



John Anthony McGuckin

The Jesus Prayer

Abstract

The Jesus Prayer is considered one aspect of a wider spiritual tradition in early Eastern Christianity that has endured to the modern age. It is one vigorous, and perhaps most famous, stream of the larger tradition we call the 'Prayer of the Heart.' The doctrine of prayer implicit in the so-called *Prayer of the Heart* is at one and the same moment an extensive philosophic charter. We make a large and costly mistake if we attempt to divorce early Christian spirituality either from philosophy or doctrinal theology, as most of our text books have seemed to do in recent times. What most of the Byzantine ascetical writers were aiming at through the



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praxis of mystical, that is interior, prayer is the very specific attempt to allow thought-free noetic awareness to emerge in the graced human consciousness after somatic and psychic levels of awareness have been ordered and stilled, along with the mental ideations or *logismoi* they generate.

Keywords

Prayer of the Heart, Jesus Prayer, Spirituality, Nous, Energeia

1 The Prayer of the Heart: An Orientation

The Jesus Prayer is one aspect of a wider spiritual tradition in early Eastern Christianity that has endured to the modern age. It is one vigorous, and perhaps most famous, stream of the larger tradition we call the 'Prayer of the Heart.' Moreover, before speaking about it more, it might be a good thing, to begin with, its own larger setting: for many things in western spiritual tradition overlap with the Byzantine tradition of heart-centred prayer. Indeed what is now commonly known as 'Centring Prayer' is very much in this family. What it strikes against very strongly, however, is the tradition of 'discursive mental prayer' – such as evidenced most notably in the Ignatian tradition of the *Exercises*. When Baroque Catholicism turned its gaze to this form of Byzantine hesychastic prayer (in an age when discursive meditation practices were at their height), it tended to dismiss it along with Hesychasm generally as *Quietism* and relegated it to the sidelines of dubious practices. This is why it was only after the Russian Revolution when the book *The Way*

of the *Pilgrim*¹ became translated, that the Jesus Prayer became known in the West. Even so, a closer reading of more rooted Western practices, such as those advocated in Richard Rolle of Hampole's *Fire of Divine Love*, demonstrate very close connections. Moreover, indeed many of the western traditions that rely on Dionysius the Areopagite, from John Scotus Eriugena to the anonymous English priest of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, also share much of the same Byzantine thought the world that was brought back into the heart of Latin Christianity in the Carolingian age. The traditions of the Prayer of the Heart, therefore, are biblically and anciently rooted and belong to the entire Christian tradition, East and West.

The Byzantine Fathers, however, take for granted a deep intellectual structure behind their spiritual doctrine: something that not everyone who was later indebted to their teaching was able to appreciate or understand. This spiritual tradition is an intellectual *ethos* that the early Christians developed in definite contradistinction to the *zeitgeist* of their time. And this was formed by two dominant things in the religious domain: (firstly) that widespread Hellenistic philosophical attitude to what humanity was and where it was going: its relation of anthropology to metaphysics that was dominating the interests of the philosophical schools in the earliest Christian centuries; and (secondly) the strong reaction that Christian prayer traditions raised up against the casual sacrificial rituals and

¹ More properly to be known as *Rasskaz Strannika*, or the *Candid Tale of Pilgrim to His Spiritual Father*. Further see: JA McGuckin. *Rasskaz Strannika: The Candid Tale of A Pilgrim to His Spiritual Father*. in: L. J Komjathy (ed). *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer*. State University of New York Press. Albany. 2015. pp. 359-406.

lengthy litanies that constituted common aspects of Hellenistic pagan cult; prayer, that is, encased in rhetoric.

So, before looking at the Jesus Prayer more particularly, I would like to take up two preliminary investigations. The first about how Christian prayer theory dealt with the philosophical anthropology that was being offered to them by the Greek philosophers; and secondly how it offered a very practical scripture-based alternative for the less educated regarding a daily prayer ritual. It will be seen eventually how the Jesus Prayer not only encapsulates most of the insights of the larger Heart-Tradition but like the former also seeks to make a synthesis of the *apologia* against the higher and lower forms of pagan religiosity of the day.

