

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

02 July 2008

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Louth, A. (2004) 'Light, vision and religious experience in Byzantium.', in *The presence of light : divine radiance and religious experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 85-103.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/hfs.cgi/00/16396.ctl>

Publisher's copyright statement:

2004 by The University of Chicago

Additional information:

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

CHAPTER FOUR

Light, Vision, and Religious Experience in Byzantium

Andrew Louth

This chapter is principally concerned with the experience of the divine, uncreated light in monastic writers belonging to the hesychast tradition (a term I shall explain in a moment); this is, I think, natural, for it is this tradition that dominates our perception of the Christian Byzantine tradition, whether one is looking at the historical era of the Byzantine world, brought to an abrupt conclusion in 1453 with the sack of Constantinople by the Ottomans, or is concerned with the increasingly significant presence of the Byzantine Orthodox tradition (including the Slav Orthodox tradition, but in distinction from the Oriental Orthodox tradition, of the Syrians and Copts, for instance) in today's world, a result of both the fall of the iron curtain and emigration from traditionally Orthodox countries over the past two centuries. But the question of light and religious experience is a wider one than what we might call the "light mysticism" of the hesychasts, and I want to start by indicating something of that.

We can begin with quite ordinary light, whether the light of the sun or that created by candles and (traditionally) oil lamps, and their place in the quite ordinary experience of Byzantine worship. Perhaps the oldest hymn in Christian Greek, which can be traced back to the third century and is possibly even older, is addressed to the "joyful light" of the glory of the Trinity, symbolized by the lighting of the evening lamp at sunset. It is sung to this day at the evening service of vespers, celebrated at sunset (and in monasteries still, clocks are set by the setting of the sun): as the sun sets, and with it the light of the world, the evening lamps symbolize the eternal light of the Godhead (the "light that knows no evening," as it is sometimes put), which is celebrated in the hymns and psalms of vespers. This use of light, both artificial and natural, was highly developed in the Byzantine world (and is still maintained in the Orthodox Church

today). Churches are orientated, that is, they face east, which is the direction Orthodox Christians face when they pray (even privately). It is from the east that the sun rises, and churches are orientated not to some geographical east, but to the point on the horizon at which the sun rises on the feast day of the dedication of the church (this was also the case in the West until the end of the Middle Ages, save in cases where local geography made it impossible). It is therefore north of east if the feast day of dedication (of a saint, or of a mystery such as the Trinity or the Nativity of Christ) is in high summer, south of east if it is in the depths of winter. It has recently been shown by I. Potamianos with what care the orientation of the church was calibrated in medieval times, and further, how in the domed churches characteristic of the Middle and Late Byzantine periods, the sills of the windows around the base of the dome were polished and fixed at such an angle that the horizontal rays of the rising sun were directed up on to the icon of Christ Pantocrator that looked down from the top of the dome, with the result that in the darkness of the church the icon of Christ would seem to hover in the reflected light of the rising sun.¹ At vespers on the preceding evening, the light from the west would shine through the open door of the church directly on to the door of the icon screen, or iconostasis (which separates the sanctuary from the nave), so that at the “little entrance” at vespers, just before the singing of “Joyful Light,” the Gospel Book, carried in the procession, would enter the shaft of light as the priest turned to enter the sanctuary through the holy doors of the iconostasis. Such care in the use of natural light demonstrates the importance attached to the symbolic significance of light in Byzantine worship: light, symbolic of God, and more precisely of Christ as the “Sun of righteousness” (Mal. 4:2), coming into the world in his Nativity and rising over the world in his Resurrection.

But light also features in Byzantine religious experience as characterizing the illumination of God’s revelation. Claims about the reality of such an encounter with the uncreated light of the Godhead lie at the heart of hesychast spirituality. But there is another encounter with light in religious experience that needs to be mentioned before we come to the question of the encounter with the divine light of God himself. Beginning with Evagrius, the fourth-century theorist of the monasticism of the Egyptian desert, and continuing constantly through the tradition of Byzantine monastic spirituality, there is to be found the idea that a significant stage is reached in the progress of the intellect (*nous* in Greek) to knowledge of God and union with him when the intellect becomes aware of its own light. This experience, if it is genuine and not a hallucination, is a sign that the intellect has attained the state that Evagrius calls *apatheia*, a state of transcendence over disturbing thoughts and feelings: “This



FIGURE 4.1. Morning light in Hagia Sophia, Constantinople. (Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Fieldwork Archives, Washington, DC.)

is a proof of *apatheia*, when the intellect begins to see its own light, and remains calm during the visions of sleep, and can look at things with serenity.⁷² But beyond this awareness of its own light, which I think means something like an awareness of its own powers of contemplation, there lies the encounter with God himself, which much of the tradition of Byzantine monasticism, and

especially that of Byzantine hesychasm, regards as an experience of the uncreated light of the Godhead himself, to which we shall now turn.

