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HESYCHASM AND MAGNANIMITY: ELDER SOPHRONY'S HYPOSTATIC PRINCIPLE AND THE ONTOLOGY OF PRAYER

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Abstract

The essay represents an attempt to recuperate the notion of Christian magnanimity in the so-called Post-Christian age. In the secularised contemporary environment, magnanimity has acquired a naturalised character and expresses itself in the language of inclusiveness and rights. Yet the reality that it can claim is self-constructed and a version of modern nihilism. Elder Sophrony's idea of hypostatic principle, operative at once in divine reality and Christ-centred prayer, not only recuperates the transformative spirit of Christian revelation but, working within the tradition of hesychastic spirituality, proposes an alternative sense of inclusivity that is more satisfying and truthful.

Keywords: *Sophrony, Silouan, Palamas, hypostatic prayer, hesychasm, magnanimity, Hart, Person, Searle, Taylor.*

“The heart of man is deep.” It is not a matter of the heart of flesh nor of measurable depth, it is a matter of infinity, that is to say, of the fact that the heart of man cannot be measured, for it opens into the depths of God. (*Metropolitan Anthony of Sourazh*)

David Bentley Hart offers a striking evaluation of the broad effects of the early Christian Church's commitment to the salvific consequences of the

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divine Incarnation of Israel's long-awaited Messiah. He calls it the Christian Revolution.

/.../ a truly massive and epochal revision of humanity's prevailing vision of reality, so pervasive in its influence and so vast in its consequences as actually to have created a new conception of the world, of history, of human nature, of time, and of the moral good. (Hart 2009, XI)

All of this is true and significant and needs to be remembered, for, as Hart realises, the impact of that "epochal revision" has been, for some time now, gradually dissolving. We are headed into another kind of epoch, one in which the very language of the Bible and the Church will hardly be recognised. In a way, the Christian faith, "permeates everything that we are, but in another it is disappearing, and we are changing as a result" (Hart 2009, 239). We might like to think of the situation as we are living it as preparatory of a Second Coming, and this may be the case. In any event, the cultural narrative into which people are now born is something quite other than the Christian one that has hitherto held sway: "We live after the age of Christendom and cultures do not easily turn back to beliefs of which they have tired or with which they have become disenchanted." (239)

On the surface of this assessment, any consideration of hesychastic spirituality and Archimandrite Sophrony's understanding of it runs directly into the question of intelligibility. This is considerably more grievous than that of relevance. The post-Christian order, described by Hart as a "bizarre amalgamation of the banal and the murderous," (238) has attained a normative status such that the Gospels' radical responses to it no longer is allowed to offer a measure by which it may be assessed and qualified as less than good. Hart speculates why the loss of this perspective has come to pass and will continue thus:

[It] seems to me quite reasonable to imagine that, increasingly, the religion of God/man, who summons human beings, will be replaced once again by the more ancient religion of man-god, who wrests his divinity from the intractable material of his humanity, and solely through the exertions of his will. (239)

But, if so, then the new emerging order recuperates in entirely new contexts, some of humankind's most ancestral tendencies that draw their gods from the stuff related to its own natural potential. Of course, on the grounds of what is currently most operative, the societal form, in which this mutation is most visible occurs, largely justifies itself as part of the ongoing development of democracy with self-creation as an implicit ideal. The process might be succinctly described as leaving behind the Christian hope of becoming god with God in order to adhere to the most primal of temptations of desiring to become god without God, otherwise called idolatry.

Concerning the historical effects of the Christian faith, Sophrony proposes a reading that, while it does not contradict Hart's reflection, puts the accent elsewhere:

Ours is sometimes called the post-Christian age. But I personally, from what I know of the history of the world and of Christianity, am convinced that Christianity in its true dimensions has never been grasped by the great mass of people. Kingdoms pretending to the name of 'Christian,' and their peoples have worn the mask of piety, while 'denying the power thereof' (Sophrony 1996, 61).

