THE READING OF RELIGIOUS TEXTS AS MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract. I examine mystical experience through the history of European religious thought, its modern state, and different spiritual practices of the Patristic epoch. The survey gives some definitions: mystical experience is situated in the field of spirituality along with practices of its acquisition – ascetics; and the fruits of it – theology and doctrine. The second part of the article is devoted to a wide field of Christian texts as a representative example of the same experience of the crystallization of mystical experience in ancient tradition, providing a few general types. Reading of religious texts is related very closely with the spiritual condition of the reader and supposes that he/she changes radically in the process of reading, being involved in some *existential-hermeneutic circle*.

The words 'mystics', 'mysticism', and 'mystical experience' point to the sphere of religion and to the religious life. In religious life, man enters a world that has not been given to him directly, that does not belong to him, and that is not submitted to the laws of his own existence. Here, the borders of possible experience are expanded, allowing for the possibility of experiences that are inscrutable, inexpressible, transcendent, and radically different from non-religious experiences, in the context of which the scope of religious experience is unknown. At the same time, like any other kind of experience, generations of thinkers have reflected on religious or mystical experience, and gradually these reflections have crystallized into certain set modes of expression. These modes of expression, I will add, are quite distant from the original experiences, only approximately conveying their reality, which cannot be fixed in words. These expressions provide only hints of the original experiences, in unsteady conventional terms, giving their probable contours. However,

such language provides normal ways to enter into the space of the mystical, and it is worthwhile tracking some of these ways.

I will first outline a problem that has arisen around the category of mystical experience, by considering some of the historical destinies of the mystical in European culture. The circumstances in which the mystical appeared in European thought provide us with sufficient material to make some substantial generalizations about the mystical, and so these events can help us in a search for the meaning of, and for regular patterns in, the mystical within religion. Next, I will turn to some examples of the *crystallization* of mystical experience in expressions made by different bearers of religious culture, which present certain regularities in mysticism. My main case study here will be different practices of reading texts in ancient Christianity, which have not lost their relevance even today.

HISTORY OF THE NOTION OF 'MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE'

The category of 'mystical experience' was strongly attacked during the Age of Reason. The philosophers of the European enlightenment banished the mystical to the metaphysical cellars as an irrational phenomenon that had no place in the clear and bright space of reason. Special 'merit' in this banishment belongs to J.-J. Rousseau, though already Jean Bodin in the sixteenth century had excluded the mystical in his defence of natural religion.

However, the foundation for mysticism's banishment from the religious world was laid in the Middle Ages. Its initiators were the carriers of mystical experience themselves, whose aim was to isolate mystical experience from the encroachments of rationality and dogmatization. The first signs of this separation are visible already in Bernard of Clairvaux. Medieval mystics drew on the Fathers of the Church, presenting themselves as the successors of the ancient Christians in their experiences, more than they drew on contemporary scholastic theology, which more and more moved away from its contemplative roots to become an independent, abstract form of discourse in the schools. This difference of expression led to an intense opposition between mysticism, and theology and its crystallized form in doctrine. By the beginning of the fifteenth century in the Christian West, mysticism and theology or doctrine were definitively separated. This separation is expressed especially in Jean Gerson's methodological rules in his treatise *On Mystical Theology* (*De*

mystica theologia, 1402–1408). This separation explains the well-known autonomy of medieval mystical experiences from official Church doctrine, popular piety, and high theology. Accordingly, there are strong reasons to speak not so much about a banishment of mysticism, as about a voluntary 'emigration' of mysticism from theological discourse, which took place in the Middle Ages, and a willing consent to such a situation from the theological schools.

