

Petr Hruška

Theôria

***Theôria* and its Place in the Spirituality of the Christian East**

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Lecturer: Christopher O'Donnell

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INTRODUCTION

“The most practical thing is a good theory.” How often is this paradoxical saying being repeated at various education courses in order to persuade their participants that appropriation of complicated theories is the best way forward? How often, however, is the advertised intimate connection between the two concepts only “theoretical” (i.e. not real, not really functioning)? How often we do experience many “theories” as totally impractical and unusable for everyday life or ministry? How often we see the word “theory” as something complicated, hyper-rational, good only for some intellectuals? Or, on the other hand, how often we wallow in developing more and more complicated theories of everything only not to have to face the difficulties of our everyday struggles?

Many things could be said about the relationship of “practice” and “theory” in the ordinary usage of these words or in the area of modern sciences. Our focus, however, has to be different. We have to explain the meaning of the Greek concept of *theôria* and discuss its place in the spirituality of the Christian East. Is the meaning of this word in the context of Eastern spirituality the same as in our everyday usage? Is there a connection between *praxis* (= ascetical life) and *theôria* (= contemplation) in the Eastern spiritual writings similar to the mentioned above? Could be the same saying used as well about these Greek spiritual concepts (i.e. could be said, “Good contemplation is the most practical thing”)? It seems that the spiritual meaning of these words are totally different. However, to make a safe conclusion, we have to explore these concepts more in detail. Because of the choice of the second exam question, we will focus predominately on *theôria*, but we have to discuss its relationship to *praxis* within the context of the whole conception of spiritual progress outlined by some of the early Eastern writers.

LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND: THE MEANING OF *THEÔRIA*

In Greek, the basic meaning of the word *theôria* can be translated as “to look at something intently and for a purpose”¹ (from *thea*, “looking at,” “sight”). Figuratively, the word can be used for “thinking,” “speculating,” “considering,” or “philosophising” (which is already close to the modern meaning of the word “theory”).² Aristotle in his *Ethics* separates “practical wisdom” and “theoretical wisdom” and sees moral life as a preparation for and essentially subordinate to *bios theôrêtikos* (“the life of contemplation”).³ In the Gospels, the word *theôria* occurs only once (Lk 23,48; people seeing Jesus on the cross). The Greek Fathers use the word *theôria* (for the first time used by Clement of Alexandria and Origen) in the meaning of “vision,” “revelation,” and sometimes also “theory” in its scientific sense.⁴

The usage in the meaning of “contemplation” has been later supported by a false, but fitting etymology: *Theos* (God) – *horan* (to see).⁵ Origen (ca. 185 – 255) uses the word *theôria* as well in the meaning of “natural contemplation” (*theôria physikê*), where the soul comes to see the created world in God.⁶ This state is prepared by *praxis* (moral illumination, a movement away from sin and a conversion to the virtues) and

¹ W.H. Shannon, art. “Contemplation, Contemplative Prayer,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, edited by M. Downey (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993) 209-214 at 210.

² T. Špidlík, *Spiritualita křesťanského východu* [The spirituality of the Christian East], Czech translation from the French by the Swiss redaction of Křesťanská akademie (Rome: Křesťanská akademie, 1983) 8.1:383.

³ A. Meredith, „Greek Philosophy, Wisdom Literature and Gnosis,“ in *The Study of Spirituality*, Student Edition, edited by C. Jones, G. Wainwright & E. Yarnold (London: SPCK, 2000) 90-94 at 92.

⁴ See, for example, St. Justin, “Apologia” I 61, 12-13: PG 6 420-421; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* I, 6, 25-31: PG 8, 281-284; Basil of Caesarea, *Homiliae diversae* 13. 1: PG 31, 424-425; Gregory Nazianzen, *Orationes* 40, 3, 1: PG 36, 361; references according to Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* from 15th October 1989 (<http://www.cin.org/users/james/files/meditation.htm#24>) n. 24.

⁵ See for example Pseudo-Plutarchos, *De musica* 27 a Pseudo-Dionisios, *De divinis nominibus*, PG 3, 696c; quoted in Špidlík, *Spiritualita*, 386 n. 1 and 5.

