

ST GREGORY PALAMAS ON THE ESCHATOLOGICAL STATE: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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This paper serves as a brief and very preliminary exploration of a fascinating and under-explored aspect of St Gregory Palamas' teaching: the nature of the next life. While we are used to thinking of St Gregory as someone who fought for the reality of human experience of the breaking-in of the Kingdom, the *eschaton*, even in this life, we are perhaps less prone to ponder what he has to say about the next life. In this respect, Gregory offers a number of intriguing suggestions, notably in terms of the vision of God with the eyes of the spiritual body and human participation, not only in the Resurrection but also in the Ascension of Christ.

The whole thrust of St Gregory Palamas' teaching is dedicated to the proposition that the *eschaton* is not to be imagined as some sort of future state but as the underlying, undergirding, and all-embracing eternal reality of the cosmos—a reality that is absolutely accessible to us in this life, and which has a habit of breaking into this world and upsetting all our comforting notions of linear time and bounded space. This breaking-in of the alone real, the Kingdom, is of course more than mildly mind-boggling, and indeed incapable of exhaustive expression. As T.S. Eliot puts it: 'human kind / Cannot bear very much reality'.¹ But Palamas is at great pains to defend the possibility of the vision and ingress of the wholly actual, the eternal now, into this life—however unbearable that might be. To put it more simply, Palamas categorically affirms that human beings can see and experience God and his Kingdom both in this life and *a fortiori* in the next life. The *eschaton* is to be understood not in terms of spatial or temporal extent (that is as far off and/or a long time ahead) but as the ultimate and uttermost here and now.²

Palamas' conception of time and eternity is certainly nourished by the hymnography and iconography of the Orthodox Church. Among many possible examples, let me invoke the text of the divine liturgy of St John Chrysostom in

¹ Thomas S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*: 'Burnt Norton', I.

² This paper was given at a colloquium on 'Imagining the Eschatological State' held at Wheaton College in the spring of 2017. It stands, as I say, as a very preliminary exploration of a complex theme that deserves closer and more sustained attention than I have been able to afford it here.

which, immediately following the recitation of the words of institution, the bishop or priest intones:

Remembering, therefore, this saving commandment and all that has some to pass for our sake, the Cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the sitting at the right hand, and the second and glorious coming again [...].³

It is all very well to remember the Cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day—but the second and glorious coming again? How are we to remember the second coming unless we understand the economy of salvation as a transhistorical event—something that has happened, is happening, and will happen—something that in a sense is always happening? A similar intuition is evident in the Book of Revelation's reference to 'the lamb slain before the foundation of the earth' (Rev. 13:8).

Multiple further assaults on what has been called the 'comforting step ladder of chronology'⁴ can be found in the liturgical texts of the Orthodox Church. Consider the *troparion* appointed for the feast of the Annunciation or, as it has long been called in the English-speaking world, Lady Day:

Today is the crown of our salvation and the manifestation mystery that is from all eternity. The Son of God becomes Son of the Virgin, and Gabriel announces the good tidings of grace. Therefore let us also join him and cry aloud to the Theotokos: Rejoice, thou who art full of grace, the Lord is with thee!⁵

Note the eternal 'now' not only in the opening 'today' but also in the consistent use of the present tense. In this feast (as with all the great feasts of the Church) we are not commemorating some distant event but entering into Christ's ongoing and ever-present economy of salvation.

Palamas, in his own homily on the feast of the Annunciation, makes it clear that notions of past, present, and future collapse in the person of the Virgin: 'She is the cause of the benefits which preceded her, the protector of those which came after, and through her those good things which are eternal shall be received'. As the one who conceived the divine fire within her and was not consumed, she is

³ Μεμνημένοι τοίνυν τῆς σωτηρίου ταύτης ἐντολῆς καὶ πάντων τῶν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν γεγενημένων, τοῦ Σταυροῦ, τοῦ τάφου, τῆς τριημέρου ἀναστάσεως, τῆς εἰς οὐρανούς ἀναβάσεως, τῆς ἐκ δεξιῶν καθέδρας, τῆς δευτέρας καὶ ἐνδόξου πάλιν παρουσίας [...]. See *Ἱερατικόν*, Ἔκδοσις Ζ' (Ἀθήνα: Ἀποστολική Διακονία, 2009), 132.

⁴ I borrow this odd but arresting metaphor from Ben Fowkes, *Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 172. As the title indicates, the subject matter of that book is quite different.

