

# The Significance of the Transfiguration for Hesychasm

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## 1. Introduction

The story of the appearance of Christ, accompanied by Moses and Elijah, to Peter, James and John in the shining glory of his divinity (Mt. 17,1-8), traditionally believed to have taken place on Mt. Tabor, i.e., the story of the Transfiguration, has inspired a number of themes of Christian spirituality. Above all in Eastern Orthodox Christianity the Transfiguration has special prominence. Thus the festival of the Transfiguration observed on 6 August both in the East and in the West, is in the East one of the great celebrations of the Christian year alongside Epiphany and Easter.<sup>1)</sup>

A decisive influence on Eastern Spirituality in this respect was exercised by the so-called Hesychasm, a type of monastic life and praying practiced by monks of the Orthodox Church with the purpose of achieving divine quietness (Hesychia). It flourished in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries as an ecclesiastical and monastic movement spreading to the Holy Mountain, and throughout the Byzantine Empire, the Balkans, and later Russia. As a result of great composure and purification of the soul and body, intellectual prayers which involved soul, mind and body (Jesus Prayer), and participation in the common Eucharistic life of the Church, the hesychasts tried to see with their own eyes the “uncreated light” which once appeared on the day of Transfiguration, namely the so-called “Taborite light”. The Hesychasts always described their experience of God with this term. For they identified the divine reality that revealed itself to them with the light that had appeared to the Lord’s disciples at His

Transfiguration.<sup>2)</sup>

The question is, why is the story of Transfiguration so important for the hesychasts. The present paper tries to examine the precise significance of the Transfiguration for the hesychasts by making reference to the writings of Gregory of Sinai (c.1255-1346), one of the most outstanding hesychast teachers.

## 2. Three steps of spiritual advances

Gregory is well-known for his teaching of a psychosomatic method of the Jesus-prayer.<sup>3)</sup> But it is too one-sided to emphasize this role exclusively. He was primarily a promoter and missionary of the monastic spirituality in general, for, as his entire writings clearly show, he was primarily a theoretician of monastic discipline. This monastic discipline of the Eastern Church, founded by Evagrius of Pontus (c.345-399), was handed down in the form of the three steps of spiritual advances, namely “ethike” (or “praktike”), “physike” and “theologike”.<sup>4)</sup>

The Sinaite is a loyal bearer of inheritance of this Evagrian idea. In chapter 127 of his *On Commandments and Doctrines, Warnings and Promises; on Thoughts, Passions and Virtues, and also on Stillness and Prayer: One Hundred and Thirty-Seven Texts*, he compares a monk with “philosopher”.<sup>5)</sup> Let us quote the relevant passage from chapter 127:

“The perfect philosopher is one whose intellect (nous) has attained love of wisdom or, rather, love of God on the levels of ethike, physike and theologike. That is to say, he has learnt from God through the ethike ascetic practice, through the physike an insight into the spiritual causes of created things, and through the theologike the theoria and a preciseness of doctrines”.<sup>6)</sup>

This means that in the “ethike”, or usually called “praktike”, one occupies oneself with the practice of purification of soul. In the physike, a transitional contemplation, one recognizes the causes in the creatures through the reading of the creator's handwriting and in the theologike, an

ultimate contemplation, one becomes worthy of the *theoria*, i.e., the vision of God, and “a preciseness of doctrines”. This last notion is a crucial point for our study and one to which we will soon come back.

In the same chapter, the term “philosopher” denotes exclusively the one who has reached the highest step, the *theologike*, while “*physike*” is attributed to the “teacher” (*rhētōr*) and “*praktike*” to the “interpreter” (*grammateus*).

“An interpreter is one proficient in the practice of the ascetic life and still actively engaged in scriptural exegesis. A divine teacher is one who mediates, in accordance with the laws governing the natural world, the spiritual knowledge and inner meanings of created things and, inspired by the Holy Spirit, elucidates all things with the analytic power of his intelligence. A true philosopher is one who has attained, consciously and directly, a supernatural union with God”.<sup>7)</sup>

From the above explanations it is clear that Gregory stands completely in the Evagrius tradition regarding the three monastic basic disciplines.