⁶ “*Theoria* is the vision of the glory of God. *Theoria* is identified with the vision of the uncreated Light, the uncreated energy of God, with the union of man with God, with man's *theosis* (...). Thus, *theoria*, vision and *theosis* are closely connected. *Theoria* has various degrees. There is illumination, vision of God, and constant vision (for hours, days, weeks, even months). Noetic prayer is the first stage of *theoria*. Theoretical man is one who is at this stage. In Patristic theology, the theoretical man is characterised as the shepherd of the sheep.” Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, “Orthodox Spirituality,” Pelagia (http://www.pelagia.org/htm/b15.en.orthodox_spirituality.01.htm#or2) Notes.

completed by *theologia* (a return to the beginning and a recovery of the likeness of God, also termed *gnosis*).⁷ Both for Greek philosophers and Christian writers it is clear that in order to reach *theôria* (contemplation in its broader sense), it is necessary to go through a thoroughgoing purification (*praxis* or *praktikê*). Two Origen's saying became therefore classical: "No *praxis* without *theôria* and no *theôria* without *praxis*" and "It is through *praxis* that one ascends towards *theôria*".⁸ This leads us already to considering a broader context of *theôria* within the whole perspective of Christian growth in the concept of Eastern spirituality.

LEVELS OF SPIRITUAL JOURNEY: THE CONTEXT OF *THEÔRIA*

The simplest division of spiritual journey can be seen the twofold division into active (ascetical) life characterized by *praxis* or *praktikê*, and contemplative (mystical) life characterized by *theôria* or *theologia*. Origen uses the symbolic of Martha (the active one) and Maria (the contemplative one) for expressing the internal connection between two basic "modes" of Christian living (see Lk 10:38-42).⁹ However, these two modes do not refer to external situation (such as "active" or "contemplative" religious orders as understood in the West), but to inner orientations or emphases. In this sense, most monks have still to struggle at the active stage of *praxis* (fighting against their sins and acquiring and developing virtues), while many people "in the world" can pursue the contemplative life of *theôria* (practicing inner prayer and experiencing intimate encounters with God in the silence of their hearts).¹⁰

In the East, the level of contemplation is sometimes further divided into two stages: the "natural contemplation" (*physikê* or *theôria fisikê*), and contemplation in the

⁷ See Shannon, "Contemplation," 210.

⁸ *In Lucam fragmenta* 39 a *In Lucam homiliae* 1; quoted in Špidlík, *Spiritualita*, 396 n. 36 and 37.

⁹ *Commentary on St. John* 80; see A. Meredith, "Origen," in *The Study of Spirituality*, 115-119 at 117.

strict sense, i.e. the vision of God (*theôria* or *theologia* or *gnôsis*, spiritual knowledge). Origen speaks here also about “ethics,” “physics” and “enoptics” and associates each of these stages with a specific biblical book (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs).¹¹ Evagrius of Pontus (346 – 399), speaking also about three ways or stages, follows Origen’s “way of light” developing as follows:

- 1) *praktiké*, including *metanoia* (repentance), *nepsis* (watchfulness), *diakrisis* (discernment), *penthos* inward grief), *katanyxis* (compunction), *apatheia* (freedom of passion) and *agape* (the offspring of *apatheia*);
- 2) *physiké*, divided into “second natural contemplation” (which has as its object the physical world) and “first natural contemplation” (which is directed toward nonmaterial things, including the inner meaning of the Scripture);
- 3) *theôria*, where the Christian can encounter God directly, in unmediated union of love (in which the human mind has to rise above all concepts, words and images, above the level of discursive thinking to the level of intuitive “gazing” or “touching” in “pure prayer”).¹²

Finally, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (5th century?), using Neoplatonic concepts of threefold movement from rest (*monê*) in God, out in procession (*proodos*) and back in return (*epistrophê*), speaks about the process of deification (*theôsis*) or union (*henôsis*) in a

¹⁰ See K. Ware, „Ways of Prayer and Contemplation: I. Eastern,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*. World Spirituality 16. edited by B. McGinn, at al. (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 395-414 at 396-397.

