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“Raise the people in silence”: Traces of Hesychasm in Dostoevskij’s Fictional Saint Zosima

Fëdor Dostoevskij’s religion – or to be more precisely, the religion that is shaped in his works – inspires interesting and often conflicting debates. While the rigorous criticism of Western Christianity and the primacy of Eastern Christian motives displayed in his novels unambiguously point to his devotion to Orthodox Christianity, the precise nature of his faith continues to puzzle many of his readers and remains food for thought and discussion.² Especially his relationship with ecclesiastical Orthodox doctrine has raised and still raises many questions. In their introduction to the contemporary edition *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, Pattison and Thompson straightforwardly state that “Dostoevsky was a confessed Orthodox Christian, but his relationship with official Orthodoxy remains unclear” (Pattison & Thompson, 2001: 7).

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² For some inspiring and recent introductions and contributions to the debate on Dostoevskij’s interpretation of Christianity, see, amongst others, George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson (eds.), *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Malcolm V. Jones, *Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience*, London: Anthem Press, 2005; Susan McReynolds, *Redemption and the Merchant God: Dostoevsky’s Economy of Salvation and Antisemitism*, Evanston (Illinois): Northwestern University Press, 2008.

One of the most notable characters that is at the heart of the rich debate on the specific nature of Dostoevskij's Christianity is the elder Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-1880). Already since the publication of the novel, many readers (from both within and outside the Orthodox tradition) have observed in the elder's teachings various divergences from the mould of Russian ecclesiastical Orthodoxy. In 1881, the official journal of the Holy Synod, *Cerkovnij Vestnik*, wrote that Dostoevskij "took a great risk when he introduced into the *Brothers Karamazov* the types of the elder Zosima and the other monks" (quoted in Belknap, 1967: 13). Boyce Gibson frankly calls Zosima "a Christian of a new dispensation" (Gibson, 1973: 190). Sven Linnér shows that Dostoevskij's portrayal of Zosima owes much to the Western literary tradition (Linnér, 1975: 123ff.). Sergei Hackel aptly reveals that Zosima's religious discourse is more evasive than affirmative where it concerns the church and that it is infused with traces of nature mysticism (Hackel, 1983). Gary Rosenshield claims that "Father Zosima's thought is shot through with undeniably pantheistic, Franciscan, Pietistic, Utopian Socialist, Hegelian historicist and sentimental humanitarian elements" (Rosenshield, 1994: 503).

Dostoevskij himself had the unambiguous aspiration to create in Zosima "a pure, ideal Christian," whom he envisioned as the "culminating point" of the narrative and the religious counterweight against the atheism and nihilism voiced in the novel (PSS 30 (1): 68, 75 & 121).³ The elder is introduced in book 1 of the novel, in which he and the monastic tradition he belongs to is the subject of a separate chapter "Elders" ("Starcy"). He is then further described in book 2, *An Inappropriate Gathering* (*Neumestnoe sobranie*), in a setting that almost borders on the burlesque and scandalous, but in which he seems to serve as the moral and spiritual centre: he tries to mediate between Fëdor and Dmitrij Karamazov and gives counsel to some pilgrim women. However, it is not until book 6, *The Russian Monk* (*Russkij Inok*), that the reader is given a full insight into the life and religious world view of the elder. This book is cast in the form of a *žitie*, written down by Alëša after the elder's death, and contains the biography and teachings of Zosima. The placement of Zosima's hagiography after book 5, *Pro et Contra*, which contains the summit of atheism in the narrative, i.e. Ivan's rebellion and the Grand

³ "This [book 6, NG] is not a sermon, but more like a story, a tale about actual life. If it succeeds, I shall have done something good: *I force to realize* that the pure, ideal Christian is not an abstract matter, but is figuratively real and possible, that stands before our very eyes, and that Christianity is for the Russian Land the only shelter for all her ills" (PSS 30 (1): 68).

Inquisitor, clearly show that the author intended it as a counterbalance to the atheist voices in the novel. Still, he did anticipate the criticism on his "Russian monk" and seems to have been aware of the dissenting tenor of some of the elder's teachings:

I have entitled this sixth book: "the Russian monk", a bold and provocative title, because all the critics who do not like us will scream: "is that what a Russian monk is like, how can you dare to put him on such a pedestal? [...] I find that I have not sinned against reality: it is valid not only as an ideal, but also as a reality (PSS 30 (1): 102).

The aura of provocation and anomalousness surrounding his fictional saint is in fact already from the start induced by defining and portraying him as a representative of *starčestvo*, i.e. an institution of a controversial nature in the history of the Russian church. Elderhood is a tradition that thrived mainly outside the walls of the official church: within the restrictive atmosphere of the Russian church, the elders represented a current of spiritual freedom and were able to maintain their independence from the ecclesiastical and secular authorities (Linnér, 1975: 88). They upheld and revived a spirituality that had been pushed into the margins of the secularized and rationalized church.

Dostoevskij explicitly draws the reader's attention to the position of elderhood as an institution that falls outside the mainstream of the Russian church already from the start of the novel in chapter 5 of book 1, "Elders." While sketching the history of elderhood and describing the special role of it in the history of the church, he emphatically points out that it occupies only a rare place in Russian monasticism and that it is seen as an innovation and therefore subject to suppression: "it [elderhood, NG] exists in very few monasteries and has even on occasion been subjected to what almost amounts to persecution as an unprecedented novelty in Russia" (PSS 14: 26).⁴

Other scholars have already placed Zosima within the *starec* tradition and have examined parallels between Zosima's teachings and elderhood in terms of individual prototypes such as Tichon of Zadonsk or the renowned Optina elders Leonid and Amvrosij.⁵ Less attention is however

⁴ "[старчество, NG] существует весьма еще не во многих монастырях, и даже подвергалось иногда почти что гонениям, как неслыханное по России новшество."

⁵ See R. Pletnev, "Serdcem Mudrye (O 'starcach' u Dostoevskogo)", in *O Dostoevskom. Sbornik statej*, Praga, 1929: 73-92; Nadejda Gorodetzky, *Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk: inspirer of Dostoevsky*, London, 1951; John B. Dunlop, *Staretz Amvrosy: model for Dostoevsky's staretz Zossima*, Belmont: Nordland, 1972; Sven Linnér, *Starets Zosima in the Brothers Karamazo: a study in the mimesis of virtue*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1975; Leonard

given to the whole theological and spiritual tradition that is at the core of elderhood, i.e. the practice of *hesychasm*.

Hesychasm is a special form of mystical prayer that is strongly rooted in the Eastern Orthodox theological tradition of apophaticism. Apophatic or negative theology (from the Greek *apophasis*, un-saying, or saying away) proceeds from a fundamental unknowability and ineffability of God and hence insists that the only valid approach to Him is to lay down human reason and human language. In order to approach the Divinity Who is beyond all human concepts it is necessary to describe Him in negative terms and hence deny what is inferior to Him. Thus, in the apophatic tradition, “theology – ‘talking about God’ – done rightly leads to silence before God, to serene contemplation of God” (Payton, 2007: 78). In its pursuit of silence before God, the apophatic tradition gives special value to the prayer method of hesychasm. Hesychasm (from the Greek *hesychia*: silence, tranquillity) is a tradition of prayer that aims at attaining the silence or *hesychia* that is the required mental condition to approach the transcendent God.

This special form of prayer has a very long tradition, beginning in early Christianity: the first foundations of hesychastic prayer were already laid in the 4th century by Evagrius Ponticus, who offers a synthesis of the spirituality of the Desert Fathers. In the 6th century, John Climacus introduces the Jesus prayer as the form of prayer that gradually disengages the hesychast from worldly matters and opens up his heart to have a mystical vision of the divine. Symeon the New Theologian (10th – 11th century) associates the mystical vision of God with a vision of light. At the end of the 13th and beginning of the 14th century, Gregory of Sinai revives the practice of hesychasm on Mount Athos and also gives the impetus to spread it, via Bulgaria, in the Slavic world. However, it was only in the 14th century that hesychasm reached its full doctrinal synthesis by Gregory Palamas, a monk at Mount Athos and later archbishop of Thessalonica who became known as the master of Orthodox mysticism. Palamas led and theoretically underpinned the defense of the hesychasts in the hesychast controversy in the 14th century and became the preeminent theologian of hesychasm.⁶ While emphatically affirming the full transcendence and unknowability of God, Palamas argues that it is possible to have an experience of the Divinity: he distinguishes between

Stanton, *The Optina Pustyn Monastery in the Russian Literary Imagination: Iconic Vision in Works by Dostoevsky, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Others*, New York: Peter Lang, 1995.

⁶ In the 14th century, hesychasm was strongly attacked by Barlaam of Calabria. Palamas stood up against him in defence of hesychasm (Ware, 1997: 66).

God’s “essence” (*ousia*), which is unknowable, and His divine “energies” (*energeiai*) that pervade creation. However remote from us in His essence, God has revealed Himself to the world in His energies. Through these energies – which are a direct manifestation of God in the world – humanity can enter in a relationship with God. Although it is impossible to know God in His essence, it is possible to see and experience Him in His energies, through hesychastic prayer, which aims at quieting and purifying the human mind so that it can witness and experience the divine energies. Palamas further argues that, when practicing their prayer, the hesychasts have a mystical vision of Uncreated Light, identical to the Divine light the three apostles witnessed at the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor (Meyendorff, [1974] 1998: 71-125; Ware, 1997: 61-70).⁷

In line with the apophatic dictum of the ineffability of God, He can only be experienced in a context of silence: only by attaining a state of *hesychia* (silence, inner tranquility), the hesychast can enter the divine realm. In order to attain inner stillness, the hesychast invokes continuously, first verbally, then as though non-discursively, the Name of Christ, a form of inner prayer, or prayer of the heart, that is in the hesychast tradition known as the Jesus prayer. By uninterruptedly and almost automatically reciting the Name of Christ through the words “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”, the hesychast gradually casts off his rational mind and progressively opens up to witness the divine energies. Kallistos Ware explains the function of the Jesus prayer to attain the required state of *hesychia*:

The Jesus Prayer is thus a prayer in words, but because the words are so simple, so few and unvarying, the Prayer reaches out beyond words into the living silence of the Eternal. It is a way of achieving, with God’s assistance, the kind of non-discursive, non-iconic prayer in which we do not simply make statements to or about God, in which we do not just form pictures of Christ in our imagination, but are ‘oned’ with Him in an all-embracing, unmediated encounter (Ware, 1986: 15).

In addition, central to the tradition of hesychasm is the institution of elderhood: younger monks are in their inner prayer guided by an elder, who is experienced in hesychastic practice and well-read in the writings on hesychasm. The elder has ascended the spiritual ladder towards God and shares his experience and inner knowledge with the younger hesychasts in his monastery.

⁷ For a history of hesychasm in the Orthodox East, see John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, [1974] 1998.

