

Second Essay:

Research Paper
ON THE DIVINE LIGHT

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towards
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“Medieval Eastern Thought, Doctrine, and Theology: From Chalcedon to Palamas”
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The objective of this paper is to address the topic of Divine Light in a way that, hopefully, supplements what we studied in the classroom of this course. It takes a wide-angel approach, sometimes branching into historical background of related issues; while sometimes focusing on specific devotional passages and/or prayers to make a vivid live picture of the topic. Finally, there is some comparison with a currently popular way to the “light” through a very different faith.

For that reason, secondary sources were used while avoiding the use of the primary sources studied in the class as those have already been covered in some good detail.

Introduction:

In most religions, and also in all philosophical systems animated by a religious spirit, the place attributed to light is so important that it is almost possible to identify knowledge of God with light, though "light" sometimes is to be taken in the sense of a metaphor and sometimes is understood in a real sense as a datum of religious experience. (1, p. 31)

In Christianity, not only Light is applied to God, but “Darkness” as well. So, a brief mention of “Darkness” is due here. “Darkness” language, as applied to God, takes its origin chiefly from the Biblical description of Moses upon Mount Sinai, when he is said to enter into the 'thick darkness' where God was (Exod. 20:21). It is significant that in his passage it is not stated that God *is* darkness, but that he *dwells* in darkness: the darkness denotes, not the absence or unreality of God, but the inability of our human mind to grasp God's inner nature. The darkness is in us, and not in him. (2, p. 169)

It is not, of course, that God as such is either light or darkness: In referring to this 'union according to energy', which lies far beyond all that man can imagine or describe, the saints have perforce used the language of paradox and symbolism. For human speech is adapted

to delineate that which exists in space and time, and even here it can never provide an exhaustive description. As for what is infinite and eternal, here human speech can do no more than point or hint.

'The divine darkness is the inaccessible light in which God is said to dwell.' There is no self-contradiction about such language, for to God 'the darkness and the light are both alike' (Ps. 139:12). 'The darkness is not the absence of light, but the terror that comes from the blinding light.' If God is said to dwell in darkness, that does not mean that there is in God any lack or privation, but that he is a fullness of glory and love beyond our comprehension. (2, p. 172)

According to their preference for the one 'sign' or the other, mystical writers may be characterized as either 'nocturnal' or 'solar'. St Clement of Alexandria (drawing on the Jewish author Philo), St Gregory of Nyssa and St Dionysius the Areopagite give preference to the 'sign' of darkness;

Origen, St Gregory the Theologian, Evagrius, *The Homilies of St Macarius*, St Symeon the New Theologian and St Gregory Palamas use chiefly the 'sign' of light.)The latter two will be discussed in some detail later in this essay.)

The primary basis for 'light' language is the sentence in St John, 'God is light, and in him is no darkness at all' (1 John 1 :5). God is revealed as light above all at the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, when 'his face shone as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light' (Matt. 17:2). This divine light, seen by the three disciples on the mountain - seen also by many of the saints during prayer - is nothing else than the uncreated energies of God. The light of Tabor, that is to say, is neither a physical and created light, nor yet a purely metaphorical 'light of the intellect'. Although nonmaterial, it is nevertheless an objectively existent reality. Being divine, the uncreated energies surpass our human powers of description; and so, in terming these energies 'light', we are inevitably employing the language of 'sign' and symbol. Not that the energies are themselves merely symbolical. They genuinely exist, but cannot be described in words; in referring to them as 'light' we use the least misleading term, but our language is not to be interpreted literally. (2, 170)

Although non-physical, the divine light can be seen by a man through his physical eyes, provided that his senses have been transformed by divine grace. His eyes do not behold the light by the natural powers of perception, but through the power of the Holy Spirit acting within him.

'The body is deified at the same time as the soul' (St Maximus the Confessor). He who beholds the divine light is permeated by it through and through, so that his body shines with the glory that he contemplates. He himself becomes light.

' *The Homilies of St Macarius* affirm concerning this transfiguration of man's body: Just as the Lord's body was glorified, when he went up the mountain and was transfigured into the glory of God and into infinite light, so the saints' bodies also are glorified and shine as lightning .• ". 'The glory which thou hast given to me I have given to them' (John 17:22): just as many lamps are lit from one flame, so

the bodies of the saints, being members of Christ, must needs be what Christ is, and nothing else... Our human nature is transformed into the power of God, and it is kindled into fire and light.

In the lives of the saints, Western as well as Eastern, there are numerous examples of such bodily glorification. When Moses came down from the darkness of Sinai, his face shone with such brilliance that no one could gaze upon it, and he had to place a veil over it when talking with others (Exod. 34:29-35). (2, p171)

The witness of the Divine Light in the Orthodox Church is closely related to the Hesychast movement, which in its turn was the subject of stormy controversy with the West. A full elaboration on this issue is beyond the scope of this essay, but given its importance, some mention of it is essential .

