

# The Experience of Reading the Church Fathers in the Post-modern Context

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## Introduction

Until recently Christianity has been accepted as «given» and theological discussions have taken place mainly within confessions. During the second half of the twentieth century, in connection with the growth and development of the Pentecostal movement,<sup>[1]</sup> the formation of its theology and the quest for its historical roots,<sup>[2]</sup> a renewed interest in the early Church Fathers, especially those of the Eastern tradition, has emerged among Protestants. The present article is dedicated to a portion of that inheritance.

The challenge of post-modernism, which allows for multiple possible readings, has led to increasing knowledge about God and about Scripture. At the same time, the experience of His presence in our life is decreasing. Post-modernism,<sup>[3]</sup> however, does not rely on abstract ideas; everything is tested through personal relationships. The critical condition of society, which is the result of secularization, is apparent to contemporary Christianity; many of its representatives are trying to find a way out of the situation through the «fellowship of the Holy Spirit» following the assertion of the apostle Paul that, «... those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God» (Rom 8:14). However, we must not forget that during the course of church history, there have always been those who stressed the importance of *personal* experience in the



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<sup>[1]</sup> Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. van der Maas, eds., *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), xix-xxii.

<sup>[2]</sup> S. Land., *Pentecostal Spirituality. A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 5-58.

<sup>[3]</sup> In this article, the author refers to «post-modernism» and «post-modernity» as generally accepted terms, used interchangeably to describe the characteristic features of contemporary culture.

<sup>[4]</sup> Among Pentecostals the testimony of the experience of the Holy Spirit by a believer has been the necessary requirement for one to become a member of a local church.

<sup>[5]</sup> Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. 3.24.1, in A. Robertson and D. Alexander, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. I (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 458.

<sup>[6]</sup> I. Zizioulas, *Bytie kak obshchenie. Ocherki o lichnosti i Tserkvi* [Being as communion. Studies in personhood and the Church], (Moscow: Sviato-Filaretofskiy pravoslavnyi-khristianskiy institute, 2006), 126.

<sup>[7]</sup> On the Day of Pentecost the Church was born. The Holy Spirit gave the Church structure, doctrinal continuity (succession) and apostolic authority.

life of a Christian. The experience of living fellowship with God includes the realization of His presence, conversion, receiving revelation and inspiration, following His will and also mystical union in the Holy Spirit. Irenaeus, in his polemics against the gnostics, emphasized that the Holy Spirit is given to the Church as breath was given to the first created man and it is the Spirit who gives us confirmation in faith.<sup>[4]</sup> Pointing to the Holy Spirit as the [means of] «communion with Christ» and «the ladder ascending to God,» Irenaeus wrote: «Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth.»<sup>[5]</sup>

Pneumatology has always been at the very heart of Eastern Christian theology, bringing together in itself all aspects of doctrine. In speaking about the specifics of the Western and Eastern traditions of understanding this issue, the contemporary Orthodox theologian Metropolitan Ioann (Zizioulas) emphasizes that pneumatology is inseparable from Christology and ecclesiology in all spheres of Christian life and teaching.<sup>[6]</sup>

The emphasis on the Holy Spirit, so typical of the theological thought of the Christian East, has sometimes led to the rejection of its «pneumocentrism» by Western theologians, while in turn Eastern Christians have blamed the West for extreme «Christocentrism.»

The difference between Eastern and Western theological thought, besides the doctrine of the Trinity, consisted in the rejection of the teaching of Tertullian-Augustine on human depravity by the East. According to this view, the human being is unable to help him/herself and is therefore totally dependent on the intervention of Christ acting through the Holy Spirit for his/her salvation. Meanwhile, the Eastern Church has always insisted that humankind was created in the image of God and, in spite of the Fall, God's goal is to restore humanity to its original perfection. Moreover, the Eastern Church developed the doctrine of unification with God, or *deification (theosis)* as the ultimate goal of humanity's restoration. This doctrine does not suggest that human beings will at any time share the divine nature; rather it emphasizes that deification is a constant process, extending throughout eternity. Deification is the result of receiving the Holy Spirit and experiencing the Spirit in the life of the Church,<sup>[7]</sup> which enables Christians personally to experience the spiritual gifts, produce spiritual fruit, and also participate in the sacraments, which give life and participation in the divine nature. The latter has flowed into the development of the teaching on the experience of the Holy

Spirit, proposing the sense (sensate, emotional) apprehension of the spiritual.<sup>[8]</sup>

Can we compare the experience of «enthusiastic Christianity» of the Pentecostal movement<sup>[9]</sup> with the experiences described by the Church Fathers of the patristic era, which Eastern Christianity maintains are indispensable? Do the longing for experience and the open expression of emotion testify to the symptoms of post-modernism in the religious life of Russian believers? Or are they more likely evidence of the theological search taking place among contemporary Pentecostals?

