

## *The Palamite Paradigm of Ecstasy and its Impact on Eastern Christian Model*

Adriana Elena Vlaicu, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Romania

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### **Abstract**

“Is human being an ecstatic being? Is it possible for a human being to live without any kind of spiritual experience?” Even from ancient times people were searching through various methods, ways to reach some high spiritual experiences regardless their religious views or methods they used such as iatromantis, yoga, Buddhist meditation, Kabbalah, Rumi or Christian and not only. This is proof that human beings do search for a spiritual experience that exceeds the material world and its rationality. For Eastern Christianity a moment of a great importance was the controversy between Barlaam, the monk from Calabria and Gregory Palamas, a greek theologian and philosopher, this controversy marking actually the first confrontation between Eastern tradition and the new occidental man. It pinpointed the articulation of hesychasm, moving from living the experience to reflecting upon it. Eastern mysticism talks about a direct knowing of God, a union with Him, while Western rationalism implies more of an imitation of God, a rational knowing of God, denying any divine implication in this process, which makes ecstatic experience completely different. Palamas presents the monologue kind of prayer, focused on repeating the name of God. It was used by the Dessert Fathers and was known as Kyrie eleison, Prayer of the mind, Prayer of the Heart to transform later into Jesus’ Prayer or Remembering the Word. This prayer is the core of the whole byzantine spirituality.

Keywords: Spiritual Experience, Ecstasy, Gregory Palamas, Hesychasm, Jesus’ Prayer, Eastern Christianity

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## Introduction

The term of ecstasy is quite an intriguing one when it comes to spirituality. The question that rose at the beginning of my research into this topic was related to whether human beings have it in their nature to unconsciously search for this kind of experience. With just a look back at the history of this term we could say that the answer is yes. Regardless the cultural and religious background, these kind of experiences were discussed, searched, needed through all our human history. It did influence culture, religion, personal beliefs and personal experiences. This paper will try to provide a brief introspection into the Orthodox type of ecstasy following Gregory Palamas teachings. It's not exhaustive considering I am still at the beginning of my travel onto this path.

This paper contains a part of my research on this topic. The main theme of my PhD thesis is "Anthropology and Spiritual Experience on André Scrima". Scrima was a Romanian theologian and priest, also a philosophy professor at Catholic University Saint-Joseph of Beirut (1968-1989) and at University Saint-Esprit from Kaslik, Liban. He is having an interesting perspective on what it means the spiritual experience. But to be able to understand his point of view I had to research to the origins of this term in Eastern Christian model. Hesychast way of reaching and describing a spiritual experience, be it called ecstasy or rapture or just spiritual experience, was acknowledged in the 14<sup>th</sup> century after the controversy between Barlaam and Gregory Palamas.

This article has six parts where I treat the topic of ecstasy in Christianity, the way hesychasm is a pattern in guiding the ecstatic experience, the specificity of Eastern Christian pattern and the birth of palamite one, the impact it had on the eastern Christian model, the main differences that are still creating a gap between the Catholic and Orthodox Church and, at the end, some brief conclusions.

### 1. Ecstasy in Christianity

In Christianity, the term ecstasy, *έκστασις*, literally means "getting out of", some sort of "withdrawal" from the normal estate. This term appears a few times in Septuagint without having though a technical signification, only referring to Adam's sleep, fear of God, madness, etc. In Christian ascetic literature this term had two main meanings. The first is a complete negative connotation and it refers to the madness caused by different factors such as sins or demons. The second sense could mean "amazement", "aim", and the implications are positive. In the most Christian writings, it refers to a special mystical experience that could be named in certain situations "rapture", the main characteristic being the mind breaking free from the body, losing all senses together with other physical and mental estates. In the Bible can be found some examples of mystical ecstasy such as Peter's in Acts 10:10, or Pavel's in II Cor. 12, 2-4. In the last it's not about a "trance" but more about a "rapture" considering the fact that he, himself, didn't know if he was still in body or not. Descriptions of similar experiences could be found in hagiographic writings<sup>1</sup>, these kinds of experiences being something normal and natural at the time.

