

## Sufism and Hesychasm

### Introduction: the Question

At the Orientale Lumen Conference of 2000 a paper entitled “Yoga and Hesychasm”,<sup>1</sup> showed how an intriguing work, “The Method of Hesychast Prayer”,<sup>2</sup> which Irénée Hausherr terms “the *manifesto* of [the Hesychast] school”,<sup>3</sup> could be equally read as a yogic text. In his critical edition of this work Hausherr summarily dismisses the psychophysical component, namely the use of posture and breath and focusing on the navel centre, as “Hindu infiltration” or as an example of “human stupidity”.<sup>4</sup> The human stupidity consists, according to Hausherr, in taking the symbolism of the earlier writers literally, as for example the famous phrase of John Climacus, “Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with your every breath”.<sup>5</sup> The other suggestion, which Hausherr does not explore, namely a Hindu influence, is of particular interest but is problematic since the Parthians, the Sassanids, and Islam raised a barrier between Europe and India.<sup>6</sup> From the beginning of the eighth century CE trade was to all intents and purposes in the hands of Arab merchants.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Dupuche, “Yoga and Hesychasm”, in *Orientale Lumen: Australia and Oceania 2000 Proceedings*, Lawrence Cross and Edward Morgan, eds (Melbourne 2001) 69-80.

<sup>2</sup> “La méthode d’oraison hésychaste”, ed. Irénée Hausherr, *Orientalia Christiana* 36 (1927) 101-209.

<sup>3</sup> Irénée Hausherr, “Les grands courants de la spiritualité orientale”, *OCP* 1 (1935) 134.

<sup>4</sup> “Infiltration hindoue”, “l’humaine bêtise”. Hausherr, “La méthode d’oraison hésychaste”, 146.

<sup>5</sup> Hausherr prefers to translate this sentence as “il faut introduire la pensée de Jésus avec la respiration”. Hausherr, “La méthode d’oraison hésychaste”, 146 or paraphrases it as: “[le souvenir de Jésus] doit devenir ininterrompue comme la respiration; elle doit, comme dit Climaque, s’attacher à l’haleine que nous respirons, et alors nous connaissons l’utilité de l’[hesychia]...”. Hausherr, “La méthode d’oraison hésychaste”, 137.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Baier, *Yoga auf dem Weg nach Westen* (Würzburg 1998) 27-28. D.T. Vassiliades, *The Greeks in India* (New Delhi 2000) studies the direct contacts between the Greeks and India but finds very little of significance for our purpose.

<sup>7</sup> Baier, *Yoga*, 28.

Was there a bridge? Did Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam, in fact provide the bridge?<sup>8</sup> The affirmative answer will show how the Prayer of the Heart links the mystical traditions of Christianity, Islam, and India.

## Part I: Hesychasm

Hesychasm, or the “Prayer of the Heart” enjoyed immense success in the Orthodox world<sup>9</sup> and has been popularised in the West by the book *The Way of the Pilgrim*. Hesychasm is commonly traced back to Mt Sinai in the sixth century and contrasts with the liturgical prayer and coenobitic life propounded by Basil the Great.

It goes through three stages:<sup>10</sup>

1. Firstly the spirituality derived from the desert fathers and described most perfectly in the school of Mt Sinai in the sixth and seventh centuries, therefore before the Hegira, the foundation of Islam. The sentence of John Climacus, who is the outstanding figure of this first stage, will have an immense impact:

Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with your every breath. Then indeed you will appreciate the value of stillness [ήσυχία].<sup>11</sup>

2. After a gap of many centuries, which it is hard to fill,<sup>12</sup> the second stage is found in the writings of Mt Athos in thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. What is perhaps the earliest of these writings,<sup>13</sup> partly quoted above, is “attributed by some modern scholars to Nicephorus”,<sup>14</sup> an Italian Catholic from Calabria or Sicily<sup>15</sup> who converted to Orthodoxy and became

a monk on Mt Athos during the reign of Michael VIII Paleologus (1261-1282), whose policy of reunion with the Catholic Church he opposed.<sup>16</sup> He arrived at Mt Athos at a time when, according to Gregory of Sinai (1255-1346), contemplative life and mental prayer were almost completely absent from the holy mountain.<sup>17</sup> Although Gregory popularises the method, Nicephorus is the first, as far as we can tell, to link the “Prayer of Jesus” with the technique of respiration.<sup>18</sup>

