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## Heart-Centered Paths: A Comparative Study of Hesychasm and Sufism

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**Abstract:** The comparative analysis of Hesychasm in the late Byzantine Orthodox Church and Sufism in the Islamic tradition illuminates intriguing parallels and distinctions in their spiritual frameworks. Emphasizing the significance of spiritual experiences through prayer, Hesychasm, rooted in Orthodox spirituality, focuses on hesychia and the prayer of the heart. Sufism, within the Islamic tradition, centers on dhikr, the continuous remembrance of Allah. Despite shared teachings on the heart and continuous prayer, the traditions diverge in practices, such as the Jesus Prayer in Hesychasm and the invocation of Allah's name in Sufism, contributing to the rich tapestry of spiritual experiences. This comparative exploration offers nuanced insights into diverse ways spiritual seekers engage with the divine across cultures. Recognizing universal quests for connection with the transcendent, the analysis contributes to the broader dialogue on mysticism and spirituality. The discussions on divine light, knowledge of God, and transformative processes underscore shared themes, while differences in theological nuances highlight the unique paths individuals traverse in their spiritual journeys. Ultimately, both Hesychasm and Sufism emphasize the experiential dimension of spirituality, fostering profound encounters with the divine despite their theological and philosophical distinctions.

**Keywords:** Hesychasm, sufism, theosis, fanā, prayer of heart.

## Introduction

This article endeavors to undertake a comparative analysis of spiritual experiences within two distinct traditions. Specifically, the study aims to elucidate both the commonalities and disparities inherent in the conceptual and methodological frameworks underpinning the ascetic teachings and mystical experiences found in Hesychasm within the late Byzantine Orthodox Church and Sufism within the Islamic tradition.

Orthodox spirituality generally provides minimal guidance on specific methods and practices but places significant emphasis on the importance of spiritual stillness (*hesychia*). This emphasis led to the emergence of a significant synthesis movement in the fourteenth century in the Byzantine world known as Hesychasm. Rather than introducing a new phenomenon, Hesychasm organized and harmonized various Orthodox traditions of prayer that had preceded it. It highlighted new aspects, particularly the necessity of instilling a calm attentiveness in the restless soul before the presence of God and understanding how the holy presence illuminates the soul. Hesychast thought prominently features themes of stillness and radiant light, using the mystery of Jesus' Transfiguration on the mountain as a central symbol to illustrate the soul's destined transfiguration into light. Key figures in the Hesychast school include St. Symeon the New Theologian, St. Gregory of Sinai, and St. Gregory Palamas.<sup>1</sup>

The terms “hesychasm” and “hesychast” are derived from the Greek word *hesychia*, meaning “quietness,” “silence,” or “inner stillness.” John Meyendorff describes Hesychasm (from the Greek word *hesychia* meaning “quietude”) as “Eastern Christianity's ancient contemplative monasticism . . . whose origins go back to the Fathers of the desert.”<sup>2</sup> According to the famous Hesychast Palamas, although the body is not bad in essence, it has a structure that

<sup>1</sup> John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008). 352-3.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Emory-Moore, “Clear and Uncreated: The Experience of Inner Light in Gelug-Pa Tantrism and Byzantine Hesychasm,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*

can be led astray by the evil. For this reason, it is necessary to practice asceticism in order not to be deceived by the evil.<sup>3</sup> Hesychasm was understood as the first condition of asceticism from the fourth to the eleventh centuries as inner peace and tranquility, and therefore the monks who adopted an ascetic life used Hesychast method. As stated, “it is impossible for muddy water to grow clear if it is constantly stirred up; and it is impossible to become a monk without hesychia”<sup>4</sup> For this reason, it is possible to say that there is an inseparable connection between Hesychasm and asceticism in the Orthodox tradition. After the eleventh century, although Hesychasm expanded its meaning and began to turn into a prayer tradition, however, the connection with asceticism remained.

Meyendorff delineates four meanings of Hesychasm. Initially, it denotes “pure prayer” in Evagrius’ writings, embodying the Christian monastic life centered on hermeticism and contemplation. Later, in the fourteenth century, Hesychasm transforms into an officially sanctioned psychosomatic prayer method, sparking the Barlaam-Palamas controversy. Meyendorff asserts that Hesychasm transcends the reductionist view of those derisively labeled by Barlaam as “people-with-their-souls-in-their-navel.” Moreover, Hesychasm, coupled with Palamism, evolves into a conceptual system crafted by Palamas. This system aims to elucidate and defend the spiritual experiences of fellow Hesychasts, emphasizing the theological differentiation in God between the transcendent “essence” and uncreated “energies,” facilitating God’s knowability through Christ. Lastly, Meyendorff notes the contemporary usage of “Political Hesychasm,” influencing social, cultural, and political ideologies, notably impacting Southern Slavs and Russians in various facets of life.<sup>5</sup> Although all of these descriptions are different,

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36/5 (December 18, 2016), 117–131. 122.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983). 41-2.

<sup>4</sup> Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, “Hesychasm,” *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Ed. John Anthony McGuckin (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). 300-1.

<sup>5</sup> John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Hesychasm: Historical, Theological and Social Problems* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1974). Introduction.

none of them contradict with each other and even they all complement each other. Hesychasm, in this sense, is the name of the tradition of Orthodox Church's prayer that focuses on Jesus Prayer to ensure spiritual tranquility and unity with God.