Among byzantine theologians, St Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor paid a lot of attention to this term. Gregory sees it most of the time as "vertigo", "passionate love", "ascension". Dionysius on the other side it's influenced in his theory by Neoplatonism in

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<sup>1</sup> Writings about life of saints

using negative terms and Gregory of Nissa by using the symbolism of darkness. For Dionysius ecstasy is strongly related to the love of God and most of the times it's described as a sudden rapture where no thoughts or feelings could be described using human language. It's more like a union with God, the highest form of contemplation and supernatural knowledge. Maximus the Confessor had also superior experiences of mind. He accepts the general idea of ecstasy that Dionysius proposes and understands it as a fulfilling resemblance to God of the human being, a union that is proof of the transformation of the human being with the help of divine grace. When it comes to ascetic literature, we can mention John Climacus that sees the true hermit as being in an endless ecstasy. He also talks about ecstatic seeing of God's light. Isaac of Nineveh also has some descriptions of ecstasy, but it's a must to mention that in Syrian language there's no equivalent for the Greek ekstasis and *in the original text of Isaac of Nineveh, words as **tehra** or **temha**, both translated as **amazement**, are used as approximate equivalents.*<sup>2</sup> However, in the Greek versions of his writings, the term ekstasis is used a few times, in one of them even mentioning the physical elements that accompany it.<sup>3</sup>

On another side, Symeon The New Theologian thought that the knowledge about God is given to us by Him as a gift and it depends a lot on the nature of our belief. The unknowability of God but also having an opportunity to get to know Him is specific to Traditional Christian Orthodox Church. He is *one of the only mystics of the Middle Ages that openly talks about his personal experiences, visions.*<sup>4</sup> For Symeon the divinity is a paradoxical mystery, impossible to be comprehended by the human mind. However, for those that are worthy of this privilege it can reveal itself as a gift. Many of the visions that Symeon experienced had ecstatic characteristics such as loss of his conscience, self-forgetfulness, also losing sight and forgetting everything around him and even leaving his own body.<sup>5</sup> Symeon mentions into his writings, many times, the term ekstasis, even considering it to be a synonym with *arpage*, ἀρπαγε, rapture and with *alloiosis*, change.<sup>6</sup> Ecstasy has two different stages, one being impetuous, enthusiast and rare that most beginners have, and another that is ceaseless, a state of being continuous of the ones that can contemplate the divine light without losing their conscience and without leaving their bodies behind. One should surpass the first type of ecstasy transforming it into the second. It's more likely that this conception was influenced by his own evolution, his youth being marked with rarer and dramatic experiences to get more frequent and well mastered ones as he grew older. And it's why he ends up believing that those experiences mentioned by the greatest saints, might be in fact a gift that beginners have. Symeon confesses that the main point of Christian experience is being able to communicate with the one that's impossible to do so and getting to know what's impossible to be known. And that's possible through Incarnation of Christ that purified man and made him able to reach this kind of bliss. The same thing will be reminded later by Gregory Palamas.

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<sup>2</sup> Ilarion Afeyev, *Sfântul Simeon Noul teolog și tradiția ortodoxă*, Ed. Sophia, București, 2010, p. 297

<sup>3</sup> *Most of the time [the man] is bend over his knees when he prays and his hands are raised towards the sky and his eyes are gazing at Christ's Cross, gathering all his thoughts about God into his prayer. And suddenly ... a spring of delight moves his soul. And his limbs go limp and his face bends down towards the ground and his thoughts change; all in such a way that he cannot do his prostrations because of a feeling of happiness that spreads all over his body. Ibid*, p. 299

<sup>4</sup> John Meyendorff, *Sfântul Grigorie Palamas și mistica ortodoxă*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1995, p. 40

<sup>5</sup> *One day he felt immersed into a purifying water and he saw sparkles all around him. He saw the rays of His face mingling into the water, like he was washed by those shiny waves, feeling as if his spirit left his body being so thrilled as if he was in ecstasy. He said he lived like this for a while and then, through a even bigger mystery, he saw himself being taken away by God, without knowing if he was taken together with his body or not. - Cf. John Meyendorff, *Op. Cit.*, p. 42, *Apud. Trad. M.L. – B. în „Vie spirituelle”*, XXI, 1931, p. 305 - 308*

<sup>6</sup> In Catechesis 16 and 36 he mentions two of his ecstatic experiences.

