



## **The Nature of Eastern Orthodox Theology,**

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Sixty-six years ago, in the closing months of the Second World War, a little book was published with the title *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient*, known in English as *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*.<sup>1</sup> For many of us, it was this book that opened up the theological tradition of the Orthodox Church. Why Lossky used the term 'mystical theology' is not entirely clear. He was himself a student of Eckhart—his doctoral dissertation on Eckhart was published shortly after his untimely death 1958<sup>2</sup>—so he was well-informed about what the West has called 'mysticism', but his book is not about 'mysticism' in that sense: there are no visions, no records of mystical

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient*, Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1944 (reissued, with the same pagination, in the series Patrimoines–Orthodoxie, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2005); English translation, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Cambridge and London: James Clarke, 1957. Cambridge and London: James Clarke, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart*, Paris: J. Vrin, 1960.

experiences, nor a great deal on methods of prayer, meditation or contemplation in that book. Most of it looks, in fact, like a traditional account of central Christian doctrines: the Trinity, the Incarnation, the mission of the Holy Spirit, the life of the Church. However, in the introduction to the book, he explains what he regards as the complementarity of mysticism and theology, a complementarity largely lost in the West, so he maintained, though preserved by the East: which is the reason, we may presume, why Lossky entitled his book 'Mystical Theology'. In the East, he claimed, mysticism and theology belong together, in a sense that, I think, emerges clearly in the following quotations from that introduction:

The eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology; between personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogma affirmed by the Church... To put it another way, we must live the dogma expressing a revealed truth, which appears to us as an unfathomable mystery, in such a fashion that instead of assimilating the mystery to our mode of understanding, we should, on the contrary, look for a profound change, an inner transformation of the spirit, enabling us to experience it mystically... There is, therefore, no Christian mystery without theology; but, above all, there is no theology without mysticism... Mysticism is accordingly treated in the present work as the perfecting and crown of all theology: as theology *par excellence*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pp. 8f. Note that in the original French, the word rendered in English as 'mysticism' is 'la mystique', not perhaps quite the same thing.

Mysticism and theology relate as experience and theory. But experience of what? Ultimately of God, but that is not where Lossky begins: he begins by speaking of 'personal experience of the divine mysteries', the term 'mysteries' being—not exactly ambiguous, but with at least two connotations—meaning both the sacraments of the Church, and also mysterious truths about the Godhead. That double meaning is no chance homonymity; the two meanings are closely related for Lossky, and for the Orthodox Church, because the mysterious truths about God—his existence as a Trinity of love, his creation of the world, his care for the world and his redemption of it, pre-eminently in the Incarnation—are truths that we experience and celebrate in the Divine Mysteries, or the Sacraments of the Church. It is this that gives Lossky's presentation such a different orientation from what is normally associated with mysticism in the West: it is not detached from dogma, but rooted in the dogmatic truths of the Christian tradition; it is not indifferent to Church organization, hierarchy and sacraments, but rooted in the structured life of the Church; it is not individualistic—indeed individualism is seen to be the deepest flaw in Western Christianity—but rooted in the experience of the eucharistic community, the Church. And yet—it seems to me that Lossky, in using the language of mysticism, remains open to the sense that it bears in Western use, the realization that, if anyone enters into a profound relationship with God—one that seeks God for himself and is impatient of settling for any kind of intermediary—then they will embark on a transforming experience, in

which the world will seem radically different, perceived from the perspective of the divine love that brought it into being. Lossky makes little of this, but it seems to me that he remains open to the way in which we are called ultimately to go beyond any conventional certainties and abandon ourselves to the infinite mystery of God.

What I want to do in this lecture is explore some of the features of such a mystical theology, conceived of as characteristic of Eastern Orthodox theology, and I want to do that in the way that comes most naturally to me, but which is also, I believe, utterly characteristic of the Orthodox tradition of theology: and that is by offering some reflections on some of those whom we call the Fathers.

I shall take four Fathers of the Eastern tradition—St Athanasios, St Dionysios the Areopagite, St Maximos the Confessor, and St Gregory Palamas—who cover a period of about a millennium, stretching from the fourth to the fourteenth century.