For him, then, the failing of Christianity lies fundamentally in the difficulty of most believers to assimilate with consequence the fullness of the Christian kerygma and, with it, the power it wishes to communicate to all². The universal, or catholic, quality of this power, we propose, would constitute an important criterion of Christian magnanimity that conforms to the dynamic of the hypostatic principle that humankind shares with the triadic God. Related immediately and practically to the ontological content contained in the Second Commandment, Sophrony

² Hart also recognises the difficulty of maintaining the standards of holiness in the aftermath of the Edict of Milan and acknowledges the significance of a remnant faction within a politically and culturally influential Church: "[That is,] its rebellion against its own success, its preservation of its most precious and unadulterated spiritual aspirations against its own temporal power (perhaps in preparation for the day when that power would be no more), and its repudiation of any value born from the fallen world that might displace love from the centre of the Christian faith" (240).

sees in it an affirmation of “the consubstantiality of the human race” that stands in need of restoration through persistent prayer (Sophrony 1987, 206). The aim is ultimately to sympathise with, to suffer with, humankind and live its destiny as one’s own through a life of prayer. The struggle that it involves mirrors that of humanity as a whole, but its efficaciousness relies on the ontological content that prayer possesses to offer the possibility for comprehensive restoration of the human condition. For Sophrony, “[...] prayer alone can restore the created world from its fall, overcoming its stagnation and inertia, by means of a mighty effort of our spirit to follow Christ’s commandments” (12)³. Herein lies the challenge of maintaining the full breadth, the catholicity, of revelation in Christ, “in its true dimensions,” such that it accompanies the ineffable expansiveness of our being.

In *His life is Mine*, Sophrony suggests where he believes one of the sources of the malaise of Christianity lies: “Experience shows all too clearly that once we Christians start reducing the scope of the revelation given to us by Christ and the Holy Spirit, we gradually cease to be attracted by the Light made manifest to us” (1977, 22). The result would practically be an annulment of the First Coming and its hoped-for effects in human self-awareness about the proximity of the Kingdom – a taste of paradise and divine filiation experienced in Christ’s presence. Clearly, Sophrony’s writings on prayer and hesychastic practices, under the influence of Saint Silouan, constitute an attempt to recover the originality of God’s revelation in Christ and its life-giving power. But what is impressive, given the general dismissal of such thinking in the present time, is his emphasis on the uniqueness of human being, its potential magnitude, and how it is that the hypostatic principle that he

³ Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 12. With the autobiographical tone that marks his teachings, Sophrony explains that, having returned to the faith and upon understanding Jesus Christ better, he experienced a dramatic change of heart. “From my inner conflicts, I spontaneously shifted to humanity at large, and found myself suffering with all mankind. /.../ I learned to live the fate of all mankind as if it were happening to me personally. It is precisely this that is enjoined by the commandment, ‘Thou shall love thy neighbour as thyself’ – neighbour, of course, in the Christian interpretation of the word” (77-78).

proposes is a key to its understanding. That is, how it is that the hypostasis in our created nature assumes infinity into itself and belongs to eternal ontology.

Surely this begs the question of intelligibility for the contemporary mind, for it is particularly problematic for the kind of rationality that accompanies the process of secularisation. Nevertheless, the question will ultimately lead us unto a Kierkegaardian either/ or situation, namely the one already sketched above in the two ways of becoming god-like and that produce two versions of magnitude. On each side of the alternative, the spiritual life of human being plays out in the tension between absolute self-affirmation and self-determination.

Magnanimity naturalised

As a rule, for the secular mind, Christianity is one religion among others. It thereby represents a narrower reality than what secularity is advancing. As an ongoing project of emancipation, secularism associates itself with an unceasing promotion of demystifying critical thought and the naturalisation of the human faculties and whatever it produces. In this regard, Nietzsche's influential diagnosis of human culture is not only an exemplification of this but has had a lasting effect. Will, he would say, is at the centre of all cultural productions, including religion. In relation to Christianity, the will-to-power manifests itself in its most perverted form. Structured around resentment toward all things natural, Christianity and its clerical class has created a system of fear before the Will's true and noble vocation to run the course of its power to expand and dominate⁴. Clearly, in this perspective that has become surreptitiously normative in Western culture, the idea of Christian magnanimity would be nearly a contradiction in terms. At best, and here we are moving