The Hesychast Controversy (3, p.71-75):

A major reason for the schism between East and West was the continuous growing further apart in their theology and in their whole manner of understanding the Christian life. Byzantium continued to live in a Patristic atmosphere, using the ideas and language of the Greek Fathers of the fourth century. But in western Europe the tradition of the Fathers was replaced by Scholasticism - that great synthesis of philosophy and theology worked out in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Western theologians now came to employ new categories of thought, a new theological method, and a new terminology which the east did not understand. To an ever-increasing extent the two sides were losing a common 'universe of discourse'.

Byzantium on its side also contributed to this process: here too there were theological developments in which the west had neither part nor share, although there was nothing so radical as the Scholastic revolution. These theological developments were connected chiefly with the *Hesychast Controversy*, a dispute which arose at Byzantium in the middle of the fourteenth century, and which involved the doctrine of God's nature and the methods of prayer used in the Orthodox Church.

To understand the Hesychast Controversy, we must turn back for the moment to the earlier history of eastern mystical theology. The main features of this mystical theology were worked out by Clement (died 215) and by Origen of Alexandria (died 253-4), whose ideas were developed in the fourth century both by the Cappadocians, particularly Gregory of Nyssa, and by certain ascetics of Egypt, above all Evagrius of Pontus (died 399). One can discern two trends in this mystical theology, not exactly opposed, but certainly at first sight inconsistent: the 'way of negation' and the 'way of union'. The way of negation - *apophatic theology*, as it is often called speaks of God in negative terms. God cannot be properly apprehended by man's mind; human language, when applied to Him, is always inexact. It is therefore less misleading to use negative language about God rather than positive - to refuse to say what God is, and to state simply what He is not. As Gregory of Nyssa put it: 'The true knowledge and vision of God consist in this - in seeing that He is invisible, because what we seek lies beyond all knowledge, being wholly separated by the darkness of incomprehensibility.

Negative theology reaches its classic expression in the so called 'Dionysian' writings. For many centuries these books were thought to be the work of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, Paul's convert at Athens (Acts xvii, 34); but they are in fact by an unknown author, who probably lived towards the end of the fifth century and belonged to circles sympathetic to the Monophysites. Saint Maximus the Confessor (died 662) composed commentaries on the Dionysian writings, and so ensured for them a permanent place in Orthodox theology.' Dionysius has also had a great influence on the west: it has been reckoned that he is quoted 1,760 times by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa*, while a fourteenth-century English chronicler records that the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius 'ran through England like the wild deer'. The apophatic language of Dionysius was repeated by many others. 'God is infinite and incomprehensible,' wrote John of Damascus, 'and all that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility God does not belong to the class of existing things: not that He has no existence, but that He is above all existing things, nay even above existence itself.

This emphasis on God's transcendence would seem at first sight to exclude any direct experience of God. But in fact many of those who made greatest use of negative theology - Gregory of Nyssa, for example, or Dionysius, or Maximus - also believed in the possibility of a true mystical union with God; they combined the 'way of negation' with the 'way of union', with the tradition of the mystics or *hesychasts*. (The name hesychast is derived from the Greek word *hesychia*, meaning 'quiet'. A hesychast is one who in silence devotes himself to inner recollection and private prayer.) While using the apophatic language of negative theology, these writers claimed an immediate experience of the unknowable God, a personal union with Him who is unapproachable. How were the two 'ways' to be reconciled? How can God be both knowable and unknowable at once?

This was one of the questions which was posed in an acute form in the fourteenth century. Connected with it was another, the question of the body and its place in prayer. Evagrius, like Origen, sometimes borrowed too heavily from Platonism: he wrote of prayer in intellectual terms, as an activity of the mind rather than of the whole man, and he seemed to allow no

positive role to man's body in the process of redemption and deification. But the balance between mind and body is redressed in another ascetic writing, the Macarian Homilies. (These were traditionally attributed to Saint Macarius of Egypt (?300-390), but are now usually considered to be the work of an unknown writer, dating from the first half of the fifth century.) The Macarian Homilies revert to a more Biblical idea of man - not a soul imprisoned in a body (as in Greek thought), but a single and united whole, soul and body together. Where Evagrius speaks of the *mind*, Macarius uses the Hebraic idea of the *heart*. The change of emphasis is significant, for the heart includes the *whole* man - not only intellect, but will, emotions, and, even body.

