



John Anthony McGuckin

## The Search For the Illumined Heart in the Eastern Christian Mystics

### Abstract

The essay charts an overview of the Eastern Christian ascetical tradition to counter the unhappy situation that this massive resource is almost wholly neglected in contemporary theological curricula, and thus largely unknown; and also to offset criticism often heard, or supposed, in modern media, that religious zealotry is detrimental to inclusivity and peaceful civilized order. It describes the three major pillars of Eastern Ascetical theology: the biblical teaching on the heart; the Alexandrian doctrine of the powers of the Nous, and the Syrian monastic teachings of the katharsis of the soul.

### Keywords

Ascetical, Niptic, Noetic, Katharsis, Byzantine



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## 1 Introduction

I am very pleased to be here among you this evening<sup>1</sup>, and to add to our considerations of how religion, so often witnessed and portrayed in our global awareness as a force for unleashing zealotry and dissension, bigotry, and narrow mindedness of metaphysical proportions: might be revisited and re-expressed, as a force for inculcating and training compassion and mutual understanding among men and women of good faith. The time is surely right. In an environment when the bloody images of the *Book of Revelation* seem to have predominated in popular Christian imagination over the eirenic sentences of the *Beatitudes*; when murderous images of the conquest of Canaan have been used to justify the enslavement and dispossession of extraneous and indigenous peoples, to the obscuring of the prophetic injunctions to care for the stranger and dispossessed in the midst of God's Israel; and when bigoted zealots of Islam have convinced whole generations of the youth of nations that the expansion of the Sharia, by violent means if necessary, is the most important of all aspects of the application of the Quran; then we surely live in a world that needs desperately to face up to the pathologically violent and bloody heritage of its religious traditions. Religion, understood by certain types of zealot mentality, can be, and obviously is, a danger to the health of the human race.

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<sup>1</sup> The lecture was first given as part of the *Distinguished Scholars Visiting Lecture Series* of the Centre For Spiritual Life, Eckerd College. St. Petersburg, Florida. Oct. 27<sup>th</sup> 2005.

## **2 An Untold Story**

So, I am glad to have the opportunity to share with you one of the great untold stories of Christianity: a reminder to us, perhaps, that it is an eastern religion of profound mystical import, with an experiential tradition of illumination and compassion that is both ancient, foundational, and more or less entirely unknown in the present. The themes of which I will speak to you this evening are to be found in literature that makes up probably two thirds of all the extant literature from the Church of the first millennium, yet only the other third was usually translated: the third that dealt with conflict, controversy and exclusion. Of the literature of prayer and experience (what is often called the ascetical theology of Christianity) probably less than ten percent has an extant English translation. And of this paltry ten percent, ninety percent has been taken from the late medieval western, and reformation church experience. The usual tale: the more or less total neglect of the foundational literature of the early Christians: Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian – a body of literature which was not heard much after that two thirds of the ancient Church began to be inexorably dissolved by the energetic expanse of ancient Islam, until it took on the character of a conquered minority in all the ancient heartlands of Christianity. In the perspective of the rise of the papal monarchy in the Church's second millennium, the views of eastern Christian 'dissidents', who claimed to retain more ancient patterns of thinking, more independent aspirations of Church governance, were doomed to be set aside with the easy fluency of an vigorously expanding western Christian communion which had by then entirely lost its original bi-lingual capacity. The Liturgy of the Roman Church may have been in Greek until the dawn of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, but by the dawn of the 5<sup>th</sup>, even an intellectual giant such as Augustine, was incapable of reading a text in Greek. And does this matter? When one considers all the Christian heritage was transmitted in this form: the Old Testament (for the

