellene,'[35] and recreate a sense of Greek identity against the West, this time based on the classical 'Hellenic' past and the spiritual tradition of the Greek Orthodoxy.[36]

The background of Yannaras' theological position is a strong reaction against Western materialism and individualism. In his book *The Church in Post-Communist Europe*, Yannaras disagrees with Samuel Huntington's thesis in his famous 'The Clash of Civilizations', which claims that cultures based on the Western Christian heritage are making progress toward economic development and democratic politics; the development in Orthodox countries is uncertain, and the prospect of development in the Muslim countries is bleak.[37] Yannaras argues that the true clash takes place between Christianity in the form of Orthodoxy on the one side, and on the other, materialism, which he calls the illegitimate child of Western Christianity.

> It is crystal clear that Huntington employs as his criteria of cultural difference among Europe's *religious* traditions the very products of European man's *antireligious* rebellion. All of us know that individual rights, political liberalism, utilitarian rationalism, economic development and progress are

[33] The exposition of this section is primarily based on D. Payne's interpretation.

[34] Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm*, 234.

[35] The nineteenth century was an era of nation-state formation in Greece, with two differing ideas as to who the Greeks were. Orthodox Christians under the Ottoman Empire, deriving their heritage from the Byzantines, understood themselves to be Romans, not Greeks. Juxtaposed to this 'Roman identity' was the 'Hellenic identity,' which supports the idea that the Greeks are descendants of the ancient Greeks of Hellas. Such division is nothing new in the nineteenth and twentieth century. As the first part of this paper shows, Byzantine humanists in the fourteenth century wanted to resurrect their ancient Greek identity. In the early nineteenth century, some Greek intellectuals, who were under the influence of German romanticism and French secularism, once again began to articulate Hellenic identity.

[36] Andrew Louth, introduction to *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, by Christos Yannaras and trans. Haralambos Ventis (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2003), 1.

[37] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), 29.

> the most representative products of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, products of modern Europe's zealous insistence on naturalism (physiocracy) as a substitute for Christian ontology, cosmology and anthropology. It is for this reason that we say that Huntington employs Historical Materialism as the criterion for determining the cultural differences represented by the 'rival' religious traditions of Europe.[38]

In Yannaras' writing, historical materialism is the result of the philosophical and theological development of the Western Christian tradition, rooted in Augustine's political theology as expressed in the *City of God*. There is no way that the uneducated barbarian nations invading Europe in the fifth to seventh century could have understood the elaborate theological reflections rooted in the philosophical achievements of the Greeks. Therefore, the Gospel had to be simplified for the masses, and the Church adopted the Roman legal-juridical tradition, which became instrumental for the control of the invading nations. Charlemagne and his advisors used Augustine's teaching of the two cities as the foundation for the religious, cultural, and political differentiation of the new empire of the German nation. The Germans and Franks had to differ somehow from the only existing empire of that time, the Roman Empire of the East. This differentiation from the East continued up to the official schism in 1054, when the division between East and West reached a new peak.[39]

When Yannaras talks about the West, he refers not only to certain geographical connotations, but also to a basic human posture toward the world and history. The roots of this posture can be traced to Western scholasticism, with its attempt to exhaust the knowable through the intellect, along with its separation of natural and supernatural. With this separation, we lose the unity between the divine and human nature, and the unity of the two natures into one person—that is to say, the possibility of personal participation in the divine truth concerning God. Consequently, man attempts to understand his experience as an individual and as a rational animal not in communion with the whole of reality. The liberal spirit of the Renaissance and the rise of the positive sciences and technology is a visible continuation of this separation, states Yannaras in his article, 'Orthodoxy and the West'.[40] The conceptual explication of revealed truth, the domination of nature and history, the banishment of God to an empirical unreachable realm, the separation of religion from public life, and the elimination of ontology and its substitution by ethics comprise the main western characteristics. To bridge the gap between the world and God's transcendence, the West emphasized the importance of ethical systems, with their peak in

[38] Christos Yannaras, *The Church in Post-Communist Europe* (Berkley, CA: InterOrthodox Press, 2003), 10–11.

[39] Id. *The Revival of Political Hesychasm*, 236–37.

[40] Christos Yannaras, 'Orthodoxy and the West', *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 17 (1972): 115–17.

ethical individualism, Yannaras continues in the same article. Consequently, even Christianity has become a religion of ethics and social action.