The significance of the *praktike* as a prerequisite for contemplation lies in the necessity of purity of the intellect. This is also for Gregory a matter of course, when he says that contemplation is possible only to those who “through grace have attained great purity of the intellect”.<sup>8)</sup> But he emphasizes also the dangers for contemplation arising from the impurity of the intellect: deceptions, illusions or conceits, of which the spiritual leaders warn again and again.<sup>9)</sup>

The “*physike*”, according to Evagrius, is a spiritual understanding of the reality of creation in its referentiality to God through the reading of divine meaning (*logoi*) hidden in all created. In conventional theological terms, it is a “*physicotheological proof of God*”.<sup>10)</sup> The Sinaite rewrites it as follows: If you become “pure, dispassionate and wholly consecrated to God”,<sup>11)</sup> “you will disclose in created things the presence of the divine *Logos*, the substantive Wisdom of God the Father; for in created things you will perceive the outward expression of the archetypes that characte-

rize them, and thus through your active living intelligence you will speak wisdom that derives from the divine Wisdom".<sup>12)</sup> The reading of the divine Logos in created things leads to the theologike, *a vision of the Trinity*: "They contemplate with clarity the logoi, or inward essences of these things, and distinctly perceive, so far as is possible, the single source of all things, the Holy Trinity".<sup>13)</sup>

Evagrius defined the "theologike" as *the vision of God through the vision of the state of the intellect itself, and that in its own light at the time of the prayer*.<sup>14)</sup> Essentially the Sinaite follows his predecessor. The idea that the intellect realizes the theologike through the vision of its own light is expressed by the Sinaite as follows:

"According to theologians, noetic, pure, angelic prayer is in its power wisdom inspired by the Holy Spirit. A sign that you have attained such prayer is that the vision of the intellect when praying is completely free from form and that the intellect sees neither itself nor anything else in a material way. On the contrary, it is often drawn away even from its own sense by the light acting in it; for it now grows immaterial and filled with spiritual radiance, becoming through ineffable union a single spirit with God (cf. 1Cor. 6,17)".<sup>15)</sup>

This quotation is also an impressive confirmation of the typically Evagrian view that the theologike takes place "at the time of the prayer" and there "the light" is "acting in the intellect".

But as we shall soon observe, the Gregorian idea of the theologike gains a totally new element that is never found in his predecessor, namely, *an association of this mystical experience with the biblical story of the Transfiguration*.

### 3. Theologike and Transfiguration

Of the total of 137 chapters of his ascetic-mystic writing (Greg1), chapters twenty-five to thirty-two treat "doctrines" (dogmata). All the chapters with exception of chapter 28 treat conventional definitions and state-

ments about the Trinity and Christology. Why did the author so persistently recapitulate the dogmatic traditions in his ascetic-mystic handbook? At this point, one must accentuate a quite important aspect of the teachings of Gregory respecting the theologike: It also includes *dogmatic orthodoxy* within the vision. Within the highest discipline, the highest activity of the intellect, Gregory distinguishes *vision* and *doctrines* from each other, which was not the case with Evagrius. Let us quote once again what Gregory says about the theologike:

“The perfect philosopher is one whose intellect ...has learnt from God through the ethike ascetic practice, through the physike an insight into the spiritual causes of created things, and through the theologike *the theoria and a preciseness of doctrines* (tēn theōrian kai tēn tōn dogmatōn akribeian)”.<sup>16)</sup>

Just this “preciseness of doctrines” or “scrupulous discernment in matters of dogma”<sup>17)</sup> is one pole of the characteristics of the theologike. That the two elements, theoria and dogmatism, are components of the theologike is unquestionable, as is clear from the discovery of the sermon of Gregory, *Discourse on the transfiguration*,<sup>18)</sup> edited by David Balfour,<sup>19)</sup> in which the Sinaite clearly speaks of the light of Tabor as divine and uncreated.