Christians of the first five hundred years predominantly read the Greek Septuagint as the inspired book, as the Christian East has done ever since), the New Testament (since even Jesus' name and titles were recorded in Greek), the ecumenical councils, the liturgies, and earliest hymns – all Greek, perhaps it does; for semantic transitioning can be effected, but translation of the whole mindset and how the different elements once held together is much harder to render across church societies that were growing more and more alienated from one another. By the end of the first millennium the strain of the linguistic and ecclesiastical divorces were becoming critically felt. Most have heard of the Great Schism between the Churches of the East and West which is alleged to have occurred in 1054, a breach that has not yet been healed; but fewer are aware of the greater divorce that had happened before that other, secondary, event could have taken place: the separation of instinctive spiritual understandings that had once united Christian communities through familial related liturgies, shared experience and common forms of prayer. Tonight's talk would like to sketch in what some of that tradition once looked like; and what benefit it could restore to the wider Christian community of the West, if it were to think again of reappropriating its own deeper and broader tradition. This heritage of the ancient Eastern Church has run on, for the last five centuries usually under the oppressive weight of political and religious coercion, into the current experience of the Orthodox Church. Only Russia had been free since the 15<sup>th</sup> century triumph of Islam over Eastern Christianity, though it had been much damaged in the psyche by its interminable foundational conflicts with the Golden Horde; but from the 18<sup>th</sup> century it had established even a university culture, until the cataclysm of 1917 swept it too down for a generation of ruin and decline. But even when it was functioning as one of the largest bodies of Christians in Europe, it was cut off by language, distance and culture from the rest of Europe, and more so, America, and its distinctive Christian voice was rarely

heard in the West. Orthodoxy, despite having the foundational traditions of Christian religion, has thus arrived in the West as a foreigner speaking an almost alien language; enumerating a mystical tradition of theologians who are today almost entirely unknown outside its own boundaries.

### **3 The Eastern Christian Mystical Writers**

My subject tonight, therefore, is another crowd of zealots: but this time religious zealots whose single mindedness time after time, after a millennium and a half of practice and of carefully passed on tradition, has been proven to emerge in a state of mind of soul characterised by peacefulness, humility, compassion, and merciful inclusivism. Such zealots we can live with. They are, of course, the mystical writers of the eastern Church; saints and theologians who have usually never been included in any of the western text books of the 'history of the church' except for moments to ridicule them, refuse permission for any to read them (not least by generations of scholars who never translated them from the ancient sources), for the western schools, frankly, were anxious to run through antiquity so as to move on as quickly as decently possible to the higher ground (whether that was Reformation theology, German systematics, or Biblical Higher criticism, one can fill in the gaps oneself - usually with only the need for a five minute perusal of the syllabus of the religion school one happens to be in). Is this an exaggeration? I am aware of only two graduate schools in America whose religion departments have a course in Byzantine traditions; of only one in England, of only one in Australia. So much for the range of the English speaking world.

Who were these writers? Why should we try to scale the mountains of difficulties that have been placed in our path to attempt a deeper familiarisation with them. If their names are familiar only to Eastern Christians, it is because the Orthodox

know them through their works and hymns and traditions which live on in the fabric of the services and prayer books of the ordinary people. To almost every one else even the recitation of their names is conducive to a permanent state of raised eyebrows: Origen Adamantine, Gregory the Theologian, John the Dwarf, Evagrius the Pontic, Dorotheos of Gaza, Timothy Wobble-Hat, Pseudo-Macarius, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, Isaac of Niniveh, Symeon the New Theologian..... and many others; known (even more oddly) as the 'Niptic Fathers' (not nip tuck as we might have heard of from the Television series of that name – but Niptic from the Greek *Nipsis* which means 'mindfulness', a word today which is predominantly found used describing Buddhist states of consciousness). Many of them are collected in a source which is even more oddly named as the *Philokalia* (literally a book 'for the lover of the beautiful'). One of the great advances of the last third of the last century was the translation of this into elegant English by Bishop Kallistos Ware and others. Try asking for that in your local paperback store and study the reaction of the bookseller. It would be too much for everyone, and counterproductive to the overall thesis, to give an exhausting account of all these writers singly; an unfortunate state of affairs, since there is hardly an extant source in English-language religious writing which gives any approachable account of them all for any general reader; but it might serve us better if I described the general drift of their school considered collectively. So let us make a start.