Gregory, who was born in Asia Minor, spent a long time at the monastery of St Catherine on Mt Sinai<sup>19</sup> but it was in Crete that Gregory learnt from a monk named Arsenius, the “custody of the spirit” and “pure prayer”.<sup>20</sup> He explicitly quotes “The Method of Hesychast Prayer”.<sup>21</sup> He will restore contemplation by promoting the prayer of the heart<sup>22</sup> with an accompanying emphasis on posture and attentiveness to the “place of the heart”,<sup>23</sup> as contrasted with the Evagriian emphasis on the intellect.<sup>24</sup>

3. The third stage of Hesychasm is represented by the writings of Gregory Palamas who defended the method against the attacks of Barlaam of Calabria who came from the same general region as Nicephorus and like him opposed the reunion of Rome and Constantinople.<sup>25</sup> During his sojourn in Thessalonica and Constantinople with some hesychast monks Barlaam learnt of the psychophysical methods popularised by “The Method of Hesychast Prayer” and was scandalised by them.<sup>26</sup> He accused the hesychasts of being Messalians or Bogomils<sup>27</sup> but soon abandoned his attacks along these lines<sup>28</sup> and directed his attention to more theological issues<sup>29</sup> such as the radical unknowability of God and the experience of Taboric light. After the

<sup>8</sup> J. Meyendorff accepts that there are parallels in Islamic and Indian mysticism and invites historical research along these lines, in *Grégoire Palamas, Défense des saints hésychastes* vol. 1 (Louvain 1973) xxxi. Baier concludes without hesitation that Sufism is the bridge. Baier, *Yoga*, 76.

<sup>9</sup> Hausherr, “La méthode d’oraison hésychaste”, 104.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Adnès, “Hésychasme”, in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. 7 (Paris 1971) col. 381-382.

<sup>11</sup> John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (London 1982) 270.

<sup>12</sup> Baier, *Yoga*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Baier, *Yoga*, 36. The dating of the text is controverted. Some say the first half of the twelfth century CE, while F. von Lilienfeld proposes some time between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. K. Dahme proposes the thirteenth century CE. Baier, *Yoga*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> He is also called Nicephorus the Solitary, Nicephorus the Hesychast, Nicephorus the Hagiorite. *Petite Philocalie de la prière du coeur*, trans. Jean Gouillard (Paris 1979) 138. He is the teacher of Gregory Palamas. Hausherr, “La méthode d’oraison hésychaste”, 118; Louis Gardet, “La mention du nom divin en mystique musulmane”, *Revue Thomiste* (1952) 645.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas et la mystique orthodoxe* (Paris 2002) 44.

<sup>16</sup> Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas*, 43. Little else is known about his life. Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas*, 44.

<sup>17</sup> Hausherr, “Les grands courants”, 132.

<sup>18</sup> Hausherr shows uncertainty on this issue. He variously rejects and supports the idea that Nicephorus is the author of “La méthode d’oraison hésychaste”. Cf. Hausherr, “La méthode d’oraison hésychaste”, 131 against and 133 in favour.

<sup>19</sup> Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas*, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas*, 51.

<sup>22</sup> Hausherr, “Les grands courants”, 132-3.

<sup>23</sup> Hausherr, “Les grands courants”, 133.

<sup>24</sup> Hausherr, “Les grands courants”, 135.

<sup>25</sup> Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas*, 64.

<sup>26</sup> Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas*, 66.

<sup>27</sup> Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> Palamas, *Défense*, xxxiii.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. “Letter V to Ignatius”, in G. Schiro, ed., *Barlaam Calabro, Epistole Greche* (Palermo 1954) 323-324, quoted in Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas*, 67.

Palamite victory he returned as a bishop to Italy and spent part of his final years teaching Greek to Petrarch.<sup>30</sup>

“The Method” climaxes with the following passage:

Then, seated in a quiet (ἡσυχῶ) cell, to one side in a corner, do as I now say: close the door and raise your mind (νοῦν) beyond any vain and passing object, then placing your chin against your breast and turning the eye of your body, along with all your mind, to the middle of your stomach, in other words to your navel, restrict your nasal inhalation in such a way as not to breathe freely, and mentally explore within your abdominal cavity in search of the place of the heart (καρδίας) where all the powers of the soul are pleased to frequent. At the start you will find a stubborn darkness and density but by persevering and practising this activity day and night you will find – O wonder – a limitless bliss (εὐφοροσύνην). In fact, as soon as the spirit finds the place of the heart, it suddenly perceives what it never knew: for it perceives the air (ἀέρα) existing in the centre of the heart and it sees itself entirely composed of light (φωτεινὸν) and full of discernment, and from now on as soon as a thought comes to the surface before even it finishes and takes form, by the invocation of Jesus Christ the [spirit] drives it out and eliminates it. From this moment on the spirit, in its opposition to the demons, awakens the natural anger and beats away the spiritual enemies. The rest you will learn with the help of God by keeping custody of the mind (νοῦς) and keeping Jesus in the heart (ἐν καρδίᾳ); for, as they say, sit in your cell and it will teach you all things.<sup>31</sup>

