

The Yoga of Hesychasm

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I must begin with a few words of caution. This article is meant to cast light on a short mystical poem, “The Ladder of Divine Graces” by Theophanis the Monk. We know very little about Theophanis, not even when he lived. All we are sure of is that he was a monastic of the Christian East, one among the monks of Mounts Athos and Sinai, whose quest towards *hesychia* or stillness has given rise to their designation as the Hesychast Fathers. Here is where a first warning comes in. Nothing I shall be saying is going to make the slightest sense unless my reader understands at the outset that for Theophanis Christianity is a mystagogical path, a way toward what is. It is not a creed, it is not a rite, and it is not an ethic. Or rather, while it includes all these things on the surface, in its essence it is the means of our becoming Divine.

A second caveat has to do with the expectations one brings to these brief remarks. We need to be modest. Into these seventy-one lines of verse are distilled over a thousand years of spiritual teaching and ascetic discipline. The poem contains what amounts to an alchemical tincture, very concentrated and very potent, and my hope is simply to offer a taste of the resulting elixir. There is no question of providing an exhaustive interpretation of this tradition. I wish only to highlight a few salient ideas, while underscoring the poet’s own repeated stress on experience. *Experience teaches one*, he says, *not words*. Whatever else, the author means to prick the conscience of anyone who supposes that doctrine can stand alone without method, theory without practice. We need the effectual means of liberation supplied by a genuine yoga.

I have mentioned how little is known of this writer. This fact is a great blessing, of course. By providing the ready excuse of necessity, it permits us cheerfully to dispense with that whole apparatus of biographical and other horizontal detail that so often intrudes between a text and its interpreters. My only concession to the usual academic procedure is to admit that “The Ladder” can be found in the third volume of *The Philokalia*, a classic compilation of Christian mystical writings ranging from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries. Beyond that, I would ask that one think of “Theophanis” strictly as a symbol for the spiritual search, and of his poem as but a provocation for entering the Supreme Reality.

The Ladder of Divine Graces

which experience has made known to those inspired by God

The first step is that of purest prayer.
From this there comes a warmth of heart,
And then a strange, a holy energy,
Then tears wrung from the heart, God-given.

Then peace from thoughts of every kind.
From this arises purging of the intellect,
And next the vision of heavenly mysteries.
Unheard-of light is born from this ineffably,
And thence, beyond all telling, the heart's illumination.
Last comes—a step that has no limit
Though compassed in a single line—
Perfection that is endless.
The ladder's lowest step
Prescribes pure prayer alone.
But prayer has many forms:
My discourse would be long
Were I now to speak of them:
And, friend, know that always
Experience teaches one, not words.
A ladder rising wondrously to heaven's vault:
Ten steps that strangely vivify the soul.
Ten steps that herald the soul's life.
A saint inspired by God has said:
Do not deceive yourself with idle hopes
That in the world to come you will find life
If you have not tried to find it in this present world.
Ten steps: a wisdom born of God.
Ten steps: fruit of all the books.
Ten steps that point towards perfection.
Ten steps that lead one up to heaven.
Ten steps through which a man knows God.
The ladder may seem short indeed,
But if your heart can inwardly experience it
You will find a wealth the world cannot contain,
A god-like fountain flowing with unheard-of life.
This ten-graced ladder is the best of masters,
Clearly teaching each to know its stages.
If when you behold it
You think you stand securely on it,
Ask yourself on which step you stand,
So that we, the indolent, may also profit.
My friend, if you want to learn about all this,
Detach yourself from everything,
From what is senseless, from what seems intelligent.
Without detachment nothing can be learnt.
Experience alone can teach these things, not talk.
Even if these words once said
By one of God's elect strike harshly,
I repeat them to remind you:
He who has no foothold on this ladder,
Who does not ponder always on these things,
When he comes to die will know
Terrible fear, terrible dread,
Will be full of boundless panic.