#### **4 Three Pillars of Tradition**

I would like to describe three pillars of theological tradition that make up the eastern Christian ascetical, or mystical school. The first is made up from the biblical roots of the doctrine of the heart as the organ of psychic awareness. The second is the Greek-Alexandrian tradition of the *Nous* (or eye of spiritual perception)

as the path to illumination of the human consciousness. It is a tradition that is often described in terms of *Theosis* – the ‘deification by grace’ of the human creature under the visitation of the divine Spirit. The third is the Early Syrian Patristic tradition of the *katharsis* ( or cleansing) of the heart so that it becomes conscious of the indwelling presence and action of the Spirit of God. The last stage is not so much a separate strand in all of this – rather the close weaving of all strands together, in the synthesis of them that was made by the Byzantine Christian church after the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Most particularly in the later Byzantine writers the early Greek Christian ideas of the illumined mind or *Nous*, are brought together with the Syrian Christian reflections on the clarified heart conscious of the acts of the indwelling Spirit: to become what we have summed up in the overall title of this talk: the state of the ‘illumined heart.’

## **5 Biblical Roots**

For all the Early Christians, Syriac or Greek, or Latin, the Bible became a massively important source of all reflection. This may seem like stating a cliché, but it was actually a patristic achievement to bring the Old Testament into mainline reflection by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century: and this for two reasons. Before that point the Great Church had tended to cite Scripture ( by which it mainly and largely meant the Hebrew Scriptures) in the manner of typological allusions. What I have in mind is the symbolic allusiveness that can read the rock in the desert as Christ (supplied by Paul), the climb of Isaac to the mountain of his sacrifice as Golgotha, or the crossing of the Red Sea as a figure of baptism. Such an allusive way of using scripture affirms its symbolic importance, but does not particularly rise out of the fabric of scripture to make a theological stance. Secondly Gnosticism had threatened the whole validity of the continuing use of scripture at all. It had tended to identify the God of the

Hebrew scriptures as a malevolent lesser daimon, hostile to the human race: and interpreted the Gospel as Christ's freeing of the gentiles from the curse of the law, and the oppression of the Law's demonic god. the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, was decidedly NOT the God of the Scripture for the Gnostics. It was, therefore, only after the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century that Christians at large would begin, not only to cling to the scripture on principle ( inventing the term at that same time of Old Testament – to connote the Christians co-option of the Tanakh), but also use this newly delineated 'scripture' in a thorough-going theological manner. It is no coincidence that it is at this same time that the first elaborated ideas of canonicity, biblical revelation and systems of exegesis are first talked about. After the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, then, we see a growing scrutiny of the scriptures as a prayer book of the Early Church. In this respect the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian ascetic writers begin to gather together the extensive biblical doctrine of the human heart. This, as you will imagine is not remotely a biological factor, and far more than a simple anthropological term, for it actually rises into becoming a doctrine that sketches out what we could call a sacramental theory of anthropology: the human being is intrinsically a mysterious figure within creation, called to a transcendent destiny whose beginning is moral obedience, and whose end is the vision of God. Let me in two minutes present a cartoon of the Old Testament theology of the heart.

In the Hebrew Bible the heart is a cipher for the whole spiritual personality, especially considered as the true deep reality of a person. It is the centre of the human creature's spiritual intelligence, that spiritual consciousness which is partly intellective but more fundamentally expressed by the word 'wisdom' (Prov. 19.8; Job. 34.10; 1K 3.12; Prov. 18.15). Thought rises naturally from the heart as the seat of spiritual intelligence for the heart is the place where thoughts reside in a creature ( Dan. 2.30; Ju. 5.16). So, a human being directs the essential life by the thoughts of the heart ( Jer. 11.20; Is. 10.7; 1K 8.17; Jer.



23.20; Ezr. 7.10 ). The heart is the locus of all moral obedience - one serves the Lord 'with all one's heart' (1 Sam 12.20; 1 Sam. 12.24 ) and the fear of God thus dwells within the heart (Jer. 32. 40). The heart of the righteous person trusts in the Lord ( Prov. 3.5) and is confident before His face ( Ps. 27.14).

The movement of the heart also describes the chosen purposes, the commitments of life, that have been adopted as a fixed allegiance and are stabilised as the firm establishment of a human being within the way of the Lord ( Ps. 119.36 ; Job. 11.13). Hannah's prayer, rising from deepest sorrow and need, was uttered 'in her heart' ( 1Sam 1.13) and God heard her. Solomon prayed for understanding of heart to perceive the moral demands of God (1K 3.9) and his wisdom and favour with God derived from the 'largeness of heart' which God had given him (1K. 4.29). A human may look on the outer appearance of another person but God always looks on the heart ( 1 Sam 16.7 ). Humans devise evil in their hearts ( Zech 7.10 ; Prov. 6.18) ; but it is also the source of their repentance when God makes the heart of the nation to melt ( Josh. 14.8), or when David's heart struck him (1 Sam 24.5).

