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“In Thy Light We See Light”—The Theological Aesthetics of Jonathan Edwards and Gregory Palamas

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Introduction

The idea that underlies this lecture, namely that there are some close and rather surprising affinities between the theological visions of Gregory Palamas and Jonathan Edwards, goes back to an informal conversation I had about twelve years ago with Fr. Alexander Golitzen. Fr. Golitzen had recently been appointed to teach Eastern Orthodox theology at Marquette University, where I had done my graduate work and was then serving as an adjunct faculty member. One day I met him in the hall and, for some reason that quite escapes me now, I showed him a passage from Edwards’s sermon, *A Divine and Supernatural Light*. As he read, his eyes grew wide with astonishment and pleasure, and finally he exclaimed, “Why, this is positively Palamite!” I suppose I had at least heard of Gregory Palamas, the great fourteenth century Byzantine theologian at that point, or the reference would have been lost on me, but I’m quite sure I had never read a word of his writings. And I must have known something about the Eastern Orthodox views on the “uncreated light,” which shone upon, or emanated from, Jesus on the occasion of his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor.¹ Otherwise I would scarcely have thought to ask a Russian Orthodox priest what he could make of a passage by a Colonial American Puritan revivalist. But it was surely Fr. Golitzen, not me, who made the connection between Edwards and Palamas sharp and explicit. And this lecture is really little more than an effort to work out the details—and mark out the limits—of his insight.
Now in one sense, any similarities we may find between these two theologians are purely accidental. There is no evidence that Edwards knew anything about Palamas, whose writings, in the original Greek, did not become available in the West until the publication of Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca* over a century after Edwards’s death.\(^2\) (Indeed, the first critical editions of Palamas’s Greek writings,\(^3\) as well as the first English translations, have only appeared in the past few decades.) And in the one place in his writings where Edwards refers to Eastern Orthodoxy, what he says is brief, superficial, and almost entirely negative.\(^4\) But precisely because there is no direct, historical connection between the Colonial Puritan and the Byzantine Hesychast, any theological convergences will be all the more striking—cases of arriving at similar conclusions from very different directions.

My procedure will be this: First, I shall give a biographical sketch of Gregory Palamas, highlighting the fierce controversy that broke out in the fifth decade of his life over the Taboric light. It was his brilliant defense of the reality of this light, and of the so-called “holy hesychasts”—the monks of the Eastern Church who devoted their lives to its contemplation—that established Palamas as one of the most revered theologians of the Eastern Church. Then, in the second section, I shall offer an extended analysis of that defense. In the third section, I shall give a synopsis of the life of Jonathan Edwards, paying particular attention to several breakthrough experiences in his own life with God and to his efforts as a pastor to induce similar experiences in his parishioners. Like Palamas, Edwards was embroiled in theological controversy over the nature of authentic Christian experience and practice, and he, too, often used the symbolism of light to describe the aesthetic, moral, and spiritual aspects of that experience. In the fourth section I shall investigate several key passages in Edwards’s writings that demonstrate this. Having
thus introduced our two heroes and their respective understandings of Christian experience, I shall conclude by comparing and contrasting their theologies. I shall try to show that there are indeed close parallels in their views, as well as some notable differences, which reflect the distinctive dogmatic commitments and spiritual practices of Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglo-American Calvinism.

1. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359): A Biographical Sketch

Let us begin with Gregory Palamas. He was born in 1296 in Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire. His father was a Senator and a close friend and advisor of Emperor Andronicus II Paleologus, and was responsible for the education of the emperor’s grandson, who later reigned as Andronicus III. In 1303, when Palamas was seven, his father died. He and his four younger siblings, two brothers and two sisters, became wards of the emperor and were educated at imperial expense. He entered the University of Constantinople as a teenager at a time when, as in the West, the philosophy of Aristotle was in the ascendency and that of Plato deemed incompatible with Christian faith. He was an excellent student, but in 1316, when he was twenty, his entire family felt the call to monastic life. His mother and sisters entered a convent in Constantinople, while he and his brothers struck out for Mount Athos, the “Holy Mountain,” the center of Byzantine monasticism.

It is important to understand that there are three basic forms of Christian monasticism. The first is the eremitic life, as exemplified by St. Anthony of Egypt (c. 251–256). The hermit lives far removed from human society—and as much as possible avoids association with other Christians and supervision by ecclesiastical authorities. Active ministry and participation in lit-
urgy and sacrament are reduced to a minimum, and replaced by the practice of mental prayer. It was among the hermits that the form of spirituality known as hesychasm—from the Greek word *hesychia*, meaning quietude or tranquility—was first developed. The second and more common form of Christian monasticism is the coenobitic or communal life, originally developed by Anthony’s younger contemporary, St. Pachomius (c. 290–346), and later refined by St. Basil of Caesarea (c. 330–379). Each monk has his own “cell,” but the cells are close together and, indeed, often more like private rooms in huge dormitories. Coenobitic monasticism generally lays great emphasis on the corporate recitation of Psalmody, the celebration of the sacraments, and social service to the wider community. The third type of Christian monasticism is a hybrid, which seeks to blend the distinct advantages and correct the potential abuses of the two pure types. Here monks live in separate cells some distance from each other and enjoy uninterrupted solitude from Monday through Friday. But on Saturday and Sunday, the monks gather for liturgy, mutual edification, and ordinary human fellowship. It was this semi-eremitic life that Gregory Palamas apparently preferred, although he also lived in coenobitic settings for several extended periods, and eventually had to give up monastic seclusion altogether in his later years, when theological controversies and episcopal duties were thrust upon him.

Palamas and his brothers took up semi-eremitic life near the Athonite monastery of Vatopedi in 1316, under the direction of the hesychast master, Nicodemus. But Nicodemus and one of Palamas’s brothers soon died, so, in 1319, Palamas and his other brother entered coenobitic life at the Great Lavra, the oldest and largest monastery on the Holy Mountain. Two years later, Palamas entered a hermitage associated with the Great Lavra, but in 1325 he and many other Athonite monks were forced by the constant raids of Turkish pirates to flee the Holy Mountain
altogether and take refuge in the nearby fortified city of Thessalonika. A year later, at the canonical age of thirty, Palamas was ordained a priest. But instead of taking up pastoral work, he and ten other monks went to a mountain retreat near Beroea, where they lived the semi-eremitic life. There Palamas stayed for five years, until the Turkish threat subsided and he could return to Mount Athos. During this time, the aged emperor, Andronicus II, was deposed for incompetence by his grandson, Andronicus III, and the commander-in-chief of his armies, John Cantacuzene.\(^6\)

From 1331 to 1335, Palamas lived in another hermitage attached to the Great Lavra. There he began to experience mystical visions\(^7\) and embarked on the literary labors which were to bring him both great fame and great trouble. He wrote a biography of a famous hesychast master and a defense of the Orthodox doctrine of the single procession of the Holy Spirit—the belief that the Spirit “proceeds” only from the Father and not, as the Latins taught, from the Father and the Son. In 1336, Palamas was named abbot of Esphigmenou, another Athonite monastery. But his monks objected to the austerities he instituted, so he resigned after a year and returned to his hermitage and his books. Shortly afterward, however, the controversy that was to define the next twenty years of his life, and was indeed, to throw the entire Byzantine church into an uproar, broke out. This was triggered by an attack made upon hesychast spirituality by the Greek-Italian philosopher, Barlaam of Calabria.

I have referred several times already to hesychasm, but I have not said much about what it is. I shall do so presently and in some detail, and I shall also summarize Barlaam’s objections to it and Palamas’s robust defense of it. But for simplicity’s sake, let us bracket this matter out and finish our sketch of Palamas’s life. In 1338, he journeyed to Thessalonika to meet Barlaam and work out their differences. The talks were amicable enough, but no settlement was reached,
and over the next four years a stream of writings, back and forth, appeared. In all, Palamas wrote nine treatises against Barlaam. These were published in three installments between 1338 and 1341, with three treatises per installment, and are hence known as the *Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*. Also published in 1341 was his *Hagioritic Tome* (from the Greek words for "Holy Mountain"), which was adopted by a synod of Athonite monks as the official theological rationale for their way of life and prayer.