Although contemporary patristic studies are only now beginning to pay attention to the pneumatology of the apostolic age and of the apologists, it is possible to observe a fairly well developed teaching on the Holy Spirit prior to the debates of the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>[10]</sup> In the Eastern Christian tradition there is no gap between spirituality and theology. Eastern tradition has never made a sharp difference between the personal experience of knowing God and the doctrines confirmed by the Church. Vladimir Lossky in his *Essay on the Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, quoting Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow, underlines that the experience of the Holy Spirit is a personal manifestation of the common faith, and thus theology is the general expression of something that may be known by every individual.<sup>[11]</sup> Any Russian Pentecostal would affirm that statement. Let us turn, however, to the testimony of Gregory the Theologian (fourth century) and Simeon the New Theologian (tenth and eleventh centuries).

## 1. The Mystical Theology of Gregory the Theologian

### 1.1. *Divine light, prayer and the vision of God*

Light in which everything may be made known is a comprehensive symbol of Hellenistic culture. The influential biblical exegete, Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C. - c. 50 A.D.), wrote about divine illumination «by the light of light» (*De Praemiis et Poenis*. 46) and about departure from the body for the sake of union with God (*De Fuga et Inventione*. 92). He thus underlined his aspiration to reach the permanent state of likeness (*mimesis*) to God and a clear vision of God.<sup>[12]</sup> Philo was the first to express the idea that the final goal of human aspiration is religious ecstasy, when the soul, having left behind all that is sensory and temporal, offers itself to the direct contemplation of God.<sup>[13]</sup> However, as a representative of Hellenistic Judaism, Philo did not

[8] S. M. Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Traditions* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 1-4.

[9] This includes the Charismatic movement and «Neo-Pentecostalism» although some scholars insist on separating these terms.

[10] И. В. Максимов, «Пнеуматология apologe- тов II века» [Pneumatology of the second century apologists] *Al'fa i Omega* 2 (46), 2006: 207-231.

[11] «It is essential that we consider nothing, not even secretly hidden wisdom, foreign to us or as something that does not belong to us, but instead we should humbly compose our mind to divine contemplation and our heart to heavenly sensation.» Quoted by V. N. Lossky, *Ocherk misticheskogo bogosloviia vos-tochnoi Tserkvi* (Moscow: SEI Center's Press, 1991), 9.

[12] Philo of Alexandria left a number of religious-philosophical tractates in which he strove to establish the connection between Jewish religious teaching revealed in the Old Testament and Greek idealistic philosophy. A Jewish apologist and a religious thinker, Philo greatly influenced later theology with his exegetical method and teaching on the Logos. See K. Schenk, *Filon Aleksandriiskiy. Vvedenie v zhizn' i tvorchestvo* [A brief guide to Philo] (Moscow: St. Andrew's Biblical-Theological Institute, 2007), 23.

[13] V. F. Ivanitskiy, *Filon Aleksandriiskiy. Zhizn' i obzor literaturnoi deiatel'nosti* [Philo of Alexandria. His

life and a review of his literary activity] (Kiev: Petr Barsky's Press, 1911), 588.

<sup>[14]</sup> V. N. Losskiy, *Ocherk misticheskogo bogosloviia vostochnoi Tserkvi* [Essay on the mystical theology of the eastern Church] (Moscow: SEI Center's Press, 1991), 19.

<sup>[15]</sup> His father, Gregory Nazianzus the Elder, had the same spiritual experience (this light was witnessed by his associates when he emerged from the font after his baptism).

<sup>[16]</sup> Hieromonach Ilarion (Alfeyev), *Zhizn' i uchenie sv. Grigoriia Bogoslova* [The life and teaching of St. Gregory the Theologian] (Moscow: Lovers of Church History Society's Press, 1998), 360.

<sup>[17]</sup> Quoted by Alfeyev, *Zhizn' i uchenie sv. Grigoriia Bogoslova*, p. 366.

<sup>[18]</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 366-367.

<sup>[19]</sup> When Philo speaks about «drunkenness» and «rage/fury» (images he borrowed from Dionysian mystery religion) he means sober rapture/ecstasy and intellectual «drunkenness.» See Schenk, *Filon Aleksandriyskiy. Vvedenie v zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, p. 23.

<sup>[20]</sup> Quoted by Alfeyev, *Zhizn' i uchenie sv. Grigoriia Bogoslova*, p. 370.

<sup>[21]</sup> According to Origen, one must pray only to God the Father «through Christ» because Christ Himself prayed to the Father and taught the apostles to do the same; see Mat 6:9; 26:39; Luke 11:2; John 12:27; 17:11, etc. (All the

give the same meaning to his personal experiences that later generations of Christians did; by the longing to reach the state of likeness to God and to achieve a clear vision of the Almighty, he meant a longing for intellectual enlightenment, although in describing supernatural reality he was obliged to resort to the language of mysticism.

