

The Origins, Development and Diffusion of »Political Hesychasm«

Introduction

Hesychasm is a meditative prayer tradition practiced by Orthodox monks since early Christian times. The practice was conceptualised theologically in the fourteenth century by Gregory Palamas (1296/97–1359). Since then, Hesychasm has become the object of numerous theological and philosophical treatments, in particular during the »Silver Age« of Russian religious philosophy. But only in the mid-twentieth century, under the unlikely conditions of Soviet communism and the Cold War, do we find two distinctively political interpretations of Hesychasm by the Russian philologist Gelian Prokhorov (1936–2017) and the Russian second-generation émigré theologian John Meyendorff (1926–1992). This chapter outlines the origins of »Political Hesychasm« in the treatments of Meyendorff and Prokhorov and then traces the influence of this concept in contemporary Russian philosophy and Orthodox theology. The focus lies on recent treatments of political Hesychasm by Orthodox authors who have made the concept the ground for political arguments about Christian Orthodox uniqueness and anti-Westernism. The chapter closes with a discussion of contemporary treatments of political Hesychasm that resist the trend of Orthodox anti-Westernism.

The Neo-patristic turn in Orthodox theology in the twentieth century has frequently been criticised for ignoring the real social and political problems in contemporary societies and for failing, therefore, to develop an Orthodox social ethics and a political theology that is up to the challenges of the modern world. The sharp distinction made by Paul Valliere and Robert Bird between the Neo-patristic school and the »modern theology« of the »Russian School« is a case in point for this judgment¹. This assessment overlooks, however, that the Neo-patristic turn has also produced its own political theology: the theology of political Hesychasm.

Political Hesychasm is a topic that cannot be omitted from a publication about »Orthodox Christian Political Theologies«. It represents one piece in of the puzzle

1 Paul VALLIERE, *Modern Russian Theology*. Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov. *Orthodox Theology in a New Key*, Edinburgh 2000; Robert BIRD, *The Tragedy of Russian Religious Philosophy*. Sergei Bulgakov and the Future of Orthodox Theology, in: Jonathan SUTTON/Wil van den BERCKEN (eds.), *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe*, Leuven 2003, pp. 211–228.

that is the contemporary panorama of political theologies in the Orthodox context. The study of its history, development, and present-day usage illuminates important facets of contemporary Orthodox theological thought. As I set out to offer, in this chapter, a critical analysis of political Hesychasm, I can draw on several studies that make my task easier. These are, first, the essay »Der Nördliche Katechon« by Michael Hagemeister, who offers a broad contextualisation of political Hesychasm in Russian Eurasian and Slavophile thought from the beginning of the nineteenth to the twenty-first century²; second, a book chapter by Andrey Shishkov that contains a critical appraisal of Hesychasm and Neo-Palamism in the context of contemporary Orthodox theology³; and third, the book-length study by Daniel Payne of political Hesychasm in contemporary Greek-Orthodox thought⁴. I also draw on a few short texts and book reviews written by myself in the past and on first-hand debates with two contemporary representatives of Hesychast studies, namely Sergei S. Horujy (Khoruzhii) and Vladimir Petrunin⁵. This chapter does not present a completely new argument with respect to any of these texts. Instead, it draws together the different interpretations and debates elaborated in various languages (German, Russian, English) and disciplines (history, theology, philosophy) in order to answer the question where political Hesychasm as a concept comes from, where it stands today and what practical implications it has for the self-understanding of Orthodox Christians. With the exception of my references to Payne and Yannaras, who discuss political Hesychasm in the Greek-Orthodox context, my focus in this chapter is on Russia.

2 Michael HAGEMEISTER, *Der »Nördliche Katechon« – »Neobyzantismus« und »Politischer Hesychasmus« im postsowjetischen Russland*, Erfurt 2016.

3 Andrey SHISHKOV, *Eastern Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and (Neo)Palamite Tradition in Post-Soviet Russia*, in: Mikhail SUSLOV/Dmitry UZLANER (eds.), *Contemporary Russian Conservatism. Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives*, Leiden 2019 pp. 321–346.

4 Daniel PAYNE, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm in Contemporary Orthodox Thought. The Political Hesychasm of John Romanides and Christos Yannaras*, Lanham, MD 2011.

5 Kristina STOECKL, *Political Hesychasm? Vladimir Petrunin's Neo-Byzantine Interpretation of the Social Doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church*, in: *Studies in East European Thought* 62/1 (2010), pp. 125–133; ead., *Book Review: The Revival of Political Hesychasm in Contemporary Orthodox Thought. The Political Hesychasm of John Romanides and Christos Yannaras*, by Daniel P. PAYNE; Vladimir PETRUNIN, *Politicheskii Isikhazm i ego traditsii v sotsial'noi kontseptsii Moskovskogo Patriarkhata*, in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26/3 (2011), pp. 499–502; Kristina STOECKL, *Book Review: The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer. Contesting Contemplation*, in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27/1 (2012), pp. 166f. Information about a seminar-discussion with S. Horujy and V. Petrunin (in Russian): *Заседание семинара. В.В. Петрунин*, published by the Institute of Synergetic Anthropology, URL: <<http://synergia-isa.ru/?p=8604>> (11-13-2023).