BYZANTINE HESYCHASM

Claims to such an experience on behalf of the monks of Mount Athos, the peninsula in Northern Greece that since the tenth century has been the greatest centre of Orthodox monasticism, became a matter of controversy in the fourteenth century, and the echoes of that controversy are still palpable in Orthodox theological circles. Synods in Constantinople upheld the hesychast claim to be able to see the uncreated light of the Godhead and endorsed the theological rationale for this, presented by Saint Gregory Palamas, with his distinction between the essence and energies of God, according to which God is unknowable in his essence but genuinely knowable in his energies, in which God is himself known and not merely something about God. Preeminent among these divine energies is the uncreated light of the Godhead, the light in which Christ was transfigured before his disciples on Mount Tabor, for which reason the uncreated light came to be called the light of Tabor, or the “Taboric light.” This hesychast understanding of the whole Byzantine tradition was reasserted in the modern period in influential form in the *Philokalia*, compiled by Saint Nikodimos of Hagiorite and Saint Makarios of Corinth and published in Venice in 1782. The *Philokalia*, soon translated into Slavonic and then into Russian, has had an enormous impact on modern Orthodoxy: virtually all the great names of twentieth-century Orthodox theology—Lossky, Florovsky, Meyendorff, Greeks such as Nellas and Mantzaridis and even Yannaras, the Romanian Stăniloae, and such representatives of monastic theology as Archimandrite Sophrony of Essex and Bishop Hierotheos Vlachos—can be regarded as standing in a “Philokalic” or “Neo-Palamite” tradition. This tradition of “Byzantine mysticism” is then a living tradition, which only makes it the more difficult to approach it in a critical, scholarly way. Most scholarly work on Byzantine mysticism that has been done in the past hundred years, including the edition of texts, has been done from within this tradition, with the result that the perspective represented by the *Philokalia* has been taken for granted. The few attempts to stand outside this tradition—from the work of the learned Jesuit orientalist Irénée Hausherr to most recently the work on Symeon the New Theologian by the Orthodox priest John McGuckin—have been interpreted as being “hostile” to the tradition by those standing inside it.³

The *Philokalia* itself can be regarded as signposting the hesychast (or Byzantine) mystical tradition, a tradition starting with Saint Antony the Great

(though the text attributed to Saint Antony is spurious), continuing through fourth- and fifth-century monastic authors such as Evagrius, Mark the Hermit, and Diadochos (Makarios of the “Makarian Homilies,” but only in the emasculated epitome of Symeon Metaphrastes), later monastic authors associated with Sinai, such as Hesychios and Philotheos, Saint Maximos the Confessor (to whom the largest section is devoted), the mysterious Peter of Damascus (author of a long epitome of monastic teaching), Symeon the New Theologian and his disciple Nicetas Stethatos (Nicetas heavily represented, Symeon surprisingly slightly), and then Saint Gregory Palamas (to whom the next largest section after Saint Maximos is dedicated) and others associated with the hesychast controversy, such as Theoliptos of Philadelphia, Gregory of Sinai, and Kallistos and Ignatios Xanthopoulos. I say “signposting,” for the list of authors included in the *Philokalia* is not to be, and has not been, regarded as definitive: both the Russian and the Romanian versions of the *Philokalia* have supplemented Nikodimos and Makarios’s original selection with monastic authors such as the Gaza monks Barsanouphios, John, and Dorotheos, John Climacus of Sinai, and Isaac the Syrian. What the *Philokalia* does is to canonize a tradition of hesychast spirituality stretching right back from the hesychast controversy to the fourth century; quite what lies behind this creation of a canon is not clear, though it is very likely that the selection derives from many years, probably centuries, of monastic formation: these are the kinds of works monks were recommended to read by their spiritual fathers, especially in the Athonite tradition (I am not suggesting for a moment that the creation of a hesychast tradition by the *Philokalia* is in any way parallel to the more or less contemporary deliberate confection of the Scottish clans and tartans, as described by Hugh Trevor-Roper).⁴ But once seen as part of a tradition, works are read with presuppositions that may be foreign to the spirit in which they were originally written.

If one asks what it is that characterizes this hesychast tradition, one might sum it up by saying that it is a tradition of (originally monastic) prayer based on repetition of the Jesus prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”), under the direction of a spiritual father, which leads to a conscious experience of the presence of God, often in the form of a vision of light. When one reads the *Philokalia* in this tradition, all of this is presupposed. But one element of this, perhaps the most striking and distinctive element, seems to be quite a latecomer to the tradition, save for the odd exception, and that is the use of the Jesus prayer. The nineteenth-century saint Ignaty Brianchaninov, in his book *On the Prayer of Jesus*, takes for granted the antiquity and universality of the practice of the Jesus prayer.⁵ The same is true of Father Lev Gillet (writing under the pseudonym “a monk of the Eastern Church”) in his

book *On the Invocation of the Name of Jesus*.⁶ This “tradition” was rather brutally handled by Irénée Hausherr in his *Noms du Christ et voies d’oraison*,⁷ and a much more historically sensitive account can be found in the frequently reprinted work by Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, *The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality*.⁸ In contrast, the importance of praying under the guidance of a spiritual father is ancient and continuous (though not always explicit in the works included in the *Philokalia*).