The path of a human being's mystical unity (fellowship) with God is hidden from the eyes of others. It is almost always a secret between God and the soul and is never revealed to an outsider, except perhaps to a confessor or a few disciples.<sup>[14]</sup> Gregory the Theologian, who had an experience of seeing the Divine Light,<sup>[15]</sup> is considered by Bishop Ilarion (Alfeyev) to be one of the creators of the *theology of light* in the Christian tradition that was further developed by such mystical writers as Maxim the Confessor, Simeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas. Theologians of Byzantine hesychasm considered Gregory Palamas to be the most authoritative author whose writings became one of the primary sources of hesychast doctrine.<sup>[16]</sup> According to Gregory the Theologian, in order to contemplate the purest light one has to purify one's mind: «As closely as anyone approaches the King, thus far does he/she become the light.»<sup>[17]</sup>

Let us become the light, as the great Light called the disciples when He said: «You are the light of the world» (Mat 5:14)... Let us dedicate ourselves totally, let us become the intentional [intelligent, wise] burnt offering, the verbal sacrifice... Let us give ourselves totally so that we may also receive back totally, for to receive ourselves in purity is to give ourselves to God and to perform the rite of our own salvation.<sup>[18]</sup>

In contrast to Philo of Alexandria the emphasis here is put not only on intellectual effort,<sup>[19]</sup> but also on physical actions. Ascetic deeds, charitable works and the fulfillment of commandments assist in reaching mystical illumination. According to Gregory the Theologian, prayer is primarily a meeting with the living God. A human being thirsts for God and needs fellowship with Him, but God also thirsts for those who thirst for him, continually and abundantly pouring [Himself] out upon them.<sup>[20]</sup> Praying to Christ was an integral part of Gregory's spiritual life. His prayers are filled with deep personal love for Christ.<sup>[21]</sup> However, he also has prayers that are addressed to each of the divine hypostases:

*To Thee, o Blessed One, I turn my glance; to Thee, my help,  
The Almighty, the Unbegotten, the Beginning and the Father of the  
Beginning -*

*Of the Immortal Son, the great Light (the Father) of an equally great Light -*

*Of the One, Who is from the One and in the One! ..*

**To Thee, the Son of God, the Wisdom, the King, the Word, the Truth,**

*The Image of the Proto-image, the nature equal to the Parent, The Shepherd, Lamb and Sacrifice, God, Man and High Priest!*

**To Thee, the Spirit, Who is from the Father, the Light of our Mind, Coming to those who are pure and making human beings divine!**

*Have mercy on me, so that even here in my old age,*

*And there when I am united with the whole Godhead,*

*I may praise Thee joyfully with unceasing hymns.<sup>[22]</sup>*

The concept of the vision of God as the goal both of prayer and ultimately of all the Christian life is the leitmotif of the Eastern Christian tradition. Irenaeus of Lyons (second century) spoke of this: «The glory of God is a living human being, and the life of a human being is the vision of God.»<sup>[23]</sup> Gregory's teaching on the vision of God is inseparable from his teaching on the knowledge of God (the incomprehensibility of God).<sup>[24]</sup> He considered that the vision of God is possible during earthly life, although only for a very few; however it will be incomparably fuller in the age to come. Every human being is capable of sensing the presence of God. The vision of God, however, becomes possible for those who purify themselves, who reach the state of deification and are constantly in prayer. Yet even in this state, a human can contemplate God only from «behind,» as it were, by sensing His mystical presence. God always remains unknowable, inexpressible, unreachable, and invisible.

## 1.2. Deification

The union of a human being with God (*deification*) is considered by Gregory the Theologian to be the pinnacle of the Christian life. This term is also used by Irenaeus; however, until Gregory no Christian theologian used it as often and as consistently. Along with the concept of adoption by God, it lies at the very heart of Gregory's theology, and later these two concepts became the basis of all Orthodox mysticism. The way leading to deification is the human being's love for God expressed in the fulfillment of the gospel commandments, prayer and mystical experience (the ascent of the mind to God in prayerful meditation). Gregory addresses himself to his own soul with the following words: «What are you willing to become? Are you willing to become a god who

known liturgies of the early Church are addressed to God the Father. Liturgies addressed to God the Son appeared no earlier than the fifth century, during the era of Christological controversies.)

<sup>[22]</sup> Quoted by Alfeyev, *Zhizn' i uchenie sv. Grigoriia Bogoslova*, p. 376.

<sup>[23]</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Protiiv eresei* [Against heresies], 4.6.6.

<sup>[24]</sup> Philo also did not believe that a human being is capable of knowing God. A human can know about God's existence, but not the nature of His existence. Using the example of Moses, Philo shows that only the Almighty Himself can allow a person to know Him in a certain measure. However, the true way to God is the way of mysticism, understood in a limited sense as the contemplation of what is beyond the limits of human comprehension and can only be experienced. See Schenk, *Vvedenie v zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, p. 115.

<sup>[25]</sup> Quoted by Alfeyev, *Zhizn' i uchenie sv. Grigoriia Bogoslova*, p. 390.

stands luminously in the presence of God, rejoicing with the angels? Go forward, stretch your wings and rise up on high.»<sup>[25]</sup> It is important to remember that this is not just an intellectual ascent to God, but rather something that involves the whole of life itself including its daily cares. Deification is the salvation of the entire person, a transformation and re-creation of his/her spirit, soul and body.