I. What is Hesychasm?

For a start and especially for readers who are new to the term »Hesychasm«, a clarification is necessary. Hesychasm (from Greek *hesychia*, »stillness«) describes the tradition of contemplative prayer in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Hesychasm is generally used as a shorthand for Orthodox asceticism, but more precisely it refers to the practice of the »Jesus Prayer«. The Jesus Prayer is a psychosomatic prayer and meditation technique, the origins of which go back to the desert fathers of the first centuries of Christianity⁶. Through the incessant, concentrated repetition of the name of Jesus Christ that follows the rhythm of the heart's beating, the ascetic is said to reach inner peace (*hesychia*) and freedom from all passions (*apatheia*), and to experience an ecstatic vision of God (*theoria*). In the fourteenth century, the question whether the sensual experiences that practitioners reported to have gone through during prayer, like the vision of light or the perception of pleasant smell, should be considered a true experience of divine reality or purely subjective imagination, led to a divisive theological dispute. On the one side stood those who insisted on the divine reality of the visions experienced during ascetic practices, on the other side stood the sceptics, who considered the divine to be unknowable and intangible. The first group was led by Gregory Palamas, a monk, theologian and Archbishop of Thessaloniki in the late Byzantine period; the second by the theologian Barlaam of Calabria (ca. 1290–1348). It was in the context of this conceptual struggle that Palamas developed his theological justification of Hesychasm. This justification rested on the distinction between the divine essence, which is unknowable, and divine energies, which emanate from the divine essence like rays of light from the sun and which are accessible to human experience. Palamas' teaching of divine energies was rejected as heretic by scholastic theologians in Rome, but was recognised as a dogma by the Byzantine Orthodox Church in 1341, 1347, and 1351. Since then, Hesychasm has been considered a specific feature distinguishing Orthodox theology from Western Christianity⁷.

In the popular book *Why Angels Fall. A Journey through Orthodox Europe from Byzantium to Kosovo*, Victoria Clark documents the lived experience of Hesychasm in Orthodox monasteries in Southeastern Europe⁸. Furthermore, in *The Globalization of the Jesus Prayer*, Christopher Johnson studies Hesychasm outside the

6 Christopher D. L. JOHNSON, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer. Contesting Contemplation*, London 2010, pp. 16f.

7 The description of the hesychast controversy in this paragraph is summarised from HAGEMEISTER, »Der Nördliche Katechon«, pp. 18–20.

8 Victoria CLARK, *Why Angels Fall. A Journey through Orthodox Europe from Byzantium to Kosovo*, London 2001.

Eastern Christian context, as one popular spiritual exercise among others that is finding followers among urban spiritual seekers across the Western world⁹.

Whereas Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer denote a religious practice, it is really their doctrinal justification, Palamism, that assumes a political character. Political Hesychasm interprets the theological struggle of the past between hesychasts and scholastics as the intellectual backdrop to a confrontation between East and West that is defined chiefly in political and cultural terms. The outcome of this struggle is said to determine the history of Orthodox civilisation all the way from Byzantium to contemporary Russia. I will discuss this interpretation of political Hesychasm, the main focus of my contribution, in sections II and III. There also exists, however, an alternative interpretation of Hesychasm and Palamism, which draws theological conclusions from Palamism that are at odds with the prevalent anti-modern and anti-Western political and cultural interpretation. I will call this approach »ethical Hesychasm« and discuss it in section IV.

II. Political Hesychasm in Byzantine and Russian Studies in the Twentieth Century

The term »Political Hesychasm« was coined and explored in the 1960s and 1970s by the Orthodox second-generation émigré theologian John Meyendorff (1926–1992) and by the Soviet historian Gelian Prokhorov (1936–2017)¹⁰. Meyendorff and Prokhorov spoke of political Hesychasm in the historical context of political struggles in Byzantium in the middle of the fourteenth century. From their theological and historical perspective, political Hesychasm was the main answer to a historical-political puzzle, namely to the question how the Orthodox Church survived the fall of the Byzantine Empire.

After centuries of almost complete scholarly neglect, the study of Gregory Palamas and his theology of Hesychasm was revived by Meyendorff, who wrote a path-breaking dissertation about him¹¹. Meyendorff was a student of Georges Florovsky,

9 JOHNSON, *The Globalization of Hesychasm*.

10 Daniel Payne gives a good overview of the early study of Palamism in the twentieth century. Among the first scholars to study Palamas systematically were the Russian Bishop Basil Krivocheine, who wrote the first major work on Palamas, published in Prague in 1936, and the Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae, who in 1938 published *The Life and Teaching of St Gregory Palamas*, a work that remained largely unknown due to a lack of translations from Romanian. Archimandrite Cyprian Kern wrote in 1947 *Elements of the Theology of Gregory Palamas*. This was the literature on Palamas available to the two students of Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff, whose major works have shaped Orthodox theology in the twentieth century in a Palamist key. See PAYNE, *The Revival*, pp. 126–128.

11 JOHN MEYENDORFF, *St Grégoire Palamas et la mystique orthodoxe*, Paris 1959.

the father of the Neo-patristic turn in twentieth century Orthodox theology; and from the perspective of patristic theology, it was only to be expected that Palamas and his teaching would also come under new scrutiny. In the panorama of over a millennium of patristic literature, Palamas comes rather late – long after the Orthodox Church defined its relationship to the Byzantine state and almost three centuries after the culmination of dogmatic differences between Orthodox and Latin Christianity in the schism of 1054. And yet, hardly any other theologian from late antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages has inspired so many commentators in the twentieth and even the twenty-first century. This is doubtlessly due to the pivotal role he played in distinguishing Orthodox teaching from Latin scholasticism in the crucial period of the fourteenth century, his influence on monasticism, and the impact of his teaching on the religious and political life of late Byzantium.

