

Mysticism and Rationalism in the Middle Ages: The Views of St. Gregory Palamas



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(Lecture Delivered at the University of Seattle in 1999)

SUMMARY

In man's effort to obtain the knowledge of God and attain union with Him, various theological movements have appeared in the West and in the East. The West developed so-called scholasticism, while the East developed mysticism.

Scholasticism (11th-13th century AD), which originated from the Schools of the 9th century, is based mostly on reason ("ratio") and this is why it is called rationalism. Its central position is that there is a single knowledge for the creation and for God, and a single methodology for the acquisition of this knowledge of the created world and the uncreated God. This means that the investigation of the created world and the acquisition of the knowledge of God are both achieved through reason.

Mysticism, expressed mainly by Neoplatonism (2nd-6th century AD) and other related systems, has as its basis the principle of ideology, the view that the soul pre-existed in the world of ideas and that, through various ways, it must be distanced from the body and return to the unborn world of ideas.

Opposite to these two traditions, coming from West and East, is the neptic theology of the Orthodox Church, which accepts neither scholasticism nor mysticism. It argues that man has a noetic and a rational energy, and that he understands creation with his rational energy and obtains the knowledge of God with his noetic energy. It also argues that man is sanctified in his fullness, soul and body, by the uncreated Grace and energy of God.

St. Gregory Palamas, who lived in the 14th century and debated with the scholastic Barlaam, expressed the neptic theology of the Church and codified the whole theology of the Church with respect to man's knowledge and union with God.

The value of the neptic-hesychastic orthodox theology is of great importance for our times and answers all major problems arising out of both western scholasticism and eastern mysticism.

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I would like to thank the University of Seattle for this honoring invitation to me to come and speak in front of such a distinguished audience, composed of renowned scholars, as well as students and distinguished guests.

I owe gratitude to Dean Theodore Kaltsounis who is my compatriot and a most kind person and I have many reasons to appreciate his character and personality. I also thank out of my heart for their presence Mr Stamatelopoulos and Mr Panayotides who are highly respected in this University and whom I respect very much, too.

My topic is: "Mysticism and Rationalism in the Middle Ages: The Views of St. Gregory Palamas".

As an introductory remark we should underline that in the 14th century, first in Thessaloniki and then in Constantinople, an important debate between St. Gregory Palamas and Barlaam took place. The debate started with the theological difference between East and West on the procession of the Holy Spirit (Filioque) and extended to many other theological and anthropological issues which have always occupied man's spirit, such as the distinction of essence and energy in God, the value of the human body, the usefulness and the limits of human education and wisdom, the noetic prayer of the heart, the value of noetic hesychia (stillness), the uncreated Light, etc.

What is significant and should be emphasized at this point is that Barlaam, who was a Uniate monk from Calabria in Italy and came to the East, first to Thessaloniki and then to Constantinople, expressed a tradition prevailing in the West, after various developments which had taken place there. By contrast, St. Gregory Palamas grew up in Constantinople, in the palace, received a traditional education, as this had been formed by the great Fathers of the Church, and then practiced this theology in the Holy Mountain. So, with what he said and wrote he expressed the orthodox theology of the Roman Empire, which is known under the name "Byzantine Empire". This is why what was discussed in this debate, as well as later with Barlaam's successors (Akindynos and Gregoras), is very important and remarkable for our age too, because it demonstrates clearly the difference between the two civilizations and traditions, the eastern and the western.

In what follows I will attempt to stress the basic points in a concise manner and in the discussion that will follow we will have the opportunity to analyze them further or provide additional clarifications.

1. Rationalism and Mysticism

By rationalism we mean the trend which is based on reason as the key for the explanation of all events and all phenomena. Of course, no one accuses reason, but there are concerns when reason becomes autonomous from the rest of man's existence or better when it is deified and not only the creation but even God Himself is interpreted through this inflated word - reason. Descartes' phrase is well-known: "I think, therefore I am".