⁵ *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite (now Metropolitan) Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 446.

both the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses and the tongs with which the Seraphim bore the live coal to Isaiah's lips. She alone, according to Palamas, is the boundary (*μεθόριον*) between created and uncreated nature—the one in and through whom God was able to unite himself to human nature and thus open to all human beings the promise of deification: 'God became human so that humans might be deified'.⁶ As the means by which God became human, and thus the very ground and matrix of *theosis*, she is to be confessed as 'the beginning, source, and root of the hope stored up for us in heaven'.⁷

Consider also the Orthodox icon in which received notions of time and indeed space are collapsed. Readers of this journal will doubtless be familiar with the notion of reverse perspective in which certain objects are depicted bigger the further away they are (for example the Gospel book held by Christ *Pantokrator*). But reverse perspective is only one of the ways in which icons challenge received notions of time and space. Icons routinely combine a bird's eye view with a face-on presentation, or a two-dimensional figure with a three-dimensional background, or interior space with exterior features. Moreover, non-simultaneous events are routinely depicted on the same plane—as in the icon of the Nativity for example. In the icon, as in the liturgy, it is always 'now'.

To return to Palamas' teaching on the experience of the *eschaton*, it is worth underlining the fact that his strenuous insistence on the possibility of the vision of eternal, uncreated reality in this life came in response to some serious attacks on the very notion of properly religious experience. The prominent and erudite Italo-Greek monk Barlaam of Calabria, with whom he had already fallen out on a separate but related issue, took grave exception to some of the claims made by monks of Mount Athos and elsewhere, that it was possible, under certain circumstances, to see God as light. Barlaam found such claims appalling, especially when voiced by those he regarded as uneducated and ignorant monks. Barlaam attacked such rustics as *omphalopsychoi* ('those who have their soul in their navels') and Messalians—an ancient heresy believed to have dispensed with the sacraments of the Church and to have taught that prayer alone brings about the vision of God with the physical eyes.⁸

For Palamas, as for St Gregory of Sinai before him, the light witnessed in prayer by the Hesychast monks was to be understood as the very same light that shone from Christ on Thabor. The theophanies of the Old Testament should, similarly, be understood as true manifestations of God—the self-revelation of the uncreated to the created. Barlaam had no time for any of this. For Barlaam, it was absurd to suggest that the creature can see or in any way experience the Creator. For Barlaam there are,

⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54 (cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.19.1).

⁷ Homily 14.15 (*On the Annunciation*). This and subsequent translations from Gregory are my own unless otherwise indicated. For the homilies, I have gratefully consulted Christopher Veniamin's *The Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas* (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2002).

⁸ The charge of Messalianism may also have targeted the Hesychast's somewhat reticent attitude to Church architecture and adornment.

properly speaking, no theophanies, no manifestations of God in this world. The best we can hope for is a kind of intellectual illumination similar to that vouchsafed to the philosophers of old. The light of Thabor cannot have been the light of divinity, but merely a created symbol standing for the intellectual illumination gifted by God to those he chooses.

In countering that it is indeed possible to see God as light, Palamas is led to specify that in seeing God, we do not see all there is of God. We do not see the essence of God, which remains forever hidden and inaccessible, but we see precisely that which God enables us to see: the revelation of his essence in his divine operation, activity, or energy. This energy is to be distinguished from the essence, even as it remains forever united with the essence. God remains one and simple. But I will not labour this point here.⁹ Instead, I shall move on to what Gregory has to say about the nature of the human beings' experience of eschatological reality in this life and move on to consider how things might be different (or indeed similar) in the next life.

Palamas understands that the uncreated light of the Transfiguration is sensed and perceived by the spiritual senses.¹⁰ There is no physical light to be seen on Thabor—a bystander would have noticed nothing particularly out of ordinary (apart from the stricken postures of the disciples). Palamas turns to Maximus for an assertion that the vision took place 'by a transformation of the senses' effected by the Holy Spirit.¹¹ It is by this transformation of the faculty of sense perception that the disciples are able to see the ineffable light. And it is this same transformation that allows the saints to see that same light in prayer—'transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit'.¹² That said, Palamas does allow, on the basis of the unity of the human being composed of body and soul, that spiritual perception is communicated in some mysterious way to the senses of the body—that, for example, a sensation of warmth or perception of visible light may accompany what is properly speaking an experience of the spiritual or intellectual senses. One also finds in Gregory a sense of the thinness of the veil between God and man in such states—a veil he calls a 'transparent' or 'crystal membrane'.¹³

There are almost innumerable other instances in which Gregory affirms the possibility and reality of the vision of God in this life. The vision of the Apostle Stephen,¹⁴ for example, was a spiritual illumination apprehended by the spiritual

⁹ See my essay on 'St Gregory Palamas on the Divine Simplicity' forthcoming in *Modern Theology*.