Meyendorff uses the term »Political Hesychasm« to refer to a social, cultural, and political programme carried out in the fourteenth century by prominent Byzantine leaders, which had widespread influence in Slavic countries¹². According to Meyendorff, the hesychast monks from Mount Athos promoted »new forms of Orthodox universalism«¹³ that allowed Orthodoxy to survive even after the fall of the empire.

The [hesychast] revival was linked with catastrophic events [...]: the empire and the cultural pride of Byzantium had been shattered by Latin conquests and the Turkish challenge. There was no reliable anchor of salvation left except the Orthodox Church. But the church's strength was not seen in structures contingent to the empire, but rather in its eschatological, mystical and ascetical traditions, maintained by monks¹⁴.

Meyendorff credits the theology and practice of Hesychasm with preserving the Orthodox Church at a time when its institutional structure, previously supported by the Byzantine state, had been almost shattered.

This interpretation is echoed by the Soviet Byzantinist Gelian Prokhorov, who first proposed the term »Political Hesychasm« in the mid-1960s¹⁵. He distinguished three periods of Hesychasm in Byzantine history: a »private [*keleinyi*] period«, during which Hesychasm was practiced by monks, but did not have a larger societal

12 Id., *Byzantine Hesychasm*, London 1974.

13 Id., *Rome, Constantinople, Moscow. Historical and Theological Studies*, New York 1996, p. 43.

14 Ibid., pp. 41f.

15 Gelian PROKHOROV, *Isikhazm i obshchestvennaia mysl' v vostochnoi Evrope v XIV v.*, in: *Literaturnye svyazi drevnikh slavian (Trudy otdela drevnerusskoi literatury)* 23 (1968), pp. 86–108. See also id., *Ètnicheskaia integratsiia v vostochnoi Evrope v XIV veke. Ot isikhastskikh sporov do Kulikovskoi bitvy*, in: *Doklady otdeleniia etnografii* 65/2 (1966), pp. 81–100; id., *Kul'turnoe Svoeobrazie Epochi Kulikovskoj Bitvy*, in: *Kulikovskaia bitva i pod'em natsional'nogo samopoznaniia (Trudy otdela drevnerusskoi literatury)* 34 (1979), pp. 3–17.

impact; a »monastic [*kinovial'nyi*] period«, in the mid-fourteenth century, which saw the theological elaboration of Hesychasm in the dispute between Gregory Palamas and Barlaam of Calabria; and a third period of »political [*politicheskii*] Hesychasm«, from the mid-fourteenth century until the fall of Constantinople in 1453, during which Hesychasm left the monasteries and became a social phenomenon¹⁶. At the end of a period of civil war in Byzantium, in 1347, all important positions in the Orthodox Church of Constantinople were occupied by hesychasts, i. e., followers of Palamas who had stood on the side of the winning party in the civil war. In this period, Hesychasm became, in the words of Prokhorov's student Vladimir Petrunin, a »political factor of East European dimensions«¹⁷. During the first half of the fifteenth century, the Orthodox Church faced the option of union with the Roman Catholic Church, under preparation at the Councils of Basel and Ferrara-Florence. The union was supported by the last Byzantine rulers, in particular by Constantine XI Palaiologos, but it was fiercely opposed by the hesychast clerics. Ultimately, this disagreement led to a break between the religious and secular leadership of Constantinople, which contributed to its fall to the Ottomans in 1453. The following quotes from Petrunin's book are indicative of this interpretation:

The Orthodox Church preserved the purity of its teaching by burying the Byzantine Empire, or rather, that what remained of it. The church preferred Turkish domination over union [with the Roman Catholic Church]¹⁸.

We see that the church did not ally itself passively with the politics of the emperor's court [...] it did not sacrifice the purity of its faith in a closer religious and political alliance with the Catholic West¹⁹.

In the last hundred years of existence of the Byzantine Empire, the church was the custodian of the imperial idea, not the imperial court of Palaiologos²⁰.

Both Prokhorov and Meyendorff concur that Hesychasm spread from Mount Athos to the Balkans and Russia through the work of travelling monks and translations of hesychast literature in Slavic languages. »Perhaps the most spectacular development connected with the hesychast revival«, Meyendorff writes, »was the spread of

16 Vladimir PETRUNIN, *Politicheskii Isikhazm i ego traditsii v sotsialnoi kontseptsii Moskovskogo Patriarkhata*, St Petersburg 2009, p. 31 (all translations from Russian are my own).

17 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

monasticism in northern Russia. St Sergius of Radonezh (ca. 1314–1392) was the acknowledged father of this Northern Thebaid, as it began to be called²¹. Also in the Russian context, Meyendorff writes, the hesychasts took on a political role:

In the spirit of the Byzantine hesychasts, his contemporaries, Sergius became involved in the social and political life of the times. [...] He supported the unity of the Church of Russia – whose dioceses were located throughout the bitterly feuding Principalities of Moscow and Lithuania – and blessed Moscovite troops before their first victorious battle against the Mongols (1380)²².