More specifically we may say that from an epistemological point of view rationalism is a theory according to which the foundation of knowledge lies in ratio, in reason. Thus rationalism derives all human knowledge from superior rational principles. The

Pythagoreans, the Eleates, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Democritus, etc. were rationalists. In fact, Plato argued that philosophical knowledge is a remembrance of the knowledge the soul used to have in its preexistence, in the unborn world of the ideas. The term rationalism in the philosophy of religion and in morality derives from this epistemological theory, since ratio, reason are perceived as the center of man's existence and of knowledge, and all other axioms and all other knowledge are based on this rationality [1].

It is known that rationalism began with the ancient Greek philosophers, continued with the philosophy and theology of the Middle Ages and reached to the modern philosophers Descartes, Spinoza, Fichte, etc. From the point of view of theology the term rationalism is identified and associated with the term scholasticism.

The scholastics are the medieval theologians in the western part of Europe from the 11th to the 13th century who studied God and everything related to Him, as well as the world, through a single epistemological methodology. This means that they studied the creatures and developed science by reason, and also studied God by reason. Thus they viewed God through the framework of creation, and identified or associated creation with God. This caused tremendous problems to the relation between theology and science, as vividly manifested during the Renaissance and above all during the Enlightenment.

It should be stated that in the 11th-13th century the term scholasticism was a synonym for University. What we now call University students or Professors used to be called Scholastic students and Professors, and university theology was called scholastic theology. There were various philosophical-theological schools and students which had the name, as well as the mentality of the school they were enrolled in.

I think a brief account of the pre-history and the atmosphere of rationalism-scholasticism is necessary in order to understand its difference with the neptic theology of the Orthodox Church.

As analyzed at great length by Jacques Le Goff in a relevant book, from the 6th century on, various Germanic tribes descended to the western part of the single Roman Empire, which was conquered by the Franks, a Germanic tribe, in the 8th century. The Franks were illiterate, but adopted the orthodox faith. Since they wanted to distance themselves from the Roman Empire and create their own Empire, as it happened indeed, they used the theories of Saint Augustine, a Latin theologian, which were different from the theological positions of the Fathers of the Church.

Saint Augustine (354-430) had been very much influenced by Neoplatonism, which had blended the views of Plato with the views of the Gnostics on ideas, effusion (aporroë), etc.. Augustine's basic views were the priority of reason over faith, a legalistic view of spiritual life, the view that death is punishment by God, the theological view of absolute predestination, etc.

The platonic belief about ideas in God and the theory of absolute predestination, which were Augustine's basic positions, were used by the Franks for the establishment of a specific social system, called feudalism, according to which there are by nature distinct classes in society, namely there are by nature nobles and by nature slaves.

Feudal society influenced deeply the theological mentality of scholastic theologians. Thus, Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) used the image of the feudal system to create the theory of the satisfaction of divine justice, according to which God was insulted by Adam's sin and therefore there was a need to satisfy the insulted divine justice. After Anselm, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) shaped the whole model of the universe of the medieval world. Thomas Aquinas tries to harmonize the theories of previous scholastics with the theories of Aristotle, without rejecting Plato, since he accepts Plato's theory about the ideas.

Therefore, the theories of Saint Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas influenced the thought of medieval theologians and of all scholastic theologians of that time. Barlaam, who was a scholastic theologian, grew up in this environment and this is why he could not comprehend the mentality of the theologians of the Roman Empire, that is, of Byzantium.

Barlaam's main view is that the noblest element in man's existence is intelligence. Only through intelligence man is able to comprehend God, not through Revelation, as we see in the Prophets of the Old Testament, the Apostles and the Saints. Because of this, he considered the philosophers to be superior to the Prophets and the Apostles and that the knowledge which comes from intelligence is superior to the knowledge coming from Revelation, because the former lies within man while the latter, he thought, was provided by external symbolic acts. Therefore, according to Barlaam, Plato, Aristotle and all philosophers are superior to the Prophets, Apostles and Saints. He believed that the vision of God attained by the Prophets and all the deified ones in general was a demonic state because it originated from outside man. Within this framework, he rejected the noetic prayer of the heart, the distinction between essence and energy in God, and he argued that the study of human education and knowledge offers us also the knowledge of God.