2 Prayer and Christian Philosophy

I do not want to go too far this evening into a review of ancient philosophy and how Christians related to it. It would take us too far afield: though it is a topic that needs some radical rethinking as for many generations now it has been very naively presupposed, chiefly among theologians who have not tended to be expansive readers, that the Early Church was some form of stooge to ancient philosophical schools – slavishly using Stoicism to shape its ethics, and Platonism to shape its metaphysics and Aristotelianism to help its logic and rhetoric. Let me simply say this: the greatest patristic writers leave no aspect of what they touched, untouched. Christian tradition profoundly alters Greek philosophy even when it seems most indebted. Pseudo-Dionysius is a radical critic of Damascus head of the Late Platonic school, not a besotted plagiariser. It is a lack of familiarity with the sources that accounts for so much wrong identification in the text books. However, as we know now,

small changes, as in a genome sequencing, can lead to massively different end results.

However, to the point: Plato navigates the cosmos of his day through epistemology. His whole systematic view of the world and the structure of humanity that derives from it is an extended meditation on human consciousness: its *energeia*, its limits, its potentials. His view, beginning to prioritize consciousness as one of the humanity's greatest values was immensely influential. It made the Christians realize that they too had to account for the rise of the personal awareness of God and for the gift of profound 'personal valuation' in the Christ mystery: even if it meant radically changing many of Plato's insights about personhood². This refashioning of the doctrine of the personal consciousness happened in their prayer praxis, and what follows here is but the outline of the theoretical presuppositions.

The Christians, among other schools of the time of Second Sophistic, had a lively interest in matters of religious philosophy that had been left unresolved by the ancient greats. A prime example of this was Plato's theory of the soul's nature and the shape of its ascent. Regarding the former, Plato had left to the philosophical tradition a dominant image of the Soul

² Briefly put the force of the concept of individuation for the Platonic system is that it is a *process of the ascent of the psyche to the Ideal, an epistemic journey, which is its liberation and return to primary form*. In the Aristotelian system the idea of individual consciousness is used a *process of moral expression. It is the emergence of the individual as free agent*. In the late revisions of both these Greek schools which we now call Neoplatonism, reflection on individuation is: *a process of inward focus for connection to the intelligible realities that signal the mystical connection of the individual to the Supreme Nous*.

being somehow like a Charioteer³; and the way one resolves the problem of the chariot's direction, being an *exemplum* of the good life. The Soul-chariot is driven by two horses, one black (standing for the appetitive part of the soul *epithymitikon*), one white (standing for the irascible part of the soul, *to thymikon*). The Charioteer stands for the reasoning faculty in a human (*to logistikon*) who struggles to control the forces of the soul, especially the more unmanageable black steed. This appetitive soul is the part of human experience and consciousness driven by instinct, desire, and self-reference. The irascible soul is that which seeks nobler and more elevated forms in life. The principle of Reason, or adjudication, tries to mediate between the two struggling 'drives' that make up the *Psyche*. It is a very lively image that held a great sway. It proposes the philosophical life as quintessentially the one which seeks to integrate human faculties, in a moral habituation that privileges higher things over base instincts: exemplifying the Socratic principle that the unexamined life is not worth living. However, Plato left behind a major epistemic aporia, or philosophical puzzle, which his later commentators still wrestled with in the Early Christian period. This aporia was critical to the early Christian ascetics. It concerns the nature of the soul's knowledge: namely its own knowledge of the self, and its knowledge of true reality, and thus its potential awareness of Absolute reality. In addressing it, the Byzantine Christians, guided by the Cappadocian Fathers' muted Origenianism, shifted the Platonic psychology in a very distinct direction that gave birth, in effect, to a new form of philosophical anthropology.

³ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 264a-254e.

Into Plato's strongly dyadic view (two horses pulling differently under the attempted mastery of the mind) they introduced more of a genuinely triadic structure to rework from its foundations the doctrine of the soul (*Psyche*). While the Apostle Paul often spoke of the binary war of flesh and spirit (*sarx, pneuma*), it was equally noticeable to the Fathers how he also tended to address the issue of the constitution of the Human as a triadic correlation of Body, Soul, and Spirit. This apostolic triad was brought into dialogue with Platonic 'Psychology' by the Fathers, beginning with Origen, so that the core of the human consciousness now became the lower soul (*epithymitikon*), the higher soul (*thymikon*) and the Spiritual Intelligence (*Nous*). Writers of the Origenian tradition, notably Gregory the Theologian, Evagrius Pontike, Maximus the Confessor, Dionysios the Areopagite, and Elias Ekdikos (along with many other monastic theorists) applied this doctrine pervasively in the Byzantine world's ascetical theory of mystical contemplation. St. Gregory the Theologian habitually calls Christianity in general, and the ascetical life in particular: 'Our philosophy.'

