CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Theology and Mysticism in the Tradition of the Eastern Church

It is our intention, in the following essay, to study certain aspects of eastern spirituality in relation to the fundamental themes of the Orthodox dogmatic tradition. In the present work, therefore, the term 'mystical theology' denotes no more than a spirituality which expresses a doctrinal attitude.

In a certain sense all theology is mystical, inasmuch as it shows forth the divine mystery: the data of revelation. On the other hand, mysticism is frequently opposed to theology as a realm inaccessible to understanding, as an unutterable mystery, a hidden depth, to be lived rather than known; yielding itself to a specific experience which surpasses our faculties of understanding rather than to any perception of sense or of intelligence. If we adopted this latter conception unreservedly, resolutely opposing mysticism to theology, we should be led in the last resort to the thesis of Bergson who distinguishes, in his *Deux Sources*, the 'static religion' of the Churches from the 'dynamic religion' of the mystics; the former social and conservative in character, the latter personal and creative.

To what extent was Bergson justified in stating this opposition? This is a difficult question, all the more so since the two terms which Bergson opposes on the religious plane are rooted in the two poles of his philosophical

vision of the universe—nature and the *élan vital.* Quite apart from this attitude of Bergson, however, one frequently hears expressed the view which would see in mysticism a realm reserved for the few, an exception to the common rule, a privilege vouchsafed to a few souls who enjoy direct experience of the truth, others, meanwhile, having to rest content with a more or less blind submission to dogmas imposed from without, as to a coercive authority. This opposition is sometimes carried to great lengths, especially if the historical reality be forced into a preconceived pattern. Thus the mystics are set up against the theologians, the contemplatives against the prelates, the saints against the Church. It will suffice to recall many a passage of Harnack, Paul Sabatier's *Life of St. Francis*, and other works, most frequently by protestant historians.

The eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology; between personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogma affirmed by the Church. The following words spoken a century ago by a great Orthodox theologian, the Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, express this attitude perfectly: 'none of the mysteries of the most secret wisdom of God ought to appear alien or altogether transcendent to us, but in all humility we must apply our spirit to the contemplation of divine things'.[1] To put it in another way, we must live the dogma expressing a revealed truth, which appears to us as an unfathomable mystery, in such a fashion that instead of assimilating the mystery to our mode of understanding, we should, on the contrary, look for a profound change, an inner transformation of spirit, enabling us to experience it mystically. Far from being mutually opposed, theology and mysticism support and complete each other. One is impossible without the other. If the mystical experience is

[1] *Sermons and Addresses of the Metropolitan Philaret*, Moscow, 1844, Part II, p. 87. (In Russian.)

a personal working out of the content of the common faith, theology is an expression, for the profit of all, of that which can be experienced by everyone. Outside the truth kept by the whole Church personal experience would be deprived of all certainty, of all objectivity. It would be a mingling of truth and of falsehood, of reality and of illusion: 'mysticism' in the bad sense of the word. On the other hand, the teaching of the Church would have no hold on souls if it did not in some degree express an inner experience of truth, granted in different measure to each one of the faithful. There is, therefore, no Christian mysticism without theology; but, above all, there is no theology without mysticism. It is not by chance that the tradition of the Eastern Church has reserved the name of 'theologian' peculiarly for three sacred writers of whom the first is St. John, most 'mystical' of the four Evangelists; the second St. Gregory Nazianzen, writer of contemplative poetry; and the third St. Symeon, called 'the New Theologian', the singer of union with God. Mysticism is accordingly treated in the present work as the perfecting and crown of all theology: as theology *par excellence*.

