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## Apophatic Anthropology and Hesychasm: Attending to the Mysterious Depths of Human Being

### Abstract

Not only the question, but the reality of selfhood is basic to all thought and action. Patristic, theological anthropology addresses both the question and the reality by framing man not only in terms of his divine origin through the inbreathing of the spirit of life by God, but also and especially as the one who ontologically bears God's image.

According to this anthropology, to bear God's image is what it means for man to be man, and so no profound anthropological knowledge of man can be obtained apart from this revealed theological truth. In the Patristic, Orthodox theology of the East, however, the apophatic dimension of God's essence is preeminently emphasized, and as such the supra-rational mystery of God is highlighted,



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a mystery not only in the sense of exceeding gnoseological or epistemological limits but mystery of an ontological nature. Yet what is arguably underdiscussed is the impact this emphasis on apophaticism has on anthropology, specifically as regards man's experience of God in terms of man's own mysterious, divinely apophatic, albeit created, nature. Since man is made in God's image, and God is ultimately and essentially mysterious, then in a very profound sense the *imago dei* that is man must also bear the image of this apophatic mystery as a fundamental dimension of his own being. Looking primarily at the work of two Twentieth Century Orthodox theologians, the present research attempts to demonstrate the consequence of divine apophaticism on theological anthropology, not only with an eye towards its dogmatic logicity, but with reference to the necessary bond of theology, spiritual life, and spiritual practice, specifically *hesychasm* and *nepsis*.

### Keywords

Apophatic Anthropology, Hesychasm, Existential Abstraction, Scrima, Staniloae

*Joseph asked Poemen, 'Tell me how to become a monk.' He said, 'If you want to find rest in this life and the next, say at every moment, "Who am I?" and judge no one.'*<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

Not only the question, but the reality of selfhood is basic to all thought and action. Patristic, theological anthropology addresses both the question and the reality by framing man not only in

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<sup>1</sup> *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, tr. Benedicta Ward, Penguin Classics, (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 85.

terms of his divine origin through the inbreathing of the spirit of life by God, but also and especially as the one who ontologically bears God's image. According to this anthropology, to bear God's image is what it means for man to be man, and so no profound anthropological knowledge of man can be obtained apart from this revealed theological truth. In the Patristic, Orthodox theology of the East, however, the apophatic dimension of God's essence is preeminently emphasized, and as such the supra-rational mystery of God is highlighted, a mystery not only in the sense of exceeding gnoseological or epistemological limits but mystery of an ontological nature. Yet what is arguably under-discussed is the impact this emphasis on apophaticism has on anthropology, specifically as regards man's experience of God in terms of man's own mysterious, divinely apophatic, albeit created, nature. Since man is made in God's image, and God is ultimately and essentially mysterious, then in a very profound sense the *imago dei* that is man must also bear the image of this apophatic mystery as a fundamental dimension of his own being. Looking primarily at the work of two Twentieth Century Orthodox theologians, the present research attempts to demonstrate the consequence of divine apophaticism on theological anthropology, not only with an eye towards its dogmatic logicity, but with reference to the necessary bond of theology, spiritual life, and spiritual practice, specifically *hesychasm* and *nepsis*.

## **2 Andre Scrima's Apophatic Anthropology**

The logical aspect of apophatic anthropology has been discussed to varying degrees of success by several authors since the Twentieth Century, who also point out the Patristic grounding of the concept, especially identifying St. Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>2</sup> Among the Eastern Orthodox, Andre Scrima has per-

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<sup>2</sup> Notable examples include: Andre Scrima, *Apophatic Anthropology*, tr. Octavian Gabor, Perspectives on Philosophy and Religious Thought 17,

haps accomplished the most thorough-going and explicit Patristic and Orthodox demonstration of the apophatic aspect of anthropology, and as such it may be useful to discuss his work for the sake of laying the groundwork. Beginning with Dionysius, Scrima distinguishes between logical and ontological apophaticism.<sup>3</sup> These two he would identify as distinct “apophatic modes.”<sup>4</sup> Logical apophaticism corresponds with ‘negative theology,’ a discursive, conceptual, even dialectical operation which is only a precursor to apophaticism proper, which employs an ontological, implicit, indirect, and non-discursive mode.<sup>5</sup> Dionysius himself makes this distinction: “Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, utilizing the distinction,

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(Piscataway, NJ:Gorgias Press, 2016); Charles Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: “No Longer I”*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); John Saward, *Towards an Apophatic Anthropology*, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, (Volume: 41, Issue: 3, 222-234, 1974); *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, *Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquia*, (Fordham University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Andre Scrima, *Apophatic Anthropology*, pp. 52-3. Scrima, a Romanian Orthodox archimandrite (d. 2000), also discusses within his corpus the work of saints Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas, among others, and grants that Dionysius is the same Areopagite of First Century Athens.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 53. It might be noted that negative theology and cataphaticism, as discursive activities, are not thereby rendered untrue; they are true within the boundaries of their proper sphere, but because they are only partial activities performed by the ‘organs’ of man’s soul, they do not exhaust what all of man’s potential for knowing of God is.

<sup>6</sup> Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, tr. Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works, Classics of Western Spirituality*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 1, 2, 136. John Parker’s 1899 translation renders this: “it being our duty both to attribute and affirm all the attributes of things existing to It, as Cause of all, and more properly to deny them all to It, as being above all, and not to consider the negations to be in opposition to the affirmations, but far rather that It, which is

on the one hand, between negative theology as discursive and, on the other hand, apophaticism proper as non-discursive, then employing negative semantic privations and denials cannot exceed the conceptual level and so cannot be authentic apophaticism because authentic apophaticism points to something beyond the experience of language entirely, whether the language is positive or negative. Since language is here made to point to something beyond language, then the aim or *telos* of apophaticism cannot be found in language, and as such apophaticism proper leads to an experience beyond language of that which is ontologically prior to language, to that which is prior to discursivity.

In contradistinction to philosophical monism, orthodox apophaticism retains the revealed, dogmatic fact of the distinction between divine Being and created being. Thus negative deconstruction unto transcendence of discursivity does not imply total *ontological* deconstruction and oceanic absorption and disappearance of the created into the Uncreated, but instead points to the experience of the Uncreated by the created at the depth limits of the created being's ontology.<sup>7</sup> In this way the truth of cataphatic and negative theology are preserved, for, according to Scrima, "The ignorance of negative theology is not a mystical agnosticism, and even less an empty place. It ends in grasping an ontological reality"<sup>8</sup> This point is important because the ontological correspondence between concept and reality assures the non-arbitrariness and integrity of positive revelation and dogmatic truth as found in the Scriptures and taught in the Church, and establishes a Christologically rooted epistemological realism, thus avoiding the snare of both monism's theological relativism and its mystical pragmatism.<sup>9</sup> In

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above every abstraction and definition, is above the privations." Still the sense of apophaticism pointing beyond semantic privation ("above the privations") is maintained.

<sup>7</sup> Andre Scrima, *Apophatic Anthropology*, p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 56-7. Of course, monism is a vast subject, and can include anything from Neoplatonism to Advaita Vedanta to Mind-Only Bud-

moving from negative theology to apophaticism, then, there need be no fear of becoming unmoored from Orthodox Christian Tradition as it exists within the discursive sphere, for the transcendental theological realism that grounds apophaticism is guaranteed, not by a tightly woven logico-scholastic system, but by the Living God who both exists beyond conceptual limits and who also gives rise to the theological and conceptual nomenclature which establishes the horizon of canonical discursivity.<sup>10</sup> Entering into this apophatic mode, then, represents not a rejection or trivialization of canonical discursivity as such, but is, in Scrima's words, "the stage of existential intuition of Divine transcendence."<sup>11</sup>

At this point, with the intellect "acknowledging its inherent inability to intellectualize Divine Being," the anthropological dimension can be brought more squarely into view.<sup>12</sup> Scrima observes: "In contrast to negative theology, the apophatic stage now considered is presented as a role of an ampler effort that includes all the levels of being, not just the intellectual one, culminating in the inner work of the prayer 'without form.'"<sup>13</sup> In other words, apophaticism brings the entire being into attentive yet non-discursive relational focus with and on Divine Being, and thus incorporates the entire spiritual life and activity of man. Man moves from thinking deeply about God to being, in a manner of speaking, immersed in Him through directed "unknowing." Thus "pure prayer" is not merely a directing of concepts towards God, nor is it aimless or directionless, but is the directed incorporation of the whole man into ecstatic relation to God. Here prayer ceases to be word and activity, but silence

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dhism, but one thing that seems to be rarely encountered within them is a firm set of boundaries established/disclosed by a *canon* of orthodoxy.

