

# EASTERN ORTHODOX MYSTICISM AND TRANSPERSONAL THEORY

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*ABSTRACT:* Christianity has remained relatively peripheral to the intellectual processes that shaped transpersonal theory. Eastern religions on the other hand provided the base upon which transpersonal theory was founded and developed. Spiritual traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism paved the way towards the exploration of states of consciousness beyond the rational mind. My basic claim in this paper is that the eastern branch of Christianity, or Eastern Orthodox Christianity, has preserved and developed over the centuries a mystical theology and practice that may enrich and perhaps expand what eastern religions have contributed so far to the emergence of transpersonal theory. This paper is an introduction to the mystical pathways of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. It is informed by seminal literature and scriptures, several years of participant observation and depth interviews of Eastern Orthodox practitioners (mystics, monks and hermits), and complemented by experiential data related to my own journey of discovery.

Transpersonal theory has developed during the last few decades to a large extent as a result of an encounter and creative dialogue between western thought and eastern religions (Puhakka, 2008). This is clearly shown in the work of such leading transpersonal theorists as Ken Wilber, Michael Washburn, Roger Walsh, Frances Vaughan, Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, Charles Tart, Stanley Krippner and others. For example, after an in-depth and sustained engagement with Zen Buddhism, Wilber mapped magnificent landscapes of human consciousness extending beyond the limitations of the rational mind. He pointed out, however, that if the West were to be transformed on a broader scale by incorporating in its worldview the truth of higher realities and stages of awareness, this would have to be done from within its own cultural and symbolic universe. Wilber further claimed that Eastern religions can only play a catalytic role for such historical transformation. Their role is to sensitize westerners to trans-egoic and super-sensible realities, which they can then uncover within their own Judeo-Christian spiritual heritage.

So far such a development has not taken place for a variety of reasons such as the heavy historical baggage of Christianity related to the Inquisition, the Crusades, and anti-Semitism. Furthermore, the historic conflict between religion and science led to a hostile attitude of some western thinkers towards religion in general and organized religion in particular. The current distortions of Christianity brought on by fundamentalist zealots did not make matters any easier. Perhaps for these and other reasons Christianity remained peripheral to transpersonal theory.

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The march of rationalism and “disenchantment,” to use Max Weber’s term, forced the West’s mystical pathways to recede underground rendering them culturally invisible. On the other hand, in Asiatic religions such pathways, like the various forms of Hindu yoga, Zen Buddhism and Tibetan meditation practices, remained available up front and closer to their exoteric forms. Consequently, they have been more accessible and baggage-free for westerners in search of higher wisdom and an escape from the asphyxiating “iron cage” of rationalism and materialist reductionism.

In this paper I would propose that Christianity too has a “yoga,” or a spiritual methodology for the attainment of higher forms of consciousness and God realization. More specifically, I would argue that the Eastern branch of Christianity, or Eastern Orthodox Christianity, because of its unique historical and theological developments has preserved in its monastic orders a methodology and practice for spiritual transcendence that may parallel those of Eastern religions. Such spiritual methods, once liberated from their archaic cultural context, may be relevant not only to transpersonal theory but also to contemporary western seekers who may feel more at ease with spiritual practices that spring from within their own cultural and religious traditions. In this sense the mystical pathways preserved in Eastern Orthodox Christianity may play a role not only in the enrichment of transpersonal theory but also in making a contribution towards a possible “re-enchantment” of the West.<sup>2</sup>

#### BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

My discovery of the mystical traditions of Eastern Christianity came about through a series of serendipitous encounters and coincidences that I would like to briefly share with the reader. I grew up in Cyprus and came to America in 1960 for my higher education. Ten years later, by the time I received my doctoral degree in sociology, I internalized the dominant assumptions of the modern worldview, namely: reductionism, positivism, relativism and determinism. That is, that the only reality is that of the observable physical universe (reductionism); that the only truth is the one discovered by our sense observations aided by the scientific method (positivism); that there is no objective basis for values other than what cultures and societies construct (relativism); and that human beings are ultimately and exclusively products of biological and socio-cultural forces (determinism). These taken-for-granted tenets of modernism allow no room for the workings of spiritual or non-material forces in human affairs. I reluctantly embraced this materialist metaphysic as self-evident and as the price I had to pay to be a *bona fide* modern intellectual and academic. Eastern Orthodoxy, the religion of my upbringing, appeared by the end of my academic studies as singularly “mythic.”

Yet, I was not a cheerful agnostic. I was fully aware of the nihilistic implications of this unspoken and often unconscious syndrome of modernity that I outlined above. Luckily, a fortuitous encounter during my graduate education with the work of Pitirim A. Sorokin, a refugee from the Russian

revolution and founder of the sociology department at Harvard (Coser, 1977; Cuzzort & King, 1980), opened a window in my mind for a future receptivity to a transpersonal view of reality as a more viable worldview and, in a deeper sense, more rational and scientific than the one I absorbed in my formal education. Sorokin, whom I would argue could be considered, along with Carl Jung and William James, as an unrecognized precursor to transpersonal theory, taught during the 1930s and 1940s, that the human mind is not only composed of a conscious and an unconscious part (as Freud taught) but also of a “supraconscious” (Vexliard, 1963, p. 168). For Sorokin it was the supraconscious that was the real source of all great human creations and discoveries in all fields of culture. He classified the experiences of the great mystics as well as the variety of psychic phenomena as springing from the supraconscious, a *sui generis* form of consciousness and therefore irreducible to the lower forms of vital and mental energies. Reminiscent of the thought of Ken Wilber (2001), Sorokin also taught that knowledge comes from three sources: from the senses (science), from the mind (philosophy, mathematics) and from intuition (mystical illumination, psychic phenomena). According to Sorokin true knowledge of reality must honor all three strands of knowledge, what he called “Integralist Truth.” Nevertheless, for Sorokin “...intuition is the real source of real knowledge.... It is especially indispensable in the apprehension of those aspects of the true reality which are inaccessible to the senses and to reason.” Furthermore, he postulated that “...intuitional truth is in no way less testifiable than the sensory and dialectic truths or propositions” (Mishlove, 1994, p. 33). In an exhaustive four-volume study of western civilization that went against the intellectual currents of his time, Sorokin (1937–1941) argued that secularization had reached its limits. He was prescient when in the midst of the carnage of the Second World War, and brushing aside the incredulity of his academic peers (believers in the unstoppable and irreversible onward march of secularization) he predicted that the world was on the eve of a massive religious resurgence.

