

PALAMAS AND SCHOLASTICISM:
HESYCHISM AND SCHOLASTICIM

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OUTLINE

Thesis: Saint Gregory Palamas was instrumental in combating the dangers of Scholasticism by defending the practice of hesychism in the Church, and in so doing, preserved the Church for times to come.

- I. The Historical development of Theological Scholasticism in the Western Roman Empire

- II. The Historical Developments of Eastern Theological Scholasticism in the Empire

- III. The Development of Mystical Theology Known as Hesychism

- IV. The Developments of Monk Varlaam in the Clash Between Scholasticism and Mysticism

- V. The Developments of Gregory Palamas And His Defense of Hesychism

Within Christianity, two roads developed that would set the course for the church, for the next millennium. Christianity came to a fork in the road. One road would develop with an infusion of rationalism and reason to faith. This would become predominantly the western path. The east would continue its sustenance of faith with the continuation of mysticism and experience. This would eventually lead to a point of divergence between how one knows God. Is it through the cognitive faculties or by the experience of communing with the Divine. During the time of Saint Gregory Palamas, these two roads would clash like a ship hitting the rocky shore. It is through these developments that the differences and dangers in church and faith if scholasticism is the foundation of Christian life is clearly illustrated..

Scholasticism was initiated from a synthesis of reason and logic within Christian practice and Aristotle's rediscovered works. In the western empire, the reforms of the Papacy brought an era of relative peace and stability to the society. This impacted the arenas of education and learning.¹ In the tenth and eleventh centuries, education was provided through monasteries and cathedral schools. It did not take long before the cathedral schools would dominate the educational scene,² and become partly philosophical in their offerings. With the rediscovery in the west of Aristotle,³ through the network of educational facilities, his works were soon making an impact on society as a whole. A great race for the synthesis of philosophy and theology emerged with western theologians⁴ who would

¹Tim Dowley, ed., Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity (Lion Publishing: Tring, Hertfordshire, England; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 274 (page reference is to reprint edition).

²Ibid.

³Ted Byfield, ed. The Christians: Their First 2000 Years (Edmonton, AB: Christian History Project, 2008), vol. 7, A Glorious Disaster: A.D. 1100 to 1300, The Crusades: blood, valor, iniquity, reason, faith, 182. Aristotle's works were known in the eastern part of the empire from "the earliest of times." But for the western kingdom, the Latin version of Aristotle was only available after the eleventh century. Nestorian Christians within Persia had shared Aristotle's works with certain Muslims who later brought his works to Spain. After the return of Spain into the hands of the Christians, 1085, they were discovered in the libraries of Toledo. Ibid., 183.

⁴Starting with Berengar, Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, Duns Scotus, and Thomas of Aquino. Thomas of Aquino, in particular, would merge the compatible parts of Aristotle into the foundations of Biblical Christianity and greatly influence the construction of western thought for centuries to come. Cf. Byfield, 183.

employ “new categories of thought, a new theological method, and a new terminology which the east did not understand.”⁵

Aristotle was not unknown in the east, but as its focus was more Patristic and communal in experience, its impact was less severe. For the Latin society, Aristotle’s philosophy of accidents and essence (or substance) provided a format for the formulation of faith into logical constructs.⁶ Theology was rationalized and became a means to prove the existence of God, God’s nature, the value of faith, the Eucharist (transubstantiation), and the interaction of the prayers of the saints.⁷ By the year 1350 A.D., Aristotle’s views were influential in philosophy, biology, animal geneology, astronomy, meterology, physics, morality, and psychology.⁸

This amalgamation brought a further divergence within Christendom. The loss of focus on communal and inter-personal bonds transformed faith into cold and non-relational theological systems.⁹ The impact of scholasticism laid the foundations for the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It flowered in Italy first and soon metamorphosed into humanism.¹⁰ Initially it persuaded mankind to live to their potential, but being fed with pride, it became anti-Christian,¹¹ for it side-stepped theology, deeming it unnecessary. Enlightenment could be sourced from the intellectual methods of the Ancient Greeks and Romans in the examination of creation.¹²

⁵Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia), The Orthodox Church (London, England; Penguin Books; reprint, Pelican Books, 1997), 62 (page references are to reprint edition).

⁶Dowley, 278.

⁷Byfield, 187.

⁸Ibid, 184. This also illustrates a common phenomenon in the western world, as new ideas would be quickly merged into contemporary thought and practice. One of the best examples would be the synthesis of Newtonian Principles (Isaac Newton) during the late 1700’s and into the 21st century. For instance, the rise of the programmatic church within evangelical protestant denominations is dependant upon such a structure.

