
The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychasm and Sufism

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The goblet revealing the universe is the heart of the perfect man;

The mirror that reveals the Truth is in reality this heart.

The heart is the depository of the treasures of the Divine Mysteries;

Whatever you seek in the two worlds, ask the heart and you shall attain it.

Shams al-Dīn Lāhījī, *Sharḥ-i gulshan-i rāz*

IT IS A STRANGE FACT of modern scholarship in the field of religion that despite such great interest in dialogue between Christianity and Islam today and the appearance of so much literature on the subject during the past few decades, relatively little attention has been paid to the inner dimensions of these religions as means of access to each other.¹ Even less has been written about the remarkable similarities between the Hesychast tradition and Sufism, each of which lies at the heart of the religion upon whose soil it has flowered.² Perhaps, however, this dearth of material on such a crucial subject should not be the cause of surprise. It should be seen as the natural consequence of that type of ecumenism which is willing to sacrifice heaven for an

¹A notable exception is F. Schuon, *Christianity/Islam—Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism* (Bloomington, 1985).

²On comparison between these traditions as concerns the prayer of the heart, see F. Schuon, the *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, trans. P. Townsend (Wheaton, IL, 1984).

illusory earthly peace and which glides over the surface of creeds and doctrines in search of common factors rather than delving into the depth or inner core of religious beliefs, symbols, language and actions where alone commonly shared principles and truths can be found.

Hesychasm is the science of prayer or more specifically the prayer of the heart cultivated within the Orthodox Church. The practices of Hesychasm go back to Christ and 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.³ As for Sufism, it too is based on an oral tradition going back to the Prophet of Islam, a tradition whose tenets began to become more explicitly formulated some two or three centuries after the birth of Islam by such early masters as Bāyazīd al-Baṣṭāmī and Junayd and which had, by the fifth Islamic century, crystallized into the Ṣūfī orders.⁴ The remarkable resemblance between Sufism and Hesychasm, especially as far as the prayer of the heart is concerned, is due not to historical borrowings but to the nature of Christian and Islamic spirituality on the one hand and the constitution of the human microcosm on the other. The prayer which revives the heart does so not as a result of historical influences but because of the grace that emanates from a revelation. Likewise, the heart is quickened and brought to life by this grace because it is the locus of the divine Presence and the center of the microcosm which relates it to higher levels of reality.

There is a striking resemblance between Hesychast and Ṣūfī teachings concerning the nature and meaning of the prayer of the heart itself. In his *Ladder of Divine Ascent* John Klimakos asserts, "Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with you every breath,"

³On Hesychasm, see the classical work of V. Lossky, *Théologie mystique de l'église d'Orient*, Paris, 1965. The most important work of this tradition and one of the most precious books of Christian spirituality is the *Philokalia*, trans. E. Kadloubovsky, G. E. H. Palmer, and K. Ware, 3 vols. (London, 1951-84), which has finally been made available to the English-speaking audience. Other classical works of the Hesychast tradition include *The Way of a Pilgrim* and *The Pilgrim Continues His Way*, trans. R. M. French (Minneapolis, 1952).

⁴On the Ṣūfī tradition, see A. M. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 1983); M. Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Los Angeles, 1975); and S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany, 1985).

while Saint Diadochos of Photike writes, "The experience of true grace come to us when the body is awake or else on the point of falling asleep, while in fervent remembrance of God we are welded to his love."⁵ As for the continuity of prayer, he writes, "He 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 their intellect even when outside places of prayer. When someone is trying to purify gold, and allows the fire of the furnace to die down even for a moment, the material which he is purifying will harden again. So, too, a man who merely practices the remembrance of God from time to time, loses through lack of continuity what he hopes to gain through his prayer. It is a mark of one who truly loves holiness that he continually burns up what is worldly in his heart through practicing the remembrance of God, so that little by little evil is consumed in the fire of this remembrance and his soul completely recovers its natural brilliance with still greater glory."⁶

In Sufism the remembrance of the name of God (*dhikr Allāh*) which is also the invocation of his Name, since *dhikr* means at once invocation, calling upon and remembrance, is the central method of spiritual realization based on the Qur'ān and the *Ḥadīth*.⁷ The Qur'ān states, "Remember (invoke) 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).

⁵The quotations from the masters of the Hesychast tradition are taken from the *Philokalia*.

⁶*Ibid.* 3, pp. 293-94.

⁷On the doctrine and practice of *dhikr* in Sufism, see L. Gardet, "Le mention du nom divin, *dhikr*, dans la mystique musulmane," *Revue Thomiste* 3, no. 3 (1952) 542-676 and 53, no. 1 (1953) 197-216; and J. L. Michon, "Spiritual Practices" in the *World Spirituality—An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, vol. 19 (in press); J. Nurbakhsh, *In the Paradise of the Sufis* (New York, 1979), pp. 31-48; and Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī, *Traité sur le nom Allāh*, trans. M. Gloton (Paris, 1981).