Although, according to Vladimir Lossky, hesychasm is a fundamental ingredient “of the ascetic tradition of the Eastern Church,” the history and development of hesychasm in Russia is a troubled one (Lossky, [1944] 1991: 209). A form of hesychastic prayer was already practiced by the monks of the Kievan Caves Monastery in the 11th and 12th century and references to it appear in writings of the 12th-century bishop Kirill of Turov (Stanton, 1995: 31). In the 14th century, hesychasm arrived in Russia from Mount Athos and through Bulgarian and Serbian translations of the Desert Fathers. The tradition of hesychasm spreading in Russia – and in most of the Slavic-speaking countries – was more inspired by the writings of Gregory of Sinai than by Gregory Palamas. Gregory of Sinai was a contemporary of Palamas who also assembled writings of earlier hesychasts (Evagrius Ponticus, John Climacus and Symeon the New Theologian) and founded a monastery in Bulgaria (near Paroria), through which his hesychastic writings were disseminated to other Slavic countries. Hesychasm received some new characteristics once assimilated to the Russian environment: generally speaking, the Russian hesychasts were less interested in speculative theology than the Greek ones, they emphasized more the social implications of eremitic monasticism and their kind of mysticism was more humanised than the Greek forms. Nevertheless, the unique spirituality of the hesychast tradition remained completely the same (Meyendorff, [1974] 1998: 145). In the middle of the 14th century, Sergej of Radonež stimulated the practice of the Jesus prayer in the Trinity Lavra he had founded.⁸

However, it was only in the 15th century, through the monk Nil Sorskij, or Nil of Sora, that hesychasm came to flowering as a vital tradition in the Russian religious mind and was spread on a large scale. Nil Sorskij (1433-1508) – whose family name was Majkov – was a monk of the Kirillo-Belozerskij monastery in Northern Russia. At a rather young age, he went on a pilgrimage to Mount Athos, where in the 14th century Gregory Palamas had brought hesychasm to a level of theological and spiritual perfection and full flowering. Nil stayed several years on Mount Athos, where he had frequent conversations with the elders and immersed himself in patristic and later writings on hesychasm. After having spent some years there, Nil returned to Russia, where he withdrew in the Volga forests because he consciously sought the solitude and isolation that is a prerequisite for hesychastic prayer, and because he

⁸ Dmitrij Tschizewskij identifies, amongst others, also traces of hesychasm in the Life of Pavel of Obnora (14th century), a disciple of Sergej of Radonež and founder of an eremitical monastery (1959: 79).

desired to be disengaged from ecclesiastical hierarchy. On the banks of the Sora river, Nil built his own *skete*, i.e. a group of separate cells or huts that are scattered around a centrally located church. The monks or hermits lived in their individual cells, where they could devote themselves to the isolated practice of hesychastic prayer. The *skete* was guided by an elder, or a spiritual guide, who had ascended the spiritual ladder and served to guide the younger hermits in contemplative life and inner prayer.

Nil was the first to write down a consistent theology of hesychasm in Russia: he developed his hesychastic views in two chief works, the *Predanie (The Tradition)* and the *Ustav (The Rule)*. In these writings, Nil drew from the ascetical and mystical writings from various Church Fathers, thereby displaying an enormous erudition. His sources are, amongst others, Basil the Great, Macarius of Egypt, Nilus of Sinai, John Climacus, Maximus the Confessor, Isaac the Syrian, Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory of Sinai (Fedotov, 1975: 269). He was the first to collect and introduce these texts in Russia. Constantly commending his readers to steep themselves into the patristic mystical tradition, Nil describes every step in the hesychastic process towards unity with the Godhead, a process that is a constant struggle against worldly temptations. The hesychast should protect himself from these temptations by cleansing his heart through solitude, silence, study of the Holy Writings, manual labour and obedience to his elder.⁹

A seminal element in Nil's form of asceticism is poverty, which he finds indispensable in the struggle against secular temptations. He strongly resisted the church's owning of land and serfs. As in the whole of medieval Europe, the Russian church and the monasteries possessed enormous estates and gained much profits and special secular privileges from them. In Nil's view, by contrast, monks should be detached from worldly wealth and should instead devote themselves to inner prayer and contemplation. Nil and his disciples came to be known as the "non-possessors" or "the Transvolgan elders." Their ideal of monastic poverty and teaching of hesychasm gradually became a thorn in the side of the ecclesiastical establishment who preferred a form of monasticism that allowed ecclesiastical possessions and owning of serfs, and that was more conform to the church's ambitions. The defenders of monastic possessions were led by Joseph of Volokolamsk and were called the "possessors": they argued that own property guaranteed the independency of the church from the state. The controversy between "non-possessors"

⁹ For a detailed analysis of Nil's life and teachings, see George Maloney, *Russian Hesychasm: the spirituality of Nil Sorskij*, The Hague: Mouton, 1973.

and “possessors” was ended at a church council in 1503, which decided in favour of Joseph of Volokolamsk and his party of “possessors.” Nil’s ideal of a basically spiritual church posed too great a threat to the ecclesiastical establishment.¹⁰ Although Nil’s type of spirituality attracted a lot of followers in both monastic and lay circles, hesychasm and the related type of monasticism was by the church authorities suppressed and pushed into the margins of Russian Orthodoxy: there was a series of persecutions against Nil’s followers and the church started consciously suppressing the hesychast movement (Billington, 1966: 63-64; Figes, 2003: 294). The ban on Nil’s monasticism cut Russian religious consciousness off from the hesychast tradition, as still practiced on Mount Athos and deeply rooted in the theological heritage of the Church Fathers.

Yet, the hesychastic legacy was not completely lost in Russia: in the 19th century, hesychastic practice and spirituality enjoyed a revival in both Russian monasticism and lay circles. At the end of the 18th century, hesychasm knew a theological renewal on Mount Athos: in 1782, the monk Nicodemus from Athos and bishop Macarius of Corinth compiled an anthology of patristic texts that centre on hesychastic practice, entitled the *Philokalia*. The publication of the *Philokalia* did not only give a new boost to hesychasm in the Greek Orthodox world, but also instigated a movement of Russian religious revivalists who wanted to restore this tradition in Orthodox spirituality. Most instrumental in the spiritual renaissance was the monk Paisij Veličkovskij (1722-1794), who was zealously devoted to reviving the practice of the Jesus prayer and related theology in the Slavic world. Paisij, who had been a monk on Mount Athos, gathered around him a group of monks to translate the *Philokalia* into Slavonic, entitled the *Dobrotoljubie* (1793). In the *Dobrotoljubie*, he even infused some texts on practicing the Jesus prayer that were not included in the Greek edition, such as some texts by Gregory Palamas (Meyendorff, [1974] 1998: 140).

Through the efforts of Paisij and his disciples, hesychasm reappeared in the beginning of the 19th century in Russian monasteries. The centre of the revival of Russian hesychasm became the monastery of Optina Pustyn’, where in 1821 a new *skete* was built where hermits could devote themselves in isolation to silent meditation and hesychastic prayer. The Optina monastery is situated near the town of Kozel’sk in the Kaluga

¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis of the controversy between “possessors” and “non-possessors”, see Florovsky ([1937] 1979, I: 19-24). See also Tom Dykstra, *Russian Monastic Culture: “Josephism” and the Iosifo-Volokolamsk Monastery 1479-1607*, München: Otto Sagner, 2006.

province, about 200 kilometres south of Moscow. In the 19th century, the hermitage had three great elders, disciples of Paisij, who were eager to re-install hesychastic spirituality in Russian religious consciousness and instigated a renaissance of mystical spirituality. The elder Leonid (1768-1841) resided in the newly built *skete* and attracted a growing group of laymen who sought for spiritual advice and comfort. He brought the institution of elderhood outside of the walls of the monastery and spread it into Russia’s cultural and religious life. The elder Makarij (1788-1860) initiated the publication and translation of patristic texts and made Optina a renowned publication house for works on hesychastic practice and spirituality. The last one of the Optina elders was Amvrosij (1821-1891) who had a great charisma and became a celebrated spiritual authority among Russian believers. In all these elders, the spirit of ancient hesychasm was brought to life again in 19th-century Russia. These famous *starcy* acquired an almost saint-like status not only among monks, but also among lay believers: they were renowned for their high spiritual aura and attracted hordes of pilgrims, who had broken away from the secularized church and who were in search of a more spiritual faith.¹¹ However, the elders’ popularity made the ecclesiastical authorities, who observed in their spiritual teachings a threat to the church, very wary. Hesychastic prayer is a highly personal and individual practice, it is directed towards establishing a personal union with God and is thus a discipline that is aloof from church rituals. The church authorities tried to discredit the elders (the elder Leonid, for example, was met with something that came close to persecution), but in the end they could not stop the thousands of pilgrims visiting the monastery. The elders were highly esteemed by the common believers and grew into a spiritual force that thrived outside the walls of the official church (Figes, 2003: 294ff.).

Among the thousands attracted to the spiritual aura of Optina’s elders was also Dostoevskij, who made in the summer of 1878 a pilgrimage to the hermitage together with his young friend Vladimir Solov’ëv, hoping to find solace there for the sudden death of his son Alëša.¹² His wife Anna Grigor’evna had asked the young philosopher and personal friend of the family to accompany her grieving husband on this pilgrimage.¹³

¹¹ For a detailed study of the Optina hermitage, see I.M. Koncevič, *Optina Pustyn’ i ee vremja*, Sankt-Peterburg 2005.

¹² Nikolaj Gogol’ and Lev Tolstoj also made some frequent visits to the monastery (see Stanton, 1995).

¹³ In her memoirs, Anna Grigor’evna wrote: “Fëdor Michajlovič was terribly crushed by this death [...] In order to comfort him a little and distract him from his sad thoughts, I begged Vl. S. Solov’ëv, who often visited us in these days of our mourning, to persuade Fëdor

Dostoevskij and Solov'ëv arrived in Kozel'sk in the beginning of July after a rather adventurous journey.¹⁴ They stayed in the monastery only a couple of days, but in this short period of time Dostoevskij met with the celebrated *starec* Amvrosij three times. The Optina hermitage, the meetings with the *starec*, and the monastic customs left a profound and lasting impression on the writer. Anna Grigor'evna writes:

Fëdor Michajlovič returned from Optina Pustyn' seemingly at peace and much calmer, and he told me a great deal about the customs of Pustyn', where he spent two days. Fëdor Michajlovič met three times with the renowned "starec" Amvrosij, once in a crowd of people, and twice alone, and from these conversations he brought a profound and lasting impression [...] From his stories it was clear, what a profound knower of the heart and seer this honoured "starec" was (Dostoevskaja, 1971: 323).

The feelings of warmth and sympathy Dostoevskij took for the elder seem to have been reciprocal: it is testified that Amvrosij liked the writer a lot (Dunlop, 1972: 59). During his stay in Optina, Dostoevskij became acquainted with the hesychastic practice and hesychastic prayer conducted in the hermitage. It is likely that the elder Amvrosij conveyed the principles of hesychastic teaching personally to him: Amvrosij's counsel to his visitors and pilgrims very often dealt with instructing on the theology and technique of the Jesus prayer (Dunlop, 1972: 157-163).