Unlike gnosticism,[1] 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 θεώσις 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. All the development of the dogmatic battles which the Church has waged down the centuries appears to us, if we regard it from the purely spiritual standpoint, as

[1] See the article by M. H.-Ch. Puech: 'Où en est le problème du gnosticisme?', *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*, 1934, Nos. 2 and 3.

dominated by the constant preoccupation which the Church has had to safeguard, at each moment of her history, for all Christians, the possibility of attaining to the fullness of the mystical union. So the Church struggled against the gnostics in defence of this same idea of deification as the universal end: 'God became man that men might become gods'. She affirmed, against the Arians, the dogma of the consubstantial Trinity; for it is the Word, the Logos, who opens to us the way to union with the Godhead; and if the incarnate Word has not the same substance with the Father, if he be not truly God, our deification is impossible. The Church condemned the Nestorians that she might overthrow the middle wall of partition, whereby, in the person of the Christ himself, they would have separated God from man. She rose up against the Apollinarians and Monophysites to show that, since the fullness of true human nature has been assumed by the Word, it is our whole humanity that must enter into union with God. She warred with the Monothelites because, apart from the union of the two wills, divine and human, there could be no attaining to deification—'God created man by his will alone, but He cannot save him without the co-operation of the human will.' The Church emerged triumphant from the iconoclastic controversy, affirming the possibility of the expression through a material medium of the divine realities—symbol and pledge of our sanctification. The main preoccupation, the issue at stake, in the questions which successively arise respecting the Holy Spirit, grace and the Church herself—this last the dogmatic question of our own time—is always the possibility, the manner, or the means of our union with God. All the history of Christian dogma unfolds itself about this mystical centre, guarded by different weapons against its many and diverse assailants in the course of successive ages.

The theological doctrines which have been elaborated

in the course of these struggles can be treated in the most direct relation to the vital end—that of union with God—to the attainment of which they are subservient. Thus they appear as the foundations of Christian spirituality. It is this that we shall understand in speaking of 'mystical theology'; not mysticism properly so-called, the personal experiences of different masters of the spiritual life. Such experiences, for that matter, more often than not remain inaccessible to us: even though they may find verbal expression. What, in reality, can one say of the mystical experience of St. Paul: 'I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth); such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth); how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter'.[1] To venture to pass any judgement upon the nature of this experience it would be necessary to understand it more fully than did St. Paul, who avows his ignorance: 'I cannot tell: God knoweth.' We deliberately leave on one side all question of mystical psychology. Nor is it theological doctrines as such that we propose to set forth in the present work, but only such elements of theology as are indispensable for the understanding of a spirituality: the dogmas which constitute the foundation of mysticism. Here, then, is the first definition and limitation of our subject, which is the mystical theology of the Eastern Church.

The second limitation circumscribes our subject, so to say, in space. It is the Christian East, or, more precisely, the Eastern Orthodox Church, which will form the field of our studies in mystical theology. We must recognize that this limitation is somewhat artificial. In reality, since

[1] II Cor. xii, 2–4.

the cleavage between East and West only dates from the middle of the eleventh century, all that is prior to this date constitutes a common and indivisible treasure for both parts of a divided Christendom. The Orthodox Church would not be what it is if it had not had St. Cyprian, St. Augustine and St. Gregory the Great. No more could the Roman Catholic Church do without St. Athanasius, St. Basil or St. Cyril of Alexandria. Thus, when one would speak of the mystical theology of the East or of the West, one takes one's stand within one of the two traditions which remained, down to a certain moment, two local traditions within the one Church, witnessing to a single Christian truth; but which subsequently part, the one from the other, and give rise to two different dogmatic attitudes, irreconcilable on several points. Can we judge the two traditions by taking our stand on neutral ground equally foreign to the one as to the other? That would be to judge Christianity from a non-Christian standpoint: in other words, to refuse in advance to understand anything whatever about the object of study. For objectivity in no wise consists in taking one's stand outside an object but, on the contrary, in considering one's object in itself and by itself. There are fields in which what is commonly styled 'objectivity' is only indifference, and where indifference means incomprehension. In the present state of dogmatic difference between East and West it is essential, if one wishes to study the mystical theology of the Eastern Church, to choose between two possible standpoints. Either, to place oneself on western dogmatic ground and to examine the eastern tradition across that of the West—that is, by way of criticism—or else to present that tradition in the light of the dogmatic attitude of the Eastern Church. This latter course is for us the only possible one.