*Christ is leading me to God in triumphant company  
On a hard and narrow way though narrow gates  
That many cannot pass through.  
He is leading me, a god created from dust, not born;  
A mortal who has become immortal.  
Together with the magnificent image of God in my soul,  
He is also drawing to deity my body, my helper,  
Just as a magnet draws black iron to itself.*<sup>[26]</sup>

<sup>[26]</sup> Ibid., p.386.

In becoming God-like, a human being does not do good only for him/herself, he/she also reveals the Word of God to others. Deification, the pinnacle of the knowledge of God, occurs when the incomprehensible God becomes as comprehensible as possible to human nature. By means of deification every Christian can aspire to reach the final goal of existence: the salvation of humankind, the renewal and transformation of the world, the entrance of all who are saved into the «Church triumphant,» the union of humanity with God, and the eschatological deification of all creation.<sup>[27]</sup> For the next ten centuries (fifth-fourteenth) Gregory the Theologian was the most quoted and the best known author, whose writings were second only to Holy Scripture itself. It was his writings that influenced the great Byzantine mystic, Simeon the New Theologian, who will be discussed later.

<sup>[27]</sup> Ibid., p.381.

Like Gregory the Theologian, Pentecostals speak of the importance of the Christian's fellowship with the living God. The way to this encounter is paved with the fulfillment of the commandments, time spent in the Word and prayer and fasting, although the term «deification» is unknown to most of them. According to the testimonies of many Pentecostals, they have experienced a vision of divine light that has changed their entire life, giving them the power to be freed from slavery to sin and vice:

I don't know how it happened, but the first thing I was aware of was light... It was different from the light that came through the door and the window: it was more like illumination than light from an actual source. But this light had something special: I felt

awe although in no way did I feel frightened. Instead, I felt a sense of recognition... «Are you Christ?» I asked. The light moved slightly. That is, it moved figuratively speaking; it was as if He immediately came closer without leaving the place where he had been earlier... I was filled with a sense of peace that I had never known before. For a long time I wept for joy. <...> I tried to tell others... about this wonderful encounter... but to my dismay, as soon as I would open my mouth to begin, the same thing happened—I felt tears come to my eyes and I knew that if I said just one more word, I would start to sob like a child.<sup>[28]</sup>

The believer's experience of a «personal» Pentecost, an encounter with God with its attendant repentance and conversion is not merely a sermon topic, but the basis of all Pentecostal teaching.<sup>[29]</sup> Experiencing the Holy Spirit is inseparable from Pentecostal spirituality, and on these grounds Pentecostals are often accused of being emotional at the expense of rationality.<sup>[30]</sup> However, the special emphasis of their preaching is the love of God: personal testimonies that make up part of a worship service are extremely emotional and sincerely express gratitude, love and compassion, hope and confidence in salvation. Their traditional hymns, many of which were inherited from the Holiness Movement, are full of such expressions.<sup>[31]</sup> Prayer is the center of Pentecostal spirituality. It is the place where the encounter between a human being and the living God occurs and where the decision is made to follow Him. Love for God and one's neighbor finds its expression in extending the Kingdom of God through witnessing, preaching and different forms of social work.

Pentecostals have always given first importance in their theology to the experience of Pentecostal spirituality.<sup>[32]</sup> Patristic theology always maintained that a human being is able to bind himself to God only through the Son in the Holy Spirit,<sup>[33]</sup> thus emphasizing that theology is the experience of fellowship with God.<sup>[34]</sup> Maxim the Confessor expresses this in the following words:

The mind applied to an active life achieves discretion, and the mind applied to contemplation achieves knowledge. The former enables the ascetic to discern between virtue and imperfection; the latter leads its communicant to the knowledge of the properties of incorporeal and corporal creatures. The gift of theology honors only the mind which, on the wings of love, has flown beyond everything said above and found itself in God, spiritually contemplating His being to the extent that it is possible for a human mind.<sup>[35]</sup>

<sup>[28]</sup> John Sherrill, *Oni govoriat na inyykh iazykakh* [They speak in other tongues] (Kazan: Linguatrans Society Press, 1991), 9-10.

<sup>[29]</sup> S. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality. A Passion for the Kingdom*; William W. Menzies and Stanley M. Horton *Bible Doctrines: A Pentecostal Perspective*, (Springfield, Mo.: Logion/Gospel Publishing House, 1999); S. Land, H. Gause, *Living the Faith*, (Cleveland, Tenn.: Pathway Press, 2001), and others.

<sup>[30]</sup> S. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, p.132.

<sup>[31]</sup> Holiness is one of the movements of recent Protestantism that appeared in the USA at the end of the nineteenth century among Methodists. It declared that the main goal of a Christian after repentance was the achievement of the second stage—«birth from above» or sanctification (an instantaneous, miraculous experience). Its visual manifestations included the repudiation of smoking, drinking alcohol, etc.

<sup>[32]</sup> See S. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, «Chapter 1. Pentecostal Spirituality as Theology: A Theoretical Introduction,» pp. 15–57.