For both Meyendorff and Prokhorov, therefore, political Hesychasm was a theological and a political programme, something that involved a specific religious practice and determinate political action²³. It is important to stress that for both the main puzzle was the survival of the church in times of political breakdown, namely, the endurance of a living practice and faith when the institutional structures that supported the church were shattered both by attacks from outside as well as by a perceived internal weakness. The political Hesychasm of Meyendorff and Prokhorov must, I believe, be read as much as a judgment on Orthodoxy in late Byzantium and as a comment on the Orthodox Churches under communism during the Cold War. For both scholars it seems to have been evident that, through the teachings of Palamism, the Orthodox faith would resist communist atheism in the monasteries and in theology.

Michael Hagemester points to an important additional source for the study of Hesychasm, in particular for Prokhorov. This is the philosophy of names (*imyaslavie*), connected with the names of Pavel Florensky and Aleksei Losev²⁴. Prokhorov repeats an idea already developed by Florensky, namely that of a »new Middle Ages« as an alternative to the Western Renaissance. The teachings of Palamas are interpreted by Prokhorov as a »pre-Renaissance counter-Reformation« or a specifically »Orthodox Renaissance«, one which does not emulate the return to pagan antiquity of which the Western Renaissance is declared »guilty«. Palamism, Hagemester summarises, is understood to prepare the conditions for a mystical-contemplative equivalent to rationalist, secular humanism²⁵.

21 MEYENDORFF, Rome, Constantinople, Moscow, p. 44.

22 Ibid., p. 44.

23 KALLISTOS WARE, Act out of Stillness. The Influence of Fourteenth-Century Hesychasm on Byzantine and Slav Civilization, Toronto 1995, p. 4.

24 MICHAEL HAGEMESTER, Imjaslavie – Imjadejstvie. Namensmystik und Namensmagie in Russland (1900–1930), in: Tatjana PATZER (ed.), Namen: Benennung – Verehrung – Wirkung. Positionen der europäischen Moderne, Berlin 2009, pp. 77–98.

25 HAGEMESTER, Der »Nördliche Katechon«, pp. 20–22.

III. Political Hesychasm in Twenty-First Century Russia

In twenty-first century Russia, after the end of the USSR, political Hesychasm has received renewed attention. Proponents of political Hesychasm see the church in a struggle with Western influences and with a Russian state and society that are not sufficiently »resilient« in their Orthodoxy and liable to »succumb« to Western influences. The main interpretative lines have not changed from the 1960s and 1970s, when Meyendorff and Prokhorov popularised the concept. Despite the changed historical circumstances, the »lesson« of Palamism continues to appear persuasive, at least to the contemporary interpreters of political Hesychasm I will introduce below.

Vladimir Petrunin, a student of Prokhorov's, has produced an updated version of political Hesychasm for the twenty-first century. In *Politicheskii Isikhazm i ego traditsii v sotsial'noi kontseptsii Moskovskogo Patriarkhata*, published by the Aleteia publishing house in St Petersburg in 2009, he argues that in the year 2000, more than 500 years after the fall of Byzantium, the ideas of political Hesychasm had found a new embodiment in the official document of the Russian Orthodox Church *The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* (hereafter referred to as »Social Doctrine«), especially in the exposition of the principles that guide the relationship with the state²⁶. For Petrunin, the Russian Orthodox Church is again facing the challenge of fighting off Western influence, and political Hesychasm is the intellectual armour to this effect. Disobedience to the state might be the only means to achieve this goal. Prokhorov wrote the foreword to Petrunin's study. The frontispiece carries a blessing of the Metropolitan Ilarion (Alfeev), then still Bishop of Vienna and Austria²⁷.

In his study, the author Petrunin draws a parallel between the late Byzantine and the post-Soviet period. He demonstrates that the former was characterised by the elaboration of the theology of Hesychasm in response to the influence of Western scholasticism and humanism, while the latter, in Russia today, is characterised by the formulation of an Orthodox social teaching in response to Western secularism, liberalism, and capitalism. Petrunin explains in the introduction that the book is a comment on the definition of church independence (the principle of non-subordination, *nepovinoventie*) in the »Social Doctrine«. The »Social Doctrine« was adopted by the Russian Orthodox Church in the year 2000 and was generally perceived as an important step towards the church's renewal and self-positioning after the fall of communism. Church-independence was one important principle

26 PETRUNIN, *Politicheskij Isikhazm*, p 80.

27 The summary of Petrunin on the next three pages follows my previous exposition in STÖECKL, *Political Hesychasm*.

enshrined in the »Social Doctrine«. The precise definition can be found in section III.5, which I quote according to the official English translation on the website of the Moscow Patriarchate:

The church remains loyal to the state, but God's commandment to fulfil the task of salvation in any situation and under any circumstances is above this loyalty. If the authority forces Orthodox believers to apostatise from Christ and His church and to commit sinful and spiritually harmful actions, the church should refuse to obey the state²⁸.

Orthodoxy derives its authority from two sources, theology and tradition (*predanie*). Petrunin explains the principle of non-subordination not on grounds of theology, but on grounds of tradition, i. e., he looks for historical precedents of non-subordination of the church *vis-à-vis* the state. He finds such precedents during the last century of the Byzantine Empire: In that period, he argues, the Orthodox Church developed an autonomous political standpoint and strategy *vis-à-vis* the Byzantine rulers, whom it reproached for their collaboration with Western powers and the Roman Catholic Church. The fact that the Patriarchate of Constantinople did not go along with the emperors' policy of rapprochement is interpreted by Petrunin as a manifestation of the principle of non-subordination and political Hesychasm.