At this point theological controversy got tangled up with the intrigues of Byzantine politics. Barlaam, as noted earlier, came from Calabria, a region in southern Italy that had been settled in classical times by Greeks, and was in fact still largely Greek in language, culture and religion, though it was politically under Italian control. And although Barlaam was formally Greek Orthodox, he was deeply sympathetic with Italian culture and, in particular, with the new currents of thinking emerging from the early Renaissance. In 1330, when he emigrated to Constantinople, his brilliance as a scholar and his familiarity with the intellectual and artistic fashions of the day earned him the support of John Cantacuzene and ultimately led him to be appointed as the Byzantine ambassador to the papal court at Avignon. His mission took place in 1340, at the very height of his controversy with Palamas, but failed to achieve the hoped-for reconciliation of the Greek and Latin churches. After his return to Constantinople, two church councils held in 1341 under the auspices of Andronicus III and John Cantacuzene supported Palamas and repudiated Barlaam’s anti-Palamite writings. Barlaam fled Constantinople and returned to Calabria.

The departure of his *bête noire* did not solve Palamas’s problems. For at just this time Andronicus III died suddenly. His son, John V, was too young to rule, so a regency government was set up, led by the boy’s mother, Anne of Savoy, and the Patriarch of Constantinople, John
Calecas. Cantacuzene was dismissed, but soon proclaimed himself co-emperor. Civil war broke out, which lasted from 1341 to 1347. Cantacuzene, though originally a supporter of Barlaam, had by this time thrown in his lot with Palamas and the Athonite monks. Thus, Palamas was regarded by the Regency as an enemy, formally condemned at a third church council, and imprisoned. During his confinement he wrote a *Confession of Faith* and *A Treatise on the Spiritual Life*.\(^\text{10}\) Apparently he saw little difference between a hermitage and a jail cell. And with the ultimate victory of Cantacuzene in early 1347, Palamas was formally vindicated by a fourth church council and consecrated archbishop of Thessalonica.

Unfortunately, lingering political turmoil in Thessalonica prevented him from entering his see for several years. In the interim, he wrote another major work, *Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life*.\(^\text{11}\) In 1350 he was finally installed by Cantacuzene and assumed his episcopal duties, and in 1351, a fifth church council definitively approved his *Confession* and condemned his enemies. However, in 1354, he was captured by Turks during a sea voyage and incarcerated for a year in Bithynia, until he was ransomed and returned to Thessalonica.\(^\text{12}\) The last four years of his life, from 1355 to 1359 were relatively tranquil. He wrote a short treatise on the moral teachings of the New Testament. And he was a very popular—because a very practical—preacher: a number of sermons, mostly dealing with the ethical, social, and liturgical life of ordinary Christians, and mostly dating from the years of his episcopacy, survive.\(^\text{13}\) On November 14, 1359, Gregory Palamas died after suffering from some internal disorder for several months and was buried in the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in Thessalonica, where his relics remain—much venerated—to this day. In 1368, he was formally canonized as a saint of the Eastern Orthodox Church and proclaimed “the greatest among the
Fathers of the Church.” He is honored by two different feast days on the Orthodox calendar: the Second Sunday in Great Lent and November 14.

2. Hesychasm and the Vision of the Taboric Light

Let us turn now to a description of the beliefs and practices of hesychasm, the form of spirituality practiced and defended by Gregory Palamas. As we have seen, hesychasm was originally developed by the Christian hermits who dwelled in the deserts of Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula, Palestine, and Syria in the fourth through the sixth centuries. Naturally, Christian solitaries cannot depend for their spiritual sustenance on the daily office, that is, the round of short communal worship services which structure the day in a coenobitic monastery. And unless a group of solitaries make special provision among themselves to gather weekly for liturgy and fellowship, they may miss these basic elements of the Christian life. The potential for loneliness, boredom, spiritual delusion and utter madness is accordingly very great. Ascetic disciplines, such as fasting, celibacy, silence and manual labor may, if properly practiced, temper the human passions; but they may just as easily arouse the very agitations of soul they are meant to tame. For example, if one goes without food, but then thinks about nothing other than his next meal, the practice of fasting itself becomes the cause of a refined form of gluttony. So, too, one may take a vow of celibacy and still burn with lust; or muzzle one’s lips while hankering for gossip and distraction; or perform manual labor out of a sullen sense of duty or a secret desire for gain. The hermit needs a form of prayer which, when used in concert with the ascetical disciplines, can quiet these insurgent passions and provide a deep and abiding sense of both divine and human companionship. The answer to this need proved to be the perpetual recitation of the Jesus Prayer.
The basic formula for this prayer is this: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The ceaseless repetition of this formula was found to enable the mind or intellect (nous), which apprehends divine reality, to descend into the heart (kardia) or spiritual center of the human being. For when one’s attention is focused on Christ, the power of divine grace bathes one’s consciousness and seeps gradually into the depths of one’s subconscious self. Eventually it was found that certain bodily postures and breathing techniques could enhance the effectiveness of the prayer formula. Thus, hesychasts often bow their heads when they pray, and seem to stare with half-closed eyes at their midriff. And they usually time the recitation of the Jesus Prayer to the rhythm of their breathing. As they inhale, they mentally voice the salutation, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,” drawing him, as it were, almost physically into themselves. Then, as they exhale, they utter the petition, “have mercy on me, a sinner,” thereby imaginatively linking the flushing of sins and passions from the heart with the expulsion of air from the lungs.

Now, all Christian monks take seriously St. Paul’s admonition to “pray constantly” (I Thess. 5:17), and the different kinds of monasticism are, in effect, different ways of interpreting that admonition and of organizing life in strict obedience to it. Cenobites, for example, understand “constant prayer” in light of Psalm 119:164: “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances.” Hence they gather as a community regularly throughout the day to pray: some of their daily services are devoted primarily to the singing of Psalms, others to meditation on Scripture, others to the celebration of the Eucharist. Private mental prayer is frequently practiced in the intervals. But the hesychasts take “constant prayer” with astonishing literalness. They believe that their attention to the Lord should be unbroken, that devotion should occupy every waking moment. And they find, to their delight, that the Jesus Prayer is uniquely well
suited to this purpose. The formula takes no time at all to memorize—in contrast to the Psalter, the daily office, and the complex cycle of liturgies for the Christian year—and can be recited silently, “in the heart,” even when one is performing other duties. It does take some practice, but really not much, to coordinate the recitation of the formula with the rhythms of the breath. And although it is obviously physically impossible for anyone, even a hermit, to do nothing but gaze constantly at one’s navel, it turns out that one can learn to say the Prayer and control the breath even when busy with other activities. In fact, some hesychasts insist that, after some months or years of practice, one no longer has to “say” the Prayer at all; it seems to say itself, to be “self-activating.” It goes on in the heart day and night, not only during times dedicated to concentrated mental prayer, but even during periods of vigorous physical activity and tranquil sleep.16 Indeed, so simple was this technique to learn (though it might take years to master), and so effective was it in grounding one’s life in Christ, that it eventually spread from the hermitages, where it had first been developed, to coenobitic monasteries and secular parishes. It thrives to this day as one of the dominant spiritual practices in the Christian East, both among monks and lay people, and is beginning to make inroads in the West, as well.17

One could object—and the Barlaamites did object—that this practice is impossible, or impractical, or superstitious, or even a flagrant violation of Jesus’ prohibition against “vain repetitions” (Mt. 6:7, KJV). But the hesychasts insisted that it was possible; that it did not interrupt the performance of one’s other duties, but rather suffused them with a vivid sense of the abiding presence of the living Christ; and that far from being an empty ritual or a form of self-hypnotism, it had a wonderfully clarifying and “Christifying” effect on one’s spiritual and moral life. And as for Jesus’ warning against “vain repetitions,” that was aimed at street-corner exhibitionism and
pious self-display, whereas this Prayer was recited in the silence of one’s heart and the seclusion of one’s cell. So far, it seemed, the hesychasts could respond to their critics.

But in one respect they seemed to overreach themselves, to make claims for their spiritual methods that were not only absurdly extravagant, but theologically unwarrantable. They asserted that the stilling of the passions through the practice of the ascetic disciplines and the constant attention to the living Christ through liturgy, Scripture meditation, and mental prayer enabled one to develop the capacity to see, in this life, with one’s bodily eyes, the same divine light that Peter, James, and John had seen radiating from Jesus when he was holding converse with Moses and Elijah on Mount Tabor. Of course, the hesychasts could point to numerous biblical stories in which God’s saints beheld, or shone with, the radiant glory of God. Moses’ face shone so brilliantly after his encounters with Yahweh on Mount Sinai that he had to wear a veil when he descended to speak with his people (Ex. 34:29-35). Elijah called down “the fire of the Lord” during his contest with the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18:38), and later was taken up into heaven on “a chariot of fire [drawn by] horses of fire” (2 Kings 2:11). When St. Stephen preached, “his face was like the face of an angel” (Acts. 6:15), and when he was about to be martyred he “gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (7:55). And Saul of Tarsus, the erstwhile persecutor of Christ’s people, underwent his dramatic conversion experience on the Damascus Road, during which he beheld “a light from heaven, brighter than the sun” (Acts 9:3; 22:6; 26:13). But did such stories from Scripture authorize the hesychasts’ claim that they, too, were sometimes granted a vision of the “Taboric Light”? Might they not simply have been undergoing religious hallucinations or demonic delusions? For Scripture also tells us that “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). It was precisely this claim that
mental prayer and ascetic practice can bring about a vision of the Taboric light that was at the root of the controversy between Barlaam and Palamas in the 1330s and ’40s.