What, however, about the stress on experience, especially the experience of seeing the divine light? In the developed tradition, as we see it in the hesychast controversy, the Transfiguration of Christ is regarded as a kind of archetype of the experience of the hesychast: the uncreated light of the Godhead is called the light of Tabor, the “Taboric light.” The question I want to pursue is not the obvious one about the authenticity of such experience, and its antiquity and continuity within the Byzantine tradition, largely because it seems to me that such a question begs so many other questions that I am not sure how one would set about answering it. I am more interested in what is being claimed by appeal to such experience, and also in what I shall call the “construction” of such an experience, for I take it for granted that there are no experiences that are uninterpreted, that experience and interpretation are inextricably bound up with each other. It is clearly not possible to deal with the whole of the Philokalic tradition, and I shall simplify my task by limiting my presentation to three figures: Saint Maximos, Saint Symeon the New Theologian, and Theophanes of Nicaea. But first a word about the inclusion of Symeon. It seems that, so far as the Greek tradition is concerned, he is a comparative newcomer to the tradition.⁹ Saint Gregory Palamas knows of him, and appeals to him, but shows scarcely any awareness of any of his writings (he seems more familiar with Nicetas’s *vita* of the saint). Even in the *Philokalia* of Saint Nikodimos and Saint Makarios, his presence is slight: of the three works attributed to him, one is inauthentic (a work on the Jesus prayer, of which the authentic Symeon seems unaware), and in the original version, one is present only in a translation into modern Greek (included in an appendix). But in this century, largely as a result of the critical edition of his works begun by Archbishop Basil Krivocheine, and brought to fruition by Jean Darrouzès and Johannes Koder, Symeon has become one of the most popular hesychast authors, and a major resource for what I have called above Neo-Palamism. My three authors each offer something rather different: with Saint Maximos I shall be concerned with his interpretation of the Transfiguration, as it seems likely that he contributes much of the interpretative framework of hesychasm; with Saint Symeon I shall be concerned with his experiences of the divine light, for, with whatever real knowledge of his work,

the hesychasts appealed to Symeon as a precursor;¹⁰ with Theophanes of Nicaea we shall look at his “Five Discourses on the Taboric Light,” recently edited by Ch. Sotiropoulos.¹¹

SAINT MAXIMOS THE CONFESSOR

Saint Maximos discusses the Transfiguration in three places, all in relatively early works of his belonging to the period when he was a monk, first in Asia Minor in the vicinity of Constantinople and then in North Africa—that is, the decade 625–35, before he intervened in the Monothelite controversy and brought upon himself the wrath of the emperor and his arrest, exile and death. Despite some differences, and even apparent contradictions, in these interpretations, there is an impressive consistency, and I shall present a synthetic account, though concentrating mostly on the longest account, that found in the tenth of his “Difficulties,” or *Ambigua*. Much of the common ground in Maximos’s several interpretations is due to antecedent tradition in interpreting the Transfiguration, a tradition that so far as the Greek East was concerned was largely established by Origen.

The different aspects of the account of the Transfiguration are interpreted as shedding light on the progress of the Christian toward knowledge of God and union with him, something made possible by the Incarnation. He follows Origen in seeing the limitation of the Transfiguration to the “inner three” among the disciples as indicating that God appears in different forms to different people, in accordance with their spiritual aptitude (a principle that informed the Incarnation itself, in which God’s self-manifestation in Christ was tailored to the different people he encountered). Only Peter, James, and John, who were closest to Jesus among the disciples, were permitted to see Jesus transfigured. So in his *Centuries on Theology and the Incarnation*, Maximos presents the Mount of the Transfiguration as a symbol of the spiritual life: at its foot the Lord appears in the form of a servant, at its summit in the form of God, “the form in which he existed before the world came to be” (*Centuries* 2.13).¹² In the *Ambigua*, the Transfiguration is also related to the spiritual progress of the disciples: the disciples are presented as having “passed over” from seeing Christ as “without form or beauty” (Isa. 53:2) to seeing him as “fair with beauty beyond the sons of men” (Ps. 44:3). Maximos interprets this as a passing over from understanding Christ primarily as the “Word made flesh” to understanding him as the “One in the beginning, with God, and God”—a passage from the end of the Johannine prologue to its beginning, so to speak. He calls this “passing over” from the “Word made flesh” to the “Word, in the beginning, with God” a move-

ment of *apophasis*, negation or denial, and this *apophasis*, he says, the disciples have learned from—or perhaps better: experienced in beholding—the blinding radiance of the face of the Transfigured Lord.

Here we encounter something quite original in Maximos's interpretation of the Transfiguration. According to the Gospel accounts, Christ's face shone like the sun (so Matthew; "was altered" is how Luke puts it), and his garments became radiantly white. In his first interpretation of the Transfiguration, in his *Quaestiones et Dubia*, Maximos had commented on the radiant face of Christ, playing on the ambiguity in the Greek word for face, *prosopon*, which can also mean "person": "the face of the Word, that shone like the sun, is," Maximos says, "the characteristic hiddenness of his being."¹³ What Maximos means is that the radiant face of Christ reveals the divine person that he is. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 had endorsed a definition according to which, in the Incarnate Christ, there are two natures—the divine and the human—united in a single person. The fifth Ecumenical Council (of Constantinople, in 553) clarified this by affirming that that one person is divine, "one of the Trinity." In a way typical of Maximos, the precise words he uses allude to the exact distinctions of the Christology of the Councils. But there is more; for if on the Mount of the Transfiguration the blinding radiance of the face/person of the Word reveals the "characteristic hiddenness" of the being of God, then apophatic theology—the theology of denial—is our acknowledgment of the divinity of Christ, for God is beyond any conception or image that we could have of him, so to acknowledge the divine is to pass beyond cataphatic, or affirmative, language, to the silence of denial. This language of apophatic and cataphatic theology was introduced into Byzantine theology by Dionysios the Areopagite, but the use to which it is put is Maximos's own. For Dionysios, apophatic and cataphatic theologies spelled out the dialectic involved in our predicating attributes or names of God: the dialectic of affirmation and denial steered a way between the twin errors of anthropomorphism and agnosticism in our attempt to say something about God. But for Maximos the terminology of apophatic and cataphatic theology seems to be bound up with our confession of the union of divine and human natures in the single divine person of the Incarnate Word: acknowledgment of the divine radiance of the face of Christ draws us into apophatic theology, for the dazzling radiance of the face of Christ is beyond affirmation and can only be regarded in silent—apophatic—wonder. Every time Maximos interprets the Transfiguration, he employs in this Christological way Dionysios's distinction between apophatic and cataphatic theology.