⁴ Elder Sophrony's take on this is pretty much on target: "Contemporary civilisation is individualistic by nature. This is particularly obvious in the realm of the arts. Geniuses are acclaimed – originators of one or another particular style. [...] This is the principle on which our social structure is based. But individuals *en masse* live in a state of decline and ineludible tragedy" (1987, 205).

beyond Nietzsche's recommendations, to associate greatness of soul with self-less service, based on humility, and self-transcendence within divine life might be plausible for a given way of life that secular life might allow in the name of inclusiveness. But its secularised translation of whatever virtue that may be found in such a spiritual position is naturalised, *i.e.*, centred around human flourishing in ordinary life. To affirm a "beyond" to human flourishing and the asceticism that it implies would be seen as potentially damaging and a violence to human nature.

Nevertheless, inclusiveness can serve as a kind of figure for secular magnanimity currently in the process of being dogmatically organised within the world system. It may not be finally the absence of metaphysics that is at issue, but a dramatically different kind. John Searle gives us a plausible picture of what this might look like. In this passage taken from *The Construction of Social Reality*, Searle expresses the hegemonic dimension of this world view with its full dogmatic character, amounting to a simulacrum of classical metaphysics:

The truth is, for us, most of our metaphysics is derived from physics (including the other natural sciences). Many features of contemporary natural science conception of reality are still in dispute and still problematic. [...] But two features of our conception of reality are not up for grabs. They are not, so to speak, optional for us citizens of the late twentieth and twenty-first century. It is a condition of your being an educated person in our era that you are apprised of these two theories: the atomic theory of matter and the evolutionary theory of biology. (Searle 1995, 6)

So, within the limitless expanse of the physical universe, evolutionary biological science acknowledges the emergence of a species of living beings capable of a complex culture sustained by an intense activity of communication. Driven by the exchanging of goods and linguistic signs, this ceaseless communicative behaviour attains in the human species a high level of symbolisation that governs its forms of life. On the one hand, this capacity for conceptual abstraction becomes the condition for the possibility for scientific discourse. On the other hand, it creates the ambience of socialisation and the creation of values that gain a systematic ideological dimension, generating institutional facts and identifiable groups who govern themselves according to them. Correlatively to these

institutional facts, societies and their religions may be properly situated. But still, the religious yearning for ultimate values emerges from within a world system constituted by brute facts that the scientific mind can ultimately differentiated from institutional facts.

We find ourselves before a latter- day version of a double ontology: no longer a double ontology distinguishing the “thinking thing” (*res cogitans*) and the science of the natural order’s physical extensiveness. The latter subsumes the facts that are only so by human agreement, or shared belief, (namely, those institutional facts) and that which simply goes on without us (namely, those brute facts). The metaphysics that holds together the intersubjective ontology of beliefs is ultimately the logic of ordinary social relationships. This logic remains largely invisible in the actual practicing of determinate language games that human beings learn and by which they regulate their actions and communication.

The Enlightenment and modernist projects that provide the atmosphere from which secular reason takes its oxygen has created its own self-justifying procedures to dictate the sustainability of its values, that is, its ersatz spirituality and its own sense of magnanimity. As MacIntyre perceived, the heroes of the age are the manager, the aesthete, and the therapist, who largely formulate and persistently recreate the criteria of the good life to the believing masses and whatever magnanimity might mean for them. This could be translated into a participation in a finite world system that sets the terms of individual emancipation in conjunction with a schizophrenic capitalism which levels and consumes all, eventually in the name of inclusivism.

In contrast with Christianity, it has no substantial affinity with the pagan past, which largely assumed an ontological realism anchored in the cosmos that the biblical faiths understood differently but were assertive of its created goodness. Moreover, in both cases, the given-ness of human being as somehow needed to be shaped meant that it possessed inherent qualities *in potentia* that needed cultivation of the relevant virtues for the sake of the good, indeed for greatness⁵.