Palamas insisted that the spiritual experiences of the hesychasts exemplify the profoundest truths of the Christian faith. Indeed, they enable us to make fully explicit one truth about God that had hitherto been only implicit in the history of Christian theology, namely the existence of the divine energies. Palamas writes: “Three realities pertain to God: essence, energy, and the triad of divine [persons].”19 We in the Christian West are familiar with the distinction between the essence and the persons, but this third “reality,” the divine energies, may baffle us. Certainly it seemed like a scandalous innovation to Barlaam and his followers, who, despite their connections with the West, still thought of themselves as loyal Orthodox. Yet as Palamas was at pains to show, this idea was implicit in the teachings of the Eastern Fathers. It had simply gone undefined—until the hesychast controversy forced the church to formulate it with new clarity and precision.20

Palamas begins by reasserting what no one questioned, that the essence (ousia) of God infinitely transcends human knowing. Indeed, Palamas often prefers to speak, not of the divine essence, but of the divine “super-essentiality,” to indicate God’s infinite qualitative difference from all creatures. But although God remains mysterious to us, we can at least know that God is mysterious to us, beyond our conceptions and categories. This is the aim of what is called apophatic theology or the way of negation. We cannot state directly what God is, but we can state what God is not, namely that which is incomprehensible, unsurpassable, and wholly “other” than creatures. But since our speech and thought forms are wedded to our experience of creatures, our knowledge of God would remain a bare abstraction to us, if it were not for those other two “reali-
ties which pertain to God,” and which have been revealed to us, namely the triad of divine persons and the manifold divine energies.

God is personal, or rather tri-personal. God is self-revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each of these persons or hypostases is fully and completely God. The divine essence is not “divided” between them, like the shares of a joint stock company co-owned by three equal partners. Rather, each of the three divine persons, in his particularity, possesses the whole of deity undividedly. Yet each simultaneously shares the whole of deity with the other two in the self-dispossessing communion of perfect love. More amazingly, one of the persons, the Son, has irrevocably joined human nature to the divine nature in the incarnation. This “hypostatic union” of the two natures in Christ means that the properties and attributes of each nature are fully and perfectly integrated in a single person, Jesus of Nazareth. Neither nature is changed by, absorbed into, or confused with the other. Each is preserved intact, and functions fully and perfectly in its distinctive ways, without impairing or disrupting the functions and qualities of the other. Yet the fusion of natures in Christ is such that he is neither more, nor less, nor other than God, just as he is neither more, nor less, nor other than human. He is both together, fully and perfectly. And because he is both together, we who are “in him” by grace through faith are given a share of the divinity which he alone possesses by nature. All this, too, is the familiar orthodoxy of the early Ecumenical Councils, and was accepted by both parties in the dispute.

What had never received adequate dogmatic formulation, however, is the soteriological claim that Christ, being at once human and divine, somehow shares his divinity with us humans. Several of the Church Fathers had said that “God became human so that humans might become divine.” But how are we to understand this? For surely we do not “become divine” in the same
sense that the Incarnate Son of God was: the two natures are not hypostatically joined in us as they are in him. Yet Scripture does affirm that we become recipients of “divine power” and even “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:3–4). Thus, what differentiates Christ from ourselves is also what mystically unites us with him, and with each other in him (John 15). We receive by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit what the Son of God is by virtue of his free act of “emptying himself” for our sake, “taking the form of a servant, [and] being born in human likeness” (Phil. 2:7). We become by grace what Christ is by nature. We have, as it were, a kind of borrowed divinity, but not in such a way that we lose our concrete individuality, our creatureliness, our finite human consciousness, or our sad history as fallen persons who depend forever on the merits of the Crucified. Thus, one might say that although the distance between ourselves and God has been overcome, the difference between ourselves and God remains. In this respect, we are spiritually united with the Father through the Son in the Spirit, and so transfigured by this union that we can even be said to be “deified,” though without losing our humanity or simply being merged with the Infinite in some pantheistic blur.

This is where Palamas takes a decisive step forward dogmatically, by proposing a solution to the soteriological paradox implicit in the formulae of Nicea and Chalcedon. He recognizes that the infinite qualitative difference between God and human beings must be preserved. But he also insists that the distance between God and human beings has been overcome, such that we, without losing our human nature and personal identity, nevertheless become partakers of the divine nature. To close the gap, Palamas introduces the doctrine of the divine “energies.”

To understand his doctrine, we must first recognize that he is using the Greek word energēia in its Aristotelian sense, to mean an activity or operation characteristic of a living being. He
is most emphatically not using it in its Newtonian or Einsteinian sense to mean some impersonal force. Thus, the energy or energies of God—the singular is simply a collective term for all of God’s activities taken together—\(^{23}\) are the workings of God in, on, and through his creatures. Indeed, all creation is but the manifestation of the creative energy of God, that is, of God’s burning to desire to share the superabundance of divine love with other beings. But that love, that energy, is not itself a “creature.” Rather, it is the divine condition of possibility for the very existence of creatures, the divine medium by which creation is providentially ordered, and the divine agency by which God’s immediate and ultimate purposes for creation are accomplished. Thus, for Palamas the divine energies are “uncreated.” Yet they differ from the divine essence in being “participable” by creatures. That is, God acts directly and immediately upon creatures through the energies; and the creatures, in turn, experience God’s energies—and in so doing really and truly experience God. The energies differ, too, from the three divine persons. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are discreet centers of consciousness, who nevertheless fully interpenetrate each other in a perfect communion of mutually self-giving love, and who work together in perfect harmony and undeviating coordination in managing the creation: the divine energies are precisely the providential and redemptive activities of the Blessed Trinity.

The divine energies operate ceaselessly upon creation; indeed, creation could not exist at all apart from their operation, and would be nothing but madness and chaos if that operation were not lovingly redemptive. But only two sorts of creatures—angels and humans—are capable of knowing and responding to the redemptive energies of God. Of the angels, we must here say nothing. And of ourselves we must admit that the capacity to know God is hardly well exercised. Stupid indifference, culpable ignorance, and outright rebellion are far more common. Neverthe-
less, some people—we call them the saints—do exercise that capacity, and indeed, organize their whole lives around its exercise, in order to experience the ineffable bliss that knowing God brings and to help others to enjoy the same experience. Put differently, the saints are those who eagerly contemplate the divine energies in which all creation is ceaselessly bathed, who learn to “see” what ought to be the most dazzlingly obvious reality of all, and who, by the very contemplation of that reality, are themselves increasingly “energized” by it, that is, transformed, transfigured, and divinized. We might almost say: they become what they behold. Palamas summarizes his theology of spirituality in the paragraph whose first sentence I quoted earlier:

Three realities pertain to God: essence, energy, and the triad of divine hypostases. As we have seen, those privileged to be united to God so as to become one spirit with Him—as St. Paul said, ‘He who cleaves to the Lord is one spirit with Him (I Cor. 6:17)—are not united to God with respect to His essence, since all the theologians testify that with respect to His essence God suffers no participation. Moreover, the hypostatic union is fulfilled only in the case of the Logos, the Godman. Thus those privileged to attain union with God are united to Him with respect to His energy; and the ‘spirit’, according to which they who cleave to God are one with Him, is and is called the uncreated energy of the Holy Spirit, but not the essence of God....