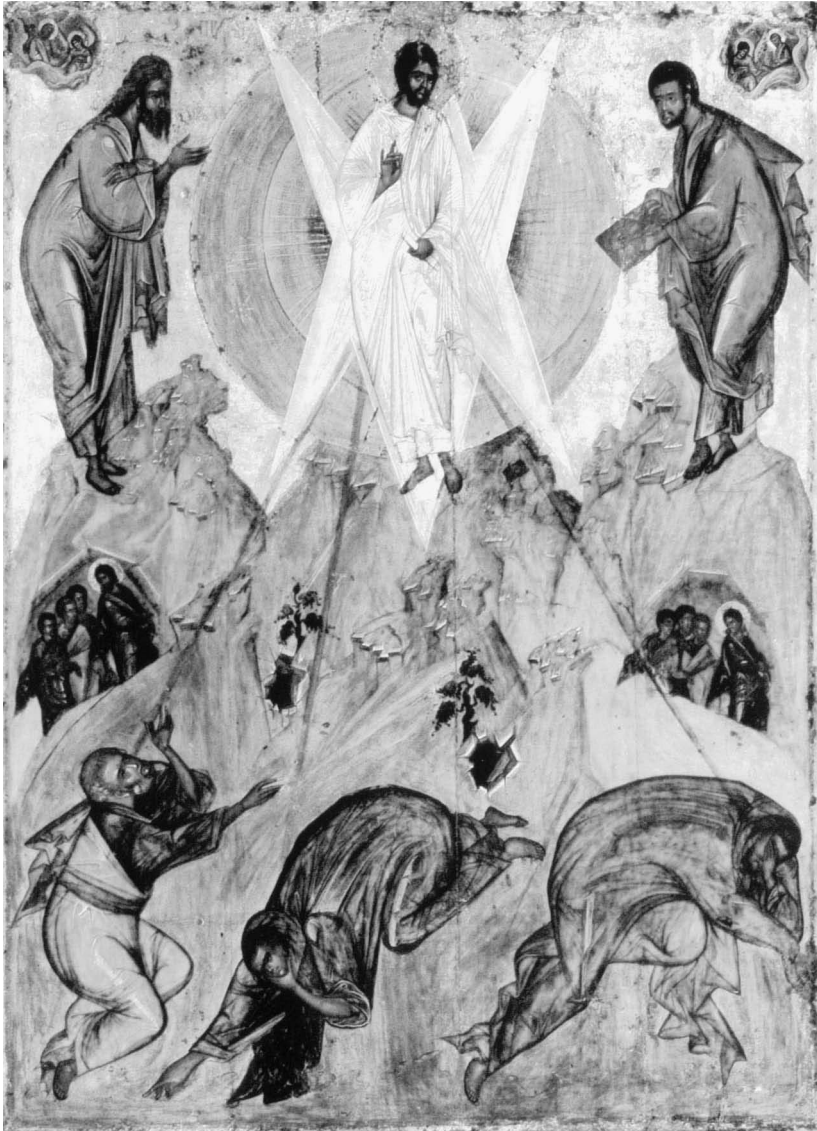


FIGURE 4.2. *The Transfiguration*, icon by Theophanes the Greek, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Originally in the Cathedral of the Transfiguration, Pereslav.

The face became radiant, but Christ's clothes, too, became white. Developing Origen's interpretation, Maximos takes the whitened garment of Christ as referring to the words of Scripture or indeed to Creation itself and is led into a long digression in which he expounds the parallelism of Scripture and cosmos. The cosmos is like a book, and the Bible is like the cosmos: both consist of words, *logoi*, which, though diverse, when read with understanding form a single harmonious whole, the meaning of which is the mind of God himself.

Maximos then proceeds to explore further the two sides of the Transfiguration, symbolized by the two figures who appeared with Jesus, Moses and Elijah.¹⁴ This is done at length, in seventeen meditations. Some of it is traditional—Moses and Elijah symbolizing the law and the prophets, for instance; much of it is arcane and fascinating. Toward the end, we encounter again the contrast between apophatic and cataphatic theology. First, Maximos seems to be following Dionysios. But this is followed by a meditation in which the distinction between apophatic and cataphatic theology is focused on the person of Christ, as we have already seen, the silent wonder of *apophasis* being a response to the dazzling radiance of Christ's face. Here Maximos says that, through accepting a human form, the Word has become a "symbol of himself," in order "through this manifestation of himself to lead to himself in his complete and secret hiddenness the whole creation, and while he remains quite unknown in his hidden, secret place beyond all things, unable to be known or understood by any being in any way whatever, out of his love for humankind he grants to human beings intimations of himself in the manifest divine works performed in the flesh."¹⁵ The next meditation affirms the primacy of apophatic theology in Christological terms: "the light from the face of the Lord, therefore, conquers the human blessedness of the apostles by a hidden apophatic theology."¹⁶ Three meditations then explicitly expound cataphatic theology in terms of the cosmic dimension of the Word made flesh.