Let us begin with St Athanasios, and in particular with his early treatise—so I would still take it to be—consisting of *Contra Gentes* and his famous, and incomparable, *De Incarnatione*.<sup>4</sup> This twofold work is an apology, a defence of Christianity, against objections from both Jews and Greeks. It is, more

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<sup>4</sup> I have used the edition, with English translation, by Robert W. Thomson: Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*, Oxford Early Christian Texts, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.

precisely, a defence of the cross, an *apologia crucis*: in the twofold work, Athanasios seeks to persuade his readers that Christ ‘was the Saviour of the universe and that the cross was not the ruin but the salvation of creation’ (CG 1), a theme he picks up again at the beginning of *De Incarnatione* when he refers to what ‘the Jews slander and the Greeks mock’, an obvious reference to the first chapter of 1 Corinthians on the reaction to the ‘word of the cross’ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22-5), which he makes explicit by contrasting what they hold cheap—namely the cross—with what it makes known, the divinity and power of Christ (*dI* 1). Christ’s death on the cross is, for Athanasios, τὸ κεφάλαιον τῆς πίστεως, the ‘chief point of our faith’ (*dI* 19), for two reasons: first, because it is in his death, triumphing over death, that Christ is revealed in his divinity—for it belongs to God to have the power of life and death; but secondly, because it is death that sums up the human plight—it is death that casts a shadow over human life, qualifying everything, threatening everything with futility. Athanasios sets all this in the context of God who creates the universe and cares for it, or more deeply of God who is the only source of being and reality. His exposition—at the beginning of *Contra Gentes* and repeated at the beginning of *De Incarnatione*—is based on his radical understanding of God’s creative activity. Picking up ideas that had been developed tentatively in the Church’s struggle against the Gnostics, Athanasios develops his understanding of creation out of nothing: the sole source of being is God, if we turn away from God, we turn away from being, and we discover the

reality of life apart from God, which is death. He presents the universe as flowing from the creative will of God, with no reality other than what it derives from him; he presents human kind as having a special role in creation, since it has been created in accordance with the image of God, that is the Word of God; in virtue of being in the image, human beings are able to look back to the source of being, God, they can contemplate him, they live a life in touch with genuine reality, with the way things are. It is natural, it is obvious: and yet human kind failed to live out such a life. They turned away from God: but where? They began 'to consider *themselves*', as Athanasios puts it (CG 3), they began to see life in relation to themselves, and in doing this they lost contact with the only source of being which is God. But this self-oriented life is oriented to nothing, for there is no source of being apart from God, and feeding on nothing, it finds itself moving towards nothingness, which is experienced as death. Death becomes the horizon for human life, and human beings are henceforth born into a world marked by death and dissolution or corruption—θάνατος and φθόρα. This is human life as we know it: 'living and partly living', as the women lament in T.S. Eliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral*—'living and partly living', and always under the shadow of death.<sup>5</sup> It is death that needs to be dealt with, according to Athanasios; it is at the moment of death that we need to find hope. The cross, which looks like just

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<sup>5</sup> See T.S. Eliot, *Collected Plays*, London: Faber & Faber, 1962, pp. 15–16, repeatedly, and echoed later on pp. 29, 48.

another example of the way in which death frustrates the hopes of human life, is however a different death: it is death that swallows up death, it is a death that offers once again life as originally offered to human kind, the 'life according to God', τὸ κατὰ Θεόν ζῆν (*dI* 5). But the cross achieves this, because the one who died on the cross, the Incarnate Word, is God, beyond the reach of death: rather than death swallowing up the Word, as it swallows us up, death itself is swallowed up. In Athanasios' words, 'And the two things occurred simultaneously in a miraculous manner: the death of all was fulfilled in the Lord's body, and also death and corruption were destroyed because of the Word who was in it' (*dI* 20).