After analyzing the terms rationalism-scholasticism, let us now turn to the conceptual meaning of mysticism. By mysticism we mean a specific movement observed since antiquity regarding man's union with God. It consists of an attempt to make the intellect, man's word, inactive, to develop the emotion, and to deliver the soul from any bond to matter, which is considered bad. In this way, man comes to an ecstasy and is completely absorbed by God [2].

A basic principle of the system of mysticism is that man's soul belonged to the eternal world of ideas in the past, fell from it and as a punishment was enclosed in the body. However, during its residence in the body it maintains the memory of the world of the unborn ideas and wants to return to it, getting rid of the body. The knowledge of the world of ideas is called illumination of the nous. The return of the soul to the eternal and

unborn world of ideas is called eros. Thus a soul noted for eros expresses a weakness, because it feels it is away from its own real world. Therefore, the basic notions in mysticism are the existence of a world of ideas, where the soul used to belong to, and that the body is bad and has to be expelled with a special method so that the soul may return to this eternal and unborn world of the ideas.

Mysticism was mainly expressed with Neoplatonism, a system which appeared in the 2nd century AD and lasted until the 6th century AD, and was a reaction to Christianity. Ammonios Sakkas (172-242) is considered its founder and it was to a large extent elaborated by his student Plotinus (204-270) who worked in Rome and had a philosophical school there.

Neoplatonism is a revival of Platonism, adjusted to the conditions of that era. There are three main differences between Platonism and Neoplatonism.

First, on the issue of God. According to Plato, there is a multitude of ideas in God, with the idea of Good having the top priority. Neoplatonists taught that the beginning and source of the world is the One, which is the absolute self-principle.

A second difference is that while Plato taught that the world is a copy of the ideas, the Neoplatonists taught the theory of effusion, according to which the world originates from the substance of God, through emission or projection. Like the sun emits its heat without losing its substance, similarly the Absolute Being emits beings without wanting it and without aiming at it. The world deriving from the Absolute Being by effusion is not single, there is a hierarchy. On a first level there is the Nous which corresponds to Plato's noetic world consisting of the ideas. On the second effusion of the One there is the soul of everything. There is a relation between the cosmic and the individual soul, and is described in a way reminiscent of the Brahman and the Atman of the Indian teaching. That is, the soul of the world lies in every individual soul and each individual soul carries in it the whole universe. The third effusion are the individual souls which exist between the cosmic soul and matter. And the fourth effusion, a very distant and incomplete manifestation of the One, is matter which is something bad and dark.

A third position of Neoplatonism is its so-called asceticism, which is explicitly mystical, according to which the soul has to get rid of the body, and this is called purification. Thus the soul had to return and unite with the divine essence whence it originated, and this is achieved with its purification, ecstasy and mystical contact with the essence of God. The asceticism of the Neoplatonists is similar to that of Plato, with a slight difference. For example, despite his view of the body as the prison of the soul, Plato never loses an aesthetic perception of the body, and this is why the beautiful dominates in Plato, while Plotinus feels disgust for the body [4].

These are the basic principles of mysticism, as found in Neoplatonism, the eastern religions and the philosophy of the Middle Ages (Baader and Schelling).

2. The Neptic Theology of the Orthodox Church

The theology of the Orthodox Church is not related at all to rationalism and mysticism. Its views on God, man, and man's salvation are on a different level, they differ radically from the views of rationalism and mysticism. Orthodox theology is not rational or mystical but neptic and mystic.

In the Orthodox Church the dominant teaching is that of the holy Apostles, the Fathers, as expressed by the Three Hierarchs - St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian and St. John Chrysostom - as well as by St. Maximus the Confessor, St. John of Damascus, St. Symeon the New Theologian. This is the theology that St. Gregory Palamas had in mind. And we might say that the great Fathers of the Church studied the ancient Greek philosophers very well, they knew the questions posed by them but gave different answers based on the theology of revelation.