In addition, Dostoevskij took with him various publications from the Optina monastery which were most probably given to him by the elder Amvrosij, who always had copies available for his more honoured visitors (Hackel, 1983: 142). He may also have obtained some Optina publications before or after his pilgrimage from specialized bookshops in St. Petersburg. Actually, a recent article by Nina Budanova – also editor of the most recent reconstruction of Dostoevskij's personal library – reveals that Dostoevskij already started showing an interest in spiritual literature in the 1850s, increasing in the following decades.¹⁵ In any case, whenever or wherever he obtained them, there are in his personal library various Optina editions that are devoted to and highlight hesychastic spirituality. Dostoevskij owned a copy of *The Life of the Elder Leonid* (*Жизнеописание Оптинского старца иеромонаха Леонида (в схиме*

Michajlovič to accompany him to Optina Pustyn', where Solov'ëv was planning to go this summer. A visit to Optina Pustyn' was since long a dream of Fëdor Michajlovič" (Dostoevskaja, 1971: 321-322).

¹⁴ Dostoevskij's relates the journey in a letter to his wife, see PSS 30 (1): 35.

¹⁵ N. Budanova, "Knigi, podarenyye F. M. Dostoevskomu v Optinoj Pustyni", in *Sofija*, Elektronnaia Versija, 2005, Nr. 1. <http://www.sophia.orthodoxy.ru/magazine/20051/knigi.htm>

Льва), 1876), a spiritual biography written by Kliment Zedergol'm of starec Leonid, the first of the 19th-century elders of Optina Pustyn' (Budanova, 2005a: 123). The purpose of this book was to make the tenets of monastic hesychasm accessible to a secular public and to popularize the related spirituality for a large group of believers beyond the secluded world of the monastery. In the *Life*, mention is made of the antagonism and persecution Leonid encountered from the side of the church authorities (Zedergol'm [1876] 1990: 63-79). Another Optina publication in Dostoevskij's library is *A Historical Description of the Optina Pustyn' monastery in Kozel'sk* (*Историческое описание Козельской Введенской Оптиной пустыни*, 1876), which includes fragments from Paisij Veličkovskij's *žitie* and works (Budanova, 2005a: 124). He also had a copy of a work called *Exalted ears of wheat to feed the soul: some translations from the Holy Fathers by Paisij Veličkovskij* (*Восторженные класы в пищу души. Из переводов святых Отцев Паисия Величковского*, 1876) which is an anthology of spiritual texts, selected from the *Philokalia* (Budanova, 2005a: 121). While there is no material evidence that Dostoevskij owned the standard collection of the *Philokalia*, or *Dobrotoljubie*, he did have this anthology in his library that compiled texts on hesychastic spirituality and instructions on how to acquire it.

Dostoevskij also owned a Russian translation (again published in Optina) of Symeon the New Theologian, a Byzantine monk who "belongs to the great line of mystics of the Jesus Prayer" (Meyendorff, [1974] 1998: 44; Budanova, 2005a: 128). Symeon the New Theologian was a monastic leader and great mystic in Constantinople at the turn of the first millennium (949-1022), who became known as "a forerunner of Byzantine hesychasm" (Alfeyev, 2000: 1). He came into conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities because he wrote so openly about his personal experience of God. He was the first to describe his experience of God as a reception and vision of light: the unknown and inaccessible Divinity reveals Himself through Light.

God is Light, and those whom He makes worthy to see Him, see Him as Light; those who receive Him, receive Him as Light. For the light of His Glory goes before His face, and it is impossible that He should appear otherwise than as Light (quoted in Lossky, [1944] 1991: 218).

Symeon's writings on light mysticism highly contribute to the theology of hesycham. In the 14th century, Gregory Palamas further developed and gave a more theoretical underpinning to Symeon's vision of the divine light. He made the distinction between God's essence and His energies

and was thus able to defend the hesychast vision of the divine light against Barlaam's claims that direct vision of God is impossible. Palamas argues that the vision of light the hesychasts receive in the experience of inner prayer is a vision of Uncreated Light, or a vision of God in His energies. He identifies it with the Light of the Godhead surrounding Christ at His Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. The Taboric Light, seen by Christ's three apostles during his Transfiguration, is the goal of the hesychasts' mystical contemplation: it is a theophany, a manifestation of God through His energies (Ware, 1997: 66ff). Some of Symeon's writings are included in the *Philokalia* (*Philokalia*, 1995, Vol. IV: 11-75). Dostoevskij possessed a copy of Symeon's *Three Discourses*, also known as *The Theological Discourses* (*Три слова преподобнаго Отца нашего Симеона Новаго Богослова, игумена и пресвитера бывшаго от ограды святого Маманта*, 1852).

Dostoevskij also possessed an Optina edition of Isaac the Syrian's *Spiritual-Ascetical Homilies*, translated from the Greek by Paisij Veličkovskij (1854) (Budanova, 2005a: 122).¹⁶ Isaac the Syrian, also known as Isaac of Nineveh, lived in the 7th century and is regarded as one of the greatest mystical and spiritual writers of the Eastern Church. His writings on asceticism, in particular *The Ascetical Homilies*, had a substantial influence on the tradition of hesychasm. Isaac the Syrian can be called a "Doctor" of hesychastic mysticism and is considered an important teacher on the mystical Jesus prayer (Maloney, 1973: 142). In the 15th century, the first Russian theologian of hesychasm Nil Sorskij drew much inspiration from Isaac the Syrian, especially in his descriptions of hesychastic contemplation and his emphasis on tears in hesychastic practice, and quoted abundantly from his writings.

The *Spiritual-Ascetical Homilies* of Isaac the Syrian was one of Dostoevskij's favourite spiritual books and was an important religious source in the genesis of *The Brothers Karamazov*. References to it appear in the notebooks for the novel (PSS 15: 203-205) and several times in the finished novel itself. Sergei Hackel has drawn attention to the fact that Fëdor Karamazov's servant Grigorij owns a handwritten copy of the *Homilies*, but understands little of it (PSS 14: 89).¹⁷ His adopted son

¹⁶ Anna Grigor'evna wrote down three different titles: *Слова Исаака Сирина; Святого отца нашего Исаака Сирина слова; Слова святого Исаака Сирина* (Budanova, 2005a: 122).

¹⁷ "He had from somewhere procured a handwritten copy of the homilies and orations of the 'God-bearing father Isaac the Syrian', read it stubbornly over many years, but understood almost nothing in it, but perhaps for that very reason loved and valued this book more than any other (добыл откуда-то список слов и проповедей "богоносного отца нашего Исаака

Smerdjakov has a printed version of it, and uses it later in the novel to cover the money he derived from the murder of the old Karamazov from Ivan (PSS 15: 61).¹⁸ Although Isaac the Syrian's work appears in the novel in an unusual, even negative context (one would rather expect Isaac's writings in the hands of Zosima or Alëša), there may be a positive, albeit anonymous role for it elsewhere in the novel, as Hackel suggests (Hackel, 1983: 145-147). As I attempt to show later on, Isaac the Syrian's *Homilies* may lay at the root of some of Zosima's spiritual teachings.¹⁹

Dostoevskij possessed some other books in his library – all Optina editions – that have a hesychastic ring to them, among them a work on repentance by Mark the Ascetic (Марк Подвижник. *Слово о покаянии*), a Desert Father of the 5th century, and a commentary on Psalm 6 by Anastasius of Sinai (*Беседа на 6-ой псалом святого Анастасия Синаита*), a 7th century ascetical and mystical writer (Budanova, 2005a: 115, 124).

It is also highly likely that Dostoevskij was acquainted with a work published in 1860 that aspired to revalue and rehabilitate the hesychastic theology of Gregory Palamas in Russia, i.e. *The Holy Gregory Palamas, metropolitan of Thessalonica, advocate of the Orthodox teaching on the Taboric Light and on the Divine workings* (*Святый Григорий Палама, митрополит Солунский, поборник православного учения о фаворском свете и о действиях Божиих*, Kiev 1860). This could be evidenced by the fact that Dostoevskij repeatedly referred to Gregory Palamas in association to the Bulgarian question (Zvoznikov, 1994: 187).

One of the other sources for Dostoevskij's familiarity with hesychastic spirituality was a book he had acquired long before his visit to Optina, i.e. *The Tale of his Wanderings and Travels through Russia, Moldavia, Turkey and the Holy Land by Parfenij, a Monk tonsured at the Holy Mount Athos* (*Сказание о странствии и путешествии по России, Молдавии, Турции и Св. Земле постриженника Святыя Горы Афон-*

Сирин", читал его упорно и многодетно, почти ровно ничего не понимал в нем, но за это-то может быть, наиболее ценил и любил эту книгу)" (PSS 14: 89).

¹⁸ "He [Smerdjakov, NG] picked up from the table the only book that lay on it, the fat one with a yellow cover, which Ivan had noticed on his way in, and pressed the money down with it. The title of the book was: *The Homilies of our Holy Father Isaac the Syrian*". Ivan Fëdorovič managed to read the title mechanically (то взял со стола ту единственную лежавшую на нем толстую желтую книгу, которую заметил войдя Иван, и придавил ею деньги. Название книги было: *Святого отца нашего Исаака Сирина слова*. Иван Федорович успел машинально прочесть заглавие)" (PSS 15: 61).

¹⁹ Hackel has examined echoes of Isaac the Syrian's cultivation of tears in Zosima's discourse (1983: 145-147).

ские инока Парфения, Moscow, 1855). Written in the tradition of the Old Russian genre of the pilgrimage, the monk Parfenij relates in an almost naive and unbiased style his wanderings and encounters with people from various backgrounds. His book, which comprises almost 1000 pages, offers a vivid insight into 19th-century Russian folk mentality, piety and monasticism. Raised in a family of Old Believers, Parfenij (born Pëtr Ageev, 1801-1878) is critical of the schismatics' radical dogma's and sets out on a religious quest in his homeland Moldavia and Russia. He encounters many other believers, pilgrims and monks from various monasteries, with whom he engages in discussions about faith and religion, and he finally decides to break with the Old believers. He then embarks on a pilgrimage through Turkey and arrives at Mount Athos, where he becomes steeped in hesychastic spirituality and is instructed in the practice of the Jesus prayer by experienced elders. His description of Athos, its monasteries and elders is filled with rapture and deep respect. Although his own wish is to stay in the secluded and silent world of Athos, the elders order him to leave the Holy Mountain and to continue his pilgrimage further to the Holy Land and back to Russia.²⁰

Many pages of Parfenij's book are devoted to the memory of Paisij Veličkovskij: Parfenij recounts in his simple and accessible style the tenets of Paisij's writings on hesychasm and the Jesus prayer. In a separate chapter, he includes a conversation with one of his spiritual guides, Father John, who teaches him about Paisij (PSS 15: 528). He also writes in detail about his pilgrimage to Optina Pustyn' and his meeting with *starec* Leonid (Pletnev, 1937: 33).

