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Noetic Prayer in the Byzantine Fathers

Abstract

The article discusses the semantic and contextual meanings of the Byzantine terms 'Nous' and 'Noetic' in relation to the later Christian literature on prayer and divine perception within human beings. It notes how the field is significantly under-researched, which has misdirected many previous decisions to translate the key term 'noetic' because of an excessive reliance on the *Patristic Greek Lexicon* of Lampe, which used a very restricted range of Christian Greek literature, offering no lemmata dating after the eighth century, all of which conspired to give the impression that the pre-Christian use of *Nous* to signify intellectual perception continued to predominate in monastic writing whereas, the article argues, a wholly new, refined, and distinctively Christian epistemological argument was actually emerging among the Byzantines.



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The history of Byzantine theology remains a vastly under-researched field. This is explicable in intellectual history because of the combined pressure offered by two distorting tendencies applying massive force: first, the suppression of Eastern Christian institutions of higher learning which progressed drastically after late medieval Islamic domination and was then continued in the recent modern era by the widespread brutalities of the communist regimes against all the varied forms of Orthodox culture; and secondly, the culture of western theological development which turned around the deep conflict caused by the splitting of the tradition into Catholic and Protestant forms of discourse. For the last half millennium western theology has been dominated by those mutual apologetics. As a result, either through the stifling of independent avenues of research or because of the relentless ignoring of the Eastern tradition by the dominant concerns of the western theological academies, great swathes of Eastern Christian culture have been overshadowed and even now are struggling to gain a purchase in curricula or research programmes.

We Orthodox sometimes talk as if this is simply a problem of the Western traditions, who, if only they could have accessed our tradition, would have avoided many problems of their own making; but this rather simplistic view overlooks the fact that our own eastern tradition might well be much less known to us than we think: that we may have narrowed it down because of the centuries of intellectual constriction that marked its passage to us over the last four hundred years. The Byzantine spiritual tradition is one example that can illustrate this. After the Eastern Christian schools of learning started to disappear, the larger surviving monasteries became the repositories of theological

learning and the Byzantine fathers, as the manuscript records demonstrate, certainly became the core of the contents of their libraries. This heroic monastic effort for basic survival of the texts, in the end resulted in the magnificent flowering of Neo-Byzantine spirituality that took place after the eighteenth century, with the Greek *Philokalia* of saints Macarius and Nikodemos¹, and the various Slavonic editions of the *Dobrotolubiye*, of saints Paisy of Neamt, Feofan the Recluse and the Optina hermits: all of which brought about a great revival of Orthodox theological consciousness in our own time. But the selection of texts made in that time was very restrictive – Nikodemos choosing only a few manuscripts contained in the Vatopedi library.

The monastic tradition had preserved these old writings under the banner of the so-called ‘Niptic Fathers.’ Nipsis is a Greek term meaning ‘watchfulness.’ It is predominantly used in the monastic understanding to cover two ideas: the mindfulness that derives from the ability to sustain a human being’s focus on God and divine realities, which in turn is founded upon the ability to be ascetically ‘watchful’ over the vagaries of the bodily passions and intellectual distractions that affect any person who wishes to follow a disciplined spiritual life. In this late monastic uptake of the Byzantine fathers, the ascetical stress is made dominant. The tone of spirituality is set by the admonition: ‘Watch yourselves’ (Lk. 21.34). This is very much what the Philokalic editors also had in mind when they first collated the texts from those medieval writers which they selected to use as guides for their contemporary monastic readers.

Another context, however, or at least another dimension of what is going on here in this original literature, can be supplied by

¹ Editing and publishing Codices 472 (12th century), 605 (13th century), 476 (14th century), 628 (14th century) and 629 (15th century) from the Vatopedi monastic library on Mount Athos.

relocating important aspects of the terminology back into the earlier Byzantine context before the collapse of the intellectual institutions. For what we see here is quite evidently a new movement in Byzantine philosophy: indeed, a new movement in world philosophy that was distinctively Christianity's contribution to the field and which, though largely unrecognized, pre-dates Phenomenology by at least a millennium. To clarify what I mean by this we need to look at how the Byzantine fathers re-define the term *Nous*, and its adjective *Noetic*, one of the essential technical terms of the Niptic writings; and also to look more closely at the larger gamut of Byzantine writers whose broader intellectual concerns were not perhaps fully represented in all the Philokalic choices of authors.