<sup>10</sup> In this way the logic of theology is not grounded in the math of words and concepts, but is grounded in the divine and incarnate Logos.

<sup>11</sup> Andre Scrima, *Apophatic Anthropology*, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

and rest.<sup>14</sup> Scrima states: “The inner life, in its coherent stability, is called to become of the same nature (to ‘co-naturalize’) with silence, to recognize, in other words, that no pulsing, no affect, no internal movement can contain God.”<sup>15</sup> An elegant description of theosis as co-naturalization with God, in this way apophaticism runs directly into anthropology and becomes the ontological foundation for hesychasm. Stillness is therefore not simply an affect, ascesis, or aesthetic, nor is it a mere counterbalancing of the movement of the passions, but the apophatic fulfillment of human being in its ontologically driven God-relation as Image-bearer.<sup>16</sup> Hesychasm therefore stands as the natural expression of apophatic anthropology, and prayer “an all-encompassing category of the inner universe.”<sup>17</sup> But before turning to the Orthodox prayer life more fully, it will be helpful to look more deeply into certain implications of apophatic anthropology.

One of the key implications of the apophatic turn as regards man’s ontology is that it distinguishes psychological activity from pure prayer. Psychological activity includes especially the inner movements of man, which is to say his thoughts, emotions, feelings, and passions.<sup>18</sup> Since apophaticism exceeds the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 60.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 61: Scrima rightly observes that the “absence of mental activity” in pure prayer is in no way “compatible with passivity and inner ‘quietism’ understood exclusively”. Soporific dullness is more like to somnambulance than the wakeful stillness of pure prayer. Being without mental activity in the Orthodox sense implies not hypnotic flaccidity but peaceful, focused clarity. Hesychasm is not a “refined technique of annihilation in order to make space to a contemplative prayer.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>18</sup> Although man is certainly a unity, for a discussion of the trichotomous structure of man supposed here: *nous, psyche, soma*, see Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2nd ed., (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1995), pp. 104-13. Pure prayer is especially associated with the *nous*, the “inner man.” The term *nous*, moreover, may be treated as roughly synonymous with

discursive activity of the intellect, and stillness refers to the stillness of the inner movements of the passions and emotions, then the psychological aspects of man operate, in a manner of speaking, at an inferior level within man's total being than the spiritual organ by which man reaches out to God apophatically.<sup>19</sup> As Scrima argues, "the psychological stage is completely exterior to the spiritual order."<sup>20</sup> Scrima will even distinguish and identify a third apophatic stage or "moment," one beyond the discursivity of negative theology, and beyond the initial stage of contemplative prayer which operates at the "threshold of the effective union with Divinity," finally identifying the third stage or "moment," that of "antinomic apophaticism."<sup>21</sup> This is when the transcendent paradoxicality of the God-man relation comes more fully into focus as the "creature meets its Builder in light."<sup>22</sup>

Now, although an exploration of this third, luminous moment of apophaticism, in the deifying experience of the Uncreated Light of God, goes beyond the scope of this essay, it is enough for

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man's spirit, understood biblically, as per St. Irenaeus. *Psyche* refers especially to the passible elements in man, including *epithymia* and *thymos*, with *logos* as distinct from *nous* by being man's practical reason, with *epithymia*, *thymos*, *logos* being "entirely restricted to the psychological sphere" (Thunberg, p. 107). Cf. *Art of Prayer*, p. 60. "The body is made of earth; yet it is not something dead but alive and endowed with a living soul. Into this soul is breathed a spirit - the spirit of God, intended to know God, to reverence Him, to seek and taste Him, and to have its joy in Him and nothing else."

<sup>19</sup> This may not strike one as strange from within a Patristic vantage, but considering the psychologizing of the present age, and the constant recourse to therapeutic models for viewing man, it is nonetheless striking to encounter the idea that 'psychological man' is neither the target nor the means of hesychia. For a classic, full length discussion of the increased, even insidious, prevalence of the therapeutic model, see Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Andre Scrima, *Apophatic Anthropology*, p. 85.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87. For a similar division of apophaticism, cf. Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 237.



present purposes to humbly observe that because apophaticism transcends psychology and its acts of conceptualization and emotionalization, one will therefore not psychologically overlay the *concept* of God during pure prayer. Conceptualization, if taken as a necessarily abiding or inextricable property of prayer, would plunge man into a form of subtle idolatry, which is to say the replacing of God with a conceptual sign of Him that permanently externalizes according to the superimposition of concepts acting as an overlay to the Divine, the Divine which, in reality, is apophatically beyond conceptualization. Man is deeper to himself than the concepts he forms, and God is deeper still, therefore for man to meet God to man's fullest ontological participation, he must meet God in that profound ontological place that is deeper than language and out of which his activities spring. Because man bears internally within himself the apophatic Image, his internal acts of conceptualization would therefore become an internal obstacle to the anthropological silence and stillness which act as the threshold of pure prayer, a discursive barrier to entering into God's divine silence and stillness.<sup>23</sup> Not "out there" but "in there," through a radical *enstasis* the experience of God is internally beyond and deep to psychological man's internality. It would be incorrect, however, to draw from this the conclusion that the God-concept, specifically, or conceptualization generally, is false. Conceptualization provides a horizon that the spirit (or *nous*) of man permeates and transcends. The concept is left behind in holy silence, but it is not thereby invalidated or rejected as if it were mere nominalism.

Two things can be discussed in light of the foregoing, one Christological and one psychological. Scrima observes that apophaticism "reveals here its deepest meaning, its crucial inner face... of the 'deepest mystery of the cross.'"<sup>24</sup> In other words, not only is the apophatic mode not de-Christological, but in apophati-

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<sup>23</sup> See below for a discussion of the vital distinction between natural and supernatural silence.

<sup>24</sup> Andre Scrima, *Apophatic Anthropology*, p. 91.

cism's self-emptying it actually re-presents the reality or *logos* of the Cross of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:18), and is apprehended by a living *kenosis* of man moving enstatically beyond his ability to conceptualize. The Cross exceeds man's ability to conceptualize and so, not in his psychology, it is also at the *kenosis* and apophaticism of the Cross where human being "meets his Creator, eternally dying in God in order to rise and live eternally in Him."<sup>25</sup> As such, "apophatic antinomism accurately represents a '*via crucis*' for a being's spiritual ascension."<sup>26</sup> The Cross is thus not reducible to the merely conceptual *cum* psychological, or ethical, but as that recapitulating and Personal divine reality which is rooted deeper and moves beyond the psychological, even the historical, "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). Apophaticism in light of the Cross is thus essentially kenotic and cruciform, where "the divine abyss is articulated with the human abyss."<sup>27</sup> This ontological coordination also provides a theologically apophatic, as opposed to a merely psychological, historical, or ethical frame for St. Paul's well-known insight into Christ's *kenosis*: "Let this mind (*φρονέω*) be in you which was also in Christ Jesus... [Who] emptied (*κενόω*) Himself" (Philippians 2:5, 7). The kenotic mind of Christ is also the apophatic mind of he who prays purely, and as such exceeds the merely psychological.<sup>28</sup> God is a supernatural infinity and man, His image, is a corresponding natural infinity "with an apophatic structure," and so according to apophatic anthropology only the "deepest mystery of man" can touch this infinite, silent, and cruciform mystery of God in the depths of his being, for "the psychological structure and interiority of man... still belongs to the exterior, observable, and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 91.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> The pervasiveness and prevalence of psychology makes this point essential and worth repeating, especially in light of the solutions discussed below, for the focus on the psychological necessarily stunts man's relationship not only with God, but also himself.