In the second half of the book, Petrunin presents the Russian Orthodox Church as the stronghold of Russian identity in the post-Soviet transition. The following quotes amply exemplify this argument:

The end of the twentieth century saw the attempt to construct a new statehood of Russia on liberal values, elaborated in the framework of Western European culture. Russia proclaimed itself part of the Western world, which led to the *de facto* denial of the independent existence of an Orthodox civilisation, the centre of which was, after the fall of the Byzantine Empire, Russia²⁹.

28 »The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church (Official Translation)«, Official Website of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, URL: <<https://www.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/>>. Because of access restrictions imposed in the European Union on Russian propagandistic websites, the official page of the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate was on 16 November 16 2023 inaccessible; see alternative on the website of the Russian Orthodox Church in Diaspora, URL: <<https://russianorthodoxchurch.ca/en/the-basis-of-the-social-concept-of-the-russian-orthodox-church/2408>> (11-16-2023).

29 PETRUNIN, *Politicheskii Isikhazm*, p. 81.

In exchange for Russian (*russkii*) Orthodox and Soviet communist universalism, there arrived a Russian (*rossiiskii*) liberal globalism, which looked at Russia not as independent centre in the world, but included it in the orbit of the Western civilisation³⁰.

It is entirely clear that only Orthodoxy is the guarantee for the independent existence of Russia in the contemporary world. Today the Moscow Patriarchate is the one and only organisation that has maintained millenary continuity over the entire course of Russian history³¹.

In his foreword, Gelian Prokhorov writes that this book is »a warning« to the government and to secular society. The warning consists in the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church might deny – and may exhort its members to deny – support to the Russian government in case this government should leave the path of truth as defined by the Orthodox Church.

Today in Russia, just like 600 years ago in the Byzantine Empire, the Orthodox Church is the only serious and organised opponent to the West and its secular values. [...] The further movement of Russia down the road of secularisation could constitute a dangerous precedent for the church to make use of its right to call the people to civil disobedience³².

Prokhorov even goes one step further, calling Russia »doomed« were it to forfeit the church's support. He writes that in periods where the state and the church were in harmony – such as the period of Constantine the Great, that of Prince Vladimir in the Kievan Rus' and of Dmitrij Donskoj – »miracles could happen«, meaning »the birth of a people« (*etnogenez*). The example of the fall of Byzantium showed, in his view, just like the fall of the Romanov Empire and of the Communist Regime, that when the church denied the state its support, this state was doomed³³. »The author sees and shows«, Gelian Prokhorov writes about his student Petrunin,

the remarkable similarity between the situation of post-communist contemporary Russia, having surrendered to the pressures of liberalism and globalisation, and the late Byzantine period, re-established after overcoming sixteen hundred years of exploitation by the Latin Empire. In the difficult political circumstances of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the Byzantine rulers and humanists gave in to the pressures from the West. Only the

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., p. 82.

32 Ibid., pp. 122f.

33 Ibid., pp. 7f.

Orthodox Church proved to be, then as now, the fortress that withstood this contaminating influence³⁴.

With this book, Petrunin interpreted the political theology of the »Social Doctrine« in a very different key from most other commentators. Several readers (including myself³⁵) saw in the »Social Doctrine«, when it was approved by the Holy Synod in 2000, a first step towards a genuine Orthodox social ethics in a modern key. Rudolf Uertz, for example, wrote that »the document contains important impulses for a constructive confrontation with the modern order«³⁶, and Konstantin Kostjuk interpreted the »Social Doctrine« as an important step towards becoming more modern and as a self-ascribed challenge for the church³⁷. Alexander Agadjanian, more cautiously, emphasised the ambivalence of the document between a pragmatic social and a conservative political agenda³⁸. Upon reading Petrunin's interpretation of the »Social Doctrine«, this conservative political agenda stands out very clearly. In his reading, the »Social Doctrine« manifests the opposition of the Russian Orthodox Church to the liberalisation, democratisation, and secularisation of the Russian state. With the hindsight of almost twenty years since the publication of the »Social Doctrine«, we can say that the anti-Western, anti-democratic Orthodox political theology detected by Petrunin appears to have caught the gist of this document more authentically than the optimistic, almost enthusiastic comments of observers who saw in it, like Uertz, »a constructive confrontation with the modern order«.

Petrunin's treatment of the »Social Doctrine« is couched in an interpretative context not immediately associated with the politically pragmatic leaders of the Moscow Patriarchate, but instead with the most conservative intellectual and fundamentalist clerical circles. The argument that the history of Byzantium presents a »lesson« to the contemporary Russian state is commonly heard among conservatives in Russia. The most prominent example of this narrative was a tele-

34 Ibid., p. 5.

35 СТОЕЧКА, Political Hesychasm.

36 Rudolf UERTZ/Lars Peter SCHMIDT (eds.), *Beginn einer neuen Ära? Die Sozialdoktrin der Russisch-Orthodoxen Kirche vom August 2000 im interkulturellen Dialog*, Moscow 2004, p. 95.