Among the Fathers, the lower soul was seen to be the body consciousness attuned to instinctive life. It had a range of needs and desires (fight/flight/acquisition) dominated by material concerns. It had also a range of perceptions: moving from simple material awarenesses (hunger, fear) to more elevated sensibilities (empathy, affection). At the top range of the lower soul's scope (or *skopos*), it overlapped with the lower range of the middle soul. The middle soul represented a more emotive and more abstracted range of consciousness (dealing in perceptions and deductions and higher questions of motivation), but it was still intimately linked with its lower neighbour: sometimes guiding it; sometimes being led by it. At

the middle soul's upper range, however, it was akin to its next higher neighbour in the triad – what the Byzantines addressed as the highest soul: the *Nous*. However, the *Nous* did not simply mean intelligence or reason – that was connoted by *Logos*⁴; and that form of human ratiocination was seen to reside usually in the upper regions of the middle soul. *Nous*, for the Byzantine spiritual writers, was that aspect of graced awareness that constituted a human being most distinctively, and differently from all other created species: making us the one mortal creature that was personally conscious of the presence of God. For the Byzantine ascetical philosophers, *Nous* was the *locus* of the Divine Image in humankind. In its lower range of *energeia*, therefore, the *Nous* would process reflection and thinking akin to *logos*; while in its higher ranges it would process transcendental awareness, and be the place (called an 'altar' by the Syrian writers) where the realisation of the divine image within human consciousness took place; and thus where awareness of God's descent into the heart also registered. In short, it was the spiritual eye that looked upon the face of God. The Byzantine philosophers thus proposed *Nous* as the synthetic term covering *Logos* and *Pneuma* (mind and spirit). This radical reworking of Platonic psychology by the Byzantines into this triadic and flexible view of the anthropological constitution understood as a system of correlated influences and mediations, gave great dynamism to a new view of human nature and provided a personalist transcendentalism which Plato's theory lacked. Plato had wished to resolve the correlation (*to syntheton*) of soul and

⁴ It has been disastrously translated as *logos* (intellect) in too many (rather careless) modern versions.

body by the intellectual dismissal, and eventual physical dissolution, of the body. By contrast, this Byzantine elevation of the material form to graced sacramental stature is a lasting contribution to Greek Christian philosophy to an epistemological anthropology. It was chiefly made by the 4th and 5th century Greek Fathers, though it is a view that is deepened by the 6th to 10th century ascetical writers. As an empirically verifiable system, it now stood against the material reductionism Aristotle could lead to, and against the static view of Plato's abstract Ideas, and presented, instead, a vision of the human person as the transcendental process of transfiguration⁵.

This achievement was essential for the completion of the Eastern Christian theory of prayer as the training of the Noetic consciousness: the opening of the spiritual eye to the vision of the invisible God in the depths of the human person. This movement also caused a major advance in the moving of the idea of personhood from its status as a peripheral accidental in Hellenistic philosophy to that of being substantive. However, without the concomitant Byzantine theology of hypostatic identity, it is doubtful whether personal spiritual consciousness (something that seems so central to our civilisation today) would have risen to such an exalted position in Western anthropology. The allure of a hypostatic sense of personhood,

⁵ The Orthodox conception of redemption as *theiopoiesis*. Further see: J. A. McGuckin. 'Deification in Greek Patristic Thought: The Cappadocian Fathers' Strategic Adaptation of a Tradition', in: M. Christensen & J. Wittung (edd). *Partakers of the Divine Nature. The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition*, Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006, pp. 95-114.

for example, has to this day held little attraction for Asian metaphysics, which sees the idea as *Maya*, an illusion.