I am not certain whether I would have discovered and practiced meditation for several years as a struggling assistant professor of sociology during the seventies had I not been first exposed to Sorokin’s thought, himself a product of the Eastern Orthodox culture of pre-revolutionary Russia. It was Sorokin, a classical master of sociological thought, who offered legitimacy to my future explorations into the lives and world of Christian saints, mystics, healers and hermits. In a real sense Sorokin offered me the green light to eventually pursue an uncharted research agenda that dealt with human subjects reputed to be specialists of transpersonal or supraconscious states of experience and cognition.

If the 1960s was the decade of my secularization and the 1970s the questioning of that very secularization the 1980s was the period of my personal, if indirect, empirical confirmation of the reality of supraconscious or trans-egoic realities. It began during my first sabbatical from the University of Maine when I was carrying out research for a book on international terrorism. It was then that I unexpectedly met Daskalos, a Cypriot Christian mystic, psychic healer and clairvoyant who exemplified all those unusual abilities that so profoundly

affected the work of William James, particularly when he met the American medium and clairvoyant Mrs. Leonora Piper (Ryan, 2008). Like James, who was convinced that Mrs. Piper's skills were not fraudulent, I was so impressed with Daskalos' authenticity in super-sensible matters that I decided to set aside my project on terrorism and instead explore his world and that of his close associates. My decision to do so was further based on the fact that Daskalos demonstrated an extraordinary philosophical acumen and knowledge of inner realities. This seemed most remarkable considering that he only had a high school education.

I realized early in my association with these unusual people that they lived extraordinary lives in the fullest meaning of that term. They carried on with their ordinary occupations while at the same time living lives full of mystical experiences, and psychic and paranormal phenomena that I could not explain in conventional ways.

I knew from the beginning of my association with them that the phenomena I witnessed could not be explained from within the boundaries of established rationalistic and scientific paradigms. I decided, therefore, that in order to meaningfully study Daskalos and his circles of close associates I had to suspend judgment and refrain from imposing my own categories of understanding. I employed instead the method of participant observation based on a phenomenological approach. That is, I simply let my subjects themselves explain their reality from within their own categories and framework of understanding. In this respect I followed Sorokin's methodological advice on how to approach a mystical intuitive like Daskalos. Sorokin wrote that

....forms of intuition, like the mystic intuition, can be verified directly by only those few who have the adequate charismatic grace of such an experience. The mass of the people can verify it only indirectly, through a comparison of the testimonies of the mystics, and through the sensory-rational study of the results of such an intuition. (Mishlove, 1994, p. 33)

I spent the 1980s studying Daskalos and his close associates and writing a trilogy about their non-ordinary world and activities (Markides, 1985, 1987, 1990). The time I spent with them during sabbaticals, leaves of absence and summers led me to conclude that the human mind is not confined within the brain, that it is in fact "non-local" (Goswami, 2000) and that human beings have latent abilities yet to be acknowledged by mainstream science. It also led me to the conclusion that extraordinary phenomena related to shamanism studied by anthropologists in pre-literate societies (Harner, 1982) can also be found within modern societies, as in the case of Daskalos and his circles of healers and psychics. They identified themselves as Orthodox Christian mystics and used Christian symbols to explain their experiences and worldview. Most importantly, after my books were published hundreds of people from around the world contacted me to report in all sincerity that they lived in the non-ordinary realities that Daskalos mapped out. Yet they remain publicly silent for fear of being stigmatized as strange or worse, mentally ill. I soon realized that there is a "para-culture" out there of ordinary people having sustained

transcendent experiences. Because of dominant materialist pre-conceptions this fact remains untapped and unrecognized by mainstream science.

#### THE THREEFOLD WAY OF CHRISTIANITY

My exposure to the miraculous or paranormal world of a lay Christian mystic like Daskalos was the most important step in my eventual realization that mainstream, organized Christianity has a well-defined tradition of experiential practices leading to mystical illumination and ecstasy.

For me the major breakthrough came when a friend, familiar with my work with the lay mystics of Cyprus, urged me to join him on a journey to Mt. Athos. This thirty-mile-long-by-ten-mile-wide peninsula in northern Greece has been reserved since the ninth century as a refuge for Christian hermits and monks. After overcoming my initial reluctance to travel to that remote region of Greece (falsely assuming that it had nothing to offer except relics of medievalism) I took up his invitation to meet, as he promised, “real saints” whose prayers cause miracles to happen. With that journey my life and exploration into Christian mysticism took yet another decisive and unexpected turn. It was on Mt. Athos, in 1991, that I first met Father Maximos, an extraordinary thirty-two-year-old charismatic monk who impressed me by his uncommon wisdom (Markides, 1995). I realized from that first visit that Mt. Athos preserved a clear and identifiable path to spiritual knowledge and practices leading to mystical illumination. Until that point I had no knowledge of its existence. With the help of Fr. Maximos, I came to recognize further that Mt. Athos preserved a tradition of eldership with masters and disciples that passed on knowledge and spiritual methods from generation to generation since early Christianity. Father Maximos, his young age notwithstanding, was considered an “elder,” someone gifted by the Holy Spirit to offer guidance to others in the same way that he himself was guided by other charismatic elders.

As a result of a series of synchronicities and unexpected developments Fr. Maximos left Mt. Athos in 1993 and ended up as the abbot of a monastery on the Troodos Mountains of Cyprus. It is there that I joined him during a sabbatical and during several summer visits in order to continue my exploration of mystical Christianity. My work with him took place during the mid-1990s during the time that Daskalos passed away.