It will, perhaps, be objected that the dogmatic dissension between East and West only arose by chance, that it

has not been of decisive importance, that it was rather a question of two different historical spheres which must sooner or later have separated in order that each might follow its own path; and, finally, that the dogmatic dispute was no more than a pretext for the breaking asunder once and for all of an ecclesiastical unity which had in fact long ceased to be a reality.

Such assertions, which are heard very frequently in the East as in the West, are the outcome of a purely secular mentality and of the widespread habit of treating Church history according to methods which exclude the religious nature of the Church. For the 'historian of the Church' the religious factor disappears and finds itself displaced by others; such, for instance, as the play of political or social interests, the part played by racial or cultural conditions, considered as determining factors in the life of the Church. We think ourselves shrewder, more up to date, in invoking these factors as the true guiding forces of ecclesiastical history. While recognizing their importance, a Christian historian can scarcely resign himself to regarding them otherwise than as accidental to the essential nature of the Church. He cannot cease to see in the Church an autonomous body, subject to a different law than that of the determinism of this world. If we consider the dogmatic question of the procession of the Holy Spirit, which divided East and West, we cannot treat it as a fortuitous phenomenon in the history of the Church. From the religious point of view it is the sole issue of importance in the chain of events which terminated in the separation. Conditioned, as it may well have been, by various factors, this dogmatic choice was—for the one party as for the other—a spiritual commitment, a conscious taking of sides in a matter of faith.

If we are often led to minimize the importance of the dogmatic question which determined all the subsequent development of the two traditions, this is by reason of a

certain insensitivity towards dogma—which is considered as something external and abstract. It is said that it is spirituality which matters. The dogmatic difference is of no consequence. Yet spirituality and dogma, mysticism and theology, are inseparably linked in the life of the Church. As regards the Eastern Church, we have already remarked that she makes no sharp distinction between theology and mysticism, between the realm of the common faith and that of personal experience. Thus, if we would speak of mystical theology in the eastern tradition we cannot do otherwise than consider it within the dogmatic setting of the Orthodox Church.

Before coming to grips with our subject it is necessary to say a few words about the Orthodox Church, little known down to the present day in the West. Father Congar's book *Divided Christendom*, though very remarkable in many respects, remains, despite all his striving after objectivity, subject, in those pages which he devotes to the Orthodox Church, to certain preconceived notions. 'Where the West,' he says, 'on the basis at once developed and narrow of Augustinian ideology, claimed for the Church independence in life and organization, and thus laid down the lines of a very definite ecclesiology, the East settled down in practice, and to some extent in theory, to a principle of unity which was political, non-religious, and not truly universal.'[1] To Father Congar, as to the majority of Catholic and Protestant writers who have expressed themselves on this subject, Orthodoxy presents itself under the form of a federation of national churches, having as its basis a political principle—the state-church. One can venture upon such generalizations as these only by ignoring both the canonical groundwork and the history of the Eastern Church. The view which would base the unity of

[1] M. J. Congar, O.P., *Chrétiens désunis. Principes d'un 'oecuménisme' catholique*, Paris, 1937, p. 15. English translation by M. A. Bousfield, *Divided Christendom*, London, 1939, p. 13.

a local church on a political, racial or cultural principle is considered by the Orthodox Church as a heresy, specially known by the name of *philetism*.[1] It is the ecclesiastical territory, the area sanctified by more or less ancient Christian tradition which forms the basis of a metropolitan province, administered by an archbishop or metropolitan, with the bishops from every diocese coming together from time to time in synod. If metropolitan provinces are grouped together to form local churches under the jurisdiction of a bishop who often bears the title of patriarch, it is still the community of local tradition and of historical destiny (as well as convenience in calling together a council from many provinces), which determines the formation of these large circles of jurisdiction, the territories of which do not necessarily correspond to the political boundaries of a state.[2] The Patriarch of Constantinople enjoys a certain primacy of honour, arbitrating from time to time in disputes, but without exercising a jurisdiction over the whole body of the oecumenical Church. The local churches of the East had more or less the same attitude towards the apostolic patriarchate of Rome—first see of the Church before the separation, and symbol of her unity. Orthodoxy recognizes no visible head of the Church. The unity of the Church expresses itself through the communion of the heads of local churches among themselves, by the agreement of all the churches in regard to a local council—which thus acquires a universal import; finally, in exceptional cases, it may manifest itself

[1] Synod of Constantinople, 1872. v. Mansi, *Coll. concil.*, vol. 45, 417–546. See also the article by M. Zyzykine: 'L'Eglise orthodoxe et la nation,' *Irénikon*, 1936, pp. 265–77.