First of all, it must be pointed out that this discourse treats the theologike as leitmotif. The prologue emphasizes this explicitly:

“Not basing ourselves on the magnificence and analogy of created things offered to us (note: the “physike” is meant), but using our mind’s eye, let us gaze from nigh at hand, with nothing intervening, upon Jesus as He flashes forth like lightning on Mt. Tabor”.<sup>20)</sup>

Gregory equates this vision of Christ “with nothing intervening” (amesōs) in the light flashing from Him on Mt. Tabor to the experience of the highest mystic state, i.e. the theologike.

The connection of the light vision with Jesus' Transfiguration goes back to Pseudo-Macarius, as H. -V. Beyer has shown convincingly.<sup>21)</sup> But in spite of the fact that this connection was already witnessed by such an old document, we cannot actually find any clear reference to it before the hesychast movements in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The identification of the light perceived by contemplative mystics with the "Taborite Light" was therefore certainly not originated by the hesychasts but rather a rediscovery and reevaluation of the idea of Pseudo-Macarius. Of the many witnesses among hesychast writings which treat the Transfiguration relating the Evagrian light-vision, our text, *Discourse on the transfiguration*, is one of the earliest and best examples. We will follow the text, analyze its contents and try to clarify its central thought in order to find a possible motive of the above mentioned connection.

The first two paragraphs can be regarded as a prelude for the whole sermon. The preacher invites his listeners who, in a metaphoric sense, have already come to the foot of Mt. Tabor to climb "the intelligible mountain of the theoria" (to horos to noēton tēs theōrias)<sup>22)</sup> in order to "see the glory of that flood of Jesus' light which blazes there", as the three apostles or "lovers of vision" (philotheamonas)<sup>23)</sup> experienced it. After this rather expectant invitation, however, the texts from paragraph three to seventeen are taken up only by exegetical explanations. These offer a comparison between the Old Testament theophanies on Mt. Horeb (Sinai) that were granted Elijah (cf. I Kings 19,8-13) and Moses (cf. Ex. 19,1-25; 20,18-21; 24, 1-18), and the New Testament event of the Transfiguration. By means of the fullness of often repeated Bible quotations and their symbolical-typological interpretation the author explains the meaning of the Old Testament divine manifestations as prognostications of the Transfiguration of the Lord insisting that the latter is the final and complete fulfillment of what was indicated symbolically in the former. Concretely the whole section consists of the following elements:

- a) A comparison of the different circumstances in the three theophanies: terrifying natural phenomena like clouds, storm, fires and

thunderclaps in the case of Moses ( § 4); “a light breath of light”<sup>24)</sup> before Elijah ( § 5). In contrast, Christ on Tabor “shone ineffably and appeared lovingly and auspiciously to us men”.<sup>25)</sup>

- b) An explanation of the reason why the three apostles were overpowered by the divine radiance: Because they had not been yet completely purified ( § 4). No one can participate in this light, “before he is purified in his hearing and understanding and has refined the flesh and make it incorruptible in the purifying fire of the Spirit”.<sup>26)</sup>
- c) A dogmatic interpretation of the Transfiguration as a revelation of the Trinity and the two natures of Jesus: The two figures appearing in the Transfiguration, namely Moses and Elijah, symbolize the two natures of Jesus and the three apostles the Trinity ( § 8-11; 15).
- d) An actualization of the Transfiguration: Though both the Old Testament theophany and the New Testament Transfiguration belong already to the past, “the Transfiguration is the truth of that theophany which is present in each (en hekastō)”.<sup>27)</sup> And this is in itself “pledge of the eternal beatitude in the other world”.<sup>28)</sup>