Using 'heart' in this Macarian sense, Orthodox often talk about 'Prayer of the Heart': When a man begins to pray, at first he prays with the lips, and has to make a conscious intellectual effort in order to realize the meaning of what he says. But if he perseveres,

praying continually with recollection, his intellect and his heart become united: he 'finds the place of the heart', his spirit acquires the power of 'dwelling in the heart', and so his prayer becomes 'prayer of the heart'. It becomes something not merely said by the lips, not merely thought by the intellect, but offered spontaneously by the whole being of man - lips, intellect, emotions, will, and body. The prayer fills the entire consciousness, and no longer has to be forced out, but says itself. This Prayer of the Heart cannot be attained simply through our own efforts, but is a gift conferred by the grace of God.

When Orthodox writers use the term 'Prayer of the Heart', they usually have in mind one particular prayer, the Jesus Prayer. Among Greek spiritual writers, first Diadochus of Photice (mid fifth century) and later Saint John Climacus of Mount Sinai (?579-?649) recommended, as a specially valuable form of prayer, the constant repetition or remembrance of the name 'Jesus'. In course of 'time the Invocation of the Name became crystallized into a short sentence, known as the Jesus

Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ. Son of God, have mercy on me (a sinner)*. By the twelfth century (if not before), the recitation of the Jesus Prayer had become linked to certain physical exercises, designed to assist concentration. Breathing was carefully regulated in time with the Prayer. and a particular bodily posture was recommended: head bowed, chin resting on the chest, eyes fixed on the place of the heart (There are interesting parallels between the Hesychast 'method' and Hindu Yoga or Moslem Dhikr; but the points of similarity must not be pressed too far.) This is often called 'the Hesychast method of prayer', but it should not be thought that for the Hesychasts these exercises constituted the essence of prayer. They were regarded, not as an end in themselves, but as a help to concentration - as an accessory useful to some, but not obligatory upon all. The Hesychasts knew that there can be no mechanical means of acquiring God's grace, and no techniques leading automatically to the mystical state.

Hesychast and the Divine Light experience (3, p75-76):

For the Hesychasts of Byzantium, the culmination of mystical experience was the vision of Divine and Uncreated Light. The works of Saint Symeon the New Theologian (975?-1035?), the greatest of the Byzantine mystics, are full of this 'Light mysticism'. When he writes of his own experiences, he speaks again and again of the Divine Light: 'fire truly divine,' he calls it. 'fire uncreated and invisible, without beginning and immaterial'. The Hesychasts believed that this light which they experienced was identical with the Uncreated Light which the three disciples saw surrounding Jesus at His Transfiguration on Mount Thabor. But how was this vision of Divine Light to be reconciled with the apophatic doctrine of God the transcendent and unapproachable?

All these questions concerning the transcendence of God, the role of the body in prayer, and the Divine Light came to a head in the middle of the fourteenth century. The Hesychasts were violently attacked by a learned Greek from Italy. Barlaam the Calabrian, who stated the doctrine of God's 'otherness' and unknowability in an extreme form. More to that later.

St. Symeon the New Theologian

SAINT SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN (975 - 1035? AD) (4, p.168):

He is the par excellence mystical theologian of the Church.

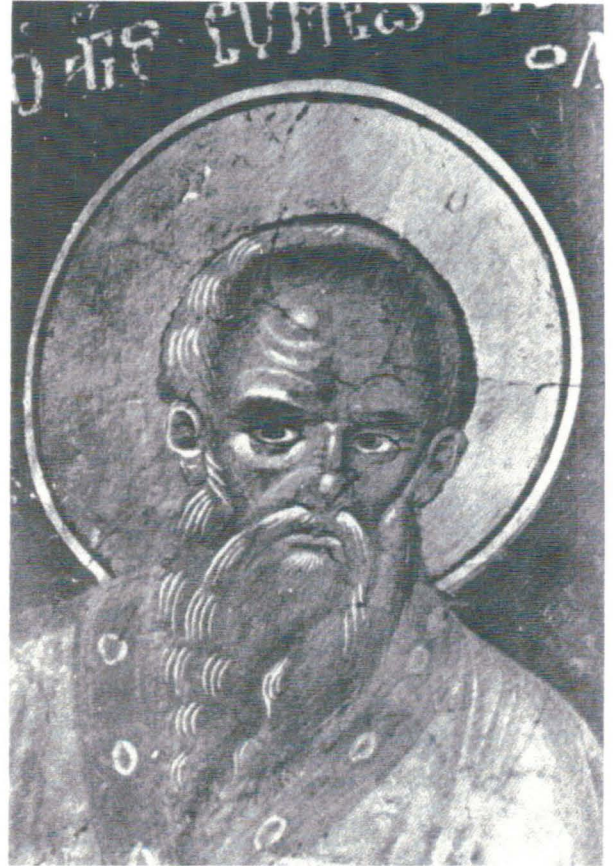
Born in Palestine, Saint Symeon went to Constantinople to study politics, but from the very first days of his life there he met a holy monk, Saint Symeon the Pious, who inspired in him the mystical love for Christ.

Living first the life of obedience, commandments and praxis, he spoke vividly on the need for love, light and immediate experience of God.

