

The Eastern Orthodox Theology and Buddhism

—Deification and Nirvāṇa—

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Introduction

AN Eastern Orthodox theologian Vladimir Nikolayevich Lossky (1903–1958), who was born in St. Petersburg and made a great contribution to introducing the core of Russian Orthodox Church to the Western European world, describes in his book *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (*Théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient*) that the main theme of the eastern theology lies in the deification (θέωσις) of human beings. In addition, he considers no distinction of the mystery itself and mystical thought, and mystical individual experience and church community to be a traditional feature of the eastern theology. In time when western theology dominated the theological field, Lossky's research re-sparked interest in eastern theology, and opened it up for a wider public. This is the significance of Lossky's research.

Since the last century Christianity has faced some problems in environmental and bioethical areas. By facing many of these problems, Christianity has also faced the fundamental problem “what exactly is Christianity?” which has been raised from inside. From the basis of such a historical background, Christian ecumenism, i.e. the movement for the unity of Christ's church came to be advocated from within Christianity. “The New Patristics” which Lossky and Meyendorff (1926–1992) mainly led has revived eastern theologians including the Greek Fathers and also Gregory Palamas whose thoughts were largely ignored until today. It became clear by their contribution that the spiritual flow of eastern theologians find its roots in the gospels of the Apostles and the Greek Fathers.

First, I would like to present the concept of deification in the eastern theology, and then, the concept of nirvāṇa in Buddhism.

I. Deification

1. The Transfiguration of Jesus on the Mountain Tabor

Is it possible for us to view God in this world? This question is ultimate for theology and salvation. According to the Christian dogma, even though the vision of God (*visio Dei*) experience is not possible to all, the way to the vision is not completely closed. It is the transfiguration of Jesus on the Mountain Tabor that the eastern orthodox presents as a Biblical ground for its possibility. Matthew says:

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. [Mt.17:1–8]

This miracle is a supernatural phenomenon for the three disciples. And in fact, this “supernature” originates in the mystery that Jesus is the Son of God. The light which shines from Christ’s face is important for understanding this miracle. Three disciples saw God as the light, that is the vision of God-experience. This miracle links closely to Incarnation (*incarnatio*). How was the Incarnation interpreted in the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church? An Alexandria’s Bishop Athanasius (ca. 293–373), one of the Greek Fathers, describes in his book *The Incarnation of the Word (De Incarnatione Verbi)*, “Indeed the Word became incarnate for making us into God.” However, it was not until Jesus died on the cross and then resurrected that we understood that God had accepted human nature (*natura humana*). So it can be said that the transfiguration of Jesus was, as it were, a resurrection while still alive. This is the core deification in eastern theology.

2. Prayer and Faith

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) wrote once in his diary that the meaning of the belief in God lies in understanding that we have questions about the meaning of life, recognizing that some problems still remains to be solved and taking notice that life has its own meaning.¹ This philosopher, who considered the world as facts to be said on grounds that the totality of existent facts is the world,² knows nonetheless problems not to have been solved. They are problems of life namely what meaning life has. The consequence was necessary deduced from the identity that the limits of language means the limits of the world.³ Because the facts belong only to the task, not to the solution.⁴ So we should consider the meaning of our living as mysterious not to be said. Our present life is as enigmatic as the eternal one.⁵

But he says that the prayer is the thought about the meaning of life.⁶ The world as facts can be said but its meaning cannot be said. Also we cannot say the meaning of life. Because the world and life are one.⁷ When it is even enigmatic for us to live in this world, the solution of the riddle of life lies outside space and time which construct this world.⁸ The facts of our living in this world do not give us the meaning of life. As the limits of the world are also the limits of language, we cannot represent the meaning of life logically. Is it impossible to communicate with the existent beyond this world namely God at all? According to Wittgenstein, we cannot speak of the outside of this world but we can think of it. This thinking is prayer of human act. Therefore the prayer means the conversation with God and inquiring the meaning of life. But it is necessary for us to understand this inquiry as the postulate. Wittgenstein considers this understanding as faith.

