

Mount Athos and Perspectives on Eastern Orthodox Monasticism

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Abstract

Spirituality of Mount Athos had a tremendous impact on the development of Monasticism in the Orthodox tradition. The Hesychastic Controversy of 14th century Byzantium and the Theology of the Uncreated Light can be considered as miles stones in its formative period. The attitude and the relationship of Athos with the female gender can be traced back to its historical developmental stages. The Athonite perspectives have noticeable dissimilarities with the Western Monasticism due the later developments taken place in the political and religious fields of the Western world.

Introduction

Mount Athos, the Garden of the Mother of God as it is known to its inhabitants, is located on the third eastern peninsula of Chalcidice in Macedonia. The Holy Mountain, as it is also called, has been the oldest monastic republic still in existence, the spiritual heart of Eastern Orthodox Monasticism, perhaps the most sacred and mysterious place in Greece; an autonomous republic completely dedicated to prayer and worship of God where no woman can set foot because of the medieval *abaton*, the tradition of exclusion of women and female domestic animals. According to the Athonite tradition¹, when the *Theotokos* visited

1 The Athonite tradition says that after the Ascension of Jesus His mother accepted an invitation to visit Lazarus, who was the bishop of Kition in Cyprus. Sailing to Cyprus her ship drifted by a bad storm and when it finally came to land, it was on the east coast of Mount Athos, near where the monastery of Iviron stands today.

Athos, after the Ascension of Jesus, she blessed its pagan inhabitants and after that they abandoned their pagan practices and were converted to Christianity. Since then she has been the patron and protector of Mount Athos (Speake 2002:17-18).

Historical documents testify that in the early part of the 9th century a famous hermit called St Peter the Athonite lived in a hermitage on Mount Athos for approximately fifty years. However, there are historians who argue that hermits had been living at the northern end of Athos peninsula even during the middle of the 8th century because of the Iconoclastic Controversy in the Byzantine Empire (Speake 2002:39; Morris 1994:37-39). The first organised Cenobium was officially established in 963 when a monk named Athanasius built the Monastery of Great Lavra with the support of his friend and Emperor Nikephoros Phokas. The Athanasian *lavra* was not a *lavra* of the older Palestinian type but a true *koinobion*. However, in his monastery Athanasius allowed a place for the eremitic or hesychast vocation for certain monks (Ware 1994:3-15). During the centuries that followed, especially from the end of 10th century up to 1204 with the Fourth Crusade, the number of monasteries on Mount Athos increased significantly. As per various accounts there were 180 to 300 monasteries of different size and character. The Latin occupation of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade proved disastrous to the Athonite republic since the Latins controlled Mount Athos as well until 1261 (Speake 2002:68-9).

Hesychastic Controversy and the Theology of the Uncreated Light

Mount Athos and its monks came to prominence and became well-known on account of a historic event that took place in the 14th century known as 'The Hesychastic² Controversy' - a debate that took place between the Athonite representative Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), and a Greco-Italian monk named Barlaam the Calabrian. The theology of the Uncreated Light was the central topic of contention in this legendary conflict. Orthodox Church reveres Gregory Palamas as the greatest Byzantine theologian and saint of the 14th century. Gregory is well known for his profound reflections on the relationship between the uncreated light and the created matter. Gregory was born into a devout family in Constantinople in the year 1296 and he grew up in

The Virgin was so enchanted by the place that she requested her Son to grant her this land as her personal domain (see Speake 2002:17-18).

2 The term 'hesychia' etymologically means peace, concentration or being still. The title 'hesychast' was also in use as a synonym for a hermit who lives alone, as opposed to a cenobite. Here, the term 'hesychast' refers to one who adheres to the particular monastic spirituality which Gregory Palamas defends (see Kallistos Ware 2000:89-92).

the court of the Emperor Andronicus II Palaeologos. He received his education at the imperial university because of his father's position there (Meyendorff 1983:5).

However, under the influence of the hesychast bishop Theoleptos of Philadelphia, Gregory refused the secular life and around 1316 he decided to enter the monastic life at the age of twenty. He was ordained priest in 1326 at the age of thirty. He spent most of his time on Mount Athos as *hegoumenos* of the monastery of *Esphigmenou* in northern Athos. He lived in utter seclusion in the hermitage of St Sabbas near the Great Lavra returning to the monastery only at weekends to celebrate the liturgy with his fellow Athonites. However, due to the hesychast controversy that arose at that time because of the arrival of Barlaam to Constantinople, Palamas came to the defence of the monks. From that time onwards he had to confront the personality of Barlaam as well as his ideas writing many treatises and letters and finally his famous *Triads* (Cazabonne 2002:303-307). Gregory's monastic life and vocation remained rooted in the spiritual tradition known as *hesychasm* taught to him by his elder Nicodemus. By the time Gregory encountered the Greco-Italian philosopher Barlaam in 1334, he was already acknowledged as one of hesychasm's leading representatives (Russel 2009).