expressible..."<sup>29</sup> Since it is the "mysterious and ineffable nucleus" of apophatic man that is his deepest place of personhood, and so his deepest point of contact with God, the cruciform meaning and method of kenotic contact will naturally correspond to it.<sup>30</sup>

Scrima argues that it is the Image-bearing ontology of man that is the foundation for, and that gives birth to, the idea of apophatic anthropology.<sup>31</sup> In asserting this he refers to St. Basil's arguments against Eunomius when Basil more generally asserts that not only can the divine essence not be known or expressed with concepts, but likewise created essences.<sup>32</sup> The essence of created being is also constituted of a "nucleus of mystery."<sup>33</sup> Thus apophaticism is not only a truth regarding the Uncreated sphere, but also a truth regarding the created sphere, and so has both a supernatural and a natural dimension. It is from this "physical and metaphysical point of articulation of the created with the Uncreated" that "a human cannot lack his mysterious interiority that exceeds and refuses the cataphatic notional determinations and also establishes his real communication with the divine."<sup>34</sup> But it is not simply from the general idea of created being that the peculiarity of man's apophatic nature is gleaned. As Scrima states, "Man's mysterious depth is not an impersonal abyss, the entrails of blind nature, but it is rather revealed as living presence, as 'face,' as 'inner man,' with a life having its own dimensions, accomplished beyond and above nature."<sup>35</sup> Thus, although there is purported to be a purely natural essence that is mysterious and beyond conceptual penetration, "the original homeland of the mysterious man cannot be natural existence, but he must come straight from the mysterious depth of his Creator who forged

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<sup>29</sup> Andre Scrima, *Apophatic Anthropology*, p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 97.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

him in His likeness.”<sup>36</sup> Again the fact of man’s origin as Image-bearer is key.

Man’s Image-bearing is rooted in his creation by God, and therefore it is not an add-on or an accident to human being, but is included in its very nature and structure. The Image-bearing quality has been wounded by the Fall, yes, but man in a theological sense *means* Image-bearer, and so he can be a poor or a good bearer of said Image, but man would cease to be man if he were not in some sense its bearer. The Image of God is what constitutes and in-forms man’s ontology, and as such “the general foundations of apophatic anthropology [are grasped] in this essential concept.”<sup>37</sup> Man is a living icon, and so he is inwardly and ontologically directed towards his Archetype, not merely outwardly and ethically. At the depths, even at the metaphysical core of his being, man is theocentric.<sup>38</sup> In creating him, “God confers to the human creature the image as an ontological foundation of its existence.”<sup>39</sup> In this way, “man is no longer man without his divine icon.”<sup>40</sup> Anticipating what will be discussed below as the existential apophaticism of hesychastic experience, Scrima adds that the “profound roots of our honest human existence must then be searched in this deep region where man’s inward mysterious face is hidden,” for the “innermost, the most personal, and the closest to man nucleus is at the same time someone else’s property: God’s property.”<sup>41</sup> Man

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<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, pp. 98-9.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 99. Cf. p. 102. The important distinction, and tension, between having the *image* and *likeness* of God goes beyond the present scope of discussion. In short, *likeness* refers to the fulfilling or becoming all that is implicate in the *image*. Cf. Andre Scrima, *Apophatic Anthropology*, pp. 108-9.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, pp. 99-100. The ethical dimension of spiritual life, i.e. following the Commandments, is thus the act of coordinating the outer reality to the inner reality.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 102.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, pp. 102-3. This is, of course, paradoxical, for man as a created being is not God, and yet finds his deepest identification not with created beings but with God.

as Image-bearer therefore cannot look to man or to nature for his meaning or identity, but to God, for man's "ontological and metaphysical center" is God, which is inaccessible to and inexhaustible by discursive motions.<sup>42</sup> Man is "no longer man without his divine icon," and so in order to transform wounded *image* into *likeness*, he must enter upon an apophatic path which takes him beyond the conceptual-psychological and into the mysterious silence of his own being.<sup>43</sup>

### 3 Dumitru Staniloae's Existential Apophaticism

The foregoing brings the present essay to a shift from apophatic anthropology as such to what might be understood as an apophatic *praxis*, or *hesychasm*, rooted in apophatic anthropology.<sup>44</sup> If Andre Scrima's work provided the theoretical grounding for apophatic anthropology, then Dumitru Staniloae's work may help to frame that discussion in terms of *existential* apophaticism, "to Jesus: by what is deep within us," what Staniloae calls an "existential abstraction."<sup>45</sup> This existential abstraction is, essentially, the threshold of *hesychasm* viewed through

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<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>44</sup> Although in great brevity, Elder Sophrony also anticipates this in his work, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, when he observes, after citing St. Markarios' reference to our being in the image and likeness of God, that "the mind can still more deeply penetrate the heart... divested of all images and concepts... Then the soul penetrates into the 'darkness' of a quite especial nature, and is subsequently... standing in the presence of God with a *pure* mind." See Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991), pp. 144-5. A look at Staniloae's work will hopefully make more clear the alluded connection between apophatic anthropology and hesychasm..

<sup>45</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*, tr. Jerome Newville and Otilia Kloos, (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2002), p. 283.

an apophatic and anthropological lens. By emphasizing the personal, existential dimension of apophaticism, Staniloae can give due stress to the process and result of the experience of disidentification with deep psychological motions and activity, not only with concepts *per se*.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, retaining also the anthropological dimension guarantees the movement beyond the merely ethical dimension of dispassion, for the process of apophaticism highlighted here thus describes the healing of a person through their disengaging from false, fallen psychological identifications, the *schema* and *praxis* of the “old man” (*παλαιός ἄνθρωπος*) and his “manner of life” (*ἀναστροφή*), the very identifications which serve to produce the passions. In other words, through existential abstraction we “are left only with ourselves and not with our superficial selves, with our traits and properties which can be seen or thought about in definite concepts.”<sup>47</sup> The radicality of this existential apophaticism is that it locates what could be described as a middle stage between the natural experience of discursivity and the supernatural experience of God, a stage of natural naked awareness rooted in Image-bearing personal being: “Rather we remain with our ‘I’ from the depths, unconstrained by the thought of things, which can’t be seen or defined by any concept whatsoever.”<sup>48</sup> In between the entanglement of self with “the thought of things,” on the one hand, and the radically mysterious God, on the other, stands the “‘I’ from the depths.” A natural or created infinity, this simple consciousness, “I,” is not escaping the prism of thought only to sit in the psychological, for we “find

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<sup>46</sup> Sakharov’s analysis of “the Development of Intrusive Thoughts” shows that the term “intrusive thoughts” applies to all images and cogitation, even “good thoughts,” such that all thought is in this sense are extraneous relative to *hesychasm*. See *Saint Silouan*, pp. 131-42.

<sup>47</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 283. Cf. Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae*, (Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 1999), p. 142: “Staniloae adopts existentialism and apophaticism as key hermeneutical categories in interpreting the Orthodox experience.”

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

ourselves only with the simple consciousness of the presence of the self, of its indefinable realities."<sup>49</sup> Recalling Scrima's apophatic anthropology heightens the profundity of the deiform nature of this naked "I," for in all its existential nakedness it is not without Image-bearing ontological content.<sup>50</sup>

Staniloae cites the pervasive Patristic prayer theme of "leaving behind (...) all perceptible and intelligible things," and in doing so observes the vital distinction between mind (*nous*) and reason (*logos*).<sup>51</sup> Reason is that organ of the mind which grasps by means of concepts, whereas mind is much broader and is the "basis of the human subject."<sup>52</sup> By "subject" is not meant the subjectivity implied by personal viewpoints based on personal psychology, but the root "I" that subsists prior to all psychological constructs. Psychologism, and by extension rationalism are thus *a fortiori* excluded. By mind (*nous*), then, is meant the "ultimate principle of all that is in him."<sup>53</sup> It is mind because it is (self-)conscious, alert, and intelligent, not dull or vegetative, but it is not reason because it is deep to reason, intuitive, and able to be still (*hesychia*) whereas reason cannot be still but must always be in motion with conceptualization. Therefore, we "must leave behind all concepts and raise ourselves above reason which forms concepts, in order to grasp the indefinable

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<sup>49</sup> Ibidem. Staniloae further states in this context that this depth center of man, his heart "is the central location of the mind, the center of man, his spirit, his subject, the whole man within, not just the intellectual or sentimental."