However, it was always felt that there was a need for a rehabilitation of, and a return of positive value to, the category of mystical experience. After all, without the mystical, religion is devastated, and doctrine and theological reflection lose their reliability. Endeavours to elevate the status of the mystical were undertaken in different epochs. One endeavour of great importance in this respect belongs to Friedrich Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century, with more attempts to reconsider the status of the mystical being made in the twentieth century. There are strong reasons to discuss here philosophical and theological attempts to rehabilitate the category of mystical experience. We will consider them in more detail before passing to the main material of this paper.

a. Philosophical Rehabilitation

In 1932, Henri Bergson's book *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* appeared. This was his last major work, and it contained reflections about the nature of religion, and of religious feeling inherent in religion, by which the author mainly understood mystical experience. Bergson presents two opposed types of religion – static and dynamic (and, parallel to this distinction, closed and open religion, and closed and open morality). Behind this dichotomy, the opposition between doctrine and mysticism in their dialectic contradiction is easily seen. Earlier, around the time of the publication of *Creative Evolution* in 1907, Bergson arrived at the idea that 'life is a great mystery' (*la vie est grand mystère*). He attempted to enter into this mystery through, among other methods, a reading of the medieval mystics and a long-term addiction to Pascal, which created in him an understanding that a mystical state is a superhuman state, a state that a person seeks through a great tension in his vital forces. Mysticism is the upper limit of the *élan vital*. Bergson describes this extraordinary state expressively: '[the soul] ... does not perceive directly its driving force, but she feels its incomprehensible presence or guesses it through symbolical vision. Then a huge pleasure, an ecstasy into which she plunges, or a delight which she feels comes: God is present in her and

she in Him. Mysteries are not present any more. Problems disappear, the gloom dissipates: this is inspiration.'[1] We can find similar lines in ancient texts of Christian ascetics and mystics speaking about the experiences of divine ecstasy, or of deification. It is necessary to specify that Bergson, as a radical supporter of dynamic religion, who did not accept Christianity, reflects in this case on Christian religiousness. He comes to the following formula: 'Christian religiousness is the content of mysticism, the form of the true religiousness of mankind.'[2]

However, the question of mysticism is understood in distinct ways by Bergson and by Christian authors.[3] If we consider Christian religiousness as the whole, and doctrine and mysticism as its parts, Bergson characterizes them as follows: doctrine is a static religion, mysticism is dynamic. For Bergson, theology or doctrine is the crystallization of mystical experience, though sometimes he calls this crystallization 'metaphysics',[4] or 'religion in a general sense', which he defines as follows: ' ... we imagine religion to be formed by a process of scientific cooling and crystallization of the substance that mysticism, flaring, poured into the soul of mankind.'[5] Therefore, religion as such is for Bergson deprived of value, and finds meaning only by being enriched through the depths of mystical experience. Bergson, it seems, cannot find a balance between the two types of religion, and it is not possible for him to carry out a productive synthesis between doctrine and mysticism. He remains on the side of the latter. Crystallization of mystical experience in theology seems to him a loss, not a gain. Nevertheless, at the level of philosophical reflection, Bergson manages to rehabilitate the category of mysticism and mystical experience, the centre of religiousness.

b. Theological Rehabilitation

The literary and theological genre of mystical theology developed in Christian antiquity within the corpus of Dionysius the Areopagite (fifth to sixth centuries) and grew considerably in the medieval

[1] Henri Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Moscow: Canon, 1994), p. 248 (in Russian, my translation).

[2] Cf. Xavier Tilliette, *Le Christ des philosophes: Du Maître de sagesse au divin Témoin* (Namur: Culture et Vérité, 1993), p. 353.

[3] Cf. Georges Marnellos, *La connaissance mystique d'après H. Bergson à la lumière de la théologie mystique de l'Eglise Orthodoxe* (Agios Nikolaos: Centre d'études de la Culture Orthodoxe, 1994).

[4] Cf. Henri Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, p. 245.

[5] Ibid., p. 256.

theological heritage. Then, for many centuries, this genre did not find any expression, but there was a return to it in the twentieth century. A systematic statement of the mystical theology of the Eastern Church was undertaken during the years of World War II by V. N. Lossky (1944). This developed theological treatise originally consisted of a number of reports which Lossky prepared for meetings with Catholic theologians and philosophers (1941–1942). The most valuable contribution of this theological masterpiece and, actually, its main goal, was noted by Rowan Williams: 'It attempts to outline a complete ethos of theology and spirituality which is shared by the vast majority of theologians from the first to the twentieth century ... this tradition of life where Church service and spirituality cannot for a moment be separated from theology.'[6] Lossky expresses a synthesis of theology and mysticism extraordinary clearly and distinctly. Reflecting on the tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy, he writes: ' ... there is no Christian mysticism without theology and, what is more essential, there is no theology without mysticism ... Theology and mysticism are not at all opposed; on the contrary, they mutually support and supplement each other.'[7] Lossky defines mystical experience as 'personal manifestation of a general belief', and theology as 'identification of that general belief that can be shared by everyone,'[8] and as personal participation in what is common.