Thus, St. Gregory Palamas, when he was a student in Constantinople, knew Aristotle's philosophy very well, but through the guidance of experienced spiritual fathers, mostly from the Holy Mountain, he lived the whole neptic tradition of the Church, with fasting, prayer, mourning according to God and the vision of the divine Light. He lived these in particular when he went to the Holy Mountain as a monk. He attained a high level of sainthood and grace.

Before turning to the main positions of St. Gregory Palamas' teaching and their differentiation from the theological positions of Barlaam and all the scholastic theologians, as well as from those of mysticism, I think it is worthwhile examining briefly the terms neptic and mystic theology.

The word neptic derives from the Greek word *nepsis*, which means watchfulness, alertness. Christ said: "Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation" (Matt. 26:41). St. Peter recommends to the Christians: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Therefore, man watches his inner world, so as to avoid the entry of a thought that will become a desire. This is called neptic life.

According to the platonic division of the soul, the soul has three faculties: the intelligent, the appetitive, and the incensive. The appetitive and incensive are called the passible part of the soul, because it is there that the passions dominate, when man desires and then wants to fulfill the desires. The Fathers of the Church accept this platonic division of the soul and in fact teach that the thoughts which dominate in the soul, through the senses and fantasy, must remain there and not proceed to the passible part of the soul to become desire and action. The effort to prevent the thoughts from becoming desire, a bad desire, is called neptic theology and constitutes the core of the science of theology.

The term mystic theology is the experience and knowledge obtained by man through his whole existence and not just through his intellect. In fact, modern science too says that there is another world beyond intelligence, not controlled by it, because man's existence is not exhausted in intelligence, intelligence is but a part of man's existence. As we will see below, man, through a special method, acquires a personal knowledge of the

personal God in the heart, and then intelligence articulates this experience. That is, intelligence is not overlooked but rather placed in its actual position.

The so-called mystic theology should not be confused with mysticism. Mystic (or secret) theology and mysticism are two different things.

3. The Views of St. Gregory Palamas

After the analysis of the main views-positions of rationalism and mysticism, we should see briefly the main positions of St. Gregory Palamas, which express the neptic theology of our Church.

First. God is neither an abstract idea nor the sum of unborn, impersonal ideas, but a person. In fact God is Triune - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God was not discovered by man with his intelligence, but He revealed Himself. The Son and Word of God was revealed to the Prophets of the Old Testament and then, in due time, incarnated and assumed human nature.

Second. There is a distinction between essence and energy in God. There is an essence and energy in God, just as there is in the whole created world. The only difference is that the world is created, while God is uncreated. This means that God's essence and energy are uncreated, while the essence and energy of the creation is created. Man actually partakes of the energy of God, not of His essence. This way both pantheism and agnosticism are avoided. The uncreated energy of God is everywhere in nature and is called *logoi* of beings.

Third. The world was not created by effusion, it is not a copy of the ideas, and the body is not an outcome of God's revengeful disposition, punishing man's soul for falling from the world of the ideas. And of course, the soul is not unborn and did not belong to the eternal world of the ideas where it wants to return to for a blissful and blessed life. St. Gregory Palamas, and all the holy Fathers, teach that the world is a positive creation by God, that the soul is not eternal by nature, but was created together with the body, that is, it did not pre-exist, and the body is not the prison of the soul but the temple of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, salvation does not consist of the departure of the soul from the body, but of the deification of the whole man, that is, there is a deification of both soul and body.