## 2. Hesychasm as a Pattern in Guiding the Ecstatic Experience

Hesychasm was mentioned from the very beginning of monasticism and its biblical origins are obvious. It was probably the most important spiritual phenomenon in Christianity and it represents an ascetic tradition that appeared around the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, but it took a formal and more solid state in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries when Jesus' prayer appeared as a contemplation method. Hesychasm passed through two major turn points, each time getting rebirthed, renewing Orthodoxy completely. One happened in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the other in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I will refer to the one that happened into the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Macmillan Dictionary of Religion defines hesychasm as an ascetic system of meditations that include breathing exercises together with a continuous repetition of Jesus Prayer, developed by the monks on Mount Athos. The purpose of this practice was visualizing the light that was believed to be the energy of God that is opposed to His essence. This meant that knowing God could only happen through illumination – which opposes revelation that the Church usually meditates over.<sup>7</sup>

Hesychast practice has three major aspects:

- 1) The prayer of the mind, Jesus' Prayer, the Prayer of the Heart, lived as a doxology.
- 2) A method, integrated part of spiritual formation that the maestro gives to their disciple.
- 3) A personal reflection communicated through text such as: treatises, letters, etc.

Hesychasm comes from ancient Greek word *hesychia* that sends us towards the verb *hêsthai*, his Latin equivalent being *sedere*: to sit, to be seated. It proposes two directions: one would be physical, exterior and one would be spiritual, both together, never separated. In its origin the expression “to sit”, “to be seated” implies the idea of stability, calmness even peace. So, hesychasm is a way of maintaining and leading a spiritual estate and the peace as such. “To sit” and “to be seated” leads us to the idea of stability itself, even a physical one. The silence, the peacefulness requires a contemplative estate which makes possible our union with God. In our hearts unity and peace are inseparable. These two open a new horizon that is “one” and in the same time “the only one”, it's solitude that must be understood through its material aspect. It only makes sense if through it one gets a communion with God and self-transcendence; otherwise it could “kill” us, throws us back into the world. Solitude involves an element of obedience. Hesychasm searches for that solitude in oneself, but not to obtain the solitude itself but to be able to hear the voice of God. The one that searches God, when reading the Bible, always finds certain expressions that manage to reach them into a complete personal and different way. A word can suddenly illuminate and give a meaning to that inner search that one has. Hesychasm is associated to a non-anxious estate, is the search that can allow oneself to consume their life into God. The hesychast strives only towards Him and their own being is lead through this desire.

Praying is the core activity of hesychasm. The true prayer is the one that can focus. This prayer is the one that fulfills a desire of accomplishment, it becomes a formula and during the 5<sup>th</sup> century it will be defined as the core invocation of hesychasm. It gains a form that contains the essence of the prayer itself - monológistos euché → invocation → name of God. The keyword in hesychast spiritual life is heart. Heart is the original center and also the depth of a person. At some point the hesychast reaches the core of their heart and this comes also with a feeling of pain that later turns into peace and that peace is revealed through tears. Tears are also a gift,

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Pye, *Macmillan Dictionary of Religion*, The Macmillan Press LTD, London, 1994, p.108

tears of love, of light that describe the feeling of finally returning to where God resides, in the heart.