My lines end on a note of terror.
Yet it is good that this is so:
Those who are hard of heart—myself the first—
Are led to repentance, led to a holy life,
Less by the lure of blessings promised
Than by fearful warnings that inspire dread.
“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”
You who have written this, hear, then, and take note:
Void of all these graces,
How have you dared to write such things?
How do you not shudder to expound them?
Have you not heard what Uzzah suffered
When he tried to stop God's ark from falling?
Do not think that I speak as one who teaches:
I speak as one whose words condemn himself,
Knowing the rewards awaiting those who strive,
Knowing my utter fruitlessness.

As my readers will have noticed, the text falls naturally into several distinct parts. First, there is a labeling of the ten steps of the ladder; second, an emphasis on the special importance of the initial step, purity in prayer; third, a listing of the ladder's benefits; fourth, a request for assistance from persons further advanced than the author; fifth, stern counsel for those who are just beginning, together with a justification for this severity; and sixth, the author's concluding self-reproach and effacement. An entire article could be written on any one of these headings. What I shall do here is to concentrate on the meaning of the ten steps themselves, adding then a few broader strokes concerning the rest of the poem.

First, though, just a word or two concerning the title. In a sense, the title of this poem says it all: *The Ladder of Divine Graces*. The man who seeks union with God must understand before he even begins his search that synergy or cooperation is the key to his movement, a cooperation between human effort and Divine mercy. A ladder must be climbed, and the climbing is accomplished one step at a time. The spiritual life demands real work, real movement, real discipline, which proceeds methodically and incrementally. It is dangerous, says Plato, to go too quickly from the many to the One, and the Hesychast tradition takes account of this fact in distrusting ecstasies and consolations not grounded in method. On the other hand, one must not forget that man's climbing is not only toward God; it is in and by God. Each of the rungs of the ladder is a gift or a grace, a real and efficacious presence of the Goal in the very midst of the way. True spirituality is not Pelagian, not a self-help technique. “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for *God is at work within you*” (Phil. 2:12-13).

The subtitle confirms this synergy. The authority of the poem's teaching is at once human and Divine. On one level it is a matter of embodied truth. What we are about to be told is no rarified speculation, concocted by some spiritual dreamer whose claims are untestable. It comes instead rooted in the concrete, the practical, the immediate, and it leads beyond mere credulity or acceptance to certainty. Notice that *experience* has made the ladder *known*. But at the same time, the knowledge is thanks to God, who has mercifully condescended *to those inspired* by Him. We should be grateful. Authentic wisdom is never man's alone, an accomplishment or achievement for which he can take credit. The *wisdom born of God* is to know that God knows Himself in us.

Turning now to the poem itself, one observes that each of the ten steps of the ladder can be distinguished by a single noun. The journey passes through the several stages of *prayer, heart, energy, tears, peace, purging, vision, light, illumination, and perfection*. But the nouns in each case are to be specified by adjectives. It is not just any prayer, but *purest* prayer that counts; not just any heart, but a *warm* one. So also we note that the energy is *holy*, the tears are *God-given*, the peace is mental, the purging is intellectual, the vision is mystical, the light is ineffable, the illumination is cardiac, and the perfection is *endless*.

“Theophanis” is careful to stress that the prayer of step one is of a most particular kind. Prayer may include but is more than a collection of petitions and praises, whether private or public, spoken or silent, personal or canonical. In its purest form, it is an imageless attention to the Divine presence, ontologically rather than discursively linked to its object, and often supported by the repetition of a short invocatory formula like the Jesus Prayer. Please note that the attention of this opening step is itself a highly advanced spiritual state, presupposing a background not even hinted at in the poem. Our exposition of the text obliges us to begin at a point far beyond what most of us may be ready for. Quintessential prayer is the bottom rung of a ladder that must first be set on a living sacramental foundation, and its scaling assumes a deliberate and extensive propaedeutic under the guidance of a spiritual father. The Christian mystical tradition knows very well that individual initiatives and exploits are always ruinous in the contemplative life. Hence the author’s deference, in the lines below, to his own elders and betters: to *a saint inspired by God* and to *one of God’s elect*.