<sup>50</sup> One cannot help but see in this an analogy with the nakedness that was "without shame" in the Garden of Eden, that of Adam and Eve prior to the Fall.

<sup>51</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp. 283-4. Specifically in this context he cites, respectively, saints Gregory Palamas and Maximus the Confessor. St. Theophan states, "In purely contemplative prayer, words and thoughts themselves disappear, not by our own wish, but of their own accord." *Art of Prayer*, p. 72.

<sup>52</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 284.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem. In this context he also employs the Patristic analogy of Mind to Reason being analogous with Father to Son.

basis of our subject.”<sup>54</sup> It is only then that the mind will conceive “its own self, and become conscious of itself,” for only the mind can perceive its own self as such.<sup>55</sup> Things and concepts are problematic because various “things and concepts are a curtain which shuts off our view, not only of God, but also of the basis of our subject.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, the existential entryway into the experience of apophaticism is the experience of this root subject self, “I,” not conceived conceptually or psychologically projected, but simple, naked self-awareness. By entering into this apophatic experience of “I,” apart from all conceptualization or directedness of awareness to concepts, ultimately even to true concepts of God, one enters into the ontological threshold of the silence of the Image-bearer’s created infinity where the Original Image is *encountered*. In this sense, prayer is related less to what we do than to what we are, and to becoming who we are.

It is important to note that the nakedness of the ontological experience, not being conceptual, cannot then become the source of its own *self*-generated dogma. As argued above, the realism of cataphatic construction is rooted in Christian revelation and so guarantees that the “naked experience of ‘I’” does not relativize or diminish the necessity of the Orthodox *canon*.<sup>57</sup> Rather, the naked experience of the Image-bearer is rooted ontologically in the original Image, and is consequently framed according to the Orthodox *canon* such that the dogmatic conceptual content of Orthodoxy informs and clothes the reemergent psychological “I.”<sup>58</sup> In this way the concept-empty mind is not unmoored from her mystical, cruciform root. The coordination of the apophatic self (“the hidden man of the heart”) with the psychological self, moreover and especially,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, p. 285.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>57</sup> In other words, existential apophaticism is not a place of entry for “new revelations,” syncretism, or dogmatic progressivism.

<sup>58</sup> The Liturgical life of the Church also serves this purpose of providing a space for the self to be formed according to the Orthodox *canon*.



functions as an existential dialectic which initiates and maintains the process of theosis, the friction unto sanctification. Without this dialectic between the concept-empty and the concept-laden self, the authentic dogmatic content of Christian faith can become denatured through a relativism of mystical experience, on the experiential hand, or get paralyzed in a self-enclosed interconceptual universe of intellectual and ethical abstractions,<sup>59</sup> on the dogmatic hand. Rather, “the human mind, as the image of the divine Mind,” finds within its own depths a living reality which corresponds to the sphere of conceptuality it left behind and to which it returns, re-collects, and remembers, and thus pure prayer and psychological life meet in the “I” as mutually reinforcing.<sup>60</sup> This, then, serves also as the source of meaning and validity of what in some sense is understood as less perfect forms of prayer.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Similar to Lossky’s description of the “closed being of particular substances.” See Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, (Crestwood: NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), p. 122.

<sup>60</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 285.

<sup>61</sup> Sakharov discusses three forms or modes of prayer, only one of which, according to the Fathers, can be truly identified as “sound, proper and fruitful.” See Sakharov, pp. 132-3. The others modes of prayer are, in fact, prayer only by way of analogy or proximity to the third, which is characterized by “rapt concentration” and absence of cogitation. If this view is taken out of its proper boundaries to an extreme, it could lead to the false impression that heartfelt, extemporaneous and/or prayerbook prayers that do not approach the “pure prayer” beyond all thought and images are not only inferior but in some way invalid. This is certainly not the case. In the context of speaking about the relation between prayerbook prayers and extemporaneous prayer, St. Theophan the Recluse states of God that “only perfunctory prayer is displeasing to Him.” See *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, (New York, NY: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 112-13 (cf. p. 72). The issue, then, is not simply about words as such, but the quality or flow of attention towards God that accompanies/is the act of prayer. Thoughts and cares can be present in prayer (1 Peter 5:7). Not only the realism of the cataphatic categories, but the Incarnation of God in human nature guarantees that embodied language can be a vehicle for true, even

According to Staniloae, the “mind should be able to see its own self as in a mirror (...). Yet, images and concepts cover the mirror with a wall which must be pierced with much effort, in order to penetrate the heart, or its own being.”<sup>62</sup> This circular seeing of one’s own being is highly significant because, in seeing, it meets something living; self meets itself, for our “subject is revealed and lives its own self, it meets itself eye to eye, as in a mirror, it gets to know itself.”<sup>63</sup> Concepts, however, have no intrinsic life, but the self does have life, thus adding vitality to existential apophaticism. Concepts not only act as a veil to the personal living subject, “I,” but because God is a Person and not merely an object, not even *the* Object, “it is necessary to forsake all objects in order to be raised to the understanding of Him.”<sup>64</sup> A consequence of the concept-veil is that both self and God get obscured. If man knows God through unknowing, then, “being neither himself nor someone else,” it follows that as Image-bearer he knows himself likewise only through an analogous process of unknowing.<sup>65</sup> The difficulty of this is especially pronounced because the psychological self provides a pseudo-complete, conceptual, and therefore lifeless picture of itself that resists life and nakedness.<sup>66</sup> The psyche’s lifeless projection of

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fruitful, prayer, even if it is not “pure prayer,” much less “perfect prayer” (cf. Sakharov, pp. 140-1).

<sup>62</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 285. The mind seeing “its own self as in a mirror” describes well the circularity of Dionysian apophaticism. For Staniloae’s continued use of the notion of the “mirror,” including its source in St. Gregory of Nyssa, see pp. 286, 287. St. Theophan also taught: “Until the soul is established with the mind in the heart, it does not see itself, nor is it properly aware of itself.” See *Art of Prayer*, p. 222

<sup>63</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 286.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 291.

<sup>65</sup> St. Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 1.3, 137; cf. 2, 138.

<sup>66</sup> This is precisely the problem of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees condemned by Jesus, white-washed tombs filled with dead men’s bones. See Matthew 23:15-28. Hypocrisy, etymologically, refers to, pretending, play-acting on a stage. The only difference here is that the fallen ego-character is the merely psychological self, which appears lively,

itself in terms of a conceptually deduced “I” therefore ends up serving as one of the most profound barriers to the experience of God. Rather than remaining within the sphere of the psyche and so at the outer limit of one’s existential surface, conceptual objects must be forsaken, for such lifeless objects are yet only external things.<sup>67</sup> When this nakedness is encountered, however, as necessary and vitalizing as this is, one is still within the natural and created self, and so the sequence from “I” to God is then still further necessary. Since the created “I” is not its own foundation, but the fundamental expression of personal, Image-bearing being, and God being the Uncreated “I Am” and Archetypal Image, then without this apophatic transition from the created to the Uncreated one has not yet touched the living Source of one’s being. In other words, to look into the natural infinity of the ontological self (as distinct from the self-considered psychologically) is not to reach the final goal (*telos*), but is to place one’s awareness in the only position where encounter with the original Image can be realized. Return to God is therefore circular by way of return into the self.<sup>68</sup> Having become free from “the slavery of contents,” one has moved, however briefly, into an existential experience beyond intellectual discursivity, even if not yet an encounter with the Divine, for “the meeting of the subject with itself reveals a positive datum with an incomparably higher value than all ob-

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but is the lifeless projection of a self-concept, “being dead (*ὄντας νεκροὺς*) in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1-3).