The dominant trait of hesychia is the prayer that calls the divine name. Name → heart. First major presupposition of calling the “Name to the heart” is focusing one’s mind. Hesychasts talked about the need of a certain physical posture and a certain rhythm of breathing. Invoking the Name means *anamnesis*, always having God in mind and keep Him in the heart. First requirement of the prayer is to remain focused, to be present into that prayer, to live for remembering continuously God. Anamnesis leads towards *presence*. The practice of this exercise of focusing proves that a *technique* is necessary eventually. The wisdom of the spiritual experience itself makes the hesychasts to understand the need of a certain body position. The breathing technique is also important. While practicing this kind of prayer hesychasts also learn the art of breathing. They are taught to *restrain the movement of the lungs so breathing won’t be done freely because the breathing that starts from the heart darkens the mind. If any kind of thoughts appear, be them good or bad, they should be ignored. Breathing should be restrained as much as possible and locking the mind into the heart while always invoking Jesus’s name.*<sup>8</sup>

The next important element is understanding the connection between spiritual experience and hesychast doctrine. Spiritual experience means living in accordance with the Holy Spirit that it is there since birth. As mentioned before hesychia has two components: silence and peace. The first shouldn’t be mistaken for muteness. In the depths of silence takes place the amazement: in front of the ultimate reality our word cannot do anything else but become silent. Peace is the peace of God. *Sometimes Jesus’s prayer should be said with the words or with the mind. They’re both recommended because when the mind cannot focus on saying it because it’s overwhelmed by thoughts and other times mouth cannot say it. So, one must pray both ways.*<sup>9</sup>

### **3. The Specificity of Christian Orthodox Pattern and the Birth of Palamite Paradigm**

When we mention a dogma we think at what it can do to make a spiritual development possible. What Christian dogmas have in common as a system that wants to be experimented is the fact that it urges an intimate communion between the believer and the divinity that decided to get incarnated for this precise purpose. Orthodox spirituality is faithful to Revelation considering the fact that the final purpose of the man is rebirth and eternal unity with Christ. Man is the only creation that is allowed to have a close relationship with its Creator. Thus, the relationship that is established between creature and its Creator is a direct and personal one. It’s a permanent dialogue, a special one.

A significant moment of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was the controversy between Barlaam and Gregory Palamas that marked actually the first dispute between the Eastern tradition and the new occidental man. One of the good things that came out of this was the “wording” of hesychasm, the pass from experience itself to meditating on it. On the other side, it also had a negative impact because it turned hesychasm into a bizarre sect for western theology. In the turbulent history of Byzantium at the end of first millennium, hermits and monks discover Mt Athos. The epoch of hesychast regeneration is marked by Palamas that arrives at Athos to live a life of a hermit. The dispute between him and Barlaam starts in 1330. Barlaam was a monk from Calabria, a product of the first occidental Renaissance of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century. Barlaam

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<sup>8</sup> \*\*\*, *FILOCALIA* sau *culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți care arată cum se poate omul curăți, lumina și desăvârși*, Vol. VII, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Române, București, 1977, p. 172

<sup>9</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, Editura Scripta, București, 1993, p. 38

spends some time at Athos and then goes back to Constantinople and launches some accusations against hesychast monks. He was an earthly spirit, mastering a knowledge that based all the issues related to belief on concepts. Palamas responds to these accusations which attracts repartees and so this situation will last a longer period of time. The major purpose of this dispute on the 14<sup>th</sup> century was that the hesychasm was shown and explained to the others so they could grasp its purpose and meaning on a side, while on the other side it made appear an image of the Eastern theological universe which was latent until then.

Barlaam said that love for the true belief was what made him leave Italy and go search for the truth. He criticized Latin theology which he considered to be a Thomist one, disapproving the belief they had that God could be known and also the fact that they were trying to prove that Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son also. What caught his attention in the Eastern Christianity was the apophatism, the fact that knowing God was impossible. Greeks believed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father only while Latin believed that Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son, adding later, on the 7<sup>th</sup> century this to the Credo (Filioque). Barlaam tried to know better his new opponents so while he was at Thessaloniki and Constantinople he spent some time at hesychast cloisters where he discovered the psychophysical kind of prayer which was in contrast with his humanist and Platonist formation.<sup>10</sup> Thus, he ended up resembling hesychasm with Messalianism and Bogomilism heresies that were popular at the time. He started to write his opposition towards these heresies and exactly to these writings responded Gregory Palamas with his Triads. He considered that God's essence can be also seen with human eyes and to support this theory the byzantine synods of the 14<sup>th</sup> century ratify the distinction between divine essence and uncreated energies that Palamas proposes. The first official document that was written as a reply to Barlaam's accusations was the Hagioritic Tome which was signed by monks and abbots from St Mt Athos. In this way all the community was taking position towards nominalist humanism of Barlaam. In 1341 two synods took place where Barlaam was convicted so he had to return to Italy.

