**Eglise francaise du Saint Esprit**

*Spirituality Course May 6, 2020*

**Orthodox Spirituality**

This week we might have bitten off more than we can chew; for two reasons. Firstly, I’m not Eastern Orthodox (though some people have compared the spirituality and the organization of the Orthodox Church of the East with the spirituality and organization of Anglicanism). Secondly, this is a vast heading. It would be like saying, “What is Western Spirituality?” and expecting a concise answer in an hour or so. The Eastern churches have a lot to say about Bible reading, prayer, liturgy, temptation, heaven, hell, angels and demons. Their conversations and teachings about these subjects are voluminous. The churches we describe as Orthodox are many and varied, and cover a vast period of history and a vast geographical area. So here’s how I think we should tackle it. We’ll begin by looking at the most important source of Eastern Orthodox spirituality (The Philoka**leea).** Then we’ll look at the distinguishing characteristics of Orthodox spirituality, and we’ll finish by looking at how those elements play out in two practical ways: in the praying of the Jesus prayer and in the reading of Icons.

Notes on the Philoka**lia**

This is a collection of spiritual texts dealing with the practice of the Christian life: particularly inner prayer. It’s a collection of the works of 35 different writers from the 300’s right up to the 1400’s. It was first published in Greek in Venice in 1782, comprising 1200 pages with double columns. St. Makarios, Bishop of Corinth, and St. Nik**O**demus, monk of the holy Mountain were responsible for drawing it together at the height of the Ottoman persecution of the Orthodox church in Turkey . Nobody knows why the collection came together as it did. On the holy mountain of Athos, it was a custom of the holy fathers to recommend particular works to their disciples. As they brought them together and formed an ongoing tradition, those works were recommended by spiritual guides to those who were pursuing a life of prayer.

In the Greek version, the texts are just placed in historical order. The earliest is attributed to St. Anthony of Egypt, the latest is attributed to St. Mark of Ephesus in the 1400’s. It’s not really intended to be a book that’s read from cover to cover. The orthodox believe that it’s much better to have guidance in reading it from an experienced elder or by reading books and articles, to show which texts to start with. If you want to look at it, you could begin with the Hundred Texts concerning Hesycheia, inner stillness. Kallistos An tho lo pos. Evagrius’ 153 texts concerning prayer, or The life of Abba Philemon. The Philokalia Brock Bingaman and Bradley Nassif OUP First English version in 1952 – encouraged by T.S. Eliot at Faber. Or look up GEH Palmer and Kallistos Ware for the scholarly multi-volume translation.

The word Philokalia could just mean an anthology. But literally it means love of beauty: of spiritual beauty. In the orthodox tradition, beauty and love go together – a bit like the English word Lovely. We are called to love God as the supreme beauty, and the source of all beauty.

There are unifying themes to the extracts that are put together in the book from all those authors; like the practice of the Jesus prayer. “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me” But there is much more to it than this. It covers the whole range of Christian life. It mentions the sacraments, but it doesn’t concentrate on them. Its main theme is inner prayer. The passages spring from the saying of Jesus that : The Kingdom of Heaven is within you. Within each one of us there is an inner kingdom, and we can enter this realm, full of wonder and spiritual space and mysteries, that we can enter through prayer. Isaac the Syrian put it this way:

“Be at peace with your own soul, then heaven and earth will be at peace with you. Enter eagerly into the treasure house that lies within you, and so you will discover the treasure house of heaven, for there is but one single entry to them both. Enter into yourself, dive deeply within yourself and you will discover the steps by which to ascend.”

**General themes**

The aim of our life is twofold henosis: union with God and theosis: deification, or sanctification.

God has made this possible in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is God’s grace that enables us to find our way back to him: through grace we share in the divine life. The Trinity is a central idea here. The flow between the three members of the trinity – the relationship between them is the bliss of human life. “Through the Spirit one ascends to the Son, and through the Son to the Father.”