Barlaam belonged to the Greek Orthodox minority of Calabria in southern Italy where he grew up and received his early formation. Although born and brought up in Italy, Barlaam regarded himself as a faithful son of the Orthodox Church. At the same time he was a 'humanist' in approach, deeply imbued with that new spirit of the Renaissance which was already generating excitement in the West (Cunliffe-Jones 2006:219). In the view of Meyendorff Palamas - Barlaam controversy was a mere intra-Byzantine methodological conflict. Meyendorff also saw Barlaam as a 'Nominalist' and therefore excluded any direct Latin influence on him during the time of the controversy (Flogaus 1998:3-5). A similar stance is taken by Kallistos Ware who claims that "the controversy of Hesychasm is not an expression of disagreement between Greek and Latin theologians as it is often portrayed, but rather an internal discussion between Greek theologians on how Dionysius the Areopagite should be interpreted" (Ware 1986:249). Thus, according to the views of the above scholars, the debate between Gregory and Barlaam began as a disagreement over theological methodology.

However, Romanides and Azkoul hold a diverse opinion to the above said view (Flogaus 1998:3-5). They argue that Barlaam was a Christian

Platonist who had been theologically schooled in the works of Duns Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, and especially those of Augustine. Thus, Romanides and Azkoul rejected Meyendorff's conviction ascribing a Latinising mentality to Barlaam, as well as to his followers Gregory Akindynos and Nikephoros Gregoras. A similar view is held by some other scholars as well, like George Metallinos who argues that the studies of the last decades have shown that the controversy between Palamas and Barlaam was a conflict between Western and Eastern traditions which took place in a Byzantine ground (net. 1995).

Its occasion was the issue of the *filioque*. Barlaam devoted himself to the study of Dionysius the Areopagite, the Eastern doctor of apophatic theology whose authority was equally great in the West. He believed that he finally found the basis for the reunion of the churches alleging that 'since God is unknowable, why go on disputing about the procession of the Holy Spirit?' The Greeks hold that the Spirit proceeds only from the Father in contrast with the Latins who claimed that the Spirit proceeds also from the Son (the *Filioque*, the seventh century addition to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed) (Meyendorff 1974:86-9).

Although both men were united in their opposition to Latin Christianity's unilateral inclusion of the *filioque* in its version of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, "they were divided over the principles underlying their objections and, consequently, over the direction their respective principles would lead them when faced with the question of whether the human person can ever be said to know God" (Russel 2009, net). According to Nes, Barlaam has a rationalistic attitude by Neoplatonistic thought. "God reveals himself from outside of our universe, through Scripture and Tradition, and impart himself to the intellect (*nous*)" (2007:100). Deeper insight into the divine mystery is not possible to achieve in this life. Barlaam argued against *filioque* on the basis of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius that God is beyond sense experience and therefore unknowable and "all knowledge of God must be indirect and symbolic reality" (Meyendorff 1974:108) He insisted that it is impossible to make any claims with respect to the inner life of Trinity.

Palamas, on the other hand, claimed that 'God reveals himself from within, through direct giving of his presence in the heart (*cardia*). Thus, knowledge of God (*gnosis*) cannot be separated from deification (*theosis*)' and as Symeon the New Theologian says 'knowledge is not the light! Rather, it is the light which is knowledge', that is to say, true knowledge of God can be gained only through experience. The kind of knowledge the mystic aims is more existential than intellectual and in this case the

Hesychastic method of prayer seems as an aid for making the monk more open to the uncreated grace (Nes 2007:100).

The Hesychasts were accused by Barlaam as *omphalopsuchoi* (people whose soul is situated in their navel) because of the practice of focusing on the stomach in order to achieve greater concentration in prayer while they say the prayer of the heart (the Jesus prayer) *Lord Jesus Christ Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*. Gregory of Sinai³, who is considered as the master of this contemplative style on Mount Athos, emphasises the importance of this prayer by saying that ‘by pronouncing Jesus’ name, we feed on it; it becomes our nourishment’ (Behr-Sigel 1992:99). Also, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel argues that “the veneration of Jesus’ name had ancient roots in Western and Eastern Christian piety”. However, the Western interest in Jesus prayer as a specific practice is quite recent (after the Russian emigration of the twentieth century to the West), since this method of prayer was disapproved by Western theologians for a long time. The Eastern Orthodox Christians have linked Jesus prayer with the Pauline exhortation “pray without ceasing” and thus this instruction given by St Paul applies, not only to monks, but to all Christians (1 Thess. 5:17).