Barlaam's position had two basic principles and around these the whole controversy took form:

1. The aristotelic postulate according to which any knowledge, including knowledge of God, has as basis perception and experience that comes through the senses.
2. A postulate of neoplatonic provenience based on Christian writers, especially on Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, according to which God is beyond any experience that forms through senses and that's the reason why He cannot be known, He is unknowable. Barlaam said that any knowledge that we can get about God is an indirect one and that even the mystical form of knowledge was in fact a symbolic one.<sup>11</sup>

Palamas didn't consider this way of life as something that was only suited for monks and hermits so he tried to spread the practice of Jesus' Prayer outside the monasteries as well. He truly believed that it was the best way to value baptism. He was also stressing on the difference between divine essence and uncreated energies. To see God face to face didn't mean to be able to see His divine essence. God choosing to reveal himself it's by His own choice and what we

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<sup>10</sup> *He mentions in the 5<sup>th</sup> letter addressed to Ignatius that he was initiated into some monstrous and absurd doctrine of a heretic belief. He said that he was presented a teaching about some amazing separation, union of mind and heart, the connection that demons have with the last, about the differences in between the red lights and the white ones, about what gets in and out through the nostrils during breathing, about the shields that form close to the navel, about getting united with God through the soul.* - Cf. John Meyendorff, *Op. Ct.*, p. 70, Apud. „*Scrisoarea V către Ignatius*”, ed. G. Schiró, în „*Barlaam Calabro*”, Epistole Grecești, Palermo, 1954, p. 323 - 324

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 85

get to see and experience is in fact an energy. Palamas mentioned the difference between God's essence and his uncreated energies but he also stated that His unity wasn't threatened because He was fully present in each one of them.

Hesychasts were mentioning the taboric light when they were referring to the divine experience and for them the light they were seeing was the same with the one that the apostles saw on Mt Tabor. The novelty that Palamas brings is exactly the difference between His essence and the uncreated energies through which He communicates and reveals himself. Palamas states that His essence causes the energies and each one of them is a divine property because they're acts of God that is Unique. He replies to Barlaam that this light mentioned by the hesychasts is actually the light of the Transfiguration of Jesus. He argues that on Mt Tabor Jesus wasn't the one that changed and that the actual change happened to the apostles. They got the power to see the light of God in all its splendor. It seems that Adam had the same power before the original sin. This light belongs to the Trinity itself and not only to one of the three persons of it. It's the light of divine nature and it can be seen only with divine benevolence. Once the hesychasts are united with this light, they do know that it's nothing that was created, that it's above everything. But even this term of "union" is improperly used because when it comes to this kind of experience notions as union, seeing, feeling, conscious, understanding or illumination are just fitting the descriptions in some way but they cannot contain it. *"That light is the core, the substance and the beauty of the era that is to come. Is the only true light, eternal, unchanged, through which we become light as well, like sons of the light."*<sup>12</sup> What Barlaam could not understand is that saying something about divinity and seeing it or have it are two separate things. The apophatic theology that he sympathizes it's rational but seeing is above ration. When he didn't like this term of seeing Palamas proposes him a new one that can contain the previous also and that was "understanding". But, for Barlaam the ecstatic experiences are results of fantasies and again Palamas explains how there are differences in between the fantasies that we create and the ones that come from the Holy Spirit. God created world and this creation is an act of free will and not only a natural consequence of divinity. It's the work of a personal God, of the Trinity that holds the free will of its three persons.<sup>13</sup> Being created in the image of God is like a divine seal that is meant to deepen the connection between creature and its creator, a connection that is personal and unique for each human being. Palamas considers that freeing yourself from passions it doesn't consist in "killing" one's passionate part, but to straighten it up towards the good, because thanks to this passionate part we can love God, the one that is close to us and we can also hate and reject evil as well. Gregory considers that the salvation is not only for the soul but for the body too. Barlaam also thinks that the most important knowledge is the one of things and that wisdom comes from sciences and these have the capacity to show us their very first models. For him the Scripture was inferior to science, only able to give symbols of wisdom but not the wisdom itself. Palamas on the other side perceived the study of sciences being an impediment for the soul to gain the true wisdom.<sup>14</sup> Barlaam doesn't admit any other form of knowledge aside from the purely rational one.

