

Hesychia: An Orthodox Opening to Esoteric Ecumenism

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The smallest creaturely image that ever forms in you is as great as God is great. Why? Because it comes between you and the whole of God. As soon as the image comes in, God and all His Divinity have to give way. But as the image goes out, God goes in.

Meister Eckhart

When I first began planning this conference nearly two years ago, I never imagined that its theme would prove so timely. Had we any doubts before, the events of this past September 11th and their continuing repercussions throughout the world have proven conclusively that interfaith understanding is today more important than ever, and that no discussion is more urgently needed than that between Christians and Muslims. We know that during his captivity in Asia Minor in the 14th century, the Orthodox archbishop St Gregory Palamas, greatly impressed by the tolerance and kindness of the Muslims he met, became close friends with the son of the Turkish Emir, with whom he had many conversations, and in one of the letters which he wrote at that time, St Gregory expressed his hope that “a day will soon come when we shall be able to understand each other”.¹ Now, nearly seven hundred years later, one prays all the more for such a day. But what exactly is the understanding we seek, and what kind of dialogue are we called to engage in?

There are those for whom inter-religious understanding means doctrinal compromise. It is assumed in this case that religions are the creation of man, that dogmas are the lingering effects of a credulous and uncritical age, and that the surest way to tolerance and peace lies in the elimination, or humanistic reconstruction, of teachings that have served as the excuse for divisiveness and hatred in the past. Thus there are Christians, to pick the most obvious example from my own tradition, who insist that the only way to honor the convictions of other religious people is to jettison the idea of Christ’s Divinity, an idea often joined to the belief that Christianity is uniquely true and salvific. Because traditional faith in the Only-Begotten has so

often been confused with an ideology of the “only correct”, it has seemed to these liberal ecumenists that the dogma must be discarded, and it is no surprise, given the reductionist tenor of religious conversation in the West, that such Christians have enjoyed a certain amount of success in promoting this method of dialogue with their counterparts in other traditions. Jesus was a preacher and a gifted teacher, they say, but there was nothing about Him of a supernatural or miraculous order: no virgin birth, no walking on the water or exorcism of demons, and no physical resurrection from the dead.

Now of course, a reductionist mindset is not the only explanation for the success of such ventures, and I do not mean to be simplistic. Clearly a considerable measure of good must come from the discovery, however occasioned, that people who practice different religions from our own are human too, and we would seriously err, especially in these turbulent and frightening days, to dismiss or belittle any well-intentioned effort to overcome prejudice and xenophobia. But we would also err if we ignored the fact that dialogue of the kind I have described so far, besides being based upon a lie about Christ, cannot help but contribute to the very problems it aims to solve. For it is in the very nature of things that pious believers will seize all the more strongly upon their convictions, and with all the more unthinking fervor, when they feel themselves threatened with a betrayal coming from within the ranks of their co-religionists. The ecumenism of the de-mythologizers is certainly not the only cause of religious retrenchment. Nevertheless liberal dialogues and exclusivist monologues remain like two sides of one coin, and it is only the shortest of steps from the substitution of a purely human teacher for the incarnate Second Person of the Holy Trinity to the insistence that a conscious and explicit commitment to Jesus Christ is the only means of salvation.

Is there any way out of this impasse? Is it possible, in other words, for people who follow different spiritual paths to acknowledge the presence of saving Truth in one other’s religions, but without undermining the dogmatic foundations of their own? To refer specifically to the traditions represented at this conference, and to put my question in a yet more pointed way: is it possible for an Orthodox Christian like myself to respect Islam as a fully valid religion, revealed by the same God whom I worship, but without denying what my own tradition teaches me about the Divinity of Jesus Christ, even though (as we know) what Muslims believe concerning this same “Jesus, son of Mary” is so considerably different? I believe very firmly that the answer is yes. Indeed I would go further and say that an affirmative response to these questions is not

simply possible; it is necessary. For Christian faith in Christ, if genuine and if pursued to its depths, is inseparable from the double precept that we should *touch* but not *cling*.

I have in mind Christ's words in John 20. Speaking on the one hand to Thomas, Jesus commands him to stretch forth his hand, to "place it in my side", and to "be not faithless, but believing"; and Thomas's response is the greatest of all the confessions in scripture: "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:27-28). On the other hand, speaking to Mary Magdalene, Christ instructs her, "Do not hold me"—the Greek verb *haptô* means to bind something fast—"for I have not yet ascended to my Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (Jn 20:17). Taken together, these two commandments provide the model for every Christian's proper relation to Jesus: one is to reach out and touch Him as "*my* Lord and *my* God," acknowledging and embracing His true Divinity, but without clinging to the outward manifestation of that Divinity, and thus without binding Him in a way that would obstruct His ascent—and ours with Him—to *His* Lord and *His* God.

This double relationship between the Christian and Christ adumbrates, in the idiom of one religion, a more general relationship, found in all religions, between the outward or exoteric form and the inward or esoteric Truth which that form conveys, and it opens us to the possibility of a different kind of dialogue, one based upon a common understanding of the metaphysical essence of traditional teachings, and not limited by the letter of their dogmatic expressions. As many in my audience know, the Swiss philosopher and perennialist author Frithjof Schuon has described this approach as an "esoteric ecumenism",² and he insists throughout his many books that it is only esoterism which can avoid the dilemma that I was speaking of earlier. It is obvious, he writes, that the "narrowly literal belief" of exclusivist dogmatism, while "feasible within a closed system knowing nothing of other traditional worlds", has become "untenable and dangerous in a universe where everything meets and interpenetrates".³ The solution, however, is not the "false ecumenism" of the liberals which "abolishes doctrine", and which (as Schuon sharply notes) in order "to reconcile two adversaries . . . strangles them both". No, a "true ecumenism" must honor and uphold the importance of traditional dogmas, irreconcilable as they may appear exoterically, while at the same time appealing, on the basis of prayer and contemplative insight, to "the wisdom that can discern the one sole Truth under the veil of different forms".⁴

What this means for our conference will perhaps be surprising to some. It means—again I am quoting from Schuon—that “the Christian must be really Christian and the Muslim really Muslim, however paradoxical this may seem in view of the spiritual communion that has to be established between them,” for both parties, precisely for the sake of the mutual understanding they seek, are obliged to adopt “points of departure which are extrinsically and provisionally separative, not because they are separative or exclusive, but because, by their intrinsic veracity, they guarantee a true intuition of unity”.⁵

For those not familiar with the perennialist perspective, this is a subtle, but extremely important point, and it needs to be emphasized. We are to take traditional doctrines seriously, not out of some sentimental and ill-conceived nostalgia for the past, and certainly not with condescension toward those presumed to have a simpler and less intelligent faith than our own. One honors these teachings because they are *true*, and because they provide, each in its own way and within the symbolic and ritual context of a given tradition, an opening onto the Truth as such. It is only by conforming to “holy separation at the base,” Schuon therefore writes, that we can realize “holy union at the summit; one can attain to the latter only by first perceiving the element of unity in the revealed form itself, and by loving this form as an expression of the Supraformal.”⁶ What this implies, concretely, is that in a dialogue such as ours the Christian interlocutor can expect to reach a sympathetic understanding of Islam only by a continued insistence that Christ was indeed God incarnate, and not merely a prophet. The Christian must embrace this teaching with his full conviction, stretching forth his hand, like Thomas, in worshipful reverence to Jesus, and communicating in His divine body and blood, for it is by this means precisely that he will come to hear finally the words given to Mary, words spoken in the privacy and freshness of that first paschal garden: Do not hold Me back, but come with Me into the very heights of the only Real. *Lâ ilâha illâ’Llâh*.