That is a rather condensed account of Athanasios' *apologia crucis*; he has a lot, too, to say about the way in which the restoration of the image in the crucified One restores to us the paradisaic knowledge of God, but what I want to draw your attention to in all this is the way in which Athanasios' theology is about an engagement between God and his creation, between God and human kind. It is not about some theological truths, but rather about something that happens—a happening, an event, into which we may enter. You will recall that Athanasios goes on to enlist the evidence of Christian martyrdom and the Christian pursuit of virginity as ways in which life in defiance of death has become a possibility for Christians. It is striking, I think, that the Christian creeds that begin to emerge in Athanasios' lifetime are not lists of theological

truths, but an account of God's engagement with the cosmos, centrally through the Incarnation. The extent of that engagement comes out in what is perhaps the most famous sentence of *De Incarnatione*: 'for he became human that we might become God' — αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνήνθρωπήσεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν (*dI* 54). For Athanasios, there is a twofold movement: that of God towards us, whereby God comes to live—to experience—human life, and our answering movement towards God, whereby we come to live—to experience—his divine life. The boldness of that claim remains characteristic of Byzantine theology.

Let us move on to Dionysios the Areopagite, the 'divine Denys'. It is this conviction of engagement that lies at the heart of Dionysios' theology, but he explores aspects of that engagement which remain implicit in Athanasios' account. There is, I would argue, though I know that not all scholars would agree with me, the same fundamental affirmation of creation out of nothing: the created order simply exists because of God; more exactly, for Dionysios, it exists to manifest God—the whole cosmos, for Dionysios, is a theophany, a manifestation of the glory of God. But a manifestation for what? or to whom? If God has created the universe out of nothing, then there is nothing to which this universe could manifest God. But anything other than God is full of distinctions and differences: there is light and shade, there are different levels, some higher, some lower, there is what is manifold, there is



multiplicity. In virtue of its multiplicity, the cosmos can be thought of as God's manifestation of himself *within* the cosmos, and *to* the cosmos.

Furthermore, Dionysios never says anything about the Fall, just as he never explicitly speaks of creation out of nothing, but when he thinks of the nature of the cosmos, he sees the manifoldness of the cosmos as something that is due to its being created out of nothing, and therefore not God, but also something that manifests the consequences of the Fall: not that the Fall is a Fall *into* multiplicity—Dionysios is a Christian at heart, not simply a Neoplatonist (though, again, I acknowledge that there are scholars who think otherwise)—but a Fall in which multiplicity and difference provide the raw material, so to speak, for the opposition and frustration, and sheer destructiveness, that characterize the fallen world. However, for Dionysios, these differences and distinctions make possible what one might think of as structures of the manifold that temper, as it were, the divine manifestation, so that we can grasp something of it. The theophany, which the cosmos is, is then a theophany in and to the cosmos. More radically, Dionysios believes that distinction, difference, height and depth, transparency and obscurity can make possible a cosmos in which we are actively drawn towards the burning centre of God's love, and also have the opportunity to draw others to experience that love. This is what he means by hierarchy:

a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine. And it is raised to the imitation of God in proportion to the enlightenments divinely given to it. The beauty of God—so simple, so good, so much the source of perfection—is completely uncontaminated by dissimilarity. It reaches out to grant every being, so far as each is capable, a share of light ... (*CH* 3. 1).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, for Dionysios, hierarchies are not mainly about rank, order, subordination (he invented the word, so we should stick to his own definition!), they are about reaching out into multiplicity and drawing everything back into union with, and assimilation to, the simplicity and beauty of God. Beauty is a key to how this works: he adopts Plato's linking of the Greek word for beauty, κάλλος, with the Greek verb to call, καλεῖν—beauty calls out and calls back to itself; it is not something simply to gaze at, it is a vision that we are called on to follow.

In his two treatises on *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysios depicts the hierarchical structures of the cosmos. The celestial realm consists of nine ranks of heavenly beings, arranged three by three: at the top, in descending order, Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones; in the middle, Dominions, Powers, Authorities; and at the bottom, Principalities, Archangels, Angels. This arrangement, three by three, discloses something

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<sup>6</sup> Translations from *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid, Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1987, sometimes modified.

else about the hierarchy: it is not simply a ladder, with three steps, as it were, rather hierarchy consists of three phases or stages, and the three ranks, and three levels of ranks, symbolize this. These phases are, working upwards this time, purification, illumination and perfection or union: the process of assimilation to God that the hierarchies effect begins with purification, continues with illumination, and finally reaches perfection (or completion: τελείωσις) or union. The hierarchies are, as Dionysios said in the passage already quoted, not just a matter of rank, but of understanding and activity. It is interesting to note, in passing, that this celestial cosmos is, for Dionysios, constituted by angelic beings; he is not talking about the heavenly bodies in the sense of stars and planets. In this Dionysios was not at all unusual amongst Christians; the art historian, Thomas Mathews, has noted that Christian art, even where it seems to be developing earlier pagan themes, tends to dispense with the signs of the Zodiac, and turn the heavenly realm into the realm of angels.<sup>7</sup>