But note: while it is true that the saints become what they behold, it is still they—in their embodied humanity and creaturely finitude—who undergo this transfiguration. Here Palamas draws a sharp line between his theology and the light mysticism of Neoplatonism, a school of late classical philosophy which both influenced and infuriated the Greek Fathers. The founder of that school, Plotinus, was said by his biographer to feel “ashamed of being in the body.” But the hesychast saints feel no such shame, and although they do strive for apatheia, that state of perfect tranquility which betokens the mastery of the passions, they utterly repudiate analgesia, that is, bodily insensibility or mental obtuseness. Hesychast spirituality is, in fact, a celebration
of the Christian conviction that the Son of God has taken human flesh, has risen bodily from
death, and makes himself savingly present to us here and now through the materiality of the sac-
raments. Our mortal bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6:19) and one day they will be
raised incorruptible like his. Of course, all Christians can say that much. Where the hesychasts
go further is in stressing the extent to which the eschatological promises can be realized even in
this life through the rigorous practice of the Jesus Prayer and the ascetic disciplines. The ultimate
transfiguration of our bodies can begin on this side of the grave, so that our natural bodily and
mental powers are enhanced by the divine energies, enabling us to experience the sober ecstasy
of heaven, the vision of God. 29 It was this enhancement that Peter, James, and John experienced
when they beheld Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on Mt. Tabor. Palamas explains:

The light, then, became accessible to their eyes, but to eyes which saw in a way
superior to that of natural sight, and had acquired the spiritual power of the spirit-
ual light. This mysterious light, inaccessible, immaterial, uncreated, deifying,
 eternal, this radiance of the Divine nature, this glory of the divinity, this beauty of
the heavenly kingdom, is at once accessible to sense perception and yet tran-
scends it. 30

Later he adds:

This light without beginning or end is neither sensible nor intelligible, in the
 proper sense. It is spiritual and divine, distinct from all creatures in its transcen-
dence; and what is neither sensible nor intelligible does not fall within the scope
of the senses as such, nor of the intellectual faculty considered in itself. This spiri-
tual light is thus not only the object of vision, but it is also the power by which we
see; it is neither a sensation nor an intellection, but is a spiritual power, distinct
from all created cognitive faculties in its transcendence, and made present by
grace in rational natures which have been purified. 31

We turn now to the life of Jonathan Edwards.\textsuperscript{32} He has never formally been declared a saint, though many of his greatest writings are phenomenological analyses of Christian sainthood, and those who knew him best agreed that he beautifully exemplified what he so brilliantly described. There is no feast day in his honor: Puritans disdained such things. And no church council has officially proclaimed him “the greatest among the Fathers of the Church,” though many have argued that he remains the greatest among American theologians.

Edwards was born on October 5, 1703 to Timothy and Esther Edwards of East Windsor, Connecticut. He was the fifth of their eleven children, and the only boy. Timothy Edwards was the founding pastor of the Congregational Church of the village, and was an effective, if somewhat conventional, Puritan preacher, and he was known in his day as an “awakener” of souls. Esther Edwards was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard, the pastor of the Congregational Church of Northampton, Massachusetts, a much revered figure in the Connecticut River Valley and another figure whose ministry was often punctuated by dramatic “harvests” of souls. That these occasional “awakenings” and “harvests” were so prized by the Colonial Puritans of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, that is, some decades \textit{before} the so-called “Great Awakening” that Jonathan Edwards triggered in the 1730s, is one indication that there was a widespread feeling that a general spiritual “declension” had befallen the Holy Commonwealths of New England since their founding in 1630s. One reason that Edwards is such a towering figure in American religious history is that he helped by his preaching to extend, and by his writings to justify, precisely what the people of his time craved: the revival of the spiritual fervor that was presumed to have characterized the founders. Like Palamas, he regarded his innovations as restorations.
Piety came naturally to Edwards. As a ten year old boy, while his friends were playing
the Puritan equivalent of cops-and-robbers, he “built a booth in a swamp, in a very secret and
retired place, for a place of prayer.” But as he later came to see, the very fact that piety did come
“naturally” to him was a problem, partly because it sometimes came off to others as irritating
sanctimoniousness, but mainly because genuine piety is not a “natural” quality at all, but a “su-
pernatural” one, a gift of divine grace. And it was not until the spring of 1721, when he was sev-
enteen years old, that he began to experience something more than his personal proclivities, fam-
ily heritage, and cultural context could have induced. This is what he called, variously, “a won-
derful alteration in my mind, with respect to the doctrine of God’s sovereignty,” “a delightful
conviction” of God’s “justice with respect to salvation and damnation,” “a new kind of appre-
hensions and ideas of Christ, and the work of redemption, and the glorious way of salvation by
him,” an “inward, sweet sense of [divine] things.” His first inkling of this new sense came, char-
acteristically enough, as he was reading scripture, specifically I Timothy 1:17: “Now unto the
King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever,
Amen.” Edwards tells us that the immediate consequence of this “new sense” was the resolution
of a religious doubt that he had been harboring for some time about the Calvinistic doctrine of
predestination. But note well: it was not just that he came to assent to a doctrine that is offensive
to natural reason, and that even Calvin called, in the technical, theological sense, horribile. No,
Edwards came to delight in the doctrine, precisely because it brought into the sharpest possible
focus the deity of God, that is, the “sweet conjunction” of God’s majesty in governing the uni-
verse and God’s meekness in rescuing the elect through the cross of Christ. This conjunction of
opposites is complete: “it was a sweet and gentle, and holy majesty; and also a majestic meek-
ness; an awful sweetness; a high, and great, and holy gentleness.” It was, in short, his first
glimpse of divine glory, and the point at which his distinctive theological vision began to germin-
ate. He would spend the rest of his career as a pastor attempting to induce others to experience
this “sense of divine things,” even though he knew that it is finally an unmerited and unmediated
gift of God, not the rhetorical razzle-dazzle of the preacher, which imparts it to the soul. And he
would spend the rest of his career as a theologian interpreting every Christian doctrine in aes-
thetic and doxological terms, and diagnosing the spiritual, moral, and psychological effects of
this divinely given sense of the divine upon those who experienced it.

The dawning of his “new sense” took place, as I’ve said, in 1721, when Edwards was
seventeen—the year after he had graduated as valedictorian of his undergraduate class at Yale.
He was still at Yale, studying for his master’s degree. Before completing his second degree,
however, he took nine months off to serve as the pastor of a Presbyterian church in New York
City, and then returned to New Haven in 1723 to write his M.A. thesis. During these years, his
great literary talents began to emerge. In his journal, known to posterity as his Miscellanies,34
and in several short unpublished essays, he began working out the lineaments of the idealist
metaphysics and the post-millennial eschatology that he would hold and develop for the rest of
his life. He also kept a diary of his spiritual exercises and experiences, and, correlatively, wrote
down a number of “resolutions” by which he sought to manage his conduct and temperament in
the most rigorously puritanical fashion. And he wrote a curious little paragraph called the “Apos-
trophe to Sarah Pierpont,” in which he blends the most intense (and, to him, probably unnerving)
eroticism and the most sublime spiritual admiration.35 In November, 1723 he became the pastor
of the Congregational church in Bolton, Connecticut, but returned to New Haven next spring to
serve as a junior professor at Yale. Perhaps his return was prompted by his growing love for Sarah. Certainly he was secure in her affections by the fall of 1726, when he began candidacy as the associate pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton. In February of the next year, he was “settled” in the appointment, and that summer he married Sarah.

As we have seen, the senior pastor of the Northampton church was the venerable Solomon Stoddard, Edwards’s maternal grandfather. Stoddard died two years after Edwards joined the staff, and Edwards took over the reins of what was then the most prestigious pulpit in the Connecticut Valley. He quickly established himself as a force in his own right. His preaching was not flamboyant, and even his famous, or infamous, hellfire sermons were delivered in a quiet and stately manner, unadorned by gesticulation or histrionics, and indeed, usually read from a carefully prepared manuscript. But there was an immense dignity and “presence” about him that commanded attention and respect. And he relieved the severity of his biblical exposition and logical argumentation with a cascade of vivid images and illuminating analogies. His aim was to drive his points home and to help his listeners experience for themselves the wonder of divine grace and the dreadfulness of divine judgment.