<sup>67</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 285.

<sup>68</sup> This seems to disagree with Golitzin’s reading of apophatic circularity, which in his treatment appears more like a “direct,” cataphatic, hermeneutic circle of progressive conceptual refinement: “out, about, and back.” See his *Mystagogy*, pp. 129-30. Dionysian circularity is one of three given motions of the soul, the other two being “spiral” and “direct,” and as such circularity is not presented as the result of a step-wise progression from “direct,” then to “spiral,” and finally to “circular,” but is quite simply “when the soul enters itself and away from external things.”

jects.”<sup>69</sup> In this light, anthropological apophaticism is what makes surrender possible, and also the acceptance of the activity of grace, for it transitions spiritual life from one of a “white-knuckled” axiological sanctification to one of mind-watchfulness (*nepsis*) and depth-stillness (*hesychia*). Man’s spiritual life must be deeper than his thinking self.<sup>70</sup> If, however, spiritual life consisted of a constant psychological tension, composed of the coordination of a ceaseless flexion of reason, emotion, and will, then any lapse of concentration or weakness of ego would undo it. Worse, the ego being the central pivot of reason, emotion, and will, it could never cease being the central figure of the spiritual life, for the ego is the substance of its own activities. According to this mode, God is externalized and reduced to an interplay of projected concepts, demands, and permissions, all centered in and dependent on the ego’s ability to sustain them. God, even the true God, may be the central, unifying *idea*, but this only serves as the ultimate projection of the psyche co-opted into the ego’s constant flexion of reason, emotion, and will. The apophatic self, being the threshold of the apophatic experience of God, is untouched, and *a fortiori* so is God. The fallen ego thus stands in the place of the living God, meaning that failure of the ego at any of its flexed points must be experienced as failing God Himself. Faith in this God, then, is fundamentally a subliminal faith in the self’s ability to maintain and live up to its own psychological projection. In order to escape

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<sup>69</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 286.

<sup>70</sup> Yannaras speaks helpfully of “the priority of personhood with regard to consciousness. Being-as-person signifies a cognitive power before any ‘semantic’ shaping of the content of consciousness... This transcendence of the of the priority of the ‘semantic’ (intellectual) shaping of the content of consciousness prevents us from identifying human existence purely and simply with *thinking*.” Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, tr. Norman Russell, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), p. 8. Since, according to him, “the reality of the person is prior to any intellectual-objective definition,” the experience of oneself in naked personhood is, in the intuitive self-disclosure of unadorned awareness, primary and thus open to experience apophatically and existentially.

the pressure and tyranny of this projected self, one then either submits to the shame of a miserable perfectionism,<sup>71</sup> the guilt of an antinomian permissivism, or the false peace of a pseudo-mystical irrationalism.<sup>72</sup> Anthropological apophaticism, however, allows the ego to existentially surrender its centrality in the de-conceptualized facing of itself in the depths of its own mystery, whereas Image-bearer it can behold the Archetypal Image in a yet more ontologically central place, one that is deep to reason, emotion, and will.<sup>73</sup>

Without his Image-bearing ontology, man could not enter into true likeness to God. If the foundation of his being were not so coordinated with God, then his nature would be more akin to the world of objects. Staniloae states, however, that “the unlimitedness of the subject makes us follow the scent of the divine infinity.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, our natural, created infinity entices us towards God. This is so, according to him, because our “subject can have its basis only in the divine infinity, not in the world of objects.”<sup>75</sup> This coordination of infinities, the natural with the divine, then causes us to pursue God as an intrinsic property of our experience of being, which is to say “the human mind, as the image of the divine Mind.”<sup>76</sup> Since the self-stripped of all conceptual overlay is by definition without passion, its transparency naturally opens up to the vision of God, and “sees

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<sup>71</sup> This, not incidentally, is the source of the false understanding of the difficult saying: “Keep thy mind in hell...”

<sup>72</sup> This is a dull, insensitive, sometimes sentimental peace. One may, alternatively, seek to embrace a new “God” more suited to one’s psychological predilections, or perhaps nihilism, in an attempt to escape the tyranny of self. One could also seek to reduce the pressure through an ingenious series of qualifications of God’s various commands such that one is miraculously always in the right.

<sup>73</sup> Prior to this, it might be said, man is unable to fully perceive the pervasiveness of sin. This vision would utterly undo his system of projection for he is unconsciously still the source of his own salvation.

<sup>74</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp. 286-7.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 287.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 285.

God through itself.”<sup>77</sup> God is therefore not experienced as “a person apart,” but as “mirrored in himself.”<sup>78</sup> Man reflects or images God by nature, and although this reflection is covered by sin, when it is cleansed in the apophatic descent into the naked awareness of “I,” seeing itself immediately “it also sees God... without turning to Him in order to see Him in His hypostasis.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, God is not externalized and projected in conceptual terms to the psyche and then embraced through some psychological mechanism, but is met in the Image-bearing depths of one’s own being when it has forsaken all psychological objects, including the psychological self, in pure awareness: “So, when I feel the mind losing its boundaries I feel at the same time that divinity is in it too.”<sup>80</sup> In wonder at the face of the natural unlimitedness of our created infinity, we realize (not by means of conceptualization but by a divine disclosure) that the “unlimitedness of our subject” is created so as to be able to receive Divine infinity of God; our “cleansed mind” becomes “the place of the abyss.”<sup>81</sup>

Existential abstraction, which is to say the direct looking into the center of self-awareness, the emptiness of psychological activity, i.e. thought, emotion, and will, by no means implies an absence of effort.<sup>82</sup> A peculiar effort, we must yet strive greatly “to arrive under the ray of [God’s] reign in a conscientious way and remain there.”<sup>83</sup> St. Paul approaches this in his letter to the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibidem, p. 287.

<sup>78</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>79</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem, p. 288. It is again worth mentioning that this is not a reference to the pantheistic loss or destruction of psychological or ontological boundaries, for the operations of the psyche are stilled in pure awareness of one’s own being.

<sup>81</sup> Ibidem: “In our creaturehood the hypostasis is the principle that assumes divinity into itself.” Sakharov, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2006), pp. 190.192.

<sup>82</sup> The existential abstraction may be understood as another name for repentance. See below for a discussion of the relation between grace and effort.

<sup>83</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp. 289-90.

Romans, significantly the section read in the Orthodox Baptismal service, when he teaches: “reckon (*λογίζομαι*) yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:11). This notion of reckoning oneself dead to sin implies that the method of defeating sin is not by strengthening the psychological self, but decentralizing it, considering the psychological self to be inoperative as a source of activity, even dead. Recall that in the previous verses he just argued that in baptism the “old man” (*ὁ παλαιὸς ἡμῶν ἄνθρωπος*) was united with Christ’s death (Rom 6:5-6). In brief, “we died with Christ” (Rom 6:8). This means that the spiritual life proceeds through the gateway of the death of the old self and its ways, or *πρᾶξις*.<sup>84</sup> The new life, however, proceeds on the basis of reckoning or accounting (*λογίζομαι*) oneself as alive in Christ Jesus. There is certainly a great ascetical effort in this, but not in the typical sense of psychological willpower, but of sustained and profound surrender: “present (*παρίστημι*) your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable (*λογικός*) service (*λατρεία*). And do not be conformed (*συσχηματίζω*, from *σχῆμα*) to this world, but be transformed (*μεταμορφώω*) by the renewing of your mind (*νοῦς*), that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:1-2). The ascesis therefore is to stay dead, to not resuscitate the old man, and in this way Christ’s command is not merely ethical but ontological in nature: “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). Clearly, it is not a matter of simply trying harder, for all trying to overcome the ego based on the ego’s efforts simply reinforces the problem or pattern (*σχῆμα*) of the psychological man and his wishing to save his life, which is actually his conceptually projected ego. The effort, rather, is simply to relinquish psychological flexion, which would be to echo the Incarnate Lord, “Not my will, but Thy will be done” (Luke 22:42). In

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<sup>84</sup> Colossians 3:9-11. Cf. Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 4:22-24.

practical terms one defeats, say, lust, not by increasing the powers of the psychological self-will, for lust exists out of the power of the psychological self.<sup>85</sup> Instead, one defeats lust by surrendering one's "will to lust" in a living sacrifice of one's pseudo-autonomous self to God.<sup>86</sup> Christ has already died, and so the benefits of His defeat of sin on the Cross become the property of the one identified with Him in His death. The method, then, is Christ, and so by accounting oneself dead and turning towards the root of self, which is apophatic and deep to the psychologically projected ego, a naked awareness of personal being is encountered, a living sacrifice which opens onto the space where encounter and transformation (*μεταμορφώω*) with God is.