Now of course, to place the central teachings of Christianity and Islam so closely side by side is bound to create something of a shock, and this juxtaposition will be especially shocking for traditional Christians, who will strongly resist the suggestion that the Jesus of the Gospels was Himself a witness to the Muslim *shahâdah*, and who may therefore find themselves from the start deeply suspicious of the dialogue I am here proposing. Surely, they will say, there is an unbridgeable difference between the belief that Christ was just one in a series of human

messengers and the belief that He is God, and they may well suppose that the perennialists have done no less an act of violence to their religion than the liberals.

I have elsewhere undertaken a doctrinal response to these criticisms and have attempted to explain in some detail how the formal dogmas of Christology promulgated by the early Councils of the Church themselves open up to precisely this esoteric equivalence.⁷ Nor, as I have endeavored to show, is this a question simply of some contrived and Procrustean compatibility. For unless we choose to be heretics, the Christian tradition forbids us to think that the Second Person of the Trinity is the same as the first, or that His Divinity was confined to the historical individuality of Jesus alone. On the contrary, in contemplating the mystery of the two natures in the single Person of Christ, we must remember that it was not the Father who was incarnate in Jesus, nor was it some particular man, but man as such, who was hypostatically assumed into God. Indeed we ourselves are that man in our essential humanity, and the God who took us into Himself was the *Logos* or Word, whose Divinity is itself derived from a yet more ultimate Source: “The Father,” as He Himself tells us, “is greater than I” (Jn 14:28). Jesus *is* most certainly God, and the perennialist would be among the first to defend the miraculous truth of that stunning ellipsis. But this does not mean that saving power was fully expended at a single moment of history, or that we should confuse the uniqueness of Him who was incarnate, *the only begotten Son of God*, with the human particularity of Jesus of Nazareth. There is only one eternal Son and one *Logos*, and “no man,” He tells us, “comes to the Father except by Me” (Jn 14:6). But nowhere do the creeds oblige us to equate His transcendent uniqueness with a singularity of the factual or temporal order.⁸

Today, however, my topic is not doctrine but method. I would like to look once again at the Christological question, so as to understand better the inward unanimity between the Christian and Muslim approaches to Christ, but I shall do so in a different and somewhat indirect way, by focusing our discussion on prayer. The goal is much the same, to encourage Christians, especially my fellow Orthodox, to keep their minds open to the possibilities of an esoteric ecumenism, but rather than examining the implications of traditional dogma as such, I wish to call your attention instead to the contemplative practice of the Christian East. “When a man seeks to escape from dogmatic narrowness,” Schuon has written, “it is essential that it be ‘upwards’ and not ‘downwards,’”⁹ for “truth does not deny forms from the outside, but transcends them from within.”¹⁰ As I shall suggest in what follows, there is no better way of

understanding what this transcendence or inward ascent may involve for the Christian than to consider that distinctive method of prayer, described in the *Philokalia* and other traditional sources, which we know by the name of Hesychasm. Of course, in the emphasis that it places upon the mystical and interior life, the East itself is already a kind of ascent within the larger tradition, an opening in the Christian carapace to truths of a less formal and less juridical order. But the *hesychia* which has been sought by its masters as the final goal of their Way points us even further upward and inward, to an opening within the opening, inviting us into the very heart of a distinctively Christian esoterism.

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It is customary for authorities on Eastern Christian spirituality to distinguish several senses of the term *hesychia*, a word often simply translated as “stillness”, and in doing so they sometimes call attention to one of the *apothegmata* that we find among the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. We are told that when the Abba Arsenios was still living in the city, he prayed to God, asking to be shown the path to salvation, and in response a voice came to him from Heaven and said, “Arsenios, be solitary, be silent, be at rest. These are the roots of a life without sin.”¹¹ Only the last of these imperatives employs a cognate of the word *hesychia* itself, but it is traditionally understood, from the way in which the teaching is expounded in other Fathers, that the practice of Hesychasm includes all three of the dimensions contained in the answer to this Abba’s prayer.

Corresponding to the three-fold structure of the human microcosm, there is first a physical or a bodily *hesychia*, which is apparent in the isolation of the hermit. “Be solitary,” were the heavenly words. Thus, on the material and most external level of our being, we are Hesychasts when we retreat from the world and live alone, exchanging our life in society, or perhaps even the cenobitical life of a cloistered monk, for the life of an anchorite. This is the mode of *hesychia* that St Gregory of Sinai has in mind in teaching that “the practice of stillness is one thing and that of community life is another”,¹² and it is in this same vein that Evagrius Pontikos (who was himself styled the Solitary) advises us, “If you cannot attain stillness where you now live, consider living in exile”.¹³ Second, there is a *hesychia* as it were of the soul, which one observes above all in refraining from speech. “Be silent,” said the voice to Arsenios. In this case, we become Hesychasts, not in taking flight from the companionship of other men, but in guarding our tongues and in deliberately withdrawing, whether permanently or at certain set times, from verbal communication with our fellows. It is to this dimension of the method that St

Thalassios the Libyan refers in warning that “only spiritual conversation is beneficial; it is better to preserve stillness than to indulge in any other kind”.¹⁴

There remains, however, yet a third kind of stillness, *hesychia* proper, suggested to Arsenios by the words “be at rest”—*hesychaze* in Greek. This, we discover, is a spiritual stillness, a *hesychia* corresponding to the level of man’s *nous* or intellect and distinguished (say the Fathers) by an inward state of complete serenity, immobility, and peace. By far the most difficult of all to attain, this truest and deepest form of Hesychasm consists in a solitude that is no longer contingent upon one’s location in space and in a silence that is independent of speech. Reproving the monk who supposes that his desert cave is enough, St Symeon the New Theologian stresses that a “stillness” understood merely in terms of “withdrawal from the world” is of absolutely no benefit “if we are lazy and negligent”,¹⁵ and according to one of the most famous of the desert sayings, it was revealed to St Anthony the Great, called the father of monks, that there was a busy physician living in the midst of the city who was his spiritual equal.¹⁶

With these and similar texts in mind, Bishop Kallistos Ware has remarked that “solitude is a state of soul, not a matter of geographical location”.¹⁷ It seems from other sources, however, that we would be justified in extending his observation to a further level, adding that true silence is a state of the spirit, and not a matter of audible communication. Thus St John Cassian, warning about the wiles we must be on guard against in our battles with the demon of self-esteem, calls our attention to the fact that “when [this demon] cannot persuade [a man] to feel proud of his display of eloquence, it entices him through silence into thinking he has achieved stillness”.¹⁸ Such an admonition would obviously not be necessary if silence and stillness were exactly the same, nor if keeping our mouths closed were sufficient for entering into the perfection of peace. But no, even as solitude is no guarantee of silence, so silence is no guarantee of serenity. There is instead yet another, deeper, and considerably rarer level of *hesychia*, where one is no longer distracted even by an inward interlocutor and where the space of the heart remains unencumbered even by the conversations that we so often have with ourselves.

