

Adrian Ignat

Humility in the writings of Meister Eckhart and Gregory Palamas

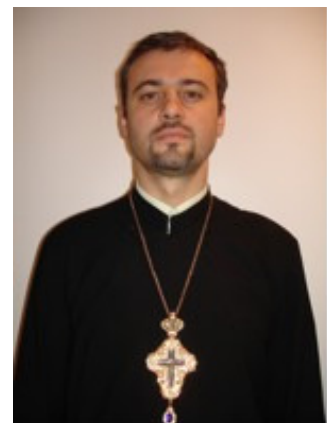
Abstract

Gregory Palamas lived approximately in the same period with Meister Eckhart. Even if Gregory lived in the East and Eckhart in the West, there are some similarities between the lives of these two important church personalities. First, both in their lives fought to prove their doctrine, both being accused of heresy. The major difference is that Palamas succeeded in imposing his doctrine as the official doctrine for the Orthodox Church. The Western Church declared Eckhart, a heretic after his death. Both writers speak about the divinization or sanctification of the human being. This fact is possible, because Jesus Christ has been incarnated. More than that, both writers thought after the way of mystics, drawing from the life of Jesus the supreme model.

Keywords

Humility, mystical writers, virtue, quietude, hesychasm, Gregory Palamas, Meister Eckhart

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Introduction

It has been said with much truth that mysticism is a world of evil sound in English ears, and it may even be affirmed, not untruly, that mystics are invariably regarded by the multitude with something like suspicion. Yet in a certain dim sense it is as true to say that all men are mystics as it is to say that all men are religious, for many are mystics after an unconscious manner – albeit, by them, the mystic realities are touched rather than grasped. Perhaps the ‘vocation to the inward life’ is not for all¹.

I began with this quotation because the writer presents in a synthesized mode the perception of mysticism for a long period of time. For many people, mysticism represents a period or a stage of the church's development. Now, in the world, for many denominations, the words „mystic” and „mysticism” have a stigma, which indicate a simple symbolism or allegorism of a relationship with divinity. But this should rather be regarded as real fact, which attain considerable prominence in the mystical interpretation of whole world. To the mystic, „it may be truly said that the whole universe bursts forth into a flame and blossoming of parable, symbol, and sacrament”².

For many people, it was impossible to see how in this life, the finite can be related to the infinite, and how, through contemplation and intensive prayers, a mystic can reach unity with God. „We can know the divine, because, potentially, we are divine”³. Every man may be a saint if he will it, because God willed it from the beginning. This is a great mystery, but in its light many other dark things become clear. For the majority of Protestants, it is very difficult to speak about ecstasy and mystic theology, even if mystical theology influenced, in one way or another, the major Reformators: Martin Luther, John Calvin or John Wesley.

„Mysticism, according to its historical and psychological definitions, is the direct intuition or experience of God; and a mystic is a person who has, to a greater or less degree, such a direct experience – one whose religion and life are centered, not merely on an accepted belief or practice, but on that which he regards as first-hand personal knowledge”⁴. For every mystic, personal experience with divinity is the most important thing. They wrote to teach others how to reach this communion, which is lost sometimes. The deep spirituality of mystics is similar to a pilgrimage to the place where divinity is. Each mystic mediates the Christian gospel, giving us a

¹ W. Major Scott, *Aspects of Christian Mysticism*, London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1907, p. 1.

² *Ibidem*, p. 11.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, London: James Clarke & Co., Limited, p. 11.

deeper, richer, clearer vision of Christian theology. T.S. Eliot said that „the way of mystics is our hope, or else despair”⁵.

Mystical theology was a stage of transition from the medieval period to the Enlightenment. Mystics develop a strong αποφατιχ theology, where humanity, in this life, can know the Creator. Jesus Christ is Mediator of this relationship. In many cases, in visions mystics see Jesus and his suffering on the cross. Some mystics, as such is John of the Cross, suffered with Him and received the gifts of Resurrection, as Jesus promised to the robber.

The majority of mystic writings affirm that, in the spiritual ascent, there are three stages: Purgation, Illumination, and Unity with divinity. Every stage begins and ends with humility or „centeredness” in yourself (Tillich). Humility means in one sense the renunciation of everything that is material and transient for the eternal. In their renunciation, mystics renounce pride (hubris) and bodily will (concupiscence). As Augustine said, „pride is the beginning of every sin”. The path of mystics included renouncing these things and replacing them with love. „Give evidence of your humility by your attitude and spirit of love rather than in speech”⁶. „The mystic recognizes and holds that far removed from ordinary paths and interests, even in the order of the soul, there is a grand experiment possible, and that some have achieved it”⁷. This experiment is a spiritual process, which demonstrates the possibility, in this present life and in this body, of the humiliation of knowing God. By means of this spiritual operation, the mystic can accomplish a reversion to the fontal source of souls, and enter into an ecstatic communion with the universal consciousness.

