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Food and Drink as Spiritual  
Nourishment in Orthodox Mysticism  
(Ps) Dionysius the Areopagite, St.  
Symeon the New Theologian and  
Nicholaos Cabasilas)

# Plan of what will be discussed:

1. What I mean by Orthodox Mysticism in Philosophy and Theology.
2. The traditional contemporary philosophical and theological view about the use of food and drink for bodily nourishment.
3. The views of three Orthodox mystics on food and drink and how they differ from the traditional contemporary philosophical and theological views.
4. Why we should be based on the Orthodox mystical views on the use of food and drink for a more coherent and justified perspective and on how and why we should fast.

# Mysticism in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology-1

Common Contemporary Definition of Mysticism  
(Merriam-Webster Dictionary):

- 1: the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics,
- 2: the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective exp. (as intuition/insight),
- 3 a: vague speculation : a belief without sound basis b: a theory postulating the possibility of direct and intuitive acquisition of ineffable knowledge or power.

# Mysticism in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology-2

*Jerome Gellman in SEP: 'Philosophers have focused on such topics as the classification of mystical experiences, their nature in different religions and mystical traditions, to what extent mystical experiences are conditioned by a mystic's language and culture, and whether mystical experiences furnish evidence for the truth of their contents. Some philosophers have begun to question the emphasis on experience in favor of examining the entire mystical complex (See Jantzen, 1994 and 1995, and section 9 below). Since this article pertains to mysticism and philosophy, it will concentrate chiefly on topics philosophers have discussed concerning mystical experience.'*

# Mysticism in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology-3

Gellman's emphasis:

1. Philosophical importance of the mystical *experience*.
2. He decides to discuss the (false) dilemma of mystical experience vs. the 'entire mystical complex' as rejected by feminist authors such as Jantzen (who think that mysticism is permeated with androcentric bias).
3. He favours the naturalistic perspective that I reject (i.e., he thinks that there are no supernatural explanations of the mystical experience).

# Mysticism in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology-4

Criticism on Gellman:

Reducing mysticism into an *experience*, i.e., as something that can be analysed, described and discussed by the rationalistic and quantifiable methods of traditional science is both an evidence of a philosophical and theological 'suspicion' towards mysticism and a reason for Gellman's dilemma: if x is something that has been discussed primarily by androcentric science, then of course it can be classified in 'either-or' terms when compared to feministic approaches to religion (very close to a 'straw man' fallacy).

# Mysticism in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology-5

Hepburn on mysticism (Thomson-Gale Enc. of Phil).:

‘...a discomfoting worry. If logic is inapplicable to the mystic’s discourse, does that not come very close to saying that discriminations cannot be made in this field between sense and nonsense, the sound and the unsound? The literal approach must be, for a philosopher, a desperate measure... To treat it as anything else would be methodologically perverse. Apart from the difficulties of discrimination, where logic is inoperative, the approach demands an unshakable prior conviction that the mystic’s paradoxes are to be taken at their face value as reports of veridical insights. Here there is much that can be challenged.’

# Mysticism in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology-6

Ralph Norman (contemp. Theologian): 'Mysticism, then, is a fundamental aspect of the Christian tradition. I have shown how it is intimately linked with a number of historic Christian doctrines, and how a re-appreciation of mysticism can lead to fruitful and creative insights into central Christian doctrines [...]. Further, I have shown how the Christian mystical tradition creates a useful locus for theological exploration of the postmodern. If Christian doctrine is to interact with contemporary thought, then this is certainly an area that needs further investigation. [...] Perhaps, after all, the premodern and postmodern are peculiarly alike, and if theology is to find a way through the thought of a Derrida or Deleuze, its best bet is to re-adopt the insights of the Christian mystical tradition.'



# Mysticism in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology-7

Criticism on Norman:

Postmodernism is incompatible with some mysticisms which emphasise tradition and are anti-relativistic (like the Orthodox Mysticism I discuss here). His view allows and supports a postmodern understanding of the mystical and a mystical understanding of postmodernity, things that cannot be accommodated within an Orthodox mystical perspective.

# Orthodox Mysticism-1

## **St. Dionysius the Areopagite (ps)**

- a. ΓΝΟΦΟΣ ΑΓΝΩΣΙΑΣ
- b. ΓΝΩΣΙΣ proportionally limited by the theologian's superior union of reasoning and intuition.
- c. God can be known through the Divine Names, but Epistemology=>Ethics of ecstatic love –rupture with God
- d. Mystical light as unifying force.

# Orthodox Mysticism-2

## St. Symeon the New Theologian- key ideas:

Humans even though created can see and unite with the triune God during this life (this union is short lived while in the body).

The mystical experience is of the whole person (both mind and body). In the mystical union, man, through divine grace gains something from the characteristic unity of the triune God, becoming, in essence, a threefold hypostasis (τριουπόστατος): he becomes one with God (θέσει) with his body, his soul, and the divine Spirit of whom he partakes.

The heart (and not the intellect nor the mind) is elevated as the organ through which and with which the mystical union can be achieved in this life (indicating a firm belief in the psychosomatic mystical experience and transformation).

# Orthodox Mysticism-3

## OM as a distinct Mystical Tradition:

Cannot be described in terms of subjectivism vs. objectivism (new epistemology-ethics).

Mystical exp. is veridical (i.e., we can say when we have it) but does not obey the laws of traditional logic and reasoning (new epistemology-ethics).

Body and soul are not divided but unified.

No intellectualism: emphasis on the heart- not the mind.

The mystical union can be achieved while alive and with the body; for later hesychastic mystics (St. Greg. Palamas- Nicholas Cabasilas): this union is via the divine energies and not the divine essence. This mysticism is made part of the Orthodox dogma by the Ninth Ecumenical Synod (1341-1351).

# Contemporary Philosophy of Food and Drink (feasting vs. fasting)

- Based on contract theories of duties-rights
- Intrinsic qualities, consequentialism, and the speciesism approaches cannot answer the demand for a re-sanctification of nature.

# Orthodox Mysticism on food and drink: feasting and fasting

- Food and drink not evil by themselves.
- Problem lies in the desire of the flesh- vain thoughts.
- Ecstatic Love entails asceticism.
- Re-consecration and re-sanctification of Nature through the mystical union of God and Creation effected via the Divine Mysteries of the Church (Nicholaos Cabasilas).