¹¹ See Ware, “Ways of Prayer,” 397; see also Špidlík, *Spiritualita*, 8.4:398-400.

¹² Ware, “Ways of Prayer,” 397-399; see also S. Tugwell, “Evagrius and Macarius,” in *The Study of Spirituality*, 168-175 at 169-170. “So for Evagrius, attaining 'apatheia' is the first step. Once 'apatheia' is achieved, with its attendant charity, contemplative activity becomes dominant. Evagrius makes a distinction between levels of contemplation. The first phase is contemplation of nature, by which we know God through his creation. ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is 'apatheia' of the soul along with true knowledge of existing things’ (*Praktikos* 2). This type of contemplation comes with effort, struggle, and at times frustration. Higher contemplation is marked by a great peace and calm. One feels no frustration, only tranquility. One gains experimental knowledge of God. It is an exalted state, beyond the capacity of man. The highest point for Evagrius, is the Blessed Trinity, a vision beyond all form, totally simple. ‘The Kingdom of God is knowledge of the Holy Trinity coextensive with the capacity of the intelligence and giving it a surpassing incorruptibility’ (*Praktikos* 3). Evagrius uses the metaphor of light to describe the states of the soul that accompany this elevated form of contemplation.” Byzantines, “Prayer in Evagrius Ponticus and St. Nil Sorski,” (<http://www.byzantines.net/scranton/evag.htm>).

way which will become classical even in Western spirituality: the process progresses along the threefold way of purification (*katharsis*), illumination (*phôtismos* or *ellampsis*) and perfection or union (*teleiôsis* or *benôsis*, where our *theôria* has indeed its place).¹³

LIGHT OR DARKNESS: THE EXPERIENCE OF *THEÔRIA*

While in the writings of Neoplatonic philosophers (and of Origen as well) *theôria* can be seen as an expression of the natural kinship of humankind with God in virtue of which human beings could attempt to ascend to God, for Athanasius, the great fighter for incarnational orthodoxy at the Council of Nicea (325), the concept of *theôria* expresses rather a gift of God descending to humanity.¹⁴ The Cappadocian Fathers (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa) then struggled with understanding the spiritual way in the context of the orthodoxy newly clarified after the Council of Constantinople (381).

Gregory of Nyssa followed up the inspiration of Origen and his threefold way. However, on contrary to Origen, who can be seen as the “theologian of light,” progressively moving toward greater and greater light on the journey of spiritual maturation (the so called *kataphatic* way), Gregory of Nyssa (perhaps because of emphasising the newly formulated orthodoxy) outlines a journey from light into darkness (the so called *apophatic* way).¹⁵ In his *Life of Moses* he speaks about Moses experiencing light (*phôs*) in the burning bush (Ex 3:2), entering into the cloud (*nephelê*) in

¹³ K. Ware points to two “shortcomings” which “may be noted in Evagrius’s map”: his emphasis on successiveness of the three stages (while they should be understood rather as “three deepening levels, interdependent and coexisting simultaneously”) and the fact that love is here set on a lower level than *gnôsis* (while Gregory of Nyssa “assigns the highest place to love” and Maximus the Confessor “insisted unambiguously upon the supremacy of love”); Ware, “Ways of Prayer,” 401-402. Byzantine mysticism developed later even more structured order in all these terms and speaks about three steps: The first step consists in purification (*katharsis*), illumination (*ellampsis*) and vision (*theôria*); the second steps consists in unification (*benôsis*); the third step then in divination (*theôsis*). Mystical vision (*theôria*), “which is a result of purification and illumination, is an intuitive perception without the intermediary of normal concepts or intellectual images originating outside the human being and processed in the mind”; P.B.T. Bilaniuk, “Eastern Christian Spirituality,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 320-330 at 327.

¹⁴ See A. Louth, “The Cappadocians,” in *The Study of Spirituality*, 161-168 at 162.