Were a man granted the grace of this first step—were those of us writing and reading this article truly prepared to go further—it would soon be discovered that true prayer is a transformative power, which begins to work its magic within the tissues of the human body itself. This is noticed initially, the Hesychasts teach, in that central part of the body, the *heart*, where pure consciousness dwells, and the most common signal of change is a sensation of *warmth*. Warmth, like the heart, is no metaphor. Something really begins to happen in the breast. One could say that it happens in and to the four-chambered beating muscle if the concern is to stress, as one must, the material actuality of the process. But at the same time, the warmth comes as proof that our true heart was always more than its concealment in matter, more than just a physical pump. In either case, the ladder brings the whole man into play. The body is not left behind in our approach to full union, but is lifted up and drawn into its Divine prototype. Heaven is more, not less, solid than earth.

And then a strange, a holy energy. What was true at first for the central organ alone gradually makes itself felt throughout the entire human organism. A centrifugal radiation of power begins now to course outward through the various envelopes of the self. *Energy* is a technical term in this context. Western philosophy is accustomed to a distinction between form and matter. Energy is the third that connects these two, the living and interior pulse through which essence communicates itself as substance. If we picture what a thing is as a center and how it appears as a sphere, then the radii are an image of its energy. God too has His own kind of energy, the effective and salvific presence of the Transcendent in the domain of the immanent. “Theophanis” is certainly no pantheist: the Divine Essence remains like an asymptote forever beyond our aspiration as creatures. Nevertheless we may participate fully in the Divine Substance and come to share in God’s powers through an assimilation of His *holy* energies. The nexus of this exchange is man’s heart, an exchange which begins when our own center moves toward coincidence with the center of God.

Tears, the fourth step, are a mark of this concentric shift. Not just any tears, however: only those that are *God-given*. It is very important that we not confuse the “gift of tears”, as it is sometimes called, with ordinary sorrow or grief. Climbing the ladder means mastering the passions, including the self-pity, resentment, and anger which sometimes express themselves in crying. We are to become objective toward our ego, no longer controlled by its sentimental involvement in the shifting play of the world. *Detach yourself from everything*, says “Theophanis”. For *without detachment nothing can be learnt*. The tears of the ladder are not tears of selfish regret or refusal. On the contrary, they are the natural result of the ego’s liquefaction. As the radiant energy of God carries the heart’s warmth forward through the rest of our organism, the many layers of ice begin melting. We become the warm, soft water of our tears. The warmth is our fervor and longing for God; the softness is our yielding to the Divine influx; the water is the power of our new-found passivity.

The next pair of steps may be usefully treated as one, for they are two sides of a single coin: *peace from thoughts* and *purging of the intellect*. Notice that the peace is from thoughts of every kind. This is no power of positive thinking, which would simply replace bad or debilitating conceptions with good ones. The Hesychast follows a path leading beyond conception as such. By *thoughts* he means any product of discursive mentation, any recording of the impressions of sense and any abstraction therefrom or combination thereof. He knows that our waking life is dominated by the mental chatter that comes from the jostling and sorting of these impressions, images, ideas, and feelings, and that our so-called waking is therefore truly a dreaming. We are never simply now in the present, so fully occupied is our mind by the memory of what was and the *idle hopes* of what will be.

Against all of this must be placed an altogether different quality of attention, superintended by what the Christian East calls the *nous* or *intellect*. Unlike discursive thinking, which proceeds sequentially with the information it has gleaned from the surface of things, the intellective or noetic faculty goes straight to their core, contemplating the inner *logoi* or essences of creatures by direct apprehension. Present in all of us but dormant in most, the intellect is first awakened and set into motion by the efforts of prayer and ascetic discipline. Once purged of the encrusting dross which surrounds it, the noetic faculty becomes in turn a purging or purifying force of its own. Cutting through the veils of forgetfulness and piercing to the world’s very marrow, it there discovers by recollection its own inward content. “For, behold, the kingdom of God is *within you*” (Luke 17:21).