In his comparative study of Hesychasm and Sufism. Seyyed Hossein Nasr defines the Hesychasm as “the science of prayer or more specifically the prayer of the heart cultivated within the Orthodox Church” and Nasr takes back the practices of Hesychasm to time of Christ and he adds “this tradition possesses an uninterrupted oral teaching which became gradually formulated and formalized from the eleventh to the fourteenth century by such masters as Symeon the New Theologian, Nikephoros the Monk, and Gregory the Sinaite who established Hesychasm on Mount Athos.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, he argues that Sufism goes back to oral tradition of prophet of Islam and become more “explicitly formulated” by some Sufi masters like as Bayazīd al-Bastamī and Junayd al-Bagdadi at second and third centuries of Islam, and after fifth century of Islam Sufi orders emerged.<sup>7</sup>

### **Prayer of Heart and *Dhikr***

The Hesychasts derived their mystical teachings, characterized by a focus on inner illumination, from the influential figure of Pseudo-Macarius. This influence extended to their emphasis on “heart mysticism,” wherein the term “heart” (*kardia*) encompassed not just the physical organ but also emotions and conscience. The Hesychasts consistently highlighted the significance of the heart in their spiritual practices and understanding, drawing inspiration from the teachings of Pseudo-Macarius.<sup>8</sup>

Abba Hesychios, a prominent spiritual teacher from Sinai in

<sup>6</sup> Seyyed Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 31/1–2 (1986), 195–203. 196.

<sup>7</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.” 196.

<sup>8</sup> G E H Palmer et al., *Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth. Vol. 4* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995). 431.

the eighth century, elucidates the prayer of the heart in the following manner:

Attentiveness is the stillness of the heart, unbroken by any thought. In this stillness the heart breathes and invokes, endlessly and without ceasing, only Jesus Christ, who is the Son and God Himself. Through this invocation enfolded continually in Christ, who secretly divines all hearts, the soul does everything it can to keep its sweetness and its inner struggle hidden from the sight of all.<sup>9</sup>

St. Makarios the Great, a prominent theologian of prayer in the early church, elucidated the significance of the heart as a focal point:

The heart itself is only a small vessel, yet dragons lurk there and lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the glitter of evil; there are rough and uneven roads there, and precipices too; but there also are God, and the angels; life is there, and the Kingdom; there too is light, and there the apostles, and heavenly cities, and treasures of grace. All things lie within that little space.<sup>10</sup>

From this point, the “prayer of the heart” evolves, guided by great teachers, into a practice that remains prevalent in Orthodoxy: the Jesus Prayer. Central to this form of prayer, according to Orthodox spiritual masters, is “attentiveness” (prosoche): the ability to penetrate the inner sanctum of the human heart, treating it as a sacred space, and quieting the restless mind and body enough to achieve this. Once within this sacred space, the practitioner becomes aware of the profound power of holiness within, as the Lord communicates with the longing heart. This moment of prayer transcends the need for words; it is a stage of communion that goes beyond verbal expression.<sup>11</sup>

The main element that distinguishes Hesychasm from other

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*. 350.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*. 351.

<sup>11</sup> McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*. 351.

monastic traditions and prayer methods of Christianity is the Jesus Prayer, it is also called the “prayer of the heart”, or “pure prayer.” During this prayer some physical conditions that must be fulfilled. Because, unlike other prayers, the monks aim to repeat the prayer of the heart not only at a certain time of the day, but to repeat it continuously in every moment of life. The monks' emphasis on continuity in this prayer is based on St. Paul's statement of “pray constantly”.<sup>12</sup>

The Jesus Prayer constitutes just one facet of the broader way of life encapsulated by the term hesychasm. Simultaneously, the Jesus Prayer holds a more general application than hesychasm, as it is employed in settings beyond a fully hesychastic life. This literal interpretation aligns with the practices of those engaged in hesychasm. Regarded as a hallmark of Orthodox spirituality, this tradition of prayer has earned the moniker “the heart of Orthodoxy.”<sup>13</sup>

Maragkoudakis describes the Jesus Prayer (“or the prayer of the Heart and Mind”) as “a short prayer used mainly in the Eastern Christian Tradition for the purpose of achieving deification and, thus, salvation.” And this prayer involves the constant repetition of the divine name of Jesus Christ and its most common form consists of seven words: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”<sup>14</sup> The basic aim of continuously repeating this small phrase is “...process works miracles, according to the teachings of Hesychasm, which is a mystical tradition found within the realms of the Orthodox Church, because of invocation of the Holy Name of Jesus Christ that has the power to fight demons and to spiritually cleanse the practitioner.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:17

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Johnson, *Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer Contesting Contemplation* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2010). 20.

<sup>14</sup> Georgios N Maragkoudakis, “The Jesus Prayer,” *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, ed. David A Leeming (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018). 1228.

<sup>15</sup> Maragkoudakis, “The Jesus Prayer.” 1228.

