

Ascetic Eros. Love and Body in Mystical Union: St Teresa of Avila and St Gregory Palamas

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Teresa of Avila – 1515 to 2015 Conference at St Mary's University, Twickenham, London. 18th-20th June 2015.

With great thanks to Yvonne Browne for her valuable language advices.

Today I would like to present here a sort of experiment, where I will try to compare two very different mystics from two different Christian traditions, from different times and who had extremely different styles of seeking unity with God. Using quite different terminologies, they practiced a similar kind of unity in different ways. Therefore the connection between them is not obvious and any sort of comparison of their doctrines holds some risk. Being aware of this, I decided nevertheless to make the attempt.

These two mystics are St Gregory Palamas and St Teresa of Avila. The first one of them – the Byzantine theologian the Archbishop of Thessaloniki, one of the most important codifiers of principles of Orthodox mysticism – of the Hesychasm, the author of a kind of summary of this mystical tradition – *The Triads*, who lived in the years 1296-1357. In the middle of the XIV century Palamas entered vigorous discussion with Barlaam of Calabria, where he defended the mystical practices of the monks of Athos and the theological principles connected with these practices. As a result of this long and intense discussion, the informal principles of orthodox mysticism were not only officially included in the theology of the Eastern Christian Church, but they were also legitimized as basic ones, this way defining the whole theological corpus of this Church as primarily negative mystical theology.

On the other hand, there is St Teresa of Avila, who belonged to an entirely different tradition – to the one, to which, incidentally, belonged the opponent of Palamas, Barlaam of Calabria, in other words, to Western Christianity. Moreover, she lived in completely different times, in another historical context – during the beginning of the Counter-Reformation, practicing an entirely different mysticism, the one which is sometimes called female mysticism, the phenomenon being practically unknown in the Eastern tradition.

What could there be in common between them? It may be easier to find some parallels between Palamas and, let's say, St John of the Cross in the context of negative theology. Finding similarities would be even easier if we were comparing Palamas with the controversial, although undeniable

representative of the Western tradition, Meister Eckhart. Moreover, both theologians lived at the same time and, what's more, continuously referred to the same authors.

However, I believe that one can compare such different mysticisms as those of Palamas and St Teresa, and that a common structure, extremely important for both doctrines, could be extrapolated from them. I am talking about a certain structure that unveils itself in the soul in the course of its relations with God (prior to their total unity) and also – under certain stipulations – in the unity itself. This moment of such an unusual relationship can be grasped through a number of notions: *asceticism*, *will* which annihilates its own source – *I*, *self* or *ego*, purified and calmed *mind*, but also – *love*, meaning love also in its erotic sense, as *eros*. Although the most unusual, paradoxical and therefore controversial thing about this moment could be the fact that then the soul and the body are practically indistinguishable, at least considering their role in the unity with God. It is not about replacing one notion with another, about confusing contexts in the course of their interpretation, but rather about such a conjunction of both levels – the soul and the body, when they appear to play almost the same role, and it is particularly visible at the very moment of the mystic's uniting with *sacrum*. Owing to such a special role of the body in that moment, the unity with God – described as undoubtedly erotic – acquires particular fullness.

I would like to underline here, that the only type of the body I am talking about is the one, that can be described through the Greek noun *soma*. This word means *body*, as opposed to *flesh*, which corresponds to the Greek noun *sarx*.

And, finally, the last hypothesis of this paper is that this specific erotic relation with *sacrum* appears to be here an equivalent of Eucharist. It is evident in the works of St Gregory Palamas and I will try to find the same phenomenon in the writings of St Teresa of Avila. I intend to treat the doctrine of Palamas as a sort of interpretational key for Teresa.

Thus, there are a few key-words I have used in the title of this paper: *ascetic*, *eros*, *love* and *body*, which means that I will talk here about a special type of *eros* which is the ascetic one, and I will try to show that such an *eros* is an example of *love* as a more common notion. Moreover, this very specific type of love must be in some way connected with the body.

Thereby in this short conference paper I will try to interpret each of these notions and their bond both to St Teresa's and St Gregory's mysticisms.