Among his numerous disciples, the most renowned is Niketas Stethatos who made Saint Symeon's works known. The most important of these are his "Discourses," his "Hymns," the "Practical and Theological Chapters" and many prayers.

Although he is considered to be a controversial personality because of the way he expressed himself, many think of him as the Father of Orthodox mysticism and the guiding spirit of Eastern Hesychasm.

He is commemorated by the Church on March the 12th (or October the 12th).



Here is St Symeon the New Theologian describing how Christ revealed himself in a vision of light (2, p.21):

You shone upon me with brilliant radiance and, so it seemed, you appeared to me in your wholeness as with my whole self I gazed openly upon you. And when I said, 'Master, who are you?' then you were pleased to speak for the first time with me the prodigal. With what gentleness did you talk to me, as I stood astonished and trembling, as I reflected a little within myself and said: 'What does this glory and this dazzling brightness mean? How is it that I am chosen to receive such great blessings?' 'I am God', you replied, 'who became man for your sake; and because you have sought me with your whole heart, see from this time onwards you shall be my brother, my fellow-heir, and my friend.'

In this vision, he speaks to God and God speaks to him. How could he see the unseeable? He saw blinding light. In one stroke, God has both revealed Himself, yet remained unapproachable. The paradox is resolved in one vision. Co-existence of opposites (very seeable yet unseeable) without contradiction

The following is his beautiful 'Mystical Prayer to the Holy Spirit'. In it, he elaborated joyfully on his experience, starting his encounter with the 'true light'. Both apophatic and positive, with numerous references to the scripture (4, pp173-176):

Come, 0 **true light!** Jn 1:9
 Come, 0 eternal life! 1 Jn 5:20
 Come, 0 hidden mystery! Eph 3:9
 Come, 0 indescribable treasure!
 Come, 0 ineffable thing!
 Come, 0 inconceivable person!
 Come, 0 endless delight!
 Come, 0 **unsettling light!**
 Come, 0 true and fervent expectation of all those who will be saved!
 Come, 0 rising of those who lie down!
 Come, 0 resurrection of the dead! Jn 11:25
 Come, 0 powerful one,
 who always creates and re-creates and transforms
 by your will alone!
 Come, 0 invisible and totally intangible and untouchable!
 Come, 0 you who always remain immobile
 and at each moment move all,
 and come to us, who lie in hades,
 you who are above all heavens. Eph 4:10
 Come, 0 desirable and legendary name,
 which is completely impossible for us
 to express what you are or to know your nature.
 Come, 0 eternal joy!
 Come, 0 unwithering wreath! 1 Pet 5:4
 Come, 0 purple of the great king our God!
 Come, 0 crystalline cincture,
 studded with precious stones!
 Come, 0 inaccessible sandal!
 Come, 0 royal robe
 and truly imperial right hand!
 Come, you whom my wretched soul
 has desired and does desire!
 Come, you who alone go to the lonely
 for as you see I am lonely!
 Come, you who have separated me from everything
 and made me solitary in this world!
 Come, you who have become yourself desire in me,
 who have made me desire you,
 the absolutely inaccessible one!
 Come, 0 my breath and life! Acts 17:25
 Come, 0 consolation of my humble soul!
 Come, 0 my joy, my glory, and my endless delight!
 I thank you that you have become one spirit with me,
 without confusion, without mutation,
 without transformation, you the God of all;

and that you have become everything for me, 1 Cor 15:28
inexpressible and perfectly gratuitous nourishment,
which ever flows to the lips of my soul
and gushes out into the fountain of my heart,
dazzling garment which burns the demons,
purification which bathes me
with these imperishable and holy tears,
that your presence brings to those whom you visit.
I give you thanks that for me
you have become unsetting light
and non-declining sun;
for you who fill the universe with your glory
have nowhere to hide yourself.
No, you have never hidden yourself from anyone
but we are the ones who always hide from you,
by refusing to go to you;
but then, where would you hide,
you who nowhere find the place of your repose?Is 66:1
Why would you hide,
you who do not turn away from a single creature,
who do not reject a single one?
Today, then, O Master,
come pitch your tent with me; Jn 1:14
until the end, make your home
and live continually, inseparably within me,
your slave, O most-kind one,
that I also may find myself again in you,
at my departure from this world
and after my departure may I reign with you, 2 Tim 2:12
O God who are above everything. Rom 9:5
O Master, stay and do not leave me alone,
so that my enemies,
arriving unexpectedly,
they who are always seeking to devour my soul, 1 Pet 5:8
may find you living within me
and that they may take flight,
in defeat, powerless against me,
seeing you, O more powerful than everything,
installed interiorly in the home of my poor soul.
Yea, O Master, just as you remembered me,
when I was in the world
and, in the midst of my ignorance,
you chose me and separated me from this world
and set me before your glorious face, Jude 24
SO now keep me interiorly,