⁵ It might be usefully recalled that Aristotle’s portrayal of the magnanimous man provides a suggestive measure by which the extent of the Christian revolution might be gauged in regard to what having “greatness of soul” might, in truth, be.

The questing for the identity of the modern self bears the marks of claiming the status of supersession in relation to the past. It takes upon itself the biblical theme of creation *ex nihilo*, even to the extent of assigning to itself the limits of the thinkable, but not necessarily the doable. It is the peculiar notion of creation and ultimately self-creation that becomes the rule, or principle, for magnanimity. The call for inclusion tends to recommend, finally, an enforced sameness in which personality is reduced to and measured by a naturalisation of peculiar traits. The critical point is met when the yearning for personhood demands a life beyond human flourishing as defined most notably from within the sphere of institutional facts. In this regard, Charles Taylor's perception of where we might be going is pertinent

It is in Book Four of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that Aristotle presents the figure of the magnanimous man as one who is conversant with all things great. Such a man can do so because he is of great worth, the epitome of the virtues, and knows it. One might say that his character is well made and belongs to greatness, just as beauty can be said to belong to good statue. From his height, the contempt that he feels to lesser human beings is simply just, for he knows how to judge the situations around him properly. Aristotle would include some nuances in how the magnanimous man is to treat others: he would be haughty in relations to those of high rank, moderate with the mediocre, but would not display superiority with the lowly, for that would be in bad taste. His necessarily good character would not allow for that. Because of this, he may eventually confer benefits to others but will not receive any, *i.e.*, he will ask for no favours. Thus, apt to discern between extremes (*aretê*) in practical matters and large of view in contemplative ones, he is the image of self-containment and self-assuredness. It is readily noticeable that the way Aristotle's magnanimous man sees himself would lead him to acknowledge little merit in Christian humility and to ignore the spiritual dangers inherent in a proud heart. Yet there remains a strong sense that the right virtues will need to be cultivated by an ascetic education of the spiritual faculties inherent in the human soul. There is at least to this extent a certain affinity with what will follow with the rise of Christendom.

It might be also interesting to note the attempt to bring magnanimity into line with an ontology compatible with the Christian tradition over against the gradual erosion of it in C. S. Lewis's *Abolition of Man* (Harper: San Francisco, 1941): "The Chest-Magnanimity-Sentiment – these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man." (25). The point is that we are becoming "men without chests." The Lewis' diagnostic is quite compatible with the patristic insistence on the heart.

In societies where the general equilibrium point is firmly within immanence, where many people even have trouble understanding how a sane person could believe in God, the dominant secularisation narrative, which tends to blame our religious past for many of the woes of our world, will become less plausible over time. /.../ At the same time, this heavy concentration will intensify a sense of living in a 'waste land' for subsequent generations, and many young people will begin to explore beyond boundaries. (Taylor 2007, 700)

Discursiveness hits bottom when the quest for unique personhood emerges and imposes itself as a vocation to be attained beyond the limits of the immanent frame. It raises, immediately, two questions: about the antecedence of Life and whether it can be other than self-giving, and, indeed, the condition of both possibility and realisation of all that exists; about how it can be known and for whom it is meant to be. Elder Sophrony's response to these is impressive, even overwhelming:

The Creator of the universe rejoiced more over man than over the glorious choir of heavenly bodies. Man is more precious than all the rest of the cosmos. Man, completed and perfected, is wondrous, even as God is wondrous. He is immortal and supra-cosmic. He is more than a microcosm – he is micro-theos. [...] Between God and man there must be commensurability in spite of all that is incommensurable. (Sophrony 1977, 77)

Sophrony sets, thus, the bar for humankind and the life of the human soul at the highest point possible. That is, he proposes a theistic metaphysics, affirming the precedence of divine substance over a created cosmos and human being called to be intimately associated, commensurable to a certain extent, with God, a god with God. For the Elder, this constitutes the true dimension of Christianity and, as we shall see, the ultimate consequence of the hypostatic principle. Moreover, considering his conviction that this dimension has not been generally reached by Christian people in the course of history, Sophrony's writings suggest that the hesychastic way points in the direction of what it looks like and how it may be achieved.