<sup>[33]</sup> Metropolitan Ioann (Zizioulas), *Bytie kak obshchenie*, p. 13.

<sup>[34]</sup> A. Nesteruk, *Logos i kosmos* [Logos and the universe] (Moscow: 2006), 45.

<sup>[35]</sup> Maxim the Confessor (ca. 580 – 662), *O ljubvi v chetyrekh sotniakh* [Four hundred texts on love], 2,26.

Theology, the knowledge of God as God is in Himself, is given in mystical union with God at the last stage of higher union with God. (In speaking of deification Gregory the Theologian gives as examples Moses on Mount Sinai and the apostles on the Mount of Transfiguration.)

Pentecostals begin their history from the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Their doctrine, which is still undergoing a process of formation, relies on a common experience of the Holy Spirit (including elements of listening: «a sound like... a violent wind, v. 2; «they... began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them»; and seeing: «tongues of fire,» v. 3).

One of the theologians who greatly influenced the Holiness Movement, the direct predecessor of Pentecostalism, was John Wesley.<sup>[36]</sup> After Wesley's conversion he started to preach about salvation through faith, declaring that the testimony of the Spirit is the inner experience of the soul: the Spirit of God testifies directly to my spirit that I am a child of God. For Protestants the problematic question is what may be taken as the main authority in the question of salvation (faith). The highest authority for Luther and the Protestantism that followed him was Holy Scripture; for Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism it is Holy Scripture and Church Tradition; for the «enthusiastic» Christians it is Holy Scripture and the experience of the Holy Spirit. However, this theme is beyond the scope of this paper and requires a separate detailed examination.

Pentecostal hermeneutics builds its foundation on the knowledge of God, emphasizing its experiential side, because it is impossible to talk about the existence of God without the concept of fellowship. This serves to emphasize the importance of believers' participation in a community led by the Holy Spirit.<sup>[37]</sup> Each congregation (church, denomination, confession) is not just a human organization; its life and the life of each individual believer is an image of life that corresponds to Holy Scripture. In these three components (the community of believers, Holy Scripture and the activity of the Holy Spirit), existing in a continuous mutual dialogue, the unification of pneumatology and ecclesiology takes place.

## 2. The Mystical Theology of Simeon the New Theologian

Before Simeon the New Theologian, only the Apostle John and Gregory of Nazianzus the Younger held the title «Theologian,» which they earned for their writings on the doctrine of God.

<sup>[36]</sup> John Wesley (1703-1791) founded the Methodist church. It is well known that he was greatly influenced by the writings of the early Eastern Church fathers, to which his doctrine of sanctification testifies.

<sup>[37]</sup> Here Pentecostal theologians rely on the Old Testament. The verb *yadah* – «to know» – may be translated from Hebrew as «get to know,» «experience,» «understand,» etc. See W. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 128-129. This emphasizes the experiential character of knowledge in contrast to the Greek *oida* – «to know,» «to understand» (close to *eido* – «to see»); for example, «Adam knew his wife» (Gen 4:1 and elsewhere). See M. Becker, «A Tenet under Examination: Reflections on the Pentecostal Hermeneutical Approach,» *JEPTA*, v. XXIV (2004): 30-48.



Simeon the New Theologian is regarded in the West as the most outstanding of the Byzantine medieval mystics for his charismatic approach, continuing the Patristic tradition.<sup>[38]</sup> The uniqueness of his works can also be seen in the openness with which he shares his spiritual experience, which is of special value for everyone seeking his/her own personal encounter with God.

<sup>[38]</sup> T. Lane, *Khristianskie mysliteli* [Christian thinkers] (St. Petersburg, 1997), 83.

### 2.1.1. *Divine Light and Tears*

It is well known that Simeon was greatly influenced by his spiritual father, a monk of the Studite monastery in Constantinople, Simeon the Studite, who called his disciple to follow the voice of conscience, fulfill God's commandments for the sake of attaining the gifts of the Holy Spirit and seek the spiritual knowledge that is gained through prayer. In the excerpt below Simeon the New Theologian mentions his teacher, calling him a slave of God and an apostle, and also talks about his own spiritual experiences:

*Inside myself I am worshipping Thee and I see Thee from a distance,  
I see Thee in myself and contemplate Thee in heaven!  
But how does this happen? Thou alone knows,  
**Shining in the heart like the Sun**, the unearthly on the earth.  
O God, Whose **glorious radiance has illumined me**,  
The One Who brought me to the saintly father Simeon,  
Thy slave and apostle, **shine on me Thyself**  
And teach me, O God, by the Holy Spirit to sing hymns  
That are heavenly, mystical, new and ancient,  
So that everyone will be amazed by the wisdom of God,  
And all who hear will glorify Thee, O my Christ,  
For by grace I am speaking in other tongues.  
Amen; let it be according to Thy will, O my Lord!  
I am sick and suffer within my humble soul,  
When **Thy light, shining so brightly**, appears in it,  
Love becomes an unceasing pain for me.  
My soul suffers and weeps, because I have no strength  
To embrace Thee and to be filled with Thee, which is what  
I yearn for.<sup>[39]</sup>*

<sup>[39]</sup> Hieromonk Ilarion (Alfeyev), «A prayer to God. And concerning how [St. Simeon], united with God and seeing the glory of God, went into ecstasy,» in *Prepodobniy Simeon Noviy Bogoslov i pravoslavnoe predanie* [St. Simeon the New Theologian and the Orthodox tradition] (Moscow, 1998), 601.