Many mystical writers spoke about humility directly or indirectly, giving different definitions. Humility is associated with the concept of work done well. „He alone can be humble-minded who has persuaded himself that he has done no great thing, however many things he may have done well”⁸. Another writer started from the biblical example of Jesus Christ, who said: „Learn form me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Matthew 11, 29), affirming two kinds of humility: the one pertaining to knowledge (understanding), the other belonging to the affections (the will).

Humility of the will, said St. Bernard, or of the heart, enables us to trample under foot the glory of the world; but this can only be learned from Him who emptied Himself, taking the nature of a slave (Phil 2:7), who fled

⁵ Richard Woods, *Eckhart's Way*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1986, p. 7.

⁶ St. Isidore of Pelusium, *Liber I*, Ep. 342, PG 78, p. 378.

⁷ W. Major Scott, *Aspects of Christian Mysticism*, London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1907, p. 3.

⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *In Philomon.*, Homily 2-3, PG 62, p. 712.

when they sought to make Him king, but who freely offered Himself when they wished to make Him suffer all kinds of ignominy and the shameful death of the cross⁹.

In the history of religions there are some extremes of humility. Thus, in the Cathar sect or in Gnosticism, the body is not just a part of creation, but is bad, and the soul is captured in the body just like in a prison. To liberate the soul, it is necessary to fast. In the Buddhism, there is also the idea of self-negation or self-emptiness. In these extremes, humanity does not have consistency, and for it, self-emptiness is required as a last purpose.

I. Meister Eckhart – Life and Activities

Meister Eckhart is one of the most interesting and disputed personalities from the mystic period in Germany. Born around 1260, Eckhart entered the Dominican order as a youth, and studied at Cologne and at Paris. There were theological schools in which the influence of the great Dominican doctors, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, was paramount. Eckhart learned much from these sources and frequently quotes Thomas's work¹⁰. But the determining fact in his mental formation was his encounter with Neo-platonic philosophy because it was appropriate to his intensely religious, yet fastidious and speculative mind. In this point, I can say that Eckhart does not deviate from the majority of mystic theology. He owed much to Dionysius the Areopagite, and perhaps also to the great, though heretical, genius of Erigena¹¹.

German scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, variously called Meister Eckhart: „the father of German speculation and mysticism“, „the father of German theology“; „the father of German prose“; „the forerunner of the Reformation and an evangelical spirit“; or „the originator of German idealism“¹². Eckhart studied and preached in Paris, Strasbourg and Cologne. He was profoundly influenced by these places and by the events and thoughts of his time. Eckhart took academic thoughts and explained them to the public in the vernacular. His sermons presented the whole of his thought. Through them, Eckhart was recognized everywhere, but at the same time, the sermons brought his condemnation as a heretic.

Eckhart lived in a dark period for the Church and nations of Europe. The papal captivity at Avignon (1309-1376) had been accomplished. The

⁹ St. Bernard, *Sermons Du Temps*, In Adv. Dni. IV, § 4, PL 183, p. 48.

¹⁰ W. Major Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹¹ Evelyn Underhill, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

¹² Anna Groh Seesholtz, *Friends of God*, New York: Morningside Heights, Columbia University Press, 1934, p. 59.

influence of King Philip IV of France over the Pope was increasing. The condemnation of Marguerite Porete and the Beguines as heretics had been decided. Living in the middle of complex events, Eckhart was able to articulate a theology, which brought his recognition in the theological world and his condemnation as heretic.

A papal bull of 1329, issued two years after Eckhart's death, condemned certain sentences taken from his writings as „heretical” and as „sounding evil”. The introduction stated that „a certain Eckhart, doctor of Holy Scripture and teacher in the Dominican Order wished to be wiser than was fitting for him and turned his ear from truth to fantasies”¹³. It is very difficult to say that Eckhart spoke about fantasies in his sermons. He loved the truth so much. For it, he said that „if God Himself should turn from the truth, he would cling to the truth (but he added ‘God is truth’)”¹⁴. In conclusion, the papal verdict was that „he wished to know more than he should”¹⁵.

II. Humility in His Writings

1. Nature of humanity

All life involves growth. It begins in a small way, changes, and develops to maturity. It is greatly affected by its surroundings, needs food and shelter, and expresses itself in varied responses and activities. It is also creative and can become the parent of new life.

These characteristics, easily seen in the life of the natural world, are equally true of the life of the spiritual world. The spiritual life, in the writings of Eckhart, develops from small beginnings, and passes through successive stages of growth, and is marked by different types of response to its spiritual surroundings. Eckhart needs food for his soul. This he gets from prayer and reading, from his silent contemplation of God, and frequently from the sacraments of his Church.

