

ONE

HESYCHASM



We are distinguished from other animals by our inexhaustible quest for self-knowledge. We possess an inner reflective power that drives us in a relentless search for a meaningful existence. Instinct is the driving force in an animal to hunt for food, to mate and perpetuate the species, and to build a dwelling place of protection from other marauding animals. But only human beings possess the intellectual and volitional faculties that allow us to ask the one question that other animals cannot ask: Why do I exist?

We can rove over the earth, conquering oceans, mountains, and all conceivable natural forces. But eventually we must return to ourselves and enter within to search for the talisman that will unlock the hidden treasures of unending happiness. However, what most of us experience when we do “return to ourselves” is a general spirit of *emptiness*. Dr. Rollo May described this general malaise:

. . . the chief problem of people in the middle decade of the twentieth century is *emptiness*. By

that I mean not only that many people do not know what they want; they often do not have any clear idea of what they feel. When they talk about lack of autonomy, or lament their inability to make decisions—difficulties which are present in all decades—it soon becomes evident that their underlying problem is that they have no definite experience of their own desires or wants. Thus they feel swayed this way and that, with painful feelings of powerlessness, because they feel vacuous, empty.¹

MEANINGLESSNESS

A universal *angst* or anxiety fills the heart of modern man with a sense of a loss of direction, of meaninglessness. Immersion in a pragmatic materialism has suffocated our communion with God deeply dwelling within our innermost self. We are adrift on a dark, stormy ocean that threatens our very meaningfulness.

Dr. Viktor E. Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist, confirms this almost universal sense of meaninglessness that pervades modern society. He writes, “Effectively an ever-increasing number of our clients today suffer from a feeling of interior emptiness—which I have described as existential emptiness—a feeling of total absence of a meaning to existence.”² He attributes this existential emptiness to the loss of instinct in modern man and also the loss of tradition. We no longer know what we *must* do by our instinct, and we have lost the ability to know what we *ought* to do by cutting ourselves off from the roots of our past.

Conformism is the compromise for those of the Western hemisphere; totalitarianism is the common choice for those of the Eastern hemisphere. T.S. Eliot in 1925 prophetically described many who are living today:

We are the hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion.³

Yet there is developing among many of us a reaction that shows itself as an ardent seeking for meaningfulness as unique persons. Some seek new purpose in life in parapsychology and mind-expanding techniques. But many others are seeking answers to the question of meaningfulness in religion, whether the traditional or the new types or an eclectic gathering together of a little of each. Fundamental Protestant churches are being packed by people, even young people, eager to find in the Bible the meaning of life. Roman Catholics find among their numbers those who follow or are in sympathy with Archbishop Lefebvre or other traditionalists. The Charismatic Renewal has given hope to many who were ready to give up on a Christianity that was too static and lacked meaningfulness for daily living.

The Anglican theologian, Dr. John Macquarrie, however, sounds a much-needed alarm in regard to any new wave of enthusiasm for "religion"; ". . . especially as much of it seems to be almost entirely void of any intellectual content. Is the exuberant spirit of celebration as one-sided as the drab secularity which has provoked it? If so, it could turn out to be very dangerous."⁴

Carl G. Jung gives us his grave reservations about the wisdom of Westerners giving up their religious traditions and embracing those of the East:

. . . my criticism is directed solely against the application of Yoga to the peoples of the West. The spiritual development of the West has been along entirely different lines from that of the East and has therefore produced conditions which are the most unfavorable soil one can think of for the application of Yoga. Western civilization is scarcely a thousand years old and must first of all free itself from its barbarous one-sidedness. This means, above all, deeper insight into the nature

of man. But no insight is gained by repressing and controlling the unconscious, and least of all by imitating methods which have grown up under totally different psychological conditions. In the course of the centuries the West will produce its own Yoga and it will be on the basis laid down by Christianity.⁵

CHRISTIAN EAST

Many today are discovering part of their Christian heritage in Eastern Christianity. With enthusiasm they find basically the same doctrines as taught by the Roman Catholic Church and by many traditional Protestant churches. But what attracts such Western Christians to the Christian East is its rich mystical tradition. It combines in an admirable synthesis the prophetic quality found in Old Testament Judaism with the immediate, immanent experience of the indwelling Trinity that Jesus preached and made available to his followers through the Holy Spirit.

Christianity first developed in the Semitic world of Judaism. God had revealed himself to his people through his prophets. But in the Old Testament, the Divine Word of God is not something abstract to be studied and reasoned over. It is primarily a transforming Word that must be experienced and have concrete repercussions upon the lives of the Christian followers. Eastern Christianity keeps alive the dynamism of the Word of God for those who hear it.

For the word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit and of the joints and marrow and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

As the Word of God enfleshed, Jesus Christ contains all the words of God's former revelation. He is the fullness of God made manifest among us. In this living Word "all things were created by him and for him" (Col 1:16). By his

resurrection, Jesus Christ lives within us and continues to speak God's word to us. That preached word spoken to the first Christian community is still being spoken in each person's existential "now" moment. In the Byzantine Liturgy of the East, each day the gospel is carried in solemn procession by the deacon or priest among the people. Then he stands in front of the people and shouts out: "Wisdom! Let us be attentive!" The faithful bow down to the gospel as to Jesus Christ himself. Hence in the Eastern churches that sprang up from those first Christian communities of Jerusalem and Antioch and Alexandria, the word of God is central to the communal liturgical prayer as well as the individual Christian's prayer life. God is still speaking his same word to those who have the ears to hear.