*by your dwelling within me,
 forever upright, resolute;
 that by perpetually seeing you, I, the corpse, may live;
 that by possessing you,
 I, the beggar, may always be rich,
 richer than kings;
 that by eating you and by drinking you, In 6:54
 by putting you on at each moment,
 I go from delight to delight
 in inexpressible blessings;
 for it is you, who are all good and
 all glory and all delight
 and it is to you,
 holy, consubstantial, and life-creating Trinity
 that the glory belongs,
 you whom all faithful venerate, confess, adore, and serve
 in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
 now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.*

He summed up his experience with the Divine Light as:

“Think of a man standing at night inside his house, with all the doors closed; and then suppose that he opens a window just at the moment when there is a sudden flash of lightning. Unable to bear its bright-ness, at once he protects himself by closing his eyes and drawing back from the window. So it is with the soul that is enclosed in the realm of the senses: if ever she peeps out through the window of the intellect, she is overwhelmed by the brightness, like lightning, of the pledge of the Holy Spirit that is within her. Unable to bear the splendour of unveiled light, at once she is bewildered in her intellect and she draws back entirely upon herself, taking refuge, as in a house, among sensory and human things.” (2, p.30)

St. Symeon the New Theologian, held the extreme view that he refuses the name of Christian to those who have not had in this life the experience of the divine Light. (1, pp.68-69)

No wonder, his “Dismissal Hymn” reflects the Divine Light:

“Having received in your soul the divine illumination, O father Symeon, you appeared to be like a brilliant star in the world, scattering away its darkness and convincing all to seek after the grace of the Spirit which they have lost. To him pray fervently that he may grant to us great mercy”. (4, p.167)

The Theology of Light In the Thought of St. Gregory Palamas

SAINT GREGORY PALAMAS (1296 - 1359 AD) (4, p183)

He is the greatest Post-Byzantine theological figure and the founder of Hesychasm. He enjoyed an excellent education in his youth because of his father who held the position of counselor to the Byzantine emperor. However, being inspired by the monastic life, he went to the Holy Mountain (Mt. Athos), where he practiced strict askesis, exercise, silence and holy "hesychia" (stillness).

The false teachings of Barlaam, Akindynos and Nicephoros Gregoras forced him to elaborate and articulate the Orthodox teaching on the procession of the Holy Spirit and to prove the foundation of the hesychastic life in the tradition of the Church. His most famous works are the "Triads" ("On the Defense of the Hesychasts"), his sermons, his 150 theological chapters and his letters.

During the last years of his life, he was elected Archbishop of Thessaloniki where he distinguished himself as a loving and caring pastor.

His memory is celebrated on the Second Sunday of the Great Lent and on November the 15th.



The mystical theology of St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica, evoked stormy polemics in the West, which have not ceased after six centuries.(1, p.45)

"In mystical contemplation a man sees neither with the intellect nor with the body, but with the Spirit; and with full certainty he knows that he beholds supernaturally a light which surpasses all other light. But he does not know through what organ he beholds this light, nor can he analyse the nature of the organ, for the ways of the Spirit, through which he sees, are unsearchable. And this is what St Paul affirmed, when he heard things which it is not lawful for man to utter and saw things which none can behold: ... whether in the body or whether out of the body, I cannot tell' (2 Cor. 12:3)-that is, he did not know whether it was his intellect or his body which saw them. For he did not perceive these things by sensation, yet his vision was as clear as that where-by we see the objects of sense perception, and even clearer still. He saw himself carried out of himself through the mysterious sweetness of his vision; he was transported not only outside every object and thought but even outside himself.

This happy and joyful experience which seized upon Paul and caused his intellect to pass beyond all things in ecstasy, which made him turn entirely in upon himself, this experience took the form of light - a light of revelation, but such as did not reveal to him the objects of sense perception. It was a light without bounds or termination below or above or to the sides; he saw no limit whatever to the light which appeared to him and shone around him, but it was like a sun infinitely brighter and larger than the universe: and in the midst of this

light he himself stood, having become nothing but eye. Such, more or less, was his vision."
St. Gregory Palamas (2, pp. 176-177)

The defense of the Hesychasts was taken up by Saint Gregory Palamas.. He upheld a doctrine of man which allowed for the use of bodily exercises in prayer, and he argued, against Barlaam, that the Hesychasts did indeed experience the Divine and Uncreated Light of Thabor. To explain how this was possible, Gregory developed the distinction between the essence and the energies of God. It was Gregory's achievement to set Hesychasm on a firm dogmatic basis, by integrating it into Orthodox theology as a whole, and by showing how the Hesychast vision of Divine Light in no way undermined the apophatic doctrine of God. His teaching was confirmed by two councils held at Constantinople in 1341 and 1351, which, although local and not Ecumenical, yet possess a doctrinal authority in Orthodox theology scarcely inferior to the Seven General Councils themselves. But western Christendom has never officially recognized these two councils, although many western Christians personally accept the theology of Palamas.