In some ways, it seems to me that the *Celestial Hierarchy* is mostly concerned to establish the principle of hierarchy as the way in which the created realm—in this simplified case of the purely spiritual realm of the angels—is a kind of graded theophany, drawing everything up to closer and closer assimilation to God. It exemplifies in a purified, concentrated form what is involved in

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<sup>7</sup> See Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Christian Art*, Princeton University Press, 1993, 148-50.

coming close to God. The name of the seraphim—for names are significant for Dionysios—signifies ‘fire-makers’ or ‘carriers of warmth’, and what this means is: ‘a perennial circling around the divine things, penetrating warmth, the overflowing heat of a movement which never falters and never fails, a capacity to stamp their own image on subordinates by arousing and uplifting in them too a like flame, the same warmth...’ (CH 7. 1). It is a picture of unwavering contemplative attention to the divine, paradoxically combined with a capacity to pass on this being engrossed in the divine. Fr Alexander Golitzin, has suggested that the model for these angelic beings is not, as scholars usually assume, the intermediary beings of contemporary Neoplatonism, but the institution of the monastic elder, who does not stand between his disciples and the divine, but exemplifies a closeness to the divine, and a knowledge of what is needed in approaching the divine, from which his disciples can learn. To use an English idiom: coming close to God is something not ‘taught, but caught’.

It is this hierarchical activity—that is, this way of purification, illumination and union that leads to assimilation to God—that is dealt with more practically in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. This is a treatise that revolves round a series of church services, and through them seeks to expound how experience of these divine mysteries draws human beings into union with God. If one concentrates on the notion of hierarchy as ordered ranks, then

there are some oddities about this treatise, for the hierarchies seems to consist of two social hierarchies—ranks of human beings holding ecclesiastical office—and three sacraments; the two human hierarchies being the threefold order of bishops, priests and deacons, and a threefold order of laity as monks, ordinary laity (called the ‘contemplative’ order, those who watch) and those not or not yet admitted to eucharistic communion, while the three sacraments are baptism, eucharist, and the sacrament of the consecration of the holy chrism. These hierarchies are discussed in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, but the treatise itself, after an introductory chapter, consists of six chapters, each in three parts, the first dealing with the rite itself, the second explaining in a provisional way its meaning, while the final part, called *theoria* or ‘contemplation’, delves more deeply, and at some length into its deeper meaning. The six chapters concern: the rite of baptism, the eucharistic rite, the rite of consecration of chrism or *myron*; then, the ordination service, the rite of monastic consecration, and the burial service. What we have here is more like a treatise of liturgical theology: the rites and ceremonies of the Church are the way in which the church, as a gathered community led by its bishop, celebrates and experiences the engagement between God and human kind that is recapitulated in the Incarnation. Something that Dionysios conveys with rare power is the way in which our response to God’s love for human kind is not simply as individuals, but as part of a community, a structured

society. We are not on our own, but are borne up by the prayers and presence of others.

There is another side to Dionysios' understanding of mystical theology, though it seems to me very closely related. The treatises on the hierarchies envisage a mystical theology as a way of participating—through the celebration of sacraments and liturgical ceremonies—in the truths that these sacraments celebrate. The sacraments are a continuation of the Incarnation, because they extend to us, here and now, that movement of God towards us accomplished pre-eminently in the Incarnation. As God became human that we might become God, so that divine assumption of humanity is extended to us in the Eucharist, so that we, through communion, might grow more deeply into the divine life. In his account of the various rites of the Church, Dionysios shows how in the prayers and psalms and hymns that accompany these ceremonies we praise God, and evoke him by the names that he has given to us. The other treatises that survive of the Dionysian corpus are more closely concerned with what is involved in such use of divine names. How do we apply such names to God? By what right can we say anything of the transcendent one? To explain this, as everyone knows, Dionysios introduced into Christian theology the language of affirmative and negative theology, or to use more directly the Greek terms: kataphatic and apophatic theology. It is quite easy to give a provisional account of what Dionysios means. In