His popularity with his parishioners and his stature among the New England clergy grew steadily during the early years of his Northampton ministry, but in 1733 a train of events began that was to make him a celebrated figure in the international evangelical community. As we have seen, his grandfather had reaped several “harvests of souls” during his long pastorate in Northampton, so the revival that broke out under Edwards’s ministry in the autumn of 1733 was welcomed by all. But its intensity, duration and impact on the local community were unprecedented, and when Edwards published an account of the revival in 1737, readers throughout the Anglo-
American Evangelical world were astonished and entranced. Indeed, for a variety of reasons, which we cannot pause here to relate, the British world was ripe at that time for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And while it is too much to say that Edwards’s *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* precipitated the wave of revivals that swept the Britain and her colonies in late 1730s and early ’40s, it undoubtedly served as a paradigm for other communities that experienced revival during this period. He soon produced three more major works documenting, analyzing, justifying, and promoting these revivals.³⁶

But then, at the height of his international fame as a pastor, evangelist, and theologian, everything began going wrong for Jonathan Edwards. For a variety of reasons, he aroused the ire—personal and/or theological—of several influential neighbors. He had periodic salary disputes with his own congregation. He badly bungled a case in his parish in which some teenagers were using a midwives’ manual for pornographic purposes. And he had to bury his uncle and strongest local supporter, Colonel John Stoddard, the son of Solomon Stoddard. Moreover, Solomon’s ghost still walked in Northampton. Half a century before, the old patriarch had instituted a new policy for admitting members to the church. He allowed anyone whose moral conduct was not publicly scandalous, and who could in good conscience affirm the basic doctrines of the Christian faith, to join: they did not have to profess, either privately to their pastor or publicly to the congregation, that they had personally experienced saving grace. Put differently, Stoddard said that the sacraments of the church, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, were henceforth to be regarded, not as *testimonial signs* of a grace already felt and publicly acknowledged by the believer, but rather as *effectual means* by which God might communicate grace to the believer. In effect, America had its first “seeker-friendly” church in 1677! This policy was unheard of in
Puritan New England and aroused bitter opposition among the Boston Brahmins. But the people of Northampton loved it and it had been firmly in place for six decades when Jonathan Edwards revoked it in 1748. He himself had enforced it for twenty years, but he now claimed that it had worried him ever since his installation. This was the last straw for his flock, and in June 1750, after much wrangling and maneuvering, they voted by a ten to one margin to fire him. The decision was upheld by a council of regional churches, which deemed the breach between pastor and people to be irreparable, but which exonerated Edwards of the charges of hypocrisy and malfeasance in his pastoral administration. His decision to revoke the Stoddardian policy on the sacraments was, it said, thoroughly principled, and his long silence about his scruples was due, not to cowardice, but to sincere respect for his grandfather’s pastoral authority and theological acumen.

Unfortunately, Edwards had spent so much of the previous few years trying to keep his job that he had made no provisions for finding another. Moreover, the Northampton congregation was in no state to call a successor. So for a full year, on a week by week basis, Edwards supplied the pulpit from which he had just been fired. Finally, in the summer of 1751, he moved to the frontier town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts to serve as the pastor of the local English congregation and as a missionary to the local Native Americans. Thus rusticated, and with the Awakening that he had done so much to launch and defend having burned itself out, Edwards had ample time for scholarship. He produced five weighty books in seven years, one of which, his Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World, is of particular importance for our purposes, since it represents his maturest reflections on the relationship between divine glory and human blessedness—the theme that had animated his life and thought since the
dawning of his “sense of divine things” over thirty years earlier. Then, in late 1757, he received an invitation to become the president of the College of New Jersey (today known as Princeton University). After consulting his friends, and after candidly warning the trustees of his faults and weaknesses, he accepted the post, and journeyed south in the dead of winter to take the reins of the young and struggling school. At that time a smallpox epidemic was raging in the area. Edwards submitted to the primitive vaccination procedure then in use, contracted the disease, recovered briefly, but then succumbed to a secondary infection on March 22, 1758.

4. “A Divine and Supernatural Light”

The starting point for any examination of Edwards’s theology of Christian experience is his great sermon, *A Divine and Supernatural Light*. It was delivered in August, 1733, on the eve of the great religious Northampton revival, and published a year later, when the revival was at its peak. George Marsden regards it as “a sort of constitution for any true awakening.”

The text is Matthew 16:17, Jesus’ response to Peter’s confession that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God: “Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (408). Edwards uses the phrase, “flesh and blood,” to signify whatever unregenerate persons may know of God through “natural conscience” or ordinary human reason (410). He acknowledges that God, through “common grace,” can enrich and intensify our natural knowledge of God, but he also insists that no amount of moral rumination or intellectual inquiry, even with the aid of common grace, can produce the kind of revelation that God imparted to Peter. Spiritual illumination does not consist merely in heightened guilt for our moral failings, or greater fear of divine wrath, or new religious insights
and visions, or a deeper appreciation for the doctrines of the Christian religion, or an intensification of religious emotion. True, it is compatible with all of these, and is often accompanied by them. But spiritual insight is an act of divine grace, not the result of human effort. It arises when the Spirit of God “unites himself with the mind of the saint, takes him for his temple, actuates and influences him as a new, supernatural principle of life and action” (411). Put simply, to be “born again” is to see everything anew, to undergo a decisive shift in the way one experiences reality. Edwards describes the spiritually illuminated person thus:

He don’t merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart. There is not only a rational belief that God is holy, and that holiness is a good thing; but there is a sense of the loveliness of God’s holiness. There is not only a speculatively judging that God is gracious, but a sense how amiable God is upon that account; or a sense of the beauty of this divine attribute (413).

Edwards uses one of his favorite analogies to illustrate the point. You can know that honey is sweet before tasting it, but you cannot know what the sweetness of honey is until you taste it for yourself (414). The analogy limps a bit, however, because it refers to the taste of a new food, rather than to a new way of tasting all foods. But the divine and supernatural light which the saints “see” is really both—an inner sensation of God’s own beauty and a thorough transformation of their world view and comportment. Thus, an infinite chasm separates one who merely believes that God is glorious because the Bible says so, and the person who actually sees the glory of God to which the Bible attests, and sees everything else differently for having seen God’s glory shining out from creation.

Edwards takes pains to show that both holy scripture and human reason support the belief “that there is such a thing as a spiritual and divine light,” and that this light is “immediately
imparted to the soul by God,” not the upshot of any “natural means.” To show that it is scriptural he cites a variety of texts, culminating in II Peter 1:16, which refers to Christ’s transfiguration. Positively Palamite indeed! But here Edwards runs into a bit of a jam. For what Peter and the other apostles witnessed on that occasion was apparently a visible light—and hence, in principle, something that everyone, not just the saints, should be able to see. Yet the essence of Edwards’s argument is that the “divine and supernatural light” which the saints “see” is spiritual, that is, invisible to the unsanctified. To get around this problem, Edwards deploys his theory of religious typology, that is, his belief that creation and scripture are a complex tapestry of “types” or “images” by which God communicates supernatural meaning to those illuminated by grace. We cannot go deeply into this complex and fascinating subject here. Suffice it to say, in this connection, that what Edwards believes the apostles beheld on the Mount was Christ’s “outward glory.” They were granted a preliminary or this-worldly glimpse of how Christ “now appears in heaven [and] as he will do in the day of judgment” (420). His point is that on judgment day everyone will see the same thing. The difference is how they will see it. The saints will be permitted to see outwardly the “things unseen” (Heb. 11:1), which they have believed in all along, while the reprobate will be compelled to see outwardly what they have hitherto denied. So if there were no unsanctified persons present on the Mount, it was not because they could not have seen Christ’s outward glory with their bodily eyes, but because God wanted on that occasion to grant the sight only to those who would comprehend its spiritual significance. Thus, what the three apostles beheld was a visible symbol of what their minds were divinely enabled to believe, namely, that Jesus is the Son of God. Edwards writes:
That [outward] glory was so divine, having such an ineffable appearance and semblance of divine holiness, majesty, and grace, that it evidently denoted him to be a divine person. But if a sight of Christ’s outward glory might give a rational assurance of his divinity, why may not an apprehension of his spiritual glory do so too? Doubtless Christ’s spiritual glory is in itself as distinguishing, and as plainly showing his divinity, as his outward glory; and a great deal more: for his spiritual glory is that wherein his divinity consists; and the outward glory of his transfiguration showed him to be divine, only as it was a remarkable image or representation of his spiritual glory. (419).

But Edwards wants to insist not only that scripture attests the existence of this divine and supernatural light, but that human reason does, too. He does not say—and indeed, he flatly denies—that human reason, unaided by grace, can attain spiritual illumination. Rather, he says that those who have attained spiritual illumination will find, upon reflection, that what has been wrought in them by grace “is the highest excellency and perfection of a rational creature” (422). Put sharply, no one can “think” her way to the beatific vision; but she who has been granted the vision will find nothing so reasonable as the fact that God reserves to himself the right to impart it to whomsoever he chooses, and in so doing, to make them “participants in the divine nature” (II Pet. 1:4). Here Edwards comes as close as a Calvinist can to saying something we have already found in Palamas: that in some sense to see God is to be God. He writes:

’Tis rational to suppose that this blessing should be immediately from God; for there is no gift or benefit that is in itself so nearly related to the divine nature, there is nothing the creature receives that is so much of God, of his nature, so much a participation of the Deity: ’tis a kind of emanation of God’s beauty, and is related to God as the light to the sun. ’Tis therefore congruous and fit, that when it is given of God, it should be nextly from himself, according to his own sovereign will. (422)

The use of light as a symbol of authentic religious experience, which Edwards develops so beautifully in this early sermon, characterized many of his later writings as well. It is a preva-
lent theme in his unpublished manuscript, *Images of Divine Things*,\(^{41}\) in his *Miscellanies*,\(^{42}\) and in his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*.\(^{43}\) But nowhere is it given more extended treatment than in his mature work, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for which God Created the World*.\(^{44}\) What he says here is particularly important for our purposes, because he makes theological use of one aspect of light that is undeveloped in his early sermon: that it is an “emanation” of a great luminary.