As many of you know, the Fathers of the *Philokalia* often describe this third form of stillness as a freedom from thoughts. As we read their writings, however, what we soon discover is that the term itself “thought” has several meanings, and that there are accordingly, even within the domain of this profoundest kind of *hesychia*, several distinct degrees of freedom, and so depths within depths. At a first and most superficial level, “thoughts”—*logismoi* is the term in

the Greek—are taken to mean specifically bad thoughts or temptations, provoked by the demons, which attack a man through the two lower parts of his soul: either through the appetitive and desiring power, which when uncurbed gives rise to lust and gluttony, or through the incensive and irascible power, whence comes the temptation to anger. St Nilos the Ascetic seems to be speaking mainly of the former when he explains that “stillness will in time free the intellect from being disturbed by impure thoughts”,¹⁹ while in the Bible St Paul refers to thoughts proceeding from the latter source when he says that “in every place men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling” (1 Tim 2:8).

As it happens, however, this same passage from scripture, 1 Timothy 2:8, provides the Hesychast with good reason for thinking that true stillness is something still deeper, involving more than just freedom from the obvious seductions of the world and their resulting passionate thoughts. For what St Paul actually says in the Greek of this verse is that men should pray without *dialogismos*, a word which can be translated as quarrel or argument, but which also means any mode of dialogue, conversation, or debate, whether taking an external or an internal form, and thus—even more fundamentally—any effect or operation of the mind. In order to pray as he ought, it is therefore essential for the Hesychast to undertake a much subtler detachment and to cultivate an inward state uncompromised by the sense-impressions, visual memories, and other conceptual contents which are at once the causes and the consequences of discursive consciousness. No longer are “thoughts” to be understood merely as the grosser images of sensuality, greed, and violence that dominate the thinking of the worldly man; the *logismoi* from which one is obliged to escape are instead the very apparatus of conceptual reasoning.

Here again, however, we find that there is more than one level, and different texts from the Fathers call attention to different dimensions of consciousness. On the one hand, certain passages are focused primarily on thoughts which flow from our perception of the physical world and which are responsible for giving shape to empirical data. When your intellect “withdraws from the flesh and turns away from all thoughts that have their source in sense-perception, memory, or the soul-body structure”, says Evagrius, “then you may conclude that you are close to the frontiers of prayer”.²⁰ Similarly St Hesychios the Presbyter counsels that we should pursue with all our strength “that perfect stillness of heart and blessed state of soul” that comes when the mind is “free from all images”, a state—he is quick to add—which “is all too rarely found in man”.²¹ Meanwhile St Gregory of Sinai teaches that we have begun to attain to a state of pure

hesychia only when “the intellect sees neither itself nor anything else in a material way. On the contrary”—he continues—“it is often drawn away even from its own senses by the light acting within it; for now it grows immaterial and filled with spiritual radiance”.²²

As this last formulation suggests, yet another level of withdrawal is possible, for there remains a final movement of inward ascent, one in which ideas as such are set aside and transcended, quite apart from any empirical or sensory basis. In this case, the *nous* or intellect, which is the seat of man’s intuitive powers of apprehension and which, when activated through purgation, affords him an immediate knowledge of essences, becomes detached (says St Gregory) “even from its own senses”, and the category of *logismoi* is thus expanded to include every object of consciousness, whether originating from a physical or a spiritual source. One notes, for example, that when St John Klimakos writes that “*hesychia* is a laying aside of thoughts”,²³ he does not qualify the term: it is not simply bad thoughts, or thoughts arising from the senses, or thoughts which take the form of visual images, but thoughts in themselves which must be placed in suspension. This teaching is reinforced by St Hesychios, who calls his reader to a “stillness of mind unbroken even by thoughts which appear to be good”,²⁴ and St Gregory of Sinai takes the additional step of insisting that even thoughts which *are* good, and not merely those appearing that way, must be renounced by the true Hesychast, for “stillness means the shedding of all thoughts for a time, even those which are divine and engendered by the Spirit; otherwise through giving them our attention because they are good we will lose what is better”.²⁵

What these spiritual masters are describing—at this deepest level of stillness—is the operative parallel to the doctrinal apophaticism for which Eastern Christianity is so well known, and which of course is so forcefully expressed in the works of St Dionysius the Areopagite. According to Dionysius, “the supra-essential being of God” is at “a total remove from every condition, movement, life, imagination, conjecture, name, discourse, thought, conception, being, rest, dwelling, unity, limit, infinity, the totality of existence”, and it therefore follows, if we wish to approach this God in true prayer, that “we call a halt to the activities of our minds”.²⁶ Just as Moses entered into darkness in his confrontation with God, so must we “leave behind everything that is observed,” writes St Gregory of Nyssa, “not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees”.²⁷ For in this way, says St Dionysius again, “by an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is”.²⁸ Many passages in

the *Philokalia* underscore the necessity of this same final abandonment. “Do not think that avarice consists simply in the possession of silver or gold,” writes St Peter of Damaskos. “It is present whenever our thought is attached to something”,²⁹ however noble and true. Therefore, as St Diadochos of Photiki teaches, true poverty—the *faqr* of the Sufis—can be attained only through a mode of “prayer, deep stillness, and complete detachment” in which “a man sets himself utterly at naught”.³⁰

Here we come finally to the innermost goal of our quest. In order to be truly still, we discover, it is not enough for a man to live alone, or to refrain from speaking, or to resist temptation, or to close his eyes, or to think without images. If he wishes to pray without *dialogismos*, like a true Hesychast, he must become—in the words of St Hesychios—“totally empty of form”.³¹

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Schuon has said that in authentic esoterism, “truth does not deny forms from the outside, but transcends them from within”, and we have been attempting to glimpse what this inward transcendence might involve for the Christian by tracing the depths within depths of Eastern teaching on stillness. But transcendence is not denial, and we would seriously err if we supposed that Hesychasm is meant to culminate in mental nebulosity, or in a collapse of concentration and contemplative focus. On the contrary, as St Hesychios and other Fathers understood the process, becoming empty of form is not the same as having no outward form or support, and detachment from every object of consciousness must not be confused with an abandonment of consciousness as such. “Pure concentration also is prayer,” writes Schuon, a concentration which is “none other than silence”. But this silence can be of operative value, he adds, only “on condition that it have a traditional basis and be centered on the Divine”.³² The Hesychast masters were well aware of this principle, and while insisting that we should set aside every thought and go beyond every form, they never relinquished their fidelity to one particular thought nor their dependence on a central and indispensable form.

