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Palamas

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THEOSIS AND THE METAPHYSICS OF LIGHT OF GREGORY PALAMAS

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*Abstract*

The corporeal experience of the divine in the corporeal vision of the deifying light (*theourgon phos*) is a main subject in the philosophical system of Palamas. He states that the experience of the divine culminates in the vision of light, following several ascetic practices like the psycho-physic method and the exercitation of intellect. This divine light is neither material nor natural; however it can be perceived with corporeal eyes. What is the ontological character of this light? About this problem there are some approaches by contemporary scholars. For instances, Clucas (1975) states that the theory of light of Palamas is a manipulation of patristic sources and an arrangement of incongruences to escape from the accusation of messalianism. Beck (1961) holds that whenever Palamas is compelled to defend his notion of light he hides himself in the antinomies. I argue that *theosis* by the *theourgon phos* can be understood as a new metaphysics of light that combines concepts like *energeia*, *ousia*, *phos*, *photismos*, *metechein*. In this metaphysics God is not understood as *lux* and the creatures as *lumen*, as in a scheme of Neoplatonist inspiration, as is the case of Grossesteste. In the metaphysics of light of Palamas the divine is understood as deifying light not in its essence, but in its energy, and the creatures will be that light because they will participate (the body too) in that light without losing their individuality.

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Gregory Palamas does not discuss whether light is the origin of the world or it is composed of a light which is the first form of corporeality,

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nor does he analyse light as a physical phenomenon. Palamas draws on the experience of monks who assure they contemplate a light, having performed certain ascetic practices. This contemplation, according to the *hesychasts*, is one of the marks of *theosis*. The vision of light was at the centre of the polemic concerning *hesychasm*.

What is the nature of this light? In several instances Palamas (1973, 1; 3; 5) asserts that is not a symbol<sup>2</sup>. It is rather a deifying light (Palamas 1973, 1; 3; 5)<sup>3</sup>, often associated to the glory of Christ (Palamas 1973, 1; 3; 7)<sup>4</sup>. It has no bounds (Palamas 1973, 1; 3; 21)<sup>5</sup>, it is infinite and supercelestial (Palamas 1973, 1; 3; 21-22)<sup>6</sup>. It is an invisible light, perceptible in virtue of the fact that the intellectual senses also convey vision to the corporeal senses (Palamas 1973, 1; 3; 33)<sup>7</sup>. The sensible eyes see light thanks to another, supernatural faculty (Palamas 1973, 1; 3; 28)<sup>8</sup>. But in order to be seen, the intellective faculty is required (Palamas 1973, 1; 3; 27-28), though it transcends the intellect.

The objections to the vision of light posed by opponents of hesychasm focus mainly on the conception of mystical experience. For them, any experience of God will always be intellectual, ecstatic, out-of-body and thus not perceptible and beyond the scope of the senses. As such, it does not seem wise to Barlaam that the hesychast monks would want to keep the intellect in the body during prayer, instead of making it exit through ecstasy (Palamas 1973, 1; 2; 4). Mantzarides (1997, 99) states that Barlaam rejects the possibility of any direct and personal relationship between God and Man. I believe that negating the divine and uncreated nature of light is not the same as negating the possibility

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<sup>2</sup> "These are not sacred symbols, accessible to the senses, which he contemplates". Cf. Mantzarides 1997, 96.

<sup>3</sup> "For this light is also a deifying light (*theourgon phos*)".

<sup>4</sup> "This same Father also calls this light the glory of Christ and considers it as transcending the senses, even though its apparition is accessible to the senses".

<sup>5</sup> καὶ πέρας ὅλων οὐχ ὄρα του ὄρωμένου – "a light that as no limit...".

<sup>6</sup> ἀπειρον καὶ ὑπερουράνιον. "That's why the great Macarius says that this light is infinite and supracelestial".

<sup>7</sup> "And through the intellect the body linked to it is made more divine".

<sup>8</sup> "This light is not a sensible light, though the apostles were considered worthy to perceive it with their eyes, but thanks to another power".

of a direct relation with God. It merely denies it under those specific terms. To Barlaam the real and direct relation with God is possible, but purely intellectual, or better yet, it does not ever involve the senses (Barlaam 1998; *Ep. I*, 30).

For Palamas (2006, 44), light is visible in two ways, either because the body apprehends it by reverberation or because the body has become spiritualized. Either way it is not, strictly speaking, the body that perceives the light but, as was said, it is the spirit that sees, an instance placed by God in the intellective faculty (Palamas 2003, III, 3).