37 Konstantin KOSTJUK, *Die Sozialdoktrin der Russisch-Orthodoxen Kirche. Schritt zur Zivilgesellschaft oder Manifest des Orthodoxen Konservatismus?*, in: Rudolf UERTZ/Josef THESING (eds.), *Die Grundlagen der Sozialdoktrin der Russisch-Orthodoxen Kirche. Deutsche Übersetzung mit Einführung und Kommentar*, St Ottilien 2001, pp. 174–196; Konstantin KOSTJUK, *Die Sozialdoktrin. Herausforderung für die Tradition und die Theologie der Orthodoxie*, in: UERTZ/SCHMIDT (eds.), *Beginn einer neuen Ära?*, pp. 67–74; Konstantin KOSTJUK, *Der Begriff des Politischen in der Russisch-Orthodoxen Tradition*, Paderborn 2005.

38 Alexander AGADJANIAN, *Breakthrough to Modernity. Apologia for Traditionalism: The Russian Orthodox View of Society and Culture in Comparative Perspective*, in: *Religion, State & Society* 31/4 (2003), pp. 327–346.

vision documentary, produced in 2008, which presented the history of the fall of Byzantium in such terms. In this documentary, entitled *Gibel' imperii. Vizantiiskii urok*, Archimandrite Tikhon (Shevkunov) explains the fall of the Byzantine Empire as a consequence of »inner weakness« and Western harmful influence and indirectly recommends a series of steps in order to prevent a repetition of history, for example the nationalisation of natural resources, the suppression of oligarchs, the safeguarding of the Orthodox faith against sects and proselytism³⁹.

To be precise, the term »Political Hesychasm« is not always used by authors representative of this position, such as Alexander Dugin or Arkadii Maler. Even though Dugin is the more well-known of the two, both have developed an ideology of »Neo-Byzantism« according to which Russia is the »withstander« (*katechon*) to Western expansion⁴⁰. Their interpretation of Palamism, Orthodox mysticism, and the Byzantine legacy connects seamlessly to the views by Prokhorov and Petrunin outlined above. The ideology finds a concrete application in the interpretation of Crimea annexation by Russia⁴¹. Maler wrote on his blog:

When the hesychast doctrine was established, Byzantium experienced the era of its decline, and Moscow Rus', on the other hand, began to rise. [...] At the same time, St Sergius of Radonezh founded the Trinity Monastery near Moscow, and the Kiev Metropolis finally ceased to have the name of the Kiev and became the Moscow Metropolis, in the time of Metropolitan Alexy (1354–1378). The triumph of Hesychasm occurred in the rise of Moscow Rus', the last stronghold of independent Orthodoxy. And today, the return of Tavia to Russia frees her from all the threats to canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine – both

39 The website of the film, including an English version of the complete text, can be found at URL: <<http://vizantia.info>> (11-13-2023).

40 See references in HAGEMEISTER, Der »Nördliche Katechon« as well as Marlene LARUELLE, Aleksandr Dugin. A Russian Version of the European Radical Right?, in: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Kennan Institute Occasional Papers Series 294 (2006), Single Issue; Anton SHEKHOVTSOV/Andreas UMLAND, Is Aleksandr Dugin a Traditionalist? »Neo-Eurasianism« and Perennial Philosophy, in: The Russian Review 68/4 (2009), pp. 662–678; Anton BARBASHIN/Hannah THOBURN, Putin's Brain. Alexander Dugin and the Philosophy Behind Putin's Invasion of Crimea, in: Foreign Affairs, p. 31 March 2014, URL: <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-31/putins-brain>> (11-13-2023); Mikhail SOKOLOV, New Right-Wing Intellectuals in Russia. Strategies of Legitimization, in: Russian Politics & Law 47/1 (2009), pp. 47–75; Maria ENGSTRÖM, Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy, in: Contemporary Security Policy 35/3 (2014), pp. 356–379.

41 I summarise this discussion of »Political Hesychasm« and the Crimea question from SHISHKOV, Eastern Orthodoxy.

Uniate influence and autocephalist schism. For those who care about which church they join and which priest they confess to, this liberation is of absolute importance⁴².

In this view, the annexing of Crimea to Russia becomes a symbolic restoration of the succession of Byzantium to Russia in modern times. Thus, Ukraine becomes the territory where the clash between the New Byzantium and the West occurs. For this reason, political Hesychasm also appeals to Russian nationalists. Egor Kholmogorov lays bare the theologian-hesychasts' idea of nation:

Did the hesychasts have, at the same time, their own idea of nation, which could be opposed to pagan nationalism? Without a doubt, they did. It was the conception of the »holy nation« [*narod*], animated by zeal for Orthodoxy, whose members arranged their lives according to God's Law, and in return, received God's special blessing and special powers of grace in all their being⁴³.

The role of the »holy nation« is, of course, assigned to the Russians:

The greatest of the hesychast Patriarchs, Philotheos Kokkinos, the disciple of Palamas, saw in the role of such a holy nation [...] Russians. [...] The Byzantine hesychasts quite consciously singled out the Russians for their outstanding spiritual qualities, for the unusual intensity of their spiritual life [...]⁴⁴.

In this way, political Hesychasm becomes the basis for a nationalist ideology of the chosenness of the Russian people. In the ideological cauldron of the Russian extreme right, political Hesychasm is one influential ingredient.

IV. Ethical Hesychasm

Throughout this chapter, I have used the term »political theology« in the sense of a theological approach to the political. It makes sense to speak about political theologies in the plural as »the ways in which theology conceives of the relationship of the church and of her mission to bring about salvation in relation to the political

42 Arkadii MALER, Palamizm i vovzrashchenie Tavrii, Personal blog of Arkadii Maler, 16 March 2014, URL: <<https://arkadiy-maler.livejournal.com/2014/03/16/>> (11-20-2023).