To sum up, therefore, the doctrine of prayer implicit in the so-called *Prayer of the Heart* is at one and the same moment an extensive philosophic charter. We make a large and costly mistake if we attempt to divorce early Christian spirituality either from philosophy or doctrinal theology, as most of our text books have seemed to do in recent times. What most of the Byzantine ascetical writers were aiming at through the *praxis* of mystical, that is interior, prayer is the very specific attempt to allow thought-free noetic awareness to emerge in the graced human consciousness after somatic and psychic levels of awareness have been ordered and stilled, along with the mental ideations or *logismoi* they generate. This stilling of the two lower levels of consciousness is so that the difficult third and highest level of *noesis* can be coaxed into action. The epistemic point here is that the human organism strains after awareness, rises over great ages of historical and cultural achievement to higher and higher levels of consciousness, refined and refining, until the dawning (noetic) awareness that subjective personhood is enhypostatized in the divine: namely, finds its ground of being and its co-inherence within the Godhead which originated it, and to which it naturally, organically, strives to return. From God we came. To God we go. To put it another way (and the idea thus stands as the gold-etched sentence at the core of this evening's talk: Spiritual (noetic) consciousness is the evolutionary goal (*telos*) of our species. It is odd, therefore, to have to note that today it is perhaps the most neglected aspect of our intellectual endeavours.

3 The Jesus Prayer

Moreover, so we come, finally, to the Jesus Prayer,⁶ which is a short and easy medium of this Prayer of the Heart⁷ that teaches the *Nous* how to emerge and be refined in a human life. The Jesus Prayer began life in the Egyptian deserts where the monks taught their novices to take a phrase from scripture and recite it over and over again in the mind until it bore fruit. This was called *monologistos* prayer: prayer using a short, focused chant from scripture. By the fifth century, this had been refined into the terms of the Jesus Prayer we know today⁸. The monks understood this *monologistos* prayer as a practical exercise in developing noetic consciousness. For without exercising the Noetic functions, as is the case with either the body or the human intellect, it cannot become articulate or fully developed. Practice is all important. The theory of the Jesus Prayer is simple enough for a child, yet complex enough never to master in a lifetime. It is the recitation of two phrases abstracted from

⁶ I have discussed this further in my study, *Standing in God's Holy Fire*, London 2001; see also idem. 'The Shaping of the Soul's Perceptions in the Byzantine Ascetic Elias Ekdikos. 'SVSThQ 55.3, 2011, pp. 343-363; idem. *The Eros of Divine Beauty in St. Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662)*. in: J. A. McGuckin (ed), *The Concept of Beauty in Patristic and Byzantine Theology*, Theotokos Press, New York 2012, 170-191.

⁷ Further see: J. A. McGuckin. *The Prayer of the Heart in Patristic and Early Byzantine Tradition*, pp. 69-108, in: *Prayer & Spirituality in the Early Church*, vol. 2. ed., P. Allen, W. Mayer, & L Cross. Queensland. 1999 (Australian Catholic University. Centre for Early Christian Studies).

⁸ Diadochus of Photike, in: Epirus. *The Chapters On Spiritual Knowledge* can be found in: G. Palmer, K. Ware, and P. Sherrard (edd). *The Philokalia*. vol. 1. pp. 251-296, Faber, London 1979; see also Life of Abba Philemon, Excerpted in: K. Ware (Ed), *The Art of Prayer*, pp. 76-77.

the Gospel stories of the Publican and the Pharisee and the Blind Man of Jericho. The one Jesus lifts up as an example of true and effective prayer, for the Publican did not lift up his eyes but said only 'God have mercy on me.' Moreover, the Blind Man also cried out unceasingly: 'Jesus Son of David have mercy on me.' The Jesus Prayer is the distillation of these episodes into a double-aspected phrase. The first half is: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God', and the second half is, 'Have mercy on me.' (or on us). This is the radical summation of the Gospel claim that Jesus is Lord, and thus anyone speaking this does so 'In the Spirit' as Paul says.⁹ It also implies that the Lord's salvation consists in his having mercy on the believer. Salvation is thus the divine compassion. Like the divine *energeia* given to the Blind Man, it is the gift of luminous vision: the startling teaching that what we then 'see' is the infinite mercy of God. It is important to note at the outset, therefore, that the repeated petition 'have mercy on me' is not at all meant to be offered up as an anxious guilt-ridden cry asking for forgiveness of sins (something that dogs the heels of many Christians because of past upbringing) but should be understood rather as an acclamation of victory, an expression of grateful faith that God's gift of salvation is given to the Church in the form of divine compassion; and is a gift that He himself is as desirous to give as we are to receive. It is also implicit at the root of the prayer that the key to the whole recitation is the acclamation of victory through the name. The Lordship of the Saviour is manifested in the name Jesus. For the Orthodox this is no less than the name of God: and the name, as the Old Testament teaches, carries the force of the divine presence itself. The name of God is charged.