As for the sayings of the Prophet, there are numerous references to the significance of *dhikr* in its relation to the heart, as 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 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.'"⁸

Şūfī writings are also replete with such references usually in the form of allusion and in a manner that is less direct than what one finds in the *Philokalia* although there are some Şūfī texts such as the *Miftāḥ al-falāḥ* of Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī⁹ which deal directly with the subject of invocation and the prayer of the heart. The Hesychast tradition and Sufism share the belief that one should remember God constantly and with every breath,¹⁰ that this remembrance is none other than the invocation of a divine Name revealed as a sacrament, that this prayer is related to the heart understood spiritually and that the practice of the incantory method must be based upon the guidance of a teacher and master and is accompanied by appropriate instruction concerning meditation, the practice of virtue and other elements of the spiritual life. Although in the case of Hesychasm the name of Jesus is employed while in Sufism one of the names of Allah is invoked, the teaching of the two traditions concerning the saving power of the divine Name and methods for invoking it display a striking resemblance to each other, bearing witness both to the universality of the method of invocation and profound morphological resemblances between certain aspects of Christian and Islamic spirituality.

⁸On references in both Islamic and Christian sources concerning the way of invocation, see Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, pp. 159-66. Concerning the spiritual significance of the heart, Schuon writes, "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.'" Ibid. p. 144.

⁹Translated for the first time into English by M. Khoury (in press).

¹⁰The Şūfīs consider the goal of the person upon the spiritual path to be not only to interiorize the invocation but also to make it perpetual. Such a person is called *dā'im al-dhikr*, that is in constant invocation.

An example of this remarkable resemblance in the 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 within which converge all the forces of human life. Also grace passes from the heart to all the other parts and elements of the human microcosm. This same doctrine is to be found in Sufism which, following the teachings of the Qur'ān, identifies the heart (*al-qalb* in Arabic, *dil* in Persian) with knowledge as well as the will and love, and which like Hesychasm considers the heart to be the seat of the divine from which the grace of his presence issues to the whole being of man.¹¹ If one can speak of the locus of the intellect (νοῦς, πνεῦμα, *al-'aql*), it is the heart, for it is with the heart that man can know the Spirit and "intellect" the supernal realities. It is when the spirit enters the heart that man becomes spiritualized (πνευματικός, *rūhānī*) and it is with the heart that man is able to "see" reality as it is. That is why the Ṣūfis speak of the "eye of the heart" (*'ayn al-qalb* or *chishm-i dil*) as the instrument with which man can "see" what is invisible to the two eyes located in the head.

In both Hesychasm and Sufism the spiritual path begins under the guidance of a master and with a turning away from the world in an act of repentance (ἐπιστροφή, *tawbah*). To follow the path both contemplation and action are necessary, contemplation (θεωρία, *al-nazar*) providing the vision and action (πρᾶξις, *al-'amal*) making actualization or realization of the vision possible. The balance between the two and the necessity of both in the spiritual life are emphasized over and over again by the masters of both Hesychasm and Sufism.¹² The intermediary stages of the path are not, however, necessarily the same and even within Sufism, the stages of the path have been enumerated in different ways by various masters.¹³ As for the end, the stillness of Hesychasm can be compared to the annihilation (*al-fanā'*) of Sufism and deification (θεώσις) to union (*wiṣāl*, *tawḥīd*). There is, however, a major difference at this stage and that concerns the question of the possibility of the attainment of the state of union

¹¹On the relation between the heart and knowledge in general, see S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York, 1981), pp. 151ff.

¹²On this issue in the context of various traditions including Christianity and Islam, see Y. Ibish and P. Wilson (eds.), *Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action* (Tehran-London, 1977).

¹³See S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, pp. 68-83.

in this life. 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 *Şūfīs* 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.

Despite this difference, however, both Hesychasm and Sufism emphasize the significance of the spiritualization of the body. In contrast to certain branches of Christianity, Hesychasm, like Islam in general and Sufism in particular, sees the body as the temple of the spirit and its techniques like those of Sufism accord a positive role to the body which is an extension of the heart. The breathing techniques connected with invocation in both traditions is very much related to the role of the breast and the body in general as are certain forms of meditation used in both Hesychasm and Sufism. In both traditions it is taught that holiness is connected with "keeping oneself" in the body.¹⁴ The incantory method can in fact be summarized as putting oneself in the Name and putting the Name in the heart. If only one could keep the mind in the body and prevent it from wandering away while concentrating upon the Name located in the heart one would become a saint. Sanctity in both traditions comes from the coincidence of the heart and the Name with the body playing the role of the sacred temple wherein this miraculous conjunction takes place.

In contrast to certain forms of passive mysticism the spiritual path of Sufism as well as Hesychasm is based on man's active participation in the quest of God. This active aspect of the path is depicted in both traditions as spiritual combat. In Sufism the constant battle against the passions is called *al-jihād al-akbar*, the greater "holy war,"¹⁵ which the Prophet of Islam considered to be much more worthy than any external battle no matter how just its cause. In Hesychasm the aspirant is taught to battle constantly against the evil

¹⁴See K. Almquist, "Temple of the Heart, Temple of the Body," *Tomorrow*, 12, no. 3 (Summer, 1964) 228-33.