The late Metropolitan Kallistos, one of the key translators of the English Philokalia in the late seventies, knew that it was a very critical matter to render *Nous* and *Noetic*, which came so often in the writings. In the classical Greek tradition the words were simply a synonym for intelligence or intellectual comprehension: and, as such, a subordinate aspect of the power of *Logos*, or rationality, in the constitution of a human being. Bishop Kallistos recognized that by the Byzantine era this idea had undergone a deep shift of meaning. He argued that all the Philokalic team of translators should agree to render these key terms as 'spiritual intellect', an aspiration that was only sporadically followed in practice.

He writes about his reasons generically in the prelude to volume one of the *Philokalia*: These texts, he says, "show the way to awaken and develop attention and consciousness, to attain that state of watchfulness which is the hallmark of sanctity. They describe the conditions most effective for learning what their authors call the art of arts and the science of sciences², a learning

² The phrase is that of Gregory the Theologian describing spiritual direction. *Oration on His Flight*.(Orat.2).

which is not a matter of information or agility of mind but of a radical change of will and heart leading man towards the highest possibilities open to him, shaping and nourishing the unseen part of his being, and helping him to spiritual fulfilment and union with God."³ One can see from this how 'Niptic watchfulness' had already impressed itself even on the modern translators as the supposed dominant theme of the collection and, I would argue from that, that the concept of spiritual attention, or consciousness (that is, the 'noetic awareness') is an aspect that was given subordinate notice. This is why I would make certain changes to this interpretive tradition.

To begin with I would certainly alter 'spiritual intellect' as a translation for *Nous*. The context of argument in the Byzantine fathers shows that the ancient Greek notion of *Nous* and *Noetic* as rational activity has entirely faded away, and what is being talked about is more evidently 'spiritual intuition'. In other words what the texts mean by Noetic activity is that stage of higher prayer where the human being becomes spiritually conscious of the divine presence and its significance, both within and without. Noetic, for me, means that moment of elevated human consciousness when the divine presence is intuited clearly: a form of awareness that needs preparatory nurturing of a specific kind: something that is true of every other stage of human consciousness as well. We have thus entered into the realm of theological epistemology, something at which the Byzantines excelled. Yeats knew it in his own way: 'O sages standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall, / Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre, / And be the singing-masters of my soul.'⁴

Let me briefly put this in its wider context. The ancient Greek philosophical tradition was founded upon the major advances it

³ K. Ware. *Philokalia*. vol. 1 Faber. London. 1979 p. 13.

⁴ W.B. Yeats. *Sailing to Byzantium*. Stanza 3.

had made in epistemology: the science of understanding, or the philosophy of knowledge. Simply put, Plato had posited that we had knowledge of reality by virtue of the fact that things we comprehended had eternal fixed archetypes (The Ideal Forms) which allowed us to have common and core recognition among the bewildering diversity of secondary material representations of reality. This became a great school of enduring thought through the Christian era and into our own in many respects. In the time of the Fathers the issue resolved into a great attack on the problem of the One and the Many, which exercised formative force on both Neo-Platonic and Early Christian thinking. In addition to this, Aristotle had taken a scientist's empirical approach to knowledge, and argued that human comprehension of reality arose from an abstraction of the impactful encounter with immanent material forms. By this encounter a *pathema* (what they defined as a passion or impression) gave rise to understanding by correct classification.

In Greek culture, although the two systems were conducted on their own terms, it was obvious that they were also synthesized to a large degree, just as they are within our own intellectual culture today. The Early Christians, and the later Byzantine writers were avid synthesists, pulling all manner of idea into their system in the cause of understanding the Christian Gospel more coherently: and from the earliest apostolic times Greek philosophy was put into service.

And yet, the evangelical tradition had left certain problems unresolved. For example in some cases the scripture spoke of humanity in a dichotomous manner, as comprised of body and Spirit, and at other times it presented humans as a trichotomy of body, soul and spirit. How in such systems did awareness operate and where did its root lie? And in order to resolve this important intellectual and spiritual issue, this is where the Byzantine fathers made their remarkable synthesis between the Gospel and Greek epistemological philosophy. They prioritized the evangelical tradition by insisting that human awareness

operated, in principle, as a theoretical ascent to the divine. To this extent, they had a degree of respect for Plato's ascentive epistemology, such as can be observed in the speech of Diotima the priestess at the end of the *Symposium*.

But they did not need Plato to teach them about what the divine ascent looked like in practice: they already had the Gospel, Apostolic writings, Psalms and Prophets. And they also retained great respect for Aristotle's empirical awareness of humanity's physical condition: their own theology of the Incarnation rooted them here and always made any complete devotion to Plato absolutely impossible. Christian thinkers through all the centuries were massively eclectic, taking whatever from the Hellenistic culture they deemed useful in the service of the Gospel. The fourth century Lactantius expresses the preference for scriptural revelation over the Academy's theology with his sharp aphorism: [*Plato*] *non cognovit deum, solum somniavit de eo*. (Plato did not know God He only dreamt about him).⁵ So it was that by combining both classic Greek epistemologies with the very down to earth Apostolic theology they spoke of humanity as being comprised of four stages of existence; or rather four modalities of awareness: body, soul, intellect and spiritual intuition. Namely: Sarx-Soma/ Psyche / Logos/ and Nous.