¹⁰ Homily 34 (*On the Transfiguration*). See also my article on the spiritual senses in Palamas and others: 'The Spiritual Senses: Monastic and Theological' in *Knowing Bodies, Passionate Souls: Sense Perceptions in Byzantium*, eds S. Harvey and M. Mullet (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 2017), 301–12.

¹¹ Homily 34.8.

¹² Homily 34.13.

¹³ [...] διεφαίνετο γὰρ οἶον δι' ὑελίνων ὑμένων ἢ θεία δύναμις διανυάζουσα τοῖς ἔχουσι τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τῆς καρδίας κεκαθαρμένους. Homily 34.14.

¹⁴ 'But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God"' (Acts 6:55–56) (RSV).

or intellectual senses and communicated to the body. Sometimes this inner illumination can even be physically manifested upon the body. This is why Moses' face shone as he came down from Sinai and why Stephen's face shone like that of an angel—in both cases being the result of an inward participation in the divine light.¹⁵ The vision of Stephen was a vision of the glory of God—that is to say a vision of God in his divine glory or energy. This is the same glory or energy that was revealed to the disciples as light on Thabor, and indeed to Paul on the road to Damascus. These visions are to be understood as unifying and deifying in accordance with the declaration of the Psalmist: 'In thy light shall we see light' (Ps. 36:9).¹⁶ Time and time again, argues Gregory, scripture witnesses to the fact that the vision of God as light is indeed a vision of God himself, if, to be sure, a vision of God's energy and not of the essence itself.¹⁷

And this vision, this experience, is, quite literally, deifying. Deification begins in this life even if it is to be perfected only in the next life. While deification may be construed as an eschatological process it is certainly not restricted to the next life. One might use the term 'realised eschatology' here, but I do not think it gets us to the heart of what Palamas is trying to express: the unfolding and inflowing of the Kingdom within human history.¹⁸ But the historical course of the Hesychast Controversy gave Gregory little leisure to consider how things might be different in the next life. While Barlaam's anti-Palamite successors had rather more subtle takes on issues such as the character of the light of the Transfiguration, the Controversy remained centred very much on the possibility of a vision of God in this life and on issues surrounding the essence-energies distinction. There was relatively little controversy concerning the next life.

Palamas does, however, make several important and intriguing observations on the next life. I shall, in what remains of this brief essay, draw attention to three such observations. Firstly, and this is perhaps wholly to be expected, he suggests that the spiritual body will be more permeable to the vision of God than even the transformed faculties of a disciple on Thabor or a Hesychast on Athos rapt in the vision of divine light. A spiritual body will see and enjoy the vision of God both spiritually and bodily. Down here the senses must be transformed in order that the soul might see the divine light, notwithstanding its embodiment in solid, mortal flesh. Much of the time the heaviness of our flesh suppresses the spiritual senses and makes us incapable of seeing the divine light. But with a spiritual body, all this is changed:

¹⁵ *Triads* I.3.30–31; cf. *Triads* II.2.12–13.

¹⁶ *Triads* II.3.27.

¹⁷ Cf. also *Triads* II.3.66; III.3.4–5.

¹⁸ Cf. John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (London: Faith Press, 1964), 194. Palamas' vision certainly does not correspond to the use of the term in C.H. Dodd and others, where it stands for an effective downgrading and deconstruction of the whole notion of eschatology. With Palamas, the *eschaton* is a powerful and ever-present reality, poised at any moment to break into our limited and time-bound reality.

In the blessed existence of the age to come [...] the body will receive an angelic dignity. With the victory of the spirit, the body will be so subtle that it will no longer seem in any way material and will no longer impede the operations of the intellect. For this reason they [the sons of the resurrection] will also enjoy the divine light with their bodily senses.¹⁹

With such unimpeded vision, even the thin 'crystal membrane' is done away with.