What we find in Maximos is an approach to the Transfiguration which discovers there a thoroughly Christocentric theology—a theology that leads to and from the person of Christ and finds in everything illumined by the uncreated light of his radiance the revelation of Christ in nature and in Scripture.

The Transfiguration, as understood by Maximos, is a kind of matrix for the whole of Christian theology. It is also presented as something to be experienced: apophatic theology is a face-to-face encounter with Christ, the Mount of the Transfiguration is where the ascent of the Christian to communion with God takes place. It could be said that in his interpretation of the Transfiguration, Maximos assimilates Mount Tabor to Mount Sinai, which for Dionysios and Gregory of Nyssa, and behind them for Clement of Alexandria and

Philo, as the mountain that Moses ascended, is a figure of the ascent to God to be made by every earnest Christian. But note what kind of experience is envisaged. Maximos is not writing an experiential account; he has nothing to say about what kind of experience is involved in encountering Christ; there is not the slightest hint of anything autobiographical, or even of any account of personal experience at second hand (save for a few rare instances, but even then it is what is revealed by the experience that is the point, not the experience itself).¹⁷

SAINT SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN

Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022) is very different from Maximos (of whom Symeon shows no conscious unawareness, to judge from his writings), not least so far as the matter of appeal to personal experience is concerned. But in this respect, as John McGuckin has pointed out, Symeon is exceptional in the whole Byzantine tradition.¹⁸ Assimilating Symeon to the “hesychast tradition,” as most scholars who have written on Symeon have tended to do, is, at first sight, odd. He is the great exception, not the traditionalist, and it is not unlikely that it was for this reason that he was so controversial in his own day. The *vita* by his disciple, Nicetas Stethatos, was clearly an attempt to rehabilitate Symeon when the tide of opinion had turned and his relics were returned to Constantinople thirty years after his death, but to judge by the manuscript tradition this attempt had no lasting success.¹⁹ As an attempt at rehabilitation, Nicetas’s *vita* obscures or even distorts the events of Symeon’s life that led to his encountering so much opposition. Most modern scholarship has, however, been inclined to follow Nicetas in its admiration for Symeon and indeed goes beyond Nicetas, in a way that was not open to Nicetas himself, by enrolling Symeon in the ranks of hesychasts. This has led, as McGuckin has demonstrated in the article I have already referred to, to a persistent attempt to interpret Symeon in hesychast terms, and in particular to interpret his visions of light by taking the Transfiguration as the paradigm of such visions. McGuckin has no difficulty in showing that this involves willful misinterpretation of what Symeon says. But, as he points out, the way in which Symeon is misinterpreted is also due to the fact that most scholars who have concerned themselves with Symeon have adopted a crudely “realist” approach to his visions, indeed both to his visions and to the account of the Transfiguration itself. A properly critical approach needs to treat Symeon’s visions not simply as straightforward records, but as literary texts composed for a purpose by someone who was certainly not ignorant of the skills of rhetoric. In his article, McGuckin sets out a taxonomy

of Symeon's visions, distinguishing first between analogical uses of vision (where the language of vision is used metaphorically, without there necessarily being any reference to an actual visual experience) and "epiphanic" visions, in which Symeon gives accounts of experiences of vision (usually by himself, though following the Apostle Paul in 2 Cor. 12 [sometimes by explicit allusion], this is usually expressed indirectly). In his account of "epiphanic" visions, McGuckin outlines a typology of three biblical paradigms of vision: first, what he calls the "Sinai" paradigm, divine epiphany on a mountain, to which paradigm the Transfiguration belongs; second, the "Pauline" paradigm, to which belong the conversion experience on the Damascus road and the rapture to the third heaven of 2 Cor. 12; third, the "open heaven" paradigm of Stephen's vision in Acts 7. 55. I am not sure that this typology is altogether satisfactory—the second example of the Pauline paradigm and the "open heaven" paradigm, both of which have an apocalyptic context, as McGuckin remarks,²⁰ perhaps belong together—but let us pass over that for the present. The importance of McGuckin's article is in offering such a typology at all, and using it to analyze Symeon's visions. He shows that for Symeon's visions the *least* appropriate paradigm is that of the Transfiguration; indeed, only once does he find this paradigm at all explicit.²¹ It is, in fact, he claims, the Pauline paradigm that is most important for Symeon, and the point of his appeal to visions is to authenticate his claim to authority, an authority derived from his spiritual father, Symeon "Eulabes."²²

McGuckin concentrates on biblical paradigms partly because he maintains that Symeon's grasp of the theological tradition was in fact rather thin.²³ I am not sure that Symeon was as theologically ignorant as McGuckin makes out; indeed, it seems to me that it is unlikely that he was uninformed about the Byzantine monastic tradition. *Catechesis 22* contains accounts of both the vision Symeon received when he was a devout layman, under the direction of Symeon, his spiritual father, and the later vision he experienced as a young monk. Here the first vision is described thus:

One day he was standing in this fashion and was saying out loud: "O God be merciful to me a sinner" (more in the spirit than using his mouth), when suddenly there shone on him in great profusion a divine illumination from on high which entirely filled that place. Thereupon the young man was no longer aware of himself. He could not remember whether he was in a house or even under a roof at all. For all around he could only see the light. Even if his feet were on the ground he was not aware of it; he had no fear of falling, no care in this world. Nothing of what touches a man, or beings endowed with a body, could then touch his thought for he forgot the entire world and was alto-

gether present in that immaterial light, and was even himself, or so it seemed to him, become light. He was flooded with tears of an inexpressible lightness and joy. Then his mind rose up to heaven and perceived another light, even brighter than that which was close to him. And what a marvelous sight! For near to the light was standing the saint of whom we have talked, the old man, equal to the angels, who had given him his instructions and the book.²⁴

In *Catechesis* 16, Symeon gives account of the effects of the divine vision (according to his biographer, Nicetas, the same vision as that just recounted from *Catechesis* 22): “It caused rejoicing, when it appeared, and wounded me when it hid itself. It made itself so close to me, transported me to the heavens. It is a pearl; it is the light which clothes me, which appeared to me like a star, which remains incomprehensible for all. It shines like the sun, and there I discerned all the creation enclosed. It showed me all that it contained and bade me to respect my proper limits. I was closed in under a roof and between walls, yet it opened the heavens for me. I lifted my eyes, sensibly, to contemplate heavenly realities, and then all appeared to me as it was at first.”²⁵

Among the several points one might comment on, I want to draw attention to the experience of light flooding Symeon and eliding his consciousness of his earthly situation, so that he feels transported beyond earthly dimensions to heaven. There is another, much earlier account of such an experience, in Dionysios’s eighth letter. This is the letter to an abbot, not himself a priest, who had driven from the sanctuary a priest who was accepting the repentance of someone who was, in the abbot’s opinion, beyond reprieve. Toward the end of the letter, he tells a story about a holy man of Crete, called Carpos. During his prayer, in which he was incensed by someone who had brought about the apostasy of someone newly baptized, he suddenly had a vision. The account of the vision begins thus: “As he described it, the place where he was seemed to be shaken completely and then split into two halves in the middle from the roof down. A shining flame appeared coming down to him from heaven (for the place now seemed to be in open air). The sky itself seemed to be unfolding, and in the vault of heaven Jesus appeared in human form amid an endless throng of angels.”²⁶

It is the same kind of experience as those just quoted from Symeon, conforming to McGuckin’s third apocalyptic “open heaven” type. Dionysios’s account, as has often been remarked, is modeled on an even earlier account found in the works of the monk Neilos.²⁷ Attention has been drawn recently to parallels between monastic “mysticism” and the visions found in apocalyptic literature by Alexander Golitzin:²⁸ he speaks of monastic mysticism as “interiorized apocalyptic.” The visions just described by Symeon and Carpos would fit such

a category. But there is another parallel between Carpos and Symeon. When he introduces Carpos, Dionysios mentions that Carpos never celebrated the “holy rites of the mysteries” unless there appeared to him, during the preparatory prayers, “a sacred and auspicious vision.”²⁹ Symeon made a similar requirement for the exercise of the priesthood. For instance, in his nineteenth hymn, he asserts: “even if someone has received all the grace of the Spirit and is free of sin from his mother’s womb, it does not seem to me proper that he celebrate the divine rites, or touch the untouchable and dread mysteries, unless God, by his command and election, give him assurance by divinely enlightening his soul and kindling him with the desire of divine love.”³⁰ Symeon made a similar demand for the authentic reception of the Eucharist: “forgiveness of sin and participation in divine life are bestowed on us not only in the bread and wine of communion, but in the divinity that attends them and without confusion mysteriously mingles with them. I say ‘mysteriously’ [*mystikos*], for the divinity is not revealed to everyone, but to those who are worthy of eternal life. It makes those who see it sons of light and of the day; for the ones who do not see the light despite its great clarity are those who sit in darkness.”³¹ But such an emphasis on felt experience of the presence and communication of the divine in connection with the sacraments is, in fact, a commonplace in Byzantine monasticism. For instance, in John Moschos’s *Spiritual Meadow*, there is story of a monk who, when celebrating, “did not perceive the coming of the Holy Spirit in the accustomed manner.”³² He is distressed and returns to the sanctuary in tears. It transpires that the Holy Spirit did not descend because the oblation was already consecrated—by a lay monk who had recited the anaphora over the oblations while he was bringing them to the monastery! But for our purposes the key expression is “in the accustomed manner”: his perception of the descent of the Spirit was what he normally experienced when celebrating the Eucharist. There are stories of other monks who were accustomed to behold the descent of the Holy Spirit:³³ it was a mark of great holiness in the celebrating priest. Perhaps Symeon is not so exceptional after all; rather, he represents an enduring tradition in Byzantine monasticism that laid stress on conscious experience of divine things, and especially of God’s sacramental activity. Maybe it was Symeon’s reassertion of this tradition in the face of the more confident assertion of hierarchical authority by the patriarch and the clergy of the Great Church at the turn of the millennium that made Symeon so controversial in Constantinople. Such an analysis only fills out McGuckin’s main claim, that in these “epiphanic” experiences we see a claim to authority by Symeon the monk. But this claim is not so exceptional: it was a long-standing monastic claim in Byzantium. Such experience, such acquisition of the Holy

Spirit, was the goal of monasticism—something that Symeon makes clear at the end of *Catechesis* 16, when he begs his monks to create in themselves a contrite heart and a humble soul so that, thanks to their tears and their repentance, they may be found worthy one day of the “vision and the enjoyment here below of the ineffable benefits of the divine light.”³⁴