In Hesychast thought and lifestyle, the “heart” occupies a central place. According to Hesychasts, there is an astonishing spiritual kingdom and a place with a treasure which is hidden within every human being. This spiritual kingdom is called “the kingdom of the heart.” The heart is the center of man's spiritual life, it is the place of wisdom and the residence of God. But at the same time, the heart is unsteady because of the fall and sinfulness of man, and is the place for good thoughts as well as bad thoughts and sin.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, Jesus said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, acts of adultery, other immoral sexual acts, thefts, false testimonies, and slanderous statements.”<sup>17</sup> Because of that, in order to get rid of the evil and bad thoughts that disturbed him spiritually, prevent him from meeting and uniting with God, and to meet with God and be “one” there, he should constantly repeat “Prayer of Heart”.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding the spiritual importance of the prayer of heart, Nasr quoted from Schuon; “The organ of the spirit, or the principal center of spiritual life, is the heart. But what is more important from the standpoint of spiritual realization is the teaching of Hesychasm on the means of perfecting the natural participation of the human microcosm in the divine Microcosm by transmuting it into supernatural participation and finally union and identity: this means consists of the 'inward prayer' or 'Prayer of Jesus.’”<sup>19</sup>

An example of this resemblance in these two traditions can be found in the doctrine of the heart itself. In Hesychasm “the heart (ἡ καρδιά) is the center of the human being, the seat of both intelligence and will ... (and) also grace passes from the heart to all the other parts and elements of the human microcosm.”<sup>20</sup>

The heart is also “locus of the intellect (*νοῦς, πνεύμα, al-'aql*),”

<sup>16</sup> Zehra Tokcan, *Hesychasm Mistisizmi Geleneği ve Gregory Palamas (1296-1359)* (Marmara Üniversitesi, 2019). 16.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 15:19

<sup>18</sup> Tokcan, *Hesychasm Mistisizmi Geleneği ve Gregory Palamas (1296-1359)*. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.” 198.

<sup>20</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”199.

and with it humans can know “the Spirit and “intellect” the supernal realities.” Therefore, “when the spirit enters the heart that man becomes spiritualized (*πνευματικός, ruhani*) and it is with the heart that man is able to “see” reality as it is.”<sup>21</sup>

The parallels between the doctrine of Hesychasm and Sufism are evident, particularly in their conceptualization of the heart. In both traditions, the heart is described as possessing knowledge, will, and love. This notion aligns with Hesychasm, where the heart is considered the seat of the divine, facilitating the reception of God's grace. Similarly, in Sufism, the Qur'an characterizes the heart as the locus of knowledge, will, and love.<sup>22</sup> Renowned Sufi Ibn Arabi further underscores the significance of the heart as the exclusive site for the love of God. According to Ibn Arabi, the heart's unique capacity to comprehend God enables the profound love that emanates from this understanding. In essence, both Hesychasm and Sufism converge in recognizing the heart as a central and sacred element in the human experience of the divine.<sup>23</sup>

According to Nasr, the heart is the center of the microcosm which relates it to higher levels of reality and also because of that its locus of divine Presence.<sup>24</sup> There are resemblances between Hesychasm and Sufism in terms of the continuity of the prayer and remembrance of God and/or Jesus. John Klimakos in his *Ladder of Divine Ascent* asserts, “Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with you every breath.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Saint Diadochos of Photike for the continuity of prayer records that “(H)e who wishes to cleanse his heart should keep it continually aflame through practicing the remembrance of the Lord Jesus, making this his only study and ceaseless task. Those who desire to free themselves from their corruption ought to pray not merely from time to time but at all times; they should give themselves always to prayer, keeping watch over

<sup>21</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”199.

<sup>22</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”199.

<sup>23</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”108.

<sup>24</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”197.

<sup>25</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”196.



their intellect even when outside places of prayer.”<sup>26</sup>

There are some techniques that the monk must follow up while practicing the prayer of heart. Prayer of heart should be done under a guidance of a master. It should be done in the dark and in silence. At the beginning of these techniques is the slowing down and restriction of breathing. The reason to keep his breathing under control is to have the monk concentrate on prayer and say the prayer carefully. In addition, while breathing is controlled, the heartbeat is synchronized with prayer. Thus, the prayer is conveyed from the mind to the heart with the breath and the prayer is kept in the heart. Eventually the heart spontaneously becomes praying. The way of sitting of the prayer is not a subject that is emphasized much in the texts describing the prayer. While there are some says that prayer should be repeated standing, and also there are those who say that it is necessary to sit on a low stool with the head tilted so that the chin touches the chest and focusing the gaze towards the center of the body. However, according to some, the monk can repeat the prayer even while lying down if he gets tired.<sup>27</sup>

Maragkoudakis also gives similar techniques of application of prayer of heart: it “is usually recited with the help of a prayer rope. In novices, as the Orthodox Church Fathers teach, and under proper guidance, extra techniques can be used for enhancing self-concentration. These include the slight bend of the head, so that the chin touches the left part of the chest, the sitting on a low stool, the closing of the eyes, the holding of breath, the linking of the in-breath to “Lord Jesus Christ” and of the out-breath to “have mercy on me,” the darkening of the room, etc. Under no way should the practitioner try to bring in mind any image, either God or of any person, thing, etc., any shape or any sound, because, according to the apophatic/negative theology behind the Jesus Prayer, the di-

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”196-7.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer Contesting Contemplation*. 26-8

vine nature and reality is beyond words and names and completely without description.”<sup>28</sup>

The practice of the prayer of the heart unfolds through five progressive stages. Initially, the prayer is vocalized aloud. Subsequently, the practitioner transitions to mental repetition, allowing the prayer to resonate within. As the mind internalizes the prayer, a continuous mental recitation ensues. In the ensuing stage, the heart internalizes the prayer, establishing a constant rhythm. During this phase, the mind undergoes purification, shedding all positive and negative thoughts. Hesychasts posit that the resultant emptiness becomes a vessel for the grace of God, as the individual attains genuine humility. The culminating stage involves a profound union with God, granting the practitioner a perception of the “the unutterable and apophatic cosmic reality.”<sup>29</sup>