True and perfect obedience is a virtue above all virtues, and no work is so great that it can be achieved or done without this virtue; and however little and however humble a work may be, it is done to greater profit in true obedience, be it saying Mass, hearing it, praying, contemplating or whatever else you can think of¹⁶.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ W. K. Flemming, *Mysticism in Christianity*, London: Robert Scott Roxburghe House Paternoster Row, 1997, p. 120.

¹⁶ Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, New York: Paulist Press, 1981, p. 247.

The profound attachment of Meister Eckhart for the church is very visible. He spoke about humility and humble attitude, but not outside of church. Being a cleric, Eckhart could not speak against church. His teachings are addressed to the people, in the church, focusing on obedience and strong faith. Speaking about obedience, Eckhart speaks about humility. It is impossible to conceive of obedience in the mystic context without humility. Humility, as a part of obedience, „cannot perturb, never fails, whatever one is doing, neglects nothing that is good”¹⁷.

Another component of his teaching is self-emptiness. It is not the same as the Buddhist concept of emptiness. It is different because in the Christian church, God exists, comes in the soul, which is clean, and lives there. He cleans up every desire for external things, returning the will to the internal and spiritual Kingdom, and love. God becomes a companion of man, establishing a personal relationship¹⁸.

Humility does not build upon action. It builds inside of humans, in their being. Becoming an internal aspect of being, humility is not manifested only in external actions, as with Pharisees of Old Testament, but in every act of our being. It is not a holiness of faces. It is an internal movement. Everything becomes holy. To rest, to drink, to sleep, or to keep vigil become holy, because these actions are connected with the internal structure of a humble being.

We ought not to think of building holiness upon the action; we ought to build it upon a way of being, for it is not what we do that makes us holy, but we ought to make holy what we do. However holy the works may be, they do not, as works, make us at all holy; but, as we are holy and have being, to that extent we make all our works holy, be it eating, sleeping, keeping vigil or whatever it may be¹⁹.

Eckhart does not teach that good works are without any effect in the process of transforming our being, but good works must be directly connected with our being, and not something external. This passage can be used to clarify that idea of indulgences, for Eckhart’s thought, and the adding of external acts for personal salvation. It is in response to the fact that a person could buy salvation in the Western medieval church. We must not forget that for Eckhart’s period of time the society, and especially the church, becomes directly dependent by money, and salvation is a prosperous business. „People ought never to think too much about what they could do, but they ought to think about what they could be”²⁰.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 251.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 250.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

Transforming the whole being, „man carries God in his every work and in every place, and it is God alone who performs all the man’s works; for whoever causes the work, to him it belongs more properly and truly than it does to the one who performs it”²¹. This idea has a profound resonance in the thought of Paul that „I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

Transformation is realized with detachment, where the humility is integral part of detachment, having as a result the union with God. The acceptance of God inside of man’s soul, makes possible the identification of God in all things. „A man should accept God in all things, and should accustom himself to having God present always in his disposition and his intention and his love”²². Here, the words of Eckhart sound a little pantheist, but it is not an identification of God with all things. Here is only the feeling of God’s presence in the world (all things), the feeling of God’s immanence.

Eckhart, as Barth, rejects the idea of a „philosophical God.” For clarification, I remember Pascal distinction between the „God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” and the „God of the philosophers”. God is not just a product of our mind; He is God of creation and love. „A man ought not to have a God who is just a product of his thought, nor should he be satisfied with that, because if the thought vanished, God too would vanish”²³. God indwells in humans, actualizing the perfect union with their souls. Eckhart sustained that „the soul is far more closely united with God than are the body and soul that form one man”²⁴.

Humility has essentially to do with the appetite; we should not deem ourselves to be above what we are. For humility it is necessary that certain knowledge of oneself is learned in the infused light of truth. If the humility is united with another virtues, such as prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, faith, hope and charity, it will work inside of our being and will transform us into the receivers of Holy Spirit.

2. The Purpose of Humility

Writing in Eckhart’s style, I wondered: Why is humility so important for the unity of soul with God? Eckhart will answer saying that „a man never be so satisfied with what he does or accomplish”²⁵. This dissatisfaction

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 251-252.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 252.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 253.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 272.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 255.

means humility in every action and penetration with the divine presence. If you are not satisfied with what you have done, you will try to fix or to focus your action in the better direction and to recover what was lost. Eckhart does this, letting God indwell in himself and to correct his mistakes and to accomplish his mission in this life. Everyone has a mission in this life, and this mission must be accomplished through a humble attitude, being the last to be the first, „washing” the feet of all people. In Eckhart’s understanding this is the total *kenosis* and self-emptiness, to which Jesus leads us in His teachings.

Through humility, we must give to our neighbors the benefit of good examples by our virtuous deeds. We can see the public actions of some people who do good but do not expect rewards for their actions. Humility is the mistress of all virtues, the surest foundation of the heavenly building, the proper and magnificent gift of our Savior. It is the first virtue, positioned in the detachment or self-emptiness. „Happy the man who is always on his guard” (Proverb 28:14).