I continued my phenomenological study, now of the monastic spirituality of Orthodoxy, by engaging Fr. Maximos in sustained conversations concerning the spiritual life, and mining a wealth of spiritual wisdom that complemented what I had learned from Daskalos. Being Fr. Maximos’ temporary chauffeur allowed me to spend many hours with him as I drove him from his mountain retreat to the various parts of the island where he carried on with his spiritual mission. This method of gathering my field data led to two books on the mystical pathways to the Divine as preserved on Mt. Athos and as experienced in the lives of Eastern Orthodox spiritual elders (Markides, 2001, 2005).

Based on the teachings of Fr. Maximos and through my subsequent exposure to the patristic tradition of Orthodoxy in general, I have come to the conclusion that Orthodox Christianity, like Buddhism and Hinduism, speaks of trans-rational stages in the ascent of the self towards union with the Godhead. These stages are accessible by every human being but can be primarily attained through an arduous spiritual struggle, ideally through the guidance of a spiritual master or an elder like Fr. Maximos.

Orthodoxy speaks of three distinct stages that every human soul must traverse in order to reunite with God. I understood them as archetypal stages in that they are considered as part of the structure of the human condition and its destiny. For lack of a better term I called these stages *The Threefold Way* (Markides, 2001, pp. 212–224). It includes, first the stage of *Catharsis*, or the purification of the soul from egotistical passions. Once the soul has undergone its purification, there is then the stage of *Fotisis*, (illumination) or the enlightenment of the soul. Finally, there is the stage of *Theosis* or union with God as the final destination and ultimate home of the human soul. The last two stages that lie beyond the ego are impossible to attain without having the soul first pass through the fires of catharsis or purification from egotistical desires and passions.

According to the wisdom tradition of the Christian elders, Catharsis is essential in helping us overcome two basic obstacles that keep us cut off from the knowledge and vision of God. They claim that the most fundamental barrier is first and foremost the sum total of our worldly passions and desires. The primary passions out of which all others spring are *hedonism*, *philodoxy* (love of glory) and *avarice*. They are the products of humanity's "fallen" nature and the enslavement of human hearts and minds to the gross and transient material universe with its myriads of temptations and seductions.

Further, the elders believe that the second fundamental barrier preventing human beings from knowing God is their exclusive reliance on their senses and rational intellect for understanding reality, which they have come to equate with gross matter. By focusing primarily on the material world, the elders believe, human beings lost their connection to Heaven. They have lost the relationship with God which Adam and Eve enjoyed prior to the Fall, or the Prodigal Son maintained prior to his decision to leave the heavenly Palace. It is their view that this split is at the core of our existential predicament and it is the cause of all subsequent psychic turmoil, and suffering. That is that our fundamental problem in life is our alienation from our divine origin and that the ultimate healing of the human soul is predicated on the restoration of our shattered relationship with the Divine, with God.

How can humans heal the split and how can Catharsis be achieved? The Athonite response is through *askesis* or spiritual exercises. The full-time practitioner of *askesis* is the "ascetic" who, contrary to popular negative stereotypes about the meaning of that word, is someone who engages in systematic spiritual exercises for the ultimate prize of *Theosis*, (union with God) what is commonly known as God consciousness or God realization. Like

the Marathon runner who subjects his or her body to rigorous and often painful training so must the spiritual athlete subject himself or herself to similar systematic and strenuous training. Such acts may appear incomprehensible and even masochistic to an outsider.

According to the Athonite elders, *askesis* implies the overcoming of the allurements of the senses that keep mind and heart enslaved to this world of gross matter. Monks and nuns, as well as committed lay persons, must replace culinary pleasures by periodic and systematic fasting as a form of spiritual exercise, in order to master the passion of gluttony. Monks and nuns must also replace sexual life by abstinence in order to free their energy and to re-direct it exclusively towards the higher goal of establishing an “erotic” relationship with God. Ownership of material objects must give way to total propertylessness and poverty. Furthermore, the aspiring novices must empty themselves of all worldly desires and ambitions by giving up whatever social positions of power and prestige they may have held in society.

There are some dramatic cases in the history of Eastern Christianity of individuals rejecting great wealth and power for the sake of a full-time contemplative existence. One such case was that of St. Savva, the greatest of Serbian saints who was once the king of Serbia. He relinquished his throne, joined Chilandari, the Serbian monastery on Mt. Athos, and at a later stage returned to Serbia to serve his former subjects as a spiritual teacher and healer.

Lay people must develop a sense of inner freedom from external possessions, positions, and feelings of self-importance. They are asked to practice *metanoia* (radical change of feeling and thinking) and to use the objects of this world without becoming enslaved by them. Ordinary people living in the world can also engage in *askesis* for according to the holy elders life in the world itself must be seen as a form of *askesis*. When this is practiced, whatever event, be it worldly success or tragedy, must be seen as a “temptation” that can be “exploited” spiritually for the attainment of humility, the real and only pathway to God.

Humility, or the overcoming of egotistical passions, can be attained either within the context of monasticism or within life in the wider world with its myriad of positive and negative “temptations.” Marriage, for example, is considered by the Christian elders as a form of *askesis*, an arena for transcending one’s egotism for the sake of the other. It is a mistake, Fr. Maximos argued, to consider marriage, as many traditional Christians do, as first and foremost a means for procreation. The primary aim of marriage is *askesis* engaged by two people who are asked to overcome their separateness in their common ascent towards God.

The Athonite elders teach that when one is emptied of worldly attachments and concerns (*kenosis*) his or her mind may then be filled with the reality of God. Ceaseless prayer plays a key role in this process. It is a corrective to the exclusive reliance on reason and the intellect for apprehending the nature of reality. Whether one lives in the world or in a monastery, the practice of prayer

remains at the center of one's spiritual life. Reminiscent of *mantra* yoga, the most important prayer practice is the repetition of the Jesus Prayer, or the "*Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me.*" When it is done systematically (such as twenty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes at night) the Prayer could be accompanied with breathing exercises (half the sentence with deep inhalation and the other half with exhalation—but breathing exercises are not recommended without spiritual guidance). A variant of the Jesus Prayer is the one introduced by St. Gregory Palamas as "*Lord enlighten my darkness.*" The Jesus Prayer can also be practiced at all times even when one is engaging in various worldly activities, like walking, tending a garden or peeling potatoes. The purpose of this "*Noetic Prayer,*" as it is often called, is to saturate the mind with the holy name that would facilitate the way back to God, towards *deification*. It is said that those "advanced in the Prayer" may be asleep but "their heart is awake." The Prayer is ongoing at the very core of their being.