Parfenij's *Skazanie* was widely read in Dostoevskij's time and seemed to touch the right chord in Russian intellectuals from various backgrounds for its naive and sincere depiction of the piety of the Russian simple folk and the genuine spirituality of the secluded monks. It was read and highly appreciated by, amongst others, Tolstoj, Saltykov-Ščedrin, Leskov and Turgenev, who called Parfenij "a great Russian painter of the Russian soul" (quoted in Jakubovič, 1978: 138).

Dostoevskij probably obtained a copy of Parfenij's *Skazanie* by the end of the 1850s, which he dearly treasured until the end of his life. According to Anna Grigor'evna, it was one of his favourite books and also one of the few works her husband took with him on his European travels at the end of the 1860s, adding that he used to reread fragments from it frequently (Jakubovič, 1978: 138). A great stimulus for

²⁰ There are very rare copies left of Parfenij's *Skazanie*. I have based myself on a concise description of its content by Pletnev (1937).

Dostoevskij’s understanding of the work came from his friend Apollon Grigor’ev, who found in Parfenij’s kind and emphatic portrayal of the Russian people the essence of his idea of “počvenničestvo.”²¹ For Dostoevskij too, Parfenij would always be associated with the beauty of the Russian land and the purity of the Russian peasants and humble monks. In an article in the 1860s, he extols Parfenij’s book because it awakens a national awareness and Russian religious consciousness that was hitherto deemed irrelevant in Russian literature. Parfenij’s name crops up in the notebooks for *Besy* (1871-72): in this novel Dostoevskij reworks a scene from Parfenij’s *Skazanie* in the visit to the holy fool Semën Jakovlevič (PSS 10: 257) (Pletnev, 1937: 36-39). Parfenij also had an influence on the creation of the next novel *Podrostok* (1875): when working on this novel, Dostoevskij reread the *Skazanie* and copied more than fifty fragments from it in his notebooks. He adopted both the theme of the Russian wanderer and the naive style of the *Skazanie* in his creation of the character Makar Dolgorukij, the pilgrim and religious wanderer (Jakubovič, 1978: 137).²² Finally, as Dostoevskij himself indicated in a letter to Ljubimov, Parfenij’s book inspired him greatly when he was working on *The Brothers Karamazov*, particularly when shaping the character of Zosima: “I took his [Zosima’s, NG] character and figure from old Russian monks and saints [...] its model is borrowed from certain of Tichon of Zadonsk’s sermons, and the naïveté comes from the book of the wanderings of monk Parfenij” (PSS 30 (1): 102).

Komarowitsch has shown that Parfenij’s book had a great stylistic influence on Zosima’s discourse, but the imprint of the *Skazanie* is also palpable on the ideological level of the novel.²³ Dostoevskij borrowed from the *Skazanie* many details of monastic life and infused them in his

²¹ In an article for Dostoevskij’s journal *Epocha* (1864), Grigor’ev wrote: “All serious readers, young and old, have read this great, gifted, yet simple book. This naive, unpretentious confession of a man with a profound inner life has evoked no small number of moral transformations, no small number of moral upheavals” (quoted in Perlina, 1985: 151).

²² Jakubovič gives a detailed analysis of Parfenij’s impact on the novel *Podrostok* (1978).

²³ “In the arrangement of their parts [of Zosima’s homilies, NG], and the whole of their syntax, there is a rhythm entirely strange to Russian literary speech. It appears as a departure from all the norms of modern syntax, and at the same time imparts to the entire narration a special, emotional colouring of ceremonial and ideal tranquillity. The frequent repetition of the same words and even the same word combinations in successive sentences [...], the alteration between long, rhythmically united sentences and introductory sentences in indirect speech; finally, the pleonasms, the tendency to pile up epithets that describe one and the same picture, as if words failed the narrator to attain the desired richness of expression – all this gives to the meaning of the teachings a certain shading of inexpressibility. The very title of Parfenij’s book, even by itself, exhibits all the stylistic traits that we have noted in the teaching of the elder Zosima” (Komarowitsch, 1928: 127-28).

description of the monastery and monastic customs in the novel; many contemporary readers recognized these intertextual references to the *Skazanie*. The account of elderhood in the chapter “Elders” in the beginning of the novel (PSS 14: 24-31) clearly owes much to a fragment on elders in Parfenij’s work and displays some striking and almost *verbatim* parallels with the original.²⁴ Emphasizing the unbreakable bond between elder and disciple, the narrator illustrates this with a recent legend: a monk who had left Russia to live on Athos was ordered by his elder to leave the Holy Mountain and to go back to the Russian wilderness. The monk does not want to leave Athos and implores the Patriarch to release him from his obedience to his elder, upon which the latter replies that he can not release him from the commands of his elder, but that only the elder has the power to do so (PSS 14: 27). This “legend” in *The Brothers Karamazov* was in fact taken from Parfenij’s biography: Parfenij went through exact the same ordeal and, although his elder had already died, the patriarch could not break the bond of obedience (PSS 15: 528). Dostoevskij also testified that he had found the idea of the scandal of Zosima’s decomposing body in Parfenij’s *Skazanie* (PSS 30 (1): 126).²⁵ As I attempt to show later, the *Skazanie*, or more precisely, the spirituality displayed in it, is also interwoven in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Another source for Dostoevskij’s familiarity with hesychasm might have been the works of Ignatius Brjančaninov, a 19th-century Russian monk and ascetical writer, who wrote at length on the Jesus prayer. Before becoming a monk, Ignatius Brjančaninov (born Dmitrij) (1807-1867) was enrolled in the St. Petersburg Academy of Military Engineering. Although he excelled in military affairs, he renounced the prospect of a military career and in 1827 the authorities granted his release from military service, upon which he entered monastic life. In the first years he lived as a novice in various monasteries, he then was professed monk and priest. Although he personally preferred to pursue a life of seclusion and devotion to contemplative prayer, he was by tsar Nikolaj I raised to the rank of archimandrite and appointed as *igumen* of the St. Sergius hermitage in St. Petersburg. In this post, Brjančaninov made severe efforts to transform the monastery and gave much attention to the beauty of the liturgy. He also became more and more engaged in the practice of the Jesus prayer. In 1857 he was appointed bishop of the

²⁴ See Pletnev for an equation of the original fragment in Parfenij with the version in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1937: 42-43).

²⁵ For other fragments in *The Brothers Karamazov* taken from Parfenij’s *Skazanie* see Terras (1981: 139, 147, 149, 263) and PSS 15: 531, 571.

Caucasus and Black Sea, a remote and unorganized diocese. His appointment could have been prompted by reasons of envy and disapproval: many members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy did not like the spiritual aura surrounding him. Brjančaninov retired from his episcopal position four years later and withdrew from the world to devote himself completely to the hesychastic prayer practice. He lived his last years in the secluded environment of the Nikolo-Babaevskij monastery in Kostroma (Ware, 2006: ix-xvi).

Brjančaninov left four volumes of spiritual writings, which were published in St. Peterburg between 1865 and 1867 (Choružij, 2004: 595).²⁶ Much of his writing is devoted to the Jesus prayer: he instructs his readers – both monks and laymen – on how to practice the prayer, on which texts they can rely for support (Greek and Russian) and how to climb the spiritual ladder to attain union with God.

Brjančaninov's writings were not only read in monastic circles, but were also relatively well-known among the religious intellectuals of that time, who, in turn, referred to him in their writings and hence further disseminated his spiritual reputation to the Russian public. Gogol', for example, wrote very highly of him in his correspondence; Leskov admired him for his great spiritual aura and portrayed him very positively in some of his stories (Belovolov, 1991: 172). Dostoevskij was also familiar with the personality and writings of Ignatius Brjančaninov. Between 1838 and 1843 he studied at the same Military Engineering Academy that Brjančaninov had attended a decade before him and where his memory was kept alive among the students. During his years at the Academy, Brjančaninov had founded a circle of "lovers of sanctity," in which they read all sorts of religious and spiritual texts. The tradition of this circle still existed in Dostoevskij's time, and he was a regular member of it during his student years. He also made some visits to the St. Sergius hermitage in St. Petersburg where Brjančaninov had been superior for more than twenty years (Belovolov, 1991: 173-174). Dostoevskij's interest in the teachings of Brjančaninov is further testified by a copy he owned of one of his seminal spiritual works, i.e. *Slovo o smerti* (1862) (Budanova, 2005a: 120).

According to Belovolov, Brjančaninov's personality and teachings served Dostoevskij as a fruitful prototype for his fictional elder Zosima. First, there are some striking parallels between the biography and spiritual journeys of Brjančaninov and Zosima: both had a military career before

²⁶ Игнатий Брянчанинов, *Сочинения*, СПб, 1865-1867.

entering the monastic path. In a section of book 6, “A reminiscence of the youth and early manhood of the elder Zosima while yet in the secular world. A Duel,” the reader gains some insight in the elder’s life before he became a monk: Zinovij (his secular name) spent eight years in an academy for military cadets in St. Petersburg where he “became transformed into a creature almost savage, cruel and preposterous” (PSS 14: 268). When he finds out the woman he loves is in fact married to another man, he challenges him to a duel. But, the evening before the duel, he strikes his servant Afanasij very hard in the face. This violent act fills him with shame and instigates a spiritual rebirth: he resigns from the army and enters the monastery (PSS 14: 268-273).

Brjančaninov was strongly attached to the monastery of Optina Pustyn’: one of his most important guides on the spiritual path was the elder Leonid, the first of the Optina elders who made the monastery renowned in the 19th century. The fictional monk Zosima is in the novel explicitly placed in the tradition of the 19th century-Optina elders (Belovolov, 1991: 170-172).

Another possible source for Dostoevskij’s familiarity with hesychasm are the writings and teachings of the 15th century monk Nil Sorskij. Nil Sorskij (1433-1508) made a major contribution to the tradition of hesychasm in Russia, in that he was the first in Russia to compile and translate Byzantine texts on hesychasm into Slavonic and to develop a consistent theology of hesychasm. He was also the first to establish a *skete*, and the associated institution of elderhood in Russia. As already described above, his ideal of monastic poverty made the church authorities very wary about the hesychasm he advocated and, as a consequence, hesychasm suffered from a ban from the 16th century on. However, in the beginning of the 19th century, there was a revival of Nil’s ideas and writings on hesychasm: in line with the Slavonic translation of the *Philokalia* and other efforts to bring the practice of the Jesus prayer back to life, Paisij Veličkovskij and his disciples were also strongly engaged in the re-establishment of Nil’s teachings and works. In 1813, the first printed edition of Nil’s *Ustav* or *Rule* appeared, followed by other editions of his writings or of literature dealing with his ideas, very often published in the Optina Pustyn’ monastery (Maloney, 1973: 33). Although there is in the catalogue of Dostoevskij’s library – which is generally acknowledged to be incomplete – no work of Nil Sorskij listed, it is highly probable, according to Nina Budanova, that the writer owned a copy of an Optina publication of Nil, i.e. *The tradition of our venerable father Nil Sorskij on sketic life by one of his disciples* (*Преподобнаго отца нашего Нила Сорскаго предание*

учеником своим о жительстве скитском, 1849).²⁷ Furthermore, references to Nil Sorskij in Dostoevskij’s preparatory notes for *Podrostok* (1875) are evidence to the fact that he was familiar with Nil even before his visit to Optina (PSS 16: 143).