[2] Thus the Patriarchate of Moscow includes the dioceses of N. America and that of Tokyo beyond the frontiers of Russia. By contrast, the Catholicate of Georgia, though within the bounds of the U.S.S.R., does not form part of the Russian Church. The territories of the Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem are politically dependent on many different powers.

through a general council.[1] The catholicity of the Church, far from being the privilege of any one see or specific centre, is realized rather in the richness and multiplicity of the local traditions which bear witness unanimously to a single Truth: to that which is preserved always, everywhere and by all. Since the Church is catholic in all her parts, each one of her members—not only the clergy but also each layman—is called to confess and to defend the truth of tradition; opposing even the bishops should they fall into heresy. A Christian who has received the gift of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of the Holy Chrism must have a full awareness of his faith: he is always responsible for the Church. Hence the restless and sometimes agitated character of the ecclesiastical life of Byzantium, of Russia and of other countries in the Orthodox world. This, however, is the price paid for a religious vitality, an intensity of spiritual life which penetrates the whole mass of believers, united in the awareness that they form a single body with the hierarchy of the Church. From this, too, comes the unconquerable energy which enables Orthodoxy to go through all trials, all cataclysms and upheavals, adapting itself continually to the new historical reality and showing itself stronger than outward circumstances. The persecutions of the faithful in Russia, the systematic fury of which has not been able to destroy the Church, are the best witness to a power which is not of this world.

The Orthodox Church, though commonly referred to as *Eastern*, considers herself none the less the universal Church; and this is true in the sense that she is not limited by any particular type of culture, by the legacy of

[1] The name *Oecumenical Council* given in the East to the first seven general synods corresponds to a reality of a purely historical character. These are the councils of the 'oecumenical' territories, that is to say of the Byzantine Empire which extended (theoretically, at least) throughout the Christian world. In later epochs the Orthodox Church has known general councils which, without bearing the title of 'oecumenical' were neither smaller nor less important.

any one civilization (Hellenistic or otherwise), or by strictly eastern cultural forms. Moreover, *eastern* can mean so many things: from the cultural point of view the East is less homogeneous than the West. What have Hellenism and Russian culture in common, notwithstanding the Byzantine origins of Christianity in Russia? Orthodoxy has been the leaven in too many different cultures to be itself considered a cultural form of eastern Christianity. The forms are different: the faith is one. The Orthodox Church has never confronted national cultures with another which could be regarded as specifically Orthodox. It is for this reason that her missionary work has been able to expand so prodigiously: witness the conversion of Russia to Christianity during the tenth and eleventh centuries, and, at a later date, the preaching of the Gospel across the whole of Asia. Towards the end of the eighteenth century Orthodox missions reached the Aleutian Islands and Alaska, passed thence to North America, creating new dioceses of the Russian Church beyond the confines of Russia, spreading to China and Japan.[1] The anthropological and cultural variations which one encounters from Greece to the remotest parts of Asia, and from Egypt to the Arctic, do not destroy the homogeneous character of this kinship of spirituality, very different from that of the Christian West.

There is a great richness of forms of the spiritual life to be found within the bounds of Orthodoxy, but monasticism remains the most classical of all. Unlike western monasticism, however, that of the East does not include a multiplicity of different orders. This fact is explained by the conception of the monastic life, the aim of which can only be union with God in a complete renunciation of the life of this present world. If the secular clergy (married priests and deacons), or confraternities of laymen may

[1] See S. Bolshakoff, *The Foreign Missions of the Russian Orthodox Church*, London, 1943.