“Theophanis” has incorporated within his own ten-fold sequence a more common and better known distinction among three basic stages in the spiritual life: purification, illumination, and union. The first of these has been the subject of the poem to this point, beginning with *purest* prayer in step one and culminating with the *purging* of the intellect in step six. His aim has been to describe the indispensable initial work of repentance, a negative movement away from illusion and death. Now we begin glimpsing the positive results of that work, for the next three steps are all concerned in some way with vision and light, and thus with the second fundamental stage of illumination. There is a *vision of heavenly mysteries*, next the perception of *unheard-of light*, and then the *illumination* of the heart itself.

Now please understand, the *mysteries* which “Theophanis” has in view are not secret facts or formulas, nor is the fruit of his path a knowledge of celestial statistics. If one were foolish enough to be interested in dating the end of the world or in the names and properties of discarnate masters or in how many lives one might have lived before now—or in any of the other bits and pieces of occult information so often dangled before the curious and restless

seekers of our day—one would have to go elsewhere. “Theophanis” has counseled detachment not only from *what is senseless* but from *what seems intelligent*, and this latter category doubtless includes much of what passes for spirituality in this so-called new age. He knows that a true mystery by definition exceeds the form of data, no matter how peculiar or enticing those data might be. The inner is always inner even in the midst of our seeing it. Etymology is important here: the term *mystery* comes from the Greek verb *muo*, which refers to a closing or shutting of the eyes and mouth. The *vision* of mysteries remains therefore a vision of *mysteries*, of realities which continue to elude even the innermost modalities of sensation and which cannot be adequately conveyed by any language. I might add that the Eastern Christian tradition regularly uses the term *mysteries* to refer to its sacraments, especially the Eucharist. We are thus reminded that the spiritual ladder must be firmly positioned on a living faith before we even consider ascending it.

Whatever it is that one noetically envisions, the Hesychasts are unanimous about its being bathed in an extraordinary *light*. Indeed, the doctrine of the uncreated light is characteristic of their teaching. Once again we are using more than a metaphor. It is said that the light in question is objectively real, its model being the light of Christ’s transfiguration on Mount Tabor, when “His face *shone as the sun*, and his raiment was *white as the light*” (Matt. 17:2). Being born from one’s vision *ineffably*, this dazzling darkness eclipses all description. And yet it is truly present, suffusing creation with the radiance of God, a sort of visible band in the spectrum of His *holy energy*. Intimately tied to our transformed perception of this light all about us, says our poet, there will come next a corresponding and complementary *illumination* within. *Beyond all telling*, this ninth step of the ladder admits man to a degree of Divine participation where he himself begins to shine with Christ’s glory. True to the maxim that like can be known only by like, the Hesychast strives by grace toward the moment when the body, now thoroughly steeped in God, bears witness in its own substance to the realities it has seen. The iconographical tradition of the halo or nimbus is no pious extravagance. Had we the eyes to see, we would realize that the true saint shines like the heaven he is.

And yet heaven is not enough. Heaven is a prison for the Sufi, say the mystics of Islam, for who wants the garden when there is also the Gardener? “Theophanis” agrees. There is more than illumination in the spiritual journey. We are not to rest satisfied with a contemplation of the splendor of God, nor with an appreciative spectator’s place in the Divine proximity, however joyful and permanent. A tenth step remains: a coinherence or union with the Supreme Reality itself. For as the Hesychast sees it, the only truly *endless* perfection is the *perfection* of what is intrinsically endless or infinite, namely, God. It is therefore into this Infinite that human nature will eventually be drawn at the very top of the ladder. Like God Himself, the top rung has *no limit*, even though its description may be *compassed in a single line*. The end of the way is in fact the beginning of an immeasurable advance into the Love that loves Love and in Love all things. Those of my readers who are familiar with Eastern Christian theology will recognize this as the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* or deification, classically summed up in the Patristic formula “God became man that man might become God”. Salvation is not just the restoration of an Edenic *status quo*. It is an unprecedented and *unheard-of life*, no longer restricted by the qualities and conditions of created existence in *this present world*. A reversion has taken place along the path of creation, a voluntary return of what we are into God. Two distinct circles remain, the human and the Divine, but their center is now the same.