The aim of this method is to bring the mind down to the heart so that the entire man, a combination of the body, soul, and spirit, can be lifted towards God. This was not accepted by Barlaam who holds a negative understanding of the body and the material world. He tends towards Origen’s theories of the body by saying that the body is a hindrance to man’s spiritual development. Palamas, on the contrary, resisted saying that “such views belong to heretics who claim that the body is an evil thing. As for us, he says, we think that the mind becomes evil through dwelling on fleshly thoughts, but there is nothing bad in the body since the body is not evil in itself” (Nes 2007:101-102). The Hesychasts are not criticised for their spiritual fervour, but for their insistence that “the body, and not only the mind, could be transfigured by divine light and contribute to the knowledge of God”. According to Palamas it is not merely to know God but all people are capable of experiencing and entering into real union with God (Meyendorff 1983:4-6).

Moreover, Palamas, keeping the tradition of the apophatic theology of the early Church Fathers, agreed with Barlaam and accepted that God is indeed unknowable. However, while Barlaam stops short at the divine unknowability, Palamas goes a step further making a distinction between the essence of God and his energies. Although

3 It is often said that the Byzantine hesychasm has its roots to Sinai and so the ‘prayer of the heart’ was brought to Athos by St Gregory of Sinai (see Meyendorff 1974:56).

God is totally inaccessible in essence, he observes, He is at the same time communicable through His energies which are divine operations whereby God manifests, communicates, and gives Himself. So, the believer through deification becomes by adoption and by grace what the Son of God is by nature. St Athanasius declared even more precisely that "God became man in order that we may become gods"⁴. According to Irenaeus of Lyon "the Word became what we are in order to make us what he is". St Symeon the New Theologian says that "if the vision of God is impossible for us, it means that the Holy Spirit has departed from the Church. The vision begins here as soon as purity of heart is achieved". A similar view can be found in Maximos the Confessor who argues that "the pure in heart will see God... as soon as they purify themselves through love and self-mastery". Therefore, it is within the prime of this communion that the believer experiences the light of Mount Tabor which is for Palamas a factual and non-symbolic revelation from God.

Hesychasts were unjustly blamed by Barlaam for sympathising with the Messalians, a previously banned sect which claimed that "the essence (*ousia*) of God could be contemplated with the physical eye" (Meyendorff 1983:3-6). It is this debate that led Palamas to write three series of three treatises, his famous *Triads*, which Gregory composed in 1341 to defend Hesychasm against the charge of Messalianism. This work was a synthesis of the spirituality of the Eastern Monks in which Palamas distinguishes the divine essence and the divine energies claiming that "God is entirely unapproachable in his essence and simultaneously entirely participable in his energies" (Cazabonne 2002:308).

In June and August of 1341, Barlaam was condemned by two sequential Synods held in Saint Sophia at Constantinople as someone whose teaching was inconsistent to the Fathers. After that, he decided to leave Byzantium and return to Italy where he spent the rest of his life. The hesychasts triumphed over Barlaam's accusations, but with the sudden death of Emperor Andronicus III, Palamas had to face now the consequences of a civil war which erupted at that time. Also, Akindynos, Barlaam's follower and previous disciple of Palamas on Athos, objected the theology of the energies as expressed by Palamas and the monks of Athos. This incident led to the condemnation of Akindynos too in the Synod of August of 1341. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the sudden death of Emperor Andronicus III gave the chance to Akindynos to return to the scene. The Patriarch John Calecas was on the side of Akindynos

4 For this and the following patristic quotations see Alfeyev 2002:185-191.

and in 1344 Palamas was excommunicated and imprisoned. However, in 1347 the Empress Anne, supporter of Palamas, convoked a synod which finally dethroned the patriarch. The next day, Cantacuzenus entered the capital and as Emperor presided over a series of councils which vindicated Palamas and consecrated him Archbishop of Thessalonica. Four years later another council condemned the last opponent of Palamas, the Philosopher Nikephoros Gregoras. The *Synodal Tome* published by this council approved the doctrine of Palamas and since then it constitutes the official confession of the Orthodox Church (Mayendorff 1974:100-3).