43 Egor Kholmogorov, Vizantizm kak Ideia [Byzantism as Idea], in: APN-Agenstvo Politicheskikh Novostei Nizhnii Novgorod, 13 February 2008, URL: <<http://apn-nn.com/113888-538205.html>> (11-13-2023), please note: the website ist insecure.

44 Ibid.

sphere as a system of power and institutions«⁴⁵. Once we understand political theologies as a variety or a range of stances which a religious tradition can take *vis-à-vis* the »challenges of political modernity«⁴⁶, political Hesychasm stands out as a conservative, anti-democratic, and anti-liberal Orthodox political theology; it defines the radical right of the politico-theological spectrum in the Orthodox context. The question that I want to consider in this last section is whether this radical right politico-theological legacy is the only one possible from the starting point of Hesychasm and Palamism? Or, to put the question differently, is the politico-theological vision to come out of the Neo-patristic theology of Florovsky, Lossky, and Meyendorff – or even Losev, for that matter – necessarily conservative, anti-democratic, and anti-liberal?

A few Orthodox theologians have made Hesychasm and Palamism fruitful for a different type of Orthodox political theology. Their works and contexts could not be more different, they come from different churches and also belong to different generations, but they both offer a critical approach to political Hesychasm. These are, for the purposes of this chapter and without any claim to exhaustiveness, the Russian Orthodox philosopher and theologian Sergei Horujy and the Greek American Orthodox theologian Aristotle Papanikolaou.

Sergei Sergeevich Horujy (1941–2020) is a Russian theologian, philosopher, and mathematician who has dedicated most of his intellectual career to the exploration of Hesychasm⁴⁷. With the inevitable background in pre-revolutionary Russian religious philosophy, Horujy, influenced by Meyendorff's books, soon began to elaborate Palamism in his original philosophical-anthropological key, which differed significantly from the debates about *imiaslavie* still *en vogue* in the Moscow circle of religious intellectuals around Losev⁴⁸. As already stated in the introduction, Orthodox theology has often been criticised for lacking systematic social teaching⁴⁹, leading some scholars to argue that we can speak of an Orthodox social ethics only from the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century onwards, reaching its

45 Ingeborg GABRIEL et al., Introduction, in: Kristina STOECKL et al. (eds.), *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity. Common Challenges – Divergent Positions*, London 2017, pp. 1–11.

46 These three challenges are: the religious-cultural disconnection (rupture), religious freedom (liberty), and an anthropocentric public morality (mastery). See Kristina STOECKL, *Political Theologies and Modernity*, in: Ead. et al. (eds.), *Political Theologies*, pp. 15–24.

47 The following two paragraphs follow my exposition in ead., *New Frontiers in Russian Religious Philosophy. The Philosophical Anthropology of Sergey S. Horujy*, in: *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 57/1 (2019), pp. 3–16.

48 Sergey S. HORUJY, *The Idea of Energy in the »Moscow School of Christian Neoplatonism«*, in: Norbert FRANZET al. (eds.), *Pavel Florenskij. Tradition und Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main 2001, pp. 69–81.

49 Vasilios MAKRIDES, *Why Does the Orthodox Church Lack Systematic Social Teaching?*, in: *Skepsis. A Journal for Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Research* 23 (2013), pp. 281–312.

first culmination in the works of Bulgakov⁵⁰. The strong ascetic tradition within Orthodoxy has been singled out as the culprit for this »otherworldly focus« of Orthodoxy, which prevented, as expressed Vasilios N. Makrides has put it, the modern »ontological upgrading of this world at the expense of the otherworld«⁵¹. In the first two sections of this article, I have demonstrated that the ascetic tradition has also given rise to a politically conservative formulation of political theology, namely political Hesychasm. In this chasm between a lack of political theology and a radical right political theology, Horujy's work traces an alternative trajectory.

In one of his many articles, entitled *Dve formatsii isikhastskoi ètiki* (*Two formations of hesychast ethics*), he addresses the question of social ethics from the perspective of Hesychasm⁵². His main point is that Orthodox theology is able to elaborate a social ethics, even if considered within a strictly ascetic framework. Horujy distinguishes two formations of hesychast (i. e., ascetic) ethics. These two formations correspond to two stages of ascetic practice. The first consists of withdrawal from the world; it is guided by »a pull to the desert« (*poryv v pustyne*) and is therefore anti-social. The goal of the solitary life chosen by the hermit was not, however, mere individual salvation. Hesychast practice included a second stage of ascetic practice, which assumed a return of the experienced ascetic to the world.

Up to this point, Horujy's analysis of hesychast practice does not differ much from the standard account given by Meyendorff or Prokhorov, who also make a distinction between the individual and the social phase of Hesychasm. Where Horujy sharply differs from his two predecessors, however, is in his conceptualisation of the »return« of the hesychast to the social world. Whereas in particular for Prokhorov and for other contemporary enthusiasts of political Hesychasm this return corresponds to a programme that is defined first and foremost theologically (against Western theology and humanism in general) and geopolitically (against the West), Horujy elaborates the ethical aspects of this return. He associates the stage of return in hesychast practice with an »ethics of burden sharing« exemplified by the tradition of Russian eldership (*starchestvo*). Horujy takes this tradition at face value and turns to original material and documentary accounts, in order to deduce from these texts a concrete existential practice. Horujy writes that the communication put in place by the elders anticipated modern day findings in psychology and psychoanalysis, but the way the elders enacted these practices was sharply different from today's forms of counselling. In modern-day counselling the psychologist, psychoanalyst, or counsellor remains detached from the patient and helps the patient to confront his or her grievances autonomously. Horujy, by contrast, describes the elders as