kataphatic, or affirmative, theology, we take the names that God has given us in the Scriptures and affirm them of Him. We say that God is good, and just, and loving, and so on. And we are right to do so, because God has revealed himself as such. But is God good, just and loving in the way that we affirm these terms? No, for God is beyond any conception that we might have of him, and to express that we must use apophatic, or negative, theology, and deny that God is good, just and loving. However, this denial is a special kind of denial: we are not saying that God lacks these qualities, we are rather saying that he transcends these qualities. Consider the different ways in which he might say that someone is not intelligent: we might, and normally do, mean that someone lacks intelligence; but we might mean that the term intelligent is a rather feeble way of describing him—he is not intelligent, he’s a genius! It is that latter kind of denial that we use in apophatic theology, except that here we have *no other way* of saying what we do mean: we can’t make clear in words what we mean by saying that God does not lack goodness, say, but that he transcends it. Dionysios has several ways of explaining why this is the case in relation to God. Kataphatic theology, for instance, can be justified, both by revelation, but more theoretically by the fact that God is the cause of all; and because Dionysios accepts, with his contemporary Neoplatonists, that the cause contains everything found in the effect, then it must follow that anything we find in creatures (except when we mean that we *don’t* find it in creatures, that is, when we register a lack in

creatures) we can also, in some sense, ascribe to God. But apophatic theology can be justified for the same reason: for if God is the cause of all, then he does not belong to the 'all', he is not one of τὰ ὄντα, the things that are, and if that is so, then everything we can affirm of creatures we must deny of God. So Dionysios reaches the conclusion: 'therefore every attribute may be predicated of him and yet he is not any one thing' (DN 5. 8).

This language of kataphatic and apophatic theology can sound like some kind of logical calculus enabling us to ascertain how our language applies to God; this is certainly an accusation made by some Orthodox about the way in which Dionysios' ideas on the predication of divine attributes were interpreted in the West. But that such an attempt is not what Dionysios had in mind is evident, I think, from the shortest of his treatises, the one actually called *The Mystical Theology*. That treatise begins with a prayer to be brought beyond anything we can know or apprehend, beyond anything we might glimpse from the Scriptures, to what he calls the 'dazzling darkness of a hidden silence', where the mysteries of God's Word will 'completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond all beauty'. What Dionysios is speaking of here is something that lies beyond the furthest reach of our comprehension, and the context of prayer is important: he is not concerned with some logical exercise in theological predication, for prayer is a form of address to a God who listens. In fact, in this treatise, the complementarity of



kataphatic and apophatic theology finds its context, not in some logical puzzle, but in what one might call the direction one is facing. 'The Word of God is vast and minuscule; the Gospel is wide-ranging and yet restricted' (*MT* 1. 3). We can use the word of God to speak to others, to say something to them of the love of God; but we can also use the word of God to address God himself. In chapter 3 of this treatise, this question of orientation comes to the fore. There he speaks of the way in which, as he tries to explain the nature of God and the revelation of God through the images of the Scriptures, his language becomes more and more abundant, but 'the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing'. About thirty years ago, Paul Rorem pointed out in a brief, but compelling, paper, that the language Dionysios uses to describe Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai in chapter 1 of the *Mystical Theology* is cultic language: the language used to describe the way the priest purifies himself and enters the sanctuary, not just in the Bible, but also in the Christian liturgical texts of the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>8</sup> What Dionysios is talking about is not primarily 'mystical experience' in the later sense—though I do not think he excludes it, nor do I think that those who found in this tiny

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Rorem, 'Moses as the Paradigm for the Liturgical Spirituality of Pseudo-Dionysius', *Studia Patristica* 18/2 (1989), 275–9