Female Gender and Its Relationship with Mount Athos

Another important issue connected to Mount Athos and got highlighted during the last few decades is concerning the *abaton* (the prohibition of female gender) on the Holy Mountain. This prohibition of women on Mount Athos is the result of the continuation of the monastic rule of *abaton* which prohibited both men and women from entering a monastery housing monastics of the opposite sex. An example of the afore-mentioned rule is the 47 Canon of the Fifth-Sixth Ecumenical Council (Quinisext) of Constantinople held in 692 which states that 'no woman may sleep in a monastery of men, nor any man in a monastery of women'⁵.

As stated by Alice-Mary Talbot, the whole peninsula of Athos is considered "as one large monastic complex, and hence it seemed proper to impose a total prohibition on women" (1994:67-8). Besides, the above rule which was applicable at both male and female monasteries, certain other explanations can be found in legends and traditions, such as the Athonite tradition whereby Athos was granted to the Virgin by her Son as her personal domain and thus no other woman enjoy the privilege of being there. Furthermore, another tradition is linked with the daughter of Emperor Theodosius I, Galla Placidia. When she visited Vatopedi (one of the twenty monasteries today) and was ready to enter the church, a voice came from an icon of Theotokos ordering her to leave the mountain because only one queen was permitted on Athos and no other woman can set foot on it.

On the other hand, it was not at Athos alone women were excluded; other monastic communities too followed this tradition. We find something of this sort in the 11th century Chrysobull of the Emperor

5 Canon 47 of the Council in Trullo (The Quinisext Council) states that no woman may sleep in a monastery of men and vice versa. Also, Justinian forbade men to visit a female monastery and vice versa for commemorative services, as well as the Council of Nicaea II in 787 (see Talbot 1988:114).

Alexios I Komnenos which prohibited women to live on the island of Patmos. But, St Christodoulos, the founder of the monastery of St John the Theologian, was forced to change the rule so as to convince the construction workers to come to the island (Speake 2002:25). Talbot stresses that the ban of women at Athos was “an unwritten law since no legislation or monastic rule of the Byzantine era explicitly states this prohibition although there are certain implications in some *Typika* or imperial edicts”. For instance, the *Typikon* of Athanasius for the Lavra Monastery (973-5) does not refer to any ban of women but it states that animals of the female sex were not allowed because “the monks had renounced all female beings”. Also, the *Tragos*⁶, the *Typikon* of John Tzimiskes (972) regarding Athos, makes no mention of women or female animals, as well as the *Typikon* of Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (1055). Instead, the edicts refer to the prohibition of eunuchs and beardless youths. Only the *Typikon* of Emperor Manuel II (1406) is somehow more specific saying that “a woman wearing masculine dress and pretending to be a eunuch or beardless youth, might dare to enter the monastery” (1994:69).

It is quite reasonable to infer from the above that there is no direct prohibition of women at Athos; rather we notice only some implications exist in these decrees. However, in practice we see that the *abatons* continue to exist to this day. The answer, as Talbot observes, seems to be that “the principle of *abatons* was so ingrained in the Athonite tradition and universally respected” so there was no need for a specific written law forbidding women from Athos (1994:72-78).

The institution of *abatons* was respected indeed by women during the Byzantine centuries as it was later by the Ottoman Turks as well. In parallel, however, women were, in a sense, connected with Athos since the donation of property to Athonite monasteries, for instance, in exchange of the prayers of the monks and commemorative services, was a common phenomenon, not only by men, but by women too establishing in this way spiritual bonds with the monasteries. Occasionally, some monks were allowed to leave the peninsula in order to negotiate about these monastic properties or when there was a need for medical treatment. The constant references against the presence of female animals “so that monks might be pure in all respects and not defile their eyes with

6 It is called *Tragos* (goat) because it is written on a goatskin parchment (see Speake 2002:39-40).

the sight of anything female”, imply the forbiddance of women from Athos too. Talbot’s conclusion is noteworthy whereby the Holy Mountain is analogous to the sanctuary of the Byzantine church where only the priest may enter and no woman except the Virgin is admitted (Talbot 1994 cited by Liveris 2005:8-9).