The reason why I have described Wittgenstein's philosophy which seems not to be related to eastern theology lies in the intention to manifest the connection between prayer and life and the relation between prayer and faith as preliminary consideration.

One of Greek Fathers, John Climacus (Ioannes Klimax, ca. 525/30–606), the director of the Saint Catherine monastery in Sinai in the seventh century, described in his book *The Ladder of Divine Ascent (Sacla Paradisi)* as follows :

Prayer is by nature a dialog and a union of man with God. Its effect is to hold the world together. It achieves a reconsiliation with God.⁹

Prayer means not only a dialog with God, but also a union of man with God. The Love of God gives everyone the possibility of union with God.

But we need a practice in order to achieve the union. One practice is a spiritual movement currently practiced presently in the Eastern Church, which is called hesychasm (ἡσυχασμός). The person practicing this spirituality is called a hesycast, and usually lives a hermitic life hidden from society, and the spiritual state they achieve is called “hesychia” (ἡσυχία).

Surviving in a harsh environment, an angel’s power is needed for those living a hermitic life.¹⁰ Because the model of hesycast is a Father who self-trained in the desert dependent on the power of God in order to make a living alone. The place where can perceive God as Saviour is the desert. The hesycasts commit themselves to a life of solely praying is introduced in 1 Thessalonians “Pray without ceasing.”

The Prayer is called “Jesus Prayer” which is a repetition of the following phrase, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The hesychasts seclude themselves from the world and consider corporal desire and pleasure, wealth and fame of this world as transient and have a craving only for vision of God.

The meaning of the repeating of the Jesus Prayer is to let the remembrance of Jesus be present with our every breath.¹¹ The remembrance of Jesus should not be mere imagination but meditation of Jesus existing inside us.

St. Paul says:

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 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.2:19–20)

Here is described the Incarnation and the death on the cross and the Resurrection in St. Paul’s existence. The Crucifixion is simply not a historical fact, but a reality of his own life. Dying to the law and living for Christ is to bring his life to completion. The hermit who reaches dispassion (ἀπαθεία), i.e. liberty from all the passions that flesh brings about, realizes the breath of Christ who makes him living. Climacus explains that dispassion is resurrection of the soul prior to that of the body.¹² Christ is the great life which can animate human beings.

Faith is a means through which we convert our attitude that Christ exists outside of ourselves, to one where he exists inside. Through faith, we can participate in the eternal life inherent in Christ.

Heaven is a symbol for completion of our lives, and we can reach this only through faith. Heaven means our original self before Creation. Self-completion by faith is to return to the original self we have lost in

this world. Eastern theology is built on the tradition that the Apostles and the Greek Fathers consider the love of God as the great life which can animate human life.

We mentioned in the beginning of this section Wittgenstein's philosophy and showed how prayer and faith are closely related with life. The interpretation of eastern theologians made it clear that our life has two dimensions i.e. the daily and the transcendental life. The approach to the transcendental life is the way of prayer. Therefore "Lord, have mercy on me" should not be understood based on logic which structurizes the world, but should be understood as the only means by which we can communicate with God existing in heaven. The answer to the call of God which awakes our original selves is faith, therefore prayer is by no means meaningless.

3. The Vision of God

I would like to describe the mechanism of the vision at the base of the description of Gregory Palamas (Gregorios Palamas, ca. 1296–1359). He describes in his book, "*Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*" (*Λόγος ὑπὲρ τῶν ἱερωῶς ἡσυχασζόντων*):

The human mind also, and not only the angelic, transcends itself, and by victory over the passions acquires an angelic form. It, too, will attain to that light and will become worthy of a supernatural vision of God, not seeing the divine essence, but seeing God by a revelation appropriate and analogous to Him.¹³

Those who acquired the dispassion by faith see *that light*. It is the same light which the three disciples saw on Mountain Tabor. But the experience does not mean the vision of the essence of God. The concept "essence" comes from a Greek "ousia" (οὐσία), and in the history of philosophy said, ousia is the term frequently seen in writings of Aristotle. The concept signifies "What is it?" (τὸ τί ἐστίν) or "What was it?" (τὸ τί ἦν εἰνάϊ) of things being in the actual world. In other words, this signifies the impossibility to view the essence of God, meaning we cannot see it by any means.