treatise a guide to abandonment to the infinite abyss of the Godhead were perversely mistaken—but the difference between the proclamation and celebration of the faith of the Gospel, and our turning towards God in prayer, whether liturgical or private. And they obviously belong together: the God of whom we speak when proclaiming the Gospel must be the God to whom we speak in the quietness of prayer. If these come apart, then our whole understanding of God, our whole theology, will unravel. Dionysios' distinction between kataphatic and apophatic theology is, like many other distinctions characteristic of Byzantine theology, a distinction that holds together, rather than holds apart. Another implication of this mutual implication of kataphatic and apophatic theology is that, because kataphatic theology is rooted in apophatic theology, the language of kataphatic theology is freed to be celebratory. Dionysios seldom speaks of 'predicating' names of God; he usually says that we 'praise' God by using these names. The way these names apply to God is more than simple predication: it expresses a joyful celebration of God who has revealed himself to us, in creation and in revelation; it is the fruit of a fundamental attitude towards God of praise and thanksgiving. This grounding of kataphatic theology in apophatic theology also means that it is disposed to use a wealth of imagery in relation to God. As the modern Greek theologian, Christos Yannaras, has put it: 'The apophatic attitude leads Christian theology to use the language of poetry and

images for the interpretation of dogmas much more than the language of conventional logic and schematic concepts'.<sup>9</sup>

One of St Maximos the Confessor's shortest works is his commentary on the Divine Liturgy, known as the *Mystagogia*. It is natural work to turn to after discussing Dionysios the Areopagite, for Maximos presents it as simply a supplement to what Dionysios had to say in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Here, I only want to comment briefly on some aspects of this work, which became immensely popular in the Byzantine tradition, and inspired a whole series of works that, like it, comment on the actions of the Byzantine liturgy. What I want to draw attention to here are the chapters that preface Maximos' comments on the particular actions of the Divine Liturgy. The first seven chapters set up a series of parallels, or images as he calls them. The Church, he says, is an image and figure of God, for both the Church and God draw things into unity: God—through his creation and providence, the Church—as a place of reconciliation. He then goes on to apply this to the church building itself, divided as it was (and still is, in Orthodox churches, very visibly) into the nave (the *naos* or temple), accessible only to the faithful, and the sanctuary (*hierateion*), accessible only to the priests and ministers. This division symbolizes the division of the cosmos into the visible and the invisible realm.

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<sup>9</sup> Christos Yannaras, *The Elements of Christian Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), p. 17.

In both cases, this is a division that does not simply separate, but holds together, so that the lower reflects the higher, and the higher is expressed in the lower. The movement of the liturgy is out from the sanctuary into the nave, and then back into the sanctuary, drawing everything—all our prayers, hopes and longings—into the hidden unity of God. Further chapters apply this division to the visible world, where the distinction between sanctuary and nave reflects the division between heaven and earth; to the human being, where the distinction is found in the difference between soul and body; to the soul itself, where the distinction is found this time in the distinction within the soul between the contemplative and active aspects of the intellect—the contemplative intellect being directed towards truth, the active intellect towards goodness, so that goodness is seen as a manifestation of truth, and also as an antechamber, as it were, of the truth. Two further chapters (6 and 7) suggest further parallels: the parallel between Scripture and the human being—Old and New Testament, and the literal and the spiritual meaning, reflecting the distinction in the human between body and soul; and finally the parallel between the cosmos and the human, the invisible and the visible being reflected in the human soul and body. In fact, in these last two chapters, what Maximos says is even more direct: how Scripture is said to be a human being (ἄνθρωπος), and how the cosmos is said to be a human being and the human being a cosmos. In this latter, we have, of course, the ancient idea of the human as a microcosm; and the idea that the Holy Scripture is

modelled on the human is the basis of Origen's understanding of Scripture in book 4 of *De Principiis*, which, of course, formed a major part of the *Philokalia*, compiled by the two Cappadocian Fathers, St Basil the Great and St Gregory the Theologian. If both Holy Scripture and the cosmos are said to be *ἄνθρωπος*, then there is a certain identity between Scripture and the cosmos: something Maximus draws out elsewhere when he suggests that both Scripture and the cosmos can be seen to consist of words, *λόγοι*—the written words of Scripture and the hidden *λόγοι* of the cosmos—in both of which we find ourselves hearing the *Λόγος*, the Word of God Himself (cf. *Ambigua* 10. 18: PG 91. 1128D-1133A).