> Christianity for the most part is an individual ethic—the most perfect, of course, as compared with previous ethics—which finds its high point in the command to 'love one another,' that is to say, in the individual's obligation to show altruism, brotherhood and impeccable social relations.[41]

In Yannaras's eyes, the West is simply concerned with being a good individual, regardless of truthfulness or authentic human existence. For this reason, Nietzsche's claim 'God is dead' is essentially correct, because God really does not matter anymore for European life. This claim has a long history, stretching back to the scholasticism of the Middle Age, with its rational demonstration of the existence of God, rather than the simple recognition of God's existence through human experience. The Greek concept of *logos*, which implies a relational, experimental understanding of the truth, translates in the West as *ratio,* referring to the individual capability to arrive at a comprehensive and exhaustive understanding of truth. God becomes an object of the mind, rather than a personal reality. In the natural theology of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz, metaphysics is associated with physics.[42]

Yannaras continues by claiming that even pietism presents a step away from metaphysics.[43] Pietism stresses the importance of religious experience and practical piety, which is intrinsically linked with individualism. Good works, daily self-examination, reading of the Bible, practical moral teaching, intense emotionalism in prayer, and a clear break with the world are just a few of the main characteristics. Man's salvation depends on his moral endeavour and moral improvement. 'Pietism fostered a conception of religion as more "social", marked by practical benevolent activities, and presented the Christian gospel as more like an ethical code with consequences for society'.[44]

Yannaras's 'A Note on Political Theology' is important for our reflection. Here he describes political theology as 'a political theory and action that is not limited merely to social utility or to the conventional rules of human relations—even if these are more efficient—but has as its goal the truth of man and the authenticity of his existence.'[45] Politics and theology, Yannaras continues in the same article, are inseparable because both deal with the meaning of man and with human relations in society:

[41] Ibid., 119.
[42] Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm*, 239.
[43] Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, trans. Elizabeth Briere, (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 119.
[44] Id., *Absence and Unknowability*, 32.
[45] Id., 'A Note on Political Theology', *St Vladimir Theological Quarterly* 27 (1983): 54.

> Politics can be considered as a chapter of theology—a true 'political theology—when it takes upon itself serving man according to his nature and his truth; and consequently serving the political nature of humanity—i.e., the power of love, which is at the heart of existence and which is the condition of the true communion of persons, the true city, the true *πόλις*.[46]

This is the point where Yannaras distances himself from western political theology, which is in Yannaras' reflection associated with Marxist and neo-Marxist political theories. Western political theology, as well as Western Christianity, is caught in 'the polarization between the transcendent and the immanent, the abstract idealism of unified ruling metaphysic and the immediate affirmation and worth of the material goods of life.'[47] From this perspective, human community is merely utilized for a convenient and efficient regulation of human thoughts and actions, which is not enough; true community aims at the truth of humanity and the existence of that which is most genuine. Such a community can be created only within the Church, where the true nature of the human being is recognized, and where the revelation of the Triune God reveals the truth of the communion of persons as ontological fact, and therefore as the 'natural' way of existence.[48]

Yannaras bases his political theology on the Cappadocian fathers and their definition of the Holy Trinity. God exists in a community of persons as a Trinity, each with its own personal particularity. Similarly, man is created in his or her own particularity as a person within the community of the human being. Yannaras defines a person as 'a mode of being which presupposes natural individuality, but is at the same time distinct from it. Each person is a sum of the characteristics common to all human nature and mankind as a whole, but at the same time he transcends it inasmuch as he is an existential distinctiveness, a fact of existence which cannot be defined objectively'.[49] In other words, all human beings have objective characteristics, reflected in the tripartite mode of existence of rationality, freedom, and dominion, but each person uses his own will in a distinct, unique matter in hypostasizing these objective characteristics. At this point, Yannaras makes an important distinction: in the West, these characteristics comprise the definition of the *imago Dei* in man, while the East believes that these characteristics are the mode in which the image *exists* in man. They are used for man's distinction from nature, but man is not exhausted by these modes of existence. They only demonstrate that the image of God is in man, but they do not define it.[50]

[46] Ibid. 55.
[47] Christos Yannaras, *Chapters of Political Theology* (Athens: Papazese, 1976), 9.
[48] Ibid. 10–11.
[49] Id., *Freedom of Morality* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 21.
[50] Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm*, 242.

In addition, each person exists in a relationship to the other in community. Man is an existential fact of relationship and communion. As person, *prosopon*, he has his face (*ops*) towards (*pros*) someone or something. He is opposite (in relation to or in connection with) something or someone. My ego or individuality develops only through my relationship with others, which allows me to become aware of my own uniqueness. In and through this relationship with the other, my rationality, freedom, and dominion become something distinct and unique, differentiating me as a person in my uniqueness.

Contrary to the person is the individual, understood as the denial and neglect of the distinctiveness of the person. By defining human existence through the objective properties of man's common nature (i.e. rationality, freedom, and dominion), we destroy what is particular to the identity of the person: his or her relationship. For Yannaras, this can have diabolic results because we wipe out the image of God as a being in relationship, and reduce man to a being an individual, a social unit, bearing some characteristics, which are common to all. Morality, truth, and authenticity of existence become something predetermined by nature and an essential necessity for man.[51] Consequently, ethics becomes understood as conformity by the individual to objective or natural requirements. By making man an individual, man becomes determined by the characteristics of human nature, but man's personal distinctiveness is ignored.

