

The Hesychast Controversy

Historical Theology

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HESYCHCHIA.

The word comes from the Greek meaning “inner stillness”. It is a mystical tradition of contemplative prayer in the Eastern Orthodox Church

It is characterized by body positions, breathing techniques and repetitive prayers. Its goal is union with God.

I. IT ORIGINS

A. THE WORD IS FOUND IN THE SEPTUIGENT AND IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT

1. From this idea and from Jesus’ statement in Matt 6:6 the tradition found it’s beginning.

a. It is a more “mystical” theology rather than the more “rational” theology that developed in the Western Church.

2. Pseudo-Dionysius the Arepagite in the late 5th century said “God is better characterized and approached by negations than by affirmations.” In other words, since God transcends all knowledge, we can only understand God by knowing what he is not.

3. Was further defined by Gregory Palamas in his defense of it in the 14th century controversy. He taught that the essence of God could never be known by his creatures, rather he could be known by his uncreated energies. What the disciples experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration is an example of this in Luke 9:28-36.

II. WHAT WAS THE CONTROVERSY

A. ABOUT 1337 IT CAUGHT THE ATTENTION OF BARLAAM OF SEMENARA

1. He was a Calabrian monk and the abbot in the Monastery of St Saviour in Constantinople

2. In a visit to Mount Athos he encountered hesychasts and their practices.

3. He regarded them as heretical and blasphemous and held the teaching to be polytheistic (a visible and an invisible God)..

B. GERGORY PALAMAS TOOK THE SIDE OF DEFENDING HESYCHASM

1. He later became the Archbishop of Thessalonica and was well educated in Greek philosophy.

2. He defended it in the three synods in 1341, 1347 and 1351.

C. The synod in 1341 saw Barlaam condemned after which he recanted and later became a bishop in the Western Roman Church.

D. Barlaam’s followers gain a brief victory in the second synod but in the third by Emperor John VI Cantacuzenus it became established doctrine of the Orthodox Church.

III. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE PRACTICES

A. CONTEMPALTIVE PRAYER

1. Seeking to separate themselves from the distraction of that which is not God, sought to experience the energies of God.

2. Assuming a position with chin to their chest to help maintain focus.
3. Often breathing rhythmically as they pray.
4. Repeating the same “Jesus Prayer” over and over. “Lord Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner”.
5. Still practiced today popularized by the collection of writing know and the Philokalia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pseudo-Dionysius_the_Areopagite

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hesychasm#:~:text=Hesychasm%20\(%2F%CB%88h%C9%9Bs,in%20the%20Eastern%20Orthodox%20Church.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hesychasm#:~:text=Hesychasm%20(%2F%CB%88h%C9%9Bs,in%20the%20Eastern%20Orthodox%20Church.)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_the_14th_century

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hesychasm>