A union between mysticism and theology, experience and reflection, seemed undesirable to the medieval mystics who held mysticism to be superior to theology, false to the philosophers of the Enlightenment, and impossible to Bergson. But this union takes centre stage in Christian, or, more precisely, Orthodox, spirituality in Lossky's work. This union, which is characteristic of the whole Orthodox tradition, has and continues to make Orthodoxy attractive to representatives of other confessions. For example, as already mentioned, Rowan Williams, the retired Archbishop of Canterbury, saw Lossky as a living sign of a continuous unity of tradition in which mysticism and doctrine, experience and its generalization, are inseparable. Moreover, Williams speaks about the results of Lossky's work, which surpasses the initial expectations of many readers: 'For many western theologians Lossky's reading brought the

[6] Rowan Williams, *Theology of V. N. Lossky: Exposition and Critics* (Kiev: Duh i Litera, 2009), p. 33 (in Russian, my translation).

[7] V. N. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Sergiev Possad: Trinity Laura of St Sergius, 2013), pp. 11, 12 (in Russian, my translation).

[8] Ibid., p. 11.

deepest understanding of theology; thanks to it, the study of patristics ceased to have a purely academic character and it was connected with a complete notion of self-knowledge and a spiritual apprenticeship ... a complete vision of human existence.'[9] Thus, the Orthodox organic combination and close interaction of mysticism and theology reveals the nature of Orthodox spirituality or religiousness. This nature had not always been clear for adherents of the Orthodox tradition, and therefore was not always apprehended.

We are obliged to Bergson for restoring mystical experience in its own right, and to Lossky for restoring the equality of mysticism and theology. Now we shall consider some continental Catholic historians and theologians who have examined the structural or disciplinary context of the category of mystical experience by introducing the additional concepts of 'spirituality' and 'asceticism'.

c. Spirituality, Mysticism, and Asceticism

In the thirties, which seem to have been a most fruitful time for new theological ideas and concepts, intensive research into the category of the mystical was conducted at Continental schools, especially in France and in Germany. This research was guided by considerations of the idea of the conflict between mysticism and doctrine or theology described by Bergson, and by the idea of the union between mysticism and theology in the ancient theological heritage of Christianity described by Lossky. The category of mystical experience came to be founded on the broader concept of 'spirituality' (*spiritualité*, *Spiritualität*), which includes both the experience of the sacred (mysticism) and practices of receiving the sacred (asceticism). In other words, spirituality consists of ascetic and mystic theology, and with that feeds and fills dogmatic theology.

Louis Bouyer in his three-volume *History of Christian Spirituality*, which traces that topic from the New Testament up to modern times (1960), offers such a view: 'Christian spirituality ... differs from doctrine insofar as instead of studying the direct description of subjects of belief, it studies their impacts on religious consciousness ... The doctrine (théologie dogmatique) always assumes the precedence of spiritual theology (théologie spirituelle).[10] As was already noted above, these two areas of Christian religiousness have existed in tension since the Middle

[9] Rowan Williams, *Theology of V. N. Lossky*, p. 5.

[10] Louis Bouyer, *La spiritualité du Nouveau Testament et des Pères: Histoire de la spiritualité chrétienne, T. 1 avec la collaboration de L. Cognet et J. Leclercq* (Paris: Aubier,

Ages. Western historians and theologians of the mid-twentieth century, seeking to overcome the separation of mystical and dogmatic theology, turned for pure models of an organic synthesis between these kinds of theology to the millennium of the Church Fathers. Marcel Viller (1930) and L. Bouyer (1960) offered a wide review of patristic synthesis in French. In German, a similar review was undertaken by Karl Rahner, who is better known for his contributions to systematic theology than for his contributions to the history of theology. Rahner published *Aszese und Mystik in der Väterzeit*[11] in 1939 as a German version of M. Viller's *Spirituality in the First Centuries of Christianity*.[12]