In the West, there is much emphasis placed on original sin, predestination and substitutionary or penal justification. This isn’t so in the East. They concentrate on the way in which divine grace interacts with human will. Our will – our ability to decide on things and act on them – is surrendered to God and conformed to the divine will. The problem is that our will is disordered. It can’t be healed without the grace of God. Christ isn’t a substitute on the cross. Christ is the Great Physician who has come to heal our sick souls. Sin is a sickness of the will that can only be cured through grace.

Grace – Charis – is luminous beauty. It is a free gift. It operates in harmony and in gracious condescension to our disordered state. By cooperating with this grace we achieve a synergy. Grace and human will cooperate with each other and lead to theosis or deification.

If this is hard to understand, let’s see how it plays out practically by looking at one of the great works of Eastern Spirituality, St. Athanasius’ life of St. Anthony. Anthony has gone out into the desert, where he’s tempted by the demons. These devils will first try to deceive him by tempting him with explicitly evil ideas. If that doesn’t work, the devils will try to frighten him by imitating phantasms – all sorts of fears; hordes of soldiers, or diseases or foul and frightening manifestations of evil forces. Then they will claim to be able to prophecy and predict things that are to come. But in fact, demons have no real knowledge of the future. They’re only guessing, so we shouldn’t take any notice of them. We have to remember that the devil is a liar and the father of lies. Don’t believe what the devil tells you. If these obviously evil pleasures don’t work, or if frightening us doesn’t work, the demons will pretend to be behave in a holy way. When what is obviously bad doesn’t work, they go to what is apparently good. How can we tell the difference between what is good and what is pretending to be good? If it’s an angel, it will end up filling us with calm and joy; even if initially we are frightened. If it’s demonic, we will feel disturbed and upset – we will be left with lingering doubts after the manifestation of their force. The effect of the apparition on us is what counts here. We can see through this that introspection; a very careful self-examination is at the heart of Eastern Spirituality.

Mark the Monk’s works can be found in the first volume of the Philokaliia. Early fifth century. His examination of the phases of temptation also show us how our human will, divine grace, angels and demons operate in the process of theosis. The stages of temptation:

1. Provocation/assault. (prosbwlh). We are not responsible for this. It comes from the outside – from the devil. It assails you independently of your free will. You’re not responsible for this. Even before the fall Adam was liable to temptation – the serpent tempted him and Eve. It comes without our wishing it to come. If we reject this demonic provocation immediately, we are not to blame. Maintain watchfulness, and reject each provocation as soon as it emerges into our consciousness!
2. Momentary disturbance. (pararripismoς) We have begun to react. We are troubled by the provocation. It’s had an effect on us and we’ve started to think about it, and from this point on, our moral responsibility is implicated. It’s not just the demons here – we are starting to engage.
3. Communion (omilia) We start conversing with the temptation. We’re turning it over in our minds and thinking, “Ah, yes. That might be a nice thing to do!” We haven’t yet fully assented to it. We’re just turning it over in our mind pleasurably. The provocation has become a thought. And we’re responsible for entering into dialogue with this evil thought.
4. Assent – or consent. (suykataqesiς) We’re not just playing with the evil suggestion. We’re saying ‘Yes’ to it. We’re now responsible, even if we haven’t carried it out in action. The spiritual law doesn’t judge us by our actions but by our intentions.

He mentions other dynamics of temptation too:

1. Prepossession, or prejudice: (prolhyiς) As a result of past sins, we might have a certain predisposition to sin in the same way. We are still in principle free, but we often fall into sin from habit, and therefore we’ll find it more difficult to resist demonic provocations.
2. Passion or pathos (paqoς) This comes from repeated giving in to the provocations. We still have free will. Nothing compels us to sin, but once we’ve allowed passions to develop in us through repeated sin in the past, we’re going to find our freedom deeply restricted.

Demons are only responsible for number 1. We’re responsible for the rest.