The absence of psychological activity in existential apophaticism also does not imply an absence of feeling. A distinction is observed between *feeling* and *feelings*, where *feelings* is closer to what is typically understood as emotions, and *feeling* is more akin to sensing or seeing. A person has, say, angry *feelings*, but *feeling* their way through a dark room, or *feeling* that they are cold, is a distinct sense and usage of the term, and so one should beware of equivocation.<sup>87</sup> Feelings such as anger belong to the

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<sup>85</sup> To deny or "hate" oneself as Christ teaches is thus not, and cannot be reduced to, a mere psychological, emotional self-hatred, but a deep, piercing insight into the distinction and division between one's own soul and spirit (Hebrews 4:12). Self-denial and hatred in this sense refer to the denial or dethronement of the psychological self-ego as the center of mass of one's personhood, and to carry one's cross means to carry the resultant dethronement-death of the psychologically projected "I" in a permanent state of transfixion to its death. In short, generating an emotional hatred of self would only serve to *strengthen* and magnify the problem of the psychological ego mechanism. To misunderstand this is to mistake the psychological "I" for the spiritual "I," and to use the ego to fight the ego, when the real battle is the surrendering or dropping of the ego in the turn to a deeper experience of personal being.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 291.

<sup>87</sup> St. Theophan uses the analogy of a feeling warm room. See *The Art of Prayer*, p. 100.



emotional realm, whereas the feeling of, say, God's nearness does not belong to the emotional realm but to watchfulness and attention in the heart.<sup>88</sup> What is being called here naked awareness is fully awake, alert, and sensitive, and so it feels the proximity of God through its attention to God, through its being ontologically directed towards Him. St. Theophan the Recluse goes so far as to say that "the chief thing is to possess a constant feeling for God... It is this feeling that constitutes our rule (...) all other rules are replaced by it"<sup>89</sup> The very words of prayer are intended only to support this feeling, and without this feeling they are lifeless.<sup>90</sup> Thus even the words of prayer are subsumed into the deeper purpose of man's experience of God in the depths of his being, for the "essential part of this is not the words, but in faith, contrition, and self-surrender to the Lord. With these feelings one can stand before the Lord even without any words and it will still be prayer."<sup>91</sup> Staniloae says similarly, only in the existential apophatic mode, that God, having overwhelmed us from within the contemplation of ourselves as pure subject, with "the force of Him as supreme Subject" then "makes us feel His greatness before His majesty. We become conscious of our nothingness, and yet this moves us to adore Him even more."<sup>92</sup> It is even discovered that this feeling for God was awakened by God Himself, the Archetypal Image moving the Image-bearer from within: "He makes us call Him."<sup>93</sup> Ultimately, the emphasis on feeling (distinct from emotions) in relation to non-conceptuality in prayer points to the necessity of "directedness," which is anchored by the Jesus Prayer. The mind, then, in turning to focus its attention on the mind itself (watchfulness), is not therefore entering into a quasi-spiritual, unfeeling,

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<sup>88</sup> Cf. St. Theophan in *The Art of Prayer*, pp. 52, 61.

<sup>89</sup> St. Theophan the Recluse, *The Art of Prayer*, p. 86. "The principal thing in prayer is a feeling heart."

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86.

<sup>91</sup> St. Theophan the Recluse, *The Art of Prayer*, p. 89; cf. pp. 70-1.

<sup>92</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 291.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 292.

and impersonal nothingness, but in surrendering to God maintains its personal toward-ness towards Him as a feeling.

From Theology to Methodology and Technology

The foregoing opens onto the problem of the practical relation between the theoretical and methodological dimensions of prayer, for the very logic of the method must correlate to the reality of the personal subject. Prayer is not *ad hoc* in its relation to man: "Prayer is always what allows the turning away of the mind from all things, from all ideas. But this isn't only an act of the self-contemplation of the mind, but is an ecstasy of the thinking subject, an act by which it transcends itself; it goes beyond itself, to the supreme and infinite Subject."<sup>94</sup> Prayer is the activity that drives man beyond himself, inwardly through himself, to God. Since the theological and theoretical also manifest in the methodological, which itself dovetails with so-called technique, it will also be necessary to briefly discuss technique in terms of some 'theory of technique,' or technology, as the specific methodologically informed practical application of scientific knowledge. This is not without precedent,<sup>95</sup> and is in a sense presupposed throughout the Church's prayer manuals, the *Philokalia* as an anthology of such texts being preeminent among them.<sup>96</sup> As such, the question of method and technique

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<sup>94</sup> Ibidem, p. 290. Perhaps *enstasis* would also be an appropriate term - a standing within oneself.

<sup>95</sup> Cavarnos' introduction to the *Philokalia* states that the "path to be followed is spoken of [in the texts of the *Philokalia*] as 'the science (*episteme*) of sciences and the art (*techne*) of arts.'" See *The Philokalia*, tr. Constantine Cavarnos, (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 2008), p. 12. St. Nikodemos, in his *Proem* to the *Philokalia*, calls the methodology or "way to find Grace" not only "wonderful" but "most scientific" (Ibidem, p. 30).

<sup>96</sup> The notional relation and distinction between technology and technique is not typically drawn in discussions of techniques in prayer, but it is nonetheless important. Translating *techne* as "art," as in the "art" or skill (*epidexiotita*) of painting or stonemasonry, is certainly acceptable, but in current usage appears to lose its relation to a specific body of technical knowledge (*technologia*) which might call for the relevant application of some specific technique or "scientific" precision,

in the context of mystical prayer and apophatic anthropology therefore centers and pivots on the movement from conceptual *cum* psychological content to pure prayer.<sup>97</sup>

#### 4 The Jesus Prayer

A full treatment of method and technique in light of hesychasm is certainly beyond the scope of the present study, and so it will have to be restricted to considering only a few salient points in order to sketch how the properties of method and technique bear relation to hesychasm and, especially, apophatic anthro-

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and so obscures and even disjoins “art’s” inner logical relation to any of its “techniques.” One would readily call a painter an artist, but hardly a stonemason, although one might be more inclined to understand him as a technician, “an expert/specialist in the practical application and technical details of a science, a person skilled in the technique of an art or craft.” Despite technology’s non-essential association with material manipulation, moving from “technique” to “technology” on the interconceptuality of *techne*, *techniki*, *technologia*, preserves conceptually this intrinsic relation between a technique and its *technologia*. An example of a specific technique would be, say, inhaling while mentally reciting “Lord Jesus Christ” and exhaling while mentally reciting, “have mercy on me.” The more “technological” consideration, however, would be a discussion of the broader, theoretically informed practical relation between breathing and praying. In other words, a technique is a specific application of a technology.