I turn now as promised to a few, even briefer, comments on the remaining parts of the poem. The most important question the reader should be asking himself at this juncture is why there

is a remainder at all. After scaling the summit of deification, the succeeding lines may seem tedious and anticlimactic. What is the author's point? Why not stop, as he easily might have, with the highly charged first half of his efforts? Why all the imploration, admonition, and self-reproach of his conclusion?

To answer these questions, we need to consider a common feature of all Hesychast writing, common in fact to the Christian East as a whole, and that is its preference for the mystical way of negation. It is sometimes said that there are two distinct spiritual paths: the cataphatic way or way of affirmation and the apophatic way or way of negation. In the former, which is somewhat more typical of western theology, one approaches God by affirming His goodness in good things, His beauty in things that are beautiful, and His truth in all truths. God is the highest or greatest of beings, to whom creatures point through their positive qualities. In the negative way, by contrast, one approaches God by prescinding from all qualities or attributes, by denying that the Supreme Reality has anything whatsoever in common with this world. God is not created or finite, of course. Every theologian knows that. But neither is He even good with the goodness we know, nor wise in terms of earthly wisdom, nor indeed does He even exist by our measures. He is not the highest or greatest of beings, but superessentially beyond even being itself.

We have seen evidence of this apophaticism in the first part of "The Ladder". The vision is a vision of *mysteries*, the Divine light is *unheard-of*, and the heart's illumination is *beyond all telling*. In short, *experience alone can teach these things, not talk*. All language is reduced to stammering and silence when confronted by the experience of God. But the same thing is true of all our experiences. Which words are really sufficient for a rose or a friendship? Perception on every level of being is always more than the concepts describing it.

"Theophanis" is therefore obliged to go further, extending the range of negation and deepening its intensity. *Do not deceive yourself*, he continues. The full force of his imperative will not be felt unless we have first admitted that our entire waking life is a web of delusion and vanity. Recall what I said earlier on the subject of *thoughts*. Try to attend to one thing alone, and we soon discover that our days are but daydreams. Whatever contact we may hope to have with absolute Truth will come only at the expense of all those *idle hopes* aroused by our present, passion-laden experience. This does not mean that we should despair of making any progress toward God, believing ourselves condemned to a sort of total depravity. The apophatic path is still a path, and the poet is quick in counseling us to make every effort to find the Truth *in this present world*. It should be understood, however, that this last phrase is adverbial, not adjectival; it modifies man's endeavors toward finding, not the Truth found. For the Supreme Reality is beyond even more than our personal experience. It transcends the entire cosmic order. What we shall *find* when we find it is *a wealth the world cannot contain*. The author means what he says: if you wish to enter God, you must *detach yourself from everything*.

Understanding this stress on negation should help considerably when it comes to making sense of the concluding parts of "The Ladder". The poet's vivid expressions of unworthiness may at first seem excessive. We are told that "Theophanis" is *indolent, hard of heart*, and *void of all these graces*; that he is presumptuous in having *dared* to write on so sublime a subject and is therefore deserving of the fate of the Biblical *Uzzah*, who was killed for touching the *ark* of God (2 Sam. 6:6-7); and finally that he is worthy only of words that *condemn himself*, an example of *utter fruitlessness*. Surely, one feels, this very eloquent monk cannot have been quite such a villain! And then, making matters perhaps even more

indigestible, there are the threats of *boundless panic*. A *note of terror* is sounded by the author's *fearful warnings*, which he deliberately intends to *strike us harshly* and to *inspire our dread*. What is going on here? Is this pious sentimentality? Is the author following some ancient stylistic precedent? Is he just trying to scare us?