Like all of Edwards’s later writings, the *Dissertation* is an assault against what he took to be the unbiblical anthropocentrism of British Enlightenment theology. There God is typically depicted as a kind of cosmic errand-boy for humanity, frantically patching up the mess we make of the world by the misuse of our so-called “free will,” and dutifully serving our little needs and interests. Against this ideology, Edwards stoutly insisted that there are no “accidents” in God’s universe, that events unfold according to a wise though inscrutable divine plan, that the alleged indeterminacy and autonomy of the human will is a fiction that dupes us into a false sense of self-importance, and that God exercises his absolute sovereignty over nature and human history alike. The universe exists to serve God’s ends, and not vice versa. But what are God’s ends? Ultimately there is only one: “the emanation and true external expression of God’s internal glory and fullness” (527). The universe, as Calvin had put it, is the “theater of God’s glory,”\(^{45}\) the arena in which God exercises and displays his own perfections. Writes Edwards: “The word ‘glory’ is used in Scripture often to express the exhibition, emanation or communication of the internal glory. Hence it often signifies a visible exhibition of glory; as in an effulgence or shining brightness, by an emanation of beams of light” (515). The universe is, as it were, God’s light show.
Yet two problems are lurking here, one in the theology and one in the symbolism. As to the first, Edwards’s effort to correct the notion that God is an errand-boy comes very close to suggesting that God is an egotist, who demands our fawning adulation. As to the second, the symbol of light emanating from a luminary, though dynamic and evocative enough, is finally impersonal. The sun shines, and without being diminished as the light flows outward. And when the light strikes the reflective surface of the moon, it shines too. So far so good. But the sun does not will its shining, nor is the moon grateful in its reflectiveness. Edwards’s solution to both of these problems is condensed into a single word, coined just for this purpose: “remanation.”

Human beings are created for the express purpose of beholding and rejoicing in the glorious sovereignty of God. Praise is not an automatic response of the creature to the Creator, but a voluntary one—and hence, there is no guarantee that it will be offered. But the failure to offer such a response constitutes, not merely a sinful derogation of God, but a tragic self-falsification of one’s own nature. Conversely, the joyful rendering of that response constitutes, not merely the payment of what God is due, but the attainment of the end for which human being exist in the first place. Says Edwards:

In the creature’s knowing, esteeming, loving, rejoicing in, and praising God, the glory of God is both exhibited and acknowledged; his fullness is received and returned. Here is both an emanation and remanation. The refulgence shines upon and into the creature, and is reflected back to the luminary. The beams of glory come from God, and are something of God, and are refunded back again to their original. So that the whole is of God, and in God, and to God; and God is the beginning, middle and end in this affair (531).

Put simply, God shines, and the saints shine back—not as the moon blindly insensibly reflects the light of the sun, but as the lover joyfully “lights up” at the smile of the beloved. And this ec-
static praise of God, which the human being gives voluntarily—and yet, at the same time, spontaneously and un-self-consciously—consists both in the enjoyment of God’s transcendent beauty, as manifest preeminently in the glorified Lord, and in active obedience to God’s righteous law, after the example of the Suffering Servant. On the one hand, Christ is “the light of the world,” and “whoever follows [him] will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). On the other hand, Christ names us “the light of the world” and commands us to “let [our] light shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:14, 16). Thus, for Edwards, the Christian life is thoroughly doxological. It involves both an aesthetic aspect—our selfless delight in God’s glory—and a moral aspect—our self-giving love of neighbor. The aesthetic aspect prevents our morality from degenerating into crabbed moralism. The moral aspect prevents our adoration of God from lapsing into effete aestheticism. The attainment of our highest good as creatures comes from remembering that the Creator is the highest good of all. Edwards writes:

God’s respect to the creature’s good, and his respect to himself, is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature aimed at is happiness in union with himself. The creature is no further happy with this happiness which God makes his ultimate end than he becomes one with God. The more happiness the greater union: when the happiness is perfect, the union is perfect. And as the happiness will be increasing to eternity, the union will become more and more strict and perfect; nearer and more like to that between God the Father and the Son; who are so united, that their interest is perfectly one (533f).

5. Comparisons, Contrasts and Conclusions

As I draw this lecture to a close, I should like to say a few words about its subtitle. I promised you a talk about “theological aesthetics,” but until now I have not used the term at all,
nor have I even explained what I mean by it. And to be honest, I’m no longer sure, after years of thinking about the term, exactly what it means. To be sure, something called “theological aesthetics” is big business these days, and a whole new branch of theology has emerged, with the usual scholarly panoply of books and journal articles and international conferences. Whatever merit all this may have, I seriously doubt whether Gregory Palamas or Jonathan Edwards would have seen much point to it. Certainly they didn’t think they were doing “theological aesthetics” when they meditated on God’s beauty, any more than they thought they were doing “theological ethics” when they meditated on God’s righteousness. They were simply doing theology. What made them so unusual was that they realized that theology cannot be done well unless due attention is given to the delight that we are supposed to take in God, just as it cannot be done well unless due attention is given to the obedience that we owe. But that seems almost platitudinous. What these giants of the spirit set out to show—and what they succeeded in showing better than most—was precisely how the quality of religious delight (and, for that matter, of religiously motivated moral conduct) is shaped by the nature of God. For the beauty of God is not the beauty of created beings, and therefore the delight we take in God’s beauty is not the same as the delight we take in a symphony by Mozart, or a roseate sunset, or a lover’s smile. Yes, it is like earthly delights in some ways. For it is an apprehension of beauty: it takes our breath away, brings tears to our eyes, and fills our hearts with the sweetest pain. But our delight in a symphony or a sunset passes after a time, though it may later awaken again. Our longing for God, however, can never be assuaged or satisfied, for it is a longing for the Infinite, a longing which the Infinite satisfies by making the longing itself extend unto eternity. God satisfies our desires for himself, not by
satiating us with his presence, but by intensifying our desire for his presence with every new manifestation of it. And those who have felt that desire long only to feel it ever more keenly.

So to say that Palamas and Edwards were doing “theological aesthetics” is simply to say that they were delineating one aspect of the authentic Christian experience of God as Holy Trinity, namely that the self-revelation of the Father in the Son through the Holy Spirit evokes mystic ecstasy in the person who contemplates it deeply. For delight is the proper response to beauty, and ecstasy the proper response to the infinite and ineffable beauty of the Triune God. Yet however emotionally overwhelming such ecstasy may be at times, it is not authentic unless it is stabilized by sober self-discipline and expressed in joyful service to neighbor. “Aesthetic” delight in God’s glory is finally inseparable from “ethical” obedience to God’s righteous will, precisely because our “participation in the divine nature” through ecstatic praise brings about the transformation of our human nature through liberation from bondage to sin and death.

Three especially striking similarities in their approaches to theological aesthetics—if that is what we must call it—have emerged from our investigations. First, Palamas’s distinction between God’s “imparticipable essence” and the divine energies recalls Edwards’s distinction between the “internal” or immanent glory of God, which God alone knows, and the “emanation and true external expression” of that glory in nature and history. Now, we must be cautious here. For as we have seen, Palamas ascribes concrete being to the divine energies, and believes that through spiritual purification and ascetic practice, the hesychast can actually “see” them, though in a way that transcends the ordinary physiology of eyesight. Edwards is cagier.

This spiritual and divine light [he insists] don’t consist in any impression made upon the imagination. ’Tis no impression upon the mind, as though one saw anything with the bodily eyes; ’tis no imagination or idea of an outward light or
glory, or any beauty of form or countenance, or a visible luster or brightness of any object.\(^{49}\)

We might say that Palamas emphasizes the objective existence of the Taboric light which the saint beholds, whereas Edwards accentuates the subjective transformation by which the saint is enabled to sense God’s excellency. But these are finally differences in emphasis and tone. For Palamas can still insist that “spiritual light is not only the object of vision, but it is also the power by which we see,” thereby acknowledging the noetic transformation of the saint.\(^{50}\) Conversely, Edwards is quite prepared to admit that what the three apostles saw at the time of Christ’s transfiguration was a “visible” and “outward” glory,” that served as “a remarkable image or representation of [his] spiritual glory.”\(^{51}\) And although Edwards has nothing comparable to the Palamite doctrine of the divine energies, he too can affirm the very same existential fact to which Palamas gave witness, namely that those who truly experience God enjoy “a participation of the Deity...a kind of emanation of God’s beauty.”\(^{52}\) Thus, despite their different theological idioms, they share the conviction that although God’s essence infinitely transcends human knowing, God’s glory can in some sense be “seen” by the saints, and that the actual vision of this glory draws those who behold it into union with God.

