

Conclusion

The dominant subject of this book is the impact of hesychasm on the development of new artistic trends during the Palaeologan era.

A brief overview of the origins of the term hesychasm explored four distinct, but interrelated, meanings of the word. Primarily, the phrases hesychasm and *hesychia* distinguish the 'solitary life' from that of living in a *coenobium* or monastic community. Hesychasm also refers to the psychosomatic technique of meditation that involves bodily ascesis and recitation of the Jesus Prayer. Moreover, the expression 'hesychasm' signifies the synthesis between the early Christian spiritual tradition of the desert fathers and the mysticism of the middle Byzantine period, putting an emphasis on knowledge of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. In the contemporary usage of the word, however, hesychasm is a synonym for the theological exposition of Gregory Palamas and his spiritual followers.

As a spiritual movement, hesychasm became a part of Byzantine theological tradition from the beginning of 9th century onwards. In the 14th century, however, the leader of the humanist movement, Barlaam of Calabria, took exception to the hesychast doctrine of the nature of uncreated light and refuted it as heretical and blasphemous. Palamas defended hesychast teaching and the conflict between Barlaam and Palamas escalated into the so-called hesychast controversy.

Palamas was not the only propagator of hesychasm in the 14th century. | The attractive personality of Gregory of Sinai, whose dogmatic system was a theological fusion of the speculative and intellectual mysticism of Evagrius Ponticus and Symeon the Theologian, also proposed hesychastic principles. His doctrine was predominantly practical, with an emphasis on outward exercises, manual labour and ascetic prayer. Gregory of Sinai instigated a new hesychastic model for the perfection of humanity, reflecting the recreation of the lost likeness to God.

Moreover, he affirmed the cosmological event of Christ's incarnation and emphasised the deification of man. In such a framework, intellectual knowledge was a point of transition, either descending to a lower realm — the wisdom of the world, or ascending to the supernatural wisdom of grace. Gregory of Sinai introduced a tripartite system of spiritual ascent, where the struggle against passions culminated in supernatural union with God. The three steps of spiritual advance were: *ethike* or *praktike*, *physike* and *theologike*.

It is difficult to ascertain the true cause of the hesychastic controversy, however, many scholars represent the hesychast quarrel as a conflict between two philosophical schools: the Aristotelian, whose doctrines were accepted by the Eastern Church, and the Platonic school whose teachings the Church rejected.¹ Lossky sought the cause of this quarrel in the contrast between mystical theology and religious philosophy — the God of revelation and mystical experience confronted the God of the philosophers on the battlefield of mysticism.² Finally, Ostrogorsky and Meyendorff claim that the triumph of mysticism in late-Byzantine society was the reason behind the deepening religious and cultural gulf between East and West, not only in Byzantium proper, but also between Eastern Europe and the West.³ Archbishop Chrysostom claimed that the tracts against the *filioque* clause, which Barlaam wrote at the time of union debates between Byzantines and Latins in Constantinople in 1333 and 1334, sparked the hesychast controversy.⁴

The followers of the hesychast tenet in Byzantine society supported the doctrines of the incarnation. They shared the eschatological notion of the Resurrection and the Second Coming of Christ and refused the neoplatonic dualistic view of the soul in opposition with the body. First, the dominant issue was the contribution made by the hesychasts to the development of a new Christocentric humanism, which emphasised synergy and the psychosomatic knowledge of God as *theosis*. This is in contrast to scholastic humanism, marked by intellectual rationalism and the dualism of the body and soul. Second, an important novelty in Palamite theology is the distinction (not division) between essence and energies in the uncreated God. This constituted an *antinomy* where God was knowable (*kataphasis*) and unknowable (*apophasis*) at the same time. Third, the Palamite doctrine of immanent energies also implies a vision of the relationship between God and the world, and hesychasts experienced God's energies in the form of uncreated light. This light manifested to the apostles during the Metamorphosis, the saints receive it through spiritual contemplation, and in art it is often represented by various symbols and artistic methods (the use of halo, gold, and highlights on painted areas). The uncreated light is also a symbol of the 'Light in the Age to come' (*Parousia*). Fourth, hesychast teaching on *theosis* offered a genuinely theological anthropology, which considered human beings as the unfinished creation of God, who are called to transcend the