The Psalms and wisdom apophthegms presented a tighter form of this same doctrine, more relevant for the doctrine of prayer, which the early Christian monks were to assimilate from their constant recitation of phrases taken from this part of scripture. The Lord knows the secrets of the heart (Ps. 44.21). He sees that humans find their deepest selves in the heart ( Prov. 23.7 ) which has a depths that can cause wonderment (Ps 73.7). But he sees also that humans work wickedness in their hearts ( Ps. 58.2; Ps. 41.6). In the heart a creature can resist God nakedly, the root of all subsequent evil (Ps. 10.3, 6), and such rebels God rejects because of their pride and arrogance of heart ( Ps. 101.4-5). God is close to those whose hearts are broken ( repentant ) Ps 34.18). He is the friend of those whose hearts are established in Him ( Ps. 112.8) for such establishment sets the creature firmly within the number of the servants of the Living God, though equally the

heart may wither and become fixed in opposition to God and the human who has hardened his heart shall fall (Prov. 28.14).

The New Testament usage in regard to the human heart takes the Old Testament trends to a further pitch. The central thrust of the New Testament continues to use the heart as the supreme symbol of the inner spiritual condition and centre of energy in a human being. The anthropology remains monistic and dynamically concrete. This is true even of Paul who lays the basis for the Christian adoption of the more common Hellenistic forms of dichotomous or trichotomous anthropology <sup>2</sup>. Paul speaks of the heart as the synonym for the 'inmost self' the inner person longing for salvation <sup>3</sup>. The evangelical doctrine reaffirms that the heart is the seat of the understanding, the source of reflection and contemplation (Mk. 7.21; Mt. 12.34; Jn. 12.40; Lk. 1.51; Lk. 2.35; Lk. 9.47; Lk. 24.25,38; Acts 7.23; Acts. 8.22; Hb. 4.12). It is the source of volition and moral decision (Jn. 13.2; 1 Cor. 4.5; 1 Cor. 7.37; 2 Cor. 9.7; Acts 5.3; Acts 11.23; Col. 4.8; Eph. 6.22; Rev. 17.17 ). It is, for these reasons, the centre of creaturely consciousness to which God turns when he reveals his presence in the world, making it the centre of the divine encounter. It is the arena in which the human being knows and relates to God in the deepest seat of religious awareness. ( Mt. 13. 15,19; Mt. 18.35; Mk. 7.21; Mk. 12.30; Lk. 8.15; Lk. 16.15; Acts 16.14; Acts 15.9; Rom. 2.15; Rom. 5.5.; Rom. 8.27; Rom. 10.9f; 1 Thess. 2.4; Gal. 4.6; 2 Cor. 1.22;; Heb. 8.10; Heb. 10.16, 22; 2 Peter. 1.19; Rev. 2.23). It is the inner sanctum of the divine indwelling as Paul puts it:

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<sup>2</sup> Pneuma, Psyche, Sarx/Soma The anthropology witnessed in the Qumran texts, especially in the Hymns, reflects more of a Spirit-Body dualism.

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 7.22.

May your hidden self grow strong so that Christ may dwell in your heart by faith.  
(Eph. 3.17).

But, it is, undoubtedly, all summed up best in that luminous phrase of Jesus :

How blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.  
( Mt. 5.8).

Here in an extraordinarily concise and graphic synopsis, the heart is the organ of spiritual vision and illumination. Its luminosity is assured by *metanoia*, that is repentance, and *katharsis*, that is, purification, a constant state of remaining open to correction. This exactly what 'purity' means in the New Testament; not a reference to sexual attitudes as it is widely misinterpreted in many corners today.