In the Western church, we often talk about the tension between grace and works. This isn’t such a huge debate in the Eastern Church. Instead, they speak of two important parts of the spiritual life: the ascetical and the mystical.

The blessings that come from ascetical practices are acquired virtues that result from our personal efforts. (prayer, fasting, bible reading, sacraments, the liturgy, kindness to others, seeking for justice etc) Our personal efforts are accompanied by the grace that God grants to every act of good will and good intention. You might think of this as the act of rowing a boat – your effort with the oars is going to get you where you want to go. It is acting into yourself; you are the one making the effort.

The blessings that come from mystical experience are gifts of the Holy Spirit who triumphs over the efforts of human beings. They are infused from outside – not acquired by our own efforts. In these moments the soul is not active – as it is in ascetical practices – it is passive. We are being acted upon by the Spirit. You might think of this as the act of sailing a boat. You’re driven along by a wind that you didn’t create, and if the wind stops, you will come to a standstill.

The balance between these two is crucial. Charisms and extraordinary phenomena don’t constitute the apogee or the essence of the spiritual life alone. Charity and love are the apogee of Christian perfection: although God offers to everyone the mystical graces of henosis and theosis. Your spiritual life will pass many times through three stages: a purgative state, an illuminative state and a unitative state. The purgative state comes from repentance, rejection of temptation and the exercise of practical virtues. The illuminative stage comes from the suppression of your passions, and is expressed through contemplation. The unitative state is a state of oneness with the divine and with all things. Your soul is perpetually flitting between all of these states.

The Orthodox Church recognizes three Holy Mysteries. Baptism, Charism and Eucharist.

The symbol of baptismal grace is the fish.

The symbol of Pentecostal grace is the dove.

The symbol of Paschal or Eucharistic grace is the lamb.

Perhaps we can now see why the Eastern Orthodox Nicene creed differs from the Western Nicene creed when it refers to the Holy Spirit. The original version of this creed reads that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (the words ‘and the son’ are not there). In 1054, the Pope in Rome excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople because he refused to include ‘and the Son’ in the Nicean creed. It was also a good precursor to the Crusades….. The Eastern Orthodox Church says that this inclusion belittles the role of the Holy Spirit, and subsumes the mystical work of the Spirit into the saving work of Christ – restricting the Spirit’s movement and making it centered on Christ alone. They say that the Spirit is immanent in all things – it is suffused through creation, it has been present at all times and in history, leading people into union with God. It is not just limited to the salvific act of Christ on the cross. It is the dynamic power behind our henosis and theosis.

A note on saints and angels. Adoration is due to God alone, but Veneration, service and honor are due to the saints. The role of guardian angels is also important. There is a huge controversy in Eastern Orthodoxy about when you are assigned a guardian angel. Is it at your birth, or your baptism? Your guardian angel is constantly with you. When you count the number of people present in a room, you must always double it: because the angel is there too. You never pray alone. Your guardian angel might speak to you sometimes in dreams, or in the moment between sleeping and waking. Your guardian angel is your ‘ideal’ form – the person you will be once your henosis and theosis is complete.

The Antidoron

This is ordinary leavened bread that is blessed but not consecrated and then distributed in the church. It comes from the remains of loaves of bread from which the communion bread has been cut already before it is consecrated. It reminds people that the eucharist was initially a meal to be enjoyed, and not just a sacred symbol. Anyone can eat it – if you’re at an orthodox church and you’re not orthodox yourself, you will be encouraged to eat a piece of the bread as an expression of Christian fellowship and love. Incidentally, its origins seem to be French in the seventh century. It was a substitute for communion for those who were not in a fit state to receive it, or because they couldn’t get to the service in which the eucharistic sacrifice was offered. It’s still called the pain bénit when it’s distributed in French churches and cathedrals after high mass. Before the reformation in England, households took it in turns to bake and present a holy loaf to the parish church. It was blessed and distributed at the end of mass. It’s been interpreted as a sort of ‘quasi-liturgical role for local women.”