What I have in mind, of course, is their methodic use of the Name. As many of you know, the spirituality of the Christian East, in addition to its characteristic stress upon stillness, has also been distinguished historically by its practice of invocatory or monologic prayer. This is a method of contemplative orison, found also among the Sufis in their practice of *dhikr*, which involves the continual repetition of a single word or short formula as an aid to concentration. In

the case of Hesychasm, the word in question is usually the Name of Jesus, which is pronounced either on its own or, more commonly, as part of a brief petition often called the Jesus Prayer, consisting of the words (or some slight variation) “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” A prayer of this kind can be used by the Christian in a variety of ways and on several levels, not the least important being as a personal plea for help in times of danger or trouble, or as an expression of devotion and love for the Person of the Savior. But for the spiritual masters, it also has a strictly contemplative or yogic purpose, which is to serve as a focus and a point of stability in our efforts to overcome distraction and to eliminate thoughts. “Let the remembrance of Jesus be united with your every breath,” writes St John Klimakos, “and then you will know the value of stillness”,³³ for through this remembrance, St Philotheus of Sinai explains, you can “concentrate your scattered intellect”,³⁴ calming and unifying the turbulent and wandering mind.³⁵ In more recent times, St Theophan the Recluse has offered the same advice. If you wish “to stop the continual jostling of your thoughts,” he writes, “you must bind the mind with one thought, or the thought of One only”³⁶—namely, the thought of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here, though, we encounter a paradox. As we have seen, the distinguishing aim of the Hesychast method of prayer, *hesychia* itself, consists in a freedom from all conceptual forms. Our goal is a state of radical simplicity and purity, in which the mind is no longer occupied with the thought of anything, even (say the Fathers) something good and Divine: a state of utter openness and emptiness that only God Himself, and no conception, can fill. In order that we might enter this state, however—so say the masters of this path to the heart—we must deliberately retain the thought of Jesus. But how is this possible? Is it not a contradiction to think that we can become genuine Hesychasts while at the same time keeping ourselves bound to the form of His Name?

It must be admitted that in many of the Eastern Christian fathers there *is* a contradiction, and that in spite of their continuing praise of contemplative stillness, what we find instead in their writings, whether in the *Philokalia* or elsewhere, is that a sentimental and devotional attachment to the incarnate person of Christ has in fact taken center stage in their practice. There is little doubt, for example, that the purity of true *hesychia* has been severely compromised, or at least greatly mitigated, in the teaching of St Theodoros the Great Ascetic when he advises his reader to “think of the blessings which await the righteous: how they will stand at Christ’s right hand, the gracious voice of the Master, the inheritance of the heavenly kingdom”—or again “that

sweet light, the endless joy, never interrupted by grief, those heavenly mansions, life with the angels, and all the other promises made to those who fear the Lord”. For—this same writer concludes—“unless a soul is strengthened with these thoughts, it cannot achieve stillness”.³⁷ There is no denying, of course, that imaginative anticipations of this kind can be a powerful aid to a man’s devotional piety, and one can have no objection to the important part they play in the discursive prayers of the Christian, nor indeed to their presence among the provisional and preparatory meditations of the Hesychast himself. And yet it is surely just as obvious that such thoughts as those described by this saint, motivated as they are by individual interest and colored by scriptural and other traditional images, cannot but clutter and distract the mind when it is seeking to enter into the deepest dimension of stillness. Clearly they must be set aside, at least at certain times, if this final goal is to be realized.

But how is this possible if one is praying the Jesus Prayer? Petitions by their very nature are constructed from concepts, they pertain to objects, and they express thoughts.³⁸ I have called into question the advice of St Theodoros, but one might well ask in his defense how *any* man, even one who guards his imagination more closely, can pray the Jesus Prayer without thoughtfully considering the words that he uses and without allowing his attention to be shaped by their meaning. How am I to bind my thoughts by this thought without thinking about it? You may say that I am exaggerating the difficulty of the method, and that in demanding from our minds a thoughtless thought, I have put the matter in too elliptical and problematic a fashion. Consider, however, the words of St Gregory of Sinai: “Unceasingly cry out: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy’, *and* [he adds at once] do not allow yourself to retain any concept, object, thought, or form that is supposedly divine, or any sequence of argument or any color”.³⁹ But how can we do that? How are we to invoke a formula containing Christ’s Name without our minds becoming enmeshed in its form?

The answer has to do with what is meant by the Name. Preaching the good news of Christ’s redemptive death, in a much-quoted passage from the fourth chapter of Acts, the apostle Peter proclaimed that “there is no other Name under Heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). As the Christians in my audience know, this is a text often cited by exclusivists in defense of their belief that a conscious commitment to Jesus is the only sure path to God. In their case, the word “name” is taken to mean a proper name, and the Name of Jesus is understood to be the appellation of a specific figure of history, Jesus of Nazareth, without whom

salvation would not be possible. This, of course, is a perfectly legitimate and straightforward reading of the verse in question, for on one important and very obvious level, the Name “Jesus” surely *is* the name of Jesus. It is doubtless true also that when St Peter used the term “name” in this context, he was thinking specifically of the incarnate Son of God, the One who was “crucified, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 4:10). Nevertheless it would be very wrong to assume that this is the only possible reference of the term, and to conclude therefore that the Name can mean only, or even that it does mean primarily, a given human name of the *Logos*.

Those who would have us restrict the word to this single level of reference have failed to consider at least four telling points. They have forgotten, first, that “Jesus” is but one of numerous ways of referring to the Son of God in the Scriptures, many of which clearly bear a more universal significance than the proper name of a man. St Gregory the Theologian provides this partial list of Christ’s Biblical names: “Image, Vapor, Emanation, Effulgence, Creator, King, Head, Law, Door, Foundation, Rock, Pearl, Righteousness, Sanctification, Redemption, Man, Servant, Shepherd, Lamb, High Priest, Sacrifice, Firstborn of Creation, Firstborn of the Dead”.⁴⁰ It would obviously be absurd to suppose that the Divine Person thus described in these terms is deprived of His saving power when the specific name “Jesus” is not being used. The Name of Jesus, one begins to see, must be something more than these two syllables alone.⁴¹

Second, unless we wish to side with the heretical modalists, who suppose that the three distinct names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit apply alike to a single Person, we must admit that the name itself “Jesus” is not uniquely salvific, for, taking it strictly as a proper name, it clearly leaves *unnamed* the other two Hypostases of the Holy Trinity, upon whom salvation depends nonetheless, and whose own names must also be regarded as sacred. The Christian is reminded of this fact, of course, every time he prays the Lord’s Prayer, asking that the Father’s Name should be “hallowed”. It is of considerable interest to note, by the way, that at least one early Christian authority seems to have acknowledged the saving efficacy of an invocation based upon the Name of the Father and employed by the followers of another religion, who *never* used the proper name of the Son. St Irenaeus writes that just as “all things are subject to the Name of our Lord [Jesus Christ], so must they also be [subject] to His [Name] who made and established all things by His Word”, that is, the Father. “For this reason,” he continues, “the Jews even now”—that is, during Irenaeus’s time—“put demons to flight by means of this very adjuration, inasmuch as all beings fear the invocation of Him who created them”.⁴² Besides his own,

Irenaeus knew of no other orthodox religion than Judaism, but surely, given this ancient precedent, there is no reason for the Christian of our day to deny a like efficacy to the Name of *Allah*.