¹⁵Actually *jihād*, usually translated as holy war in English, means exertion but it certainly also includes the meaning of waging battle against all that destroys the equilibrium which Islam seeks to establish in human life. See S. H. Nasr, "The Spiritual Significance of *jihād*," *Parabola*, 7, no. 4 (Fall, 1982) 14-19.

tendencies within himself and one of the classics of Orthodox spirituality is called *The Unseen Warfare*.¹⁶ In contrast to much of modern religious thought which has a disdain for the positive significance and symbolism of combat understood in its traditional sense,¹⁷ both Sufism and Hesychasm are fully aware that the peace which surpasseth all understanding cannot be attained save through long and strenuous warfare against those forces within us that prevent us from entering the kingdom of God which is none other than the heart itself.

Finally, in comparing Hesychasm and Sufism one is struck by the significance of light in conjunction with the practice of the prayer of the heart in both traditions. The Hesychast masters assert that God is light (φῶς) and the experience of his reality is light. Symeon the New Theologian even calls spiritual experience the “incessant experience of divine light.” Divine light is uncreated and identified with God’s energies which he communicates to those who through spiritual practice enter into union with him. As Saint Gregory of Palamas writes 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.” The Hesychast tradition speaks of grades of light from the uncreated light of the Divinity to the light of the intelligible world and finally sensible light. The practice of the prayer of the heart leads man from this sensible light which surrounds all beings here on earth to the light of the angelic realm and finally the Divine Light itself.

In Islam also God is called in the Qur’ān itself the “Light of the Heavens and the earth” (24.35). On the basis of this famous verse,

¹⁶See *Unseen Warfare: the ‘Spiritual Combat’ and ‘Path to Paradise’ of Lorenzo Scupoli*, trans. E. Kadlouborsky and G. E. H. Palmer (London, 1978).

¹⁷This is due both to the unprecedented horror and devastation brought about by modern warfare, thanks to modern technology, and a certain type of pacifism which identifies the whole of Christian spirituality with the passive acceptance of the world about us in the name of peace.

It needs to be pointed out, however, that liberation theology as currently understood and practiced has nothing to do with the spiritual warfare of which Sufism and Hesychasm speak and represents from the point of these traditions a further surrender to the world and worldliness in the name of justice which is usually envisaged in solely earthly terms.

numerous schools of Islamic philosophy and mysticism have developed in which the symbolism of light, (*al-nūr*), plays a central role, the best known of these schools being that of Illumination (*al-ishrāq*) founded by Shaykh Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī.¹⁸ The divisions of light by Suhrawardī and other masters of this school bear a close resemblance to those found in the Hesychast tradition without there being necessarily a historical borrowing although Suhrawardī's philosophy did have some followers such as Gemistos Plethon in Byzantium. Many Ṣūfī orders also based their teachings on the symbolism of light, especially the schools of Central Asia, such as the Kubrawiyyah order.¹⁹ There is certainly a sense of spiritual affinity between the golden icons of the Byzantine church and certain Persian miniatures where gold, the supreme symbol of the sun and also the Sun, is used profusely. The light that shines in the heart of the practitioner of Hesychasm on the one hand and Sufism on the other is certainly not based on historical borrowing but comes from God and is the fruit of experiences and types of spiritual practice which display remarkable resemblance to each other.

Needless to say, there are also important differences between the prayer of the heart as practiced in Hesychasm and Sufism. One makes use of the name of the message, that is Jesus, and the other the source of the message, that is Allah. One emphasizes love and the other knowledge without either denying the other element. One derives its efficacy from the grace issuing from Christ and the other from the "Muḥammadan grace" (*al-barakat al-muḥammadiyyah*). One is largely practiced within the context of monasticism and the other within society at large.

Yet, the similarity and consonance of the two paths remain as an undeniable reality and constitute a most remarkable aspect of the bonds which relate Christianity and Islam and which can bring about better understanding between them. In this age of facile ecumenism, when so much is said on the surface and so little effort is devoted to the depth where the heart resides, the Hesychast tradition within Orthodoxy offers a most precious channel through which what is most inward and central to the Islamic tradition can be better understood.

¹⁸See H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1971); and S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delmar, NY, 1975), chapter 2.

¹⁹See H. Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. N. Pearson (Boulder, 1978).

And this tradition is also a most valuable means of access to what constitutes the heart of the Christian tradition for Muslims who wish to gain a deeper understanding of Christian spirituality.

More than a quarter of a century ago in a conference organized by a group of Catholics in Morocco to create better understanding between Christianity and Islam, the notable French Islamicist Louis Massignon said, "It is too late for conferences; the only thing that matters now is the prayer of the heart." If it were too late then, it is certainly much too late now to bring about understanding between Christianity and Islam only through outward means. More than ever before what matters is the prayer of the heart which has been miraculously preserved to this day in the Orthodox tradition while it continues as the central practice of *Ṣūfīs* throughout the Islamic world. To understand the significance of this prayer in Hesychasm and Sufism is to grasp the profound inner resemblances between Christian and Islamic spirituality. To practice the prayer of the heart is to enter that sacred sanctuary where all diversity returns to unity and where every divine message is seen as a reflection of the face of the Beloved who is One although speaking many tongues.



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