1 H.W. Haussig, *A History of Byzantine Civilization*, J.M. Hussey (trans), (London 1971) 364–365.

2 V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood 1976) 220–221.

3 B. Krivocheine, *St. Symeon the New Theologian* (Crestwood 1986), G.A. Ostrogorsky, 'Афонские Исихасты и их Противники', Записки Русского Научного Института Велграде (Belgrade 1931); Arhimandrite Cyprian, *Антропология Св. Григория Паламы* (Cambridge 1996); Lossky, *Мистическое Богословие* (Kiev 1991); J. Meyendorff, 'О Византийском Исихазме и его Роли в Культурном Историческом Развитии Восточной Европы', *История Церкви и Восточно-Христианская Мистика* (Moscow 2003).

4 R.E. Sinkewicz, 'The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God in the Early Writings of Barlaam the Calabrian', *Mediaeval Studies*, vol. 48 (1982).

limited boundaries of their creation and to become infinite. This transcendent dimension of salvation was/is achieved by two means: the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church, and the hesychast practice of the invocation of the name of Jesus.

Neither hesychasts nor humanists left writings dedicated to art, and no document bears witness to a connection between religious movements in Byzantium during the Palaeologan period and the development of new iconographic trends in Byzantine and Slavic religious art. A polarisation of the ascending (mystical, hesychastic) and descending (antique, humanistic) characterised the art of this period. They, in turn, corresponded to two dichotomous paths in the Byzantine culture (hesychasm/humanism, Christianity/Hellenism), which influenced the formation of artistic styles and canons in the 14th and 15th centuries. Hence, the religious paintings of the Palaeologan era expressed the essential foundations of Byzantine and Old Greek culture, revealing at the same time the spiritual ideals of contemplation and transfiguration of humanity and Hellenistic ideals of perfection and beauty. These iconographic trends did not exclude a plethora of private, complicated and interwoven trends (hesychasm and humanism). When hesychasm became a universally accepted doctrine, not only in monastic life but also in the Byzantine Church, transformations in iconography occurred that affected the overall form and meaning of the compositions. The aim of this art also changed; its purpose was to show the contemplation of transfigured flesh and matter, shading divine light, the fullness of ascending to ethereal heights where everything is perfect. No work of art represents the possible reciprocal influence of hesychasm on art more than paintings representing the oeuvre of Palamas. Another influential image for the hesychasts was the composition of Barlaam and Iosaphat.

Along with illustrations of the liturgy, new images appeared whose main task was to reveal the meaning of the sacrament by abstract symbolic images, such as the Image of Sofia and the Communion of the Apostles. Other iconographic changes occurred in the late-14th century, and many compositions were either reintroduced or redeveloped, such as the Akathist Hymn, Barlaam and Iosaphat, the Prayer of John Chrysostom, Pachomios and an Angel, the Heavenly Ladder, and Symeon the New Theologian's vision of light. Moreover, there was an increase in images representing monks, hermits and stylites, and known hesychasts. New subjects emerged, such as the images of John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and Athanasius the Great as seen in the Church of the Archangel Gabriel, in Lesnovo. The Theotokos of the Life-Giving Spring emerged in the 14th century, due to changes in the liturgy and the introduction of a new liturgical office in honour of the Virgin Mary in 1335.

Other important changes occurred in Christian art of the 14th and 15th centuries. The emergence of the complex mandorla, the eight rays of light, the OVN

monogram, three-dimensional rainbows, zigzag patterns on murals consisting of red and blue bands within a circular band, and fanlike highlights on figures, all are hesychast innovations. There is a use of monochrome colours (red, ochre and dark shades of blue). White strokes — the rays of divine light — illuminate painted surfaces (as white patches on the face, neck and hands). Iconographical changes occurring in the Transfiguration, the Anastasis and the Trinity allude to the possible development of artistic trends informed by hesychasm. The revisionary semantics emphasising the light of Tabor and its symbolism clearly materialised in the miniature of the Transfiguration, accompanying the theological writings of John Kantacuzenos, *Parisinus Graecus* 1242. This reflected the impact of the conflict, and it provides a visual representation of the uncreated light of God — the underlying doctrine defended by the hesychasts.