Yet a third point is this. Quite apart from the question of its proper or particular usage, the word “name” is often used in the Bible, not in reference to a specific person at all, but as a synonym for authority and power, above all that of God, and in the context of Acts 4, where the subject is the Divine saving presence that was embodied in Jesus, it is certainly this meaning that must be regarded as central. To say with St Peter that there is salvation in “no other name” is not to name Jesus uniquely; it is a way instead of underscoring His intrinsic Divinity. We Orthodox see this deeper meaning of the Name portrayed in many of our icons of Christ, where, inscribed within the nimbus surrounding His head, one finds not the proper name “Jesus”, but the Greek words Ο ΩΝ, meaning “the One who is” and referring of course to the Name of God given to Moses on Horeb (Ex 3:14).⁴³

Finally, there is a fourth reason for rejecting the claim that salvation is limited by the name itself “Jesus”, and hence for a methodical detachment from the Person thus named, and it is a reason which Orthodox Christians, with their stress upon mystery and the way of negation, should be quick to understand. We have said that “Jesus” is only one of the names of God’s Son, that the Father and the Holy Spirit have their own saving names, and that the word itself “name” connotes Divine presence and power, regardless of the given form which this presence might take. But we must also remember that the ultimate Source of Divinity in the unknowable Godhead, however many names it might take in the world, *cannot* be named as It is in itself. Although rightly praised “by every name”, says St Dionysius, It is finally best named “the Nameless One”.⁴⁴ St Gregory Palamas, among many others, concurs: “The super-essential nature of God is not a subject for speech or thought or even contemplation,” he writes, and hence “there is no name whereby it can be named, neither in this age nor in the age to come, nor word found in the soul and uttered by the tongue”.⁴⁵

It is still true, of course, that there is salvation in none other than the Name of Jesus, and the Hesychast is no less obliged than other Christians to accept and to honor this principle. But at the same time no Christian, least of all the aspiring Hesychast, should allow himself to forget that Jesus is not the only name of the Son, that the Son is not the only name of God, that God is not the only name of the Named, and that the Named is truly named by no name.

* * *

One well known authority on the spirituality of the Christian East has written that “the Jesus Prayer is fundamentally Christocentric. We are not simply invoking God, but our words are addressed specifically to Jesus Christ—to God incarnate, the Word made flesh, the second Person of the Holy Trinity who was born in Bethlehem, truly crucified on Golgotha, and truly raised from the dead”. This same writer adds, with specific reference to the Sufi practice of *dhikr*, that “a religion such as Islam which rejects the incarnation cannot be invoking God in the same way as Hesychasm does”, and he suggests that we should compare the invocatory method of prayer to a picture frame, while the specific name that one invokes in any given prayer may be likened to the image within that frame. “Despite the resemblances between the ‘frame’ of the Jesus Prayer and certain non-Christian ‘frames’,” he concludes, “we should never underestimate the uniqueness of the portrait within the ‘frame’. Techniques are subsidiary; it is our encounter face to face, through the prayer, with the living person of Jesus that alone has primary value”.⁴⁶

But is this really true? Is it thus, and thus only, that one may engage in this prayer? The teachings to which I have been calling your attention in this paper suggest otherwise, and I therefore find that I must respectfully disagree with this author. The inner emptiness which the Christian aspirant is encouraged to seek and the inner plenitude of the Name which he is taught to invoke prove, if anything, that Hesychasm and Sufism are all but identical.⁴⁷ Indeed, it is precisely because of the often remarkable parallels between the teachings of certain Eastern Fathers and their counterparts in other religious traditions that Christian exoterists, including those of the East, are sometimes mistrustful of the Hesychast writers. The Orthodox scholar John Meyendorff, for example, voices his concern about what he calls the “individualistic and spiritualized tendency” of St Gregory of Sinai,⁴⁸ and much the same reservation is expressed, more forcefully, by the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who complains that “the mystical teaching of Evagrius in its fully developed consistency stands closer to Buddhism than to Christianity”.⁴⁹ The criticism of Protestant writers often goes even further, of course, extending to the *via negativa* as such and thus to one of the distinguishing marks of the Eastern perspective in general. Luther was doubtless speaking for many others when he wrote that “Dionysius is most pernicious; he Platonizes more than he Christianizes”.⁵⁰

On the other hand, it is certainly true—and I have acknowledged this point already—that the writings of these same Fathers are at the same time strongly colored by a devotional

attachment to Christ's Person; St Theodoros, whom I quoted earlier, is by no means unique in this respect. In fact, as one quickly discovers in reading the *Philokalia* and other traditional sources, even the most apophatic of Hesychast authors do not always practice what they preach, and the method of prayer which they follow and promulgate remains, not surprisingly, a largely bhaktic one. Schuon has written about "the unequal and often disconcerting phenomenon of average Sufism", a Sufism that confuses first principles with "the categories of an anthropomorphist and voluntaristic theology", and we must in all honesty acknowledge the existence, in the Christian East, of what might be called by analogy an average Hesychasm, in which the absolute imprescriptibility of the Divine Essence and the operative rigor of a truly intellectual detachment are both sacrificed to the needs of a conventional piety.

My interests here, however, are not of the historical or textual kind. I am not asking the question how in fact most Eastern Christians have prayed, and my chief concern is not with how best to describe the spirituality disclosed in the surviving works of their major authorities, nor again with whether these writers should be praised or blamed. I am concerned instead with what is possible for the Christian seeker today, especially one who finds himself called to a path of knowledge and who seeks to understand the inner essence of religion, and with whether that Christian, without in any way denying the truth of his own tradition, may acknowledge the equal truth of a way not his own—perhaps even drawing from it an encouragement and nourishment for his own spiritual practice. I believe that he can, and the point of my remarks has been to indicate how the *hesychia* of the Christian East might help to point him in the right direction. Historically, of course, the Hesychast writers were not themselves interested in these questions, and most of them would have been just as resistant as many other Christians to the claims of another religion, and hence to the possibility of an esoteric ecumenism. Nor is there anything surprising in this, for as Schuon points out, "a man's spirituality cannot be held to depend on knowledge of a historical or geographical kind",⁵¹ and in the case of the Fathers, even those who, like St John Damascene and St Gregory Palamas, had contact with Islam, it is far from certain whether they encountered Muslims of their own spiritual stature, with whom they could have joined in a truly metaphysical dialogue. Nevertheless, for the Christian today, who lives in such different circumstances, and who *does* know about the mystical paths of other religions, the teachings of the Hesychasts can serve as a means for deepening his participation in Christ, while

at the same time providing the keys for inwardly transcending whatever limitations those teachers may have felt obliged to impose on themselves.