Abaton, however, contrasts with a view held in 15th September 1997 at a meeting of the European Union by two women ministers from Sweden and Finland. The two women objected to the exclusion of women from Mount Athos as being “contrary to the principles of equality and free movement of persons within European Union”. On the other hand, the Greek delegate Alekos Alavanos argued that “such political correctness was not deemed sufficient reason for any changes”. His statement was supported by socialist Euro MP Anna Karamanou, the former General Secretary for Equality. Both politicians advocated the right of the Athonite monasteries to debar women from Athos. Their point was defended by most Greek feminists who acknowledged that “their exclusion was a cultural and not a feminist issue” (Liveris 2005:10). A similar view is held by Giangou, professor of the University of Thessalonica. He claims that “today this institution (the *Abaton*) may be viewed as being contrary to human rights and to the principle of gender equality; however, it maintains a legal, cultural heritage that is precious for the monk’s unencumbered way of living” (net. n.d.). The institution of *Abaton* was born out of weakness rather than spite against female gender. Besides, it has been argued by Professor of Ecclesiastical Law Ioannis Konidaris in his book *Mount Athos Abaton* that the principle of *Abaton* is applied “to all women without any exception. There would be a case of violation of the principle of equality, only if specific categories of women or only women meeting some specific criteria were allowed entry” (net. 2003). As the Metropolitan of Tyrolae and Serention and professor of Canon Law Panteleimon Rodopoulos declares that “Athos, like many other monasteries all over the world, is not merely a collection of monuments from the past, or tourist traps, but rather a living place of worship, contemplation and spiritual struggle” (2000:429).

Athonite and Western Monasticism

We have mentioned in the introduction that hermits settled down at Mount Athos from the mid 8th century onwards. However, the starting point of the organised cenobitic system on Athos took place in the 10th century (963) where St Athanasius built the monastery of the Great Lavra. Athanasius’s monastic programme was based on the Byzantine model of St Theodore the Stoudite (759-826) who, in his turn, was

drawing on St Basil the Great (d. 379), that is, he intended to apply the traditional cenobitic monasticism in its Basilian-Studite form with a difference, however, since, unlike Theodore, Athanasius permitted hesychast life to be practised alongside the cenobitic as it was on Athos before. For Athanasius, the primary work of the monks is the unceasing prayer. Monks must fight “as athletes and martyrs” and the cutting off of self-will through obedience to the abbot, is the only way that leads to Christ and holds the community in unity. Everything in the brotherhood is common and no one owns anything as his individual possession (Ware 1994:5-14).

It can be said that from that time onwards Mount Athos with its numerous monasteries and hermitages became and remains to this day the main Orthodox centre of ascetic tradition. At the same time, both the Eastern and the Western monasticism had its roots in the teaching and practice of the Desert Fathers. It is this common origin that is responsible for the relationship between Orthodox and Catholic monasticism in spite of their differences (Heppell 1991:23). Therefore, it will not be out of place to make a brief reference to Western monasticism too in order to discern its development especially after the 9th century.

From the sixth century onwards St. Benedict’s Rule became the main source of all European religious life (Dreuille 1999:93). St Benedict, being familiar with the lives of the desert Fathers, the writings of St. Basil, Cassian and others, used in his Rule several earlier forms of monastic life but in less severe way than that of Egypt and Syria (Huddleston 1999, net). By the 9th century Benedictine tradition became normative thanks to the interventions of Carolingian Empire. “The church wanted to ensure the maintenance of monastic standards and the state could use monastic houses as powerful instruments in the promotion of imperial power” (Burton 1996:11). After the fall of the Carolingian Empire, monasteries tried to be exempted from local powers, lay or episcopal, and to develop new monastic life. An example of this movement was the abbey of Cluny founded in France in 910 which was, together with other monasteries, placed under the direct jurisdiction of the Pope. The monks of Cluny focused on liturgy and meditation on the Scripture and on the writings of the Fathers. Although they strictly followed the Rule of Benedict, they did not include manual work in their daily life being contrary to the Benedictine Rule (Dreuille 93-96).

However, by the end of the eleventh century, monasticism in Western Europe started to change in various ways emphasising the importance of devotion. From the abbey of Cluny appeared new monastic orders which exerted great influence on the church. According to Benedicta

Ward, the ascetic spirituality of the new monks “became the norm for the devout Christians especially for the clergy; making the twelfth century a turning point in the history of western thought”. The new orders were seeking to return to the ancient eremitical tradition as they believed that it was the only valid form of monastic spirituality. Some of their characteristics were their desire for a simple and solitary life, poverty, fasting, penance, silence and manual work. The main monastic movements were the Carthusian order (1084) which adapted the ancient model of the Egyptian monks; the Cistercians (1098) who, in reaction of the very prosperity of the monasteries, wished to return to the original Rule of St Benedict following asceticism and a life of poverty; the Augustinian and Premonstatensian Canons who followed the Rule of St Augustine; and the military orders: the Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitalers whose main work was the protection and service of pilgrims to the Holy Land (1986:285-90).