The eighteenth through twenty-third paragraphs<sup>29)</sup> contain a dogmatic treatise on the nature of Jesus within the Trinity. The starting point is God's voice from the cloud: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (cf. Mt 17,5; Mc 9,7; Lk 9,35).<sup>30)</sup> This is followed by an interpretation of the Transfiguration scene in the form of explanations put into the mouth of God the Father. But what the Father brings up on that occasion is a dogmatic explanation composed of different biblical quotations (mostly from the Gospel of John) relating to the Son and His relationship to the Father and to the Holy Spirit ( § 18). This part is, as D. Balfour expresses correctly, “the mass of ardent utterance which pours like lava from this

theological volcano".<sup>31)</sup> This "theological volcano" is followed by another digression which argues for the Trinity on the analogy of the interaction among the intellect, the word and the voice in men, each of which corresponds to the father, the son and the Holy Spirit (§ 19-21). In the subsequent two paragraphs (22-23) the discussion focuses on the "plan of divine economy"<sup>32)</sup> in Jesus Christ, represented in correspondence with the formation and the function of the "word" in men.

After this rather complicated, and for a sermon quite monotonous dogmatic section of paragraph twenty-four, the mood is again elevated to that at the beginning of the sermon. The scene is determined again by the splendid event on the Tabor. The apostles who meanwhile have been purified and enlightened by "the purifying power of the Spirit", recognized the Son and "cognitively perceived Him within themselves"<sup>33)</sup> but also the Trinity itself, i.e., not only the Son but also the Father through the voice from above and the Holy Spirit "through the resplendent cloud",<sup>34)</sup> at this moment, the whole creation begins to rejoice over the complete revelation of the Trinity on Tabor. The author then joins the mystery of the Transfiguration with Jesus' farewell prayer before his arrest, in which he asks the Father for glorification (cf. Jn 17,5) and the Father promises His Son the glorification on the cross and in the further future, in order to show "Jesus to be and to become most primordial God and Lord in all respects".<sup>35)</sup>

In the twenty-fifth paragraph<sup>36)</sup>, the sermon reaches its climax: An invitation to the vision of the Son who was transfigured on Mt. Tabor after the model of the biblical figures, namely, an invitation to praise the Transfigured, to see Him with Moses, to ascend with Elijah, to enquire into divine matters with John, to confess our acknowledgement with Peter, to approach the light with James, and, so far as is possible, to gaze on His "glory as of the only begotten from the Father" (Jn 1,14). This is followed by the author's own praise to the Lord Jesus (§ 26)<sup>37)</sup> and to the Father in the first part of paragraph twenty-seven<sup>38)</sup> with a prayer to the Lord (from the second part of § 27 up to § 28<sup>39)</sup>), and thus end the whole sermon.

#### 4) Conclusion

Two points are to be accentuated in this whole discourse. First, it is obvious that the Transfiguration is actualized by means of contemplation: At first, the *temporal universality* of the validity of the New Testament Transfiguration is put into the foreground. It took place already in the Old Testament theophanies anticipatorily and typologically. But it also occurs “in each” in the present and this experience is a “pledge of the eternal beatitude in the other world”. However the main attention turns towards the present actualization through the *theoria*. The New Testament scene of the Transfiguration, Tabor, is now put into the inner world of the contemplative as “the intelligible mountain of the *theoria*”. Above all through the labeling of the three apostles as “lovers of vision” the preacher brings the past event into an inner connection with the present mystic vision. On the part of the apostles Gregory transfers the concrete, visual phenomenon of the Transfiguration into their inner world, saying that they saw the Transfigured “cognitively perceived Him within themselves”. Finally the whole sermon, as the prolog has already done, finishes once more with an invitation to the contemplation of the Transfigured.