When as a young man St Gregory of Sinai was taken prisoner in a Turkish raid, I do not know where he may have gone or with what Muslims he may have spoken, or what his own spiritual aptitude may have been at the time, or why he entered the monastic life after being released from captivity. But when he tells me to “concentrate solely on the pure, simple, formless remembrance of Jesus,”⁵² I presume that he must have meant what he said, and that he is inviting me to enter into a method of invoking Christ’s Name which does *not* involve thinking explicitly about the incarnation—about the One who was born in Bethlehem, truly crucified on Golgotha, and truly raised from the dead.⁵³ To be in-carnate, after all, is to be circumscribed by a form, and a formless *form* is a sheer contradiction. On the other hand, a formless *remembrance* is still a remembrance. There is no indication that I should stop invoking the Name, which continues to serve as a support for my concentration and as a vehicle of Divine saving power. But I must do so, it seems, in a way that is deliberately detached from all conceptual contents, and thus from my thoughts, not only about the particularities of the Son’s earthly life, but even about His Person as such.

Similarly, when St Dionysius explains that “the wonderful ‘name which is above every name’” (Phil 2:9) *is* the Name of “the Nameless One”, of the “hidden Divinity which transcends [even] being”,⁵⁴ I do not know whether he is speaking as a pseudonymous 5th century Syrian monk, or (as my tradition tells me) as a disciple of St Paul’s. What I *do* know is that for this same Paul, writing in Philippians 2, the “name which is above every name” is the Name of Jesus, and I am once again obliged to conclude, therefore, that within the initiatic context of an authentic Hesychast method, the meaning of the word “Jesus” is not limited to the historical and individual order. St Dionysius adds strength to this conclusion: “Every affirmation regarding Jesus’s love for humanity,” he writes—and it is just such an affirmation that we find in the Jesus Prayer—“has the force of a negation pointing toward transcendence”. For even though God is fully present in Jesus, “He is hidden even after this revelation, or, if I may speak in a more divine fashion, is hidden even amid the revelation.” The “mystery of Jesus” can thus “be drawn out by no word or mind. What is to be said of it remains unsayable; what is to be understood of it remains unknowable.”⁵⁵

If this is true, however, then clearly one's invocation of this Name need not—and, in the case of the Hesychast, *should* not—be combined with an exclusive focus upon the incarnate Person of Christ, but should be accompanied instead by a gradual detachment of the mind from all associations and categories, whether empirical or dogmatic in character. Without in any way denying the miraculous facts of Christ's life or the saving truths of Christological doctrine, the Christian pilgrim must make an effort to abstract from those facts to their essential meaning, and to look along these truths toward the Truth. For it is thus and thus only that, with Heaven's help, he may come at last to that dimensionless center where, in the words of St Hesychios, “the Heart sees the God of gods in its own depths”—a God who is no longer approached as a distinct object of consciousness, but who Himself (the saint adds) is both “the Seer and the Seen”.⁵⁶ “I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart,” echoes the Sufi saint Mansûr al-Hallâj. “I said, ‘Who art Thou?’, and He answered ‘Thou’”.⁵⁷

According to Marco Pallis, “the essential question to be asked” of any religious tradition is whether it provides “the means for taking a man all the way in the spiritual life”—whether “the formal limits” are such as “to leave an open window looking towards the formless Truth, thus allowing for the possibility of its immediate or ultimate realization”.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, we Christians have tended to keep our shutters closed. Not of course that we are lacking in windows, but they are usually made of stained glass or painted on wood, coloring the beams they are designed to transmit, and most Christian authorities, content with their own devotional piety, have done very little to make the serious seeker aware that it is possible for a man to go outside into the fresh morning air.⁵⁹ Among the masters of the Christian East, however, one hears at least rumors of openings, and regardless of whether any given one of them was willing to look directly on the white light of the Truth, we find at least scattered hints in their writings as to how we might open a few windows for ourselves. The details of their practice are a subject for another time. How precisely to enunciate the invocation, and where to place it in the mind or the heart; how to coordinate the repetition of the Name with a persevering effort to prescind from all thoughts; how to support this inner work by the rhythm of one's breathing or movement—these are important questions that I have not sought to address in this paper. Nevertheless, I think we can begin glimpsing, at least, the essential elements of the Hesychast method, and what we find, I suggest, is that they mirror the instructions of the risen Lord Himself.

Thomas, as you will recall, jnanic patron of those seeking an immediate certitude, was told that he must be patient and begin by touching the form, truly taking hold of what God had revealed, for Jesus *is* the Son, and the Son *is* God, and God *is* the Named, and the Named *is* its Name, which Name, for the Christian, *is* “Jesus”. As for Mary Magdalene, prototype of the *bhakta*, she was nonetheless warned against clinging, and thus against confusing the form with the Essence, for Jesus is *not* the only name of the Son, *nor* is the Son the only name of God, *nor* is God the only name of the Named, and the Named is truly named by *no* name.⁶⁰ It has been suggested that the method of invocatory prayer is only the picture frame of one’s practice, and that it is the portrait within the Christian frame, Jesus Himself, to whom His followers must direct their undivided attention. But this, it seems, is not the best comparison. If we wish to follow the Hesychast path to the heart, it is Jesus who must be approached as the frame—the frame, not of a portrait, but a window. Seekers living in the Christian house must not turn their backs on this window, supposing it to be too narrow to show them the Truth. But neither should they remain at a distance, as if they were admiring a favorite painting from across a gallery. They must take a step forward and lift up the sash, placing their head and shoulders both inside its ample opening. What they shall see then, of course, is no longer the frame, but instead the bountiful emptiness of a mountain valley and across its grassy expanse, if they look carefully, the outlines of other houses with other windows not their own.

¹ Quoted in John Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 106.

² As in the title of his book *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1985).

³ *Logic and Transcendence*, trans. Peter N. Townsend (London: Perennial Books, 1975), 4.

⁴ *Logic and Transcendence*, 182.

⁵ *Logic and Transcendence*, 223-24. “The inward and essential knowledge of a theologically exclusive Muslim,” Schuon continues, “may be infinitely closer to the Christ-given mysteries than is the mental and sentimental universalism of a profane despiser of ‘separatist dogmas’” (*Logic and Transcendence*, 224n). We may add, *mutatis mutandis*, that the mystical insight of a theologically exclusive Orthodox saint is doubtless much closer to the Sufic *tawhid* or “union” than is the ecumenism of the modernist or liberal Christian, who has no qualms about destroying the very foundations of his religion in the interest of greater “understanding”.