In the French-German continental academic tradition, the category of mystical experience, as defined through the category of spirituality, was rehabilitated on the basis of laborious research into the ancient patristic heritage. Researchers argued that the spiritual aspect of religiousness is implemented in two ways: in pure mystical experience and in receptive practices – that is, in mysticism and asceticism. This direction of research was further developed and realized in the form of a fundamental research project: seventeen volumes of *The Dictionary of Ascetic and Mystical Spirituality: Doctrine and History* (1937–1995).[13] The basic concept, which had already been formulated in previous studies, is reflected in the title of the dictionary: the concept of Christian spirituality comprises two indispensable elements, asceticism and mysticism, which are involved with one another and cause one another. Mystical experience is achievable through ascetic means. The fruit of the crystallization of mystical experience-doctrine-must be supported and renewed by familiarity with mystical experience through ascetic practices. Thus, we arrive at a peculiar existential hermeneutic circle-from mysticism through asceticism to doctrine, and from doctrine through asceticism to mysticism. The mutual relations between mystery in mystical experience and its crystallization in theology are mediated and partly caused by ascetic practices.

1960), pp. 10–11; Cf. Louis Bouyer, *Introduction à la vie spirituelle. Précis de théologie ascétique et mystique* (Paris: Desclée, 1960).

[11] Karl Rahner, 'Spiritualität und Theologie der Kirchenväter', *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 3 (Benziger: Herder, 1999).

[12] Marcel Viller, *La spiritualité des premiers siècles chrétiens* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1930).

[13] *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique: doctrine et histoire*, fondé par M. Viller, F. Cavallera, J. de Guibert; continué par Charles Baumgartner, M. Olphe-Galliard, A. Rayez, A. Derville, P. Lamarche, A. Solignac. T. 1–17 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1937–1995).

Now we can proceed to consider one such practice. The choice to consider this practice is caused by the specifics of Christian religiousness in its textually expressed character. I shall consider the book as a cultural and religious phenomenon and the ways of reading texts as a spiritual practice in ancient Christianity. An examination of this practice confirms our general view on mystical experience and its crystallization in theology.

PHILOSOPHY OF BOOKS

Paul Claudel compared the cultural phenomenon of books to an architectural construction of the Renaissance era, during a public lecture entitled 'Philosophy of the Book'[14] in 1925 at a ceremonial opening of the international book fair in Florence. Claudel presents this philosophy through a thoughtful contemplation of the physiology of books as containing 'images of the Past, testimonies of the Present, and impulses of the Future'.[15] Books contain uncountable possible worlds through which readers may travel. Not incidentally, the most outstanding works of world literature follow the logic of spiritual travel, that entry into the mysterious space of an unknown world that is called a mystical experience. Books can represent in themselves a certain spiritual topography which can be filled with reality. Their content is life in this space, a journey in the inner world.

These features of books give a religious significance to the practice of reading. During different eras, and in different intellectual and spiritual traditions, great responsibility was attached to the practice of reading. Pierre Hadot has closely analyzed these practices at the Hellenistic philosophical schools.[16] Hadot has shown that most known texts of late Antiquity were constructed through the principles of satisfying the intellectual and spiritual needs for spiritual change and moral perfection. Reading appears as a major spiritual exercise, as a spiritual feat, as a breakthrough to the transcendent. Very close to these Hellenistic practices were the practices of reading in ancient Christianity, which were a mystagogy, an initiation into the mysteries of the Divine world.

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[14] Cf. Paul Claudel, *La philosophie du livre*, Œuvres en prose (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 68–81.

[15] Ibid., p. 72.

[16] Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Moscow and Saint-Petersburg: Stepnoy Veter, 2005) (in Russian).

PRACTICES OF READING

Bergson called a peculiar crystallization of various experiences of penetration into mystical space a 'dogmatization of dynamic religiousness'. The spiritual bookish character of the Christian tradition represents a striking example of this crystallization. The aspects of religiousness revealed in the previous section – mysticism (experience), asceticism (practice), theology (the process of the crystallization of experience), and doctrine (the results of the crystallization of experience) – are pertinent here. The book itself appears as a crystallization, reading as an ascetic practice, the contents and the goal of reading as mystical experience. Here, I must introduce some additional classification of types of reading depending on internal factors and characters of spiritual texts.