⁹Paul Negrut, “Searching for the True, Apostolic Church: What Evangelicals Should Know About Eastern Orthodoxy,” Christian Research Journal (January-March, 1998) : 32. A particular expression of this is the emphasis of certain groups over the “personal relationship with Christ mediated through the study of scripture.” Ibid., 34.

¹⁰Ted Byfield and Ric Dolphin, eds. The Christians: Their First 2000 Years (Edmonton, AB: Christian History Project, 2010), vol. 8, The Renaissance: God in Man: A.D. 1300 to 1500., 215.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 214.

Thirdly, as the scholastic emphasis on essence came at the cost of personhood, faith became impersonal and remote. The focus on interaction with the divine was not through the encounter and communion with God¹³; rather it argued for cognitive proof of God's existence.¹⁴ In practice, theology of the intellect divides rather than unifies¹⁵. Thus faith is only as good as the knowledge upon which it is built. It is self-fulfilling, in that the exultation of personal opinion exalts the opinions of one or a few persons, which has hastened relativism. What happens to those who are cognitively challenged? The experience of contemporary society indicates that advances in knowledge come at the expense of faith in God. Besides, the creation of theological systems is dependent upon certain interpretations and correlations of presuppositions.

As the Church spread over the entire Roman world, the historical developments would impact the churches in different ways. By the seventh century there were countless differences, and after the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the eastern church submitted to the presuppositions of both empire and Emperor. With the empire experiencing sustained attacks on many fronts and losing territorial ground, the belief of preservation and conservation increasingly arose.¹⁶ Part of this conservation included the unity of opinions, thus ensuring peace and harmony.¹⁷ Current issues were settled with answers from the past, especially the Patristic Fathers.¹⁸ Church doctrine was forced to submit to the tendencies of the Emperor. This initiated the effect of the intelligentsia to search for answers in Greek philosophy and

¹³This is like knowing your mother by reading accounts about her. How does knowing about your mother equate to knowing her? The two are not the same, and so without communing with God, one can only talk about knowing about God. This is impersonal and dry knowledge, and it should not be surprising if such knowledge lacks the power to motivate. Cf. also, ". . .speaking about God and meeting God himself are two different things. "St. Gregory Palamas As A Hagiorite." In Pelagia, Accessed from www.pelagia.org , 3/15/2011, 10.

¹⁴Ware, 215.

¹⁵It is said that there are over 20,000 church denominations within the American continent.

¹⁶Alexander Schmemmann, The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy, trans. Lydia W. Kesich, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977; reprint, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 2003), 220, 223, (page references are to reprint edition).

¹⁷Ibid., 224-5.

¹⁸Ibid., 226, 235.

the Hellenism of pre-Christian times.¹⁹ The river of ideas became stagnant and Christian fundamentals became too much of a burden. As the church was not able to effectively deal with this sudden surge towards Plato, Parmenides, Plotinus and others. The Church itself became infected with the rush toward abstract knowledge.²⁰ By the twelfth century, theology spoken among the ruling classes was more a competition of sorts to introduce new themes and problems to confound their listeners.²¹ This rash of knowledge replaced experience for theological foundations within the ruling classes, but within the monasteries, the mystical outlook continued as before. This brought about several clashes between the Byzantines and the monastic communities, first with Saint Simeon the New Theologian, and then with Saint Gregory Palamas.²² The clash with Palamas in particular, was a pinnacle of history, for it brought to a head scholasticism of the west, the official theology of the Byzantines, and the mystical, or hesychist theology of the eastern monastics, particularly those of Mount Athos.

Hesychism developed in the east²³ and greatly followed in the monastic circles of Mount Athos. Its focus was on stillness, for it is deemed, “essential for man’s purification and perfection, which means his salvation.”²⁴ It involved purification of the heart and the *nous*²⁵ from the passions, to commune with God within the practices of the sacraments, the reading of Holy Books, fasting and love.²⁶ This was

¹⁹Ibid., 230.

²⁰Ibid., 235, 231.

²¹Ibid., 229-232.

²²Ibid., 233.

²³Its origins are based upon the thoughts and experiences through the centuries by the saints: Clement of Alexandria, Dionysios, Maximos, John of Damascus, the Cappadocian Fathers and their disciple Evagrius of Pontus. Cf. Ware, 62 and, “St. Gregory Palamas As A Hagiorite,” 1-2.