## **6 The Alexandrian Tradition of the Enlightened Nous**

So much for the first pillar of the Christian mystical doctrine. The second, I suggest is the tradition found predominantly in the Alexandrian and Cappadocian Fathers (Clement of Alexandria, Origen Adamantius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Evagrius the Pontic and Gregory of Nyssa) which has often been called the Noetic school. The Nous is the central Greek philosophical term for consciousness. It was co-opted by Christians from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onwards to describe the state of the human being as a psychic consciousness seeking enlightenment. Despite the large-scale rejection of Gnostic religion in its hostility to the scripture principle, the Greek Fathers actually rescued several of the Gnostic religious insights: not least the belief that the human Nous was a place where the divine transected with the creaturely. For the Alexandrian Christians the incarnation of the

Divine Logos, second person of the Trinity, was a perfect realisation of this. As the Logos was made flesh, they argued, so flesh itself was rendered divine by a graceful and mysterious co-option. Athanasius of Alexandria put it like this in speaking of the divine Logos (De Inc. 54): 'He became Man in order that might become god.' he is quite well aware of the shock value of his syllogism: just as Jesus himself was when he used the same ploy in Jn. 10. 34-5. The flesh of Jesus, in Eastern Christian tradition, for example, is seen, therefore, to be luminous with the divine presence and energy. It is itself radiant, life-giving, a source of healing, and grace. patristic writers in the West were very anxious to keep the categories of flesh and divinity separate ( both in terms of Jesus and humans at large: and so Jesus did some things as God, some things as a human: and humans at large were creatures, fallible, separated by God by an immense chasm, a *massa damnata*). This is not so for the theologians of the East. For the Alexandrians, everything Jesus did, was an act not of God, or of a man, but rather of the God-Man. To employ the technical terms: a Theandric act. Christ's humanity was light-emitting. On Thabor he was seen to be exposed in his natural incarnate state. the suppression of this light on most occasions was taken to be an exercise of economy. When he touched Lazarus and emitted life, this was seen by them to be a natural exercise of his Theandric energy.

More than this being a Christological curiosity, however, the Greek fathers saw the incarnation as the ultimate paradigm of salvation. For them we were not saved by the Cross alone, but by all the mystery of the Incarnation of the Lord in history. We were saved by his enfleshment, of which the suffering were part, as was also the resurrection and ascension. For the Alexandrians, the incarnation redesigned human ontology: a new Adam makes a new race. The long attachment to the corruption of death is seen to be broken as an inexorable law of being for those who have been made alive in Christ. the new Adam is first in a series of New Humanity, defined now no longer by its ontological

separateness from God, but by its intimate harmony with a God who chose to be incarnated as a man. The preferred term for this theology of salvation was *Theosis kata charin*. This meant the gift of deification as a grace communicated by the Spirit of God, to make the humanity of the Old Adam rise into the new humanity of the Second Adam. This meant in the overall theory, that New Humanity would be given an immortal destiny. It was seen, in practice, exemplified in the illumination of the *Nous*, or mind, that was felt to be characteristic of a godlike creature: one primary proof of the pudding was the 'seeing-through' of the fallacy of idols, but the other was a relentless desire to live the compassionate and altruistic life on the pattern of the New Adam, and exemplified by him in the social and ethical program of the Beatitudes.

The New Humanity, was a new praxis of illuminated human beings. The Christian life was thus defined not as primarily a set of doctrines, rather a life dedicated to enlightenment, where the ethical, socio-political, and personal aspects of religion were seen as one, and the ultimate goal of discipleship was a communion with the divine analogous to the intimacy of the correlation of divine and human in Jesus, though supplied to them by the gift of the divinising Spirit, not ( as in the case of Christ) by the hypostatic presence of the Logos). If we were to sum up the keynote of this approach in the fewest words we might describe it as a vision of the *Theosis* of the human consciousness by grace, that was seen to be accelerated by humanity's moral ascent and compassionate awareness: its *mimesis* of the Incarnate Lord.