3. Humility must be joined with poverty

Humility is renunciation of oneself. What does renunciation of oneself mean? Renunciation of oneself, in the thought of many Fathers, is spiritual and material poverty. In Liberation theology is visible this concept of renunciation and care for the poor. In the thought of Eckhart, the poverty, which must be with humility, has both elements: spiritual and material. „Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). „A man is poor who has nothing. To be poor in spirit means that as the eye is poor and deprived of color, and is able to apprehend every color, so he is poor in spirit who is able to apprehend every spirit, and the Spirit of all spirits is God”²⁶.

Complete humility is only when „you are naked of all created things, of all comfort from created things”²⁷. God cannot come into your soul if it is not clean from all created things. The created things are for the help of people, but if they are not used with consideration (sharing with others), they can lead to the losing of one’s own soul.

The material poverty is important, in Eckhart’s view, because through it, man can detach himself from the possession of external things and return to the most important thing – valuation of connection with God. Through material poverty, man abandons the pride of the world. On the other side, spiritual poverty leads man, through humility, to the appreciation of God’s presence in his soul and in the world, and to the consideration that we are

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 220.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

equal here and to our Father. In spiritual poverty, it is not important who has wealth and power in this world. The focus goes to love and profound humility. A Holy Father said that „is blessed the poor man who takes humility to himself as his bride”²⁸.

4. Humility is virtue’s foundation, protection, and center

Humility is the base of every virtue. How can somebody think that it is possible for pride to coexist with virtues? If the humility is not the purpose of one or another virtue, it is still the center of them. In fact, all the virtues are placed around humility. None can build a spiritual edifice without humility.

This is why a good man ought to feel great shame before God and in his own eyes if he is made aware that God is not within him, and that it is not God the Father who is performing his works in him, but that miserable creatures still live in him and attract him and perform his works in him²⁹.

Humility leads one to his to own emptiness and recognition of one’s unworthiness. It is nourished with reproaches, patience under the lash, meekness under severity. Deriving from true knowledge of God and true knowledge of self, humility is the simple road, which leads to true wisdom.

Humility, in most cases, is associated with intense prayer. Prayer helps the human soul to lift up to his Creator, and to have a conversation as a child with his Father. In prayer, humility is present, humbly asking. „Lord, my God and my comfort, if you turn me away from yourself to anything, give me another you, so that I pass from you to you, for I want nothing except you”³⁰.

Humble prayer is not asking for one or another thing: „I want it so, or so!”³¹, but is going out from what is ourselves and from our will. The best prayer, in Eckhart’s consideration, should be, „Give me this virtue, or that way of life’ or ‘Yes, Lord, give me yourself, or give me everlasting life”³². The true prayer is in true obedience and self –emptiness, because own external will is a „poison of all obedience”³³.

²⁸ St. Anthony of Padua, *Sermon Dom. Cifra Oct. Nativitatis Divine S. Francisci Assisiatis necnoc S. Antonii...opera*, PL, p. 12.

²⁹ M. Eckhart, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 214.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 248.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 248.

5. Self-contempt

In the writings of Eckhart, self-contempt does not take a dramatic understanding. It does not mean self-starving or self-punishment, in the idea that will win easier salvation. He thought that it is was important „to make a start with yourself, and abandon yourself”³⁴. But how can one abandon himself/herself, without ignoring and punishing himself/herself? The abandonment begins with getting away from yourself, with moving the focus from only own your good to the common good, from the external things to the spiritual presence, making man submissive to God’s love. „He ought to begin by forsaking himself, because then he has forsaken everything. Truly, if a man renounced a kingdom or the whole world but held on to himself, he would not have renounced anything”³⁵.

The renunciation must have deep roots in the will of our being. Our will must be transformed and must renounce every idea of having something or holding in our possession of something. „All sorrow comes from love and from holding dear. Therefore, if I feel sorrow because of perishable things, my heart and I will still love and hold dear perishable things, and God still does not have the love of my whole heart, and I still do not love such things as God would have me love with him”³⁶.

6. The pre-eminence of humility

For all the vices and passions the remedy is humility. „Humility is the guardian of virtue”³⁷. The man of humble mind always loathes his own will as wayward, and in his requests to the Lord he studies with unwavering faith to learn and to obey. „If you are to receive god’s joy, you are obliged to pour out created things. Saint Augustine says: ‘Empty yourself, so that you may be filled. Learn not to love, so that you may learn how to love. Draw back, so that you may be approached’”³⁸.

7. Humility is medicine and protection

Humility is the most salutary medicine for souls; it takes counsel with regard to all spiritual problems, reduces the swelling of the wounded spirit, strengthens weaknesses, corrects tendencies to depravity, and

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 249.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 249.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 214.

³⁷ St. Gregory the Great, *In Evangel. Lib. I*, Hom. 7, §4, PL., p. 1102.