The illumination of *Parisinus Graecus* includes references to doctrines advanced by Palamas. The use of black and blue for the mandorla, as well as the introduction of geometrical shapes to represent the glory of Christ, are important. The hesychast type of mandorla was formed by superimposing two squares (a square and a rhomb) over a circle. The manuscript of Kantacuzenos contains the most prominent composition containing this symbol. Kantacuzenos was a known supporter of Palamas and a chief protagonist of the hesychast controversy. Moreover, the hesychast mandorla was a favourite amongst painters on Mt Athos in the late Byzantine and post-Byzantine periods. The monastic circles at Mystra promoted this mandorla during the 14th and 15th centuries. From the doctrinal point of view, the hesychasts adopted the eight-pointed mandorla as the principle means of expressing their belief in the concept of divine light. The shapes of a star or an octagon were symbols for rebirth and resurrection, frequently decorating baptismal fonts in churches large and small. For the hesychasts, however, eight symbolised not just the transcendence of created order but also the eighth day and eschatological perfection. Another interpretation suggests that the three geometrical forms (the square, the rhombus and the circle) crossed by rays of light, signified the three hypostases of the Trinity.

Not only was the shape of the mandorla changed, Mt Tabor became a mountain of spiritual ascent while the theological memory of Sinai was still present. The most prominent difference was the introduction of a three-fold mountain, instead of one angular and rocky landscape. It stresses the upward movement of the soul towards God. The appearance of Moses and Elijah alongside Christ at the Transfiguration provide further evidence, which strengthens this assertion. Both Moses and Elijah are specifically connected to Mt Sinai. Both were hesychast models of ascetic monasticism, rather than Old Testament archetypal visionaries. Moses is a prototype mystic who rejected worldly beliefs and entered the divine darkness. Prophet Elijah, on the other hand, 'embodied

the hagiographical topos of the solitary hesychast', receiving the experience of God in the desert of Mt Horeb by practising the noetic prayer of the heart. Principally, however, the hesychastic way of life as presented through Christ's Transfiguration on Mt Tabor was a full manifestation of the divine nature of Jesus Christ and the eschatological 'glory of God's presence'.

The Transfiguration miniature of *Parisinus Graecus*, in turn, can be taken as a sublime attempt to capture the effects of the Taboric light on humanity (in participle form). In particular, the miniaturist gave special emphasis to the emotional effect of what the disciples saw and how this vision affected their spiritual states. To be precise, the three disciples fell headfirst to the ground, gesticulated, and crouched away from the blinding light. In contrast, Christ stood calmly on the top of the mountain between the figures of Moses and Elijah.

The symmetrical position of Adam and Eve on both sides of Christ was of particular importance. Christ pulled both Adam and Eve simultaneously into his mandorla in a choral movement that conveys a sense of leading, guiding and protection. God envisaged deification as the final destiny of all material creation. Also, Christ's gestures affirmed the hesychast view of grace and its relation to human salvation, embodied in the idea of cooperation (*synergia*). Christ opened the way to paradise for Adam and Eve, and he called humanity to salvation. The response to Christ's calling, however, lies in the voluntary consent of humanity to either accept or reject his salvation.

The moment of Christ's descent into hell is, in a way, a reverse Transfiguration, accentuating the last stage in the kenotic act of God, and the salvation of humanity. This event was no longer played on Mt Tabor, however, but at the centre of the earth and the cosmos, free from every geographic peculiarity. Thus, the step-like, cloven rocks of the Transfiguration changed into the barren rocky plains of the Anastasis, which pointed towards the kataphatic aspect of the human salvation from hell. The white garments of Christ have a twofold significance in the Anastasis scene. They affirm that Christ maintained his human nature, the rational and the spiritual soul undiminished even after the Resurrection and they allude to the transformation of all creation.