Similarly in Sufism, as *dhikr* means at invocation, the remembrance of the name of God (*dhikr Allah*) is also the invocation of God’s name. In Sufi traditions, calling upon name of God and remembrance of Him are the central method of spiritual realization based on the Qur’ān and the *Hadith*. The Qur’an states “remember (invoke/dhikr) thy Lord over and over; exalt him at daybreak and in the dark of the night” (3:40). Also, “O ye who believe, remember (invoke) God again and again” (33:41); and “Remember (invoke) thy Lord’s Name and devote thyself to him wholeheartedly” (73:8). As for the relation of invocation to the heart, the Qur’ān states, “The hearts of those who believe are set at rest in the remembrance (invocation) of God; verily in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest” (13:28).<sup>30</sup>

On the significance of *dhikr* in its relation to the heart there are many references, for example,

There is a means of polishing all things whereby rust may be removed; that which polishes the heart is the invocation of Allah, and there is no act that removes the punishment of Allah further from

<sup>28</sup> Maragkoudakis, “The Jesus Prayer.”1228-9.

<sup>29</sup> Maragkoudakis, “The Jesus Prayer.”1228.

<sup>30</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”197.

you than this invocation. The Companion said: 'Is not the battle against unbelievers equal to it?' The Prophet replied: 'No, not even if you fight on until your sword is shattered.'<sup>31</sup>

In both Hesychast and Sufism traditions “one should remember God constantly and with every breath,” and in both this must be based upon the guidance of a teacher or master. While in Hesychasm the name of Jesus is employed, in Sufism one of the names of Allah is invoked.<sup>32</sup>

### **Uncreated Light and *Nūr* of God**

In comparing Hesychasm and Sufism another significant similarity is the significance of light in conjunction with the practice of the prayer of the heart in both traditions. For Hesychasts God is light (φως) and the experience of his reality is also light.<sup>33</sup>

When Barlaam went to Thessaloniki to learn more about the form of prayer practiced in the monastery by Hesychasts.<sup>34</sup> Barlaam was astonished by the assertion made by the Hesychast monks he encountered in Thessaloniki, contending that they could directly witness and experience the uncreated light of God through their method of prayer. Barlaam disagreed with this claim, suggesting that the light witnessed during the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, referred to by the monks as the light they observed, held symbolic significance in the context of biblical accounts.

In the Bible, every account of God's appearance (theophany) occurred under specific conditions. The light witnessed by the apostles of Christ on Mount Tabor is a discernible light that can be comprehended intellectually, perceived through the air, captivating everyone, yet transient. Its designation as divine stems from its role as a symbolic representation of divinity. Barlaam asserts

<sup>31</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”198

<sup>32</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”198.

<sup>33</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.” 201.

<sup>34</sup> John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (Leighton Buzzard: Faith Press, 1974). 45

that obtaining direct information about God through direct contact is, in any case, unattainable.<sup>35</sup>

The main controversy was on the question of whether the Taboric light is “created” or “not created.” According to Palamas, this light is God himself and therefore it is “divine” and “not created.” However, according to Barlaam, this light is only a symbol, It does not have an eternal being like God, that is why it was “created.” God is one entity and cannot be divided, therefore, if this light is considered to be “uncreated” and “divine,” it must be admitted that the light seen is God itself. Also, as stated in the Bible<sup>36</sup> it is not possible to see God with actual eyes.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the background of this conflict was again the same problem: how the true knowledge of God is obtained? According to Palamas, the knowledge of God can be obtained by uniting with God, but Barlaam does not accept this view.<sup>38</sup> And Palamas stressed the reality of the “deification” of man: man is able to become “God by grace” and to see the “uncreated Light.”<sup>39</sup>

Around 1380, Theophanes, the third bishop of Nicaea with that name, wrote five discourses on the “Taboric light,” emphasizing a firsthand experience of Mount Tabor's light, dismissed by the Calabrian monk Barlaam as hallucination. Barlaam argued that experiences mediated by the senses, such as visions of light, couldn't be encounters with the ineffable God.<sup>40</sup> The discourses by Theophanes, titled “On the Taboric Light” (*Peri thaboriou photou*),

<sup>35</sup> Cory Hayes, *Deus in Se et Deus pro Nobis: The Transfiguration in the Theology of Gregory Palamas and Its Importance for Catholic Theology* (Duquesne University, 2015). 60-61.

<sup>36</sup> “No one has ever seen God” John 1:18.

<sup>37</sup> Gregorius Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters / Saint Gregory Palamas*, ed. Robert Edward Sinkewicz (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1988). § 148, 253-255.

<sup>38</sup> Joost Van Rossum, *Palamism And Church Tradition: Palamism, Its Use Of Patristic Tradition, And Its Relationship With Thomistic Thought* (New York: Fordham University, 1985). 6.

<sup>39</sup> Van Rossum, *Palamism And Church Tradition: Palamism, Its Use Of Patristic Tradition, And Its Relationship With Thomistic Thought*. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Louth, “Light, Vision, and Religious Experience in Byzantium,” *The Experience of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T

may initially suggest a discussion of experiences related to beholding the light of Tabor. However, the content goes beyond this expectation and delves into a sophisticated philosophical discourse on our participation in God. In these homilies, Theophanes contends that the light of Tabor is identical to the “life-giving and deified body of God the Word.” This identity, he argues, extends to the reception of Holy Communion, asserting that denying the reality of the vision of the Taboric light equates to denying the reality of divine communion in the body and blood of Christ during the Eucharist.<sup>41</sup> The hesychast controversy, according to Theophanes, revolves not around the legitimacy of mystical experiences but the fundamental reality of communion with God. Another aspect addressed is the opponents' appeal to Maximus's *Ambiguum*, where the Transfiguration light is considered a “symbol” of the transcendent Godhead. Theophanes responds by emphasizing that a symbol is not necessarily distinct from the reality it symbolizes and clarifies that Maximus meant it symbolized the incomprehensibility of the Godhead. This underscores the significance of Maximus's exposition on the Transfiguration in shaping the interpretation of the hesychast vision of the divine light. Despite defending experiences recounted by holy monks, Theophanes prioritizes the reality of encounter and communion between the uncreated God and created humanity over psychological analysis of light-related experiences.<sup>42</sup>