For convenience of exposition, rather than considering the vast number of kinds of reading in the book culture of Christian antiquity, I will consider only the main types of reading. I focus not so much on the texts themselves, which have various degree of authoritativeness – from being inspired by God, to being mere aids to the religious life – but I rather focus on the many practices of reading texts. Multiple practices of reading can often be applied to one text, showing the essentially polysemantic character of Christian hermeneutics of religious texts.

In the cumulative written heritage of ancient Christianity we can distinguish the following practices of reading based on the character and contents of the texts being read: narrative (for example, texts of the Scripture of the New Testament), orative or prayerful in the broadest sense (for example, texts of Church services and of communal and private prayers), instructive (for example, ascetic, didactic, and broadly theological texts), and, finally, figurative practices applied to texts the content of which was difficult to interpret, due to its use of figures of theological language.

a. Narrative Reading

The ecclesial liturgical tradition followed unchanging, ancient rules for reading some narrative texts in an annual cycle of liturgical life during daily sacramental services. For example, during Holy Week, a cycle of evangelical texts, the so-called 'Twelve Gospels', is read. In this order of readings, believers share each year in the depths of the expiatory feat of Christ the Redeemer, and in his sufferings for the human race. Again and again, the unprecedented tragedy of the betrayal of Christ to death is endured. The history of Christian mysticism includes a vast

experience of spiritual compassion with Christ the Redeemer. (This experience blossomed with particular intensity in the Middle Ages, especially with the western Christian mystics, and also during the era of the Reformation. Here extremely interesting practices were formed, such as 'imitating the sufferings of the Lord' and 'imitation of Christ', which have been intensely studied by medievalists.)

Considerable parts of the books of the New Testament have a narrative character and assume a mainly narrative practice of reading. They form the religious worldview of Christianity. They do not demand special practices of figurative interpretation, though they do not exclude the possibility of applying the full exegetical arsenal of the Christian tradition. Narrative reading demands complete involvement from the reader in the reading process; in the practice of reading in this case, one must enter into the narration experience and into its communication of events.

b. Orative Reading

Orative, or prayerful texts in a broad sense, are completely intended for regular reading and for prayerful practice. Such practices are a complex spiritual-corporal experience, and the element of the text itself is just one element of the experience among others, including gesture, singing, image, and liturgical movement. Such experiences can be seen, for example, in the special ascetic practices of Orthodox hesychasm. The most ancient classification of four kinds of prayer offered by Origen in the third century[17] – glorification, gratitude, confession of sins, and petition – is useful for understanding this mode of reading. Orative reading assumes the full involvement of the believer in the existential hermeneutic circle of mystical experience, which is found through the effort exerted in reading the crystallized elements of prayerful formulas and texts.

c. Instructive Reading

Instructive reading deals with a wide range of theological texts, pastoral messages, Church sermons, monastic rules, spiritual manuals, and many other kinds of texts. The method of reading or listening to such texts has to be simple and obvious, involving grasping doctrine and applying it in one's spiritual experience. Mnemonic devices are of central importance here. These texts should be organized so as to be quite

[17] Origenes, *De oratione*, §14

clearly perceived and remembered. They are the best examples of the experience of a religious community crystallized in standard doctrines and instructions given in didactic form. However, they demand from the recipient the most conscious participation, not only at an intellectual level, but involving the human being as a whole, taking into account all of his spiritual experience.

An excellent example of this is the *Scala Paradisi* of St. John Climacus. The literary form of this major ascetic treatise clearly serves the obvious purpose of bringing a reader or listener to a condition of being able to have a high degree of proximity to God. The author makes numerous remarks in his text that make his intentions and plan clear. The reader must pass from a renunciation of sin to an acquisition of virtue, and, ideally, this journey is made through the reading process. Accordingly, in the 27th chapter, St John writes: 'On the meagre reason given to me as an unskilful architect, I built a ladder for ascension. Everyone must consider for himself on which rung he is standing.'[18] The end of this ascension is love, to which in the *Scala*'s final chapter an enthusiastic anthem is sung. One comes to the end of the treatise by finding the highest virtue.