In the second answer to Akindynos, Palamas presents both his own thesis and Barlaam's concerning the light emitted by Christ during the transfiguration. Palamas claims that Barlaam is wrong when he defends that the light shining at Mount Tabor "was created, definable and perceptible" (2003, II, 10). For him light must be uncreated, eternal and undefinable, transcending the intellect as well as sensation, and it was seen by the eyes of the apostles because they had received the grace of the time to come, experiencing in advance the grace of restored humankind (Palamas 2003, II, 65). Mount Tabor announces that the body in the age to come will be able to contemplate when it becomes spiritual e co-eternal (συνδιαίωνισει) with the soul (Palamas 2003, III, 3).

Akindynos, supporting Barlaam, draws on the Gospel of John to show that the vision of light cannot be the vision of God, for in John 1, 18 it is said that it was never seen by anyone, except by the Only Begotten Son. The perplexity of Akindynos before the assertion of the possibility of a vision of God also finds support in the Credo, stating that God is the creator of visible and invisible things, so that it is not possible that he himself is visible (Palamas 2003, II, 65). Akindynos abhors the idea that anything capable of being seen can at the same time be divine and uncreated. However, according to Palamas, it is precisely that which is stated in the Gospel, i.e., that the light is the glory and the Kingdom of the Father and the Son. If that is so, it cannot be created.

Also within the context of this theological debate, from the relation between the passages of Mark 9, 1 and Matthew 17, 1-2, where Christ appears saying to the disciples that some amongst them, before they die, will experience the coming of the Kingdom of God, and after six days Peter, John and James witnessed the Transfiguration, tradition is set on

the notion that the vision of Christ's radiance in Mount Tabor is the experience of the Kingdom of God. Thus, according with Palamas, light must be divine and uncreated. This episode is of particular relevance for the hesychasts, for it will always be the biblical paradigm by excellence used to legitimate their own luminous experience.

If it weren't for this conviction maybe the reference to light would have been read as a metaphor, but since the hesychasts' orthodoxy was under discussion, and the latter was dependent, among other issues, on the veracity of the experience of light, there was no other way but to show that Fathers spoke already of this experience and that they identified light with one of God's energies. Anyway, I believe that it remains to be explained in a more consistent manner why the luminous experience of the hesychasts had to be identified with that of the disciples. At Tabor they may have experienced the divine and uncreated light, as the Fathers have interpreted. But this could have been a unique and unrepeatable experience<sup>9</sup>.

Besides the theological arguments, in order to demonstrate that the light contemplated upon by the hesychasts is divine, uncreated and a sign of deification, Palamas must show that in God essence and energy are distinct elements (though not separated) and that their distinction does not affect divine simplicity. Palamas' task was not, therefore, an easy one.

In the first *Triad in defence of the hesychast saints*, Palamas seeks, precisely, to show that the disciples' experience of light at Mount Tabor is identical to that of the hesychasts. The first and second part of the first *Triad* are a prolegomenon or a primer for what Palamas wants to defend,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. for instance, Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 44*, 3. Gregory of Nazianzus clearly states that God himself is an inaccessible light (*aprositon phos*). And in *Oration 40 On Holy Baptism*, also asserts that "God is the highest, the unapproachable, the ineffable Light, that can neither be conceived in the mind nor uttered with the lips". Nothing about grasp the light with intellect nor senses, nor that this is the energy of God, communicable and participable unlike his essence. The Light of Mount Tabor is for Gregory of Nazianzus the light of Godhead, not of his energy. The Light is contemplated in the three persons of Trinity. Gregory of Nazianzus speaks also in a second Light, i.e., the angels. And a third Light which is human being.

namely, that the practices and doctrines of the hesychasts are rooted in tradition. In the first part he elaborates on questions concerning knowledge, for it was necessary to show that Barlaam reduces knowledge to a single kind, that is, the kind which is obtained by the use of natural reason; while the hesychasts, besides natural reason, are also aided by supernatural knowledge and, precisely because of that, their knowledge is more sharp and it covers aspects of being wider than Barlaam's. In the second part of the first *Triad*, Palamas rehabilitates matter, for he envisages to show that the body is also *capax visionis Dei*. The third part of the first *Triad* is the exposition of the hesychast system. In this third part the problem of the corporeal vision of divine light is addressed.

Palamas' interpretation of the visual experience of light that the hesychasts claim to contemplate seems to be original. The several descriptions of the psychophysical method does not mention this experience. It is in Symeon the New Theologian that is to be found the sole description most resembling that of Palamas.

In Evagrius we find something remotely alike. Evagrius makes frequent references in his work, especially in *Concerning Thoughts* and *Reflections (Skemmata)*, to the experience of light, though an intellectual light. "Light" is a metaphor for intellectual knowledge. In Diadochos of Photiki we also find references to light, especially in the work *Gnostic Chapters*, but, in this case, as the effect of an illusion of devilish origin.