Second, the connection of dogmatism with the *theoria* is apparent. The purely dogmatic sections (§ 8-11; 15; 18-23) occupy almost half of the whole sermon. In his theological descriptions and arguments the preacher takes trouble unremittingly and exhaustively, on the authority of biblical and patristic sources as well as the Nicean-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Symbol of Chalcedon, to describe the Trinitarian relationship of the three Persons as well as the two natures in the one hypostasis of the Son and His Economy, and to emphasize their orthodoxy. The whole doctrinal section (§ 18-23) that H -V. Beyer calls “a true compendium of doctrines”<sup>40)</sup> consists of the words of God to which the voice from the cloud provided the stimulus. The author gives reasons for the arrangement of the dogmatic statements in this context with the enthusiastic claim: “For all will be taught by God (Is. 54,13; Jn 6,45), in such a way that we learn from Him and through Him what we ought to know”.<sup>41)</sup> All these discussions finally

lead us to the complete revelation of the Trinity through the Transfiguration of the Second Person.

With this observation, the most essential motive of the sermon is clear. It tries to link the monastic experience of the *theoria* to the biblical Transfiguration to prove the former to be equivalent to the latter and thus to authorize the mystic vision as biblically founded. Such an emphatic dogmatism has relevance exactly for the grounds for believing that the object of the vision is a true God. The criterion for a legitimate dogma consists in the confession of the Trinity and the two natures in hypostasis of Christ. The Transfiguration therefore is the complete revelation of both doctrines. With these doctrines the whole mystery of God manifests itself “through the high revelatory pronouncements”,<sup>42)</sup> that are given in form of the dogmas by God. Therefore the Transfiguration can be regarded as the highpoint and climax of orthodoxy. The *theoria* is the actualization of this biblical incident “in each”. That is the theologike of the Sinaite who thinks that one who is worthy of the theologike “has learnt from God the *theoria* and a preciseness of doctrines”.<sup>43)</sup>

The dogmatism of our author proves by no means to be interested in the dogmatic science, or a theological discussion in itself. The right doctrines have their true validity only on the mystical level. Without mysticism, theology is pointless. On the other hand, theology is necessary as a guarantor of the orthodoxy of mysticism. This inseparable connection of theology and mysticism is in reality a fundamental character of the tradition of the Eastern Church, as V. Lossky emphatically insists:

“The tradition of the Eastern Church has never keenly distinguished between mysticism and theology, between personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogma announced by the church....Theology and mysticism do not exclude each other: On the contrary, they support and supplement each other. The one cannot exist without the other....There is no Christian mysticism without theology – But above all there is no true theology without mysticism”.<sup>44)</sup>