St. Gregory of Palamas began by reaffirming the Biblical doctrine of man and of the Incarnation. Man is a single, united whole: not only man's mind but the *whole* man was created in the image of God. (5). Man's body is not an enemy, but partner and collaborator with his soul. Christ, by taking a human body at the Incarnation, has 'made the *flesh* an inexhaustible source of sanctification'.(6) Here Gregory took up and developed the ideas implicit in earlier writings, such as the Macarian Homilies; the same emphasis on man's body, as we have seen, lies behind the Orthodox doctrine of icons. Gregory went on to apply this doctrine of man to the Hesychast methods of prayer: the Hesychasts, so he argued, in placing such emphasis on the part of the body in prayer, are not guilty of a gross materialism but are simply remaining faithful to the Biblical doctrine of man as a unity. Christ took human flesh and saved the whole man; therefore it is the *whole* man - body and soul together - that prays to God.

From this Gregory turned to the main problem: how to combine the two affirmations, that man knows God and that God is by nature unknowable. Gregory answered: we know the *energies* of God, but not His *essence*. This distinction between God's essence (*ousia*) and His energies goes back to the Cappadocian Fathers. 'We know our God from His energies,' wrote Saint Basil, 'but we do not claim that we can draw near to His essence. For His *energies* come down to us, but His essence remains unapproachable'.(7) Gregory accepted this distinction. He affirmed, as emphatically as any exponent of negative theology, that God is in essence absolutely unknowable. 'God is not a nature,' he wrote, 'for He is above all nature; He is not a being, for He is above all beings ... No single thing of all that is created has or ever will have even the slightest communion with the supreme nature, or nearness to it. (8) But however remote from us in His essence, yet in His energies God has revealed Himself to men. These energies are not something that exists apart from God, not a gift which God confers upon men: they are God Himself in His action and revelation to the world. God exists complete and entire in each of His divine energies. (9)

It is through these energies that God enters into a direct and immediate relationship with

mankind. In relation to man, the divine energy is in fact nothing else than the *grace of God*; grace is not just a 'gift' of God, not just an object which God bestows on men, but a direct manifestation of the living God Himself, a personal confrontation between creature and Creator. 'Grace signifies all the abundance of the divine nature, in so far as it is communicated to men.'⁽¹⁰⁾ When we say that the saints have been transformed or 'deified' by the grace of God, what we mean is that they have a direct experience of God Himself. They *know* God - that is to say, God in His energies, not in His essence.

God is Light, and therefore the experience of God's energies takes the form of Light. The vision which the Hesychasts receive is (so Palamas argued) not a vision of some created light, but of the Light of the Godhead Itself - the same Light of the Godhead which surrounded Christ on Mount Thabor. This Light is not a sensible or material light, but it can be seen with physical eyes (as by the disciples at the Transfiguration), since when a man is deified, his bodily faculties as well as his soul are transformed. The Hesychasts' vision of Light is therefore a true vision of God in His divine energies; and they are quite correct in identifying it with the Uncreated Light of Thabor.

Palamas, therefore, preserved God's transcendence and avoided the pantheism to which an unguarded mysticism easily leads; yet he allowed for God's immanence, for His continual presence in the world. God remains 'the Wholly Other', and yet through His energies (which are God Himself) He enters into an immediate relationship with the world. God is a living God, the God of history, the God of the Bible, who became Incarnate in Christ. Barlaam, in excluding all direct knowledge of God and in asserting that the Divine Light is something created, set too wide a gulf between God and man (more on Barlaam below). Gregory's fundamental concern in opposing Barlaam was therefore the same as that of Athanasius and the General Councils: to safeguard man's direct approach to God, to uphold man's full deification and entire redemption. That same doctrine of salvation which underlay the disputes about the Trinity, the Person of Christ, and the Holy Icons, lies also at the heart of the Hesychast controversy.

Gregory Palamas was no revolutionary innovator, but firmly rooted in the tradition of the past; yet he was a creative theologian of the first rank, and his work shows that Orthodox theology did not cease to be active after the eighth century and the seventh Ecumenical Council.

