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The Social Aspects of Fourteenth-Century Hesychasm

Goran SEKULOVSKI, Paris

In the 1940s, Martin Jugie noted that, save for a few old-fashioned partisans, ‘Palamism was quite dead as a doctrine of the Greco-Russian Church,’ and he did not think that ‘the sympathies of a few Russian émigrés would manage to revive it’.¹ The Assumptionist father was a poor prophet on this point. In Orthodoxy there has been such a resurgence of interest in the works and doctrine of St. Gregory Palamas that today Palamism occupies a central place in Orthodox theology and spirituality.

This interest, however, has often been limited to the factual and theoretical aspects of the controversy. Although hesychasm is the object of many works in the corpus of studies of Byzantine theology, its social roots and societal ramifications have been largely neglected. Despite this neglect, one cannot but be aware of the political dimension of the victory of hesychasm, even beyond its reception of conciliar approval. The controversy, having involved a great number of social ranks – imperial and ecclesiastic, lay and monastic alike – agitated all of society. It saw the disciples of the great hesychast masters rise to power, among them Gregory of Sinai, a contemporary of Palamas, and their immediate successors, including the future Patriarchs of Constantinople Isidoros, Kallistos, and Philotheos. However, this movement had been long in the making, and the innovative character of the Palamite apotheosis of 1347-1351 has often been exaggerated. The rigorist influence of monasticism had already triumphed under the Patriarchate of Athanasius I (1289-93; 1303-09), and in fact at that time there was fulfilled an already ancient call to reform. This very reform is the subject of our paper.

Rooting his social thought in an essentially monastic view of the Christian life, Patriarch Athanasius I felt a personal responsibility for the political and social decadence of the Empire and wished to reform society on the model of cenobitic communities as

¹ M. Jugie, *Le Schisme Byzantin* (Paris, 1941), 383.

ideal for a common social life. Athanasius has been harshly criticised on this point by modern historians like R. Guiland, who wrote that ‘Athanasius had but one error, that is that he regarded Byzantium as one vast monastery’[...]‘unfortunately, Athanasius was and remained an ascetic’.²

Athanasius was not the first to behave in this way. He followed in the footsteps of St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom.³ According to certain historians of Christian thought, St. Basil was the first bishop to unify the episcopate and monasticism in a social mission. He organized Byzantine monasticism and showed the close relationship that exists in monastic life between social outreach and ascetic discipline. Heir to the Fathers of the Golden Age, Athanasius was also the forerunner, of the fourteenth-century hesychasts. The ideals of Athanasius would serve as a model to the hesychast monks who, like him, after 1347, came to manage the patriarchal see. Although none among them had a temperament like that of Patriarch Athanasius, nor his zeal in the search for social reform, the spiritual continuity between him and them is evident.

The subjects of political and social order were inevitably included in the theological aspects of the hesychast quarrel. While the manner in which those subjects arose may have been accidental, they can in no case be treated as incidental. The new leaders of the Byzantine Church from then on had to tie their mysticism into immediate historical practice. From its purely monastic state in the fourth century, hesychasm came to shape a particular style of civilization at the end of the fourteenth century. In the order of ecclesiastical politics, the hesychasts tried their utmost to keep the Patriarchal throne in their own hands, in spite of all the secular changes occurring in the Empire. From their triumph in 1351 to the end of the fourteenth century, a time which saw seven different Patriarchs of Constantinople, only one of them, Macarius (1377-79; 1390-91) seems not to have belonged to the hesychast movement. The exercise of spiritual power over so many decades resulted in the predominance of hesychasm in the spiritual and political life of late Byzantium, thus assuring the status of official doctrine. No matter how much these hesychast leaders may have been influenced by Athonite traditions and anchorite

² Rodolphe Guiland, ‘La correspondance inédite d’Athanasie, Patriarche de Constantinople (1289-1293 ; 1303-1310)’, in: Ernest Leroux (ed.), *Mélanges Charles Diehl*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1930), 121-40, 130, 137.

³ The Emperor Andronicus II Paleologus (1282-1328) himself compared Athanasius to John Chrysostom. See Nicephoras Gregoras, *Roman History*, I.VII.1, Ludwig Schopen (ed.), CSHB (Bonn, 1829), 216f.

practices, and however much they might have deplored 'worldliness', they were nevertheless obliged to exercise their influence in temporal matters. It is this translation of a piety into an often political, sometimes administrative and always social form, which attracts our interest.