Fourth. There is a distinction between nous and reason. Man's soul has two parallel energies, the noetic and the intelligent energy. Through the noetic energy man acquires the knowledge of God, through the intelligent energy he is in relationship with creation. When St. Gregory speaks about the nous, he means the most subtle attention, which differs, of course, from intelligence. St. John of Damascus calls the noetic energy "the noetic eye", the eye of the soul. We know from Orthodox Tradition that before Adam's fall the nous was fully open to God and received the knowledge of God, but after the fall the nous was darkened and was identified with intelligence. Thus in the fallen man, the

noetic energy is not clearly distinguishable, because it is confused with intelligence, passions and the conditions of the environment.

Fifth. Man's entire effort in the Orthodox Church, with the sacraments and the ascetic life, does not consist of delivering the nous from the body and the world, but of liberating it from the fleshly and worldly mentality, that is, of delivering it from the influence of intelligence and the passions to acquire the experience of the illuminating and deifying energy of God, so that the whole man (soul-body) is transformed.

Sixth. St. Gregory Palamas, expressing the whole neptic theology of the Church, talks about a dual, not a single methodology. While Barlaam, the scholastics, the philosophers, as we have seen, employed a single method, the same method for the knowledge of God and of the world, having intelligence at its center in both cases, St. Gregory Palamas introduces a dual methodology implying that we acquire the knowledge of God with the nous and the knowledge of the world with the reason-intelligence.

The method of the knowledge of God, and therefore man's salvation, is related to the cleansing of the nous-heart, the illumination of the nous and the deification of man. Cleansing is not the mortification of the passible part of the soul, but its transformation; the illumination of the nous is not the knowledge of the archetypes of beings but its illumination by the Grace of God. This means that the nous has to be freed from the domination of intelligence and this is achieved with repentance, obedience, asceticism - and this is called and is the cleansing of the nous. When the nous is cleansed it is illumined, it receives the illuminating energy of God and this is expressed in the noetic prayer of the heart. Then man has an unceasing memory of God, without the other faculties of the soul becoming inactive, annihilated, since the intelligence is conscious of the environment and the other faculties of the soul (appetitive and incensive) turn to God and are offered to Him completely. And some, like the Prophets, the three Disciples on Tabor, St. Paul on the road to Damascus, St. Stephen the first martyr and many other saints were granted to see the deifying energy of God, that is to see God in the uncreated Light.

Seventh. Noetic prayer, in particular, was studied and elaborated in depth by St. Gregory Palamas. He interpreted Christ's commandment "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Matthew 6:6). He interprets this way the well-known Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, and in particular the way the Publican prayed. He bowed and smote upon his breast and said little, but: "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). When freed from the tyranny of the intelligence, the nous enters the heart and from there ascends to God. This method is found in all Fathers of the Church. It is analyzed by St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. John Chrysostom, St. Maximus the Confessor, etc. The vision of God can be found in all the works of St. Symeon the New Theologian. And of course all these which constitute the most secret mysteries of the neptic theology are encountered in the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas.

By contrast, in Barlaam's theology these distinctions are not found, because the essence is identified with the energy of God, the nous is identified and confused with reason, and the method of knowledge of God and the world is single, it uses reason.

4. The Value of Neptic Theology

After what we have said it becomes clear that neptic theology has a great value for our times. Let me stress four points.

First. With neptic theology we make a correct distinction between theology and science, that is between faith in God and human knowledge. There is no confusion between these two realities, because theology is a fruit of the experience of the nous, and its center is the heart, while science is a product and result of a rational process. Theology knows how to prepare men for the knowledge of God, while science knows how to prepare men for the knowledge of the created world. A theologian may be a scientist, and a scientist may be a theologian, but he does not confuse these two distinct methodologies, that is a theologian becomes a scientist by studying human science, and a scientist becomes a theologian by purification, illumination and deification.

The clash between science and theology took place in Europe under the influence of scholastic philosophers, because, as we have seen, they identified the two methods. And this is what happened with metaphysics. Metaphysics held that there is a relationship between the world of ideas and the perceptible world, and everything that exists in the world is a copy or a fall from the world of ideas. The view that there is a harmony between the ideas and the whole creation is an outcome of metaphysics. However, the Fathers of the Church do not believe in such metaphysics, because there can be no proof of the existence of these ideas. On this point, too, the holy Fathers are modern, their word can be accepted by modern science. Orthodox theology is anti-metaphysical, because it is not a philosophy but medicine which heals the spiritual illnesses of men.