²⁴“St. Gregory Palamas As A Hagiorite,” 4.

²⁵The *nous* is mankind’s wealth. It is prudent and allows the person to judge between good and evil. Cf. “St. Gregory Palamas As A Hagiorite,” 9. In its natural state the *nous* focuses ones desire on God which results in the unity of soul and body. This natural state occurs through contemplation, the prayer of the heart, the removal of thoughts from the heart, obedience to the Holy Spirit and unceasing watchfulness. Ibid., 11.

Saint Gregory Palamas stated, “When we strive with diligent sobriety to keep watch over our rational faculties, to control and correct them, how else can we succeed in this task except by collecting our mind, which is dispersed abroad through the senses, and bringing it back into the world within, into the heart itself, which is the storehouse of all our thoughts?”

²⁶Father Bassam A. Nassif, “Light To The World: The Life of Saint Gregory Palamas (1296-1359),” Again Magazine 27, No 1 (Spring 2005), 23.

mystical theology firmly planted upon the Church and Christ's incarnation.²⁷ Hesychism held in balance both the transcendence of God, that is His essence²⁸, while proclaiming knowledge of God by way of His energies. The uncreated light of God was one such energy.²⁹ The hesychist experience taught that this light was not a material substance and was the same light that Jesus exuberated on Mount Tabor.³⁰

Said Gregory of Palamas,

For on the day of the Transfiguration, that body, source of light of grace, was not yet united with our bodies: it is illuminated from outside those who worthily approached it, and sent illumination into the soul by the intermediary of the physical eyes; but now, since it mingled with us and exists in us, it illuminates the soul from within.³¹

Clearly the hesychist position stood counter to the theology of scholasticism.

In the year 1330 A.D., Mount Athos had a visitor, a Greek monk from Calabria, Italy, who was already an established scholar, named Varlaam. Varlaam was extremely outspoken and became caught up in the theological debate of knowledge and experience. He was opposed to the hesychist platform,³² as education was more important than ascetic labours and contemplative prayer.³³ Human knowledge, he believed, was a gift from God, and more valuable than experience of the saints, the apostles and the prophets.³⁴ Having excluded direct knowledge of God, he viewed the experience of "light" as merely

²⁷Ware, 70. This foundation allowed experience to avoid the speculative and individualistic tendencies prevalent within scholastic theology.

²⁸Saint John of Damascus stated, "God is infinite and incomprehensible and all that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility. . . .He is above all existing things, nay even existence itself. As quoted from Ware, 63. In this manner, God is still God, greater than all of His creation, and yet immutable while interacting with His creation. Thus God, through His energies, enters into communion with us, bestowing grace upon his objects by manifestation of light. Cf. Ware, 68.

²⁹Throughout history certain holy people (for example, Moses, Anthony the Great, and Colmcille {also known as Columba}) of God have experienced and exuded a light which the senses could experience.

³⁰Nassif, 25.

³¹Ibid., 22.

³²This opposition was in part due to the influence of ideas arising out of the west, both humanism and rationalism. Cf. Steenberg.

³³Ibid.

³⁴"Gregory Palamas." In Orthodox Wiki. Accessed from [www.orthodoxwiki.org/Gregory Palamas](http://www.orthodoxwiki.org/Gregory_Palamas) , 3/15/2011.

a created phenomenon.³⁵ Further, Varlaam would declare that God can only be known through philosophy and mental faculties; thus the theologian is not one who prays, but one who thinks.³⁶

Varlaam was not only opinionated, but he also regarded himself as one with the mandate of confronting the hesychist. The monks were not equipped to counter the persuasive tendencies of Varlaam, or his prolonged attacks. With that in mind, Saint Gregory of Palamas, as an unwilling servant, could not do any other than defend the truthfulness of Hesychism and the errors of rationalism propagated by scholasticism.

Palamas was born in 1296 A.D. and at the age of 20 joined the monastic orders.³⁷ Ten years later Gregory would be ordained as a Priest.³⁸ He had previously studied Greek philosophy, but the concept of abstract theology made little impact upon his studies.³⁹ True theology was, “the work of life and the creative solution of vital problems . . . and all genuine theology is mystical at the root, since it is primarily of religious experience.”⁴⁰ As the Church is the pillar and foundation of truth, Palamas based his interaction with the Greek philosophers of antiquity, by their agreement to the confessions of the Church. Specifically, the Greek authors were only beneficial if they could bring clearer understanding to the truths of the Church.⁴¹ With this foundation, Palamas could thus refer to philosophy, and yet remain unmoved by it, for they did not define his own experiences.⁴² As revelation and experience was the light of the soul,⁴³

³⁵Ware, 69. Cf. also “How can an intimate communion of man with the Divine be achievable through prayer, since the Divine is transcendent and ‘dwelling in unapproachable light’ (I Timothy 5:16)?” Quoted from Nassif, 24.