The word *nūr/light*, which is mentioned in various verses in the Quran and tradition of Prophet Muhammed/hadiths, played an important role in the foundation of certain opinions of thinkers belonging to some religious and philosophical movements in the history of Islamic thought. According to al-Ghazali (d.505/1111), the first, universal, true and supreme light is God itself. It is the light of lights, and with the appearance of this light, whatever else comes to being other than Him. the beings in the world derive

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Kapstein (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 85–103. 99.

<sup>41</sup> Louth, “Light, Vision, and Religious Experience in Byzantium.” 100.

<sup>42</sup> Louth, “Light, Vision, and Religious Experience in Byzantium.” 100.

their light from Him through His inspiration.<sup>43</sup>

As Symeon the New Theologian calls spiritual experience as “incessant experience of divine light,” and “the divine light is uncreated and identified with God's energies which he communicates to those who through spiritual practice enter into union with him.” Nasr quotes from Palamas in his *Homilies on the Presentation of the Holy Virgin to the Temple*, “He who participates in divine energy becomes himself in some way light. He is united with light and with this light he sees with full consciousness all that remains from those who do not possess this grace ... The pure of heart see God ... who being light dwells in them and reveals to those who love him, their Beloved.”<sup>44</sup>

The concept of light has an important place in Muhammad's life and prayers. The Prophet was getting up at night and prayed as : “O God! Give light to my heart, eye, ear, right side, left side, above, below, in front of me, behind me and increase my light.”<sup>45</sup> When the Prophet was asked how he saw God on the night of Ascension (*Miraj*), he said, “I saw him as a light.” However, in another narration, he answered as “He is a light, how can I see it.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in the Quran God is called “Light of the Heavens and the earth” (24.35). Because of this verse, many philosophical and spiritual schools in Islam developed symbolism of the light (*al-nūr*) and therefore, light plays a central role in Islam too.<sup>47</sup>

Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi (1154-1191), commonly known as Suhrawardi, was a Persian philosopher, mystic, and founder of the Illuminationist or “*Ishraqi*” school of Islamic philosophy. Suhrawardi played a significant role in the development of Islamic philosophy, particularly in integrating philosophical ideas with mysticism. His philosophical system, known as “*Ishraq*”

<sup>43</sup> İlhan Kutluer, “Nūr,” *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Türk Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2007). 246.

<sup>44</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”201.

<sup>45</sup> Süleyman Uludağ, “Nūr,” *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Türk Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2007). 244.

<sup>46</sup> Uludağ, “Nūr.” 244.

<sup>47</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.” 202.

or “Illuminationism,” sought to combine Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thought with mystical insights. Suhrawardi emphasized the role of light as a symbol of divine illumination and knowledge. He believed that direct intuition and spiritual insight were crucial for understanding the divine and the nature of reality.

To establish the universal applicability of the new epistemology across all dimensions of reality—whether perceptible or imperceptible, tangible or conceptual, phenomenal or noumenal—Suhrawardi contends that a redefinition of the universe is imperative. This departure from Avicenna’s Aristotelian intellectual knowledge, characterized by discrete, numerically ordered intellects, involves elevating “essence,” representing the authentic and concrete, above “existence,” the derived and logical ideal. Contrary to the Aristotelian model, Illuminationist knowledge does not rely on sensory data and the derivation of universal concepts.<sup>48</sup>

Suhrawardi’s the Illuminationist philosophy further challenges the Peripatetic concept of definition, expanding into a comprehensive knowledge theory emphasizing self-knowledge and self-consciousness as foundational. This perspective forms the basis for a cosmology presenting the true essence of things through a sequence of self-conscious and self-subsistent entities depicted as “lights” within a continuous continuum, constituting the entire cosmos. The God of this cosmos is “the Light of Lights”, radiating a covering light across all of existence. Illuminationist epistemology posits that knowledge is attained when both the subject and the object are present and manifest without obstacles, allowing the knowing subject to grasp “the essence of the object.”<sup>49</sup>

The experience of light is the determining factor for knowledge in Illuminationist epistemology. To understand how “experiencing light” contributes to knowledge, let’s briefly explore

<sup>48</sup> Hossein Ziai, “Suhrawardi on Knowledge and the Experience of Light,” *The Experience of Light: Divine Radiancy and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T Kapstein (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 25–44. 27.

<sup>49</sup> Ziai, “Suhrawardi on Knowledge and the Experience of Light.” 28.