Finally, one of the most famous classics on hesychastic spirituality is the 19th-century work *The Candid Tales of a Pilgrim to His Spiritual Father* (*Откровенные рассказы странника духовному своему отцу*), best known under the titles *The Way of a Pilgrim*, *The Pilgrim’s Way* or *The Tale of a Pilgrim*. The book consists of four tales of an anonymous pilgrim – whose identity remains a mystery to this day –, who describes in a very accessible, almost naïve manner his experience of praying the Jesus prayer. The pilgrim wanders around the Russian and Siberian land, while discovering and practicing the Jesus prayer, with the help of a *starec*, a rosary, and a copy of the *Philokalia*. In the first two narratives, the pilgrim relates how he came to learn the Jesus prayer, partly guided by his *starec*, and after the death of his *starec*, from his own study of the *Philokalia*. In the meantime he travels to Irkutsk and meets various people, with whom he shares his knowledge of the Jesus prayer. In the third narrative, he looks back on his earlier personal history before becoming a pilgrim. In the fourth narrative, he relates his further experiences of his spiritual journey, practice of the Jesus prayer and his encounters with other pious people. The work – which was followed by a sequel, *The Pilgrim Continues His Way* – gives a unique and vivid insight into the teaching, spirituality and practice of the Jesus prayer, into the ways and techniques of the inner prayer, into the texts of the *Philokalia* and into its effect on the person praying it. The tales of the anonymous pilgrim are one of the fundamental sources for the study of the Jesus prayer, and is until today a much-read work of Russian spiritual literature, both in Russia and the West.

The events described in the *Candid Tales of a Pilgrim* occur in an era prior to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, yet the tales were not published until 1881. The manuscript was discovered on Mount Athos by the abbot of the St. Michael the Archangel monastery in Kazan’, Paisij Fëdorov, who made a copy of it and published it in Kazan’ in 1881.²⁸

²⁷ N. Budanova, “Knigi, podarennye F. M. Dostoevskomu v Optinoj Pustyni”, in *Sofija*, Elektronnaia Versija, 2005, Nr. 1. <http://www.sophia.orthodoxy.ru/magazine/20051/knigi.htm>

²⁸ For the textual history of the tale, see Aleksei Pentovsky’s introduction to a recent English translation of it, *The Pilgrim’s Tale*, edited and with an introduction by Aleksei Pentkovsky; translated by t. Allan Smith; preface by Jaroslav Pelikan, New York: Paulist Press, 1999, pp. 1-46.

Since this was the same year in which Dostoevskij died (in January), it is virtually impossible that he read the tales of the anonymous pilgrim. Still, it is fairly probable that he had heard of this piece of spiritual literature and was in some way familiar with its contents and treatment of the Jesus prayer when working on *The Brothers Karamazov*. Recent research has shown that an original manuscript of the tales was present in the monastery of Optina Pustyn' before it reached Mount Athos. In 1859, the elder Amvrosij of the Optina monastery made a redaction of the tales, which is the earliest known redaction of the text (the so-called *Optino-redaction*). In the correspondence of Amvrosij, the tales are mentioned in various places (Pentkovsky, 1999: 2-5). There is a possibility that during his stay at the Optina monastery Dostoevskij may have heard about the tales of the anonymous pilgrim. Given the writer's literary fame and growing religious reputation, Amvrosij might have told him about the manuscript.

In addition to his familiarity with the Optina spirituality, there was – as convincingly argued in Olga Stuchebrukhov's article on hesychastic motives in *Crime and Punishment* in a previous volume of *Dostoevsky Studies* – also another source for Dostoevskij's knowledge of hesychasm, i.e. the works and ideas of the Slavophiles Ivan Kireevskij and Aleksej Khomjakov. Especially their concept of integral knowledge, which was a rich source of inspiration in the development of Dostoevskij's religio-philosophical views, can be traced down to the tradition of hesychasm (Stuchebrukhov, 2009).

To sum up, I have traced and pointed out various theological, spiritual and even literary sources that acquainted Dostoevskij with the long tradition of hesychasm. He was of course no dogmatic theologian and we can assume that it was especially the spiritual consciousness surrounding hesychasm rather than the theological discussions that attracted his interest and attention.

In a notebook of 1880, Dostoevskij wrote that since Peter the Great the church was in a state of paralysis (Berdjaev [1923] 1991: 121).²⁹ In the beginning of the 18th century Peter the Great had enforced church reforms that were detrimental for Russian spirituality: the Russian church

²⁹ "Cerkov' v paraliče s Petra Velikogo." This line comes from a notebook dated in 1880-1881 and is for the first time published in *Biografija. Pis'ma i zametki iz zapisnych knižek F.M. Dostoevskogo*, Sankt-Peterburg, 1883. The phrase became a popular aphorism for dissenting religious minds such as Dmitrij Merežkovskij, who quotes it a couple of times in his *L. Tolstoj i Dostoevskij* (1901), and Nikolaj Berdjaev in his *Mirosozercanie Dostoevskogo* (1923).

was turned into a state-controlled and secularized institution that served the tsar's political ambitions rather than guarding its spiritual life. Since the abolishment of the Patriarchate and the establishment of the Holy Synod – presided over by a chief procurator who was directly appointed by the tsar as a kind of watchdog over the ecclesiastical authorities – the state increasingly consolidated its power over the church, which gradually slipped into a spiritual vacuum. The church – by the following tsars reduced to nothing more than a ministry of religious affairs and thus completely transformed into a mere handmaiden of state and tsar – no longer fulfilled its social role in Russian society and lost in the process of secularization and rationalization much of its spiritual ethos (Pipes, 1995: 221-245). In what follows, I aim to show that in his fictional saint Zosima Dostoevskij attempted to create an alternative to the paralyzed Russian church: in his prototype of the "pure, ideal Christian" he infused and revived echoes of a Russian spiritual consciousness that had been pushed into the margins of the Russian church, i.e. the spirituality of hesychasm. Although there is in Zosima's discourse no explicit use of hesychastic terminology, there are some undeniable references to and echoes of the practice and spirituality of hesychasm throughout his teachings.

First of all, there are in the novel some manifest references to the monastery of Optina Pustyn' and its renowned tradition of *elderhood*. Zosima is literally named and highlighted as a *starec*, which is a function and institution that is inextricably bound up with the practice of hesychasm. It has been documented by other scholars that Zosima is, amongst others, modelled on the historical Optina elder Amvrosij, whom Dostoevskij had met and conversed with twice during his visit to Optina and had observed once amidst a crowd of visitors (Dunlop, 1972). Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that Dostoevskij's depiction of monastic life in the novel is based on his impressions of the Optina hermitage: the Optina rule of sketic life, the monastic customs, many of the scenes he witnessed and conversations he had with the monks, are incorporated in the novel. Also, various monastic scenes and reflections on monasticism in the narrative are inspired by *The Life of Elder Leonid*, the hagiography of the first Optina elder Leonid that Dostoevskij possessed (Stanton, 1995: 151-183).³⁰

³⁰ Stanton suggests another reference to the Optina hermitage in the geographical setting of the novel in the fictional town "Skotoprigonevsk" ("the place to which the cattle has been driven"). There might be an etymological correspondence with the town in which the Optina monastery is located, Kozel'sk (of which the root is Kozel, "goat"), since both are designations of animals. Moreover, there is an additional correspondence of water imagery in

The hermitage of Optina Pustyn' is literally named in a separate chapter "Elders" ("Starcy") in the beginning of the narrative (Book 1), by its popular name "Kozel'skaja Optina" (the monastery is closely located to the city of Kozel'sk). In this chapter, the narrator sketches the origins of *starčestvo* in Sinai and on Mount Athos and describes the evolution of it in Russian monasticism:

In the first place, then, those competent in the specialism assert that the elders and elderhood have been with us in our Russian monasteries only since very recent times, even less than a century, while in the rest of the Orthodox East, in Sinai and on Mount Athos in particular, they have already existed for well over a thousand years. It is claimed that elderhood also existed among us in Russia in the most ancient times, or that it certainly must have existed, but that in consequence of Russia's tribulations – the Tatar invasions, the mass upheavals, the break in our former relations with the East after the subjugation of Constantinople – this institution became forgotten among us and the elders died out (PSS 14: 26).³¹

Still, as the narrator relates, elderhood was revived in Russia at the end of the last century by "one of the great ascetics (as they call him), Paisij Veličkovskij and his disciples" (PSS 14: 26), who instigated the recovery of hesychastic practice by his Slavonic translation of the *Philokalia*. The narrator then does not refrain from mentioning that elderhood only exists in a few monasteries and "has even on occasion been subjected to what almost amounts to persecution as an unprecedented novelty in Russia" and continues that elderhood has "thrived in particular among us here in the land of Rus at a certain renowned hermitage, the Kozel'sk Optina," thus pointing at the special role of the Optina hermitage in the renaissance of hesychasm and the related institution of elderhood (PSS 14: 26).³²

the nearby towns, the actual Pryski (from *bryzgat'*, "to splash") and the fictional Mokroe ("wet") (Stanton, 1995: 164).

³¹"И во-первых, люди специальные и компетентные утверждают, что старцы и старчество появились у нас, по нашим русским монастырям, весьма лишь недавно, даже нет и ста лет, тогда как на всем православном Востоке, особенно на Синае и на Афоне, существуют далеко уже за тысячу лет. Утверждают, что существовало старчество и у нас на Руси во времена древнейшие, или непременно должно было существовать, но вследствие бедствий России, Татарщины, смут, перерыва прежних сношений с Востоком после покорения Константинополя, установление это забылось у нас и старцы пресекались." (PSS 14: 26).

³²"Возрождено же оно у нас опять с конца прошлого столетия одним из великих подвижников (как называют его) Паисием Величковским и учениками его, но и доселе, даже через сто почти лет, существует весьма еще не во многих монастырях, и даже подвергалось иногда почти что гонениям, как неслыханное по России новшество. В особенности процвело оно у нас на Руси в одной знаменитой пустыне, Козельской Оптиной." (PSS 14: 26).

Reference is then made to the three renowned elders of Optina: "there have been three elders in succession, and Zosima was the last of them": Zosima is thus explicitly placed within the tradition of the Optina elders and is from the start surrounded with their charisma (PSS 14: 26). The narrator then overtly talks about the popularity of the elders and their historical status of seemingly posing a threat to the established church, thereby also mentioning the church's suspicious and even hostile reaction to them:

It [the monastery, NG] thrived and became renowned all over Russia because of its elders, to whom the pilgrims thronged in their multitudes for thousands of versts from all across the land [...] That is why in a large number of our Russian monasteries elderhood was initially met with what almost amounted to persecution. At the same time the elders immediately began to acquire a high degree of respect among the common people. To the elders of our monastery, for example, there thronged both simple people and the most learned ones, with the purpose of submitting to them, of confessing before them their doubts, their sins, their sufferings, and ask them for counsel and teaching. Witnessing this, the opponents of the elders cried out, along with other accusations, that here was the sacrament of confession being arbitrarily and frivolously degraded, in spite of the fact that the perpetual confession of one's soul to an elder as his novice or secular has nothing of the character of the sacrament (PSS 14: 27).³³

Leonard Stanton has shown that the *Life of Elder Leonid*, given to Dostoevskij during his stay in Optina, was a very important source for the writer when describing the tradition of the elders in this chapter: the above quoted passage, for instance, is copied from *The Life of Leonid*. Other parts on Russian monasticism in the novel are, although a bit simplified, almost *verbatim* lifted from Leonid's *žitie* (Stanton, 1995: 151-183).