When undertaking serious spiritual work one ideally needs an experienced guide, an elder who is divinely gifted. Such an elder would take upon himself the sacred responsibility of monitoring the spiritual development of the novice by helping him or her to navigate through the myriad of obstacles that one is likely to encounter in this kind of work. The Athonite tradition has preserved this system of "eldership," which seems to have been virtually disappeared everywhere else within the Christian movement. In the absence of an experienced elder the lay person may still be spiritually nurtured by the tradition of the Church or *Ecclesia* that is viewed by the Orthodox elders as a form of spiritual hospital that can lead human beings to proceed safely on the path of their deification. It is done through systematic participation in the sacraments of the church such as confession, communion, all-night and prolonged communal vigils (reminiscent of collective meditation practices), charitable activities and the like.

The Eastern Church, seeing itself as a spiritual hospital, bases its practice not only on the study of the Bible but most importantly on the systematic study of the lives and teachings of the great saints, those who have become one with God, who have attained their deification in this life. The saints, Fr. Maximos said repeatedly, can serve as beacons for navigating on the spiritual path. They can teach us how to live and how to develop the type of discernment we need so that we may be able to distinguish the authentic from the unauthentic, the master or saint from the false prophet and impostor, the good spirits from the bad, the angels from the demons. The life of saints as inspirational stories could offer guidance to action for the struggling soul. It is the empirical or experiential confirmation of the validity of the Gospel as a spiritual guide to one's life. Therefore, unlike the western churches, particularly the various fundamentalist protestant denominations, the Bible must be supplemented with the entire praxis and tradition of the saints. In this light it is interesting what the Great Russian Saint Silouan the Athonite (1866–1938) once said, that if we hypothetically assume that all the bibles of the world are destroyed in a massive earthquake it does not mean that the Bible will disappear. The saints could re-write it for, according to St. Silouan, the Bible is already written in the heart of every saint (Sophrony, 1999). This mystical understanding of scripture

is alien to Protestant fundamentalism since the category of the “saint” has been rejected along with the monastery, the institutional set up that facilitates the production of God-realized elders and preserves the spiritual methodologies that can lead to an experiential knowledge of God.

The necessity of Catharsis is generally overlooked in the West by contemporary practitioners of the spiritual arts. Also overlooked is the notion of *metanoia*, the radical transformation of heart and mind, and the attainment of utter humility as a necessary prerequisite to union with God. Even within the human potential movement that has been flourishing in recent decades perhaps not enough attention has been given to purification as the de-focusing of the mind from egotistical preoccupations and its refocusing on the Divine. Most of the attention has been placed on personal empowerment and transformation and on the attainment of ecstatic states and psychic abilities as ends in themselves. Therefore, one of the spiritual gifts that the Christian East can bring to the contemporary West is the spiritual psychology of Catharsis and its methodology for overcoming the cult of narcissism.

In the Athonite tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy Fotisis, or Enlightenment, the second stage in the soul’s ascent towards God, is the natural consequence of the work carried out during the previous stage of purification and is offered to the heart as a gift by the Holy Spirit. It is only at the stage of Catharsis (reminiscent again of the eight-fold path of the Buddha) that human will can and ought to be actively engaged. Fotisis as a gift of Grace is, among other things, Holy Wisdom itself. In this state the purified soul, the saint, becomes a channel through which God reveals His Wisdom, which is the true meaning of Enlightenment or Fotisis (Kontzevitch, 1996; Ware, 1979).

The Christian elders teach that a soul that has reached the stage of Fotisis is as a rule endowed with gifts of the spirit such as divine wisdom, prophetic vision, healing, clairvoyance, and other extraordinary, or what we today would call “paranormal,” abilities that seem to violate the known laws of the material universe— In this respect the stories and legends about the miracle-filled life of Christian saints from ancient times to the present is stunningly reminiscent of those reported in Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1987).

Most importantly, however, Fotisis means the vision and the experience of the *Uncreated Light*, God’s Divine light. It is considered the most prized gift of the Spirit superseding all other gifts, the real goal of the spiritual struggle. It is the mystical contemplation of God’s presence in the world that floods the soul with exquisite joy. It is the experience of Moses on Mt. Sinai, of Jesus on Mt. Tabor, of the Apostles at Pentecost and of all the great saints throughout the ages.

Before his death in 1994, Elder Paisios, one of Fr. Maximos’ elders, confided to a close disciple of an extraordinary experience he had with the *Uncreated Light* which was typical of other such accounts.

One night while I was in my cell reciting the *Efche*, the Jesus Prayer,” he reported, “I began to feel overwhelmed by a heavenly joy. My dark cell, lit

by only one candle, began gradually to fill up with a most beautiful white-blue light. At first the light was very intense. But then my eyes got accustomed to its brilliance. It was the *Uncreated Light* manifesting Itself! I stayed in that condition for several hours and lost every sensation of worldly matters. I lived in a different, spiritual world, much different from this world of carnality.