Notes on the Jesus prayer

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. The result of that request was the prayer that we call The Lord’s Prayer. The practice of the Jesus prayer is intended to advance us from prayer repeated by our lips to prayer that is part of our inner being. Prayer isn’t something that we merely *do*, it is something that we *are.*  We don’t just say prayers from time to time, we are people who *are* prayer all of the time. The prayer is quite simple. It’s an invocation that is frequently repeated. Its most common form is, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” Other simple ‘arrow’ prayers exist in Christian practice too, like “Maranatha”, “Our Lord, come!” “O God make speed to save us, O Lord make haste to help us.” “As a man / woman I have sinned; as God, you forgive.” “Lord, remember me in your kingdom.” “Glory to You, O God, glory to You.” “Jesus help me”.

The distinctive nature of the Jesus prayer is that it is centered specifically on the holy name of Jesus. (Kyrie Jesou Christe, uie tou theou, eleison me.” Seigneur Jésus Christ, Fils de Dieu, aie pitié de moi.” It is composed of four strands.

1. A cry for mercy
2. The discipline of repetition
3. A quest for stillness (hesychia)
4. The veneration of the Holy Name.

A cry for mercy

This element of the prayer is found in formal liturgical worship as early as the fourth century, and it was probably a very ancient form of Christian prayer. It’s important to remember that this isn’t something gloomy and exclusively penitential. It certainly implies sorrow for sin, but it also is full of divine forgiveness. It asserts that God’s loving kindness and compassion are greater than my brokenness and guilt. (eleos = mercy elaion = olive oil A pun rather than an etymology!) The prayer is full of light and hope.

The discipline of repetition

This is first found among the Desert Fathers of Egypt in the fourth century. Their daily work was very simple (basket making or plaiting rush mats for instance). How was the monk to occupy his mind while doing these monotonous and repetitive tasks, and still “Pray without ceasing”? (I Thes. 5:17) The answer was, repeat a single word or phrase that simplifies the mind and brings it from fragmentation to unity.

The quest for stillness (hesychia)

Evagrius of Pontus (346 – 399) “When you pray, do not shape within yourself any image of the deity, and do not let your intellect be stamped with the impress of any form…. Prayer is a putting-away of thoughts.” He’s not referring here to liturgical worship which involves a multiplicity of images and symbols. St. Diadochus of Photike: “The intellect requires of us imperatively some task that will satisfy its need for activity. For the complete fulfilment of its purpose we should give it nothing but the prayer Lord Jesus. Let the intellect continually concentrate on these words within its inner shrine with such intensity that it is not turned aside to any mental images.” Repetition stills the active mind, and when the active mind is stilled, we can acquire a prayer of interior silence. This isn’t a discursive meditation on specific incidents in Christ’s life. It’s not a prayer that makes full use of the imagination. Neither does it make use of the faculty of will. The imagination is stilled, and instead we dwell on Christs total and immediate presence. If a visual image occurs, we set it aside. There are no chains of reasoning or strings of resolutions. We’re just thinking solely of Jesus himself. The best way to do this is to concentrate on what you want to acquire. Don’t think: “I’ve got to drive out all distracting thoughts!” instead, concentrate with loving tenderness of Jesus. The idea isn’t to arrive at a mind stripped of images. Rather, it’s to acquire a heart full fo love. Images can recede into the background, and Jesus can be allowed to be in the foreground.

The veneration of the Holy Name

The theology of the divine name has deep roots – remember the strictures about pronouncing or even writing down the name of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus taught his disciples to pray in the name of Our Father, but also in his own name (in the last discourse of John 16). St. John of Gaza said “To rebuke the demons is possible only for the great ones who possess authority… but all that is possible for us who are weak is to take refuge in the name of Jesus.” In the Jesus prayer, the name of Jesus is felt to contain within itself grace and power. When you call upon a person by name, you render that person dynamically present. You are invoking a person, not using a formula.