Among the contemporaries of Gregory Palamas was the lay theologian Nicholas Cabasilas, who was sympathetic to the Hesychasts, although not closely involved in the controversy. Cabasilas is the author of a *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, which has become the classic Orthodox work on this subject; he also wrote a treatise on the sacraments entitled *The Life in Jesus Christ*. The writings of Cabasilas are marked by two things in particular: a vivid sense of the person of Christ 'the Saviour', who, as he puts it, 'is closer to us than our own soul'; and a constant emphasis upon the sacraments. For him the mystical life is essentially a life in Christ and a life in the sacraments. There is a danger that mysticism may become speculative and individualist - divorced from the historical revelation in Christ and from the corporate life of the Church with its sacraments; but the mysticism of Cabasilas is

always Christocentric, sacramental, ecclesial. His work shows how closely mysticism and the sacramental life were linked together in Byzantine theology. Palamas and his circle did not regard mystical prayer as a means of bypassing the normal institutional life of the Church. (3, p76-80):

His position within the Orthodox Church is summed up nicely in his "Dismissal Hymn":
"*Star of Orthodoxy, support and teacher of the Church, beauty of monastics and undefeatable defender of theologians, o wonderworking Gregory, pride of Thessaloniki and preacher of grace, pray for ever that our souls may be saved.*" (4, p.181)

Barlaam:

The Hesychasts were violently attacked by a learned Greek from Italy. Barlaam the Calabrian, who stated the doctrine of God's 'otherness' and unknowability in an extreme form.

It is sometimes suggested that Barlaam was influenced here by the Nominalist philosophy that was current in the west at this date; but more probably he derived his teaching from Greek sources. Starting from a one-sided exegesis of Dionysius, he argued that God can only be known *indirectly*; Hesychasm (so he maintained) was wrong to speak of an immediate experience of God, for any such experience is impossible. Seizing on the bodily exercises which the Hesychasts employed, Barlaam accused them of holding a grossly materialistic conception of prayer. He was also scandalized by their claim to attain a vision of the Divine and Uncreated Light: here again he charged them with falling into a gross materialism. How can a man see God's essence with his bodily eyes? The light which the Hesychasts beheld, in his view, was not the eternal light of the Divinity. but a temporary and created light. (3, p76)

Conclusion:

The Greek Fathers liken man's encounter with God to the experience of someone walking over the mountains in the mist: he takes a step forward and suddenly finds that he is on the edge of a precipice, with no solid ground 'beneath his foot but only a, bottomless abyss. Or else they use the example of a man standing at night in a darkened room: he opens the shutter over a window, and as he looks out there is a sudden flash of lightning, causing him to stagger backwards, momentarily blinded. Such is the effect of coming face to face with the living mystery of God: we are assailed by dizziness; all the familiar footholds vanish, and there seems nothing for us to grasp; our inward eyes are blinded, our normal assumptions shattered. (2, p.15)

The theology of Light is not a metaphor, a literary fiction lending an affected disguise to some abstract truth. Nor *is it* a doctrine, properly speaking, in the sense where "doctrine" means an intellectual system tending to replace the realities of experience with abstract concepts. Its negative, "apophatic" character *is* expressed by antinomic oppositions, which

we have tried to describe, and continues the theological method of the Fathers, who affirmed the fundamental dogmas of Christianity by always confronting us with antinomies: unity-trinity for Trinitarian dogma, duality-unity for Christological dogma .. In fact, just as the dogmas of Nicaea and Chalcedon-'which impose on us an ineffable distinction between Nature and Person in order to safeguard the mysterious reality of the Trinity and of Christ, true God and true Man-likewise the dogma of the real distinction . between essence and energies-imposed on our minds by the antinomy of God unknowable and knowable, incommunicable and communicable, transcendent and immanent has no other goal than to defend the reality of divine grace, to leave open the door to mystical experience, outside of which there is no spiritual life in the true sense of that word. For the spiritual life requires that the Christian dogmas not merely be confessed, but lived by the faithful. In this way of thinking one no longer experiences difficulties in accepting the severe word of St. Symeon the New Theologian, who refuses the name of Christian to those who have not had in this life the experience of the divine Light.

The theology of Light is inherent in Orthodox spirituality: the one is impossible without the other.

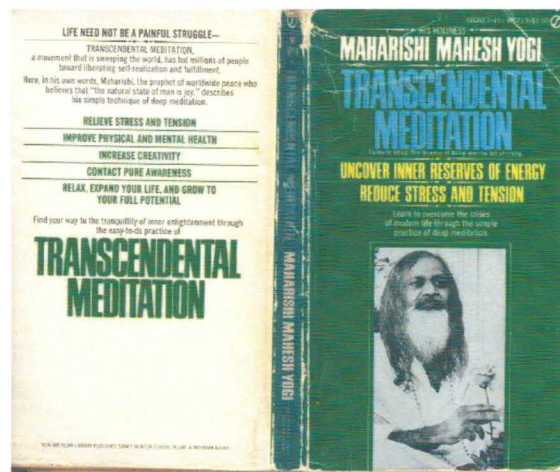
All the liturgical texts are impregnated with it. Are these only metaphors, Byzantine rhetoric? Or rather, ought what one habitually wishes to take as affected forms of a fixed religiosity, devoid of genuine speculative content, be taken as something living and concrete, as religious experience? It seems evident to us that outside of this theology of Light, whose outlines we have just traced, all the spiritual richness of the Christian East would appear to the eyes of a foreign observer as deprived of life, of that inner warmth which rightly represents an intimate quality of Orthodox piety. (1, PP.68-69):