Christian Magnanimity and Hesychastic Prayer

Sophrony's high view of humankind's unique dignity stands firmly within Saint Gregory Palamas' culminating 14th century synthesis of the hesychastic tradition and the doctrine of deification, described by Norman Russell as arguably the "Orthodox Church's noblest expression of the content and purpose of the spiritual life" (Russell 2004, 309). This certainly includes the conviction, articulated in *One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, that human being is closer to triadic God than the angels in its specific difference, among rational beings, for its having a life-giving capacity. In view of *theosis*, this would involve the human soul's loving conjunction with the sensible world of the body also subject to spiritual transformation⁶. Hence the place that the psycho-somatic has in the hesychastic life, as St Gregory Palamas states it in this passage, taken from the Homily Nineteen: "[...] the soul encompasses the body with which it is created, and is everywhere within it, not in spatial terms nor as being contained by the body, but as enclosing and containing it, since it is in God's image in this respect as well" (Palamas 2009, 159). The extent of the soul's encompassing potential, as thus expressed, possesses always and already the pattern from which magnanimity in the Christian sense emerges and as the hypostatic principle will make explicit. Like Saint Gregory, Elder Sophrony established his conceptual convictions about the viability hesychastic practices on the empirical evidence of the actual testimonies that were the hesychasts themselves. Namely, those with whom they shared the monastic life on Mount

⁶ Gregory Palamas, *One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, see especially chapter 38. For Saint Gregory Palamas, the emphasis is importantly on the communication of life from on high that is structurally operative in the way the triadic character of the divine image is operative in human being. In other words, the life-giving capacity of human being consists of a spiritual (or intellectual) love for corporeal reality that reflects the Spirit's involvement in the economy of salvation of the created order. On the other hand, the angels are, by nature, closer than human beings to the divine image for being immediately enveloped by divine illumination, by uncreated light. From this, we can begin to comprehend the Palamite underscoring of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor as anticipatory of a more perfect partaking of divine life in the "never-ending Day of the Kingdom."

Athos, as well as their own experiences. For Sophrony, Saint Silouan represented the living evidence of Christ-like existence and a qualified witness to the validity of the hypostatic principle. Concerning the living evidence, Sophrony's recalling of his Staretz' impact on his life is telling, for they constitute, for him, experiential facts demonstrative of Christ as God.

For example, Saint Silouan appeared to Sophrony as heaven-sent, authoritative and indubitable:

[...] I looked upon his words to a certain extent as the Christian world looks upon Holy Scripture which imparts truths as acknowledged and pure facts.

Throughout my time with Blessed Staretz Silouan I never for an instant doubted that his words were 'words of life eternal', received from on high. (Sophrony 1991, 119, 75)

Significantly, Sophrony's portrait of the Staretz challenges that of Aristotle's magnanimous man, substantially modifying, if not reversing, the latter's qualities.

Simplicity stamped the Staretz' outward manner but his demeanour did not mask his aristocracy of spirit. [...] he did not know what it was to spurn or disregard. He was a stranger to affectation. He was a really noble in the way only a Christian can be noble. (1991, 53)⁷

But in what does this Christian nobility consist? In evaluating retrospectively Silouan's life, Sophrony judges that, from early on, his Staretz was given the grace of the perfect.

Lively experience of the *Persona* is rarely given to people here below. It comes by praying like Christ for the whole world as oneself. Led to such prayer by the Holy Spirit, man existentially lives the image of the Triune God. In this kind of prayer one experiences the consubstantiality of the human race. Such prayer reveals the ontological meaning of the second commandment. (1987, 203)

The Staretz thus received a vocation from on high that is exceptional for the spiritual heights and the spiritual suffering to which he was called: "[...] in his conversation and writings we meet with

⁷ See note 13 for a summary of Aristotle's notion of magnanimous man.