In addition to these unambiguous references to the Optina hermitage and the tradition of *starčestvo*, there are in the novel, and especially in Zosima's discourse, various other less explicit but still manifest allusions to the practice and spirituality of hesychasm. I will now trace and exca-

³³ "Процвел он и прославился на всю Россию именно из-за старцев, чтобы видеть и послушать которых стекались к нам богомольцы толпами со всей России из-за тысяч верст [...] Вот почему во многих монастырях старчество у нас сначала встречено было почти гонением. Между тем старцев тотчас же стали высоко уважать в народе. К старцам нашего монастыря стекались например и простолюдины и самые знатные люди с тем, чтобы, повергаясь пред ними, исповедывать им свои сомнения, свои грехи, свои страдания, и испросить совета и наставления. Видя это, противники старцев кричали, вместе с прочими обвинениями, что здесь самовластно и легкомысленно унижается таинство исповеди, хотя непрерывное исповедывание своей души старцу послушником его или светским производится совсем не как таинство." (PSS 14: 27).

vate a subtle, yet unambiguous hesychastic subtext in Zosima's discourse and uncover how the tradition of hesychasm is, as if accordingly to its dictum of silent prayer, wordlessly evoked in the novel.

First of all, there is an undeniable hesychastic thread in Zosima's sermon on the Russian monk in book 6, "Something concerning the Russian monk and his possible significance" ("Нечто об иноке русском и о возможном значении его", PSS 14: 284ff). Although not eschewing the question of the contemporary process of religious and moral degeneration in clerical and some monastic circles, Zosima sets out to defend monasticism against its critics. He extols a particular group of monks who preserve true religion and should be taken as models for the spiritual rebirth of Russia:

Yet even so how many meek and humble ones there are in monkhood, who yearn for solitude and ardent prayer in silence. They are less noticed and are even passed over in silence, and how surprised would men be if I told them that from these meek monks, who yearn for secluded prayer may once again come the salvation of the Russian land! For verily they are being prepared in silence 'for an hour, and a day, and a month and a year'. Meanwhile, in their solitude, they are preserving the image of Christ in its magnificent and undistorted form, in the purity of God's truth, as it was handed down to them by the most ancient fathers, apostles and martyrs, and when the need arrives they will show that image to the wavering truth of the world. Great is this thought. This star will shine in the east (PSS 14: 284).³⁴

There is a manifest hesychastic subtext in this discourse on the Russian monk, which must have sounded familiar to 19th-century Russian religious readers. First, Zosima repeatedly emphasizes the importance of silence for the religious authenticity and integrity of the Russian monks; silence seems to be a prerequisite for the monks' potentiality to revitalize Russian Christianity. Second, Zosima insists on prayer in absolute isolation and seclusion from the world as necessary conditions to preserve the purity of the monks. It is no coincidence that both silence and seclusion are instrumental in the practice of the Jesus prayer. The Jesus prayer is practiced in a context of silence: only by reaching a mental state

³⁴ "А между тем, сколь много в монашестве смиренных и кротких, жаждущих уединения и пламенной в тишине молитвы. На сих меньше указывают и даже обходят молчанием вовсе, и сколь подивились бы, если скажу, что от сих кротких и жаждущих уединенной, молитвы выйдет может быть еще раз спасение земли русской! Ибо воистину приготовлены в тишине "на день и час, и месяц и год". Образ Христов хранят пока в уединении своем благолепно и неискаженно, в чистоте правды божией, от древнейших отцов, апостолов и мучеников, некогда надо будет, явят его поколебавшейся правде мира. Сия мысль великая. От востока звезда сия воссияет" (PSS 14: 284).

of *hesychia* the hesychast can open up towards the mystical union with God. Kallistos Ware explains the function of silence as follows: "the hesychast, the person who has attained *hesychia*, inner stillness or silence, is *par excellence* the one who listens. He listens to the voice of prayer in his own heart, and understands that this voice is not his own but that of Another speaking within him" (Ware, 1986: 1). Although a prayer in words ("Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"), the Jesus prayer eventually leads to inner silence: it enables the hesychast to cancel out his human voice and to become perceptive to the Divine mystery that is beyond all human speech. The anonymous pilgrim tries to capture the paradoxical relationship between praying and attaining silence: "I gave up saying the Prayer with my lips. I simply listened carefully to what my heart was saying" (*The Way of a Pilgrim*, 1986: 20), and quotes an instruction from Symeon the New Theologian on how to start praying: "Sit down alone and in silence" (id.: 10). In the same tradition, Nil Sorskij's main advice concerning the practice of mental prayer is: "we should endeavor to maintain our mind in silence" (quoted in Meyendorff, [1974] 1998: 151).

Silence is a "telling" and polysemic motive in Zosima's discourse. In line with the apophatic creed of the unknowable and ineffable Godhead, the elder is throughout his sermons conspicuously mute about God: he preaches love, mutual responsibility and the image of Christ, but very little about God. Zosima's approach to and speech of God is mostly through his manifestation in the world, i.e. Christ. Furthermore, silences tend to occur in Zosima's speech at moments of spiritual tension and transformation. There is, for example, a conspicuous silence when he tells about the moment in which he has an overturning spiritual transformation, after which he resigns from military service and enters monastic life (in "A reminiscence of the youth and early manhood of the elder Zosima while yet in the secular world. A duel", PSS 14: 268ff.).³⁵ His transformation is instigated by the beating of his servant Afanasij, but whereas he abundantly describes the beating itself, he keeps silent about his actual spiritual experience, which is nevertheless one of the most crucial key moments in his life.

Both hesychastic motives of silence and isolation recur in the same sermon on the Russian monk:

³⁵ For instances of apophatic silence in the whole novel, see Malcolm Jones (2005: 139-146.)

The monastic path is a different matter. Obedience, fasting and prayer are even the objects of laughter, yet it is only in them that the path to true and genuine freedom is contained: I cut off from myself my superfluous and unnecessary deeds, I humble and scourge my vain and proud will with obedience and thereby attain, with God's help, freedom of spirit and together with it spiritual gaiety! Which of them is more capable of raising aloft a great idea and of going to serve it, the isolated rich man or this *freed* one, freed from the tyranny of objects and habits? The monk is reproached for his solitariness: "You have withdrawn into solitariness in order to save yourself, living the life of a monk within monastery walls, and you have forgotten the brotherly service of mankind". But we shall see which of them will be more diligent in the matter of brotherly love. For the solitariness is not ours, but theirs, only they do not see it. And from our midst since olden days have come leaders of the people, so why should they not exist now? The same meek and humble fasters and vowers of silence will rise up and go to accomplish the great task (PSS 14: 285).³⁶

While stressing the significance of both solitariness and silence for the Russian monks, Zosima also insists on the kenotic renunciation of one's will, this is another hesychastic motive to which I will return later. The *starec* ends his speech by putting in a nutshell his basic philosophy concerning the Russian monks: their duty is "to raise the people in silence" ("В тишине воспитайте его [народа]") in order to prepare them to receive God's truth (PSS 14: 285). Zosima's emphasis on silence is decisively hesychastic: the hesychast lays down human language and withdraws in silence to become receptive to the voice of God that is beyond all human understanding and reveals itself in silence.

In addition to the hesychastic motives of silence and isolation, Zosima's discourse on prayer contains other references to the practice of the Jesus prayer. In his sermon "Concerning prayer, love and the contiguity with other worlds" ("О молитве, о любви и о соприкосновении мирам иным"), the elder gives the following advice:

³⁶ "Другое дело путь иноческий. Над послушанием, постом и молитвой даже смеются, а между тем лишь в них заключается путь к настоящей, истинной уже свободе: отсекаю от себя потребности лишние и ненужные, самолюбивую и гордую волю мою смиряю и бичую послушанием, и достигаю тем, с помощью божьей, свободы духа, а с нею и веселья духовного! Кто же из них способнее вознести великую мысль и пойти ей служить, — уединенный ли богач или сей *освобожденный* от тиранства вещей и привычек? Инока корят его уединением: 'Уединился ты, чтобы себя спасти в монастырских стенах, а братское служение человечеству забыл.' Но посмотрим еще, кто более братолюбиво поусердствует? Ибо уединение не у нас, а у них, но не видят сего. А от нас и издревле деятели народные выходили, отчего же не может их быть и теперь? Те же смиренные и кроткие постники и молчальники восстанут и пойдут на великое дело." (PSS 14: 285).

Young one, do not forget prayer. Each time in your prayer, if it be sincere, a new emotion will make itself fleetingly glimpsed, and in it a new thought with which you were previously unfamiliar and which will give you courage again; and you will realize that prayer is an education. Remember also: each day and whenever you are able, say to yourself over and over again: "O Lord, have mercy on all those who have appeared before you this day (PSS 14: 288-289)."³⁷

Although Zosima does not literally recite the words "Lord, Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me," there are undeniable echoes of the Jesus prayer in these lines. The elder stresses the need for repetitive and incessant prayer, which is instrumental in hesychastic practice: in order to attain inward stillness, the hesychast repeats perpetually and uninterruptedly the Jesus prayer. The hesychasts follow Paul's dictum in his First Epistle to the Thessalonians: "Pray without ceasing" (5: 17). By continuously and almost automatically invoking and reciting the Name of Christ, the hesychast becomes disengaged from the material world and becomes absorbed in a mystical state of silence and tranquillity, which is a gateway towards the ultimate experience of God. The almost mechanical and rhythmical repetition of the name of Jesus brings the hesychast into a state of contemplation and utter concentration towards the divine. "Pray an oral prayer without ceasing", writes Nil, because this is the only way to calm the mind from worldly thoughts and open up to the Divine truth (Nil Sorsky, 2003: 56). His *starec* gives the anonymous pilgrim the following advice: "The continuous interior Prayer of Jesus is a constant, uninterrupted calling upon the divine Name of Jesus with the lips, in the spirit, in the heart (*The Way of a Pilgrim*, 1986: 8). There is thus a hesychastic ring to Zosima's emphasis on continual, repetitive prayer.

Furthermore, Zosima's short prayer "O Lord, have mercy on all those who have appeared before you this day" ("Господи, помилуй всех днесь пред тобою представших") appears as a revised, more universal version of the original Jesus prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" ("Господи, Иисусе Христе, Сыне Божий, помилуй меня, грешного").