⁶ *Logic and Transcendence*, 224. As examples of this “holy separation”, Schuon notes the following: “St John Damascene held a high position at the court of the caliph in Damascus [where he “wrote and published, with the approval of the caliph, his famous treatise in defense of images, which had been prohibited by the iconoclast Emperor Leo III”]; yet he was not converted to Islam, any more than were St Francis of Assisi in Tunisia, St Louis in Egypt, or St Gregory Palamas in Turkey. [“While a prisoner of the Turks for a year, he had friendly discussions with the Emir’s son, but was not converted, nor did the Turkish prince become a Christian”]. . . . Tradition tells that the Sufi Ibrahim ibn Adham had as his occasional master a Christian hermit, without either being converted to the other’s religion” (*Christianity/Islam*, 91).

⁷ See “The Mystery of the Two Natures”, *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter 1998), 111-141.

⁸ Schuon adduces the general principle: “A religion is a form—hence a limit—which contains the Limitless, if this paradox is permissible; every form is fragmentary because of its necessary exclusion of other formal possibilities.” For this reason “it is contradictory to base a certitude that demands to be considered as total on the phenomenal order . . . while demanding an intellectual acceptance” (*Understanding Islam* [Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1994], 174).

⁹ *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1995), 4. “Dogmatic form is transcended,” Schuon continues, “by fathoming its depths and contemplating its universal content, and not by denying it in the name of a pretentious and iconoclastic ideal of ‘pure truth’.”

¹⁰ *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, trans. Peter N. Townsend (London: Perennial Books, 1987), 118.

¹¹ Quoted by Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, Vol. I of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 136. See *The Desert Christian: Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 9.

¹² “On Prayer: Seven Texts”, *The Philokalia*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), Vol. IV, 279.

¹³ “Outline Teaching on Asceticism and Stillness in the Solitary Life”, *The Philokalia*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), Vol. I, 33.

¹⁴ “On Love, Self-Control, and Life in accordance with the Intellect: Written for Paul the Presbyter”, *The Philokalia*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), Vol. II, 311.

¹⁵ “On Faith”, *The Philokalia*, Vol. IV, 19.

¹⁶ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 6.

¹⁷ *The Inner Kingdom*, Vol. I of *The Collected Works of Kallistos Ware* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), 93. One is reminded of the Sufi *afrad* and his mysterious master Al-Khidr, whose *fard*—that is, isolation or singularity—is manifest with a special, if paradoxical, clarity when he is present among men.

¹⁸ “On the Eight Vices”, *The Philokalia*, Vol. I, 91.

¹⁹ “Ascetic Discourse”, *The Philokalia*, Vol. I, 230.

²⁰ “On Prayer”, *The Philokalia*, Vol. I, 62-63. “Structure” is my term. The translation of Palmer et al. says “soul-body temperament”.

²¹ “On Watchfulness and Holiness”, *The Philokalia*, Vol. I, 182. St Philotheos of Sinai agrees concerning the exceptional nature of spiritual *hesychia*. Speaking about “the noetic work that is the true philosophy of Christ”, he notes that “it is very rare to find people whose intelligence is in a state of stillness” (“Forty Texts on Watchfulness”, *The Philokalia*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware [London: Faber and Faber, 1984], Vol. III, 17).

²² “On Commandments and Doctrines, Warnings and Promises; on Thoughts, Passions, and Virtues, and also on Stillness and Prayer”, *The Philokalia*, Vol. IV, 239.

²³ Quoted by Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*, 96. Ware points out that St John is here “adapting an Evagrian phrase, ‘Prayer is a laying aside of thoughts’”.

²⁴ “On Watchfulness and Holiness”, 180.

²⁵ “On Stillness”, *The Philokalia*, Vol. IV, 270. Writes St Isaac the Syrian, “As the saints in the world to come no longer pray, their minds having been engulfed in the Divine Spirit, but dwell in ecstasy in that excellent glory; so the mind, when it has been made worthy of perceiving the blessedness of the age to come, will forget itself and all that is here, and will no longer be moved by the thought of anything” (quoted in Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* [Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976], 208).

²⁶ *The Divine Names in Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 54, 53.

²⁷ *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 95.

²⁸ *The Mystical Theology in Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 135.

²⁹ “A Treasury of Divine Knowledge: Obedience and Stillness”, *The Philokalia*, Vol. III, 107.

³⁰ “On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination”, *The Philokalia*, Vol. I, 255. Lossky points out that “at the extreme height of the knowable, one must be freed from that which perceives as much as from that which can be perceived: that is to say, from the subject as well as from the object of perception” (28). And Schuon observes that *hesychia* is thus “the exact equivalent of the Hindu and Buddhist *nirvana* and the Sufic *fana* (both terms signifying ‘extinction’); the ‘poverty’ (*faqr*) in which ‘union’ (*tawhid*) is achieved refers to the same symbolism” (*The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, trans. Peter Townsend [London: Faber and Faber, 1953], 181n).

³¹ “On Watchfulness and Holiness”, 177. Similarly, in the continuation of *The Way of a Pilgrim*, we are told that “the spiritual and incomprehensible Being of God may be present to the mind and recognized in the heart in absolute ‘formlessness’ (*The Pilgrim Continues His Way*, trans. R. M. French [San Francisco: Harper and Row, n.d.], 222).

³² *Stations of Wisdom*, 124. This silence, Schuon continues, “has been called a ‘Name of the Buddha’ because of its connection with the idea of the Void”, for “Shunyâmūrti, ‘Manifestation of the Void’, is one of the Names of the Buddha” (125).

³³ Quoted by Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: The Sisters of the Love of God, 1974), 11. St Hesychios offers an almost identical formulation: “The strength of the heart’s stillness, mother of all the virtues, is preserved in us through our being helped by the Lord. . . . Let the Name of Jesus adhere to your breath, and then you will know the blessings of stillness” (“On Watchfulness and Holiness”, 179).

³⁴ “Forty Texts on Watchfulness”, 27.

³⁵ We are told that the value of the practice comes at least partly from the fact that the Name itself carries within it a power and beauty with which our other thoughts are unable to compete. St Hesychios admits that it is extremely

“difficult to still the mind so that it rests from all thoughts,” and yet there lies close at hand a ready solution to this problem in the Name, for “he who through unceasing prayer holds the Lord Jesus within his breast will not tire in following Him”, and “because of Jesus’s beauty and sweetness, he will not desire what is merely mortal” (“On Watchfulness and Holiness”, 188).

³⁶ *The Inner Kingdom*, 101. The last phrase is added by Bishop Kallistos.

³⁷ “A Century of Spiritual Texts”, *The Philokalia*, Vol. II, 25.