Second, both theologians insist that the experience of God is a result of divine grace, not a by-product of human effort, yet both insist that Christians must faithfully practice the divinely appointed means of grace. But here wide differences between the two of them open up. As we have seen, Palamas advocates the performance of ceaseless mental prayer and constant ascetical practice, but he does not claim that the vision of the Taboric Light is a direct and automatic result of the hesychast’s labors. The heretical sect known as Messalians apparently taught something
like this, and there are indications that Palamas had close personal contacts with them. But he expressly repudiates their error.

You claim [he writes to Barlaam] that the grace of deification is a natural state, that is, the activity and manifestation of a natural power. Without realizing it, you are falling into the error of the Messalians, for the deified man would necessarily be God by nature, if deification depended on our natural powers, and was included among the laws of nature! ...But know that the grace of deification transcends every natural relationship, and there does not exist in nature “any faculty capable of receiving it.”

The fact remains that Palamas shares the characteristic synergism of the Eastern Church, believing that, under normal circumstances, divine grace is communicated to those who, by their prayers and labors, are “worthy of it.” Edwards, as a Calvinist, will accept no talk of human “worthiness.” He insists, rather, that the divine and supernatural light “is immediately given by God, and not obtained by natural means.” Edwards admits that God “makes use of means,” such as the exposition of Scripture and the preaching of the Word of God, in imparting divine light to the saints; but he denies that such means “operate by their own power, or a natural force.” These means are not per se “second causes,” having objective value or instrumental efficacy of their own. Thus the Puritan must always reckon with the possibility that her devotions will be graceless “flesh-and-blood” exercises. To think otherwise would be, for Edwards, to deny the sovereignty and freedom of God to act when, and how, he chooses. That said, Edwards did not regard the “outward” means of grace as useless. On the contrary, during the Northampton revival of 1733–35, he actively encouraged the renewal of the old Puritan practices of family prayer and small-group Bible study, promoted the new trend in congregational singing begun in England by Isaac Watts, and spent many hours each day giving spiritual care to his congregation.
though the performance of devotional exercises does not cause spiritual renewal for Edwards, it often occasions it.

Third, both Palamas and Edwards work out highly nuanced positions on the role of the emotions in the Christian experience of God. To explicate the details of their positions fully and to offer a point-by-point comparison would take another lecture. But a few general remarks are warranted here. As we have seen, Palamas believes that the “passions” impede our knowledge of God, and that assiduous ascetic practice and mental prayer are needed to still them. But the tranquility to which the hesychast aspires is by no means physical or emotional stupefaction: apatheia is not to be confused with analgesia, precisely because the pathé (passions) are not simply our ordinary human feelings and emotions, but rather those habits, moods, dispositions and deeply embedded fantasies which constitute our sinful self-absorption. What Roberta Bondi has said of early Eastern Christian monastic writers applies also to Palamas: “[The] word ‘passion’ carries a negative meaning most of the time because for them a passion has as its chief characteristics the perversion of vision and the destruction of love. A passion may very well be a strong emotion, but it need not be. A passion can also be a state of mind, or even a habitual action.”59

Indeed, it is precisely by taming the disruptive passions that the hesychast attains to that exquisite emotional sensitivity and freedom marked, on the one hand, by “holy compunction” and godly sorrow, and, on the other, by spiritual joy and ecstasy.60

All that said, the stately tranquility of Athonite hesychasm would seem to stand in the sharpest contrast to the fervent emotionalism of the Great Awakening. And there is no doubt that the religious ethos of Eastern Orthodox monasticism and Anglo-American evangelicalism are in certain respects as different as night and day. Yet in his Treatise Concerning Religious Affec-
tions, Edwards makes two points which, taken together, suggest a deeper agreement with Palamas than we might expect. First, he differentiates affections from passions. Affections, he says, are “vigorous lively actings of the will or inclination,” whereas passions “are more sudden, and [their] effects on the animal spirits are more violent, and the mind more overpowered, and less in its own command.” Here, too, the word “passion” carries a negative connotation, though it seems to refer primarily to the ungovernable insurgencies of physical appetite and need. As to the affections, they are motions of the will. But not all such motions, even when triggered by religious exercises, indicate the operation of divine grace. For as he says:

There are false affections, and there are true. A man’s having much affection, don’t prove that he has any true religion: but if he has no affection, it proves that he has no true religion. The right way, is not to reject all affections, nor to approve all; but to distinguish between affections, approving some, and rejecting others; separating between the wheat and the chaff, the gold and the dross, the precious and the vile.

Thus, despite marked differences in their nomenclature, Edwards and Palamas are making much the same point. What Edwards means by “false affections” comes close to what Palamas means by “passions,” namely misdirected or disordered inclinations. And preeminent among the “true affections” that the Colonial revivalist sought to evoke by his preaching are the very things that the hesychast master believed mental prayer and ascetic discipline would produce, namely godly sorrow and spiritual joy.

From what we have seen, there is good reason to agree with Fr. Golitzen’s observation that, in their deep structures, the Edwardsean and Palamite theologies demonstrate remarkable affinities. This is not to minimize the wide differences in the religious ethos of the churches they represented. From what little Edwards says about “the Greek church,” we may presume that he,
like most Colonial Puritans, would have been hostile to its episcopal polity, its monastic system, many of its ceremonial and liturgical practices, and its lavish use of icons, incense, and holy relics. Conversely, one suspects that Palamas would have disliked both the plainness of Colonial American church architecture and the sensationalism of revivalist preaching and worship. Yet despite their very different social worlds and ecclesial settings, it is striking how similarly Edwards and Palamas render the Christian experience of God. Both insisted that to know God is to enjoy God, to delight in God, to marvel at God's ineffable beauty.

But in emphasizing the aesthetic element of Christian faith, neither was misled into simply equating beauty with holiness. For not all earthly beauty, or the pleasure we take in it, is holy. Conversely, the ultimate revelation of divine holiness is a picture of unspeakable ugliness from a purely human point of view: the Son of God hanging in shame before the world. As Isaiah put it: “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces” (Isa. 53:2f). No, the particular kind of beauty that Christ embodies is the beauty of self-sacrificial love, which is to say, a moral beauty—the radiant beauty of dutiful obedience. Christ's crucifixion stands between his transfiguration and his resurrection precisely as the sign of the ethically transfiguring effect upon the believer that a lifetime of cross-bearing must effect upon those destined for heavenly glory. That said, the theologies of Jonathan Edwards and Gregory Palamas are, finally, theologies of glory, and not, like that of Martin Luther, for example, theologies of the cross. That is, they accentuate not the agony of service, but the ecstasy of adoration. They emphasize how the Triune God, in his external self-expression, irradiates all creation with glorious light, graciously enables
his worshipers to behold that light, and so draws them into eternal participation in his own nature. They affirm, with the Psalmist, that in God’s light we see light (cf. Ps. 36:9). And they add that in seeing it, we ourselves become light.

Notes

1 The story of Jesus’ Transfiguration is told in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Mt. 17:1–9; Mk. 9:2–10; Lk. 9:28–36) and alluded to in II Pet. 1:16–21. These sources do not name the place where this extraordinary event took place, but two of the greatest fourth century Fathers, Jerome and Cyril of Jerusalem, both of whom were well acquainted with the geography of the Holy Land located it on Mount Tabor and this is generally accepted in the tradition. Modern critics, however, point out that, in its narrative context, the Transfiguration took place when Jesus was in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi, and therefore Mount Hermon is more likely to have been the implied site. For details, see Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), s.v. “Transfiguration” by D. M. Beck, 4:686f.

2 A Latin edition of the Greek Fathers, in 81 volumes, was published between 1856 and 1861. A second series, in 166 volumes, contained the Greek text with a Latin translation; it was published between 1857 and 1866. See the entry for Jacques-Paul Migne in The Catholic Encyclopedia (1914), http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10290a.htm. The writings of Gregory Palamas can be found in vols. 150–151.