The first point to notice about all this is the way in which Maximus sets up a whole structure of mutual reference: what takes place in the church building has its meaning in the context of a division between sanctuary and nave that applies from the cosmos to the inner depths of the human person—the significance of the Divine Liturgy runs through this whole gamut of reference. It picks up the fundamental movement of the Scriptures, between Old and New, surface and deeper meaning; it then reflects this on to the majesty of the cosmos and into the hidden depths of the soul. Maximus has set up something like a set of Chinese boxes, each containing the other, each related to the other. The extremes are the cosmos and the individual soul; the action of the divine liturgy concerns both and holds them together. This

corresponds to one of the most striking features of the kind of Byzantine theological synthesis we find in Maximos: the way in which the divine economy has not just a human but a cosmic significance, and combined with that the way in which the human task of responding to God's activity, which involves a demanding asceticism, is integrated into his theological vision. In this Maximos was recapitulating emphases already present in the Greek theological tradition, but in his vision the cosmic, the historical, the liturgical and the ascetic are all drawn together and all mutually inform one another. It was in accordance with this vision that the church building throughout the Byzantine world came to be seen as a microcosm and decorated as such, with the icon of Christ in the dome of the church gazing down on the worshippers below, apparently supported by the light penetrating the church from the windows at the base of the dome. In participating in the Divine Liturgy, the Byzantine Christian was conscious that he was participating in something of cosmic significance. It is in direct continuity with this tradition that modern Orthodoxy has readily found ways of voicing ecological concerns. But this cosmic emphasis is not detached from the life of the ordinary Christian, for the same liturgical action shines into the depth of his soul, and reveals the dimensions of an ascetic programme of purification, illumination and union that becomes, in that light, not just a matter of personal care for the self—*souci de soi*, in Foucault's phrase—but a means by which each Christian is enabled to participate in the reconciliation and restoration of the created cosmos, set at

odds with itself by human sin. It is in these terms that Maximos describes the individual ascetic task:

The human is a mystical church, because through the nave which is his body he brightens by virtue the ascetic force of the soul by the observance of the commandments in moral wisdom. Through the sanctuary of his soul he conveys to God in natural contemplation through reason the principles of sense purely in spirit, cut off from matter. Finally, through the altar of the mind he summons the silence abounding in song in the innermost recesses of the unseen and unknown utterance of divinity by another silence, rich in speech and tone. And as far as is possible for humans, he dwells familiarly within mystical theology and becomes such as is fitting for one made worthy of his indwelling and he is marked with his dazzling splendour (*Mystagogia* 4).<sup>10</sup>

When we hear St Maximos speaking of ‘the silence abounding in song’ and the ‘innermost recesses of the unseen and unknown utterance of divinity’, we would not be mistaken in hearing the language of those lovers of God, whom we call the ‘mystics’. Furthermore, those last words evoke the image of transfiguration: one of the most powerful ways of expressing deification, the transformation of the human into the divine.

I have left very little time for my final Father, St Gregory Palamas, the fourteenth-century defender of the Athonite monks, or hesychasts, who

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<sup>10</sup> G.C. Berthold’s translation in Maximus the Confessor, *Selected Writings*, Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1985, 190 (slightly modified).

claimed in their prayer to behold the uncreated light of the Godhead and find themselves transfigured in it. But it is just one sentence of Gregory's that I want to reflect on, or even only part of a sentence. At the very beginning of the controversy that tore apart the intellectual society of the ailing Byzantine Empire, rapidly falling to the advance of the Turks and itself rent by civil war, Gregory remarked in a letter to Barlaam, the chief of his opponents at that time:

It is not safe for those who do not know how to speak to God to speak about God, nor for those to judge about the immaterial light who do not know what can be apprehended beyond the light, and have not been initiated into the intellectual part of the soul and 'the life hidden in Christ' by the true and intellectual light, as having truly found and been raised to the first resurrection.<sup>11</sup>

'It is not safe for those who do not know how to speak *to* God to speak *about* God'. If we do not know how to speak to God, then the God about whom we speak will be no more than a concept. Apophatic theology, I have suggested, is Dionysios' term for the experience of going behind what we say about God and seeking to rise to God himself. 'Rise to God': that is the metaphor we naturally use, but what we mean is 'turn to God and seek him directly' and that, as the Gospel constantly reminds us, can both mean some kind of seclusion ('when you pray, go into your chamber and seek your Father who is

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<sup>11</sup> Palamas, *Ep. 1 to Barlaam* 41 (Gregory Palamas, *Συγγράμματα* I, ed. P.K. Chrestou [Thessaloniki, 1962], pp. 248-9).



in secret'), but also willingness to encounter God in the 'least of these little ones'. This is something we need to remember, for the entry into the 'dazzling darkness', where we shall be overwhelmed by the light of God, is mainly a matter of turning away from our concepts and strategies, the ways in which we make ourselves at home in the world, and seeking to enter the world as God created it; but there is more—this 'dazzling darkness' is ultimately overwhelming and alters the very way we perceive God and the world, which is perhaps the heart of what is meant by the 'mystical', in the way the word has come to be used in the West.