## Part II: Sufism

Sufism is a natural development within Islam.<sup>32</sup> Although it draws significantly on a variety of sources, on eastern Christianity, both Nestorian and Syriac,<sup>33</sup> on Gnosticism, neo-Platonism, Manicheism, and Buddhism, as

well as on yoga and Hinduism,<sup>34</sup> it takes care to show that its major tenets are compatible with the essentials of Islam and interprets texts from the *Qurʾān* to substantiate its teachings. It is through the writings of al-Ghazali in the eleventh century<sup>35</sup> that Sufism is finally accepted into the mainstream of Islam.

The Sufis, much influenced by the early Muslim female mystic Rabiʿa,<sup>36</sup> seek a special friendship (*walaya*) with God. A fine example of this love is given in a poem by Hallaj (c. 858-922 CE):

I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I.  
We are *two* spirits dwelling in one body.  
If thou seest me, thou seest Him;  
And if thou seest Him, thou seest us both.<sup>37</sup>

They believe they can do so by a direct knowledge of the divine truth<sup>38</sup> so that ecstasy and experience are preferred over theoretical knowledge and learning.<sup>39</sup> The heart is all important.<sup>40</sup>

Progression along the mystical way depended on training under guidance so that various paths (*ṭarīq*)<sup>41</sup> and schools developed led by masters (*shayk*) who have themselves attained gnosis.<sup>42</sup> The relationship of these masters and schools is highly varied and complex.<sup>43</sup> Progress can take place

<sup>34</sup> Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders*, 33.

<sup>35</sup> 1058-1111 CE. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 64.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Margaret Smith, *Rabiʿa the Mystic A.D. 717-801, and her fellow-saints in Islam* (Amsterdam 1974). “Her conception and expression of [divine love] is regarded as an important milestone in the development of Sufism.” Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 31.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted without reference in Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 58.

<sup>38</sup> Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Zuʾn-Nun (796-c. 861 CE) describes gnosis as “...knowledge of the attributes of the Unity, and this belongs to the saints, those who contemplate the Face of God within their hearts, so that God reveals Himself to them in a way in which He is not revealed to any others in the world.” Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 47.

<sup>41</sup> Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders*, 1.

<sup>42</sup> The Sufi brotherhoods trace their origins back to Muhammad himself. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 20. Some do so through the figure of Abu Bakr, the first caliph of Islam and one of the Prophet’s most devoted followers. The Shiite Sufis, however, trace their origin back to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 25. As an example of the claim to legitimacy the Naqshbandi, although they begin in 1140 CE (Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 95) provide a pedigree of authority (*silsilah*) stretching back to the Prophet.

<sup>43</sup> The paths “are in number as the souls of men”, which phrase is quoted without acknowledgment in Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 20.

through non-celibate monastic life or the hermit life, through poverty and reliance on God alone, through public self-humiliation<sup>44</sup> or through music and poetry<sup>45</sup> with its themes of profane love and through intoxication with wine, to which the dervishes added “number and symbol, colours and perfumes and incense...even alcohol and drugs.”<sup>46</sup>

The goal can be reached above all through the ritualistic repetition of a formula centering on recollection or *dhikr*, the recitation of the divine name,<sup>47</sup> which is given a solid basis on the *Qur’ānic* injunction: “Remember God with frequent remembrance and glorify Him morning and evening”.<sup>48</sup>

The *dhikr*<sup>49</sup> can be practised in two situations: solitary and collective. It was divided into three types: the recitation of the tongue, the recitation in the heart and the intimate recitation.<sup>50</sup> Ghazali describes the solitary recitation<sup>51</sup> in a way which suggests that the technique may depend on the recitation of the single word, the *monologistos*, of the desert fathers<sup>52</sup> and especially those of Mt Sinai.<sup>53</sup> The earliest evidence of recitation in a group, the collective recitation dates to the twelfth century CE<sup>54</sup> and most clearly reflects the influence of Indian practices via the Mongols, not only in the use of *japa*, recitation, but also in the use of postures taken from *haṭha-yoga*.<sup>55</sup> Did the private recitation also include breathing techniques and postures? It is hard to know since the private method was reserved to the initiate.<sup>56</sup>