Yannaras argues that the best mode of existence for human beings is possible in the life of the church. 'For the Church is not a religion, it is not a school of spirituality, but a place where we are invited to transform our existence into *being as relationship*. We are invited to a meal, to a banquet—and a banquet is a way of practicing life as communion.'[52] In a church community united with God, man experiences God's love not through his rational faculty, but through experience in loving communion, which is a transformative experience where the realization of the image of God in man takes place. The highest expression of this communion is the Eucharist, where the community is united with God. In this communal mode of existence, the person is transformed into a new being and a new mode of life. This experience opens the person to new knowledge about God.

Such experience of God and of personal transformation entails the true meaning of freedom. Freedom means self-transcendence, or the ability to escape the confines of our nature. Freedom is the 'ability to live our existence as a realization of love, so as to reach the truth of the *person*.'[53] By going out beyond oneself toward the other, the person achieves personhood.

[51] Id., *Freedom of Morality*, 26.

[52] Id., 'The Church: A Mode of Being that Can Conquer Death', *Sourozh* 49 (1992): 24.

[53] Id. 'Towards a New Ecumenism', *In Communion* (Dec. 2004), accessed June 22, 2016. http://incommunion.org/2004/12/13/towards-a-new-ecumenism-2/.

If the person is defined only by his nature, then he is unable to experience this kind of freedom because the same definition of human nature limits a person's ability to reach out to the other. This is the reason why Yannaras criticizes the western comprehension of freedom as the ability of choosing one action over the other,[54] and opposes any philosophical, social, or religious ethic. These views do not support authentic human existence, the 'salvation of the soul' and the collective attainment of human flourishing. Even the western understanding of human rights falls short in this regard.

By the strengthening of individual rights and protecting the individual's freedom of choice, modern democracy prefers the affirmation of earthly life, the celebration of matter and of the body, and the opportunity for all to advance in material prosperity. Similarly, even religion becomes transformed into a moralism that supports the 'good' life of society. As many other things, religion becomes a matter of choice, consumed for enjoyment and pleasure, far from an ontological transformation through ascetic struggle over biological existence.

As an alternative to Western secularized and democratic societies, Yannaras proposes the Byzantine autonomous communities from the nineteenth century as a model for human society.[55] These communities were centred around the life of the monastery, based on an apophatic knowing, and with a vivid cultural engagement and strong social institutions. All these are necessary conditions for the experience of communal truth, in which the members of the community perceive their identity as persons and not as individuals. In this community, the person is not understood as an object of knowledge, but as a subject that can be known through ecstasy and love. The monastic hesychasm as the exemplary module of ecclesiastical community becomes the model for human society.

> Monasticism will be revealed as a dynamic and real witness and reminder of the separation of the Church from the world, of the 'exodus' of the Church from the 'imposition' of the world. The ecclesiastical consciousness will recognize in the monastic life the lost truth of the charismatic union and the real confession of faith: The distinction of the Church from the 'world' will transpose progressively in the separation of the monks from the 'worldly' Christians. Finally, the entire clergy, without denying its obedience to the worldly-political hierarchy, will be clothed in the dress of the monks, enlarging the chasm and its objective difference from the 'popular' or 'worldly' Christians.[56]

In his concluding remarks, Payne claims that Yannaras tries to formulate an authentic Orthodox identity for the modern world through the thought of Gregory

[54] Id., *Freedom of Morality*, 81–83.
[55] Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm*, 252.
[56] Id., 'A Note on Political Theology', 204.

Palamas and political hesychasm.[57] In order to do so, Yannaras provides the basis for a society that is antithetical to secular materialism and cleansed from Western elements, such as Western political development, ideas of secularization, globalization, privatization, materialization, consumerism, and modernization.[58]

Conclusion

The term 'political hesychasm' embraces different meanings, open to diverse interpretations. In Petrunin's writing, political hesychasm refers to the renewal and self-positioning of the Russian Orthodox Church after the fall of communism, which was challenged by the political government and Western influence of liberal values and liberal globalism. Political hesychasm in the fourteenth century seems to be even less determined than Petrunin's one. It would be hard to argue that a pure hesychasm had a direct political or social influence on the society of that time. There is no doubt, however, that hesychasm and the Jesus prayer as a spiritual tradition and teaching represented a spiritual force and motivation, energizing Palamas' teaching and social action, and providing guidance to the followers of Palamas' ideas. Palamas as a spiritual father and church leader was immersed in specific political, social, historical, and religious frames, which shaped his responses. Grounded in hesychasm, Palamas transcended all these frames and gravitated towards a reality beyond those historical coordinates.