While in that state I was exposed to heavenly visions and extraordinary experiences. Without noticing, many hours passed by. Then the *Uncreated Light* began to recede and I returned to my previous condition. I was hungry and I ate a piece of dried bread. I was thirsty and drank some water. I was tired and sat down to rest. I felt like an animal and deplored myself for being no different than the beasts. This natural humility was born inside me as a consequence of the change in my situation. From the spiritual condition I was in, I had entered into this one and, perceiving the difference, there was little left for me but to condemn and loathe myself. When I walked outside I thought it was still night with a full moon. Not far from me there lived another brother in his hermitage. I walked there and asked him for the time. It was ten in the morning. The *Uncreated Light* was so intense that I thought the light of day was like the night and the Sun was like the Moon! (Tatses, 1992, pp. 39–41)

Likewise Elder Joseph, another of Fr. Maximos' spiritual elders narrating his personal life as a monk at the Vatopedi monastery on Mt. Athos wrote:

....I remember clearly that as soon as I began to mention in my prayer several times the name of Christ my heart filled with love. Suddenly it increased so much that I was no longer praying but I was in a state of wonder about this overflowing of love. I wanted to embrace and kiss all human beings and the entire creation and at the same time I was thinking so humbly....I felt the presence of our Christ but I could not see him. I wanted to fall down to His immaculate feet and ask Him how does He set fire to the hearts of people and yet remain hidden from them. I was then given to understand that Christ is inside every human being. I said, my Lord let me be in this state forever and I need nothing else. This state lasted for some time and when I came back to my original condition I couldn't wait until I went to my gerontas [elder] to tell him all about it....”

He further had this to say on the matter:

When the mind of the person has been cleansed, purified and enlightened ....it is given, in addition to its own light, the light of Divine Grace so that it remains permanently within him. Then it snatches him and exposes him to visions and perceptions true to Its own nature. However, such a person has the capacity, if he so wishes, to ask through prayer. Then Grace is energized and what he asks is given simply because he asks. But I believe the truly devout avoid such requests except in extraordinary circumstances. (Joseph, 1984, pp. 302–303)

As Elder Joseph states, those who are offered such gifts of the Spirit accept them in utter humility and must never be a source for self promotion and self-aggrandizement. In fact such gifts may also be strong temptations that can often lead to a tragic spiritual fall. That is why great saints do their utmost to hide them from others and use them only sparingly and only to help fellow human beings in their spiritual, psychological and medical needs. It is for this reason also that the desert fathers have been called *nyptic*, meaning vigilant. They were constantly conscious and on guard against such temptations. Therefore, from the point of view of the holy elders of Orthodoxy any healing ability that one may be endowed with should not be flaunted for the sake of impressing an audience. I remember the strong reaction of Elder Paisios when I naively asked him about his reputed abilities to heal people. He emphatically denied such “rumors” stating that all he does is pray for people and that whatever healing takes place is the result of God’s Grace and Providence. Yet these rumors crossed the Atlantic reaching me in Maine when I first heard of him and of his reputed friendship with wild animals like bears and poisonous snakes; —In Orthodox spirituality the God-realized individual who has reached paradise in this life re-establishes a harmonious relationship with nature that was a characteristic of life before the Fall. Hence the legends of saints who lived among wild beasts without fear of being harmed.

The experience of the *Uncreated Light* may also take other more concrete forms. It may bring about dramatic healing phenomena and serve as a shield against external dangers. An extraordinary case is that of the renowned Russian art critic Peter Andreyevich Streltsov who joined the famous monastery at Optina (frequented by both Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky) and became a monk by the name of Father Arseny. During the Stalinist terror, Fr. Arseny was exiled to Siberia in a *Gulag*, the notorious prison camp. For nineteen years, between 1939–1958 while under extreme conditions, the charismatic Fr. Arseny brought healing and solace to many prisoners including communists and hardened criminals. Many of these prisoners, touched by his acts of kindness and altruism, were transformed and became his disciples. The most dramatic episode took place when Fr. Arseny and a young prisoner named Alexei were locked up in an unheated isolation barrack made of nothing other than sheet-iron. Their sentence was to stay locked in there for forty eight hours in temperatures below –30 Fahrenheit. In reality they were sentenced to a cruel death. The guards expected to find two frozen corpses when they opened the door two days later.

According to his biographer the moment the guards shut the door Fr. Arseny calmly advised his companion to take the opportunity they were offered and to pray openly and without fear. He then put himself immediately into a state of intense prayer. Alexei, who was not religious, thought that Fr. Arseny had lost his wits. He was beginning to feel his body freezing up and prepared himself to die. The space was filled with Fr. Arseny’s voice praying. Suddenly everything changed. The darkness, the cold, the numbness, the pain and the fear disappeared. Alexei looked at him and could not believe his eyes. The isolation chamber had become spacious and very bright and the interior resembled a church. Father Arseny was now wearing brilliant vestments as he prayed

loudly with his hands stretched upwards. On both sides of Fr. Arseny, stood two very handsome lads wearing brilliant costumes. Alexei stood up. His body felt warm, he was able to breathe freely and his heart was filled with joy. He then began to follow Fr. Arseny with the prayer, feeling God's presence with them. Twice the thought crossed Alexei's mind that they were dying and that they were in a state of delirium. But everything felt otherwise. Everything felt totally real. Father Arseny then asked him to lie down and get some sleep while he continued with the prayer. At some point they heard shouts and knocks at the door. Alexei opened his eyes and saw that Fr. Arseny was still praying. The two young men blessed them and disappeared instantly. The light gradually receded and they found themselves once again inside the narrow and frozen shack. When the guards opened the door they were stunned. Instead of two frozen corpses they found them both standing with guarded smiles and serene faces. We are alive, Fr. Arseny simply announced to the speechless guards, refusing to offer any further explanations (Father Arseny, 2000).

It is important to note here that the experience of the *Uncreated Light* can unexpectedly befall any human being, regardless of his or her station in life. Alexei was not a believer yet he had the experience of the *Uncreated Light* which not only saved his life but also transformed him as a person. Saul was a persecutor of Christians until he fell off his horse on the road to Damascus and was temporarily blinded by the brilliance of the *Uncreated Light*. That experience catapulted him not only to fulfill his extraordinary historic mission as St. Paul, Apostle of the nations but also to provide to Christians the proper understanding of God as unconditional and total Love.