THEOPHANES OF NICAEA

We come to Theophanes, the third bishop of Nicaea bearing that name, who around 1380 wrote five discourses on the “Taboric light.” There is no doubt that the appeal to the vision of the light of Mount Tabor was an appeal to experience, an appeal dismissed by the Calabrian monk Barlaam as an hallucination. For Barlaam no experience, and certainly no experience mediated by the senses, as a vision of light must be, could be an experience of the ineffable God. To experience light not emanating from normal created sources, such as the sun, was to have a hallucination. As is well known, Barlaam’s attack on such claims, which had been made by monks of the Holy Mountain of Athos, provoked a bitter controversy in the already failing Byzantine Empire. The most famous defender of the monks was Saint Gregory Palamas, who had been an Athonite monk himself and became archbishop of Thessaloniki in 1347. Saint Gregory’s defense invoked the distinction in God between his essence, which is unknowable, and his energies, by which he makes himself known: it is a distinction *within* God; the divine energies are God; they are not some kind of lesser intermediary. The claim of the hesychast monks to see the uncreated light of the Godhead was therefore a claim to see God in his energies, not in his essence, which remains unknowable. This defense of the hesychast vision of the divine light was endorsed by synods held at Constantinople in 1341, 1347, and 1351 and given formal expression both in the *Hagioretic Tome*, issued by the monks of the Holy Mountain (1340–41) and also in additions to the formal proclamation of Orthodox belief, reaffirmed each year on the first Sunday of Lent, called the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*. Controversy, however, continued and was perhaps only finally extinguished by the collapse of Byzantium itself in 1453.

Theophanes’ discourses belong to later stages of the controversy. From their title, “On the Taboric Light” (“Peri thaboriou photou”), one might expect that there would be a defense, analysis, and even account of such experiences of beholding the light of Tabor. What in fact we find is a sophisticated philosophical discussion (in which, incidentally, Theophanes shows himself to be well versed in Aristotelian conceptual analysis) of the nature of our participation in God. So far as the light of Mount Tabor itself is concerned, these homilies ad-

dress two issues. First, in the first two discourses, Theophanes argues that the light of Tabor is identical with the “life-giving and deified body of God the Word” (1.94f.)—identical, that is, neither less than nor greater than, nor even equal to, but identical with. A consequence of this, which Theophanes draws out, is that to deny the reality of the vision of the Taboric light is equivalent to denying the reality of divine communion in the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. What at first sight seems to be an exceptional experience—beholding the light of Tabor in prayer—is *identified* with the most normal liturgical action of the life of any Orthodox Christian, the reception of Holy Communion. The argument between the hesychasts and their opponents is not, then, about the reality or otherwise of rare “mystical” experiences, but rather about the reality of participation in God at all. Doubts about the possibility of communion with God through the visible light of Tabor cannot be doubts that stop there; such doubts will dissolve the reality of communion with God through the bread and wine of the Eucharist in Holy Communion. The controversy is not about mysterious, or “mystical,” experiences at all, but about the reality of communion between the uncreated God and created human kind. The second issue, which is first raised in the third homily, concerns the appeal made by the opponents of hesychasm (the Akindynites, Theophanes calls them) to the passage in Maximos’s tenth *Ambiguuum*, which we have already discussed, where he expounds the mystery of the Transfiguration. There Maximos says that the light of the Transfiguration was a “symbol” of the transcendent Godhead. Therefore, the Akindynites argue the Taboric light was not itself divine, but only a symbol of the divine. Theophanes’ response to this is twofold: on the one hand, a symbol is not necessarily distinct from the reality it symbolizes; on the other hand, what Maximos means is not that the light was a symbol of the Godhead, but rather that it was a symbol of the incomprehensibility of the Godhead. I mention this mainly because it shows something that is not always evident in the extant texts, how important Maximos’s exposition of the Transfiguration was in the hesychast controversy: it was Maximos’s long pondering on this mystery that provided the matrix for interpretation of the hesychast vision of the divine light. And that brings us full circle, for when we started with Maximos, we noted that though his theology was concerned with a face-to-face encounter with Christ, no kind of prominence was given to psychological analysis of experiences of light: light was a way of saying something about the reality of the encounter, rather than a way of describing its psychological modalities. So with Theophanes: although he is defending experiences related by holy monks, the focus of his defense is on the reality of encounter and communion between the uncreated God and created humanity.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I would like to make a few points about the place of visions of light in the Byzantine tradition. First of all, behind it lies the rich language of vision in the Bible, in which we can discern several paradigms, and these paradigms serve different purposes, of which our writers are well aware. We need to be clear that we are speaking of visions of light, in the plural: there are different kinds, different matrices of interpretation. Secondly, following on from this, we need to be cautious of the prominence given to the Transfiguration as a paradigm of experience of light in the fourteenth-century hesychast controversy, given the importance this controversy has assumed in modern Orthodoxy, and therefore for scholars interested in the Byzantine tradition, many of whom, if they are interested in religious matters at all, belong to, or are sympathetic to, Orthodoxy as it currently understands itself. Thirdly, the perception of the Transfiguration as a paradigm of experiences of light owes a very great deal to Maximos and has more to do with stressing the reality of communion between the uncreated and the created than with the modalities of psychological experience. Fourthly, the link between Symeon and the hesychasts is not that Symeon is a precursor of hesychasm in the matter of visions of light, though in other respects he shares much with them—his stress on personal experience, for instance, and on the importance of spiritual fatherhood. Rather, it seems to me that Symeon is a kind of virtuoso of experiences of light, drawing on all the biblical paradigms to express a multifaceted understanding of the nature of Christian experience (something that the article cited by John McGuckin has made clear, though even he tends to oversimplify the different ways in which appeal to experiences of light can function). But Symeon is not simply exceptional: he shares with the earlier (and later?) Byzantine monastic tradition a kind of “open heaven” mysticism of what Alexander Golitzin has called “interiorized apocalyptic,” which is closely related to sacramental experience. Further research is needed before we can know how deep and extensive such monastic experiences of light are within Byzantine monasticism.