## Notes:

- 1) Cf. A. Michael Ramsey, art. Transfiguration, in: ed. G. S. Wakefield, *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, London <sup>3</sup>1986, 379-380.
- 2) Cf. J. Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1974, 116.
- 3) Cf. E. Hisamatsu, "Hesychastische Gebetslehre bei Gregorios Sinaites", *Studia Patristica vol. 30* (1997), 218~223.
- 4) Cf. Evagrius, Practicus 1 = ed. A. Guillaumont / C. Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique. Traité pratique ou Le Moine (Sources Chrétiennes 171)*, 498.
- 5) That was common in monastic literature, in which the monastic life was called "true philosophy". Cf. P. Miquel, art. Monachisme II. Naissance et développements du monachisme Chrétien, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 10 (1980), 1555-1556; G. Bardy, "«Philosophie» et «philosoph» dans le vocabulaire Chrétien des premiers siècles", *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 25 (1949), 97-108.
- 6) Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrines, Warnings and Promises; on Thoughts, Passions and Virtues, and also on Stillness and Prayer: One Hundred and Thirty-Seven Texts* (abbr. "Greg1"), chapter 127 = Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and Makarios of Corinth, *The Philokalia IV*, Athens 1961 (3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the Philokalia published 1782 in Venice) (abbr. "Phi IV"), 57,39-58,4.
- 7) Greg1, chapter 127 = Phi IV, 57, 33-38.
- 8) Greg1, chapter 130 = Phi IV, 60, 8-9.
- 9) Greg1, chapter 130 = Phi IV, 60,9-11.
- 10) H.-V. Beyer, *Gregorios Sinaites Werke. Einleitung, kritische Textausgabe und Übersetzung*, Wien 1985 (unpublished), 4.
- 11) Greg1, chapter 133 = Phi IV, 61,23-24.
- 12) Greg1, chapter 134 = Phi IV, 61, 27-30.
- 13) Greg1, chapter 98 = Phi IV, 47,35-37.
- 14) Cf. A. Guillaumont, "La vision de l'intellect par lui-même dans la mystique évagrienne", *Mélanges de l'université Saint Joseph* 50 (1984), 255-262.
- 15) Greg1, chapter 116 = Phi IV, 52,30-35.
- 16) Greg1, chapter 127 = Phi IV, 57,39-58,4.
- 17) Greg1, chapter 57 = Phi IV, 39,7.
- 18) Abbr. "Greg2"
- 19) D. Balfour, "Saint Gregory the Sinaite. Discourse on the Transfiguration. First critical Edition, with English and Commentary"; *Theologia* 52/ 2 (1981), 644-680 (abbr. Balfour).
- 20) Greg2, § 1 = Balfour, 644[9-11].
- 21) Cf. Pseudo-Macarius, Logos 18,7,3 = ed. W. Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature. Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius*, Leiden 1954 (Nachdr. 1965), I, 207, 19-23. Cf. H. -V. Beyer, "Lichtlehre der Mönche des vierzehnten und des vierten Jahrhunderts, erörtert am Beispiel des Gregorios Sinaites, des Evagrius Pontikos und des Ps. -Makarios/Symeon", *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 31/ 2 (1981), 504-505; 511.
- 22) Greg2, § 1 = Balfour, 644[7].
- 23) Greg2, § 2 = Balfour, 644[18].

- 24) Greg2, § 5 = Balfour, 648 [73-74].
- 25) Greg2, § 4 = Balfour, 646[50-51].
- 26) Greg2, § 6 = Balfour, 650[91-92].
- 27) Greg2, § 17 = Balfour, 656[210]-658[211].
- 28) Greg2, § 17 = Balfour, 658[211].
- 29) Greg2, § 17 = Balfour, 658[216]-673 [377].
- 30) Greg2, § 18 = Balfour, 658[217-218].
- 31) Balfour, 635.
- 32) Greg2, § 22 = Balfour, 666[336].
- 33) Greg2, § 24 = Balfour, 672[380].
- 34) Greg2, § 24 = Balfour, 672[384].
- 35) Greg2, § 24 = Balfour, 674[416-417].
- 36) Greg2, § 25 = Balfour, 674[419]-676[436].
- 37) Greg2, § 26 = Balfour, 676[437]-678[456].
- 38) Greg2, § 26 = Balfour, 678[457-465].
- 39) Greg2, § 27-28 = Balfour, 678[465]-680[496].
- 40) H. -V. Beyer, *Gregorios Sinaites Werke*, op. cit., 4.
- 41) Gregorius of Sinai, *On the Signs of Grace and Delusion, Written for the Confessor Longinos: Ten Texts*, chapter 1 = Phi IV, 66, 10-12.
- 42) Greg2, § 3 = Balfour, 646[4].
- 43) D. Balfour delivered a relatively detailed prelude to his critical text edition of this sermon (Cf. Balfour, 633-644). Unfortunately he overlooked the above described characteristic of the theologike-interpretation, not least the importance of its dogmatic meaning. For, otherwise, he could not have written that the psychological argument of the Trinitarian dogmas (§ 19-21) is "uninspiring because it seems uninspired" (Balfour, 636). This is far not only from a scientifically appropriate argument but also from a correct understanding of Gregory.
- 44) V. Lossky, (übers. V. M. Prager), *Die Mystische Theologie der morgenländischen Kirche*, Graz/Wien/Köln, 1961, 12-13.