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<sup>12</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și Învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, Ed. Scripta, București, 1993, p. 58

<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, Ed. Anastasia, București, 1990., p. 124

<sup>14</sup> *Gregory Palamas says that the begging is the fear of God from which continuous and painful prayer arises and following His demands. Through these, reconciling with God, fear turns into love, and the pain from the prayer turns into happiness, a flower of illumination rising within us, from which a knowledge of God spreads like scent. The one that is overwhelmed by love for fake wisdom, tortured by theories and the complications of sciences, can never reach the true wisdom. Not even its beginning because their soul is preoccupied with countless reflections. Not even knowing the dogma is not enough without an exemplar christian life.* - Cf. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și Învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, Ed. Scripta, București, 1993, p. 32

The Prayer of the Heart is the kind of prayer that mind does inside of the heart, that has the capacity of cleaning and purifying both thoughts and senses and that channels all the activity of the one that prays towards fulfilling God's wish. This prayer wants to bring the mind into the heart and from there to start the real prayer: "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*"

Once the dispute starts Palamas makes clear that hesychasts don't see and don't consider that they can see God in His essence. They can only contemplate the uncreated energies that radiate from Him. This distinction wasn't something Palamas came up with. It existed from before in hesychast tradition in the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century. What Palamas did was to gather these teachings into a dogma that the Orthodox Church accepted. These energies are available to see just to those that search for them. The only method that Palamas accepts is the Prayer of the Heart considering that this prayer only has the capacity to purify both body and spirit and with God's will the senses of the one that prays are reshaped, regenerated, renewed and in this way is given the access to contemplate the divine light with own senses.

Even though Palamas never talks openly about ecstasy, the method that he proposes has a profound ecstatic character when it comes to the spiritual experience. Even if he might consider that this term is not the right one to express the outcome of Jesus' Prayer, the experiences have a profound ecstatic form. The believer that prays like this has the chance to contemplate the Light of God and His uncreated energies, using both body and soul.

#### **4. The Impact the Palamite Doctrine Had on Eastern Christian Model**

The hesychast dispute was the collision between western scholastic type of thinking and the eastern traditional one, leading to the necessity of the Eastern Orthodox Church to take a position, which turned soon into a doctrine. The eastern mysticism claims a direct knowledge of God by the human being through his own forces. Dumitru Stăniloae says that Palama's doctrine doesn't transform the divinity through ration and reflection into an abstract and absent one. He considers that what the Occident did was to transform even Christ into an impersonal and distant character that only came to do His part and this is the reason why they got buried into so many atheist doctrines and philosophies.

Nowadays is impossible to speak about Orthodoxy without considering the implication that Palama's doctrine had and the way he influenced its future development. In 1351 took place the most important Synod, this occasion being the official way through which the Orthodox Church approved Palama's doctrine by publishing the Synodal Tome. The decisions that were taken during this synod were continuously perfected and straightened thorough all the 14<sup>th</sup> century during future synods. What Palamas could never accept was the fact that Barlaam's naturalism was preventing any opportunity for the Holy Spirit to be involved in getting to know God. Barlaam considered that the body is like a prison for the body, so the idea of one that can receive the grace was absurd. For Palamas this was possible considering the Incarnation of Christ which blessed the bodies of human beings making them worthy of getting the grace in both body and spirit. Actually this was the hottest topic of their whole dispute. The anthropological frame where Palamas inserts the hesychast spirituality is that, from the moment of the Incarnation of Christ, our bodies *become temples of the Holy Spirit that resides within us*.<sup>15</sup> And that's the precise reason for which the man needs to preserve his body and search for the Holy Spirit through the Holy Mysteries. So, God is inside of us and there's where we need