Second. With the neptic Orthodox theology we avoid the temptation of the eastern religions which are mostly related to mysticism. Eastern practices presuppose an impersonal and without hypostasis God; they talk about man's salvation consisting of the mortification of the passible part of the soul and the soul's departure from the body, which is considered bad and a garment of the soul; they talk about the depersonalization of man, because man is not viewed as a person but as an individual, whose individual Atman is united and merged with the universal Brahman; they employ the method of meditation to reach nirvana and avoid samsara, etc.

The Orthodox neptic tradition, though, as expressed in the teachings and lives of the saints, talks about man's real personal union and communion with God, about a transformation and not a mortification of the passible part of the soul, the salvation of the whole man who consists of soul and body, and his union with God. When an ascetic has noetic prayer, then he has a clear awareness of the entire world, because noetic

prayer can take place even in the street and in the crowd, since with noetic prayer the Holy Spirit prays within man's heart, which means that man accepts the energy of the Holy Spirit, which activates man's noetic energy.

Third. The cure of man is achieved through neptic theology. The soul receives the Grace of God, man finds meaning in his life, the Grace of God is carried from the nous to the body and this means cure. Man acquires unselfish love for God and man, gets away from self-love and individual love for God and man, is cured of self-love and individual happiness. The center of his life is God and he views the whole world through this perspective. Self-love is changed to love of God and love of others.

Thus, man becomes social, because he loves people and the whole creation. He solves all ontological, existential, anthropological, social and ecological problems. He loves the whole world and even nature itself, in which he sees the energies of God. He has meaning in his life, defeats death itself, which is the most tormenting problem he faces ever since he is born, because all the successive crises he passes through in his life are related to the mortality and corruptibility of his existence.

Therefore, a cured man loves the personal God and has great respect for nature, which he does not violate. This restoration of man's relations with God, other people and creation, is what contemporary man greatly needs; otherwise he remains sick, because he does not know God, is possessed by the fear of death and feels that everyone approaching him is a threat to his own existence.

Beloved,

Rationalism creates many problems to man today. It is actually a fragmentation of human existence. The limits of reason are quite restricted, so a man based on it is wounded, weak, limited, sick. Mysticism of either the Neoplatonic or the eastern type also splits man, because it undervalues his body and leads him to a loss of his personal and social character.

We need the Orthodox neptic and mystic theology which takes us out of the deadlocks of our life. St. Gregory Palamas expresses this theology and we must read him with a lot of attention and interest, because he has a lot to offer. This explains why there is a great turn toward the study of his work.

A theology outside the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas is a secularized theology which cannot help the wounded, unhealed and disappointed man. We feel a great gratitude for the existence of such a great saint.

Recently I read Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, his greatest work, which played a key role in the formation of the modern world. I felt that if God was as described by Thomas Aquinas, imposing discipline, with man being forced to accept Him, then it is better for man to live without God, because such a God is tough, unrelenting, He demands justice and punishes harshly. By contrast, God as described by St. Gregory

Palamas, is a God of love, eros, lovable, Who cures man so that he unites with Him. He is a God who seeks personal communion with man and wants to lead him not only to Adam's life before the fall but even higher.

This is the God we search for, and this is why we love St. Gregory Palamas who theologized on how to acquire the correct method to attain communion with Him. In the theology of St. Gregory Palamas we see who the true God is and who true man is. And this double knowledge helps us solve all the problems torturing us.

ENDNOTES

1. Christos Androutsos, "Dictionary of Philosophy", publ. Rigopoulos, p.262.
2. *Ibid.*, p.247.
3. Socrates Gikas in "Religious and Moral Encyclopedia", vol. 10, pp.450-452.
4. *Ibid.*