An illustration—a parable— of what this entails can be found in the story the Elder Zossima tells of his older brother Markel, who died a young man of consumption.<sup>12</sup> Before his illness, he had lost his faith, and seemed to take delight in upsetting his mother and the servants—and the young Zossima himself—with his strident rejection of the Faith and religious practice. In the spring of the year he died, his mother learnt that his consumption was serious and that he would soon die. She tried to persuade Markel to observe Lent and take communion. To start with he angrily rejected this, hurting his grieving mother. But during Holy Week, he had a change of heart and started to go to church, though saying to his mother that he was 'doing it only for

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<sup>12</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part II, Book Six, Chapter 2 (quotations taken from the translation by Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky, London: Everyman's Library, 1997, 287–90).

your sake, mother, to give you joy and peace' — which upset his mother even more, as she sensed that he knew he was close to death. He quickly got worse and had to confess and receive communion at home in bed. A change came over him: from brutally rejecting religion, he welcomed it when his nanny wanted to light the icon lamp. Zossima says he remembers him sitting, 'quiet and meek,... sick but his countenance... glad, joyful'. His mother is glad, but also sorrowful, as she can see how much he is suffering from fever and coughing, and that he has little time to live. Markel tries to comfort his mother: 'Mama, do not weep, life is paradise, and we are all in paradise, but we do not want to know it, and if we did want to know it, tomorrow there would be paradise the world over.' But he also says: 'I shall also tell you, dear mother, that each of us is guilty of everything before everyone, and I most of all.' His mother protests that there are murderers and robbers, far more guilty than him. As he seeks to explain, the people round him think he is slipping into delirium. He goes on: 'Birds of God, joyful birds, you, too, must forgive me, because I have also sinned before you.' Zossima comments that no one could understand this, that his weeping mother protested that he took too many sins on himself. 'Dear mother,' he said, 'my joy, I am weeping from gladness, not from grief; I want to be guilty before them, only I cannot explain it to you, for I do not even know how to love them. Let me be sinful before everyone, but so that everyone will forgive me, and that is paradise. Am I not in paradise now?'

There are two things that strike me about this story. First, Markel takes communion, not out of real conviction, but out of pity for his grieving mother—and with that little act of humility and repentance, he finds that the gates of repentance swing open, and he enters paradise. The sense of being in paradise, however—and this is my second point—is not just manifest in his seeing nature in all its beauty, but in his sense of guilt ‘in everything before everyone’, in his seeking forgiveness from everyone, even the birds.

This seems to me a parable of what is really meant by ‘apophatic theology’ For the way to God—turning to God himself by way of what Dionysios called ‘apophatic theology’—is by way of repentance, by letting go of our ways of making something of God, and allowing ourselves to be made something by God himself. As Vladimir Lossky put it:

The apophatic way of Eastern theology is the repentance of the human person before the face of the living God. It is the constant transformation of the creature tending towards its completeness: towards that union with God which is brought about through divine grace and human freedom. But the fulness of Godhead, the ultimate fulfilment toward which all created persons tend is revealed in the Holy Spirit. It is He, the Mystagogue of the apophatic way, whose negations attest the presence of the Unnameable, the Uncircumscribed, the absolute Plenitude... The apophatic attitude in which one can see the fundamental character of all theological thought within the Eastern tradition, is an unceasing witness rendered to the Holy Spirit who makes up all deficiencies, causes all limitations to be overcome, confers upon the knowledge of the

Unknowable the fulness of experience, and transforms the divine  
darkness into light wherein we have communion with God.<sup>13</sup>

Here, it seems to me, we find the heart of the mystical theology of the Eastern  
Church.

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<sup>13</sup> Lossky, *op. cit.*, pp. 238f.