Our answer in each case must be no. One must admit that the poem could be read this way and that it is easy to be put off by its seeming platitudes and fire-and-brimstone exhortations. Such a reading, however, would be quite mistaken. A man who understands so precisely the *pure science of prayer*, who is subtle enough to distinguish between *illumination* and *light*, and who from his own wrestling with *thoughts* can speak so powerfully about the limits of language is surely aware of what we ourselves can see so clearly. We all know from our own not-so-subtle experience that *terror* and *panic* are emotions belonging to the hardened, not the liquefied, *heart*. They are measures of the ego's continuing eccentricity in relation to God, the result of its congenital complicity in a world that will finally disappoint every one of us. In Hesychast terms, such passions are simply more *thoughts*, more psychic chatter. "Theophanis" cannot possibly be construed as encouraging them. Nor can he have failed to see that insofar as someone recognizes his *fruitlessness*, he cannot be *utterly* fruitless. The poet is well aware that the ego has a way of feeding even on abjection and self-condemnation, of being proud of its sin. When he refers to himself as *the first* among those *who are hard of heart*, it would therefore be absurd to imagine that he expects us to think we are his rightful superiors.

Only the negative way can make sense of these puzzling expressions; both the self-reproaches and the warnings require transposing into an apophatic key. It is helpful to recall the anonymity of the poet. The compilers of *The Philokalia* have recorded a name, or at least a pen name, but that is all. In reading the "Ladder", we are not listening to a particular individual whose biography might be used in checking the accuracy of his judgments. We are listening to a voice which the accidents of history have now rendered impersonal, according perhaps to its own design: the voice, as I proposed earlier, of the spiritual search itself, the inward cry of every man's longing for God. I suggested that the author's name should be seen as a symbol, and I can now be more precise about that symbol's significance. "Theophanis the Monk" is not such and such an ego. He is the ego as such—the principle of limitation, individuation, and self-forgetfulness in each of us.

With this in mind, his estimate of himself becomes perfectly intelligible. He is indeed *void of all graces*, not just in fact but in principle. For measured against the Supreme Reality at the top of the ladder, the ego is even less than unworthy; it is a virtual void, a centrifugal tendency toward the "outer darkness" (Matt. 8:12) of destruction and the root of blind and *fruitless* craving, and its mortification is essential to our seeing that God is the only true center. Competition with the Divine is never more than illusion.

The promises of *terror* and the *fearful warnings* can be interpreted along similar lines. I have singled out the words *terror* and *panic* as signs of a purely emotional and ego-centric attachment. But suppose we read them instead in conjunction with two of the poem's other terms: *fear* and *dread*. Fear is often just a passion itself, of course, a feeling of malaise, consternation, or anxiety, and as such it too must be excluded from the soul of the man who is seeking *peace from thoughts*. But in an older and deeper sense, *fear* signifies awe. Rather than a subjective and blood-freezing fright, it points us toward an objective and liberating wonder. No mere reactive emotion, this kind of fear is a real organ for perception and participation in God. Let us not expunge the common sense meaning of the poet's words.

Doubtless there will come a day of sheer panic for those who in this life did *not ponder always on these things* and did not by a serious spiritual effort grow accustomed to the daily death of desire. But for those who did, the holy *fear* of awe will be among the *blessings promised*. Far from something they might wish to escape, the exquisite joy of *dread* will be offered as one of the rewards of their way, a delicious *fruit of all the books*.

The true seeker knows from repeated *experience* that the negation of a negation is something wondrously positive. “Theophanis” is not trying to frighten us or force our submission to a sectarian ideology. On the contrary, with a precise and carefully selected dialectical language, he is simply describing what makes it possible to climb the ladder: the negations are nothing but the spaces between the rungs. And he is showing us, from the point of view of the ego he “is”, what must inevitably happen as one moves through these spaces: how the many layers of ambition and cowardice and resentment and greed and smugness and torpor are each in turn stripped away and the naked soul is ushered, beyond all possibility, into the *heart* of the living God.

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