Note the following Sufi text:

He must keep the tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, his lips and teeth firmly shut, and hold his breath. Then [he begins to recite the phrase *lā ilāha illā ‘llāh* which means: “There is no god but God”:] starting with the word *lā*, he makes it ascend from the navel to the brain. When it has arrived at the brain, he says *ilāha* to the right shoulder and *illā ‘llāh* to the left side, driving it forcefully into the pineal heart through which it circulates to all the rest of the body. The phrase *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh* is made to incline from the left to the right side and then one says, “My God, Thou art my goal and satisfying Thee is my aim”.<sup>57</sup>

Although this text dates from the seventeenth century and is quoted here for its succinctness, it corresponds to the methods practised at least since the twelfth century CE.<sup>58</sup>

A number of elements are to be noted: the physical disposition of the mouth; the holding of breath; the recitation of a sentence “There is no god but God”, which is recited in stages moving through the various centres of the body, from the navel to the brain, then in a sort of circular pattern down to the heart, from which the word penetrates to the rest of the body. Thus posture, breath, recitation, the various centres, and the heart are involved<sup>59</sup> but the word and the heart hold central place.<sup>60</sup> As a result the practitioner

<sup>57</sup> Tāj-ad-dīn ibn Zakariyā, *Risālat fi sunan at-Tā’ifat an-Naqshabandiyya*, Cambridge, Add. MS. 1073, pp. 4-5 quoted in Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders*, 202. Tāj-ad-dīn died in Mecca CE 1640.

<sup>58</sup> Gardet, “La mention du nom divin”, 658.

<sup>59</sup> “Dans le *dhikr*, du moins tel qu’il est pratiqué depuis le XIIe siècle, s’unissent étroitement les règles de l’émission de la voix et de la prononciation, celles concernant l’émission du souffle, et les poses ou attitudes corporelles”. [In *dhikr*, at least in the way it is practised in the XIIth century, the rules concerning voice production and pronunciation and the rules concerning the emission of breath and the postures or attitudes of the body are closely combined.] Gardet, “La mention du nom divin”, 659.

<sup>60</sup> Gouillard, *Petite Philocalie*, which contains a selection of texts from the *Philokalia*, includes, as an Appendix, 235-248, a Sufi technique on the Prayer of the Heart taken from *Tanwīr alqulūb* written by Sheik Muhammad Amin al-Kuridī al-Shāfi’i nal-Naqshabandi (d. CE 1914). 3rd edn (Cairo, no date given) 548-558. He includes this text because it compares with and indeed surpasses in detail the text of “The Method”. The Naqshbandi, as a brotherhood, is said to originate with Abu Ya’qub Yusuf al-Hamadani (d. 1140 CE) but one of his disciples, “Abdu’l-Khaliq bin ‘Abdu’l-Jamil from near Bukhara, was the true originator of the unique features of the order with its stress on purely mental *dhikr* and the restraint of the breath.” Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders*, 62-63. Although his writings were founded on the *Shari’a*, his eight principles of Sufi life and the rituals were deeply indebted to yogic practices current in the region of Bokhara. Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders*, 62 f. The Naqshbandi derive their name from Muhammad Bahā ud-Din Naqshband, born in 1317 near Bokhara. Marinette Bruno, *Les dits de Lalla et la quête mystique* (Paris 1999) 126.



knows God directly and experiences ecstasy. The Hesychast text and the Sufi text are clearly comparable.

### Part III: Contacts Between India and Sufism

Already in the eighth and ninth centuries CE wandering monks who were called Indian – although the precise meaning of this designation is not sure – were to be found in Mesopotamia and Syria.<sup>61</sup> In the ninth century CE Abu Yazid (d. 874 or 878 CE) promoted the control of breath in a way, which is Indian.<sup>62</sup> In the tenth and eleventh centuries CE Al-Bīrūnī (CE 973-1048)<sup>63</sup> made an Arabic translation of the *Yoga-Sūtras* of Patañjali,<sup>64</sup> which would indicate a level of interest and discussion in such matters. Indeed Al-Bīrūnī often notes the similarity of yoga with the teaching of the Sufis.<sup>65</sup> The matter is by no means settled. In the eleventh century CE the practitioners of *haṭha-yoga*, the Nath-yogins supposedly founded by Gorakhnath in north-east India, have penetrated into Central Asia and Iran and influence the Sufi brotherhoods.<sup>66</sup> By the twelfth century CE *dhikr* had come to involve “posture, control of breath, co-ordinated movements and oral repetition”.<sup>67</sup> In the thirteenth century CE the typically *haṭha-yogic* text *Amrita Kunda* was translated into Arabic.