What is more, the above quoted passage reveals a manifest apophatic worldview: only through prayer, and not through rational argumentation, can one come to a full understanding of the world. The *starec* highlights

³⁷ "Юноша, не забывай молитвы. Каждый раз в молитве твоей, если искренна, мелькнет новое чувство, а в нем и новая мысль, которую ты прежде не знал, и которая вновь ободрит тебя; и поймешь, что молитва есть воспитание. Запомни еще: на каждый день, и когда лишь можешь, тверди про себя! 'Господи, помилуй всех днесь пред тобою представших.'" (PSS 14: 288-289).

prayer as education, thereby distinguishing it from rational education and hinting at the supremacy of mystical knowledge. Such an apophatic mood permeates his whole discourse on prayer:

Much on earth is hidden from us, but in recompense for that we have been gifted with a mysterious, sacred sense of our living bond with another world, with a celestial and higher world, and indeed the roots of our thoughts and feelings are not here, but in other worlds. That is why the philosophers say that it is impossible to grasp the essence of things on earth (PSS 14: 290).³⁸

The Jesus prayer should be practiced in a context of isolation and separation from the world: inner stillness can only be achieved when the hesychast is detached from the world and worldly matters, for all worldly thoughts are considered as the devil's temptations. The practice of hesychasm is closely associated with a special type of monasticism, i.e. the *sketic* type, which was introduced in Russia in the 15th century by Nil Sorskij and was revived in the Optina hermitage. The *skete* consists of a group of separate cells or huts that are scattered around a centrally located chapel or church. The monks or hermits live in their individual cells, where they can devote themselves to silent contemplation and hesychastic prayer. The *skete* is guided by an elder who serves to support the younger hermits in contemplative life and inner prayer. The *skete* type is obviously recreated in *The Brothers Karamazov*: it is several times described in the novel that the monks live in separate cells. Furthermore, Nil's monastic model is also in other ways evoked in the personality and teachings of Zosima.

In Nil's rule of *sketic* life, much emphasis is put on the principles of individuality and self-realization. Within the *skete*, the external rituals of church life are cut down to a minimum and only have meaning when they support or contribute to the monk's interior contemplation. Each monk is free to arrange his time in prayer and work, whereby the fixed times for liturgical services are limited, so that the monks can spend a maximum amount of their time to the practice of the Jesus prayer. Aiming to set up a profoundly spiritual and contemplative monastic type, Nil rejects the

³⁸ “Многое на земле от нас скрыто, но взамен того даровано нам тайное сокровенное ощущение живой связи нашей с миром иным, с миром горним и высшим, да и корни наших мыслей и чувств не здесь, а в мирах иных. Вот почему и говорят философы, что сущности вещей нельзя постичь на земле” (PSS 14: 290). A similar apophatic emphasis is present in the passage in his *Life* in which he describes his impressions of the Book of Job (“Concerning holy scripture in the life of father Zosima”). Opposing the ones who seek a rational explanation for the suffering of Job, Zosima replies: “But the greatness of it is that here there is a mystery – that here the earth's transitory countenance and eternal truth have come into contact with each other” (PSS 14: 265).

external formalism that existed hitherto in the Russian monasteries and opposes any form of hierarchy among the monks.

In accordance with Nil’s hesychastic teaching that a routine observance of liturgical rules is of less importance than the individual practice of silent contemplation and inner prayer, the monastic idea conveyed by Zosima is for the most part aloof from ecclesiastical practices and is deeply penetrated by a spirit of freedom. It has been noted by other scholars that Dostoevskij’s primary spokesman on monastic spirituality shows many divergences from the mould of ecclesiastical Orthodoxy. The most conspicuous deviation is that the traditional teachings and practices of the church, its liturgy, rituals and sacraments play a very small role in Zosima’s discourse (and in the whole novel, for that matter). Sergei Hackel, observes that “in general, and certainly in respect of the devotional practices advocated by him [Zosima, NG], the church is not involved, recollected or (apparently) required. Nor do the discourses, which might be expected to contain the essence of Zosima’s teachings, refer to sacraments or services, the normal manifestations of Orthodox church life” (Hackel, 1983: 149). There are some rare references to the church, but these are in the margins of Zosima’s discourse, as if to open up a religious orbit at the centre of which is a spiritual consciousness that goes beyond the ecclesiastical realm. Not only the doctrines and practices of the church, but, even more remarkably, traditional monastic discipline is almost absent in the elder’s personality and teachings. According to his title *uepocxumonax* (*ieroschimonach*, i.e. a priest who has taken the vows of celibacy and wears the robes of monks), Zosima is a priest (14: 260; 295), but there is no indication that he participates in any monastic service.

Whereas the importance of monastic discipline and submission to monastic rules is toned down, emphasis is put – like in Nil’s teachings – on strict obedience to the *starec*, a hesychastic motive that is strongly related to kenoticism. Alěša, who is very reluctant to leave the monastery, obeys the wish of his elder and goes into the world. In the chapter “Elders” in the beginning of the novel, obedience to the elder is highlighted as essential to *starčestvo*:

So then, what is an elder? An elder is someone who takes your soul and your will into his soul and his will. Having chosen an elder, you give up your own

will and render it unto him in full obedience, with full self-abnegation (PSS 14: 26).³⁹

Conspicuously, a forceful distinction is made between “the obligations to an elder” and the ordinary monastic vows of obedience:

One’s obligations to an elder are of an order different from those associated with the ordinary ‘vows of obedience’ which there have always been in our Russian monasteries. Here it is a question of the perpetual confession of all who are working under the elder, and of an indissoluble link between binder and bound (PSS 14: 26).⁴⁰

Two historical legends are related to underscore the unbreakable bond between elder and disciple, in which the ecclesiastical authorities have no power or control. In the early days of Christianity, there was a novice who had failed to fulfil the commands of his elder, left his monastery in Syria and went to Egypt, where he performed many great and heroic deeds in the name of faith and died a martyr’s death. The church regarded him as a saint and wanted to bury him with the ritual grandeur worthy of a saint, but during the ceremony his coffin was three times cast from the church. Only then they heard that the man had broken his obedience to his elder, and that he could only receive a proper funeral when his elder absolved and forgave him. The other legend is a more recent one (and seems to anticipate Alěša’s self-sacrifice in obedience to Zosima): a monk was ordered by his elder to leave Athos, which he loved as a sacred place and a haven of refuge, and to travel to Jerusalem first and then to northern Siberia, because, the elder said, there is his place, and not on Mount Athos. Unwilling to leave Athos, the crushed monk went to the Oecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople and implored him to release him from his obedience to his elder. But the Patriarch replied that not only was he, the Patriarch himself, unable to release him, but that there existed no human or power on earth which could release him from the commands of his elder, except the elder himself.⁴¹ The narrator concludes that “in such manner is the elderhood in certain cases invested with a limitless and inscrutable power. That is why in a large number of our Russian

³⁹ “Итак, что же такое старец? Старец это - берущий вашу душу, вашу волю в свою душу и в свою волю. Избрав старца, вы от своей воли отрешаетесь и отдаете ее ему в полное послушание, с полным самоотрешением” (PSS 14: 26).

⁴⁰ “Обязанности к старцу не то что обыкновенное “послушание”, всегда бывшее и в наших русских монастырях. Тут признается вечная исповедь всех подвижающихся старцу и неразрушимая связь между связавшим и связанным” (PSS 14: 26).

⁴¹ As mentioned above, this story is almost literally copied from the biography of the monk Parfenij in his *Skazanie*.

monasteries elderhood was initially met with what almost amounted to persecution" (PSS 14: 27). In the tradition of elderhood, the *starec* is represented as an inviolable spiritual authority, who exceeds ecclesiastical power and stands aloof from church hierarchy and practices.

Another decisively hesychastic echo in Zosima's discourse is the recurrent use of light imagery: especially the sun, and all light flowing from the sun, operates as a forceful and significant religious metaphor. The metaphor of the light, and especially light emanating from the sun, is crucial in hesychastic theology: for the hesychasts, the culmination of mystical experience is the vision of the Divine and Uncreated Light, which they identify with the Light of the Godhead surrounding Christ at His Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. The Taboric Light, seen by Christ's three apostles during his Transfiguration, is the goal of the hesychasts' mystical contemplation: it is a vision of God's energies. The unknown and inaccessible Divinity reveals Himself through His Uncreated Light: "God is called Light", argues Gregory Palamas, "not with reference to His essence, but to His energy" (quoted in Lossky, [1944] 1991: 220). As described above, the works of Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), one of the most renowned Byzantine mystical writers and an important source for later hesychasts, abounds in such a light mysticism: "God is light, a light infinite and incomprehensible [...] all that comes from Him is light" (quoted in Alfeyev, 2000: 170). Although imperceptible to the human mind, God can be experienced as a vision of light:

Entirely incomprehensible, entirely imperceptible are your works, both your glory and the knowledge we have of you. That you are, we can know it, and your light, we see it, but what you are and of what kind, we are all ignorant of it [...] [you are, NG] light, inaccessible light, light which operates everything (Symeon the New Theologian, 2006: 328).

Although Symeon the New Theologian was the first Byzantine writer to develop an emphatic theology of light, the theme of the divine light was already a topic in patristic literature before him. Early sources like Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac the Syrian already mention the vision of divine light, thus testifying that it was a common experience already in the circles of the Desert monks (Alfeyev, 2000: 226).

Dostoevskij was certainly acquainted with the hesychastic interpretation of the Divine Light: as I mentioned above, among the books in his personal library is a copy of Symeon the New Theologian. In a notebook to *The Brothers Karamazov*, he wrote down some thoughts on the "Light of Tabor", which indicate that, while working on his novel, he

was engaged in some reflections on the hesychastic metaphor of light (PSS 15: 245).