d. Figurative Reading

Under the figurative type of reading, I include both some of the Bible and apocryphal texts, in which ascetic or mystical experiences are reflected in a literary form. The word 'figurative' indicates the formation of the text from certain figures of speech. This kind of reading in particular requires certain special techniques. Biblical texts in this category include the trilogy of Solomon, especially its second and third parts, *Ecclesiastes* and the *Song of Songs*, elements of the prophetic books that cannot always be interpreted literally as a fruit of visual experience, and the *Book of Psalms*. The interesting and constant tradition of interpretation behind this practice of reading is connected especially with the trilogy of Solomon.

This trilogy consists of three books: *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *Song of Songs*. Their reading is built dynamically and progressively. *Proverbs* is comprised of instructions in elementary ethics. It is built throughout in the form of pairs of oppositions, calling the righteous person and cautioning the sinner, for example: *For the upright shall dwell in the*

[18] Joannes Climacus, *Scala paradisi*, XXVII, §30.

land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it (Prov. 2:21–22). *Ecclesiastes* contains tragic disappointment in the aimlessness of existence in the world and the senselessness of human wisdom. *Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. The wise man's eyes [are] in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all* (Eccl. 2:13–14). *Vanity of vanities; all is vanity!* (Eccl. 1:1). *Ecclesiastes*' position overturns the elementary morals of *Proverbs*, and it deprives natural virtue of its sense. However, the practice of figurative reading does not stop with this book, but proceeds to the book following it, the *Song of Songs*, which leads the reader to community with God. This book was always and only interpreted as the metaphorical image of the marriage of the human soul with God, and of the Church with Christ.

The practice of reading these three books of the trilogy passes through three states. The three books of trilogy correspond to stages of spiritual experience: clarification, consecration, deification. It is supposed that this experience is really endured, and that it is full of depth. Similar interpretations of the trilogy are extraordinarily widespread in the ancient theological tradition during many epochs and in very different regions. We find its presence among the Alexandrian theologians, the Cappadocians, ascetic writers, and among exegetes of the Antiochean school. Certain authors tried to apply the same scheme to reading other Biblical and Evangelical texts, though without great success, such as Ambrose of Milan to the Gospel according to Matthew, John and Mark, and Clement of Alexandria to Moses' Pentateuch. This style of exegesis clearly shows the practice of reading as a spiritual exercise, in which there is full correspondence between one's reading and one's experienced state. Thus, reading promotes a spiritual ascension. Reading gains a dynamic character, such that one's experience is no longer an isolated occurrence, but rather serves the human soul as a transforming, performative instrument, involving purification by turning to the divine.

An example of this open dynamic structure of reading is found in the widely known work of Origen. His exegetic model is based on the anthropological scheme 'body – soul – spirit',[19] which he transfers to the Biblical text. Remarkably, this scheme applies to the whole of human existence, including posthumous existence, rather than being limited to

[19] Origenes, *De principiis,* IV, 2 (Philocalia I. 11).

the situation in which one is reading. In particular, he writes about this in his commentary on *Leviticus* when speaking about the eschatological time of spiritual comprehension of divine mysteries: 'The creator put a body, soul and spirit in the Scripture; the body is before us, the soul is contained in us [i.e., our interpretation], the spirit belongs to those who in the future inherit eternal life and are going to ascend into heaven and to comprehend the truth of the Law. So let us investigate not the letter, but the soul, and, if we are able, we will go forth to the spirit.'[20]

Interpretation of the trilogy of Solomon is not the only example of reading as an ascension. Other examples include Gregory of Nyssa's treatise *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms*. Gregory of Nyssa considers the *Book of Psalms* not as a collection of independent texts that are not directly connected with one another despite the fact that they fall into certain groups.[21] Rather, he establishes in the whole collection of Psalms one unique purpose (σκοπός): a forward-moving ascension to a condition of beatitude by means of virtue. To this ascension there corresponds the order (τάξις) of the list of Psalms – from the first to the 150th. The ascension has its own logic, or sequence (ἀκολουθία). Gregory sees here five steps: 1) Ps. 1–40 – an inducement to renounce evil and to inherit the good; 2) Ps. 41–71 – to express a strong aspiration to join God; 3) Ps. 72–88 – having recognized that the values of the world are petty and that the world celebrates lies, one is enlightened so as to comprehend what is truly beneficial; 4) Ps. 89–105 – a contemplation of the stable nature of God and the variability of human persons; 5) Ps. 106–150 – a fascinating review of the disasters of human sinfulness, the rescue of mankind, God's mercy and the actions of divine grace in the saved person, and, finally, the 150th Psalm contains the glorification of God in all creation.