Palamas' second observation about the next life is, I think, rather more interesting and perhaps even somewhat surprising. In short, he affirms that resurrection pure and simple will not necessarily entail the vision of God, given that it also applies to sinners for whom resurrection is but a prelude to the second death which is, of course, far worse than the first. As he writes to the Nun Xena:

Even though at the regeneration to come, in the resurrection of the righteous, the bodies of the godless and sinners will also be raised up, yet they will be given over to the second death, age-long chastisement, the unsleeping worm (cf. Mark 9:44), the gnashing of teeth, the outer, tangible darkness (cf. Matt. 8:12), the murky and unquenchable fire of Gehenna (cf. Matt. 5:22), in which, as the prophet says, the godless and sinners 'will be burned up together and there will be none to quench the flame' (Isa. 1:31). For this is the second death, as St John has taught us in the Revelation (cf. Rev. 20:14). Hark, too, to the words of St Paul, 'If you live in accordance with your fallen self, you will die, but if through the Spirit you extirpate the evil actions of your fallen self, you will live' (Rom. 8:13). Here he speaks of life and death in the age to be: life is the enjoyment of the everlasting kingdom, death age-long chastisement.²⁰

But for those raised unto salvation, the outlook is, happily, rather better:

And for those who experience it the consequence of this resurrection will be true incorruption and eternal life with God: they will become spiritual instead of non-spiritual, and will dwell in heaven as angels of God (cf. Matt. 22:30). As St Paul says, 'We shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall be with the Lord for ever' (I Thess. 4:17). The Son of God, who in His compassion became man, died so far as His body was concerned when His soul was separated from His body; but this body was not separated from His divinity, and so He raised up His body once more

¹⁹ *Triads* 1.3.36.

²⁰ *To Xena* 11 (trans G.E.H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware in *The Philokalia* 4 [London: Faber and Faber, 1995], 296).

and took it with Him to heaven in glory. Similarly, when those who have lived here in a godly manner are separated from their bodies, they are not separated from God, and in the resurrection they will take their bodies with them to God, and in their bodies they will enter with inexpressible joy there where Jesus has preceded us (cf. Heb. 6:20) and in their bodies they will enjoy the glory that will be revealed in Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1). Indeed, they will share not only in resurrection, but also in the Lord's ascension and in all divine life.²¹

It is this promised participation in the Ascension that I find particularly interesting.

As he lived, died, rose again, and ascended, so all of us live, die, and are resurrected. But not all of us will attain to the ascension, but only those for whom 'to live is Christ, and to die for him is gain' (Phil. 1:21), those of us who, before they died, crucified sin through repentance and a life lived in accordance with the Gospel. After the common resurrection, they alone will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (cf. I Thess. 4:17).²²

In a sense, Christ's Ascension is a greater mystery than his Resurrection. In celebrating his Ascension 'we celebrate the passage of our nature in him, not just from the subterranean realm up to the earth, but from the earth to the heaven of heavens, and beyond that to the throne of him who is master of all.'²³

Other resurrections and ascensions are of course encountered in scripture and tradition but, Palamas declares, 'we celebrate none of them as we do the Lord's Resurrection and Ascension, because we do not and will not participate in them.'²⁴ This participation in the Ascension is a distinctive and arresting feature of Palamas' account of the next life.²⁵

Thirdly and lastly, let me note Palamas' embrace of the doctrine of infinite progress or *epektasis*. Taking Dionysius (rather than Gregory of Nyssa) as his proximate source of inspiration, Palamas alleges that there is no question, but that the experience and contemplation of God is an infinite pursuit, beginning in this life and continuing in the next. In the next age, those who are counted worthy will advance infinitely as they draw ever closer to God, their capacity to enjoy his grace growing as they advance tirelessly in their ascent to him. Beyond apophatic theology, beyond even the *ekstasis* that lies far above apophatic theology, there begins a higher

²¹ *To Xena* 14–15 (trans G.E.H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware in *The Philokalia* 4, 297–98).

²² Homily 22.16 (*On the Ascension*).

²³ Homily 21.1 (*On the Ascension*).

²⁴ Homily 21.4 (*On the Ascension*).

²⁵ Alas, Palamas does not merit mention in Douglas Farrow's *Ascension Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2011).

contemplation of light. In such contemplation, one who has through ascetic effort and prayer reached the very summit of human possibilities is illumined and ravished by the Holy Spirit in ways which ultimately exceed human comprehension or expression. I shall allow his own words on this score to stand as a fitting conclusion to this preliminary and tentative exploration of his vision of the eschatological state.

This contemplation has a beginning and something following that beginning that is sometimes fainter, sometimes brighter, but has no end, for its progression is infinite as is the ravishment of revelation. Illumination is one thing but sustained vision of the light and the realities which are in the light is quite another thing: a vision in which far off things appear to the eyes to be near and the future appears as present.²⁶

²⁶ *Triads* II.3.35.