NOTES

1. See Iakovos Potamianos, *To Fos sti Byzantini Ekklisia* [Light in the Byzantine Church] (Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 2000).
2. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 64, in *Traité pratique*, ed. A. Guillaumont and C. Guillaumont, Sources Chrétiennes, no. 171 (Paris, 1971), p. 648.
3. See n. 22 in John A. McGuckin, “The Luminous Vision in Eleventh-Century

Byzantium: Interpreting the Biblical and Theological Paradigms of St. Symeon the New Theologian,” in *Work and Worship at Theotokos Evergetis*, ed. Margaret Mullet and Anthony Kirby, Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations, vol. 6, no. 2 (Belfast, 1997), pp. 90-123.

4. See Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 15-41.

5. Saint Ignaty Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*, trans. J. M. Watkins, 2nd ed. (London, 1965).

6. Father Lev Gillet, *On the Invocation of the Name of Jesus* (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius; repr., Oxford: SLG Press, 1970).

7. Irénée Hausherr, *Noms du Christ et voies d'oraison*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, no. 157 (Rome: Pontificale Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1960).

8. Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, *The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality*, Fairacres Publication 43, rev. ed. (Oxford: SLG Press, 1977).

9. He was always more popular in the Russian tradition; see Hilarios Alfeyev, *St. Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

10. See Gregory Palamas, *Triads in Defence of the Holy Hesychasts* 1.2.12, in *Grégoire Palamas, Défense des saints hésychastes*, ed. J. Meyendorff, *Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, Études et Documents*, no. 30, 2nd ed. (Louvain, 1973), p. 98.

11. Ch. G. Sotiropoulos, *Niptikoi kai Pateres ton Meson Chronon* (Athens, 1996) (the homilies are to be found on pp. 175-302).

12. Maximos the Confessor, *Capita theologica et oeconomica* 2.13 (PG 90.1130D-1132A).

13. Maximos the Confessor, *Quaestiones et Dubia*, ed. J. H. Declerck, *Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca*, no. 10 (Turnhout: Brepols; Leuven: University Press, 1982), 191 (p. 134).

14. Maximos the Confessor, *Ambigua* 10.31: PG 91.1160B-1169B; English translation, *Maximos the Confessor*, trans. A. Louth (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 128-34.

15. *Ambigua* 10.31b: PG 91.1165D-1168A.

16. *Ambigua* 10.31a: PG 91.1168A.

17. See, for instance, *Ambigua* 10.3: PG 91.1113D.

18. McGuckin, “The Luminous Vision,” p. 95 n. 3.

19. See Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Discourses*, ed. A. Golitzin, vol. 3, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), p. 22. (This “vol. 3” is in fact a monograph on Symeon by Golitzin).

20. McGuckin, “The Luminous Vision,” p. 101.

21. In the account of what McGuckin calls an assimilation of Vision II (the vision toward the beginning of his monastic life) to Vision I (the “conversion” vision before he became a monk) in *Catechesis* 35.6, see “The Luminous Vision,” p. 118. The text used here and elsewhere for Symeon’s writings is that edited by J. Darrouzès, B. Krivochéine, and others in *Sources Chrésiennes*, no. 51 (*Chapitres théologiques, gnostiques et pratiques*

[Theological, Gnostic and Practical Chapters]], nos. 96, 104, and 113 (*Catéchèses* [Catecheses]), nos. 122 and 129 (*Traité théologiques et éthiques* [Theological and Ethical Treatises]), and nos. 156, 174, and 196 (*Hymnes* [Hymns]) (Paris: Le Cerf, 1957-73).

22. It seems to me that McGuckin spoils his case by arguing that in all the paradigms the central concerns are the same, viz., authentication of authority, and the establishment of the basis for a program of reform: see "The Luminous Vision," pp. 101f.

23. This is the burden of his article "St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022): Byzantine Spiritual Authority in Search of a Precedent," in *The Church Retrospective*, ed. R. N. Swanson, Studies in Church History, no. 33, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), pp. 75-90.

24. *Catechesis* 22.88-104.

25. *Catechesis* 16.127-36.

26. Dionysios, *Epistula* 8, ed. A. M. Ritter, *Patristische Texte und Studien*, no. 36 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), p. 190.

27. See Neilos, *Epistula* 2: PG 79.297D-300C.

28. In unpublished papers he has shown me, and also in his contribution to the XIII International Conference on Patristic Studies, Oxford, 1999.

29. *Ep.* 8 (Ritter, p. 188).

30. *Hymn* 19.159-65.

31. *Ethical Treatise* 10.189-97.

32. *Pratum spirituale* 25.

33. *Ibid.*, 27, 150.

34. *Catechesis* 16.159-64.