In other words what emerges in the Byzantine patristic and ascetical writings is a picture of the architecture of humanity that

⁵ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*.5.15: 'Plato, indeed, spoke many things respecting the one God, by whom he said that the world was framed; but he spoke nothing respecting religion: *for he only dreamed of God, but he had never known Him.*' Here he alludes to 1 Jn. 4.8. Further see: A.K. Meinking, "Sic Traditur a Platone: Plato and the philosophers in Lactantius", in: R. C. Fowler (ed), *Plato in the Third Sophistic*, De Gruyter, Berlin. 2014, pp. 101-120.

sees it as an ascentive proleptic curve⁶. It begins in Body, rises through Soul, and emerges in Spirit. But each of those three stages are further articulated and refined within themselves. The Byzantines have taken the Hellenistic dyadic division of soul into *Epithymitikon* and *Thymikon* (the so-called ‘Appetitive’ and ‘Irrascible’ souls) and turned it into a triadic pattern to correspond to the apostolic literature: but have also then refined that triad of body, soul and spirit, into a sextuplicated system: Flesh+Body (that is, *Sarx-Soma*); Soul and Mind (*Psyche-Logos*); and Spirit and Nous (*Pneuma-Nous*).

Let us see how they worked this synthesis. Alluding to the Greek philosophical sense of *to Epithymitikon*, the Christian Body is itself divided into two experiences. The first is the flesh (*sarx*), (which the New Testament had characterised as a restless force of disobedience) and the other is the bodily identity (*soma*) which is seen as the incarnated reality of the human being seeking salvation and finding it in the sacramental blessing of the offer of new life which Christ, the Logos Incarnate, has given to the race. Both *sarx* and *soma* are rooted in materiality and among

⁶ The argument here derives from a fuller lecture given at the 2022 Timisoara conference on Hesychastic Spirituality. c.f.: J.A. McGuckin. ‘The Significance of ‘Nous’ in Hesychastic Philosophy: Illustrated by the Hymns of Divine Eros of St. Symeon the New Theologian.’ In: N. Tanase & D. Lemeni (edd). *Holiness, Prayer, and Hesychast Spirituality in the Orthodox Tradition*. Brill. (Studies in Eastern Christianity). Leiden. 2022; and is further argued in: Idem. ‘Classical and Byzantine Christian Notions of the Self and their Significance Today.’ In: *Patristic Theology*. vol.1. 2024. pp. 6–21. (McMasters University, Center for Patristics & Early Christianity. Hamilton ON). See also: Idem. ‘Byzantine Philosophy.’ in: *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*. [Supplement 2012–2013]. Ed. R. Fastigii. Gale Cengage. New York – Detroit. 2013. vol 1 (A–D). pp. 195–198; and also: Idem. ‘The Search for the Illumined Heart in the Eastern Christian Mystics.’ *Inter-national Journal of Orthodox Theology*. 15.1. (2024). pp. 7–25.

the Byzantine fathers both predominantly designate the way in which both aspects, sarkikal and somatic, can turn away from God towards dissolution (*ptharsía*) or turn towards God in immortality (*athanasía*)

These powers of the soul (the lower soul as it was described in the Hellenistic conception) were seen to be demonstrating the body-consciousness as attuned to instinctive life. They comprised a range of needs and desires (fight/flight/acqtion) dominated by material concerns. They also revealed a range of perceptions: moving from simple material awarenesses (hunger/fear) to more elevated sensibilities (empathy/affection). At the top of the soul's lower range (or *skopos*), the Byzantines saw it as overlapping with the lower range of the next dimension of the soul's powers (*to Thymikon* as the ancient Greeks would say). But the Byzantine fathers no longer see this, in the Hellenistic manner, as a distinct alternative, for this, to them, is now merely the middle range of three soul-powers. It is also worth noting that in this sense they have of the overlapping of the newly posited three ranges, the two major liminal spaces: namely, the movements between body to soul, and those between soul to spirit, were factors that especially occupied and interested the hesychasts of the later era, who wished to focus and refine the idea of spiritual consciousness in the day-to-day ascetical life of prayer.

