

APOPHASIS & THEOSIS: AN INTRODUCTION TO BYZANTINE THEOLOGY

Lecture 4: Gregory Palamas and Hesychasm

St Gregory Palamas: his life

Born Constantinople at end of 13th century

1318: went to Mount Athos with his two brothers

With the advance of the Turks, he left and in 1326 was ordained priest in Thessaloniki.

Retired as a hermit to Beroea, returning to Athos in 1331

1334: becomes involved in controversy with Barlaam, a monk from Calabria, over the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, in which Barlaam defended the Byzantine rejection of the *Filioque* against the Latins.

1337: Barlaam attacks the claims of Athonite monks to see the uncreated light of the Godhead in their prayer. Palamas defends the monks in his *Triads* (c.1338).

1340-1: Palamas gains support of Holy Synod of Athos; 'Hagioretic Tome'.

1341: Synod in Constantinople supports Palamas against Barlaam

1344: Synod in Constantinople condemns Palamas

1347 & 1351: Two further Constantinopolitan synods support Palamas
Between these dates, Palamas publishes his *150 Chapters*.

1347: Palamas consecrated Archbishop of Thessaloniki, but unable for political reasons to enter his see until 1350

1354: captured by Turks off Gallipoli, and spends more than a year in captivity, during which he engages in dispute with Muslim theologians.

1359: dies

1368: canonized

Background to the Hesychast controversy

- Longstanding struggle in Byzantine intellectual circles between upholders of the 'outer wisdom' (= pagan philosophy, especially Plato) and the 'inner wisdom' of the monks. Condemnation of John Italos in 1082
- Mysticism of Light: Macarian Homilies, Symeon the New Theologian, Theophtos of Philadelphia, Gregory of Sinai
- Opening to Byzantine philosophy to the West. Translations of Augustine and Boethius by Maximos Planoudis; translations of Aquinas by the Kydones brothers

Issues in Hesychast controversy

- Reality of religious experience
- Essence/energies distinction

- Deification
- Sense of the wholeness of the human person

Long-term consequences

- Hesychasm became a powerful movement in the declining years of Byzantium. Muscovite monasticism, especially the tradition of St Sergii of Radonezh and the Trinity-St Sergii monastery, influenced by this
- After 1453, and the fall of Constantinople, monasticism became the most vital tradition to preserve Orthodoxy, and though hesychasm was not particularly strong under the Ottomans, it remained a tradition to recover: kollyvites and the *Philokalia*
- In the twentieth century, there has been a strong tendency to regard hesychasm as defining of Orthodox theology. There are pros and cons; pro – the sense of the priority of prayer in our access to God; con – a tendency to ignore, or reject, developments in the Western tradition of Christianity, to the impoverishment of Orthodox theology.

Bibliography:

Translation of texts from Palamas in: *The Philokalia. The Complete Text...* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995). I am sure there are translations into Dutch, too.

John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (London: Faith Press, 1964). An abridged translation of the original French, now published by St Vladimir's Seminary Press. Universally regarded as flawed, but not yet replaced.

Two examples of modern 'hesychast' theology:

Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man* (SVSPress, 1984)

Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ, The Nature of the Human Person* (SVSPress, 1987)