Suhrawardi's defined epistemological process. The principles shaping the subject in the Illuminationist framework evolve through multiple stages. The initial stage involves an activity undertaken by the philosopher (the subject), requiring him to "abandon the world."<sup>50</sup>

The subsequent stage encompasses various types of experiences, with the philosopher attaining visions of a "divine light" (*al-nūr al-ilāhī*). The third stage involves the acquisition of unlimited and unbound knowledge, constituting Illuminationist knowledge (*al-'ilm al-ishrāqī*). The philosophy of Illumination comprises three stages related to the question of knowledge: preparing for the experience, receiving it through illumination, and constructing a systematic view of it.<sup>51</sup> An additional stage involves documenting the results of the illumination experience and inquiries in written form. In summary, the first stage is an activity through which the philosopher readies himself for Illuminationist knowledge – a specific way of life preparing for the acceptance of "experience" and its validation. The second stage is the illumination phase, and the third stage involves constructing a systematic view. The last stage includes symbolically representing, in written form, the structure developed during the third stage. The initiation of the first stage involves activities such as embarking on a forty-day retreat, abstaining from meat, and preparing for inspiration and revelation. While these activities fall under the general category of ascetic and mystical practices, they do not strictly adhere to the prescribed states and stations of the mystic path or Sufi tariqa as known in the mystical works of Suhrawardi's time.<sup>52</sup> Through these practices, the philosopher with intuitive powers, in whom, as Suhrawardi asserts, resides a portion of the "light of God" (*al-bāriq al-ilāhī*), can, through "personal revelation" and "vision" (*mushahada wa mukashafa*), acknowledge the reality of his own existence and affirm the truth of his intuition. Thus, the first stage

<sup>50</sup> Ziai, "Suhrawardi on Knowledge and the Experience of Light." 28.

<sup>51</sup> Ziai, "Suhrawardi on Knowledge and the Experience of Light." 29.

<sup>52</sup> Ziai, "Suhrawardi on Knowledge and the Experience of Light." 29.



involves (1) an activity, (2) a condition (common to everyone, given that every person possesses intuition and a certain portion of the light of God), and (3) personal revelation.<sup>53</sup>

The comparison between Hesychasm and Sufism reveals a striking parallel in their emphasis on divine light. In Hesychasm, particularly expounded by Palamas, God is equated with light, and the encounter with the divine is expressed as an experience of uncreated light. The controversy with Barlaam revolves around whether this light is “created” or “not created,” with Palamas asserting its divine and uncreated nature. This aligns with the concept of deification, asserting that individuals can unite with God and partake in the divine light through spiritual practice. In Islam, the Quran and hadiths frequently reference *Nūr* (light), symbolizing God's illumination. The Prophet Muhammad's prayers invoke light for various aspects of the self, and the Quran designates God as the “Light of the Heavens and the Earth.” Both traditions recognize the transformative power of divine light, accentuating its symbolic richness and universality in the mystical experience across religious boundaries.

### **Knowledge of God and *Kashf***

Palamas makes a distinction between God's essence and His energies. His essence remains eternally inaccessible to human beings, but through his energies God makes Himself known and also deifies human with his energies.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, we only can know God through His energies.

As a neo-Platonist, Barlaam argues that God is beyond sense experience and therefore He is unknowable except indirectly, through entities perceptible to the senses, and thus mystical knowledge does not have any literal reality but only symbolic. Barlaam objected to the Hesychasts who claimed to have been granted direct knowledge of God and according to him, knowledge

<sup>53</sup> Ziai, “Suhrawardi on Knowledge and the Experience of Light.” 29.

<sup>54</sup> Ruth Coates, “Bakhtin and Hesychasm,” *Religion & Literature* 37/3 (December 18, 2005), 59–80. 67.

of God “must of necessity be mediated though knowledge of created world, or ‘knowledge of beings’”<sup>55</sup> Barlaam denies any possibility of supernatural knowledge which is derived from revelation. According to Meyendorff, disputation between Barlaam and Palamas was “essentially a debate on the relation between ancient philosophy and the Christian experience” because even though Palamas himself had studied Aristotelian logic in his early ages, he defended the Christian revelation through grace as a supernatural form of knowledge.<sup>56</sup> According to Palamas even though the philosophy is a “natural gift from God,” “true condition for receiving the divine vision is not philosophical education but a purified heart ... [and] ... knowledge of God is attained not through exertions of the intellect, but freely from God, by grace, and takes the form not of intellection but communion, a meeting and merging of persons.”<sup>57</sup> Palamas promotes the knowledge derived from personal experience over theoretical knowledge.

As an anti-Hesychast, Barlaam emphasizes that the knowledge of God can only be acquired by rational methods and scientific knowledge. However, Palamas advocated that spiritual knowledge against Barlaam. The debate continued when Barlaam mocks the way Hesychast monks pray, and accusing them of Mesalianism. Palamas prepared a statement against Barlaam and had it signed by the monks in Athos. The discussion, which had heated up with this statement, tried to be resolved by the councils that had convened over and over again. According to Barlaam's understanding of God, He is completely beyond human understanding and logic, understanding/knowing him is only possible through his creations. Barlaam claims that knowledge of God can be derived from scientific knowledge of the world rather than spiritual knowledge. According to Barlaam, it is not possible to experience and observe God directly.<sup>58</sup> Unlike Barlaam, Palamas does not seek

<sup>55</sup> Coates, “Bakhtin and Hesychasm.” 64.

<sup>56</sup> Coates, “Bakhtin and Hesychasm.” 64-5.

<sup>57</sup> Coates, “Bakhtin and Hesychasm.” 65.

<sup>58</sup> Alexis Torrance, “Precedents for Palamas' Essence-Energies Theology in the Cappadocian Fathers,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 63/1 (October 14, 2009), 47–70. 48.

to demonstrate the existence of God; rather, his objective is to establish that human beings can engage in communication with God. In his perspective, God is not a static entity but rather an observable and even unifiable presence. Consequently, Barlaam rejects the idea that humans can unite with God and dismisses the notion that spiritual enlightenment can serve as a means for understanding God. The dispute between Palamas and Barlaam centers on the method of acquiring knowledge about God.