As for Macarius of Egypt (1992, I, 2-11) says that the soul taken by the Holy Spirit is wholly transformed into light, face and eye. This soul is to be wholly illuminated by the glory of the light from Christ's face. All of Macarius' homilies are replete with allusions to divine light. However, we do not find any reference to a possible vision of light by the bodily eyes. But we find the idea that the body of the saints in the age to come will be transformed into light, as well as their soul:

"Just as the body of the Lord was glorified when he ascended the Mount and was transfigured in divine glory and infinite light, so are the bodies of saints glorified and glisten as lighting. Just as the glory that was inside Christ covered his body and the whole of it shined, so in saints the inner power of Christ in them will in that day be externally poured over their bodies." (1992, XV, 38)

And in Gregory of Sinai all references to light, both in the work *On the Commandments and Doctrines* and *On Prayer*, mean an intellectual illumination. Only once is the vision of eternal light mentioned, but only in the world to come, never *in via*.

Symeon the New Theologian states that those who are worthy of seeing God see him as light, but he does not explain the experience as does Gregory Palamas. He does not speak of essence and energy, nor of how bodily eyes are able to perceive the light. Perhaps an explanation similar to Palamas' is not to be found in Symeon because the circumstances did not force him to describe in detail and apologetically the luminous experience.

In conclusion, the experience of light is present in several spiritual-philosophical systems, from East to West, and it is not exclusive of Christian thought. References to light in a metaphysical sense are found in works within the Hindu, Buddhist, Judaic, Muslim contexts<sup>10</sup>. In the

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Plotinus, Al-Suhrawardi, Abhinavagupta. I leave here a passage concerning the Buddhist context: "Due to the developed state of his mind at this stage, a brilliant light appears to the meditator. At first he catches a glimpse of something like a lamplight in the distance. Even if there is no lamp inside his hut, he seems to see one even with his eyes open. He then discovers that this light emanates from his own body". This passage is in a chapter about illusions of pride that may supervene during meditation. So the practitioner should not pay attention to them. In *Visuddhimagga* (XX, 105-125) (*Visuddhimagga* is an interpretation of the Pali Canon written in 5<sup>th</sup> century by a monk called Buddhaghosa) quoted by Matara Sri Nanarama, *The seven stages of purification* (73). I merely stress that this example concerns visual experiences of light as a result of meditation techniques. There are several interpretations of meditation-induced experiences of light in Buddhist traditions. "Some types of light may signal that a particular discipline such as concentration has reached a certain stage of development, whereas other lights may be the result of imbalanced practice. Some interpret lights as a vehicle for investigating the constructed nature of phenomenal appearances; other light experiences are deemed unimportant side effects of meditation". In J.R. Lindahl, Ch.T. Kaplan, E.M. Winget and W.B. Britton, "A phenomenology of meditation-induced light experiences: traditional buddhist and neurobiological perspectives", in *Frontiers in Psychology* (2013) 4, 6-7. As for the similarities of the psychophysical method with the technics used in yoga see Bois, J. (1901), «Les hésychastes avant le XIV siècle», *Échos d'Orient*, V, 1. For the similarities between the distinction essence-energy with early Vedanta see

case of the hesychast context, this experience that occurs in the secrecy of the heart had to be translated into a philosophical language and systematized explanatorily in virtue of circumstances. Thus, trying to explain in what way a human being is wholly transformed into God, but without losing his individuality, and in what way the vision of light is a true deifying experience, but maintaining the non-partakeability in divine essence, Palamas asserts that to experience light is to partake not of divine essence, but of divine energy, distinct from the former though indissociable from it.

What is the specificity of Palamas' thought relative to other descriptions of the vision of light? The engagement of the body is doubtless one of the differentiating marks. Deification, in Gregory Palamas, entails not only the transformation of the intellect but also that of the body. This means that the reconfiguration of the existent reaches even its lowest recesses, that is, matter, source of such discomfort for Neoplatonic thought. It is this, precisely, that can be drawn from the experience of the divine light.

The vision of light as divine and uncreated, the vision proper of divine glory, implies problems such as that of the (in)commensurability between the limited and the unlimited; the extension of something that lacks extension; of permanence within impermanence; the real and direct manifestation in time and space of something atemporal and purely spiritual; the manifestation in being of something that lies beyond being.

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Natalia Isayeva, *From vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, chapter 11. Isayeva says that the only way that some Hindu thinkers (Gaudapada and Bhartrhari) had to explain the problem of one and many aspects of Bhraman was in the level of energies.

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