³⁸ M. Eckhart, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

removes all unhealthy and diseased growths. „Humility lifts man up to heaven and gives him a place among the choirs of angels”³⁹.

Humility helps man to continue his spiritual life, being a medicine for body and soul. It protects man for every wrong decision and action. Eckhart found a wonderful example in Scripture for humility as medicine or protection for man: „If a thief were able to suffer death with a true, complete, pure, glad, willing and joyful love of divine justice, in which and according to which God and his justice will that the evildoer be put to death, truly he would be saved and blessed”⁴⁰.

Having humility, the soul „shines in darkness” (John 1: 5), leading another soul to the right way of perfection. In humility, soul is not just for itself, for its own good; the soul is for the good of everybody, receiving and giving gifts from God, as a good servant of his master.

8. Humility and the measure of holiness

In humility man can be among people, pleasing them, and at the same time, in connection with God. He cannot be in a high stage of perfection without the help of humility. Humility gives to man a complete resource for spiritual life, for continue ascent to the Creator. „If you are thinking of raising a high and noble edifice, then devote your first attention to the foundation of humility”⁴¹.

Humility, as the measure of holiness, is directly connected with the goodness in humanity. „Goodness is not created, not made, not born; rather it is what gives birth and bears the good man; and the good man, insofar as he is good, is unmade and uncreated, and yet he is born, the child and the son of goodness”⁴². In God’s presence „is no sorrow or suffering or affliction. If you want to be free of all affliction and suffering, hold fast to God, and turn wholly to him, and to no one else”⁴³.

9. Humble person pleasing to God and men

How to please God and men in the same time? It is not a contradiction between these two things? It is a contradiction, when man tries to please and to be pleased in the same time, ignoring the presence of God, making from this, his own purpose of existence, moving the center in external

³⁹ St. Nilus, *De octo spiritibus malitiae*, c.17, PG., p. 1255.

⁴⁰ M. Eckhart, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

⁴¹ Augustine, *De salutaribus documentis*, c.18, PL., p. 441.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 209-210.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 211.

things. But if a man pleases God and men in the same time, without expecting a reward, looking for pure love, not for the same payment, pleasing, not expecting to be pleased, he can step on the path of God. „If a man loves him and all things and performs all these works not for reward or honor or ease, but for God’s sake and for his glory alone, that is a sign that he is God’s Son”⁴⁴.

God is love (1 John 4:16), and He loves us first. From this love people come and take, „abandoning and denying their own natural will”⁴⁵. It is a great strengthening of the spirit of love when, according to the Apostle Paul, men endeavor to „anticipate one another in honor” (Rom. 12:11), and love to serve mutually, each considering the other his superior, with no puffing up by those so honored.

10. Humility is modest and gracious

„The truly humble person is a stranger to vanity, rejects all praise, rejoices in being held in contempt, and readily forgives injuries”⁴⁶. Humility is always pleasing and obliging, kind to friendship, indifferent to insults and affronts. It is neither puffed up in success nor depressed by adversity. A humble man cannot hate or be jealous of the success or honors of his neighbors. He will enjoy for the happiness of someone and will cry the misfortune and anxiety of another.

We read in the Lives of Fathers that a man complained to a holy father that he was suffering. Then the father said: ‘My son, do you want to pray to God to take it away from you?’ Then the other said: ‘No, father, because it is profitable to me – that I see well. But pray to God to give me his grace so that I suffer it willingly’⁴⁷.

But not just it; the humble man is always not impassive to the needs of others. He will help and supply the needs of everyone, as a good companion and lover servant of God. „A pagan philosopher, Socrates, says that virtue makes impossible things possible, and even easy and delightful”⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 228.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 230.

⁴⁶ Thomas of Kempis, *Hortulus rosarum*, c. 9, n. 4, Opera Omnia 4., p. 19.

⁴⁷ M. Eckhart, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 238.

11. Humility and meekness

„Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11: 29). In these words Jesus Christ taught us how to be humble and meek in our heart. If it is a humble attitude without a humble and meek heart, will be something external, something pharisaic.

It is part of our being a son for us to suffer. Because God’s Son could not suffer in his divinity and in eternity, the heavenly Father therefore sent him into time, to become man and to be able to suffer. So if you want to be son of God and you do not want to suffer, you are all wrong⁴⁹.

Jesus was the most humble man from humanity, giving His life for the sake of others, being God but taking body (kenosis). „Here you have the honey of humility with the sweetness of meekness. As honey combines with all kinds of herbs in the compounding of medicines, so all virtues are seasoned with the sweetness of humility”⁵⁰.

12. Humility is joyful

St. Athanasius speaking about Antony said: „His soul was free from blemish, for it was neither contracted as if by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor possessed by laughter or dejection, for he was not troubled when he beheld the crowd, nor overjoyed at being saluted by so many”⁵¹. Humility as a joy is without imposition or sorrow. It is addressed to the hearts and is like sweet perfume, and diffuses its fragrance, warm with love and devotedness.