¹⁵ See Shannon, “Contemplation,” 210-211.

which is mingled light (fire) and darkness (Ex 13:21 and Ex 19), and ascending into the thick darkness (*gnophos*) on the summit of Sinai (Ex 20:21 and Ex 33) “where God dwells.”¹⁶

These two “ways”, *kataphatic* (affirmative) and *apophatic* (negative), have been later assimilated into the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. To his three modes of purification, illumination and perfection correspond three different “theologies”: *symbolic* (“the theology of procession”), *kataphatic* (“the theology of return,” see Dionysius’ treatise on *Divine Names*), and *apophatic* (“the theology of rest,” see Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*).¹⁷ In this way, the seemingly so opposite approaches to *theôria*, the “mysticism of light” (Ireneus, Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, Evagrius, the Marcan Homilies, later then Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas) and the “mysticism of darkness” (Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa), can be seen not as opposites, but as complementary perspectives of one and the same way into the heart of God’s mystery: the “dazzling darkness which with utter obscurity outshines the brightest light.”¹⁸

CONCLUSION

After this short exploration of the meaning, context and experience of *theôria* in Eastern Christian spirituality, we can now come back to our initial questions.

Having reflected on the various concepts in the writings of several classical authors, we can confirm our initial impression that the meanings of *praxis* and *theôria* in Eastern spiritual writings are indeed very different from our everyday usage and that the necessary progression starts with our ascetical (both negative and positive) *praxis*

¹⁶ See Shannon, “Contemplation,” 211; Louth, “The Cappadocians,” 166-167; Ware, “Ways of Prayer,” 401; Špidlík, *Spiritualita*, 8.4:398 and 3.3:92; see also Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae* 11, PG 44, 1000cd; quoted in Špidlík, *Spiritualita*, 403 n. 11.

¹⁷ A. Louth, “Denys the Areopagite,” in *The Study of Spirituality*, 184-189 at 186-188.

and proceeds to *theôria* (both as natural ability of contemplating the nature and as God's gift of resting in God's "dazzling darkness").

However, we can also paradoxically assert that the process should be working the other way around as well and that good contemplation (*theôria*) is nothing complicated or hyper-rational. On the contrary, it is indeed highly practical and life-transforming gift. Tomáš Špidlík states it very clearly:

The faith and good works do not lead directly to perfection, but enabled the Christian to live in contemplation (*theôria*), which is the only real '*praxis*' appropriate for a rational human being.¹⁹

Finally, our concluding paradox of deeply practical theory confirms as well one of the major Orthodox theologians of today, Vladimir Lossky:

Unlike gnosticism, in which knowledge for its own sake constitutes the aim of the gnostic, Christian theology is always in the last resort a means: a unity of knowledge subserving an end which transcends all knowledge. This ultimate end is union with God or deification, the *theosis* of the Greek Fathers. Thus, we are finally led to a conclusion which may seem paradoxical enough: that Christian theory should have an eminently practical significance; and that the more mystical it is, the more directly it aspires to the supreme end of union with God.²⁰

¹⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology* 1, PG 3, 997b; quoted in Ware, "Ways of Prayer," 410.

¹⁹ Špidlík, *Spiritualita*, 1.3:32.

²⁰ V. Lossky, "Theology and Mysticism in the Tradition of the Eastern Church," Orthodox Christian Information Center (http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/lossky_intro.htm). In terms of relationships is something similar expressed in the following quotation: "Because our destiny is to partake, as the Church, in the divine trinitarian life after its Likeness, the entire substance of the spiritual life of the Christian is relationships. It is all about improving the quality of how well you relate to others: God or neighbor. There is no quality of relationship to God that is not intrinsically tied to the quality of how well one relates to the least of these your neighbors. Prayer is relationship. In sharp contrast to Buddhist, Yogic, or pagan Greek forms of contemplation (*theoria*), Orthodox contemplation is *gnosis* because it is personal relationship. There is no advance in prayer that is not an advance in how one is in relationships. If there is a block in the prayer life, the same block is there in your relationships." T. Mether, "Hesychasm: Orthodox Spirituality Compared and Contrasted with Other Religious Traditions," Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (<http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article8149.asp>).

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