Political hesychasm as understood by Yannaras seems to be less descriptive than the one in the fourteenth century. His political hesychasm results in a theological-political program of recovery of the person (i.e., the subject that it is in relationship with. This is not the same as the individual characterized by rationality, freedom and dominion). The difference between person and individual is too easily overlooked by modern secularized society, which overemphasizes the rule of human rights, but forgets the deeper dimensions of human existence.

The invention of political hesychasm, and increasing interest in hesychasm in the last century are part of a complex process of globalization that has triggered a new dynamic. This has emerged not only on the economic and political level, but also through a new search for tradition,[59] its creation and invention,[60] as well as its recovery.[61] This is the framework in which we should place Petrunin's neo-Byzantine interpretation of the *Social Doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church*, as well Yannaras' theological reflection on the Greek identity.

[57] Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm*, 259.
[58] Ibid.
[59] A. Edward Shils, *Traditions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
[60] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
[61] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984).

Next to this increasing interest in tradition, we witness also the phenomenon of subjectivization, what Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead describe in terms of 'spiritual revolution'[62] (i.e., a societal turn away from external, objective or prescribed roles and authority towards life lived in reference to one's own subjective experience). This revolution helps us explain the worldwide increasing interest in religious studies in general, and in our case the increasing interest in hesychasm in modernity. The rapid dynamic of globalization challenges people's multifaceted search for their national identity, which also includes their spiritual identity. Both Petrunin and Yannaras feel challenged by the process of globalization, and their writing results in search of a new identity.

Many religious practices, including the Jesus prayer, have been dislocated and adapted to new settings and environments, and exposed to new ways of interpretation. Thus, we have, nowadays, a wide spread of the Jesus prayer and hesychasm, inside and outside of the Orthodox world, in the monasteries and among laypeople. This phenomenon goes beyond the boundaries of the Orthodox Church, its traditions and nations.[63] I argue that our situation is similar to the one of Palamas; Palamas and the advocates of the hesychast movement in their time were aware that hesychasm as such transcends social, cultural and political ideologies. With this in mind, Palamas wrote his apologetic defence against those who were accusing hesychasm of heresy.

Even though only superficially, we have touched on Palamas' engagement with the religious, social, cultural, and political issues of his time, and his recurring efforts to protect and reinforce the complete union of man with God. Individuals, as well as human society, are to be transformed in a Christian society. It seems that Palamas embraced the modernity of his time and formulated new strategies for individual as well as societal flourishing, beyond the language and cultural boundaries of the fourteenth century. The spread of the hesychast practices created and strengthened a cultural self-image as a form of resistance against the humanism or nationalism of that time.

Let us say that Yannaras, with his critique of Western individualism and its argumentation in favour of human rights wants to break the frameworks of materialism, consumerism, and development based only on economy and free market on the one side, and, on the other, offers a means of identification for modern Orthodox Christians in their ascetic-theological tradition. He introduces a personal ontology that protects the person from the 'diabolic' forces of this world, and allows the person to express her uniqueness within society through a free loving act of communion

[62] Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

[63] Christopher D. L. Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 177–78.

with the other.[64] Yannaras bases his reflection on Palamas' distinction between an individual's essence and energies. The person's essence, which remains unknown to all, is a gift to human society, and cannot be expressed in her uniqueness through exercising her claims of human rights. The person expresses her uniqueness only through going outside of herself and through being in free loving acts of communion with the other. This is the way in which she expresses her humanity. Here, the church plays an irreplaceable role: it protects the essential freedom and dignity of human persons by talking about the injustices of late capitalism; the church as a transnational body challenges the authority of the state in its failure to recognize the ontological freedom of the person.

As Palamas does not seek to articulate an explicit political theology, neither does Yannaras; however, both of them remain concerned with the preservation of a theological tradition and an Orthodox Christian identity through hesychasm. Will hesychasm help create this identity? No, hesychasm will not create identity if we take it as nostalgia for the past, as an elitist mystical experience, or as a conservative critique of modernity; it will help form identity if it instantiates the good news of the Gospel in contemporary culture. Only in this way we can say—in agreement with Charles Taylor's idea of a massive subjective turn of modern culture,[65] or the idea of the spiritual revolution,[66] or Sergej Khoružij's 'anthropological turn in Christian theology'[67]—the hesychast tradition will have an immense political impact in modernity.

[64] Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm*, 262.

[65] Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 29.

[66] Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution.*

[67] Sergej Khoružij, 'Anthropological turn in Christian theology: an Orthodox perspective', Lecture at the Divinity School, University of Chicago, October 4, 2006, Online Library, Institute of Synergetic Anthropology, http://synergia-isa.ru/english/download/lib/Eng12-ChicLect.doc.