Like Gregory the Theologian, Simeon speaks about his experiences of the Divine Light. He mentions it in all his writings, without hiding the fact that over the years his experiences of seeing the Light became more frequent. The description is given in a most personal way, in line with the passage quoted above, in which, besides his experiences with the Light, Gregory mentions prayer *in other tongues* and how much his *soul suffers* and *cries*.

## 2.2. Ecstasy and Deification

Simeon the New Theologian experienced ecstasy throughout his whole life. In his opinion, the soul that is growing in the spiritual life leaves behind such experiences, having a constant experience of the divine reality in which it dwells.

The one who has the light of the Holy Spirit within... becomes like a man whose inner being, for some reason, is set on fire... Having no strength whatsoever to control himself, being watered constantly by tears and refreshed by them, he stirs up even more the fire of love. From this he sheds more tears and is washed by their flood, shining even brighter... After being in this state for a long time [a person] considers it to be natural... and it always stays with him... From that time he remains in the light, or more accurately, with the light, and is no longer in ecstasy but instead is able to see himself and everything around him and his neighbors...<sup>[40]</sup>

<sup>[40]</sup> Ibid., pp. 400-402.

For Simeon the conscious mystical experience was so important that he insisted the perception of grace and the enlightenment that grace brings about in the contemplation of God must be recognized as the norm for every Christian.

Those who have not yet had the knowledge and vision of such goodness, and have not sought it with great persistence and sobbing and tears, in order that, cleansed by these kind of actions, they might reach it [this state] and, perfectly united with it [goodness], have fellowship with Him; tell me—how can they ever be called Christians?<sup>[41]</sup>

<sup>[41]</sup> Quoted by Archbishop Vasiliy (Krivoshein), *Prepodobnyi Simeon Novyi Bogoslov (949-1022)*, [St. Simeon the New Theologian (949-1022)] (N. Novgorod, 1996), 181.

The doctrine of deification sums up the theological system of Simeon the New Theologian, whose entire life testified that this deification is a reality experienced in our world. According to the Eastern Church tradition, the final goal of the spiritual life and eternal beatitude (in the Kingdom of Heaven) is fellowship with the Holy Trinity, the deified state of co-heirs of the divine essence, as gods created after the uncreated God and possessing, by His grace, everything that the Holy Trinity has by nature.<sup>[42]</sup> Salvation itself, which Christians regard as fellowship or communion, speaks of a free response of love through which fellowship with God becomes deeper and more intense. Simeon saw the fruit of the Holy Spirit's deification process and the climax of perfection in divine love which he called, «grace acquired by our inner being.» Love for one's neighbor is the evidence of a person having acquired true love for God.<sup>[43]</sup>

<sup>[42]</sup> V. N. Losskiy, *Ocherk*, p. 52.

<sup>[43]</sup> Ibid., pp. 160-161.

Thus the Christian East, in seeking a solution to the question of salvation worked out the doctrine of theosis (deification), an in-

separable part of which is a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit by everyone who goes by the name of Christian, while the West gives more attention to the juridical (legal) aspect of the same question as expressed in the doctrine of grace, and speaks of «adoption,» «restoration,» «redemption» and «justification.» However, Western theologians also speak of grace that produces real change in human beings as well. The «theology of transformation» developed by the Anglican Church can be taken as an example.<sup>[44]</sup> Similar tendencies may be noted in contemporary Lutheran theology. Luther, who himself insisted that Christ is present in a believer and who stressed the unity between Christ and a Christian, did not hesitate to use the concept of deification (*Vergöttlichung*<sup>[45]</sup>) in the same sense as it was used by the early Church.

... a Christian lives not within himself, but rather in Christ and in his neighbor. If he does not, he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ by faith and in his neighbor by love. By faith he ascends to God through himself. By love he descends through himself to his neighbor. And still he abides always in God and in His love...<sup>[46]</sup>

In the course of a recent dialogue between Orthodox and Lutheran theologians that took place in Finland, the understanding was reached that for Luther faith is partaking in the existence of God.<sup>[47]</sup> When the Holy Spirit pours out the love of God upon a person, he/she becomes a conduit (intermediary, means) of the divine grace, a «god» and «savior.» Luther emphasized that this is the work of God's grace in a person who is merely an instrument in His hands.<sup>[48]</sup> Grace Brame, a contemporary Lutheran theologian, defines theology as faith expressed in statements, propositions and creeds, and spirituality as «faith based on our relationship to God through prayer and letting God live and love through us.»<sup>[49]</sup> Faith fulfilled by love which is produced in a human being by God's grace is the basis of John Wesley's theology, at the center of which lies the doctrine of sanctification. As in patristic tradition, Wesley's teaching stresses that likeness to Christ is achieved gradually by a process of conscious response to God's call and acceptance of the grace He offers. Wesley emphasizes that the goal of the Christian life (Christian perfection, or renewal of the image of God) is inseparable from the manner of the Christian life. In experiencing the new birth, because of the changes taking place in the heart, a human being puts on a new nature (Col 3:9). The renewal of the human soul in righteousness and true holiness takes place—the renewal of God's image in us—where God's love guides feelings, inclinations, needs and passions, as was the case with Adam before the Fall.<sup>[50]</sup>