Drawing from Augustine, Eckhart asked: „How can God’s gifts, material and spiritual, satisfy the man who is not satisfied with God’s own self?”⁵² God gave Himself to us, as a gift in joy and humility, without sorrow or expectations. He continues to invite all people to His table, to serve from His body and His blood, without exhaustion. Only rejoicing in God and His gifts, we can rejoice in own humility. „If God has suffered already, before ever I suffer, and if I suffer for the love of God, truly all my sufferings will easily turn into my consolation and joy, however great and varied my suffering may be”⁵³.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 231.

⁵⁰ Hugo de Folieto, *Tractatus de Claustro animae*, Colonia, 1504, digitisation 2007, 1100

⁵¹ St. Athanasius, *Ad Abelpium* 4, Migne, PG 26, Berlin: H. Dorries, 1964, p. 134

⁵² M. Eckhart, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 233.

13. Pride and vainglory

As servant of God, man must employ prudence in protecting his heart lest he destroy himself even in his good works with vainglory, and be lost. The biggest danger for many people, who are in the spiritual ascent, is pride. A second of pride and everything, which they build in their ascent, will be destroyed. For it many fathers speak about continues humility in the spiritual ascent. „Without humility and charity every other virtue is considered a vice”⁵⁴.

Pride is not only „the beginning of sins”, as Augustine said, but is the beginning of destruction of all virtue. A man who turns away from God, focusing on himself, loses himself and the presence of God in him. He will focus in winning vainglory as a thing, which replaces God’s presence. But vainglory, as every vice, cannot replace God without effects. The most important effect is that man, drinking from vainglory, cannot stop. He continues to be thirsty even when he drinks.

Through this a man ought to know whether it be proper that he should delight and rejoice in wholly abandoning and denying his own natural will, and in completely forsaking himself in everything God wants him to suffer. This is the best understanding of what our Lord said: If any man will come to me, he should forsake and deny himself and take up his cross” (Matthew 16: 24), that is, he should lay down and put away everything that is a cross and suffering⁵⁵.

14. Pride the beginning of all sin

„Pride is the beginning and end and cause of all sins; because pride is not only a sin in itself, but no sin could ever have been, or can be, or will be, without pride”⁵⁶. Augustine, Eckhart and many other church fathers consider pride so dangerous, because pride causes man to return focus see from God to himself. Man becomes the center of the world (his world), and the world revolves around him. Protagoras said: „Man is the measure of all things”. Man becomes a ruler of the universe, a god himself. He can do what ever he wants without any restriction. Thus, man can save himself without any help from outside (Pelagians). In this case, why is the presence of the divine necessary? The existence of God does not make any sense. „God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas. 4: 6).

⁵⁴ Isidore of Seville, *Sentent. Lib. II*, c.38, PL., 639

⁵⁵ M. Eckhart, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *In Tract. Sup. Ep. Joan*, Prolog, PL., 1053.

We have seen how dangerous is pride and why it is the beginning and the end of all things. „Pride is a tumor of the spirit, filled with corruption, which if permitted to grow unchecked, will break out into a large sore”⁵⁷. Only in humility can man escape from the temptation of pride. „Every proud man is an abomination to the Lord” (Prov. 16:5). Becoming humble, man rejects pride and does not give it an opportunity to come and live in his soul. Blakney, quoting from Eckhart, said: „Creatures (by themselves) are pure nothings. I do not say that they are either important or unimportant but that they are pure nothings. What has no Being (of and by itself) is nothing. Creatures have no Being of their own, for their Being is the presence of God”⁵⁸.

15. Christ as model of humility

On account of this vice, on account of this great sin of pride, God came in humility. This cause, this great sin, this mighty disease of souls, brought down the Almighty Physician from heaven, humbled him even to the form of a servant, treated him most shamefully, hung him on a tree; that by the saving strength of so great a medicine this swelling of pride might be cured⁵⁹.

Jesus Christ is the universal model of humility. Beginning with His Incarnation, the second Person of the Trinity makes a kenosis to take human shape in time. Through this act mediation between God and humans becomes possible. But the act of kenosis did not stop here; it continued throughout the entire life of Jesus Christ, reaching its apogee in his suffering and death on the cross. „Why did God become man? So that I might be born to be God – yes – identically God. And God died so that I, too, might die to the whole world and all created things. One must understand the saying of our Lord in this sense: ‘All that I have heard, I have revealed to you’”⁶⁰.

In Eckhart’s thought, the fruit of Incarnation of Christ is that „man may become by the grace of adoption what the Son is by nature”⁶¹. We do not become identical sons of God with his own Son, but we become his sons in grace, his children in love. He comes into our soul and lives there. For this to happen, the imitation of Christ is required. What more humility can there be than to take human shape and to give himself, when he is God?