In a verse in the Qur'an, it is stated: "We have removed your veil, now your eye is sharp today" (50/22). Because of this verse, Sufis used the term *al-kashf* (removing, uncovering, unveiling) in the two meanings: "knowing/experiencing something from invisible world because it is behind the scenes and beyond the mind" and "observing the energies/manifestations of God (*tejellis*)."<sup>59</sup>

The Sufi Qushayri, for example, describes the *kashf* as "the thing that appears in the heart of the Sufi who remembers God." Ghazzali also, defines the *kashf* as "the appearance of a light in the purified and cleansed heart, or the removing of the veil in matters related to divinity and the appearance of the truth clearly." He also points out that there is such a potential in the essence of human and human can some metaphysical facts which are the mind is incapable of to know, can be known by the *kashf*. Similarly, another prominent Sufi Ibn Arabi asserts that divine truths can be grasped with the *kashf* and the knowledge obtained through the *kashf* is accurate without causing any doubt.<sup>60</sup>

In drawing parallels between Hesychast understanding and Sufi perspectives on knowledge, the text points to the concept of *kashf* in Sufism. *Kashf* involves the unveiling or revealing of spiritual truths, akin to the Hesychast idea of experiencing the divine light. Both traditions recognize the potential for humans to access metaphysical knowledge beyond the realm of the intellect, emphasizing the role of spiritual experience and divine illumination.

<sup>59</sup> Süleyman Uludağ, "Süleyman Uludağ, "Keşf," *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Türk Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2022), 315.

<sup>60</sup> Uludağ, "Keşf." 315.

There are some similarities between Hesychast and Sufi perspectives, we can say that, based on examples provided, there exist more similarities than differences in their approaches to obtaining knowledge of God.

### **Theosis and *Fanā***

Another important similarity between two traditions is that the annihilation (*al-fanā*) of Sufism and deification (θεώσις-*theosis*) in Hescyhesim to union with God (*wisāl, tawhīd*).<sup>61</sup> According to Hesychasts, the emphasis on silence and tranquility in the origin of the word should not be understood as passive waiting or lack of movement but “an attitude of listening to God and of openness towards Him.”<sup>62</sup> This waiting in silence should be understood as being ready to listen to God. Because when man seizes spiritual stillness by suppressing his desires and thoughts, he will try to understand Him and open room for God by directing all his senses to God. The aim of this method of prayer is attaining spiritual perfection by the grace of God and also with a mystical lifestyle he can union with God through by attaining the true likeness of God: *theosis*.<sup>63</sup>

According to Palamas, the way to avoid worldly worries, love of possessions, and appetite for worldly things, which prevent man from uniting with God and attaining inner peace, is the monk's closure in his cell and his constant prayer.<sup>64</sup> Because prayer is the bond between God and his creations, and its only way to be unite with God. The monk should practice the Prayer of heart, especially to avoid the wishes and desires of the material world.<sup>65</sup> When the monk turns to his inner world by practicing this

<sup>61</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.”200.

<sup>62</sup> Johnson, *Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer Contesting Contemplation*. 15.

<sup>63</sup> Johnson, *Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer Contesting Contemplation*. 15.

<sup>64</sup> Gregory Palamas, “To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia,” *Philokalia Vol. 4*, ed. G E H Palmer et al. (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 293–322. 310.

<sup>65</sup> Gregory Palamas, “Three Texts On Prayer and Purity of Heart,” *Philokalia Vol. 4*, ed. G E H Palmer et al. (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 343–345. 343-344.

prayer, he will discover the palace of love in his heart, which is the center of his body and the residence of God. He will finally be enlightened here by God's grace and will be perfect.<sup>66</sup>

Palamas posits that in God's essence (*ousia*), He transcends even the concept of Godhead. However, through His operations or energies (*energies*), God establishes a close connection with the contingent order. This enables those deemed worthy to participate in God by attaining a vision of the divine light.<sup>67</sup> Palamas argues that humans can unite with God through His energies. However, Palamas' distinction between the essence and energies of God will not resolve the issue either. Because this time Barlaam accused Palamas with dualism because he damaging the plain and simple structure of God by dividing Him.<sup>68</sup>

The idea of possibility of human being to participate in God shocked Barlaam, therefore he wrote down a treatise called "Against the Messalians."<sup>69</sup> In this treatise, Barlaam accused the hesychasts with same errors as fourth century heretics group who believed that they could achieve a corporeal vision of divine essence through ascetic effort and uninterrupted prayer. Palamas responded to Barlaam with his Triad under the subtitle of "On Theosis."<sup>70</sup> Palamas believes that the heart is not only a physical organ, but it is the spiritual center of man's being where the encounter with God takes place. Therefore according to him, union with God happens not outside of the body but within it (in the heart). This is called deification or theology of *theosis*, and plays a central role in Orthodoxy. Indeed, its rooted in the doctrine of Incarnation: "God became man in order that man might become God." As it was accepted in the seventh Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon, there is a union of divine and human natures within

<sup>66</sup> Palamas, "To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia." 315.

<sup>67</sup> Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). 304.

<sup>68</sup> Van Rossum, *Palamism And Church Tradition: Palamism, Its Use Of Patristic Tradition, And Its Relationship With Thomistic Thought*. 81.

<sup>69</sup> Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*.304.