Then, I want to raise a question "what is that light?" Palamas says:

There exists, then, an eternal light, other than the divine essence; it is not itself an essence—far from it!—but an energy of Superessential. This light without beginning or end is neither sensible nor intelligible, in the proper sense. It is spiritual and divine, distinct from all creatures in its transcendence; and what is neither sensible nor intelligible does

not fall within the scope of the senses as such, nor of the intellectual faculty considered in itself.¹⁴

Palamas calls that light “energy” (ἐνέργεια) that means the action of God. The light is without beginning or end, i.e. it is transcending all creatures and the increate. But we cannot view it with our eyes nor intellectually, because it is spiritual and divine.

This light is the one that we can view only with “spiritual sensation” (αἰσθησις πνευματική). According to Palamas, the intellect is refined by dispassion and when man becomes similar to an angel or God, he can enjoy the brightness of God consequently. Without the power of the Holy Spirit we cannot view the light.

According to Palamas, we cannot see the divine essence, but we can see God as the energy by the revelation. Palamas had an opponent whose name was Barlaam (ca. 1290–1348). This Greek taught theology and philosophy at the University of Constantinople. He gave mainly the lecture on the theology of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (ca. 500), because he found this theology to be agnostic. Barlaam was, so to speak, nominalist, so that he considered that God could be recognized by no means. Although he saw that the theology of Thomas (Thomas de Aquino, ca. 1225–74) as the type of the western, he criticized Thomas strongly, because Thomas insisted that the human intellect could reach all existents. The reason why the eastern theology fascinated him lies in that this theology concluded the recognition of God to be impossible. As Barlaam experienced the hermitic life with hesychasts for a while, the spirituality with which they sought after the vision of God gave him a great shock, so that he concluded their practice as uncanny.

Palamas wrote *Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts* in order to reply to the criticism of Barlaam. This book also afforded the opportunity to represent the system of hesychasm. At the council in Constantinople in 1341, the dispute between Palamas and Barlaam ended by judging Barlaam to be heretic. The Eastern Church approved the distinction between the divine essence and the divine energy in the theology of Palamas orthodox. Therefore the vision of God did not lapse into the heresy insisting that God can be perceived¹⁵ but developed into the central doctrine of the Eastern Church.

It is not until we can accept the grace of God, that we can achieve the vision of God. But God that we can view as the light is His energy, but we should not consider the energy as His essence. God shares with us not His nature, but His glory and brightness deify us. Palamas calls also the light “divinity” (θεότης), further “deification itself” (αὐτοθέωσις)

and “the origin of the divinity” (θεοαρχία).

What are the ground on which we can be deified? According to Palamas, it consists in the Incarnation. He thinks that the infinite Love of God has united the divine Person with human nature and has given us life in this world with a body. In addition, this Love has united itself with the human person and made the body the shine of the divine. It is one of the features of eastern theology to interpret the reality of the Incarnation as the deification of human beings.

II. Stillness

1. Nirvāṇa in early Buddhism

All human acts in this world can be classified into one of the four sufferings (四苦) namely birth, old age, sickness and death. No one can escape from these sufferings or the transmigration. Birth and death repeat infinitely. The origin of these sufferings must be clarified in order to be liberated from them. Buddhism explains the origin as the fundamental ignorance of the true nature and existence (無明). Wavering arises from ignorance and the self is constituted as the subject of this wavering. In turn, attachment arises when considering the self as an existence beyond time and space.

The Buddha says:

For him who clings there is wavering; for him who clings not there is no wavering. Wavering not being, there is calm; calm being, there is no bending. Bending not being, there is no coming-and -going (to birth); coming-and-going not being, there is no de cease-and-rebirth. De cease-and-rebirth not being, there is no ‘here’ or ‘yonder’ nor anything between the two. This indeed is the end of Ill.¹⁶

The state in which all sufferings disappear is when all things have been stilled. There being nothing going, there is nothing dying. And there nothing coming, there is nothing being reborn. There is no here nor yonder because “yonder” cannot be constituted without being “here.” The state where there is no birth and no death is nirvāṇa, i.e. the stillness explained by the Buddha.