<sup>[44]</sup> E. Zaitsev traces the connection between Anglican and Orthodox methodology, rooted in the writings of the Eastern Church Fathers. See E. Zaitsev, *Uchenie V. Losskogo o teozise* [The teaching of V. Losskiy on theosis] (Moscow, 2007), 127.

<sup>[45]</sup> German : deification.

<sup>[46]</sup> Martin Luther, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia. Svoboda khristianina* [Selected writings. On Christian liberty] ( St. Petersburg, 1994), 49.

<sup>[47]</sup> Hannu T. Kamppuri, ed., *Dialogue between Neighbors: Theological Conversations between the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland and the Russian Orthodox Church. 1970-1986* (Helsinki: Publication of the Luther-Agricola Society, 1986); Ross Aden, «Justification and Sanctification: A Conversation between Lutheranism and Orthodoxy,» *St. Vladimir Theological Quarterly*, 38 (1994): 101-109.

<sup>[48]</sup> E. Zaitsev, *Uchenie*, p. 130.

<sup>[49]</sup> G. Brame, *Faith, the Yes of the Heart* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 52.

<sup>[50]</sup> T. C. Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity. A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Michigan. 1994), 175.

The more a contemporary Russian Pentecostal is acquainted with the writings of the Fathers, the more he/she feels «at home» and understands their language, their means of expression and their spiritual experiences. Because of the mystical encounter with the living God experienced in prayer, a person may visualize the Truth in the Holy Spirit as a product of the post-modern era. According to the contemporary American Pentecostal theologian Steve Land:

Pentecostalism is more Catholic than Protestant in emphasizing sanctification-transformation more than forensic justification, but more Protestant than Catholic in the conviction that the Word is the authority over the church and tradition for matters of faith, practice, government and discipline.<sup>[51]</sup>

<sup>[51]</sup> S. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, p. 30.

True Christianity encourages incredible freedom to everyone who searches for Truth, requiring faith not only of the mind but also the heart. Contemporary Orthodoxy understands the importance of fellowship with God and regards it as the main criterion for all spiritual life.<sup>[52]</sup> Trinitarian theology may be interpreted as a theology of fellowship, a theology of mystical union with God, implying experience, and the gradual change of human nature which results from the deepening relationship with the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the experience of the Holy Spirit as described in the works of Gregory the Theologian and Simeon the New Theologian, for whom the foundation of faith is the encounter with God «face to face,» the contemporary Pentecostal finds confirmation of his/her personal experience received through participation in church life, which he/she defines as charismatic manifestations or deeds of the Holy Spirit. For the Pentecostal, an encounter with Christ is a reality; however, we must not forget that we have to learn what it means to live an evangelical life. After all, it is a person's life that testifies to the conversion of the heart to God, that is, an encounter with Christ that awakens in the heart of a believer a desire to know God, to love Him and seek His fellowship as much as possible. This is the human response to God's search for the true worshipers, who worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23).

<sup>[52]</sup> Hegumen Petr (Meshcherianinov), *Problemy votserkoveniia* [Problems of joining the Church] (Moscow, 2007), 87.

## Conclusion

It must be acknowledged that Pentecostalism and Orthodoxy in Russia often regard each other with some suspicion. Pentecostals see the majority of Orthodox believers as nominal Christians (in this they share the opinion of Simeon the New Theologian about the Christianity of the Patristic era!) and regard the veneration of

icons and relics as features of pagan cults. The Orthodox, in turn, view Pentecostals as Western Christians (alien to the national culture) and sometimes simply a cult, seeing dangerous tendencies in their high level of emotion (an inclination to exaltation, etc.).

This article represents an attempt, in speaking of experiences of the Holy Spirit, to see in the Patristic tradition the evidence of true Christian life in the values (the indispensability of experience) on which Pentecostals insist. Examples from the heritage of Gregory the Theologian and Simeon the New Theologian show us the richness of Eastern Christianity's experience of communion with God, based on authentic spiritual experience. It is remarkable how in our era of secularization, both in the East and the West, growing interest in the mystical side of Christian life is characteristic of so-called «radical Christianity.»