³⁶Nassif, 24. Varlaam would go so far as to regard the mental acts of the monastics on Mount Athos as heretical, claiming that the *nous* is not at the interior of the heart, but outside of the body. Cf. also, Synaxarion, trans. Father S. Janos (www.saintjohnwonderworker.org, accessed 2006), November 14/27. And, “St. Gregory Palamas As A Hagiorite”, 7.

³⁷Synaxarion. Also cf. Nassif, 22.

³⁸Nassif, 24.

³⁹Ibid., 23.

⁴⁰Schmemmann, 235.

⁴¹Steenberg.

⁴²Schmemmann, 236.

⁴³“St. Gregory Palamas As A Hagiorite”, 7.

. . .Deity is goodness itself, true mercy and an abyss of loving bounty – or, rather, He is that which embraces and contains this abyss, since He transcends every name that is named and everything we can conceive – we can receive mercy only by union with Him. We unite ourselves to Him, in so far as this is possible, by participating in the godlike virtues and by entering into communion with Him through prayer and praise. Because the virtues are similitudes of God, the [to] participate in them puts us in a fit state to receive Deity, yet it does not actually unite us to Him.⁴⁴

If such is true, then the, “prophets had greater knowledge of God because they saw, knew and communed with God.”⁴⁵ This put Palamas in opposition to Varlaam and in so doing brought him to the forefront in defense of Hesychism, with the writing of several tracts including, *Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychists* (1338 A.D.) and *Svyatorsk or Hagioritic Tomos* (1340 A.D.)⁴⁶

Varlaam and Palamas both gave their assents for a Church Council to settle the issue, with the council opening with a debate between the two parties in *Hagia Sophia* Church in Constantinople, May 1341 A.D. A decision was not long in coming, for on May 27, the council sided with Palamas in defending the truthfulness of God’s inapproachable essence, but approachable in His energies.⁴⁷ Soon political posturing and the hostility of the state governing powers would exhibit hostilities towards Palamas,⁴⁸ but that is for another time. A total of six councils were called⁴⁹ and all were in agreement with the faith witnessed by Palamas. With the declaration by the Church, the Church now had the tools and resources in hand to counter the further developments of rationalism into the coming centuries, as soon the dark cloud of the Turks would descend upon the eastern empire.

The west associated the image of God with the intellect, while in the east God worked through Palamas to reinforce the importance of communing with God. The intellect alone cannot sustain either

⁴⁴“Gregory Palamas” In Orthodox Wiki.

⁴⁵Ibid. Cf. also “St. Gregory Palamas As A Hagiorite,” 7.

⁴⁶Synaxarion.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Several councils (one in May, 1342 and another in May through July, 1347) were formed to mute his influence and jail him for four years. Cf. Steenberg.

⁴⁹May 1341; June 1341; February 1, 1347; August 1347; The Council of Blachernae of May, June, August, 1351(which would declare that Hesychism was the true expression of the Church’s faith, Cf. Nassif, 25 and Schmemmann, 236); and the council that met in 1368, whereby Gregory Palamas was sainted.

faith, or the Church. Despite much opposition, Saint Gregory Palamas stood true to the faith⁵⁰ against both the western tendencies and those of the Byzantine circle. It was not enough just to talk about faith; theology had to be of the type that grasped the whole person and transformed them. The Hesychist experience became well known and practised. This would prepare the Church for its survival during the dark times. What greater expression could the Church give in gratitude to God for the service of such an extraordinary individual than the bestowing of sainthood upon such a one who was faithful to the Divine Will and the provider of an antidote for scholasticism?

⁵⁰This was in contrast to the western experience which could disconnect thought from action. For instance, despite the ill treatment at the hands of Varlaam, and others, Gregory continued to express love and peace, repentance and forgiveness. Cf. "St. Gregory Palamas As A Hagiorite", 6. Palamas also desired the reconciliation of the Empire and the Church, and regarded himself as a peacemaker in the process. Cf. Steenberg.

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