1. "In the Image and Likeness of God", Vladimir Lossky, St. Vladimir Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 10707, 1974.
2. "The Orthodox Way", Father Kallistos Ware, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 10707, 1980.
3. "The Orthodox Church", Timothy Ware, Penguin Books, 1964
4. "Voices in the Wilderness", Nikolaos S. Hatzinikolaou, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts 02146, 1988
5. P.G. c1, 1361C.
6. Homily 16 (P.G. cli, 193B).
7. Letter 234, I.
8. P.G. cl, II76C.
9. Compare Maximus, *Ambigua*, P.G. xci, II48n.
- 10 V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 162.

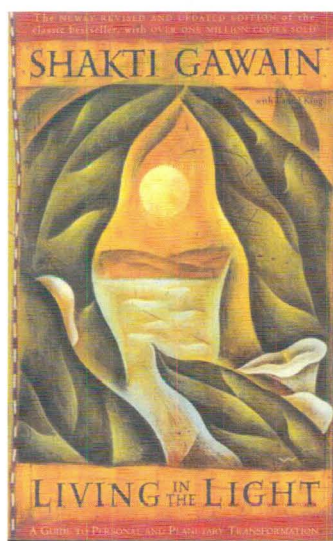
Appendix: Not all “Lights” are the same

Christian mystics don’t hold a monopoly over the “Light” experience. Mystics thorough history and all over the world reported “Light” experience. Some of the most popular practices today are of Hindu background.

Such was my first experience in “spirituality”:
“Transcendental Meditation” at the school of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi branch in Beirut. The “Mantra” was the way to emptying the mind from all concerns, making it ready to welcome passively the Nirvana as gift from the vibrations of the universal life. The first gift was the “cosmic orgasm” (nothing sexual), a joyful feeling of electric current in the spine: a gift for life that can be summoned at almost any moment.



Then, after several years of loyal practice, there came the “Light” while meditating: a bright patch of whitish-cream light fading into amber light at the fringes. It would last anywhere from several seconds to several minutes with a nice feeling of bliss. Yes, a bliss, but not an overwhelming one. And the light was without shadows indeed, but not blinding.



Years later, I saw a close representation of my experience: The light on the cover of this book by Sakti Gawain, a Scottish lady with Christian background who converted to Hinduism. The light in my experience was of similar brightness to that in the water waves, even though of a different shape.

Given that she is well informed about the light experiences of Hindu mystics, the light represented here is probably the upper limit of what can be seen this way.

It is without shadows indeed, but not blinding.

It gives a feeling of bliss, but not overwhelming joy.

It looks real, but it is not all the reality.

In contrast to that, a “True Light” experience that came, unexpectedly and undeservedly while being hardly at the fringes of Christian presence. It came to save my life. If it was not for it I would not be alive today. It was blinding light in a dream. But even while blinded it was clear (somehow) that it filled the whole space, where every point of it shone with unlimited intensity. It did not linger as the meditation light did. It was only a flash.

Yet it brought unlimited joy. It was the most REAL entity that I have ever seen. The only thing that is perfectly REAL. It did not leave any shred of doubt that it was everything that matters. Nothing else matters. The first time it came with a voice “Fear not” and a vivid movement of flickering wings that were the window through which the Light burst; the second time, weeks later, it came with a mysterious sound; the third time it was silent. Each time it broke through total empty darkness, through a different “window” yet it was the same light. Every time it made real changes in life: The first removed my incurable stuttering. After the second, Science lost its independence and started to look as only images of God. After the third, people started to tell me about their dreams (I have now records of hundreds of dreams of others).

Twenty years later it came for the fourth time, not through darkness, but through regular room light. It came through the merging of two translucent window lights; shattering both and emerging as the “The Naked Light” of the unlimited space where every point in it bursts with blinding light. That is when its difference from and relation with the Meditation Light became clear: The Meditation Light was Light coming through the windows of translucent glass; and filtered by whatever the color the fogged glass was. The Meditation Light got its limited brightness from the unlimited brightness of the True Naked Light passing through a translucent medium: A barrier of some artificiality that was hindering the passage of the True Naked Light.

This was the True Light coming totally freely Naked with all barriers removed.

And in the way it came, there was an implied advice which lead to many things that lead to writing a couple of essays on Science helping the faith. Those essays lead, through some unexpected coincidences, to joining the Trinity College. I am not sure what will come out of it; I just followed it blindly.

That True Light experience, while liberating in many ways, is not without its demands, that are sometimes quite harsh.... but that is another story.