The corpus of Palamite writings reveals their author to be a contemplative who also knew how to be a man of action. Familiar with the Scriptures and the Fathers, Palamas nonetheless had a keen consciousness of the world and its needs. In this capacity, he turned towards the society of his times. His social teaching comes to expression in the best of his homilies preached at Thessalonica in the form of commentaries on the Gospel readings of Sundays and feast days.⁴ This Archbishop of Thessalonica appears here as a preacher, but also as a reformer. He was concerned not only about hesychasm and monastic spirituality, but also about every subject relevant to ecclesiology and to the social responsibilities of each Christian. A faithful priest of the people of God, Palamas worried greatly about the daily life of the people of the Empire, inquiring openly about social justice as well as civil order. It is significant that his sermons, which are different from his other writings because of their lesser theoretical content, rarely refer to hesychasm. Only two homilies, thirty four and thirty five, refer to the divine and uncreated Light. Despite several brief references to Barlaam and Akyndinos in homily sixteen, and several occurrences of hesychast terms elsewhere, the hesychast polemic in his sermons is almost non-existent. It would thus be erroneous to consider the hesychast theologian solely as a defender of eremitic mysticism and his works of interest addressed only to a closed circle of initiates. To do so would be to forget the centrality that he grants to concrete realities of ecclesial life and mission.

The hesychasts did not proclaim the mysticism of the Jesus Prayer outside of the Church, but only within the bosom of an ecclesial tradition, which was always their first concern. For Palamas, the point of hesychasm was communion with God and with men. Salvation is neither an individual affair, nor a simple manifestation of Christian life, nor a separated phenomenon. In his view there is no difference between monastic spirituality

⁴ The Palamas homiliary was compiled by his disciples and the existing editions include sixty three homilies arranged in the manuscript in the order of the liturgical year. Homilies one to forty were published in Jerusalem in 1857 and this edition was reprinted in PG 151, 13-550, completed again by two homilies (forty two to forty three) from the older edition of Christian Friedrich Matthaei, Moscow, 1776. In 1861, Sophokles Oikonomos edited homilies forty two to sixty three, thus completing the Jerusalem edition.

and the message of the Gospel, which implies love for God and for the neighbour. Palamas considered monastic community life to be fundamental for the organization of social life. This is because the former has the Eucharist for its centre, with the altar of the sanctuary prolonged or extended by the table in the refectory. This is what Chrysostom would call the complementarity of the sacrament of the altar and the sacrament of the brother. Within the community, individuals experience ‘the sense of life’ in Communion, developing integral social relations through coming together, and sharing ‘otherness’ as a function of their common life. The best image of this unity in diversity is clearly manifested in conciliar actions, which are produced by the *Ekklesia*, that is, by humanity brought together on the Trinitarian model. Christians, united by the Spirit and by Love, must ‘preserve unity with God and with one another, this unity being divinely procured for us by God, by the commandment of love’.⁵

Speaking of the necessity of community life for maintaining a strong society, St. Gregory Palamas tackles another theme, that of the value and importance of money:

Concerning the needs of the body, we satisfy some by our own means and others with the help of other people, by giving in turn our services. For one and the same person cannot at the same time be a wise man and farmer, tailor, weaver, builder, shoemaker, doctor, and competent in all other trades besides. And as each cannot by oneself satisfy all one’s needs, and since in the same domain all have, without fail, the same needs, an intermediary – money – was invented as a means to be used by society. By this means the excess of one person is limited and the need of another is met.⁶ Thus the farmer gives his excess to one who does not work the soil, and having received money for this, buys, for example, a house or a piece of cloth [...]. It is thereby that in the community the lives of all of us are bound to one another, and as a result, towns and cities are born where man is a social being.⁷

Man is a social being, that is why he organizes himself in a community, be it in the form of a village or an empire. Incapable of living or surviving alone, by and for himself, man cannot progress in a society that does not develop itself. Far from being nostalgic for

⁵ Gregory Palamas, *Hom.* 13, Sophokles Oikonomos (ed.), *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ ομιλίας* (Athens, 1861), 180. The translation of Palamas homilies in this paper has been made by the author.