### Between Sufis and Hesychasts

The weight of scholarly opinion is moving in the direction of Sufism as the bridge between India and the psychophysical influences seen in “The Method of Hesychast Prayer” but what is the bridge between Europe and Sufism? How did this occur on the Christian side?<sup>68</sup> Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that the textual record is unpublished or destroyed and also that the interaction was oral in the first instance.<sup>69</sup>

The seventh and eighth centuries CE allowed easy converse between Christians, Jews, and Muslims. It was only with the involvement of the state with religious questions, from the time of the Abassid caliphate, that these relations became strained.<sup>70</sup>

Despite, indeed because of the Crusades, the contacts between Europe and the Levant were constant and considerable. The pilgrimages, whether of Christians to the Holy Land or of Muslims to Mecca or of the wandering *sādhus* of India, meant a constant mixing of human beings. For example, Abu Madya, who was born in the twelfth century CE in Seville, adopted Sufism during his travels in North Africa and after his pilgrimage to Mecca spent time in Baghdad with Rifa’i, the founder of a Sufi order, and learned from him as also from Dervishes who had come from India, breathing and posture techniques, which he later communicated to his disciples in the Maghreb of North Africa.<sup>71</sup> The cities of Venice and Genoa grew rich in trade with the Middle-East and, indirectly, with South and East Asia. The homeland of Nicephorus and Barlaam, namely Sicily and Calabria, saw a remarkable cooperation between Christians and Muslims during the Norman overlordship and especially under Frederick II Hohenstaufen.<sup>72</sup> However, according to Gardet it is from the monastery of St Catherine in the Sinai Peninsula, that the method ultimately derives<sup>73</sup> and was eventually brought to Mt Athos by Gregory of Sinai.<sup>74</sup> Note that exchanges between the Christian East and Mt Sinai were very popular among the monks<sup>75</sup> despite the Muslim conquests. St Catherine’s location in the Muslim world and its freedom from the tutelage of Constantinople are thought to be of considerable importance so that in this respect it is the meeting point of East and West.<sup>76</sup> Mt Sinai, Crete, Sicily, Calabria, Mt Athos, Thessalonica, and Constantinople: the few traces we have of hesychasts practising the psychophysical techniques indicates the general lines of a movement, which will eventually be brilliantly defended by Gregory Palamas.

<sup>61</sup> Baier, *Yoga*, 29.

<sup>62</sup> Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 43-44.

<sup>63</sup> Baier, *Yoga*, 29.

<sup>64</sup> Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders*, 197 n. 5. Gardet, “La mention du nom divin”, 205 n. 2.

<sup>65</sup> However, writers such as Massignon have brought into doubt any connection between these traditions. Baier, *Yoga*, 30.

<sup>66</sup> Baier, *Yoga*, 31.

<sup>67</sup> Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders*, 199.

<sup>68</sup> Meyendorff is convinced that, given the multitude of contacts between Christians and Muslims at the time, there must have been mutual influence. Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas*, 47.

<sup>69</sup> Baier, *Yoga*, 70.

<sup>70</sup> Baier, *Yoga*, 34 n. 40.

<sup>71</sup> Baier, *Yoga*, 34.

<sup>72</sup> Sigrid Hunke, *Le soleil d’Allah brille sur l’Occident* (Paris 1963).

<sup>73</sup> Gardet, “La mention du nom divin”, 645 n. 4.

<sup>74</sup> Hausherr, “La méthode d’oraison hésychaste”, 132.

<sup>75</sup> Meyendorff, *Saint Grégoire Palamas*, 61-62.

<sup>76</sup> Baier, *Yoga*, 33. Ibid. n. 39, Baier acknowledges his debt on these suggestions to Prof. E. Chr. Suttner.

## In fine

The later history of Hesychasm shows an abandonment of the techniques of breathing and postures,<sup>77</sup> perhaps under the pressure of criticism from opponents such as Barlaam or from the Catholic West.<sup>78</sup> This contrasts with the increasing use of such techniques among the Sufi brotherhoods<sup>79</sup> to a point where the process is highly detailed.

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<sup>77</sup> Gardet, "La mention du nom divin", 200.

<sup>78</sup> Baier, *Yoga*, 52.

<sup>79</sup> Gardet, "La mention du nom divin", 200.