## **7 The Syrian Tradition**

Our third pillar we described as the Early Syrian spiritual theology of the heart seeking *katharsis*. Its chief writers are Afrahat the Persian, Sadhona the Syrian, John the Dwarf, Pseudo

Macarius, and Isaac of Niniveh. Running through all of them is a solid biblical semantic which takes the heart (rather than the Noetic consciousness) as the centre of spiritual insight. To this extent they have often been seen as 'less intellectual' than the great Greek theologians: but this is a mistaken categorisation. Their works have languished in Syriac, which after the ascent of Islam in the 8<sup>th</sup> century heartlands of Iran, Iraq, Arabia and Syria, where these writers dwelt, became an inaccessible language for the wider Church until the middle of the last century, when translations first started to appear. The Syrians stress the need for apprehension. The heart is the capacity of a human creature to be aware. Its most difficult awareness is not the accumulated awareness of the outside cosmos, which we call experience of life, or society. But rather the awareness of its own selfhood, as a living consciousness under the eye of God. To escape the difficulty, and terror of this consciousness, the human heart tries time and time again to disguise and reify itself as another element of the external material cosmos. But there is something that prevents this self-delusion, and that, as they express it, is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit within the deepest level of the heart of the baptised disciple. Baptism communicates the mystical gift of the presence: it is the gift of the capacity of *Theosis* to the believer. After that point the heart must choose to return its gaze toward its true Lord (the Divine Spirit) or towards its false Lord, the Ruler of this Age, the seductive spirit of evil. The ever-present tension results in an inability of the heart to stand still. Like a humming bird if it is not in motion by choice, it is in motion by default. Once its wings stop, it falls to the ground. Once the heart ceases to move towards an abiding awareness of the presence of God in the heart, it inevitably begins to move to the preferring of ease and bodily delight to all other things. This the Syrians see as an integral disordering of the human destiny as graced consciousness. They have a pessimistic view of ease and bodily delight as addictive constructs that soon grow into tyrannical masters, leading humans to prefer their own ease

even over the rights and hopes of others. For the Syrians, this is the quintessence of the spirit of evil that seduces the heart into sin, by drowning out its innate ear for the 'still small voice' of the innate Spirit of God. Once again, for the Syrians, spiritual apprehension is only guaranteed by *metanoia*: a stance of remaining open to the demands of God in the awareness of human fragility and the need for endless forgiveness, of self and other. It is described by the favoured motif of the *katharsis*, or regular cleansing, of the heart, through asceticism, and especially regular prayer. Prayer is seen as the deepest form of ascetical endeavour, the hardest and boldest assault on the chasms and crevasses that comprise our human geography: the overwhelming dawning of the realization that we alone of all the species on this small planet, do not wholly belong here; and actually stand, when we cease the distracting din of our civilization, in the presence of another who looks upon us. As Paul put it starkly: 'As you know, here we have no abiding city.' (Heb. 13.14).

If we were to put together these three foundational pillars of the Eastern Christian mystical tradition: the Biblical doctrine of the heart; the Alexandrian concept of the deified Nous, and the Syrian notion of the divine consciousness of the heart: we would find ourselves beginning another long and convoluted story. Let me cut that knot straight away by saying that this would simply be the story of the rise of Byzantine mystical writing from the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the 14<sup>th</sup>: the flowering of the mystical traditions that would eventually underpin the Hesychast movement and supply the dominant traditions of contemporary Greek and Slavic Orthodox spirituality to this day. Byzantium is major source of mystical writing; largely untranslated to this day: but its genius lies in synthesis, not in novel creation, at least on this front.

## 8 The Geography of the Heart

How are these ancient and complex doctrines relevant today? Are they really worth excavating and reappropriating? Allow me to answer that in this my final summation. What this early mystical tradition of the Christians tells me, as a modern, first and foremost, is that mysticism is not a peripheral and exotic category, but a fundamental avenue to understand anthropology, salvation theology, and ethics. what I mean by that is that they seem to teach me that it is not necessary to seek the heart, as if it were a complex idea, for both scripture and the early Christian tradition are both taking it for granted that it is the heart itself that is restless for God and wishes to do the seeking. But a highly important part of this doctrine is that the heart is not alone in seeking, for God has elected the heart as the holy ground of encounter. It is the place of the indwelling. The prayer of the heart is not merely the turning of the whole self to God. It is, more than this, the seeking after the heart by God who is restless to save and bring life to his creature. The heart is not simply a biological or affective part of the human creature but, in the biblical understanding, the whole creature understood as having a capacity for a higher life, and ultimately a capacity for God who has given to a conscious creature the instinct for divine presence by means of the heart's sacred character. The heart, therefore, is most exactly the person understood as a creature under the eye of God, a mysterious and holy reality even though creaturely and limited. The heart signifies the whole person who can enter in, or may draw back from, the sacred space which is that geography of the divine encounter which later spiritual writers will wish to discourse over in terms of the syntax of spirituality. The particular geography of this terrain of the heart is stark and apocalyptic in biblical and monastic literature, like the desert which is so often elevated as its symbol. It is either the holy ground of fiery revelation (as in the type of the Burning