Pentecostalism in the West is indebted to its direct predecessor—the Holiness Movement and its leaders (Finney, Moody, Palmer and others) who advocated sanctification and the baptism of the Holy Spirit.<sup>[53]</sup> Pentecostals differ from evangelical fundamentalists in that their search for truth is not limited to the sphere of the mind, but includes spiritual experiences and the change of conduct which is essential to a true conversion. The Pentecostal worldview is characterized primarily by the emphasis it puts on the importance of communion with God (fellowship with God, in the language of the Fathers), and the constant reminder that love is also an emotional experience.<sup>[54]</sup> Salvation, when understood as communion, involves a free response of love, and a free turning of the human will towards God and His ways, which makes communion with God deeper and deeper. An interest in eschatology and ecclesiology is typical for Pentecostals.<sup>[55]</sup>

One can compare the three components of the Eastern Church Fathers' mystical encounter with the Holy Spirit mentioned in this article with the three major characteristics of Pentecostal theology: *orthodoxy*, *orthopathy* and *orthopraxis*. Orthodoxy corresponds to prayer, in which an encounter with the living God takes place. Its goal is the vision of God, knowledge of His will and free acceptance of it. Orthopathy corresponds to experiencing the presence of God, as expressed in various ways (tears, ecstasy, etc.). Orthopraxis is the transformation of a believer's life (deification, transformation into His image). In its understanding of experiential or mystical theology, Pentecostalism seems close to the Patristic tradition. Despite all our differences, it is of great importance to learn to recognize each other as Christian churches, as brothers

[53] S. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, pp. 47–50.

[54] J. D. Johns, «Pentecostalism and the Postmodern Worldview,» *JPT* 7 (1995): 73-96.

[55] In the teaching of the Eastern Church Fathers on deification, Alfeyev notes the pronounced eschatological and anthropological components. Final deification will take place in the Kingdom of Heaven, while here on earth we are preparing for this event for the purpose of taking part in the divine light in the world to come. The same idea is expressed in Jewish sources of the Tannaim era. Compare this example from Pirke Avot: «Rabbi Jacob said, «This world is the threshold of the world to come; prepare yourself on the threshold to enter the chamber (palace)» (3.16). Rabbi Jacob is the teacher of Jehuda ha-Nasi under whose leadership the Mishna was completed (second century A.D.).

and sisters in Christ, the children of the same Lord. It is important to learn to respect the image of Christ in one another and to have fellowship with each other, in accordance with what we testify to the world about our common Christian faith.

Nowadays Pentecostalism (including the Charismatic movement, which some authors call «Neo-Pentecostalism») is becoming a noticeable phenomenon in the religious and social spheres of the country, attracting the attention of the media and provoking considerable controversy.<sup>[56]</sup> We must agree with Sergey Shcherbak's opinion that, whether we want to or not, all of us who are facing complex problems in contemporary social and religious life had better stop dealing with them in terms of exclusive categories (such as, «mine vs. alien»; «community of believers vs. sect.» etc).<sup>[57]</sup> All of us, faculty members and students of theological institutions alike, have to remember that the goal of every kind of education, secular as well as religious, is the intellectual and spiritual growth of a human personality, open to and capable of constructive dialogue, testifying to a mature consciousness. Dialogue is already taking place between Jews and Christians, Lutherans and Orthodox, Catholics and Pentecostals. Why not initiate a dialogue between Orthodox and Pentecostals who have common roots in the Holy Scripture and in the spiritual experience of the Patristic tradition? V. Losskiy, the noted representative of Neo-Patristic theology, asserts that all the necessary provisions for a Christian to reach the final goal of union with God are given by the Church; however, it is not the result of an unconscious process. It is accomplished by uniting our free will with the Holy Spirit, and we are lacking only one thing—personal determination.<sup>[58]</sup>

Contemporary Pentecostal theologians have observed that at its beginning the Pentecostal movement was open to others, later it entered the way of exclusivism, and now is turning back to its origins. T. Richie underlines the importance of the Pentecostal heritage of ecumenism and inclusivism as a response to the religious diversity and pluralism of opinion, which is characteristic of the post-modern era.<sup>[59]</sup>

The search for a more solid and constructive dialogue between the Eastern and Western branches of the Christian traditions is one of the most urgent tasks of the Church in the process of spiritual self-definition of contemporary humanity. There is a need for a new form of spirituality capable of integrating in itself the entire manifold historical experience of humankind and our nation, without excluding multiple variations and pluralism when assessing the past, present and future.

<sup>[56]</sup> It is especially surprising that a denomination whose history may be traced in Russia to the beginning of the twentieth century, experienced all the difficulties of religious persecution equally with the representatives of the Orthodox Church and other confessions, and is recognized all over the world, is still sometimes considered a cult in Russia.

<sup>[57]</sup> S. Shcherbak, «Novye religioznye dvizheniia i sredstva massovoi informatsii v sovremennoi Rossii,» [New religious movements and the mass media in contemporary Russia], *Stranitsy* 11 (1, 2006): 88-112.

<sup>[58]</sup> V. N. Losskiy, *Ocherk*, p. 163.

<sup>[59]</sup> T. Richie, «The Unity of the Spirit: Are Pentecostals Inherently Ecumenists and Inclusivists?» *JEPTA* 26.1 (2006): 21-35.

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