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<sup>15</sup> I COR 6,19



to go and find the Light from the Mt Tabor. The apostles could only see it from the outside because at that time Jesus didn't die and revive yet. The Christian orthodox mystic knows that, with the Mystery of Baptism and the Eucharist Mystery, he has the chance to get to know the divine and he looks for Him inside his heart. The grace that comes from God it's uncreated same as the light from Mt Tabor. Palamas was the one that planted the fundamentals of Christian Orthodox world. He was the one that got the bases of orthodox dogma of knowing and experiencing God through the Prayer of the Heart. The only point he agreed with Barlaam was the fact that God will always remain impossible to be known in his essence. He could only be known through his uncreated energies.

Even after Constantinople fell hesychasm didn't disappear. Through its simplicity it could influence both clerics and laity. Mt Athos remains the center of spiritual life. For the hesychasts it was obvious that Jesus' Prayer couldn't replace the grace received through the Holy Mysteries. This prayer's only purpose is to help the believer with their search. The permanence of the hesychast tradition, its continuous development inside the Orthodox Church, wouldn't have been possible without the doctrinal and anthropological coherence to which it corresponds. It's actually a model of fidelity towards the only truth of all Christian life and in this way we can speak of Jesus' Prayer as a true manifestation of orthodox spirituality. There are authors believing that because of Palama's victory any possible reform in Orthodoxy became impossible. This victory was the victory of Christian humanism against the pagan one that the Renaissance was proposing.

Yannaras considers that the confrontation between Orthodoxy and Occident is not a matter of abstract theoretical antagonisms, neither a historical dispute between two different institutions and that's why it cannot be solved with brotherly efforts of reconciling the two Christian Churches. He states that the theological differences themselves are not that important, but their immediate consequences on life and historical impact are. Orthodox conscience has to face the challenge of occidental atheism and nihilism that destroyed - literally and not coincidentally - Christianity that turned into a religion of the Occident. The critique applied to religion by Illuminism, Liberalism, Marxism, Freudism, atheistic existentialism, scientific agnosticism seemed to be fundamental and justified historically. Today the impasse of occidental civilization surpassed theoretical borders. It manifests in the agony and absurdity the way everyday life is lived. This civilization of "balancing horror", of rational programs of "general happiness", of toxic waste, of unhealthy consumerism, of enslavement of human existence with totalitarian ideologies ended up threatening life itself at a global level. In this general death, the Church still waits for the Universal resurrection. It's like the "wheat grain" that seems to die in vain into the ground - this is Orthodoxy today.<sup>16</sup> So in the next part I will just name some of the most important differences between the Orthodox and Catholic Church that are present nowadays too.

## **5. Differences between Catholic Church and Orthodox Church Today**

Even if the basis of their belief is same, there are still crucial differences even today that make a reconciliation most likely improbable. And I will name briefly and the most important ones.

a) First of all, the Catholics believe that aside from Heaven and Hell there's the Purgatory where the souls stay for several centuries before going to Heaven. For the Orthodox there is no such thing. In the Gospel of the final judgement there are mentioned just two places: heaven

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<sup>16</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Abecedar al Credinței*, Editura Bizantină, București, 1996, pp. 200 - 201

and hell. When Christ will come again to make His final judgement he will split people in two: the ones that go His right and the ones that go to His left and so, the ones on the right will be sent to Heaven and the ones from the left, the sinners, will be sent to Hell.