The bearer of light, the flesh of God beneath the earth dissipated the gates of Hades. The Virgin Mary gave birth to Christ in a cave, and the jaws of Hades trembled. He rose from the dead, and the bonds of hell begin to feel the crushing weight of their overthrow. The world was enlightened and rebuilt from the burdens of sinful existence. The event of the Anastasis did not aim to fulfil the act of salvation, but offered a path; it was not a quiet acceptance of the divine, but a complex spiritual work in progress aspiring to a higher purpose.

The fresco of the *Anastasis* at the Chora church added distinctive and unexpected features to the fully evolved Palaeologan style. Overcharged with classical reminiscences, mannerism and oddities, the portrayal of this scene in the Church of the Holy Saviour was revolutionary. Coming in the 14th century, the adoption of this style showed that, 800 years after Justinian, when the subject first appeared, Byzantine art still had all its creative powers. Although it is difficult to confirm hesychasm influenced these changes, it is almost certain that the fresco of the *Anastasis* at Chora illuminates the concept of *theosis* (the union of grace) between human beings and Christ.

The significant installation of Christian art informed by hesychasm in the Slavic lands is remarkable. This art was characterised by a continued ability to apply the formulae of its great past. It shares common iconographic schemes and details, not just in regard to compositions created in the very beginnings of Christianity, but in subjects dealing with Trinitarian dogma. This issue was the central topic behind the development of the hesychast controversy. A detailed analysis of Andrei Rublev's *Trinity* shows how his art was dependent on, or rather informed by, hesychasm. Whereas, in the Transfiguration, changes occurred in iconography, in the *Anastasis* the changes are of style and, in the *Trinity*, there are differences in form and perspective. Rublev created the icon of the *Trinity* in memory of Sergius of Radonezh, a known hesychast and expounder of the doctrine of the Trinity. Rublev followed the life of solitude and *hesychia*, and he never referred to the *podilniki* (iconographical guides) to create a work of art, but received visions of the images depicted in his paintings.

Under the influence of hesychasm, Rublev made significant changes to the composition of the 'Hospitality of Abraham' (Old Testament Trinity). He applied an allegorical reading of the narrative, and the story took on a more rudimentary character. Abraham and Sarah are missing from the composition. Rublev placed the three angels in a full circle and he depicted them as equals. There is a little house over the left angel, a mountain over the head of the right and a tree over the central angel. There is not, however, a full description of the Biblical text. Overall, in Rublev's interpretation, the Hospitality of Abraham acquired Trinitarian rather than Christological connotation.

Rublev's *Trinity* was rooted in the theology of hesychasm, in its essential doctrinal foundation of unity and power, harmony and peace, and the divine presence of God within history. Rublev also sought, however, to depict the salvation of the individual, a theotic transformation in God's image driven by the idea of the possible *theosis* of humankind. In other words, *kenosis* precedes *theosis*. The presence of the Trinity and the salvific act of God were to be experienced in the Eucharistic community, where the faithful received the uncreated light of *theosis*. Finally, the three hypostases engage in a common action of Trinity in the *oikonomia*, as in the case of Eucharistic consecration.

The contours of the building in this composition are reminiscent of graphics used in the emblem for Christ, whereas the palace itself is reminiscent of yet another iconographic component — the tablet placed the Cross with the inscription ‘Jesus of Nazareth, King of Judaea’.

Rublev sought to emphasise the Trinitarian communication of the Father’s transcendence, and the ability to receive this communication and know God. Moreover, Rublev affirmed the same principal of antinomy as invented by the hesychasts in his depiction of the angels’s attitudes, gestures and their inclinations. While being almost identical, these characteristics have some differences. The use of blue summarises the outer and inner action of the three angels, and alludes to the hesychast understanding of the Trinity’s ontological outpouring of the uncreated energies that are common to hypostases of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It also signifies Christ’s historical manifestation of the uncreated light, which the Son shares with the Father. Hesychast theologians tried to define how the hidden, divine person of God the Father realises his transcendence by exceeding himself through the action of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The action reveals the hidden nature shared by the three hypostases outside the essence of the Father. Rublev structured his *Trinity* to present a sophisticated theological understanding of transcendence made manifest, and to relate it to the Trinity’s creative interaction.