The first notion is the *ascetic* and I understand it in the most ordinary sense, so there is no need to give it much time. The only thing I would like to mention is that it indicates a special kind of exercise, a certain *praxis* of the mystic pointed to an interiorization of the center of his existence, a redirection of the attention, mind and will to the inside, turning him into a so-called *inner person* or

inner man (Plato's notion¹ we can find both in Palamas' and in Teresa's writings). The ways to achieve this include prayer, self-mortification and different kinds of psychosomatic practices. The latter ones were particularly popular among hesychasts.

Thus, the *ascetic eros* would mean here a special kind of love, which would correspond with a sexual relation in its most common sense or, if we assume that asceticism is connected with interiorization of experience, then its *eros* is either reflection or analogue, or even continuation and particular example of what external *eros* is.

In any case, *eros* defines the relationship between the mystic and God, and it has to be said that in the Christian tradition usage of this notion is far from being an unusual occurrence. Even though for the description of these relations as *love* the most common term was the Greek noun *agape* (as also its verbal form *agapao*), which denoted a sublime type of love, for example, the one between a parent and a child.

Though, this should not deceive us, since the verb *agapao* sometimes played the role of *erao* (examples can be found in the outstanding *Greek-English Lexicon* by Liddell and Scott²). But even if it were only extraordinary situations, Palamas often talks about this phenomenon using nouns derived from the verbs *erao*, *agapao* and *fileo* – the third out of three basic Greek terms for *love* – as synonyms. We can see this inter alia in *Triads II,ii,23*. Moreover, he sometimes speaks of the essence of God as of erotic love. For example, in the *One Hundred and Fifty Texts* he tells us directly: “Ἐκεῖνο δὲ τὸ Πνεῦμα τοῦ ἀνωτάτου Λόγου, οἷόν τις ἔρος ἐστὶν...”³ – “The Spirit of the supreme Logos is a kind of [...] *eros*”⁴.

And there is nothing strange about it, since Palamas wasn't the first one to do this. For example, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who in his work *The Divine Names* uses *eros* in multiple ways, practically giving the definition of this type of love: “Ἔστιν ὁ θεῖος ἔρος καὶ ἐκστατικός· ἐξίστησι γὰρ ἑαυτῶν τοὺς ἐρῶντας, ὡς ζῆν καὶ κινεῖσθαι οὐκ ἐκείνους, ἀλλ' ἐν αὐτοῖς τοὺς

¹ ὁ ἐντὸς ἄνθρωπος from Plato's *Republic*, IX, 589ab.

² Liddell, Henry George; Scott, Robert; Jones, Henry Stuart; McKenzie, Roderick, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1996, ἀγαπάω, p.6.

³ PG 150, 1145A (ΓΡΗΓΟΡΙΟΥ ΑΡΧΙΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΥ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ ΤΟΥ ΠΑΛΑΜΑ “ΕΚ ΤΩΝ ΤΟΥ ΑΥΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΛΟΓΩΝ ΥΠΕΡ ΤΩΝ ΙΕΡΩΣ ΗΣΥΧΑΖΟΝΤΩΝ” [in:] ΓΡΗΓΟΡΙΟΥ ΑΡΧΙΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΥ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ ΤΟΥ ΠΑΛΑΜΑ ΤΑ ΕΥΡΙΣΚΟΜΕΝΑ ΠΑΝΤΑ – GREGORII PALAMÆ, THESSALONICENSIS ARCHIEPISCOPI OPERA OMNIA THEOLOGICA, HOMILETICA, HAGIOGRAPHICA, POLEMICA, ASCETICA, ... Accurante et denuo recognoscente J.-P. Migne, Bibleotecæ Cleri Universæ sive Cursuum Completorum in Singulos Scientiæ Ecclesiasticæ Ramos Editore, Gregotii Tomus Prior, Patrologiæ Graecæ Tomus CL, Petit-Montrouge, 1865.).

⁴ St Gregory Palamas, *Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life: One Hundred and Fifty Texts* [in:] Palmer, G. E. H.; Ware, Kallistos; Sherrard, Philip. *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. Volume 4, London, “Faber and Faber”, 1999, p. 361.

ἐπομένους”⁵ – “This divine yearning (eros – *A.M.*) brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to self but to the beloved”⁶.