<sup>97</sup> Although they can be said to overlap, they are not yet synonymous. Method addresses the problem of how to proceed, and technology identifies and assembles the tools useful for applying real leverage to the problem. Technique is the specific application of technology. The witness of the Fathers is that no specific techniques are required as such, but being relative are applied with discernment according to temperament and maturity. For the problem addressed by technology, cf. *Art of Prayer*, p. 71. “We must acquire the habit of always being in communion with God, without any image, any process of reasoning, any perceptible movement of thought. Such is the expression of prayer. The essence of inner prayer, or standing with the mind in the heart, consists precisely in this.”

pology. The central technique of the hesychast is the Jesus Prayer, together with discerning watchfulness and stillness, or *nepsis* and *hesychia*. The relation between the Jesus Prayer and the apophatic depths of human being is rooted in the dogmatic fact that the Spirit of Christ actually indwells the heart of the believer, and therefore calling on His Name is the directing of the mind towards Him in the apophatic “location” within the depths of the heart.<sup>98</sup> In approaching existential abstraction, then, the human mind centers upon the single “thought” of Jesus. Reducing the mind from its typical habit of many thoughts to one single thought is a key methodological consideration. Thought is non-different from mind, and so scattered thought is scattered mind, whereas focused thought is focused mind.<sup>99</sup> In this way, focusing on a single thought is not equivalent to the superficial act of “thinking,” as in “thinking about” something, i.e. discursivity. Focusing the mind on a single thought is instead equivalent to focusing the energy of the mind, and so the mind itself. This singularity of thought-focus therefore stabilizes the fluctuations of the mind, and concentrates it, so that by focused attention it may descend into deeper places of being-awareness, i.e. “mind-in-the-heart.”<sup>100</sup> It might also be said that awareness or attention is the life or spirit of the mind.<sup>101</sup> The

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<sup>98</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 292.

<sup>99</sup> St. Gregory of Sinai states succinctly: “The origin and cause of thoughts lies in the splitting up, by man’s transgression, of his single and simple memory, which has thus lost the memory of God and, becoming multiple instead of simple, and varied instead of single, has fallen prey to its own forces.” See St. Gregory of Sinai, *Texts on Commandments and Dogmas*, in *Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart*, tr. E. Kadloubovsky and G.E.H. Palmer, (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 48.

<sup>100</sup> *Art of Prayer*, p. 68, pp. 97.124-5; Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 283. The initial stage of concentration is simply that of the mind or “head,” which then penetrates deeper to become concentration of the heart, i.e. the depths of the mind.

<sup>101</sup> The Patristic Trinitarian analogy of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as mind, reason, and spirit thus take on a methodological dimension as well. See St. Gregory of Sinai, *Texts on Commandments and Doctrines*,

subject of the self-resting in itself, free from all thoughts and images, is pure attention-awareness, “all ears and eyes.”<sup>102</sup> Here “all personal actions, thoughts, and intentions cease.”<sup>103</sup> This shows that concentration is not reducible to a mere ethical, pragmatic, or devotional exercise, a mere spiritual “discipline” or pious aesthetic, but touches the essence of the self. It also shows that prayer centered on the Name of Jesus is not the same as conceptualization. St. Dionysius states, “Jesus... is transcendent mind, utterly divine mind,”<sup>104</sup> which is to say that to call on Jesus is not to call on a conceptualized psychological projection, but a living reality within the depths of one’s subject or self. If the Archetypal Image is Jesus, and the Image-bearer says, “Jesus,” then the Image-bearer it is not enacting an imagination but is participating, however faintly, in the reality at the source of his own being.<sup>105</sup> In this way, the Name of Jesus, not in

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pp. 43-44; cf. Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 284. Identifying man’s *spirit* with his awareness or *attention* seems a natural conclusion. For example, St. Theophan states that attention “is the root of all our inner spiritual life.” *Art of Prayer*, p. 127 (cf. Matthew 6:21). Since reason (*logos*) is so easily confused with discursive reasoning in the English language, *mind* would appear to better describe the Trinitarian analogy. Since, however, *nous* is often translated as *mind*, perhaps consciousness might be submitted as a translation option, rendering the analogy of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as consciousness, mind, and attention. Moreover, attention is a focusing or localizing of consciousness and mind, and in support of the analogy Biblical usage seems to especially associate the localization of God’s presence with the manifestation of the Spirit, either dwelling within or coming upon a person. Cf. Genesis 1:2, Exodus 31:3, Numbers 11:17, Judges 3:10, 1 Samuel 10:6, 1 Kings 18:12, 1 Chronicles 12:18, etc. Man is even a temple of God. Cf. Romans 8:9, 11; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16, 19

<sup>102</sup> Sakharov, p. 133.

<sup>103</sup> *Art of Prayer*, p. 70.

<sup>104</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, tr. Colm Luibheid, “Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works,” 1.1, 372A, p. 195.

<sup>105</sup> Following from there is a sense in which the Jesus Prayer can be understood as both means and end, that to truly pray the Jesus Prayer, in its fulness, participates in God and as such is an end in itself. Pure and

its sounds but in its meaning and substance, is not an artificial imposition on the mind, even though internal verbalization eventually gives way to silence.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, because of this, although the Name is not merely an essential part of a prayer “technique” as if it were only a pragmatic mechanism to alter brain waves and enter “deeper states” of concentration and mystical experience, it is a central part of the orthodox *technologia* for reintroducing the self to itself and finally coordinating self to the Source of self and all being, the “I Am.”<sup>107</sup> Calling on the Name of Jesus is, in that light, a fulfillment of human personhood.<sup>108</sup> In sum, the Jesus Prayer acts hesychastically within the psyche at the ontological level to focus or structure the mind in order to “introduce” the praying person to the heart, the seat of pure or naked existential self-consciousness, the self-

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perfect prayer may go beyond words, but this cannot be seen as invalidating the reality of concentrated prayer as likewise within the liminal space of true prayer. As St. Theophan stated, “Only perfunctory prayer is displeasing to [God].” See *Art of Prayer*, p. 113.

<sup>106</sup> Staniloae states that mental “recitation ceases-only the repetition of the minings with thought is left” (p. 280). Cf. *Art of Prayer*, p. 125. “Words are only prayer’s expression and are always weaker in God’s eyes than prayer itself.” Cf. pp. 70-1. “Inner prayer means standing with the mind in the heart before God, either simply living in His presence, or expressing supplication, thanksgiving, and glorification.” In this sense silent attention towards God in the depths of one’s heart could occupy the whole rule of prayer.

<sup>107</sup> *Art of Prayer*, p. 84. The aspect of it being a spiritual discipline is obviously not illegitimate, and may be described as a preparatory stage as long as its apophatic and anthropological *telos* is not lost sight of. St. Theophan states of the disciplinary and preparatory aspect: “Unceasing prayer overcomes evil through hope in God, it leads a man to holy simplicity, weaning his mind from its habit of diversity of thought... He who prays ceaselessly gradually loses the habit of wandering thoughts, of distraction, of being filled with vain worries, and the more deeply this training in holiness and humility enters the soul and takes root in it, the more he loses these habits of mind.”

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Archimandrite Zacharias, *Man: The Target of God*, (Dalton, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2016), pp. 218-19, 222-23, 226.

place deeper than the psyche, and thus is key in existential abstraction.<sup>109</sup>

## 5 The Breath

Although not considered strictly necessary, in addition to the application of the Name the Patristic *technologia* also typically applies the breath together with it.<sup>110</sup> The techniques can and do vary, but the technology is the same. Therefore the next anthropological aspect of methodology to be discussed is the role of the Holy Spirit and the breath, for although not often discussed in relation to breathing, it is yet significant. Notwithstanding the interconceptual relation between breath and spirit in the Biblical languages,<sup>111</sup> there is also a Scriptural precedent discerning an ontological relation between breath and spirit *cum* Spirit, as Job states, “For my life (נְשָׁמָה, *něshamah*) is yet

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<sup>109</sup> “The Divine Name has become the ontological content of man’s hypostasis.” Zacharias, *Man: The Target of God*, p. 226.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp. 262-82. Patristic references connecting the breath with the Jesus Prayer are numerous. One example, among many possible, is from St. Nicephorus the Solitary who states that the “breathing is a natural way to the heart.” St. Nicephorus the Solitary, *Profitable Discourses on Sobriety*, in *Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart*, 33. Cf. *Art of Prayer*, pp. 96-7, 103, 104, 197.