DIVINE IMMANENCE

Christianity added a revolutionary element of divine immanence within man that could never have been dreamt of by the non-Christian religions. This was not to be an assimilation whereby we would lose our identity as human beings. Rather, we would experience our true identity in loving submission to the triadic uncreated energies of God abiding within us. Jesus Christ teaches that, as a result of living according to the Word of God, we have a new immanent relation to the indwelling, triune God. "If anyone love me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our abode with him" (Jn 14:23).

Christian prayer allows us, by the Holy Spirit's gift of faith, to enter into a continued living experience of being "begotten" by the Father in the Word through the Holy Spirit. Thus Christianity, as it evolved in the East, would mingle in a healthy synthesis the two basic polarities of God without and God within. The synthesis that best characterizes Eastern Christian spirituality has been called *hesychasm*.

AN EVOLVING SPIRITUALITY

Hesychasm is a Christian form of living the spiritual life that has its roots in the first hermits who fled into the barren deserts of Egypt and Syria during the fourth century. One author defines hesychasm as a spiritual system of essentially contemplative orientation that finds the perfection of man in union with God through continuous prayer.⁶ However it is defined, hesychasm must not be limited solely to the mechanical recitation of the Jesus Prayer, along with the technique of respiration, sitting posture, and fixation on the navel. It is true that in the fourteenth century a renaissance of hesychasm on Mount Athos did focus attention on such techniques, but the essential features of this spirituality developed much earlier and were conceived of as an entire way of life in Christ designed for totally committed Christians striving in the physical deserts to be completely focused in loving surrender upon the indwelling Trinity. From such a desert spirituality hesychasm evolved as it received various influences from spiritual writers representing the Antiochene and Alexandrian schools of thought.

HESYCHIA

The desert hermits who form the beginnings of this spirituality were merely seeking to flee from the multiplicity of their lives by living in the desert as simply as possible and devoting most of their waking hours to incessant prayer. St. Arsenius the Great has always been considered an example of the perfect hesychast, the Christian who silenced his heart in order to listen to God's word speak within. "Hesychast" comes from the Greek word *hesychia*, which means tranquility or peace. Hesychia is that state in which the Christian, through grace and his own intense asceticism, reintegrates his whole being into a single person that is then placed completely under the direct influence of the Trinity dwelling within him.

Arsenius, as the story is told in the *Lives of the Fathers*, while still at the imperial court of Constantinople, prayed to God in these words: "Lord, lead me along a way of life where I can be saved." A voice said to him, "Arsenius, flee men and you will be saved." The same Arsenius, now a hermit in the desert, made again his same prayer and heard a voice that said to him, "Arsenius, flee, keep silence, remain tranquil; these are the roots of impeccability."⁷

This formed the basis for the hesychastic spirituality. The first stage consisted in a "fleeing from men" that was spatial, external, and physical. Such a separation from society was not an end in itself and certainly was not encouraged because of a belief that society was totally evil. It was considered a means to a higher end: attaining the most intimate union with God. To attain this state of awareness of living in the presence of God day and night, the hermits knew that they had to flee from noise by exterior and interior silence, which, in the words of St. Basil, is the beginning of purity of the heart.⁸ St. John Climacus further defines silence: first of all as detachment from concern with regard to necessary and unnecessary things; second, as assiduous prayer; and third, as the unremitting action of prayer in the heart.⁹

Thus such physical withdrawal was only a means to attain a spiritual state of inner silence, of attention to the presence of God within. Again St. John Climacus shows us the relationship of physical withdrawal to the withdrawal from all obstacles to inner integration: "Close the door of your cell physically, the door of your tongue to speech and the inward door to the evil spirits."¹⁰ The true journey of the hesychast is not merely a physical journey into the desert or away from society; its essence consists in the inward journey into the "heart." The hesychast has meditated on the words of the Lord, "The kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17:21). And so he seeks his true self by listening to the word of God that resides within his heart.

Such desert athletes knew from their own reflective experience that, in order to listen to the indwelling word of

God, they had to give up all attention to themselves. The demands of self-love had to be silenced so that God could communicate his loving presence to them. The heart had to be quiet. This silencing of the heart and bringing it to full attention to God's inner operations was the goal of *praxis*, the austere regime of ascetical practices that aimed at breaking the dominance of the false self. All practices of vigils, fasting, solitude, and silence had meaning only to develop *hesychia* or inner tranquility of the heart.

THE HEART

The heart in scriptural language is the seat of human life, of all that touches us in the depths of our personality: all affections, passions, desires, knowledge, and thoughts. It is in our "heart" that we meet God in an I-Thou relationship.¹¹ The heart, therefore, in scriptural language and as used by the hesychastic writers, is the center of our being, that which directs us in our ultimate values and choices. It is the inner chamber where in secret the heavenly Father sees us through and through. It is where we attain inner honesty, integration, and "purity of heart."

St. Theophan the Recluse (1815–1894), one of the outstanding nineteenth-century Russian mystics, describes the heart in the hesychastic tradition:

The heart is the innermost man or spirit. Here are located self-awareness, the conscience, the idea of God and of one's complete dependence on Him, and all the eternal treasures of the spiritual life. . . . Where is the heart? Where sadness, joy, anger, and other emotions are felt, here is the heart. Stand there with attention. . . . Stand in the heart, with the faith that God is also there, but how He is there do not speculate. Pray and entreat that in due time love for God may stir within you by His grace.¹²