50 VALLIERE, *Modern Russian Theology*.

51 MAKRIDES, *Why Does the Orthodox Church*, p. 292.

52 Sergei S. HORUJY, *Dve Formatsii Isikhastskoi Ètiki*, in: Id. (ed.), *Issledovaniia po Isikhastskoi Traditsii*, St Peterburg 2012, pp. 4–25.

taking upon themselves the others' grievances, literally at the expense of their own personal health and well-being. He finds affinities between this idea of social ethics and the ethics of responsibility of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

Horujy is highly critical of the concept of political Hesychasm, as evidenced in a published exchange with Petrunin⁵³. There, Horujy states that political Hesychasm contradicts Hesychasm as a spiritual-anthropological phenomenon and calls »completely unacceptable« the erasure of the dividing line between the spiritual and the political. While he does not use the term himself, I would argue that we could describe his position as an »Ethical Hesychasm«. The political implications of this ethical Hesychasm are not spelled out in his works, but his personal distance from the intellectual circles cited in section III gives evidence of the conclusions he has drawn from his philosophy for his own personal political position⁵⁴.

One theologian who has, by contrast, made the political implications of an ethical Hesychasm explicit is Aristotle Papanikolaou. In his book *The Mystical as Political*⁵⁵, Papanikolaou develops an Orthodox political theology on the basis of Palamism that extends beyond a reflexive opposition to the West and a nostalgic return to a Byzantine-like unified political-religious culture. The central element of Palamism, in his reading, is the principle of divine-human communion. Papanikolaou concludes that the ascetics of divine-human communion cannot be confined either to the monastery or to the church, but that the whole world is the field where divine-human communion and its imperative of love must be played out. »The political community is not the antithesis to the desert«, he writes, »but one of the many deserts in which the Christian must combat the demons that attempt to block the learning of love«⁵⁶. Shishkov interprets Papanikolaou's project as showing »that a critically reinterpreted tradition of Palamism could be the groundwork for protecting democracy and human rights from theological positions«⁵⁷.

53 See the protocol of a debate held in 2012, published by the Institute of Synergetic Anthropology, URL: <<http://synergia-isa.ru/?p=8604>> (11-13-2023).

54 The Greek theologian and philosopher Christos Yannaras would agree with Horujy judgment that political Hesychasm is a *contradictio in terminis*. Yannaras disagrees with the treatment of his work offered by Daniel Payne in his book, which is subtitled *The Political Hesychasm of John Romanides and Christos Yannaras*; see Norman RUSSEL, *Metaphysics as a Personal Adventure*. Christos Yannaras in Conversation with Norman Russel, ed. by Christos YANNARAS, Yonkers, NY 2017, p. 79.

55 This is an argument first made by Andrey Shishkov, who has called the political Hesychasm outlined in sections II and III »romantic political Hesychasm« and what I call ethical Hesychasm in section II »critical political Hesychasm«.

56 Aristotle PAPANIKOLAOU, *The Mystical as Political*. Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy, Notre Dame, IN 2012, p. 4.

57 SHISHKOV, *Eastern Orthodoxy*.

Papanikolaou wholeheartedly endorses the attribute »political« for his interpretation of divine-human communion – in fact, for him »the mystical is the political«⁵⁸. In light of the complex history of political Hesychasm outlined in this essay, it should be clear that his »mystical as political« differs profoundly from and indeed directly challenges the »Hesychasm as political« of Russian conservatives. Papanikolaou does not discuss the political Hesychasm of Meyendorff, Prokhorov, or their contemporary interpreters in his book, even though he is no doubt aware of them and of the ways in which the historical dispute between Palamas and Barlaam, between Orthodox mysticism and Neo-scholasticism has been interpreted in ways that fuel, to this day, Orthodox anti-Westernism and anti-liberalism. Papanikolaou's political theology of divine-human communion directly challenges this trend.

Conclusion

Political Hesychasm represents one piece in the puzzle that is the contemporary panorama of political theologies in the Orthodox context. The study of its history, development, and present-day usage illuminates important facets of contemporary Orthodox theological thought. In sections II and III, I showed that political Hesychasm in the Russian context today is confined to a conservative, far-right intellectual sphere in which it is used as a justification for anti-Westernism, anti-Liberalism, and even military aggression in eastern Ukraine. In section IV, I made the argument that this political Hesychasm is not the only political theology possible to emerge from an intellectual engagement with Palamism, citing two contemporary authors and their works – Sergey Horujy and Aristotle Papanikolaou – in evidence. I have discussed their approach under the heading of »ethical Hesychasm«. In the introduction, I started from the observation that the Neo-patristic turn in Orthodox theology in the twentieth century has frequently been criticised for ignoring the real social and political problems in contemporary societies and for failing, therefore, to develop an Orthodox social ethics and a political theology that is up to the challenges of the modern world. I argued that such an assessment overlooks that the Neo-patristic turn has indeed produced its own political theology: the theology of political Hesychasm. The aim of this chapter was to outline the meaning of political Hesychasm, its contemporary uses, pitfalls, and alternatives.

58 PAPANIKOLAOU, *The Mystical*, p. 1.