⁶ The argumentation of Palamas does not differ greatly from that of St. Basil the Great: ‘if each one would keep only that which is necessary to satisfy his current needs and give the superfluity to the indigent, wealth and poverty would be abolished’. *Hom.* 6 (PG 31, 262-78) in Adalbert-Gautier Hamman (ed.), *Riches et Pauvres dans l’Église Ancienne* (Paris, 1982), 75 and following.

⁷ *Hom.* 48, Panagiotes Chrestou, Theodoros Zeses *et al.* (eds), *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Ἀπαντα τὰ ἔργα*, vol. 11 (Thessalonica, 1987), 136-50, 136-38.

primitive ways, Palamas recognized the power of civilization and the value of material goods. Money, useful for the exchange of goods, is thus transitory, separate from all absolute significance, showing on the contrary that wealth itself is not an absolute.

The hesychast theologian shows his concern for the salvation of all, rich and poor alike, and he describes the condition by which the rich can even become a model for the poor:

If someone is rich, famous, or a leader, let him not be troubled, for if he desires it, he can find the Glory of God. If he abstains and puts an end to his inclination to evil, he is able to achieve great virtues and weed out the disposition towards evil, not only for himself but for many others as well. He can act according to justice and with sobriety, and give an example to others who live in dissolution and injustice. Obedient to the Gospel and words of Christ, the rich man is able to submit disobedient people to the Church of Christ, by the grace of God and by his example, above all those who are lower than he, for he who is submitted wishes to be like his master.⁸

Even if the expression has too modern a ring, Gregory Palamas contrasts ἀνάστασις (the resurrection) with ἐπανάστασις (rebellion). He rejects revolt because all rebellion, like that of the zealots, brings about disunion and, by rupturing communion, opens society to every kind of evil. He emphasizes on the other hand the notion of synergy, according to which each man must work by his co-operation towards salvation, a salvation that nevertheless comes to him from God. Neither utopian nor pietist, Palamas developed a strong idea of action and collaboration in the terrestrial world, admonishing the rich, the wise, and princes: ‘if they wish to save themselves, let them force themselves and put all their efforts towards their salvation’.⁹

It is man’s responsibility to make of his individual destiny a collective one, social as well as religious, historical as well as eternal. These last words summarize the hesychast point of view on society, which problems cannot be considered autonomously, but must always be put in relation with our alienation from God. True society would be founded on the communion of God and man, this Kingdom for which Eden provokes nostalgia and of which the Church gives a foretaste. In contrast, the alienation of man from God, under the influence of the devil, ‘the divider’, creates an anti-society that ruins liberty and love by

⁸ *Hom.* 15 (PG 151, 180D-181A).

⁹ *Ibid.*

an ever-greater reign of anti-sociability, crowned as a principle. True love, communion as the sacrament of unity, appeared for Palamas in the Church, the Body of Christ. In one of his homilies,¹⁰ he stresses the fact that we, all of us, compose the unity and communion of the Body of Christ, where there are neither superiors nor subordinates, and where each person accords an ontological priority to the neighbour.

As a social reformer by virtue of his evangelical maximalism, Gregory Palamas discourses on society as a starting point for his Christian faith, with the spiritual growth of the people as its finality. This he does always in the context of his preaching. Thereby he links the political horizon with the verticality of transcendence – and, in all cases, he holds together the social body with its religious identity.

In conclusion, the evidence is convincing enough for us to affirm that the mystical and dogmatic aspects of hesychasm have most often been over-emphasized and in a one-sided way. For hesychasm, founding itself on prayer and fulfilling itself in dogma, was no less a social and political movement. The following facts appear to be historically inseparable: the new religious dynamism which the rehabilitation of hesychast spirituality sustains, the theological fecundity of which Gregory Palamas and his disciples gave proof and the social and political implications of this dynamism. These made the Palamites themselves the prime movers in Byzantium and all the Slavo-Balkan world. The sacramental realism which the hesychasts profess is strongly bound to a historical conception of the Church and the Church's role within the world. Consequently, the individual perfection of the monk is inconceivable if he does not simultaneously belong to the *politeia* - to the community of culture and politics – to which these sacraments speak and which they fulfil.

This fundamental and essential community life needs to become a model for social existence as a whole. For although the Church is not one with society, it is the Church that gives an eschatological dimension to history.

¹⁰ *Hom.* 15 (PG 151, 181A).