Furthermore, the widespread teaching of the heretical groups, such as the Catharists and the Waldensians led to the creation of the last great monastic movement of the Middle Ages – that of the Mendicant Orders (monks dedicated to a life of poverty) – the Dominicans and the Franciscans. Their aim was both to eliminate heretics and to return to the Gospel imitating the poverty of Christ and his disciples as indicated in Matthew 10⁷ (Tugwell 1986:294-5).

According to Heppell, although in both the East and the West the cenobitic system had been established, Eastern monasticism had nothing equivalent to the Benedictine Rule because of the absence of a widely applicable rule. In the East, for example, each monastery held a specific foundation charter or *Typikon* regulating matters, such as of worship, the daily activities of the monks and the governance of the monastery. In spite of the existence of these charters, the *Typika* were very similar to each other since they were based on the Byzantine one, and the use of the same *Typikon* was not unusual. Another difference was the authority of the abbot which was not as strong as in the West (1991:23).

Besides, the development of the monastic orders in the West was facilitated by the papal authority which allowed the creation of daughter monasteries in other states dependent on the mother monastery. In the East, on the contrary, the common monastic *Typikon* (Rule), such as the

7 ...But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And preach as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying, give without pay. Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the laborer deserves his food (Matt. 10:6-10).

Typikon of Studios of Constantinople and the *Typikon* of Athos which was based on the first, although it was adopted by many Orthodox monasteries of the eastern Europe, did not create dependent relations between the monasteries since the monasteries of every local church belonged to the canonical jurisdiction of the local bishop. In the case of Athos, however, although it spiritually belongs to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the administrative authority is exercised by the Holy Community, twenty elected members one from each monastery, the Holy *Epistasia* whose president carries the staff of the *Protos* (the First), and by the Extra-ordinary Twenty-Member Synaxis (the Abbots of the twenty monasteries) which is the supreme legislative and judicial body on the Holy Mountain. Thus, in the Eastern monasticism the phenomenon of the different monastic orders as it was and is in the West is absent. Western monasticism was more involved in the social life playing a central role in the arts, education and even politics. The disapproval of monasticism by the faithful because of the secularism and richness of the monasteries, led to the creation of these new monastic orders which played an important role in the whole life of the Western Church (see Phidas 2002:435-6).

Conclusion

St Gregory Palamas clearly emphasised that the kind of knowledge the mystic aims is more existential than intellectual. He proposed the Hesychastic method of prayer as a powerful aid for helping the monk open to the uncreated grace and vision of God. Cleansing the heart by prayer, especially by Jesus prayer, the praying person attains the *theosis* (divinisation) by the *theoria* (vision) of God as uncreated light through his energies. Palamas' concern was to affirm the possibility and the reality of "direct personal communion with God Himself", that is, a real participation in His uncreated energies and not in His essence which remains inapproachable and incomprehensible. For the Orthodox Church, the Greek patristic tradition on the vision of God received its dogmatic formulation and found its fulfilment in the theology of Palamas – although for Western scholars it remains a debatable point – who set out the distinction in God between the transcendent Essence and the uncreated energies (see Fahey and Meyendorff 1977:26-33).

Athonite monasticism has been mainly *hesychastic* that is, far from society, engaged in contemplation and unceasing prayer being faithful to the Byzantine and Basilian model of monasticism. It is in this hesychastic mode of life that the *abaton*, the exclusion of women from Athos, can be understood. As stated by Talbot, this holy peninsula, being like a big monastery, "was and is entirely cut off from the

outside world” – though it is visited by many male pilgrims in the last decades – “and thus from the female gender; an Athonite ideal where Athonites must be totally isolated from contact with women” far from temptations and distractions in order to achieve their aim which is the purification of the heart and the union with God (1994:72). Apart from certain medieval developments, Eastern Monasticism has changed little since the 4th century to this day; the monks devote their day to lengthy liturgies, prayer – private or collective – and simple work. As we have seen, in contrast with the development in the West, Eastern monks do not belong to different orders with specialized functions, and the monasteries of every local church belong to the canonical jurisdiction of the local bishop. Again, in the case of Mount Athos the monasteries or *lauras* are basically alike in nature and autonomous in organization remaining to this day as it was throughout the Middle Ages, the mystical and theological heart of Eastern Orthodoxy.

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