4 The most complete account by Edwards of his knowledge of church history is A History of the Work of Redemption, Works, Vol. 9, ed. John F. Wilson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press [hereafter abbreviated as YUP], 1989). This comprises a series of thirty sermons preached at Northampton in 1739 and published posthumously in 1774. The editor was Jonathan Edwards, Jr., who furnished the text with a subtitle borrowed from his father’s famous letter to the trustees of the College of New Jersey: The Outlines of a Body of Divinity, including a View of Church History, in a Method Entirely New. Sermon 22 of the History covers events in the Eastern Roman Empire from the death of Constantine the Great in 337 to the fall of Constantinople in 1453 in a few short pages (403–416), most of which are devoted to what Edwards regards as the machinations of the devil in the heresies of Arianism and Pelagianism, in the neo-paganism of Julian the Apostate, and in the rise of Islam. His treatment of Greek Patristic and Byzantine theology is superficial at best, and he says of “the Greek church” only that it was “sunk into great darkness and gross superstition.”


Two of these visions, as recorded by Palamas’s friend and biographer, Philotheus Kokkinos, are quoted in Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, “Orthodox Theology: Divine Charisma and Personal Experience,” trans. John Chryssavgis, Theology Today 61 (2004): 11f. To be precise, only the second is explicitly said to come from Palamas’s stay at the skete of St. Savva. The date of the first, though presumably earlier, is not given—at least in this article.

The Gendale translation, cited in n2 above, is an abridgment, but a judicious one: many redundancies and polemical excurses, which were characteristic of Byzantine literature, but which simply ignore impatient modern audiences, have been excised. A brief excerpt can also be found in Philokalia 4:331–342.


Two English translations are available: (1) Treatise on the Spiritual Life, trans. Daniel M. Rogich (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing Co., 1995), and (2) Philokalia 4:293–322, where it bears the title, To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia.


During the night of 2 March, 1354, a terrible earthquake demolished the coastal city of Gallipoli. The survivors fled, seeking shelter elsewhere, and by the next morning, a troop of Turks had occupied the site and claimed it as their own. Palamas was on board ship when the calamity occurred, but put in to shore, perhaps to offer aid and comfort to the victims. He was then captured by the Turks and sent to Bithynia. For details of the capture and its aftermath, see Nicol, Reluctant Emperor, 125f.


The fundamental starting point for the study of the Hesychast tradition is The Philokalia, a collection of Patristic and Medieval texts, which was compiled in the eighteenth century by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth and published over the years in many languages and redactions. Two of the most famous versions appeared under the title Dobrotolubiy, the first an Old Church Slavonic translation published by Paisiy Velichkovsky (d. 1794), and the second a modern Russian translation published by Theophan the Recluse (d. 1895). An English translation of selections from Theophan’s Russian translation, titled Writings from the Philokalia: On Prayer of the Heart, trans. E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer was published by Faber and Faber, Ltd. of London.
in 1951. (In 1966, the same publisher brought out a companion volume: Igumen Chariton of Valamo, *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, ed. Timothy Ware, trans. E. Kadloubovsky and E. M. Palmer. This work represents the great flowering of nineteenth century Russian hesychastic thought, which was triggered by the publication of the Slavonic and Russian translations of the *Philokalia*, but it is a different book altogether.) As noted in n4 above, a modern critical English edition of the entire *Philokalia* is currently under way; four of the projected five volumes have appeared to date. In addition, the Classics of Western Spirituality series, published by Paulist Press, has made a number of writings from the Eastern Christian mystical tradition available to us in modern, critical editions. These include: Gregory of Nyssa [c. 335–c. 395], *The Life of Moses* (1978); Pseudo-Macarius [late fourth century], *Spiritual Homilies* (1992); John Climacus [c. 580–c. 650], *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (1982); Maximus Confessor [580–662], *Selected Writings* (1985); Symeon the New Theologian [949–1022], *The Discourses* (1980); Nil Sorsky [c. 1433–1508], *The Complete Writings* (2002); and *The Pilgrim’s Tale* [anon. nineteenth cen.], (1999).

15. Succinct definitions of the meaning of these two terms in Eastern Christian spiritual writings may be found in the Glossary of *Philokalia* 4. *Nous*, which refers to the “direct apprehension or spiritual perception” (431) but must be further differentiated from *dianoia* (reason), which is the “discursive, conceptualizing and logical faculty in man” (434). Nicholas Gendle (in *Palamas, Triads*, 118n3) puts this second distinction crisply: “In patristic usage, these two modes of cognition (mystical and intellectual) correspond to two different human cognitive faculties; the *Nous*, the spiritual mind or intuitive intellect, capable of direct apprehension of the truth of things; and the *dianoia*, the analytical and discursive intellect that works out problems by logical stages and knows about things.”


17. As far as I know, it was J. D. Salinger’s novel, *Franny and Zooey* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1961) that first introduced American readers to the Jesus Prayer, where it is presented as a kind of antidote to the superficiality of contemporary American life. As noted above, both Paulist Press and Faber & Faber, Ltd. have done much to make the hesychast classics widely available to British and American readers.

18. That certain saints were not only able to see the divine light, but could at times radiate with it, is attested in the hesychast literature. The most famous example was the Russian *starets*, St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833). See Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 158–162.

19. *Topics*, no. 75 in *Philokalia* IV:380. For clarity’s sake, I have here changed the word, “hypostases,” which stands in the text, to the more familiar “persons.”

20. As D. M. Nichol has pointed out, there is a deep “ideological gulf” between the Eastern and Western Christian approaches to theology. Western theologians have, he says, “a passion for defining every article of the faith,” which the Easterns find “legalistic” and “authoritarian.” The latter, in contrast, are often content to allow doctrines to go undefined—unless controversy forces an issue. The Westerns, in turn, regard the Eastern approach as “maddening obscurantism.” See *Church and Society in the Last Centuries of Byzantium*. The Birkbeck Lectures, 1977 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 93–97.


23 See Topics, no. 68, in Philokalia 4:377: “The divine superessentiality is never named in the plural. But the divine and uncreated grace and energy of God is indivisibly divided, like the sun’s rays that warm, illumine, quicken and bring increase as they cast their radiance upon what they enlighten, and shine on the eyes of whoever beholds them. In the manner, then, of this faint likeness, the divine energy of God is called not only one but also multiple by the theologians... Therefore the powers and energies of the divine Spirit—even though they are said in theology to be multiple—are uncreated and are to be indivisibly distinguished from the single and wholly undivided essence of the Spirit.”


25 Topics, no. 75 in Philokalia 4:380.


28 Triads, II.ii.7, p. 49 and 128n80.


30 Triads, III.i.22, p. 80.

31 Triads, III.i.14, p. 100


39 Marsden, 157.


41 In *Works* 4.3–153. *Images* was apparently written between 1737 and 1741. Cherry’s claim (27) that the theme of light “dominates the entire notebook” seems to me exaggerated, though perhaps forgivably.


45 *Institutes*, I.v.8 (1:61); I.vi.2 (1:72); I.xiv.20 (1:180); II.vi.1 (1:341). For other references, see 1:61n27.

46 According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 18:579, this “rare” English word comes from what appears to be an equally rare Latin word, *remanare*, which means flowing back or reabsorption. Apparently it was used by Lucretius in a pantheistic sense, to refer to the reabsorption of a soul into the universe. The only instance of the use of the English word listed in the *OED* is from a British author of the late nineteenth century, although Edwards had used it over a century before. But I have been unable to determine whether Edwards borrowed it from Lucretius or invented it himself. Either way, it would be incorrect to assert that Edwards was using the word in a pantheistic sense, for the saints do not lose their identity in God when they rema-
nate his glory. Rather, they attain their full actualization as persons in that “world of love” we call heaven. (Cf. Sermon 15 of Charity and Its Fruits, in Works 8:366–397.)

47 It bears mention here that Jenson, 93, observed the similarities between Edwards’s doctrine of the Trinity and that of the fourth-century Eastern Fathers. (And I must register my gratitude to my colleague, Dr. Caleb Henry, for drawing my attention to this.) But Jenson makes no mention in his extended discussion of A Divine and Supernatural Light, 65–78, of the similarities between Edwards’s treatment of the subject and that of such great light-mystics of the Christian East as Gregory of Nyssa, Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas.

48 Triads III.i.22, p. 80.

49 Light, in Works 17:412.

50 Triads III.i.14, p. 100.

51 Light in Works 17:419.

52 Ibid., 121.


54 Triads III.i.26, p. 82

55 Triads III.i.29, p. 85.

56 Light, in Works 17:416.

57 This is one of the points in Edwardsian theology to which Jenson, 69–73, who is usually so enthusiastic about it, takes sharpest exception.

58 For Edwards’s own account of the social factors and ecclesiastical reforms that precipitated the revival, see Faithful Narrative in Works, 4:147–159, and Marsden, 155–58.


60 Triads II.i.6–12, pp. 49–52.

61 Works 2:98.

62 Works 2:121.