The Buddha further says:

He who has reached the consummation, who does not tremble, who is without thirst and without sin, he has broken all the thorns of life: this will be his last body.¹⁷

“His last body” is the body that he who has reached enlightenment has. The reason why the body is described the “last body” is that he is not going to be reborn.

Nirvāṇa explained in Buddhism is different from “hesychia” (ἡσυχία) in the tradition of the eastern theology, as Meyendorff indicated, because the latter seeks to be animated by the great life, i.e., God. The former is to accept “all things are transient” and the latter is the place of the Trinity given by the grace of God. The reason for the difference between the two is to be seen in the fact that Buddhism has no Creator. Creation means that God as the Being Itself (*Ipsum Esse per se*) gives everything its own being, but the Buddha does not have such a role as the creator.

According to Christian thinking, sufferings come from original sin. It is the transcendental ground of human incompleteness which appears as sickness or death. But God has no room for death to enter. Therefore, salvation means receiving eternal life from God. In Buddhism, life and death coexist but life exists not as substance. That is, life is not sustained by a greater life, and liberty from sufferings in our lives is not achieved by connecting to a greater life.

2. Nirvāṇa in Mahāyāna Buddhism

Nirvāṇa is also considered the goal of practice in Mahāyāna Buddhism, but one difference is the appearance of bodhisattvas, who do not remain in nirvāṇa but exist in the world of transmigration to save all sentient beings from sufferings. This nirvāṇa is called “non-abiding nirvāṇa” (無住処涅槃). We can find this feature only in Mahāyāna.

Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250) describes in his book *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*:

The transmigration is nothing essentially different from nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is nothing essentially different from the transmigration.

The limits of nirvāṇa are the limits of the transmigration. Between the two, also, there is not the slightest difference whatsoever.¹⁸

According to Nāgārjuna, all is *śūnyatā*. And *śūnyatā* exists as non-substantiality. Therefore the boundary line between nirvāṇa and transmigration is meaningless. But considering nirvāṇa as nothingness comes to *śūnyatā*, too. Nirvāṇa is neither being nor non-being. However, whether Nirvāṇa is being or non-being, there appears attachment. And attachment, mentioned above, originates from fundamental ignorance. In a world in which fundamental ignorance disappears, the definitions of transmigration or nirvana become meaningless.

The Buddha's description that there is no "here" or "yonder" nor anything between the two applies to the relation between nirvāṇa and transmigration. Nirvāṇa is not "yonder." From this viewpoint, we can say that the attitude for bodhisattvas not to stay in nirvāṇa does not mean denying the Buddha's theory of nirvāṇa, but interpreting it properly for the salvation of human beings. And bodhisattva's acts of salvation are a manifestation of the compassion of the eternal Buddha which overflows from the within.

The idea of deification in the tradition of the eastern theology is one that is easy to relate to for Buddhists. I think it is a common feature of both the eastern theology and Buddhism to have the unity of the transcendent with the human as a central theme and to see the transcendent inside of the self. Research of the eastern theology has just begun in Japan. When we deepen this research further, based on the research of Lossky and Meyendorff, the unknown world of the human being will be unlocked. Then, we can advance to a new stage of dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism.

Notes

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tagebücher 1914–1916*, Ludwig Wittgenstein Werkausgabe Bd. I, Erste Auflage 1989, Suhrkamp, S. 168.; An einen Gott glauben heißt, die Frage nach dem Sinn des Lebens verstehen. An einen Gott glauben heißt sehen, daß es mit den Tatsachen der Welt noch nicht abgetan ist. An Gott glauben heißt sehen, daß das Leben einen Sinn hat.

² *Tractus logico-philosophicus*, S. 14.: 2.04; Die Gesamtheit der bestehenden Sachverhalt ist die Welt.

³ *Tractus logico-philosophicus*, S. 64.: 6.4; *Die Grenzen meiner Sprache* bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.

⁴ *Tractus logico-philosophicus*, S. 84.: 6.4321; Die Tatsachen gehören alle nur zur Aufgabe, nicht zur Lösung.