What could be the meaning of this? First of all, this is the kind of relationship, whose participants are so close that they become completely annihilated for the other person and relinquish their own subjectivity. Loss of subjectivity combines here with total union with *the Other*: another person or simply some kind of *otherness* as a common notion, but at the same time as something real. Similar motives concerning the essence of *eros* could be found even in rather distant, at least historically, from Pseudo-Dionysius and Palamas – contexts: for example, in Georges Bataille’s work *Erotism*. In this text attention is paid to the following extremely important motif: erotic love and death always go hand in hand, they are similar figures of the same phenomenon⁷. And this is undoubtedly confirmed by the motif of the mystic’s soul dying for the world, and, finally, for the self. Could annihilation of one’s own subjectivity possibly be anything other than death while living, death for the world, death of the outer person?

Secondly, the distinctive feature of this type of love is also pleasure, which accompanies such self-annihilation and which is immensely desired.

And thirdly, this desire is so intense, *inter alia*, for the reason that it appears as a concentration or a recollection of all desires, of a whole person’s attention and will, of all energies, as Palamas would say.

What, from this perspective, can we see in St Teresa’s description of love of God? There is, undoubtedly, a kind of practice, love united with death, self-annihilation, pleasure. One quotation should suffice, although we can easily produce further examples: “it is possible for a soul enamoured of her Spouse to experience all these joys and swoons and mortal agonies and afflictions and delights and rejoicings in Him, when she has left all worldly joys for love of Him and has placed herself and left herself wholly in His hands. And this not only in word, as some do, but in very truth, with words confirmed by actions”⁸. This quotation comes from *Conceptions of the Love of God*⁹. If there were still

⁵ PG 3, 776A (ΔΙΟΝΥΣΙΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΑΡΕΙΟΠΛΑΓΙΤΟΥ ΤΑ ΣΩΖΟΜΕΝΑ ΠΑΝΤΑ – S. DIONYSII AREOPAGITÆ OPERA OMNIA QUÆ EXSTANT, et commentarii quibus illustrantur, studio et opera Balthasaris Corderii, Societatis Jesu Doctoris Theologi. Accurante et denuo recognoscente J.-P. Migne, Bibliothecæ Cleri Universæ sive Cursuum Completorum in Singulos Scientiæ Ecclesiasticæ Ramos Editore, Tomus Prior, Patrologiæ Graecæ Tomus III, Petit-Montrouge, 1857).

⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 712A (IV, 13) [in:] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, translation by Colm Luibheid, “Classics of Western Spirituality”, “Paulist Press”, New York, 1987, 712A (IV, 13, p.82).

⁷ Georges Bataille, *Erotism. Death and Sensuality*, transl. by Mary Dalwood, “City Lights Books”, San Francisco, 1986, p.11 *passim*.

⁸ St Teresa of Avila, *Conceptions of the Love of God* [in:] St Teresa Of Avila, *The Complete Works*, vol. 2, translated and edited by E. Allison Peers, “A Continuum imprint”, “Burns and Oates”, London, New York, 2002 p.361.

any doubt about “recollection and elevation of the spirit”¹⁰, which in the cited fragment can be read from the words about leaving herself wholly, we can find it not only in this work, but inter alia in *Spiritual Testimonies* and, generally, in all her texts describing this kind of unity.

Is it really about *eros* and not about other above-mentioned types of love? It is difficult for me to judge it from a lexicological perspective. Unfortunately, I do not know Spanish well enough to safely distinguish from one another the notions used by Teresa to describe love as I distinguish their Greek counterparts. Teresa uses, inter alia, verbs: *amar* and *quero*, as also nouns: *amor*, *caridad*, *merced* and even *amistad* (friendship). I am attempting to classify them on the basis of their features and functions. However, I would risk the hypothesis that, within such a fundamental experience as reaching the frontiers of self-immanence, as described by Teresa, these notions – exactly as it is in Greek – merge with each other into one more general notion of *love*, where all of its varieties – in this rather unusual situation – appear to be synonymic. And then we can see something that is described by St Teresa in the *Way of Perfection*: “but in this house [...] all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped”¹¹. This is the first trait of *ascetic* or inner *eros* which, incidentally, is immersed in a state that can be rather called *entasy*, than *ecstasy*: it is impossible to distinguish it here from the other types of love. In other words, love in mystical unity cannot be deprived of the erotic dimension.