³⁸ This is why some *startsi* recommend reducing the invocation to the name “Jesus” on its own. The Archimandrite Lev Gillet points out that “the name Jesus forms the core and motive force” of the Jesus Prayer, and he adds that “the oldest, the simplest, and in our opinion the easiest formula is the word ‘Jesus’ used alone” (*The Jesus Prayer* [Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminar Press, 1987], 93). Speaking of *japa yoga* in general, Marco Pallis has observed that “the less the formula used lends itself to rational analysis, the better it will match the inward synthesis of which it is destined to become the operative support.” Within the operative context of a contemplative method, the discursive meaning of an invocation, including the Jesus Prayer, is not the issue. On the contrary, “it is the Holy Name, sonorous presence of the divine grace enshrined in the formula, that is both the source of its power to illuminate and a sharp sword to cut off ignorance and distraction at the root” (“Discovering the Interior Life”, *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism*, ed. Jacob Needleman [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974], 195).

³⁹ “On Stillness”, 270n.

⁴⁰ *Oratio* 40:4; quoted by Tomáš Špidlík, S.J., *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1986), 35. In his book *The Name of Jesus*, bearing the significant subtitle *The Names of Jesus Used by Early Christians*, Irénée Hausherr points out that while the name “Jesus” is “one of the names of the well-beloved Son”, for “Hermas [author of the second century “Shepherd”] and others like him the very person of the Son was the name, the only name which perfectly expressed the Father (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1978), 18.

⁴¹ This of course is not to deny the powerful symbolism of this name and its letters. Like every name of God, “Jesus” is rich in meanings, which have been somewhat more elaborated in the West than in the East. Schuon observes that “it is not by chance that [St] Bernardino [of Siena] gave to his cipher of the Name of Jesus the appearance of a monstrance: the divine Name, carried in thought and in the heart, through the world and through life, is like the Holy Sacrament carried in procession. This cipher of the Greek letters I H S, signifying *Iesous*, but interpreted in Latin as *In Hoc Signo* or as *Jesus Hominum Salvator* and often written in Gothic letters, can be analyzed in its primitive form into three elements—a vertical straight line, two vertical lines linked together, and a curved line—and thus contains a symbolism at once metaphysical, cosmological, and mystical; there is in it a remarkable analogy, not only with the name of *Allah* written in Arabic, which also comprises the three lines of which we have just spoken (in the form of the *alif*, the two *lams*, and the *hâ*), but also with the Sanskrit monosyllable *Aum*, which is composed of three *mâtrâs* (A U M) indicating a ‘rolling up’ and thereby a return to the Center. All of these symbols mark, in a certain sense, the passage from ‘coagulation’ to ‘solution’” (*Stations of Wisdom*, 131-132n). Symbols, even so, they remain, no one of which manifests the Truth uniquely; there is always more to the Name than a name.

⁴² *Against Heresies*, II.6; Vol. I of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1967), 365-366. One wonders whether this means that the Jews of the late second century A.D. had retained the proper pronunciation of the *Tetragrammaton*.

⁴³ The Fathers sometimes quote Psalm 46:10 in this connection to underscore the relationship between the Divine Name and the practice of *hesychia*: “Be still, and know that I AM God”. Nikitas Stithatos comments that “this is the voice of the divine Logos and is experienced as such by those who put the words into practice” (“On the Inner Nature of Things”, *Philokalia*, Vol. IV, 109).

⁴⁴ *The Divine Names*, 54.

⁴⁵ Quoted by Lossky, 37.

⁴⁶ Ware, “Praying with the Body”, 31.

⁴⁷ The focus of this paper is spiritual method, but one may note in passing that the ultimate goal of these two traditions is described by their masters in remarkably similar terms. It is impossible not to think of the maxim of Islamic mysticism that “the Sufi is not created” when St Gregory Palamas describes *theosis* or deification as “unoriginate (not only uncreated), indescribable, and supratemporal” and when he says that “those who attain it become thereby uncreated, unoriginate, and indescribable, although in their own nature they derive from nothingness” (*The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff and trans. Nicholas Gendle [New York: Paulist Press, 1983], 86). St Gregory says that he is here following “the divine Maximus”, that is, St Maximos the Confessor, who tells us in turn that the supreme spiritual state involves ‘the complete reversion of created beings to God. It is then that God suspends in created beings the operation of their natural energy by inexpressibly activating in them His divine energy’ (“First Century of Theology”, *The Philokalia*, Vol. II, 123). Meanwhile Ibn al-‘Arabî teaches that “the final end and ultimate return of the gnostics . . . is that the Real is identical with them, while they do not exist” (*Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, II.512.9, quoted by William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabî’s Metaphysics of the Imagination* (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 1989), 375).

⁴⁸ *St Gregory Palamas*, 66.

⁴⁹ Quoted by McGinn, 146-47.

⁵⁰ “Babylonian Captivity”, quoted by Karlfried Froehlich, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century”, in Introduction III to *The Complete Works*, 44.

⁵¹ *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 51-52. Schuon continues, “It can therefore be said that the universalism of initiates is virtual as to its possible application, and that it becomes effective only when circumstances permit or impose a determined application. In other words, it is only after contact with another civilization that this universalism is actualized, though there is, of course, no strict law governing this matter, and the factors which will determine the acceptance by such and such an initiate of any particular alien form may very greatly according to the case” (52).

⁵² “On Stillness”, 270n. He adds that God, “seeing your intellect so strict in guarding itself”, will “Himself bestow pure and unerring vision upon it and will make it participate in God”.

⁵⁴ *The Divine Names*, 54, 49.

⁵⁵ *The Letters in Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 264 (Letters Three and Four). In this respect, Schuon observes, the Name of Jesus is like all “Divine Names”, which “have meanings that are particular because belonging to a revealed language and universal because referring to the Supreme Principle. To invoke a Divinity is to enunciate a doctrine; he who says ‘Jesus’ says implicitly that ‘Christ is God’” (*Stations of Wisdom*, 132).

⁵⁶ “On Watchfulness and Holiness”, 185.

⁵⁷ Quoted by William Stoddart, *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam* (New York: Paragon House, 1985), 83. There could be no clearer evidence of Schuon’s claim that while “dogmatically the divergence between Christianity and Islam is irreducible, metaphysically and mystically it is no more than relative” (*Christianity/Islam*, 104).

⁵⁸ *The Way and the Mountain* (London: Peter Owen, 1991), 96.

⁵⁹ One is reminded of Christ’s words to the Pharisees: “Woe to you lawyers! for you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering” (Luke 11:52).

⁶⁰ Whenever one is speaking of a manifestation of God's saving power, such and such an avatic name must be carefully distinguished from the Divine Name as such. Schuon observes that "the 'Name' in the Christian form—as in the Buddhist form and in certain initiatory branches of the Hindu tradition—is a name of the manifested Word, in this case the Name of 'Jesus', which, like every revealed Divine Name when ritually pronounced, is mysteriously identified with the Divinity" (*The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 182).