thoughts that surpass any ordinary man, reaching into territories beyond the understanding of 'normal' people" (1991, 124). This can be gauged by his conviction that the struggles of his inner life are paradigmatic of human life as Christ Himself, the image of the perfect man, revealed it to be. Silouan understood, "that the field of man's spiritual battle with evil – cosmic evil – is his own heart" (1991, 45). Christian nobility and magnanimity range, thus, themselves around the identification with all of humankind that is not at all the result of speculative dialectics and the desire to out-narrate rival versions of truth. The life of prayer becomes the key: "The Staretz' life was spent, above all, in prayer, and the praying mind does not think – does not reason – but lives. Its activity consists, not in the manipulation of abstract concepts but in participation in being." (1991, 105)

The accent is on *life* and *living* by God and the illumination that comes from the Father of lights. According to Sophrony's testimony of Silouan's experience and his own conclusions, "Christianity is not a philosophy, not a doctrine, but life, and all the Staretz' conversations and writings are witness to this life" (1991, 111). Prayer, the purer the better, serves, then, as the conduit to this life beyond philosophical argumentation and into ontological participation. "All the good that proceeds from God and returns to God is *indestructible*. Prayer is one of the highest forms of ontological good, indestructible, eternal" (1991, 198). In this deifying process, the human person acquires a new content from the dimension and patterns of Hypostasis- Persona, the inmost principle of divine life.

From Scripture and always following Silouan, Sophrony notes that, "Christ's prayer in the garden of Gethesemane is the noblest of all prayers by virtue and power to atone for the sins of the world." (1977, 91)

In this event, demonstrative of the radicalness of God's saving act in His Christ, we realise that our knowing God is proportionate to our entry into the mystery of the Lord's consent to give Himself up for the salvation of His world. To that extent we also enter into this godly mode of being preparatory to experiencing of the uncreated light on Mount Tabor. It is, therefore, that the prayer of the Gethsemane and the witnessing of the Transfiguration configure the two extreme and contrasting yet comprehensive points of hypostatic prayer that are held together by Christ becomes paradigmatic for the full expression of the life of the

human soul, the life of I AM incarnate in Christ, at once the perfect revelation of God and perfect manifestation of man as the new Adam.

Gethsemane and Mount Tabor represent, in scriptural terms, the tension expressed in the revelation given to Silouan as the ultimate wisdom for those who have received the grace of tasting, however little, the agony of Christ in Gethsemane. The keeping one's mind in the hell that it intimates as extreme risk and danger beckons an awareness of Christ's divinity, His conquest of the limits of mortality, and a call to faith, dissolving the despair that awakes in us for the life of the soul. "When it is given to us from on High to enter this new sphere of Being, we arrive at 'the ends of the world' (1 Cor. 10:11) and pass into the light of Divine Eternity" (1977, 95). The trial and decision for unconditional trust in the Father's love for the life of the soul that bears His image and likeness yields the fruit of realisation of personhood. "Drawn by the Spirit of God to prayer for the whole world and to share in the Lord's prayer in Gethsemane, we suddenly behold in ourselves a divine miracle – a spiritual sun rises in us" (1987, 195). God is the Absolute reality, yet human being, the likeness of the Absolute, is essential life also for the world. And prayer is constitutive of the communication that promises a double enablement: God becomes effectively God for us and we become godly in His likeness for the sake of the world's salvation and life.

While Mount Athos represents the privileged setting for Sophrony's quest for the Absolute, Saint Silouan is, significantly, the live witness and explicator of the pathways to divine knowledge. However, the Church is the defining antecedent and indispensable condition for mutual understanding for those who seek God. That is, along with the sacramental life by which she nourishes the faithful, the Church provides the guidelines for shared experience of the divine and how it is to be understood by successive generations of saints. In them, we find continued testimony of fidelity to the God whose love for them does not preclude trials. The logic underlying this knowledge is thus: the greater the loyalty and trust, the greater the testing, the more complete the experience. So, we are speaking of something other than human flourishing on its own terms. The ontological character of prayer implies struggle and personal creativity.