The elders of Orthodoxy teach that people's understanding of God is based on their spiritual maturity. In this respect they categorize people into three spiritual age-groups: the "slaves" of God, the "employees" of God and the "lovers" of God. The "slaves" view God as a punishing overlord who dispenses punishments to those who violate His commandments. This, according to the elders, is an infantile understanding of God. The next stage in the maturation of the self towards God is that of the "employees" who do good and follow the commandments because they expect to be rewarded by God. They are in an exchange relationship with the Divine. It is a step above that of the slaves but nevertheless still not the most mature and real way of conceiving the Almighty. The majority of humanity, according to the elders are on the employee stage. Those who truly understand God are the "lovers of God," the great saints and mystics of Christianity. These are people who have experienced and tasted the heart of God, who do good and follow the commandments not because of fear or expectation of rewards but because of a passionate love for God (Markides, 2005, pp. 127–147). In this light Christ is understood as the manifestation in the world of the archetype of divine love. According to the elders of the Christian East "God became man so that man may become God."

The elders teach that all three stages are legitimate stages in the ascent of human beings towards God, given their stage of spiritual maturity and development. The reader will recognize, of course, how this spiritual

categorization is consistent with the perspective of developmental structuralism in psychology, particularly as it relates to moral development.

Once the gifts of Grace are bestowed upon a person through Fotisis, then Theosis is the next and final destination of the soul's journey. This stage is beyond all stages and it defies all human understanding. According to the tradition of the holy elders, and Christianity in general for that matter, the individual soul does not lose its uniqueness upon its return to God. It does not merge with God in such a way that its autonomy is compromised or annihilated. The Prodigal Son does not lose his identity upon his return to the Palace. On the contrary, he carries along with him into his new deified state the accumulated experiences of his worldly sojourn. One could perhaps argue that the entire cycle of the involution of the spirit into the lower worlds of separation and suffering and the subsequent evolution back to God is for the "autonomization" of the human soul within the oneness and unity of God.

This particular point may be one of the key differences when one compares the spirituality of the Christian elders with some Buddhist and Hindu interpretations concerning the final destination of the human soul. From the perspective of the Christian elders, what is annihilated through Catharsis is not the inner self aware "I-ness" but the sum-total of egotistical passions that obstruct our vision of God. Saint Seraphim of Sarov may be in a state of oneness with God but he still remains autonomous within that oneness as a self-aware soul, as St. Seraphim serving God's plan. In saying that, one needs to be reminded that the best of all the wisdom traditions warn that the nature of the final destination of our spiritual journey is beyond all humanly constructed notions, all dogmas and beliefs.

In spite of these inherent limitations in understanding Theosis, spiritual adepts, great saints and contemporary theologians tried to convey a most feeble glimpse of this ultimate mystery of human destiny. "The divinization of the individual is the supreme gift of the Grace of the Holy Spirit," wrote a contemporary Greek theologian who based his work on the experiential testimonies of the leading elders of the Eastern Church. *Theosized* human beings undergo changes not only in mind and soul but also in body. Such individuals become forgetful of ordinary bodily needs such as food and sleep since they do not have the physical urges and needs of ordinary humans. Such persons are no longer as subjected and confined by physical laws as ordinary persons are. "Their soul has tasted the depth of divine Eros and the sweetness of mental gifts and, therefore, it cannot rest on what it has so far achieved but proceeds to further heavenly realms" (Tsames, 1985, pp. 105–14).

Finally, the teaching of the holy elders about *Theosis* has its social dimension. *Theosis* must not be seen within the context of a personal, egocentric joy. It is often stressed by the holy elders that the *theosized* individual, even though he (or she) has attained perfection within a perfect God and is united with the highest archangelic powers of Cherubim and Seraphim does not rest within this joyful condition. "Instead, he becomes an emissary of the Holy Spirit, choosing to live among fellow humans and serving them through word and deed like the

apostles. Such a *theosized* person, being in continuous contemplation of God, is capable of guiding others towards their own salvation and *Theosis*” (Tsames, 1985). This point, of course, is reminiscent of the Buddhist understanding of the Bodhisattva.

Professor of comparative religions at Concordia University Dr. John Rossner added the following comments about the life and practices of Christian monks and hermits after I concluded a presentation on the Threefold Way at a conference he organized in Montreal:

Such practices are based on the belief that it is important to get away from the world and its attractions for the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. This is the path of the hermit throughout history. Keep in mind that the aim of these people is not to become members of monastic communities, a brotherhood, or a sisterhood. Monasteries in the West have been focused on communal life itself. In eastern monasteries, on the other hand, the focus has been elsewhere. They are communal only in a very secondary sense. It’s the bonding between the individual and Heaven that is of central focus not the bonding of the members of the monastery with each other. The early hermits originally came together in monasteries only to celebrate the liturgy but continued living separately in their caves. They created monasteries where they could eventually eat together because it was simpler. They were struggling for knowledge and wisdom that comes not from logical processes but from super-conscious levels and that happens when the mind stops, as it is in yoga and in Buddhism. Lamas and monks and nuns live separately from each other in these non-Christian traditions and they can’t go into each other’s monasteries for similar reasons as in Christian monasteries. But if we don’t understand that, if we impose our twentieth century, North American concepts into what went on then and dismiss the whole thing, we will be the losers. We can’t accept that lifestyle because we are in a different situation. We live in the modern world. But we still have from time to time to go apart from it and dwell in this inner relationship with Heaven. It is as a result of that relationship that the great miracles of the saints occur. (Markides, 2001, p. 219)

Why have western intellectuals, historians of religion and theologians been unaware of the teaching of the Christian elders about the Threefold *Way*? Why has the influential and controversial Anglican Bishop of Newark, Dr. John Spong, for example, stated once in utter frustration that “if the Anglican Commission can turn this far to the right, then it joins a strident fundamentalist Protestantism, an antiquated Roman Catholicism, and an *irrelevant Orthodox tradition* [italics added] as the major expressions of Christianity at the dawn of the twenty-first century...I see no hope for a Christian future in any of them. There is very little in any of these conservative traditions with which I could identify” (Spong, 1999, p. 441).

Bishop Spong is a rationalist, a radical theologian who shows neither interest in nor awareness of the mystical and miracle tradition of the holy elders. He judges Christianity on the basis of how it is represented by the churches, not

the mystical Christian tradition as embodied in the lives of the great saints. He is not alone among critically thinking western theologians, historians and philosophers in offering this kind of assessment in regard to the exoteric aspects of the Christian tradition. Their interest is in ethics, social justice and reform. Salutary pursuits as these may be, they are not necessarily paths to mystical illumination. The question that needs to be answered is why are these scholars unaware of or willing to disregard an entire Christian mystical tradition?

#### SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The sociological answer to this oversight, I believe, lies in the way Christianity developed within the historical parameters of the Roman Empire and its aftermath. Emperor Constantine made some crucial decisions which had a lasting impact on both Western civilization and the Christian movement. During the middle of the fourth century, he elevated Christianity from a persecuted sect to the official religion of the Roman Empire. Since then, Christianity (and the Judaism out of which it emerged) along with Greek philosophy and Roman law, became the third cultural component that formed what is understood as Western civilization. The polytheism of the ancients was replaced by the God of Israel and the Ten Commandments became the ethical foundation of the West. Constantine then for strategic reasons shifted the capital of his empire from Rome to Constantinople after he realized that the former had become vulnerable to the barbarian tribes from the north. Changing the capital to “the New Rome” affected the course of western history as it allowed the empire to last for another thousand years. There was, perhaps, an additional reason for relocating his capital to the East. The old Rome was too stained with its pagan past. Constantinople was a fresh start, a city without a history, founded exclusively on the new religion. Whereas the eastern part of the empire known as “Byzantium” thrived and prospered, the social and political infrastructure of the western part of the empire eventually collapsed under the weight of the Germanic invasions. This development left the Roman Church as the sole organized institution keeping a politically fragmented and barbarized western European society together. The Dark Ages descended upon Europe, a development that did not take place in Byzantium, an important point that western historians have often overlooked. It is interesting to note that during the Dark Ages Constantinople was a center of culture with over a million inhabitants whereas Paris had only a few thousand. Here is how a medieval historian describes the prevailing conditions in the West.

The leadership which was so badly needed by the disorganized Western society of the sixth century could come initially only from the church, which had in its ranks almost all the literate men in Europe and the strongest institutions of the age. The church, however, had also suffered severely from the Germanic invasions. The bishops identified their interests with those of the lay nobility and in fact were often relatives of kings and the more powerful aristocrats; the secular clergy in general was ignorant, corrupt, and unable to deal with the problem of Christianizing a society which remained

intensely heathen in spite of formal conversion of masses of Germanic warriors to Christianity. The grossest heathen superstitions were grafted onto Latin Christianity...By the beginning of the 7th century church discipline in Gaul was in a state of chaos, and the problem was the most basic one of preserving the sufficient rudiments of literacy to perpetuate the liturgy at doctrines of Latin Christianity....The Latin church was preserved from extinction, and European civilization with it, by the two ecclesiastical institutions which alone had the strength and efficiency to withstand the impress of the surrounding barbarism: the regular clergy (that is, the monks) and the Papacy. (Cantor, 1969, p. 161–quoted in Cockerham, 1996, p. 11)

These historical developments signaled the beginning of the preoccupation of the western Church with the management of this world, so much so that in some cases the Pope himself participated in military expeditions and used the sword with the same ease as the Gospel. It was a ghastly development for the eastern monks and hermits, who objected to any form of violence.

The reluctance of the Byzantine church to accept that ends could justify means (even to the point of insisting that killing enemy soldiers in battle was sinful) led to a feeling that no one could engage in politics, war, or commerce without some moral taint. This put the Byzantines at a certain disadvantage against western merchants or Crusaders, or Muslim Holy Warriors. (Treadgold, 1997, p. 849)

While the political and military institutions of the western part of the empire collapsed, the overall social and political infrastructure of the eastern part of the Roman Empire remained relatively intact. The various emperors still handled the affairs of this world, often committing atrocious crimes against their enemies, while the Church remained otherworldly both in its praxis and in theological orientation, fulfilling its role as the conscience of the empire, and often serving as a countervailing power against the arbitrariness of imperial power. Its focus and legitimate domain was not the affairs of state but the realms beyond this world. The mystical element in Eastern Christianity (the *Threefold Way*) which has survived to this day in some ancient monastic communities may, therefore, be attributed to the fact that in Byzantium the Church, unlike its western counterpart, did not exercise direct political power and authority over the society. There were clear and definitive boundaries between the ecclesiastical, religious sphere on one hand and the imperial state on the other. The emperor as the “vicegerent of Christ” on earth perceived as his primary role the safeguarding and protection of Orthodox Christianity. With full economic and political support from the state, the monks were left in peace in their monasteries to focus all their energy and attention on the systematic exploration of inner spiritual life and otherworldly goals. While Western Christianity became more oriented towards this world, Eastern Christianity remained monastic and eremitic in character.

The essential function of both monks and nuns was seen as the pursuit of holiness. Byzantine monasteries may have devoted less time to study, scholarship and education than their western counterparts, but they took

seriously the obligation of hospitality and sponsored works of charity, establishing hospitals, orphanages and houses for the poor. Yet the greatest stress was placed on abnegation of the world, as was fully demonstrated by the citing of the monasteries of the Meteora clinging to the perpendicular rocks of the Thessalian mountains or by the extraordinary monastic republic of the Holy Mountain of Athos. (Green, 1996, p. 67)

The different historical developments of the western and the eastern part of the Roman Empire paralleled and perhaps were responsible for the rise of two distinct orientations in Christian theology. The type which developed in the West was based on the thought of Aristotle, the philosophical precursor to the scientific revolution and the philosopher whose primary focus was the study of this world. God as the “Unmoved Mover,” Aristotle taught, can be known and proven by studying nature and through philosophical, logical deductions. Saint Thomas Aquinas, who introduced Aristotle to the West, was the catalyst for the Roman Catholic Church to embrace Aristotelian philosophy and establish it as the central orientation in Catholic theology. Western theology, by adhering to such an orientation did in fact plant the seeds for the scientific revolution and the rise of rationalism that paved the way for the modern secular world as we know it. This “scholastic” perspective, however, was at odds with that of Eastern Christianity which believed that God can only be known through spiritual practice and direct mystical illumination.