<sup>70</sup> Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*.304.

the Son, Hesychests and God are also “unmerged yet undivided.”<sup>71</sup>

According to Palamas, attaining of knowledge of God is possible because God is accessible to human beings. Therefore, deification is an experiential reality. The monks’ contemplation of the divine light is the contemplation of God’s glory, and it does not mean this glory is the essence of God however it is still divine. Palamas gives the example of Moses the lawgiver, Stephen the protomartyr, and Arsenius the desert ascetic as who were “visibly transformed by divine light.” God is beyond senses but the knowledge of God is still experiential and because the monks know that they believe that they see “the hypostatic light spiritually -in reality not in a symbolic fashion.”<sup>72</sup> They aware of that they experience “an illumination immaterial and divine, a grace invisibly seen and ignorantly known.”<sup>73</sup>

However, according to Barlaam, the light seen by the monks is not divine, it is “created symbol of divinity,” therefore, during the monks experience the grace of God, not God. Palamas argues that deifying light is not symbolic, it is essential, however, it is also not the essence of God but his energies.<sup>74</sup>

The Hesychasts search for deification (*theosis*) or mystical union with God, through the struggle to achieve purification with constant prayer. The Hesychests expected to be awarded with personal experience of God through this constant prayer (which is also known as prayer of heart). However, this experience should not be understood as a material vision but “transfiguration of body and soul through the indwelling of the divine energies.”<sup>75</sup>

However, Nasr noted there is a major difference between these two traditions about the possibility of the attaining the state of union in this life.<sup>76</sup> Nasr argues that

<sup>71</sup> Coates, “Bakhtin and Hesychasm.” 66.

<sup>72</sup> Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*.305.

<sup>73</sup> Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*.305.

<sup>74</sup> Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*.305.

<sup>75</sup> Coates, “Bakhtin and Hesychasm.” 62.

<sup>76</sup> Nasr, “The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism.” 199-200.

Whereas in Hesychasm deification can be expected fully in the next life and can only be approached in this life through synergy or cooperation between God and man, in Sufism union is possible in this life. There are those Sufis who, while in this world, have already passed beyond the gate of death or annihilation and who have experienced already the supreme state of union or unity while still living in this body.<sup>77</sup>

However, Nasr overlooks an important concept in the Sufism: *fanā-fi'llah* (union with or annihilation within the God).

*Fanā-fi'llah*, a fundamental concept in Sufism, denotes the state of annihilation in the divine presence. Sufis aspire to merge with God, accomplishing this union by eradicating their entire existence, forsaking all worldly attachments, and transcending mundane concerns. *Fanā-fi'llah* manifests as a continuous state of ecstasy and fervor, marking the Sufi's transition from a subjective, illusory existence to a unified existence with God, experiencing the divine presence within their heart. As the process of self-annihilation progresses, only the existence of God persists. This intricate journey in Sufism involves various transformative practices leading to the realization of *fanā-fi'llah*.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Hesychasm within the late Byzantine Orthodox Church and Sufism within the Islamic tradition provides a nuanced understanding of the shared spiritual principles and unique expressions of the divine quest in these two traditions. Both Hesychasm and Sufism highlight the centrality of spiritual experiences, particularly through prayer and contemplation, as pathways to profound encounters with the divine. The heart, considered a sacred center in both traditions, serves as the locus for divine communion and illumination.

Hesychasm, deeply rooted in Orthodox spirituality, places a

<sup>77</sup> Nasr, "The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism." 200.

<sup>78</sup> Filiz Kalyon, *Tasavvuf Sembollerinin Usuli Divanı İle Fuzuli'nin Türkçe Divanıdaki Kullanışı* (Ankara: Iksad Publications, 2020). 99.

distinctive emphasis on hesychia, or spiritual stillness, and the prayer of the heart. The Jesus Prayer, with its stages of progression, encapsulates the Hesychast journey toward union with God. On the parallel path, Sufism, tracing its roots to the Prophet of Islam, focuses on dhikr, the continuous remembrance of Allah through heart-centered prayer. Despite differences in specific practices, both traditions converge in recognizing the heart as the principal center of spiritual life.

The controversy between Palamas and Barlaam in Hesychasm, centered on the nature of the Taboric light, reflects the tension between philosophical approaches and experiential, mystical knowledge. Palamas emphasizes the distinction between God's essence and energies, asserting the possibility of humans uniting with God through spiritual practice. In Sufism, the concept of kashf, or unveiling, is not exactly the same but has some similarities with the Hesychast idea of experiencing divine light directly, highlighting the potential for metaphysical knowledge beyond intellectual understanding.

The similarities between *theosis* in Hesychasm and *fanā* in Sufism underscore a shared emphasis on a transformative process of union with God. Both traditions advocate a profound change in the individual, moving toward a state of divine unity or annihilation. The Hesychasts' pursuit of theosis through constant prayer has some parallelizes with the Sufi aspiration for *fanā-fi'llah*, involving the annihilation of the self in the divine presence. While Nasr's observation regarding the timing of deification in Hesychasm and Sufism might oversimplify the Hesychast perspective, the concept of *fanā-fi'llah* in Sufism aligns with the Hesychast goal of experiencing divine light and union with God in the present.

In essence, the comparative exploration of Hesychasm and Sufism contributes to a broader dialogue on mysticism, spirituality, and the diverse expressions of the human quest for the divine across cultural and religious landscapes. The parallels emphasize the universal human quest for a deeper connection with the trans-



centent, while the divergences highlight the unique paths that individuals traverse in their spiritual journeys. Both traditions enrich the tapestry of spiritual experiences, offering profound insights into the multifaceted nature of the divine quest.

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