There are two ways to use this Jesus prayer: either a free use – when it’s said once or many times as you go about your daily occupations – and the fixed use, when the Jesus prayer is repeated as a part of our appointed times of prayer and our entire focus is on the act of praying. Either of these things can be done – you can use it freely, without feeling obliged to use it as a fixed prayer discipline.

When you use it freely, you’re engaged in the act of finding Christ everywhere. You can use it while you’re doing something else. You can use it as your first thought when you wake up, and your last thought before you sleep. It’s short and simple. It can be said without complicated preparation in situations where a more complex prayer would be impossible. You can use it if you can’t sleep, if you’re in pain or mental distress, when you’re suddenly tempted or when you’re in the middle of a crisis. It will make the most secular situation sacred. “Your hands will be at work, but your mind and your heart will be with God”. One of the unwritten sayings of Jesus that circulated among early Christians said, “Lift the stone, and you will find me; cut the wood in two and there am I.”

When practiced like this it becomes self-acting. It passes from our consciousness into our unconscious. It’s a sort of afterglow. Some people recite the prayer just before going under a general anesthetic. When they regain consciousness several hours later, the first thing of which they become aware is that they are seeing the prayer. It’s useful when you’re doing routine tasks, but not really appropriate when we’re engaged in something more absorbing. I sometimes pray it in my mind over a person who comes to see me for direction, but when they begin to speak, all my concentration is on what they are saying.

Using it as a fixed form of prayer - repeating it for five minutes – or even an hour – is a spiritual practice in itself, and we don’t have time to go into it very deeply here. There are two suggestions I’d make if you’re interested in this. You could either buy a little book by Kallistos Ware called The Jesus Prayer, or you could watch a video on Youtube entiled The Jesus Prayer for Beginners. I’ll send you the link in my transcript. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_VeNg7GE2o> +

You can use a prayer rope, pray with each breath “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God” with the in-breath, and ‘Have mercy on me a sinner” as we breathe out. You can also use the prayer as an intercession for someone else: “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on Nigel” or any other name you would like to put there.

In the end, the aim of these prayers is to achieve a prayer of the heart – it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. It is a place of inner peace – a stillness that is invoked. Dag Hammarskjold in Markings “Understand -through the stillness; act – out of the stillness; conquer – in the stillness.” This is the Hesychia – the contemplative prayer of stillness that Orthodox spirituality is intended to cultivate.

Icons are more an image for the eyes of faith than for the eyes of the flesh. An icon strives to be an image of something that’s invisible. So it aims to teach the faith. It has to be faithful to our world – which was created by God – but it also has to be faithful to the same God who can’t be circumscribed or reduced to a representation. With earthly things – form, color, light ­- an Icon has to represent the religions reality of a world beyond this visible world. It’s guided not primarily by aesthetic imperatives, but by faith and revelation.

Icons are a reflection of the incarnation. They represent a presence. The reality of the prototype is present in the reality of the image. The likeness isn’t naturalistic, it is a sort of epiphany that is manifested to a soul that’s been enlightened by faith. It reaches beyond our natural faculties and discloses its real meaning in the act of contemplation. It is the imprint of the celestial world on matter, so it becomes an object of veneration. Through a spiritual likeness, the reality of holiness becomes present in and through the icon. The icon becomes a means of grace. It enables us to begin to see a world that is transfigured by the light of God.

Thou angel of God who hast charge of me, be thou a bright flame before me. Be thou a guiding star above me, be thou a smooth path below me, be thou a kindly shepherd behind me: today, tonight and forever. I’m tired and I am a stranger. Lead thou me to the land of angels. For me it is time to go home to the court of Christ and the peace of heaven.

Meeting Recording:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/play/6Jcqf-yq-z83S92U4wSDV6V6W47of6qs1CYfq_ALn0-9W3dWOlujZbFBauqaGNJav9C8zrDvrWmapOKJ?autoplay=true&startTime=1588804804000>