Christianity eventually split formally into the Roman and the Eastern Orthodox churches during the Great Schism of A.D. 1054. Since then the “two Christianities” followed their radically different and separate ways.

Western Christianity underwent further radical convulsions that led to increasing secularization. In the middle of the sixteenth century Martin Luther nailed to the door of his church his “95 theses” that launched the revolution against the Pope. With Protestantism, monasticism as an institution was abolished altogether as well as the practice of honoring the saints, who traditionally had served as spiritual guideposts on the path towards *Theosis*. In the words of Fr. Maximos, it was as if “the heart was taken out of Christianity.” In addition to a cultural repudiation of cloistered life, Protestantism redirected believers to express their faith through a “this-worldly asceticism,” an orientation of disciplined, rational action *within* the world. As the great early 20<sup>th</sup> Century German sociologist Max Weber showed, (1958) this re-orientation of western culture had, as an unintended consequence, the development of a “Protestant work ethic” that has played a major role in revolutionizing the world by opening the gates to modern capitalism and the industrial revolution.

By means of a primarily rational, scholastic approach to God, and by marginalizing the *Threefold Way*, Western Christianity waged a losing battle with science, which eventually came to be viewed by many leading western thinkers as an alternative to religion. The western intellectual tradition since the middle ages has been, therefore, galvanized by an unrelenting adversarial

spirit against religion which was identified and equated with social backwardness and reactionary politics.

Eastern Christianity, on the other hand, remained until recently, cut off and insulated from these secularizing influences, primarily because of the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 and because of the fall of Orthodox Russia to the communists in 1917. A consequence perhaps of this cultural hibernation and isolation from western historical developments was the preservation of the eastern Christian monastic tradition which safeguarded to date the *Threefold Way* and the institution of “eldership.” They were the products of the millennial existence of the historically defunct and forgotten Byzantium. Given the social and cultural characteristics of the Byzantine state and society it was possible for the nurturing of an “enchanted” and otherworldly orientation to the world, a state that Max Weber assumed existed only in Asiatic societies. It is this mystical version of Christianity that Byzantium may offer to the present, post-modern, secular age, namely the restoration of the “eye of intuition,” as a pathway to knowledge as legitimate as that of science, or the “eye of the senses” and of philosophy, or the “eye of the mind.” Byzantium’s legacy and its gift to the modern age may be the *Threefold Way*, in a parallel way that the gift of the western branch of Christianity to the world has been the growth of science, critical social thought and modern democracy.

#### CONCLUSIONS

I have tried to outline in the form of an “ideal type” some of the basic contours of the mysticism of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. I have suggested that it has the potential to contribute to the on-going development of transpersonal theory as well as towards the possible “re-enchantment” of Western culture. The premises of its *Threefold Way* are consistent with a transpersonal understanding of human consciousness, namely that there are stages of human cognition over and beyond the egoic, rational mind. Eastern Orthodoxy, however, places the greatest weight of its theory and praxis in overcoming self-centeredness through the purification of the “heart” from egotistical passions as the key prerequisite for the attainment of higher stages of illumination and awareness. For example, its elaborate spiritual psychology on the nature and formation of destructive passions and the methods to overcome them (Markides, 2001, pp. 115–130) are, I believe, unique and potentially valuable for the further development of transpersonal perspectives as well as offering insights for spiritual counseling. As an increasing number of people begin to engage in spiritual practices Eastern Orthodoxy with its millennial tradition and practice can offer guidelines on how to proceed on the path and avoid temptations that can lead in spiritually undesirable directions.

What I have suggested above should not be construed as an implicit claim that Eastern Orthodoxy, particularly in its exoteric forms, is problem-free or superior to other spiritual perspectives. In fact, if mystical Orthodoxy is to contribute to this re-enchantment of the world it will need to be freed from its

limited and homogeneous cultural milieu. For example, contemporary ecclesiastical representatives of Eastern Christianity have yet to come to terms with the western enlightenment and modern critical thought. Along with mystical wisdom there is a strong xenophobic element preserved in Eastern Orthodox culture nurtured by centuries of isolation from the wider, modern world. This insularity is the result of Eastern Orthodoxy's centuries-old confrontation with Islam and the bitter legacy left over by the western crusades that paved the way to the Islamic takeover (Norwich, 1997, p. 306). Transpersonal researchers and thinkers, therefore, will need to marshal a high level of discernment and understanding as they mine the spiritual jewels lying dormant within the Eastern Orthodox spiritual tradition thus making them accessible and relevant to a modern understanding of supraconscious realities.

It is perhaps a stroke of good spiritual fortune that during the last few decades an increasing number of Eastern Orthodox works by modern and enlightened theologians have made their appearance in English. They include such writers as Bishop Kallistos Ware of Oxford University (1979), Philip Sherrard (1998), Elder Sophrony (Sakharov) (1988), Vladimir Lossky (1997), Jean Meyendorff (1996), John Chryssavgis (2008), Elizabeth Theokritoff (2009), Theokritoff and Cunningham (2008), and many others. In addition, there have been translations of Eastern Orthodox spiritual classics like the nineteenth century Russian work by an anonymous author *The Way of the Pilgrim* (1974), the *Philokalia* by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain (1990), *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by St. John Climacus (1991), *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* by St. Isaac the Syrian (1984), and others. Furthermore, biographies of the life of contemporary saints also made their appearance in English translations from Russian and Greek originals, such as Elder Sophrony's *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (1999), Eldress Gabrilia's *The Ascetic of Love* (1999), and Elder Porphyrios' *Wounded by Love* (2005). This literature can serve as the introductory raw material for an enriched transpersonal theory that would accommodate, incorporate and take advantage of the sacred wisdom that comes from the Christian East.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to my wife Emily J. Markides and my friend Michael Lewis for their critical and valuable comments.

<sup>2</sup> I must point out that there have been earlier attempts of reviewing the potential contribution of Christian psychological concepts to transpersonal practice and theory. Among them, the work of Father William MacNamara (1975) "Psychology and the Mystical Christian Tradition" (published in Charles Tart's edited classic work *Transpersonal Psychologies*) stands out.

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