⁵⁷ St. Nilus, *Capita paraenetica*, 71, PG. 1162

⁵⁸ Raymond Bernard Blakney, *Meister Eckhart a Modern Translation*, New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1941, p. 185.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁶⁰ Raymond Bernard Blakney, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

⁶¹ M. Eckhart, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

A man should accustom himself to seeking and wanting nothing for himself in anything, and to finding and accepting God in everything. For God does not give, he has never given any gift so that we might have it and then rest upon it; but all the gifts he ever gave in heaven and on earth he gave so that he might give us the one gift that is himself⁶².

16. Examples of humility

In church history there are many examples of saints and fathers of the church, who dressed in humble clothing. Thinking of them, Eckhart advised man to not be anxious or despairing by their virtues. „People may become anxious and distressed because the lives of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the saints were so harsh and laborious, and a man may be able to perform little like this and may not feel himself forced to do so. No one ought to think this”⁶³. A man must consider that God is present with him and that „wherever man may go, far or near, God never goes far off”⁶⁴.

He gives the example of Jesus, who performed all the works for our salvation. In response, we must follow Him in our actions. „And it ought to be a man’s habit at all time and in all his works to form himself in the life and the works of our Lord Jesus Christ, in everything he does, and refrains from and suffers and experiences”⁶⁵.

17. The fruits of humility

Humility exists in interdependence with two important elements: reason and will. Reason must not be idle or lulled to sleep. It must lead the entire being to the recognition of God and into connection with Him, being a guardian and vigilant protector of true will. The true will exists only in relation with God, under the leadership of true reason. „Humility exalts God and the more I have it, the more he is exalted and the more gently and sweetly his divine influence and gifts flow into me”⁶⁶.

The daughters of humility are: perpetual self-accusation, hatred of one’s will, and abomination of one’s judgment and opinion. Self-negation, the destruction of our own self-image, is a more essential step toward the purity of heart, which is necessary to conceive God’s Word within: „By

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 275

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 266

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

⁶⁶ Raymond Bernard Blakney, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

putting off self we take in Christ, God, blessedness and holiness”⁶⁷. Here, in fact, Eckhart is calling only for the destruction of the self-conscious ego.

III. Gregory Palamas

A major spiritual and intellectual figure of Orthodox Byzantium, Gregory Palamas – monk, archbishop and eminent theologian – dedicated most of his life to the theological argument that the living God is accessible to personal experience, Gregory said, because he shared his own life with humanity. Gregory composed between 1338-1342 his writings: *For the Defense of Those Who Practice Sacred Quietude*.

The Greek term ησυχια (quietude) is found in monastic literature beginning in the fourth century. It designates the mode of life chosen by hermits, dedicated to contemplation and constant prayer. Such monks were also known for centuries as hesychasts. The term *hesychast* was used to designate a “hermit” or an anchorite from the very beginnings of the monastic history. References of it are in the writings of Evagrius of Pont and St. Gregory of Nyssa. For Evagrius, prayer is „the highest act of the mind”, an „ascent of the mind of God”⁶⁸.

The state of prayer „can be aptly described as a habitual state of imperturbable calm. It matches to the heights of intelligible reality the mind which loves wisdom and which is truly spiritualized by the most intense love”⁶⁹.

The thought of Palamas is based to the discipline of „keeping one’s mind in the heart”, placing there the Name of Jesus. This prayer is named The Jesus prayer: „Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”. Very similar with the hesychast method of prayer are the concepts of *yoga* in Hindu and *dhikr* in Islam. Both *yoga* and *dhikr* are physical techniques, which by themselves and immediately produce the desired effect, whereas the hesychast method is never more that a means to gain the attention and silence of the spirit, and the practice of the virtues and fasting are specific conditions for it. It is the combination of these factors, of which breathing is by no means the most important, which make man receptive to grace.

In the hesychast controversy with Barlaam of Calabria and Gregory Akindynas, Palamas was accused of being influenced by and having connections with sectarian groups, such as the Messalian movement. Messalians were a sectarian group, which had profound doctrinal roots in

⁶⁷ M. Eckhart, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

⁶⁸ Evagrius, *The Praktikos. Chapter on Prayer*, tr. J. E. Bamberger, Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publication, 1970, p. 63.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

the Bogomil and Cathar heresies. As answer to this accusation Palamas asked: „If, as the Lord of the prophets and apostles teaches, ‘the Kingdom of God is within us’, does it not follow that a man will be excluded from the Kingdom if he devotes his energies to making his mind go out from within himself?”⁷⁰

Palamas defined the role of the human body in prayer and in a Christocentric understanding of human life in its wholeness. He claimed that the human body, and not only the mind, could be transfigured by divine light and contributes to the knowledge of God. „God became man in order that man might become God in him”⁷¹.