**Practicing the prayer of the heart:
the creating of ever-renewable empirical evidence**

Making prayer pure becomes the issue and involves a creative praxis in order to find our way to it and, thereby, to God. "Prayer is creation, the loftiest form of creation, which makes prayer infinitely diverse" (1991, 131). Still, in order to approach it, an apophatic methodology, garnered from the accumulated wisdom of the saints, is the surest path. Sophrony's articulation of this methodology around "three forms of prayer" represents a systematic and conceptual response to what he learned existentially from his Spiritual Father. In following the succession of these states, the distinctiveness of the hypostatic principle can be clearly appreciated along with the kind of empiricism that corresponds to the state of pure prayer. We believe that Sophrony's treatment of the subject has contemporary import in the way it raises the (earlier) Wittgensteinian question about the conditions of seeing the world aright. For Sophrony, it also questions the status of exterior images and discursive language in knowledge, opening a path in detriment of the primacy of affective interiority that cannot be properly "said".

The first form of prayer is borne along by its impulse toward exterior reality that stimulates the imagination to create variant expressions of what the world looks like. Reality is virtually hallucinated into something dream-like.

The divine, and in general all that the spiritual represents itself in various fantastical aspects, following which actual human life, too, is gradually diffused by elements from the sphere of fantasy. (1991, 131)

The situation becomes spiritually problematic for the ascetic when these images become the pretext for "intrusive thoughts" and when the will cannot resist delectation that nourishes some passion which, if reinforced, puts the soul under bondage.

The second form is meditative, *i.e.*, an inward movement, that considers in the heart and mind that which extraneous and speculates upon it. If fantasy is the danger contained in the first form of prayer, the passions of vanity and pride are liable to interfere in the second. Still, the

imagination again is in full operation but at a conceptual level and the world that it produces is also contrived, albeit in a way that is less naïve for involving a critical instance. Thus, a certain grace comes with this prayer, even if related to theological discourse, even if it takes the Areopagitic apophatic but highly conceptual route to theology. There is, however, less inclination to struggle against the passions and the effects of this grace is decreased. Cogitation is, nevertheless, of primary concern.

Here, life is concentrated in the brain. The mind is not united with the heart – it is perpetually turned outwards in its aspiration to understand and master all things. (1991, 160)

Intellectualism and the pride associated with it satisfy philosophical theologians who remain fascinated by their metaphysical constructs. But the only light that they see is that which derives naturally from being in image of God. As Saint Gregory Palamas also maintained, the problem does not reside in reason as such, but in the pride that emerges within its association with imagination:

Pride strengthens the action of the imagination, whereas humility suspends it. Pride bristles with desire to create its own world, whereas humility is quick to receive life from God. (1991, 167)

The third form of prayer is characterised by the “rapt concentration” within the soul. Here the mind is “in prayerful attention stationed in the heart. [...] the imagination is curtailed and the mind is released from all the mental images that have invaded it.” (1991, 133)

Pure prayer results from a will and mind that becomes strengthened through struggling against intrusive thoughts and intellectual imagination. The cleansing of the heart is *condition qua non*.

Only the heart purified of the passions is capable of the awe before the inscrutability of God. The mind joyfully is silent, powerless before the majesty of the vision. (1991, 138)

What matters is not cogitation but the eventfulness of the mind either being enclosed in the heart or living in harmony with the prayers being said. In this consists the experience of hypostatic prayer, moving

into the order of existential moments and relating to a truth without beginning. "But though received suddenly, it must still be absorbed gradually, in a long process of prayerful striving" (1987, 207). The feeling is immaterial, the energy of which is Absolute Life, born spontaneously in the soul.

Sophrony's retrospective account of his experience as a hesychast under the supervision of Saint Silouan reflects the series of events that mark his own progress. He wished to clarify this for the sake of others seeking spiritual edification. As we have seen just above, such clarification could not be satisfied with a better articulation of ideas in confrontation with other rival orderings of ideas. Recourse to some form of narrative explanation has its important place for the sake of communication. But the affective pathos of awakening to the hypostasy of God as *Persona* remains ever to be brought anew into the present.