occupy themselves with social work, or devote themselves to other outward activities, it is otherwise with the monks. The latter take the habit above all in order to apply themselves to prayer, to the interior life, in cloister or hermitage. Between a monastery of the common life and the solitude of an anchorite who carries on the traditions of the Desert Fathers there are many intermediate types of monastic institution. One could say broadly that eastern monasticism was exclusively contemplative, if the distinction between the two ways, active and contemplative, had in the East the same meaning as in the West. In fact, for an eastern monk the two ways are inseparable. The one cannot be exercised without the other, for the ascetic rule and the school of interior prayer receive the name of spiritual *activity*. If the monks occupy themselves from time to time with physical labours, it is above all with an ascetic end in view: the sooner to overcome their rebel nature, as well as to avoid idleness, enemy of the spiritual life. To attain to union with God, in the measure in which it is realizable here on earth, requires continual effort, or, more precisely, an unceasing vigil that the integrity of the inward man, 'the union of heart and spirit' (to use an expression of Orthodox asceticism), withstand all the assaults of the enemy: every irrational movement of our fallen nature. Human nature must undergo a change; it must be more and more transfigured by grace in the way of sanctification, which has a range which is not only spiritual but also bodily—and hence cosmic. The spiritual work of a monk living in community or a hermit withdrawn from the world retains all its worth for the entire universe even though it remain hidden from the sight of all. This is why monastic institutions have always enjoyed great veneration in every country of the Orthodox world.

The part played by the great centres of spirituality was very considerable not only in ecclesiastical life but also in the realm of culture and politics. The monasteries of

Mount Sinai and of Studion, near Constantinople, the monastic republic of Mount Athos, bringing together religious of all nations (there were Latin monks there prior to the schism), other great centres beyond the bounds of the Empire such as the monastery of Tirnovo, in Bulgaria, and the great *lavras* of Russia—Petcheri at Kiev and the Holy Trinity near Moscow—have all been strongholds of Orthodoxy, schools of the spiritual life, whose religious and moral influence was of the first importance in the moulding of peoples newly converted to Christianity.[1] But if the monastic ideal had so great an influence upon souls, it was, nevertheless, not the only type of the spiritual life which the Church offered to the faithful. The way of union with God may be pursued outside the cloister, amid all the circumstances of human life. The outward forms may change, the monasteries may disappear, as in our own day they disappeared for a time in Russia, but the spiritual life goes on with the same intensity, finding new modes of expression.

Eastern hagiography, which is extremely rich, shows beside the holy monks many examples of spiritual perfection acquired by simple laymen and married people living in the world. It knows also strange and unwonted paths to sanctification: that, for instance, of the 'fools in Christ', committing extravagant acts that their spiritual gifts might remain hidden from the eyes of those about them under the hideous aspect of madness; or, rather, that they

[1] There is some useful information about eastern monasticism in the little book by Fr. N. F. Robinson, S.S.J.E., entitled *Monasticism in the Orthodox Churches* (London, 1916). For Mount Athos, see Hasluck: *Athos and its Monasteries* (London, 1924) and F. Spunda, *Der heilige Berg Athos* (Leipzig, 1928). For the monastic life in Russia, see the following studies of Igor Smolitsch, 'Studien zum Klosterwesen Russlands', in *Kyrios*, No. 2 (1937), pp. 95–112, and No. 1 (1939), pp. 29–38, and, above all, the same author's 'Das altrussische Mönchtum' (XI-XVI Jhr.), Würzburg, 1940, in *Das östliche Christentum*, XI, and *Russischer Mönchtum*, Würzburg, 1953.

might be freed from the ties of this world in their most intimate and most spiritually troublesome expression, that of our social 'ego'.[1] Union with God sometimes manifests itself through charismatic gifts as, for example, in that of spiritual direction exercised by the *starets* or elder. These latter are most frequently monks who, having passed many years of their life in prayer and secluded from all contact with the world, towards the end of their life throw open to all comers the door of their cell. They possess the gift of being able to penetrate to the unfathomable depths of the human conscience, of revealing sins and inner difficulties which normally remain unknown to us, of raising up overburdened souls, and of directing men not only in their spiritual course but also in all the vicissitudes of their life in the world.[2]