⁵ *Tractus logico-philosophicus*, S. 84.: 6.4312; Ist denn dieses ewige Leben dann nicht ebenso rätselhaft wie das gegenwärtige ?

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tagebücher 1914–1916*, S. 167.: Das Gebet ist der Gedanke an den Sinn des Lebens.

⁷ *Tractus logico-philosophicus*, S. 67.: 5.62; Die Welt und das Leben sind Eins.

⁸ *Tractus logico-philosophicus*, S. 84.: 6.4321; Die Lösung des Rätsels des Lebens in Raum und Zeit liegt *außerhalb* von Raum und Zeit.

⁹ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Devine Ascent*, translation by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russel, notes on translation by Norman Russel, introduction by Kallistos Ware (*The Classics of Western Spirituality*), New York/Ramsey/Tronto 1982, p.274.

¹⁰ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Devine Ascent*, p. 263.

¹¹ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Devine Ascent*, p. 270.

¹² John Climacus, *The Ladder of Devine Ascent*, p. 282

¹³ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, edited with an introduction by John Meyendorff translation by Nicholas Gendle (*The Classics of Western Spirituality*), 1983, New

York/Ramsey/Toronto, p. 32.

¹⁴ *Gregory Palamas, The Triads*, p. 100.

¹⁵ According to the Christian doctrine, God is a body and has a corpus by no means. This is universal doctrine including that of the Eastern Church. Thomas explains this doctrine in *Summa theologiae* part I question 3.

Summa theologiae I, qu. 3 art. 1, co.: Respondeo dicendum absolute Deum non esse corpus. Quod tripliciter ostendi potest. Primo quidem, quia nullum corpus movet non motum, ut patet inducendo per singula. Ostensum est autem supra quod Deus est primum movens immobile. Unde manifestum est quod Deus non est corpus. Secundo, quia necesse est id quod est primum ens, esse in actu, et nullo modo in potentia. Licet enim in uno et eodem quod exit de potentia in actum, prius sit potentia quam actus tempore, simpliciter tamen actus prior est potentia, quia quod est in potentia, non reducitur in actum nisi per ens actu. Ostensum est autem supra quod Deus est primum ens. Impossibile est igitur quod in Deo sit aliquid in potentia. Omne autem corpus est in potentia, quia continuum, in quantum huiusmodi, divisibile est in infinitum. Impossibile est igitur Deum esse corpus. Tertio, quia Deus est id quod est nobilissimum in entibus, ut ex dictis patet. Impossibile est autem aliquod corpus esse nobilissimum in entibus. Quia corpus aut est vivum, aut non vivum. Corpus autem vivum, manifestum est quod est nobilium corpore non vivo. Corpus autem vivum non vivit in quantum corpus, quia sic omne corpus viveret, oportet igitur quod vivat per aliquid aliud, sicut corpus nostrum vivit per animam. Illud autem per quod vivit corpus, est nobilium quam corpus. Impossibile est igitur Deum esse corpus.

As God is neither a body nor has a corpus, He is not a visible object at all. Consequently the intention to perceive God in this world spoils the completeness of God and lapses into heresy. Seeing from the context, one of opportunities of Barlaam's criticism against hesychasts is Messalians who did not think ceremonies as important. They also insisted that the salvation could be given by prayer and God could be seen in this world, so that they lapsed into heresy. Barlaam identified hesychasts with Messalians. But Palamas insisted that the vision of God was possible only as the energy which was distinct from the divine essence.

¹⁶ *The Minor Anthologies of The Pali Canon Part II. UDANA: Verses of Uplift and ITIVUTTAKA : As It Was Said*, transl. by F. L. Woodward, Oxford 1996, UDANA, VIII iv, pp. 98–99.

¹⁷ *The Sacred Books of The East*, transl. and edited by F. Muller, vol. x Part I. DHAMMAPADA, Part II. SUTTA-NIPATA, Delhi 1973, p.83.

¹⁸ *Nāgārjuna, A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā with an Introductory Essay*, by Kenneth K. Inada, Tokyo, 1970, p. 158.