⁹ 1 Cor. 12.3.

At the sound of the Name of Jesus, all the heavenly powers attend. This is the unpronounceable name now voiced by humble people in the Cosmos, as once only the High Priest of Israel could whisper it in the Holy of Holies on *Yom Kippur*. Now the Day of Atonement has dawned when all the priests of Christ's New Covenant shout out the cry of Victory (*Niketeria*): that they have entered into the presence of God in the flesh. Moreover, this is why the prayer invites the practitioner to pull in the first half of the phrase, the divine name, in the in-breath, tasting that 'Name Above all Names'¹⁰; and exhale with the out-breath the petition for mercy. Now tonight we shall demonstrate the prayer publicly, and obviously, this correlation of the in and out breath with the words cannot be achieved. When it is publicly recited the main repetiteur simply acts like a human metronome, and those following the prayer set their own rhythm of breathing. This is very important: not to breathe too slowly, or too fast, but to set a quietened pace that suits. In that ever so gentle moment of stillness in between the in and out a breath, the mind is led to a pause in and around the Name itself.

The triadic nature of the human being is addressed by the prayer. At a physical level, the body is taught to stand (I find this easiest) or to sit or kneel with the head bowed a little, and the eyes closed. The hand runs through a woollen rosary, called a *komboskini* that numbers the prayers regarding hundreds, or centuries. By standing still, by beginning the prayer with an initial concentration on what is implied by these words, and by numbering the beads the body is distracted, like a baby given a rattle, to be content and be still. However, at the next psychic

¹⁰ Philippians 2.9-10.

level, once the body is stilled the soul and mind usually begin to be more agitated. One sits down to pray, and suddenly one begins to think about a million other things. The mind races: it seems uncontrollable. The Jesus Prayer teaches the *Logismos* (our teeming thoughts) to begin to be quiet too. This is a prayer that uses words, very few words, and words of great weight, to begin to pass in prayer beyond words and certainly out of thoughts. This is the key to the Jesus Prayer: it is to lead us to a form of mystical prayer that is without images, without words, and ultimately without ideations: for although the prayer continues, increasingly mechanically and repetitively so, if the body and mind are genuinely stilled, ultimately it is intended that the *Nous* might come into play: that spiritual instinct ever seeking in our spirit to sense the divine presence. The *Nous* will only be energized, however, so quiet is its sensibility, once the clamour of the body and the mind have been stilled.

Moreover, so the teachers of this prayer say to begin the session energetically, focusing on the quieting down of the body into a stasis of stillness, and then concentrating the mind on the words, until they become entrancing. However, then, like a parent tip-toeing out of the child's bedroom once it has fallen into a doze – ever so quietly in case you wake the little screamer once more, then the *Nous* quietly is meant to descent into the divine presence itself and simply be there before its God. It communicates by luminous light. It speaks wordlessly. It is spoken to in light. The teachers suggest imagining the place of the heart in the chest and bringing the mind down captive at an early stage in the prayer, down into the heart. In other words losing the sense of the words, ceasing to be carried along ideationally by the Jesus Prayer, but walking away from it – in a sense – while the body and mouth remain to recite the phrase, but while the *Nous* descends into the sanctuary of the heart and

stands silently face to face before the God of mercy and compassion.