Bush), or the desolate wasteland of the creature's rebellious sterility (as in the type of the waters of Meribah). For the early Christian writers, Prayer (itself a reflection of the condition of this inner heart), retains this character of *Krisis*, or judgement, that we find especially in the Gospel sayings about the human heart. It is not, in the first instance, an emotional or comfort-laden cipher. The character of our prayer is, like it or not, a profound indicator of the quality of one's true discipleship. This graphic, monistic, and dynamic understanding of the human being in the face of God remains at the core of all the subsequent Eastern Christian understandings of prayer and the spiritual life. Even when certain Alexandrian writers do speak of mystical vision as an ascent of the mind away from material concerns, I propose that the overall context is never ultimately lost sight of ( and certainly not by the Syrian writers) that all our awareness is deeply grounded in community. This fundamentally grounded and dynamic character of the doctrine ought to be noted from the outset, however, for whatever insights the East Christian doctrine of the prayer of the heart opens up, it should not be read as comparable ( certainly not reducible ) to the later Western concept of praying with the heart, meaning 'affective prayer'; traditionally understood as a lower stage of spiritual development than pure contemplation. It is simply not this and, moreover, is deeply opposed to the anthropological and many of the theological suppositions of this more familiar schema as set out in numerous contemporary books on spirituality. Equally, we must state that neither is it reducible ( as is often supposed in many modern Orthodox writings about the prayer of the heart ) simply to the Jesus Prayer, though the tradition of the Jesus Prayer certainly fits within the overall schema of the prayer of the heart, where short phrases (prayer - *monologistos*) repeated with attentiveness (*Prosoche*) provide a method of returning to the consciousness of the heart and the One who dwells patiently within it, other to us.

What the movement of the heart primarily means in this biblical syntax, especially when it is referred to prayer, is the creature's inmost consciousness of God's presence in its most sacred interior reality. That awareness of the Presence is invariably connected with the 'coming to reality' - the reflection of the ontological state of 'coming-to-be' which is the Creator's fundamental gift to creaturehood. And in the Eastern sources, that 'coming to reality' is invariably connected with a deep realisation of the divine as other, and the human as severely limited and provisional. Only from this basis of true confession of creatureliness (the turning of the heart ) can the creature progress, incomprehensibly, into the inviting presence of the One who makes creatureliness transcend its ontological boundaries. the other, in this Christina philosophy, becomes not the Alien, but the alternate ground and stabilisation of being. Resistance to this principle is the ultimate idolatry: the elevating of the Parmenidean principle that 'Humanity is the measure of all things', the supreme judge and lord of its own human history: a *hubris* that never has yet been quenched despite the appallingly tragic record of our most recent century, which has shown our race excelling itself in terms of all previous recorded history in the degree and extent of its mutual savagery and aptitude for destruction. To the basic scriptural doctrine of the heart, therefore, the Christian East, can be seen to have added two other primary spiritual concepts: *Penthos* - the joy-making sorrow of the repentant consciousness ; and *Prosoche* - attentiveness to reality - awareness not only of the attempt of deep seated and hidden passions to corrupt the heart but, more fundamentally, awareness of the movements of the Lord within the heart's quietened sensibility.

This location of the heart as the organ of insight; the domain of metanoia, the holy ground of the transcendent definition of the destiny of humankind as seers of the presence of God: is (I believe) a unique synthesis achieved in the Byzantine Christian tradition, and has much to recommend itself to contemporary

Christian thought: not least in an age such as ours when the contemporary Christian political revival seems to represent more *hubris* than *metanoia*; and in an age when spirituality of the so-called 'New Age' is trying to assert itself in a manner substantially divorced from coherent programs of ethics and social compassion. The spirituality of the Illumined heart, by contrast, prioritises an inclusive, humble, and compassionate pilgrimage, as the proper manifestation of the Christian agenda for our age.