So such love at the limits of the mystic’s immanence is a kind of passion, which appears to be the sine qua non of the union with *sacrum*. This is no wonder, since it was perceived as one of the ineffaceable elements of the soul, even in the situation of mystical rapture. It is connected with the division of the soul, which is derived from Plato's *Republic*, where parts of the soul are *reason*, *spirit* and *appetite*¹². In the Christian mystical tradition, to say nothing of strictly the Neo-Platonic tradition, in this context it is worth mentioning, inter alia, St Gregory of Nyssa, who also proposed “triple division of the soul, into such parts as thinking, desiring and irritable (that is wrathful, the one that includes emotions)”¹³. Something similar can be found also in the works of Evagrius Ponticus and a number of other theologians. On the other hand, St Gregory Palamas, accepting this division, in his

⁹ or *Meditations on the Song of Songs* in other translation (St Teresa of Avila, *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, 1.6 [in:] *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila*, vol. 2, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D., “ICS Publications”, “Institute of Carmelite Studies”, Washington, D.C., 1980, p.218).

¹⁰ St Teresa of Avila, *Spiritual Testimonies*, 1.2 [in:] *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila*, Volume One, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D., “ICS Publications”, “Institute of Carmelite Studies”, Washington, D.C., 1976, p.372.

¹¹ St Teresa of Avila, *Book Called Way of Perfection*, 4.7 [in:] *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila*, vol. 2, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D., “ICS Publications”, “Institute of Carmelite Studies”, Washington, D.C., 1980, p.30.

¹² *Republic* 473cd.

¹³ Сергей Хоружий, *К феноменологии аскезы*, „Издательство гуманитарной литературы”, Москва, 1998, p. 41.

Triad I, describes *praxis* according to each part of the soul in the following way: “For the senses we ordain the object and limit of their scope, this work of the law being called ‘temperance’. In the affective part of the soul, we bring about the best state, which bears the name ‘love’ (*agape* – *A.M.*). And we improve the rational part by rejecting all that impedes the mind from elevating itself towards God (this part of the law we call ‘watchfulness’). He who has purified his body (*soma* – *A.M.*) by temperance, who by divine love (*agapes* – *A.M.*) has made an occasion of virtue from his wishes and desires, who has presented to God a mind purified by prayer, acquires and sees in himself the grace promised to those whose hearts have been purified.”¹⁴

As love we here see *agape*, not *eros*. But the hypothesis concerning the synonymy of different words for love in such an unusual context has already been introduced. Love in this sense, as a desiring part of the soul, combines with another part, which Palamas calls *thymoeides*,¹⁵ but in the Western tradition, for example, in the works of St Augustine, is called *irascibilis* (that is, wrath). Moreover, this part is connected both by Palamas and St Augustine with one more capacity – with memory: in Greek *mneme*.¹⁶

In other words, one can interpret these parts as 1) the *passionate part* – *love*, and at the same time *wrath* and *memory*, as also 2) *will*, and 3) *mind* (or *reason*).

The same motif can be found in the works of St Teresa, who – almost undoubtedly – was influenced by Gregory of Nyssa (as, for example, in the case of an arrow piercing the heart). However, it has to be mentioned, that she does not speak directly of the above-mentioned triple division of the soul. She just repeatedly names these parts as basic ones for the soul. Although it has to be added here, she describes love rather as an act of will¹⁷: “love is like an arrow sent forth by the will. If it travels with all the force that the will has, freed from all earthly things, and directed to God alone, it truly must wound His Majesty.”¹⁸ On the other hand, Teresa speaks of memory as of something different from love.

There is one more extremely interesting aspect. This motif is vividly presented in the works of Palamas and – it seems – the place for it can be implicitly found in the doctrine of St Teresa of Avila.

¹⁴ Gregory Palamas, *Triad I.2.2* [in:] Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, edited with an introduction by John Meyendorff, translation by Nicholas Gendle, preface by Jaroslav Pelikan, “Classics of Western Spirituality”, “Paulist Press”, New York, 1983, p. 42. Greek insertions from: Jean Meyendorff, *Grégoire Palamas, Défense des Saints Hésychastes*, t. 1, Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes, “Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense”, Louvain, 1959, pp.77, 79.