<sup>111</sup> The wordplay in Genesis makes the ontological connection clear. “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed (נָפַח, *naphach*; LXX: ἐμφυσάω, *emphysáō*) into his nostrils the breath (נְשָׁמָה, *něshamah*; LXX: πνοή, *pnōē*) of life; and man became a living being (נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*; LXX: ψυχή, *psychē*)” (Gen 2:7). Man is a נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*, “a breathing creature.” Similarly, although the Septuagint loses some of the wordplay, man is a ψυχή, *psyche*, that which has “the breath of life,” from ψύχω, *psýchō*, meaning “to breathe, to blow.” Although a strict notional correspondence is not being drawn here, the interconceptuality is clearly manifest. See also רִּוּחַ, *rûwach* and πνεῦμα, *pneûma*, which also testify to ontological connection between life, breath, spirit, wind, and even mind. Cf. Genesis 7:15.

whole in me, and the spirit (נְשָׁמָה, *něshamah*) of God (אֵלֹהִים, *'elowahh*) is in my nostrils (אֵף, *'aph*)" (Job 27:3).<sup>112</sup> In other words, the breath is also a "special mystery" pointing to the co-presence and interpenetration of life, breath, and the Spirit of God<sup>113</sup> Consequently, there is not merely an accidental, pragmatic, or poetic relation between life, the breath, and the Spirit, and therefore the breath and prayer, but a deep ontological correlation.<sup>114</sup> A living icon of the Holy Spirit, the breath also bears witness to Christ. Through its exhale and inhale, the breath itself physiologically and semiotically rehearses the death and resurrection of Christ; each exhale is a death, a laying down of breath-life-spirit, whereas each inhale is a resurrection, a taking up again of breath-life-spirit. In this way the physiology of man's breath-spirit bears witness to Christ, *just as the Holy Spirit does* (cf. John 15:26). Mentally connecting the breath to the Name of Jesus is therefore not of an accidental nature. St Hesychios taught, "If you truly wish to put your thoughts to shame, to be serenely silent, and to live in the effortless enjoyment of a sober and quiet heart, let the Jesus Prayer cleave to your breathing."<sup>115</sup> In this light, the breath is taken out of the realm of mere *ad hoc* pragmatism, and yet it also underscores the seriousness of the Patristic warnings against the ignorant uses of manipulative breathing techniques, for the breath participates ontologically in a mysterious reality beyond the ken of men. This explains, moreover, beyond its mere utility, the breath's consistently being suggested as a technical aid to prayer, for it immediately signifies life-Life, or image-Image, which

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<sup>112</sup> See especially Genesis 2:7, where the very making of man is predicated on God breathing spirit into his nostrils.

<sup>113</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God, Vol. 2: The World: Creation and Deification*, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), p. 72.

<sup>114</sup> This differs from Staniloae's presentation of the use of the breath, which, although highlighting as very useful, he yet characterizes it as only an "auxiliary means" of assistance with the Jesus Prayer. See Staniloae, 282. Cf. Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God, Vol. 2: The World: Creation and Deification*, pp. 70, 72.

<sup>115</sup> *Art of Prayer*, p. 103.



is to say the Image-bearer's bearing of the Protype Image, and so reveals the ontological and synergistic connection between breath-spirit-Spirit, "Jesus"-Jesus, and the hesychast's existential abstraction.<sup>116</sup>

## 6 Limits of Technology

The last point to be addressed in this section is not an additional application of spiritual *technologia*,<sup>117</sup> but the theoretical limits of such a technology, especially as regards the relationship between effort and grace. Technology implies effort, and there is only so much that natural man can accomplish through effort, yet he has further to go, and so the boundary between that which is accomplished according to man's natural powers and that which is given solely by God is needs to be identified. St. Theophan the Recluse discusses this distinction especially in regards to warmth of heart, specifically between a natural (anthropologically apophatic) and supernatural (divinely apophatic) warmth. For example, he distinguishes between two states, one strenuous and one self-impelled, "when prayer acts on its own accord."<sup>118</sup> The first state is characterized by the presence of effort, and suggests that this operates within the boundaries of the natural man, under the guidance of his will. Such "natural fruit" include collectedness or concentration of mind, "devoutness and fear of God, recollection of death, stillness of thought,

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<sup>116</sup> *Art of Prayer*, p. 60. Although words may be suspended in silence and rapt concentration, the breath continues into the silence totally non-conceptually. For some, the extreme reactivity of the mind to conceptualization may indicate a need for strictly breath-focused prayer, the above ameliorating any fear of straying away from Christian orthodoxy. As St. Theophan states, "Feeling toward God - even without words - is a prayer. Words support and sometimes deepen the feeling."

<sup>117</sup> The idea of "looking" into the heart, the heart being a physical-metaphysical organ, would also be a fruitful inquiry.

<sup>118</sup> *Art of Prayer*, p. 71

and a certain warmth of heart.”<sup>119</sup> Notice his inclusion of “stillness of mind” and even “warmth of heart,” for this calls to mind especially the threshold stages of the apophatic abstraction where the mind is concentrated within itself, gazing so to speak at the depths of the mind, feeling as it were its pure subject beyond psychological activity. This threshold is deep limit to which spiritual technology can go, for these are not yet “the fruit of grace.”<sup>120</sup> In order to go beyond natural stillness requires grace, but certainly these natural fruits are not without significance. In themselves they have no value, because they stand prior to grace, “but it is certain that grace cannot come before these natural fruits of inner prayer have made their appearance.”<sup>121</sup> These natural fruits are necessary, and yet he also distinguishes between a special grace and “one common to all.”<sup>122</sup> This “common” grace refers to the natural stillness mentioned above, when “the ferment of thoughts is stilled” and a certain “permanent warmth is formed in the heart... This is the limit to which prayer performed by man can rise.”<sup>123</sup> It is open and available to all to achieve, and is the “fruit of the concentration of attention in the heart accompanied by a feeling of warmth.”<sup>124</sup> As such, the existential abstraction is rightly available to the natural man, “not only monks but laymen as well,” is “simple and not on a high level,” according to the common grace given to man at Baptism, and “can become the prayer of mind-in-the-heart in a wholly natural way.”<sup>125</sup> Beyond this, which St. Theophan encourages one to cultivate,<sup>126</sup> regarding “what comes from grace (...) we must simply await; no kind of tech-

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 125.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 126.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 126. 160. St. Theophan discusses three kinds of warmth, physical, lustful, and spiritual, of which only the last, spiritual, is being discussed here. Spiritual warmth is divided into natural and grace-given.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 161.

nique can lay hold on it by force.”<sup>127</sup> As such, there is an enormous field of apophatic labor open to the natural man as Image-bearer, to which the Name of Jesus and the breath bear ontological relation, but this is intrinsically limited according to man’s ontological boundary precisely as Image-bearer, requiring God’s active relation, i.e. special grace, to move deeper.

## 7 Conclusion

Apophaticism is not essentially a doctrine, nor is it itself a mental, conceptual abstraction, and much less is it approached through mental abstraction or speculation. The *existential* abstraction is, rather, the way where one attentively pierces the distinction between mind and thought, gazing “between” thoughts into the mind itself, quite apart from thought, and ultimately beholding the Original Mind reflected and encountered at the depths of the personal mind. By uncovering the inner relation between man’s apophatic anthropology in light of an existential abstraction, the practice of prayer can be more focused on what is actually happening, and “techniques” more meaningfully integrated. Of course, a great deal could only be touched on and sketched, and certainly more could be said, especially regarding Trinitarian and personalist theology. Profound is the mystery of God’s presence through the mystery of man’s presence. Thus, to the question that Poeman asks at the beginning of the present study, “Who am I?” the answer is found not in any conceptual answer, but in ceaselessly following, as a principle spiritual practice, the mysterious direction to which the question points: man’s apophatic approach to God through his apophatic experience of himself. The refraining from judgment insures that the projected self, together with its restless discursivity, is not resurrected, that the “old man” stays dead. It is this ceaseless directing of attention inward, of radical enstasis penetrating beneath the substratum of psychology,

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<sup>127</sup> Ibidem, p. 136.

that produces rest, real rest, divine rest, not in this life only, but also in the next, positioning the man of faith for the full flowering of grace-given theosis.

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