- b) Filioque. Catholics believe that Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son. Orthodox believe that this is a crucial dogmatic mistake because John the Evangelist himself says that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and its send into the world **through** the Son.
- c) Papal supremacy. The Catholics consider the Pope to be the supreme head of the Church, the successor of St Peter. While the Orthodox consider this to be incorrect and mainly see it as a sin of pride.
- d) Papal Infallibility. Catholics consider that the Pope cannot make mistakes as a human being when it comes to faith and when he preaches which is also a new dogmatic idea that the Orthodox Church rejects quite vehemently. As human beings we're all prone to mistakes, perfection belonging only to God.
- e) The Immaculate Conception of Virgin Mary. Catholics believe that she came through the Holy Spirit, but the Orthodox believe that she was born from earthly parents as a fruit of their prayers.
- f) At the blessing of the Holy Gifts Catholics don't have the prayer where the Holy Spirit is invoked like Orthodox. They do believe that those get blessed by themselves when they say the words "Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my Body, which will be given up for you."<sup>17</sup>
- g) Catholic priests don't get married which, from Orthodox point of view, goes against Ecumenical Councils that decided for the priests with a parish to have families and set examples.
- h) Papal Indulgences. Orthodox believe that no money can underdo sins and that there's another way to repent for one's sins and in Orthodox Christianity this is an important part of a Christian's life.
- i) Chrismation, known also as Confirmation, the Holy Mystery by which a baptized person is granted the gift of the Holy Spirit through anointing with oil. The Orthodox do it right after baptism, before the first reception of Holy Communion, while Catholics have it reserved to those of the age of reason.

## Conclusion

The ones that study spirituality describe ecstasy as a mystical estate par excellence. Mystics from everywhere agree that ecstasy is a great estate, one in which the soul of the man is united with divinity. The term of ecstasy became synonym with exaltation. Mystical ecstasies are universal and have many things in common regardless the religious background of the ones that get to experience them. Their purpose is to lead the man to a superior place, very different than the normal one, getting to know the divine, discovering the truth and also the true knowledge. All the knowledge got from this type of experience are suddenly give the one experiencing them the feeling of a knowledge that comes from inside which is in fact the only truth. The one that experiences it is brought face to face with the ultimate reality that can be experienced through intuitions and emotions.

The dispute between Barlaam and Palamas was one between different thinking models. Barlaam represent the rational thinking following an intellectualist model, where ration is the one that has the capacity to have an intuition about God. On the other side, Palamas is the one that, even if not contesting the value of ration, when it comes to natural knowledge, he has to admit its limits when it comes to knowing God. Ration is the one that works with objects and

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<sup>17</sup> I Cor 12:24

all that gets to be known is objectified and represented. Faith on the other side is the one that personifies. Trying to use same “language” that Barlaam uses, Palamas proves that God is person and because of that He is impossible to be known as such. If objects can be known as beings, persons represent something mysterious and they could never get to be known as beings. The only way to know God is through His uncreated energies and by communicating with Him. To know divinity only rationally is impossible. The world is His creation and a place where His energies are emanated.

The knowledge that a man can get is an experimental one and not one based only on ration. When Barlaam denies the possibility of a union with God, Palamas defends it. If the he considers that a man can see God only at Universal resurrection, Palamas considers that this kind of knowledge and “seeing” can begin even in this world, when the passions of the soul are transformed and not eliminated. The kind of prayer that he proposes has as purpose the purification of both body and soul and with that the chance of contemplating the uncreated light of God becomes real with the benevolence of the creator. Is not a reward for personal efforts but a gift. Thus, Palamas does not propose a technique that can guarantee and ecstatic kind of experience, but emphasizes the importance that this technique has. It’s about an experience that any believer has the chance to live. As personal as this estate is, the more important is the community to which he belongs because it can offer a landmark, a certitude of the lived experiences.

The echoes of their dispute are still felt today, the orthodox have same highlights that Palamas defended so many centuries ago even though less and less orthodox live the spirituality of their church. Secularization is a general phenomenon that affects even countries that are orthodox. If Occident was allowed to develop freely starting with the second millennium, the Christian Orient was repeatedly pressured by foreign forces or ideologies that prevented any healthy development such as the communist system that managed to destroy most of the souls of the people under its domination. Also, we should keep in mind that the occidental spirit is mainly oriented towards analytical ration and pragmatism while the oriental spirit is mystical, speculative and oriented more towards the other world. *“For here we have no fixed resting-place, but our search is for the one which is to come.”*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 13:14

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**Contact email:** [adriana.vlaicu12@gmail.com](mailto:adriana.vlaicu12@gmail.com)