¹⁵ Gregory Palamas, *Triad II, 2, 19* [in:] Jean Meyendorff, *Grégoire Palamas, Défense des Saints Hésychastes*, t. 1, Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes, “Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense”, Louvain, 1959, p. 361.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p.363.

¹⁷ St Teresa of Avila, *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, 5.5 [in:] *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila*, vol. 2, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D., “ICS Publications”, “Institute of Carmelite Studies”, Washington, D.C., 1980, p.249.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 6.5, p.252.

Since there are similarities in the above-mentioned structures and there also are some common sources, thus, such an assumption could be reasonable. I am talking about a special role of the body in the above-mentioned structure. I mean the type of the body which – as it was mentioned at the beginning of this paper – could be described by the Greek noun *soma*, in other words, the particular dynamic type of the body. Palamas refers to it in the fragment cited above, describing the structure of the soul. This is no wonder, since in his doctrine the soul serves as a form of the body and it is not the body that contains the soul, but *vice versa* (*nota bene* it is treated in a similar way in works of Meister Eckhart, who was a contemporary of Palamas). Meanwhile, a rather common perception of the body as the prison of the soul arises from popular confusion of the notions *soma* and *sarx* (*body* and *flesh*). Unfortunately, there is no possibility for any further explanation of this question in this short paper.

Therefore, Palamas can speak of the uniting of the soul with God as like the uniting of the body with another body, as *mystical eros*, which appears to be equivalent to *Eucharist*. He refers here to St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, where Paul speaks of being “of the same body” – *sysomos*.¹⁹

Undoubtedly, the unity with God as the *Eucharist* – in the sense of the kind of *eros* I am talking about here – is also described by St Teresa. But she speaks of the soul. Moreover, one can even claim that the soul is one out of two or three notions that are basic for her mysticism. As for the body, for the most part she speaks of it with contempt, as of something that only ties up, limits the soul and causes disgust. However, I have the impression that she speaks of the *body* and the *flesh* as synonyms, confusing two dimensions: the body as something dynamic and elusive and the hypostatic body-flesh, which serves as a garment. The precise distinction of these notions is possible only through analysis of the etymology of their Greek counterparts (as also of the contexts where they appeared). The fragment from the above cited *Conceptions* could serve here as an example, since in this work Teresa uses both words *cuerpo* and *carne*²⁰ (*body* and *flesh*) as equivalents. It is typical for the *flesh* that as a hypostasis it always tends to represent the dynamics out of which it arises, and in this way the flesh tends to negate it and to mix here different discourse levels. I was not successful in finding the precise distinction of both notions in St Teresa's writings. However, there is a sort of rehabilitation of the body (described, indeed, as *carne*), according to which the body as led by the soul or even joined with it in one unit, the body – which possesses its own will on the way to purification and perfection – will be

¹⁹ Ephesians 3:6.

²⁰ *Conceptos del Amor de Dios o Meditaciones sobre los Cantares de Santa Teresa de Ávila*, 2.14, <http://www.santateresadejesus.com/wp-content/uploads/Conceptos-del-Amor-de-Dios.pdf> (June 16th, 2015)..

saved. As she wrote in the *Conceptions*: “When once the will is united (*or* its will is united – Junta su voluntad – *A.M.*) with that of God, it will complain no more.”²¹

If only St Teresa had considered it to be important to take into account the sublime semantic difference between two notions signifying the different aspects of the body, the erotic raptures described by her, with more terminological precision, could have become even more expressive and radical. However, for this reason they will not lose their brightness as poetical figures, where even a lack of precise description of every detail cannot deprive the whole text of expressiveness and vividness, where *eros* between the ascetic and God in their uniting appears to be equivalent to Eucharist.

²¹ St Teresa of Avila, *Conceptions of the Love of God*, 3.10 [in:] St Teresa Of Avila, *The Complete Works*, vol. 2, translated and edited by E. Allison Peers, “A Continuum imprint”, “Burns and Oates”, London, New York, 2002, p.381. Spanish insertion from: *Conceptos del Amor de Dios o Meditaciones sobre los Cantares de Santa Teresa de Ávila*, 3.10, <http://www.santateresadejesus.com/wp-content/uploads/Conceptos-del-Amor-de-Dios.pdf> (June 16th, 2015).