Having originated his quest as yearning for an impersonal Absolute, Sophrony discovered that personhood is actually the constitutive principle of the Absolute. "[...] And now we stand before the Living Absolute – which is exactly what, and only what, we are seeking" (1987, 203). So, there is not only an awareness of a real beyond human flourishing that is in excess of ordinary life, but that is also communicable to the extent that, through the participation with it, a transformation takes place in the human soul. Such is effectively the actualisation of the Divine image that human being already possesses and is responsive to the I AM THAT I AM, the hypostatic dimension: "[...] man hypostasises divine attributes such as eternity, love, light, wisdom, truth" (1987, 192)⁸. The *persona*, revealed in human being, transcends the limits of the world, while, like Christ, the hypostatic principle unfolds in him: "Embracing the whole world in prayerful love, the persona achieves *ad intra* the unity of all that exists. In the creative act of his becoming, he aspires to universal unity *ad extra* also. In love lies his likeness to God who is love" (1987, 197). The *ad extra* expansion of the human person is life-giving as Palamas saw it to be and as Sophrony recognises in humankind's multi-

⁸ "The Name of God is I AM THAT I AM. For man, the image of the All-Highest, this word *I* is one of the most precious of all, since it expresses the principle of the *persona* in us." (1987, 204)

hypostatic quality: in human being, one nature manifests itself plurality of personae. Under the impetus of the second commandment, the prolonged practice of prayer for the whole world defines, then, the specificity of Christian magnanimity and the kind of holiness that lifts up the world from its fallen state. Questing after the one-ness of humankind in the image of the One-ness of the life-giving Holy Trinity, the magnifying of the human soul in Christ challenges the closed world system; it threatens to widen the vectors by which the course of history is contemplated as having to come to terms with the consubstantiality of humankind that sustains its commonality only under the condition of realising its multi-hypostasity, its plurality, as divine filiation, as sons in the Son. That is, the enhancement of divine communion.

Concluding Remarks

As Father Nicholas Sakharov noted in his study of Elder Sophrony, his uncle, the hypostatic principle never receives a clear straightforward definition. It can only be discerned in the what characterises a person's existence as a relational being who is self-aware, self-determined, possessing creative energy, and cognitive of the dimensions of reality around him. It is also discerned in the human person as "main recipient and vehicle of divine knowledge" (Sakharov 2002, 48). For our part, we should like to offer, in conclusion, our own understanding of it on the basis of the contexts in which the concept is often deployed and in relation to the theme of magnanimity.

1. In contrast with naturalised magnanimity, the hypostatic principle affirms a personalising power that is at once radically antecedent and radically kenotic. That is, it is, as hyper-power, un-originate and by nature self-giving. The divine image in human being implies a belonging to this reality without beginning and is itself marked by the vocation of self-giving.
2. But a more striking appreciation of this personalising power that the Triadic God shares with humankind lies in its perfect generosity, its comprehensive salvific reach advanced in the

person of Christ, God Incarnate who sends the Holy Spirit to extend the effects of divine energies throughout creation: the tension between the Kingdom of Heaven [God's invisible presence known in His uncreated Light; His rule in accordance with His self-giving (kenotic) nature] and the depths of Hell (separation from the Source; His Light felt as chastising), reflected in a fallen world. The partaking of Christ's reality is meant to expand our being toward the former, but not without facing the irreality of the latter that nevertheless needs to be raised up, personalised, hypostasied.

3. Hesychastic prayer reveals the hypostatic principle in its yearning to hold together heaven and cosmos in the I AM THAT AM, the Godhead to whom the prayer is addressed. But it is the delving into the dimensions of the Second Commandment that the practice of prayer places us individually on the common ground with all humankind and manifests the sense of Christian magnanimity in its full dimensions. The strength of its attainment comes from God and with God. And for contemporary humanity, the freedom that it proposes is a difficult one, but – with grace – conceivably the only real one possible. For it seeks life not from the impersonal, unloving and unfree. Rather it refers to Life that comes unceasingly as gift, freely and lovingly given, of divine personhood.

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