Palamas defined the doctrine of distinction between „essence” and „energy”. „When God was conversing with Moses, He did not say, „I am the essence”, but rather „I am the One Who is “ (Exodus 3:14). Thus, it is not the One Who Is who derives from the essence, but essence that derives from Him, for it is He who contains all being Himself”⁷².

His personal discipline is involved out of five days each week. He practiced the ideal uninterrupted „prayer of Jesus” in his hermitage, rejoining his community on Saturday and Sunday for Eucharistic and human fellowship with the brethren. Being alone, he believed that man could reflect upon Jesus, our Savior, reciting constantly the „prayer of Jesus”. Being in community, the monk becomes helpful to himself and other people through humility. In this way contemplation is connected with *πραξις*, or good works.

In Palamas’s view, the human body is not bad in itself, because if it were, Jesus would not have taken it. „Apart from sin nothing is wrong in itself in the present life, not even death, but (everything) can lead to evil”⁷³. It is not a great merit to purify only the mind and to keep body out of every divine work. The body, as companion of the soul, must participate in the divine presence. „How can one follow the Gospel path to holiness without bodily activity in accord with the life in the Spirit? Is not the love of one’s neighbor, of which St. Paul gives such a living and intensely active example, necessary to union with God?”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, New York: Paulist Press, 1983, p. 43.

⁷¹ St. Athanasius, *Ad Abelpium 4*, Migne, PG 26, Berlin: H. Dorries, 1964, p. 1077.

⁷² Gregory Palamas, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁷³ Gregory Palamas, *op. cit.*, 2, I.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

IV. Meister Eckhart and Gregory Palamas

Gregory Palamas lived approximately in the same period with Meister Eckhart. Even if Gregory lived in the East and Eckhart in the West, there are some similarities between the lives of these two important church personalities. First, both in their lives fought to prove their doctrine, both being accused of heresy. The major difference is that Palamas succeeded in imposing his doctrine as the official doctrine for the Orthodox Church. The Western Church declared Eckhart, a heretic after his death. This decision has not changed between then and now.

Second, both lived in a dramatic period of time for the church. In the West, the papal schism and flight to Avignon imposed a new approach to everything; in the East, the civil war and the danger of the Turks decreased the power of Byzantium.

Third, both Eckhart and Palamas were monks, with positions of powerful influence among the clergy. They had experienced an intense spiritual presence, and wanted to share with others their experiences. They responded to this spiritual presence in different ways: Eckhart through detachment and obedience as the highest virtues; Palamas through the hesychast prayer, where the body is not only a instrument for the soul; it is a co-participant in the spiritual life and spiritual presence of God. „In St. Gregory’s essay on the hesychasts, he decisively points out for us the importance of the body and its quintessential role in the cleansing of the mind and the attainment of perfection”⁷⁵. The positive element in Palamas’s spirituality, acquisition of grace and of life in Jesus Christ, is based on the uninterrupted *monological prayer*.

Fourth, both brought something new in theology, articulating with success a full spirituality, being defined by their churches as mystics. Gregory Palamas articulated the distinction between οὐσία (essence) of God and uncreated energies, and the doctrine of hesychast prayer. Palamas taught the philosophical concepts of theology in the vernacular language. We must not forget that the Pope, who condemned him, said that he „wanted to know too much”.

To conclude my discussion, I would like to compare two passages from Palamas and Eckhart. Palamas said: „Christ has become our brother, having shared flesh and blood like ours, and so having become like us. (...) As does a husband his wife, so has he drawn us to him...by sharing in his blood, having become one flesh with us”⁷⁶. Eckhart thought: „The first fruit

⁷⁵ Bishop Chrysostomos, *Contemporary Traditionalist Orthodox Thought*, Massachusetts: Nordland House Publishers, 1982, p. 52.

⁷⁶ Gregory Palamas, *Homilies 56*, ed. Oikonomos, Athens, 1861, p. 207.

of the Incarnation of Christ, God's Son, is that man may become by the grace of adoption what the son is by nature, as it says in the text here, 'He gave them the power of becoming sons of God', and in the third chapter of Second Corinthians, 'with faces unveiled reflecting as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, we are being transformed in the same image from glory to glory' (2 Co. 3:18)"⁷⁷.

In both passages the writers speak about the divinization or sanctification of the human being. This fact is possible, because Jesus Christ has been incarnated. In the first passage, the writer focuses on the fact that Word of God becomes flesh, sharing with us the same body. For this the body is not bad or evil, or the cause of our corruption. Our body is identical with the body of our Savior. If the body in Jesus Christ participated in his every miracle, then we can receive in our body the divine gifts of God.

In the second passage, Eckhart insists in saying that God's Son came and brought us the possibility of becoming the children of God through His grace. A person can become a child of God only by being transformed in God's image. If the Word of God was possible to become human, for humans it is possible to become sons of God. Both texts have profound and very close meaning. Both writers thought after the way of mystics, drawing from the life of Jesus the supreme model.

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