As with the case of the reading of the trilogy of Solomon, this spiritual practice of the reading of the *Book of Psalms* incorporates universal elements of Christian spiritual experience and sanctity. Both schemes have much in common, though Gregory of Nyssa's five part scheme is irreducible to the threefold scheme of the trilogy. But the spiritual

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[20] Origenes, *In Leviticum* (Philocalia I. 30) '...σῶμα καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ πνεῦμα, σῶμα μὲν τοῖς πρὸ ἡμῶν, ψυχὴν δὲ ἡμῖν, πνεῦμα δὲ τοῖς ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι αἰῶνι κληρονομήσουσι ζωὴν αἰώνιον.'

[21] Cf. M. J. Rondeau, 'Exégèse du Psautier et anabase spirituelle chez Grégoire de Nysse', *EPEKTASIS: Mélanges patristiques offerts au cardinal Jean Daniélou* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972), pp. 517–531.

process standing behind both schemes is identical. This process is a way of being rescued and achieving beatitude or deification. Much that is mysterious is made clear, though the heights of spiritual experience remain inexpressible for those who are still in the valley of worldly life. The *Scala Paradisi*, and the interpretations of the trilogy of Solomon and of the *Book of Psalms*, each show similar vectors of experience, and define the ultimate goal of a spiritual path. Each of them ends in a condition of the highest community with God, in love, marriage, and the beatitude of being with God.

I shall sum up the result of this overview. Each of the four practices of reading religious texts has its own properties. Without inappropriately privileging any one of them, we can make some observations about each. In narrative reading, the reading is extremely concentrated on the contents and the direct message of the text; the reading works together with the narrated events, such that the reader becomes their eyewitness. The central texts for this kind of reading are the evangelical narrations about the Incarnation and the Redemption, that is, narrations about the Divine oikonomia. In this case, mystical experience is presented as directly including the narrated events. In orative reading, the attention of the reader is focused on the appeal to the object of a prayer; its prevailing scheme is a circle, repetition, recurrence. In this case, the reader becomes both the direct participant of the discourse and its main performer. Prayer becomes a focus and, at the same time, an expression of mystical experience. Instructive reading is most pragmatic; what is needed for such reading is reduced to what is required for understanding and remembering. Here, the reader is an addressee. But in this case there is also a place for mysticism inasmuch as these pragmatic texts are preparations for and instructions in the obtaining of mystical experience. Figurative reading most clearly includes practices of spiritual reading for the sake of a spiritual ascension. These texts bear within themselves the primary weight of spiritual guidance and direction on a spiritual road to the universal purpose of human existence. Any text of this type represents itself as a certain spiritual journey, a reflection of the divine manifestation apprehended by the author. At the heart of any personal or common religious text of this sort lies an experience of spiritual movement towards the divine, an experience of a meeting with the divine world, that is, mystical experience as such. In this kind of reading, the reader becomes devoted and initiated. Thus, figurative reading sends the reader to this unknown spiritual space, thereby extending the divine

phenomenon beyond the limits of the author's experience, and beyond the limits of the text.

CONCLUSION

There is nothing neutral in the written heritage of ancient Christianity, or in the crystallized mystical experience of many generations as it is cast in texts. Everything in these texts comprises obvious or hidden testimonies of secret experience. And therefore to any text certain performative practices of reading should be applicable to a greater or lesser extent; the task of these practices is not limited by their direct results, but aims at an involvement of the reader in mystical space. My most important conclusion here is that any experience of spiritual reading involves the reader in a certain existential hermeneutic circular motion, combining efforts to interpret texts with attempts at internal spiritual change. Such a strategy is already beyond just the reading of texts, since it extends the mystical light beyond the limits of possible experience.