Now if we return to that middle level of their psychic architecture, the *thymikon*, we can see that this was understood by the Christian Byzantines as a more emotive and more abstracted range of consciousness (dealing in perceptions and deductions and higher questions of motivation) but it was still intimately linked with its lower neighbouring soul-range: sometimes guiding it; sometimes being led by it. It was intended to be the tutor or *paidagogos* of the lower movements of the soul but was often seen as having to struggle to predominate, because of the force of the material rootedness of humanity's synthetic life: spiritual powers being wedded to materiality – what

Gregory the Theologian had called the 'tragedy of the third creation': that is, humanity, which was neither simply one of those things or the other. Plato's image of the chariot of the soul⁷ was a simpler sketch of this idea, and this too is reflected in aspects of the Christian terminology.

Even so, for the Christian hesychastic writers, these stages of inner motions are not different parts of the soul anymore, let alone different souls, they are considered more as the natural ranges of a coherent soul's dynamic activity; the very life-force. To that extent we may deduce that the guiding force of this whole philosophical movement among the Byzantines was, in some form or other, meant as a clarification of the semantics of consciousness. Perhaps we would today put it (dominated as we are by Aristotelian models of thought) in terms of how consciousness arises out of materiality: but the Byzantine fathers would pose the question rather as how spiritual consciousness had been divinely welded to materiality when the former is immortal and the latter corruptible: and what those welds, or interstitial joinings, revealed theologically.

The upper ranges of this middle soul (*to thymikon*) were understood to reveal precisely those answers, for here the soul's energies started to reach its highest levels, namely its spiritual consciousness. The elucidation of this new technical terminology, of course, is clearly one of the most dominant themes in all Byzantine Christian writing. We may remember that the energy of the soul in its middle range is especially concerned with conscious activity. Here the Byzantine instinct placed *to logistikon*. *Logos* or human ratiocination is, simply put, thinking and deducing all manner of things, including higher questions of meaning. This power was located at the very junction of these second and higher two layers of soul. The human energy of *logos* served as the link to the third and highest

⁷ Plato. *Phaedrus*. 246af.

range of the soul: the *Nous*. The *Nous*, however, was not simply a synonym for intelligence or reason⁸ - this was covered well enough by such terms as *logos*, *gnome*, or *eidesis*, and was seen to reside in the upper regions of the middle psychic range. *Nous*, on the other hand, was viewed specifically as that aspect of graced awareness which constituted a human being differently from all other created species.

For the Byzantine ascetical philosophers *Nous* (not *logos*) was the locus of the Divine Image in humankind. This was why so many human intellectual conceptions of God could be so utterly fallacious. In its lower ranges of energy the *Nous* would process and refine reflection and thinking about divine reality. Maximus Confessor, for example, placed a great deal of emphasis on the ability of the *Nous* to discern, behind the deceiving veil of material forms, the divine purposes that lay there (what he called the *logismoï*). *Nous* was the faculty of translating the semantic signs of material appearance (*to eidos*) into the sacred language of God's providence. In other words, the *Nous* fundamentally processes transcendental awareness, and this is why it is the place where the consciousness of the divine image within human awareness is hypostatized; the precise *locus* where the spiritual sense of God's descent by grace into humanity is consciously registered. This is why the *Nous*, when it is performing this sacred task of sensing, translating and reverencing the divine presence, becomes synonymous with the spirit (*pneuma*) and reaches communion with the divine. In that beautifully simple and elegant process, the Byzantine fathers thus complete the synthesis of the Greek philosophical anthropology with that of the Apostolic writings, and offer

⁸ And several times the Philokalic translators simply assume that it was, perhaps relying too much on Liddell and Scott's lexicon of the ancient Greek writers, and even on Lampe's Patristic Greek Lexical supplement to it, which itself ceases to offer lemmata after the 8th century.

Christian phenomenology made new, to a world that did not listen to it because it was too busy politically crushing it. All of this, is such a fundamental reworking of psychology by the Byzantines that it can in no way be called a simple variation on Platonic themes. This double-triadic view of the anthropological constitution, as a system of ascentive correlated influences, gave profound dynamism to a new view of human nature, and supplied an immanent transcendentalism to social theory which ancient philosophical structures could not achieve. Plato had pathologically wished to resolve the ill-at-ease correlation (*to syntheton*) of matter (*hyle*) and soul (*Psyche*), by the dissolution of the body. By contrast, this elevation of the material form to sacred and sacramental stature was an important and lasting contribution of Byzantine Christian philosophy. What remains to be done, by those of us whose tradition this is, but which is outside the possibilities of this present paper, is now to show how a full range of the Byzantine fathers, both inside and outside the Philokalic edition, actually demonstrate this in their praxis of ascentive prayer and theological reflection: something that would be a profound demonstration of the synonymy, within Orthodox tradition, of active spirituality and authentic theology.