Such is the intent. Many people find that they rarely get to the point of satisfactorily shutting up the body or the mind's thoughts long enough to stay in the silent sanctuary for more than a few seconds at a time. However, like everything else: this improves with practice. It matures our prayer life; strengthens and advances it. And if one realizes at any stage that the mind has taken over, by wandering off as it so often does (for it is an awesome thing to stand in the presence of God) or if the body grumbles against being so relegated in terms of our attention, body and mind acting like the spoiled children they often are, then all one has to do is begin again. Start with a focused calming of the body, a zealous return to the meaning of the words of the prayer, and then be ready once more to allow the eye of the *Nous* to open up again in the inner silent sanctuary of the heart. It is a prayer than can be learned in a moment, and take the rest of one's life to master. If it does not quite work, at least one has spent time acclaiming the victory of the Resurrected Lord before the face of the Angels: which is no mean achievement. If it does work: it can never quite be articulated, for one will have stood in the presence of the Risen Christ and been radiated with the light of his beautiful face.

4 Conclusion: From Antique Desert to Modern City.

The total vision of God is impossible for a human consciousness: but a Christian believer can expect, in the course of a developing spiritual life, to be able to move to an increasingly profound awareness of God's presence, as well as growing insight into the styles of his activity, and the signs of his empowerment, both in the world and in the human heart. In

simple terms, God is inviting individuals who respond to his graceful presence in the small things, to an ever-increasing perception and penetration of the greater mysteries. Many of the ancient Christians writers on prayer called this the invitation to the recesses of the 'Bridal Chamber' of the Word of God, the Holy Logos. It begins in attentiveness (*prosoche*) and ends in the ineffable stage of silent wisdom (*apophasis*). The latter is a stage which is very noticeable in all of the ancient Christian writings on prayer: where the force of words clearly begins to elude the writers and preachers, and they tail off in quietness (which is the original meaning of the word *Mystikos*). By this they suggest rather than define; and call on their readers to recognise the mysteries from out of their own experience, rather than expecting to have them spelled out in written words by others.

The Prayer of the Heart was once suited to desert dwellers, and meant to burn the sense of scripture within them, and also to fill out long hours of night vigils, giving a structure to their prayer life, and an increasing progress from vocal prayers to silent contemplation. However, it is not an antique dead letter. It is a profound exercise in the clarification of the soul and mind for modern urban dwellers too. We now inhabit a modern desert, with few spiritual guides to help us, and a dreadful paucity of spiritual oases to sustain and refresh us. It is important on our pilgrimage first to descend into the chamber of our innermost heart and learn to see ourselves truly. However, that knowledge will be overwhelming if we do not find ourselves grounded in the love of God; whose presence we seek to comprehend our very existence's meaning. The Jesus Prayer can be a new form of urban asceticism renovating the inner life of the Church and bonding communities together in a search for deeper self-awareness and more profound

investment in the springs of the Christian tradition: scripture and sacraments, and one another.

Our lecture this evening has stressed two ideas: firstly that the traditions of early Christian prayer are rooted in deep philosophical structures that have been greatly neglected in modern theology and, sad to say, in modern Church life; where sermons on interior prayer are still as few and far between as they were when I was young and so very tentatively tried to find out why so few people, including the clergy, seemed to know much about an interior life of prayer, or at least were more than shy of talking about it. My claim tonight has been that for the ancient Christians prayer was not simply a devotional exercise but a philosophical praxis: thus giving a firm apologetic refutation of the idea that piety was ever separable from wisdom. That divorce of faith and reason was always seen by the Early Church as constitutive of pagan cult as Lactantius argues so pervasively in the *Divine Institutes*, and it is certainly descriptive of the pseudo-religiosity of the various forms of Gnosticism, ancient or modern, and also characteristic, to this day, of many forms of soporific spirituality, that put the mind to sleep, over-stimulate the emotions and ignore the moral and social conscience of the practitioner.

Our second idea was to see how this deep anthropology of consciousness was put into effect among the early ascetics by the simplest type of prayer that was at one and the same time a call upon God for mercy and a victory cry celebrating the divine energy of the Resurrection in our midst. As St Paul taught, we hold in our Church, great treasures in a humble pot. Before we might have a chance of sharing those riches with others, perhaps we need to consider adopting a life of interior prayer that effectively leads us deeper into a personal covenant with Christ. If prayer renews the life of the Church, it will certainly mean that the mission of the Church begins once again to be

radiant and significant to the multitudes around us who seek for spiritual authenticity so earnestly, so anxiously. As St. Seraphim of Sarov, put it so well. "Acquire the Spirit of God and thousands around you will be saved."