The individual experiences of the greatest mystics of the Orthodox Church more often than not remain unknown to us. Apart from a few rare exceptions the spiritual literature of the Christian East possesses scarcely any autobiographical account dealing with the interior life, such as those of Angela of Foligno and Henry Suso, or the *Histoire d'une âme* of St. Teresa of Lisieux. The way of mystical union is nearly always a secret between God and the soul concerned, which is never confided to others unless, it may be, to a confessor or to a few disciples. What is published abroad is the fruit of this union: wisdom, understanding of the divine mysteries, expressing itself in theological or moral teaching or in advice for the edification of one's brethren. As to the inward and personal aspect of the mystical experience, it remains hidden from

[1] See on this subject E. Benz, 'Heilige Narrheit', in *Kyrios*, 1938, Nos. 1 and 2, pp. 1–55; Mme Behr-Sigel, 'Les Fous pour le Christ et la sainteté laïque dans l'ancienne Russie', in *Irénikon*, Vol. XV (1939), pp. 554–65; Gamayoun, 'Etudes sur la spiritualité populaire russe: les fous pour le Christ', in *Russie et Chrétienté*, 1938–9, I, pp. 57–77.

[2] Smolitsch, *Leben und Lehre der Starzen*, Vienna, 1936.

the eyes of all. It must be recognized that it was only at a comparatively late period, towards the thirteenth century in fact, that mystical individualism made its appearance in western literature. St. Bernard speaks directly of his personal experience only very seldom—on but a single occasion in the Sermons on the Song of Songs—and then with a sort of reluctance, after the example of St. Paul. It was necessary that a certain cleavage should occur between personal experience and the common faith, between the life of the individual and the life of the Church, that spirituality and dogma, mysticism and theology, could become two distinct spheres; and that souls unable to find adequate nourishment in the theological *summae* should turn to search greedily in the accounts of individual mystical experience in order to reinvigorate themselves in an atmosphere of spirituality. Mystical individualism has remained alien to the spirituality of the Eastern Church.

Father Congar is right when he says: 'We have become *different men*. We have the same God but before him we are different men, unable to agree as to the nature of our relationship with him.'[1] But in order to estimate accurately this spiritual divergency it would be necessary to examine it in its most perfect manifestations: in the different types of sanctity in East and West since the schism. We should then be able to give an account of the close link which always exists between the dogma which the Church confesses and the spiritual fruit which it bears. For the inner experience of the Christian develops within the circle delineated by the teaching of the Church: within the dogmatic framework which moulds his person. If even now a political doctrine professed by the members of a party can so fashion their mentality as to produce a type of man distinguishable from other men by certain moral or psychical marks, *a fortiori* religious dogma succeeds in transforming the very souls of those who confess it. They

[1] Congar, op. cit., p. 47.

are men different from other men, from those who have been formed by another dogmatic conception. It is never possible to understand a spirituality if one does not take into account the dogma in which it is rooted. We must accept facts as they are, and not seek to explain the difference between eastern and western spirituality on racial or cultural grounds when a greater issue, a dogmatic issue, is at stake. Neither may we say that the questions of the procession of the Holy Spirit or of the nature of grace have no great importance in the scheme of Christian doctrine, which remains more or less identical among Roman Catholics and among Orthodox. In dogmas so fundamental as these it is this 'more or less' which is important, for it imparts a different emphasis to all doctrine, presents it in another light; in other words, gives place to another spirituality.

We do not wish to embark on a 'comparative theology'; still less to renew confessional disputes. We confine ourselves here to stating the fact of a dogmatic dissimilarity between the Christian East and the Christian West, before examining certain of the elements of the theology which forms the foundation of eastern spirituality. It will be for the reader to judge in what measure these theological aspects of Orthodox mysticism can be of use for the comprehension of a spirituality which is alien to western Christianity. If while remaining loyal to our respective dogmatic standpoints we could succeed in getting to know each other, above all in those points in which we differ, this would undoubtedly be a surer way towards unity than that which would leave differences on one side. For, in the words of Karl Barth, 'the union of the Churches is not made, but we discover it'.[1]

[1] 'The Church and the churches', *Oecumenica*, III, No. 2, July, 1936.