The relation between the three hypostases of the Trinity remains unique, immovable, and distinct for each hypostasis, in particular the hypostasis of the Father. The angels mirror each other, which alludes to hesychast theology; the use of blue refers to the hesychast understanding of the Trinity’s ontological power, which came from the uncreated energies of God. Rublev’s *Trinity* produces a lyrical aura of harmony and quietness while, at the same time, inviting a rhythmic movement of unstoppable power. Rublev’s *Trinity* represents the state of *hesychia*, a condition of tranquility, interrupted by a movement from God, and by the idea of Trinitarian unity. The sense of movement in Rublev’s *Trinity* has usually been described as quiet, gentle, anxious, and sorrowful, or as detached, meditative, contemplative, intimate, gentle and direct. The middle angel’s action of bending the knee, and the movement of the wings of the third angel (the Holy Spirit), express the spiritual uplift that complements the symbolism of spiritual rest. The movement of the middle angel bears a note of sovereignty, independence and strength; while the discrete forms express the motion of the third angel.

Rublev used circles and many other geometric shapes. Three octagons emerge when the arc of the horizontal sides of the icon construct a border. The smallest octagon includes the focal point of the piece — the chalice and the arms stretching towards it. The middle octagon involves the central elements of the scene — the angels and the sacrificial chalice, and the largest embraces

all elements of the figurative scene with mathematical precision. It mirrors the slopes of the thrones and pedestals of the angels, the axonometric axis of the left building, and even the tangent of the right mountain. Rublev used the mixture of deep blue and dark red to create an impression of light shining out of the icon. This created a place for a divine meditation, allowing the observer to enter the uncreated light of God and experience divine transformation. Although the divine essence is beyond human comprehension, humanity participates in the divine energy and hence, in a way, comprehends the manifested hypostases of the Father (Nous), the Son (Logos) and the Holy Spirit (Pneuma). Maximum similitude between the creator and creatures is achieved through unity of the mind, the heart and body. The first step is harmony between body and soul, and the domination of the latter over the former. It is by concentrating all his physical and spiritual efforts that one acquires a state of communion (*koinonia*).

The appearance of circles in Rublev's *Trinity* evokes God's transcendence as a self-identity which exceeds its limits through interaction with another. The circle itself signifies the dual action of the outflowing and return of God: he flows out to humanity through *kataphasis* and humanity returns inwardly to him by a circular movement of *ascesis* (*apophasis*). Moreover, the circular shape of the chalice alludes to two different doctrines. First, it reflects the process of actualising the divine outpouring, which occurs through the Eucharist, and secondly, to the inner movement of return of faithful souls during communion with God. This also reflects on the landscape. The rock behind the angel symbolises the mountain of ascent, while the symbolism of three landscape features behind the angels' heads represents the redeeming power of Christ's condescension. The spiral structure of foliage is Rublev's innovation and alludes to the teaching of Dionysius the Areopagite on divine names, where the soul which turns inwards from external things to God, takes an inverse motion to that of the body. Rublev discarded the unnecessary elements from his composition so the observer can feel the divine aura emanating from the angels. This leads to a sense of communion with the heavenly world. This unique solution to the challenge of symbolising the divine transcendence of God discards experimental human knowledge of God.

A survey of the religious art in Byzantine and Slavic lands during the 14th and 15th centuries shows that, in all epochs dominated by an ideological or a spiritual orientation, one may find texts or works of art reflecting the particulars of the given period. During the Palaeologan era, the rise of Byzantine hesychasm informed new iconographic trends in religious art of Byzantine and Slavic lands. The miniature of the Transfiguration from *Parisinus Graecus* 1242 confirms the introduction of complex iconographic symbolism under the impact of the Byzantine hesychasm (octagon mandorla, tripartite representation of Mt Tabor and positioning of the apostles). In the fresco of the *Anastasis*, the Chora church,

variations transpire in terms of symmetrical positioning of protopsalts, dynamic movement of Christ (presented without the cross) and architectural design of the landscape (the Anastasis appears as a reverse Transfiguration). Finally, in Rublev's *Trinity*, the variations that are present in the use of form, proportion, perspective and the overall aim of the figurative scene, present the trinitarian nature of God (a figurative scene inscribed within circles and octagons as well as the removal of unnecessary elements from the composition).

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