Light mysticism is a powerful thread in Zosima's discourse, especially at moments when speech seems to fall short. Zosima has one very vivid reminiscence of his deceased brother Markel, which is evoked by light imagery rather than being couched in specific words: "The hour was vespereal, serene, the sun was going down, illuminating all his room with an oblique ray" ("Час был вечерний, ясный, солнце закатывалось и всю комнату осветило косым лучом", PSS 14: 263). As pointed out above, in the episode in Zosima's life where the *starec* recounts his spiritual transformation after beating his servant Afanasij, there is a sudden rupture between the extensive and detailed description of the beating scene and the linguistic void concerning Zosima's actual spiritual transformation. While the narrator refrains from pinning down Zosima's spiritual experience in words, he reverts to the visual imagery of the sun to evoke the mystical outburst in Zosima: "the sun was shining, the leaves were happily sparkling in the sun" ("а солнышко-то светит, листочки-то радуются, сверкают", PSS 14: 270). Earlier in his *žitie*, the elder relates how his mother took him in his childhood to church on the Monday of Holy Week, where he had his first impressive spiritual experience and 'consciously accepted for the first time the first seed of God's word in his soul' (PSS 14: 264). It is remarkable that this experience is not so much associated with the institution of the church *per se*, but rather with a combination of mystical feelings that are evoked through the reading of the Book of Job and light that pours down in the church. When looking back on this spiritual moment, the elder remembers:

It was a sunny day, and as I remember it now I seem to see once again the incense rising from the censer and quietly floating aloft, and up in the cupola, through the narrow little window, God's rays fairly streaming into the church down upon us, and, as it rose towards them in waves, how the incense appeared to dissolve in them. I watched in tender emotion, and for the first time in my life I consciously accepted the first seed of God's word into my soul (PSS 14: 264).⁴²

In line with the hesychast's ultimate experience of God in the vision of the Taboric light, Zosima receives "the first seed of God's word" not

⁴² "День был ясный, и я, вспоминая теперь, точно вижу вновь, как возносился из кадила фимиам и тихо восходил вверх, а сверху в куполе, в узенькое окошечко, так и льются на нас в церковь божьи лучи, и, восходя к ним волнами, как бы таял в них фимиам. Смотрел я умиленно и в первый раз отроду принял я тогда в душу первое семя слова божия осмысленно" (PSS 14: 264).

through verbal communication, but in a mystical vision of "God's rays". In like manner, since God takes the form of light, Zosima's daily ritual to glorify the Divine mystery is directed towards the sun: "I bless the daily rising of the sun, and, as before, my heart sings to it, but now I am more enamoured of its setting, of its long, oblique rays" (PSS 14: 265).⁴³ In Alēša's vision of the wedding at Cana, Zosima – "whose eyes are shining" – invites his disciple to the wedding and points at the presence of Christ, by referring to Him as the "Sun": "Do you see our Sun, do you see Him?" ("А видишь ли Солнце наше, видишь ли ты его?", PSS 14: 327).

Furthermore, in hesychasm there is a strong emphasis on the kenotic ideal of self-renunciation and humility: a first prerequisite to engage on the path to spiritual perfection and union with God is the kenotic renunciation of one's own individual will and obedient acceptance and following of the Divine will. The human will and desires are too much attached to the material world and hence obstruct the hesychast in his striving towards spiritual fulfilment. "An indispensable, essential condition of success in the Prayer of Jesus is the keeping of His commandments", writes Ignatius Brjančaninov, "If we constantly observe the Lord's commandments, then by our spirit we shall be united with Him" (Brianchaninov, 2006: 132-133).

A kenotic striving also permeates Zosima's personality and teaching. His comforting counsel to the woman grieving over the death over her little son Aleksej is to accept humbly and unquestioningly the death of her beloved boy in the strong belief that he is now one of God's angels ("Women of Faith", PSS 14: 46). In a similar spirit, the elder instructs his favourite disciple Alēša in a gentle, but firm tone that he has to leave the monastery and go into the world, how reluctant and unwilling he may be, because that is the place where God commands him to be. Alēša obediently sets aside his desire to stay in the peaceful and secure monastic environment and goes into the world to fulfil the role God called him for. In his sermons, Zosima utters his hopes concerning the future of Russia: he believes that God will save Russia, in spite of its current crisis in religious consciousness, because "Russia is great in its humility" ("спасет бог людей своих, ибо велика Россия смирением своим", PSS 14: 286). Humility, or *smirenje*, which not coincidentally also means *kenosis* in Russian, is the hallmark of Russian religious identity: in their humility and acceptance of suffering, the Russian people bear and live by the

⁴³ "благословляю восход солнца ежедневный, и сердце мое попрежнему поет ему, но уже более люблю закат его, длинные косые лучи его" (PSS 14: 265).

image of the suffering Christ, who died for the sins of all mankind and was reunited with God.

Zosima several times emphasizes the importance of humility for the regeneration of Russia's spiritual consciousness and Russian Christianity. In fact, his whole moral message that everyone is guilty before everyone and everyone is responsible for everyone's sins is decisively kenotic in its fundamentals.

There is only one means of salvation: take yourself and make yourself responsible for all men's sins. Friend, this is indeed truly so, for no sooner do you sincerely make yourself responsible for everything and for all men, then you will immediately see that is so in reality and that you are guilty for everyone and for everything (PSS 14: 290).⁴⁴

The only path to salvation is to imitate the kenotic Christ and to take others' sins upon us. Christ died on the cross for the sins of humanity; in like manner, in order to attain redemption, we should all suffer for the sins of the whole of humanity. Zosima advocates a worldview that accepts, even embraces, the sinfulness of human nature, instead of discarding it as a scapegoat for all the evil in the world: "Brothers, do not be afraid of human sin, love man in his sin, also, for this likeness of Divine Love is indeed the summit of love upon earth" ("Братья, не бойтесь греха людей, любите человека и во грехе его, ибо сие уж подобие божеской любви и есть верх любви на земле, PSS 14: 289). The elder's positive emphasis on sins echoes the hesychastic teaching on the need of the hesychast's developing the gift of *penthos*, i.e. a state of constant repentance and sorrow for one's sins. *Penthos* keeps the hesychast aware of his sinful nature and thus functions as a constant caution not to give in to worldly temptations. Moreover, it continuously reminds the hesychast of God's all-embracing mercy and grace.

Closely related to *penthos*, or the necessity of sorrow and repentance, is what the hesychasts call "the gift of tears". In the 15th century, Nil Sorskij compiled earlier texts on the gift of tears – such as writings by the Desert Fathers Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac the Syrian – and greatly contributed to the hesychastic theology of tears. From then on, tears became an important ingredient of Russian hesychasm and became highly valued as a spiritual gift, as a special mark of divine grace. First, tears bring the hesychast in a state of emotional rapture, thereby releasing the

⁴⁴ "Одно тут спасение себе: возьми себя и сделай себя же ответчиком за весь грех людской. Друг, да ведь это и вправду так, ибо чуть только сделаешь себя за всё и за всех ответчиком искренно, то тотчас же увидишь, что оно так и есть в самом деле и что ты-то и есть за всех и за вся виноват" (PSS 14: 290).

mind from its purely rational activities and opening it up to its spiritual workings. Second, tears make the hesychast aware that this life is inherently sinful and consequently filled with grief. Weeping reminds humanity of its sorrowful condition of original sin and the broken communion with God, and, stimulates to repent and re-establish the union with God. We must weep for our sins in order to be forgiven and redeemed. In Nil's theology, tears still the passions and deliver men from sins: "for one, wishing to be delivered from sins, is delivered from them by weeping and one, wishing to keep the self from sin, is kept so by weeping" (quoted in Maloney, 1973: 128). Tears purify the soul from sin and protect it against the temptations from evil. Though tears are a gift of God, the individual must consciously prepare himself to receive this gift by inner prayer and meditation: "Above all, pray for the gift of tears", is Nil's advice, and "continue to meditate in this fore-said manner and if God should give us the grace of tears, we must not restrain ourselves, but weep as much as possible, according to our strength and power, for the Fathers have taught that such weeping delivers us from the eternal fire and other impending torments (Nil Sorsky, 2003: 98). Tears enlighten the mind and give the one who has prepared himself a deeper knowledge of God, they open up the road towards spiritual union with God.

Such a cultivation of tears is also present in Zosima's discourse. The elder repeatedly mentions his shedding of tears when reading Holy Scripture (especially the Book of Job) and, in a similar spirit, advises the priests to weep when reading from the Bible and instructing it to the peasants because their tears, together with the words from Holy Scripture, will affect and open up the hearts of his listeners (PSS 14: 266). His spiritual transformation, instigated by his beating of the servant Afanasij, is accompanied by shedding of tears (PSS 14: 270f.). When the mysterious visitor has confessed his murder to Zosima, the elder prays in tears before the icon of the Mother of God (PSS 14: 281). In the same passage in which the elder eulogizes Russia and the Russian people for its innate capacity for humility, he praises its special gift of tears. Both *smirenje* and tears bring the Russian people closer to God and will eventually redeem Russia: "But God will save Russia [...] so tirelessly still does our people believe in the truth, recognizing God and weeping in tender piety" (PSS 14: 286).⁴⁵ The gifts of humility and tears are also combined in Zosima's following words, which sound as a reworking of the epigraph to the novel, taken from the Gospel of John (John, 12: 24):

⁴⁵ "Но спасет бог Россию [...] Так что неустанно еще верует народ наш в правду, бога признает, умирительно плачет" (PSS 14: 286).

And if you cannot speak to the malicious people, then serve them silently and in humility, without ever losing hope. If all forsake you and even drive you away with force, then, remaining alone, fall to the earth and kiss her, moisten it with your tears, and the earth will bear fruit of your tears, even though no one has seen or heard you in your solitude (PSS 14: 291).⁴⁶

In this passage, the elder blends the cult of tears with a religious practice that has no strong roots in ecclesiastical Orthodoxy, i.e. the kissing and veneration of the earth, which is adopted from the tradition of *dvoeverie* (dual faith) in Russia.⁴⁷ Furthermore, there is the hesychastic motif of solitude and isolation as the prerequisite to practice inner prayer and open yourself up to God. Zosima repeats the same combination of tears, kissing the earth and solitary prayer only a page further:

And remaining in solitariness, pray. Love to bow down to the earth and kiss her. Kiss the earth and untiringly, insatiably, love, love all creatures, love all things, seek this ecstasy and this frenzy. Moisten the earth with the tears of your joy and love those tears of yours. As for this frenzy, be not ashamed of it, cherish it, for it is the gift of God, a great gift that is vouchsafed not to many, but to the chosen (PSS 14: 292).⁴⁸

Besides tears, another important element of *penthos* and an effective weapon to struggle against temptations, is the recollection of death. We must keep the remembrance of death always before us, because the thought of death and last judgement reminds us of our sinful nature and prevents us from giving in to our passions. Nil Sorskij writes: “The Fathers say that in our mental activity it is most helpful to have ever

⁴⁶ “А если уже не можешь говорить с озлобленными, то служи им молча и в унижении, никогда не теряя надежды. Если же все оставят тебя и уже изгонят тебя силой, то, оставшись один, пади на землю и целуй ее, омочи ее слезами твоими, и даст плод от слез твоих земля, хотя бы и не видал и не слышал тебя никто в уединении твоём” (PSS 14: 291).

⁴⁷ According to Fedotov, “in Mother Earth, who remains the core of Russian religion, converge the most secret and deep religious feelings of the folk. Beneath the beautiful veil of grass and flowers, the people venerate with awe the black moist depths, the source of all fertilizing powers [...] The very epithet of the earth in the folk songs, “Mother Earth, the Humid”, [...] alludes to the womb rather than to the face of the Earth. It means that not beauty but fertility is the supreme virtue of the Earth.” Christianity did much to destroy the folk religion surrounding the Earth, for it found too much sexual connotations of the cult of the fertile and birth-giving Earth. Instead, the veneration of the Earth was in Christian times replaced by the worship of the Mother of God (Fedotov, 1960: 12-14).

⁴⁸ “В уединении же оставаясь, молись. Люби повергаться на землю и лобызгать ее. Землю целуй и неустанно, ненасытимо люби, всех люби, всё люби, ищи восторга, и иступления сего. Омочи землю слезами радости твоя и люби сии слезы твои. Иступления же сего не стыдись, дорожи им, ибо есть дар божий, великий, да и не многим дается, а избранным” (PSS 14: 292).

before us the remembrance of death and the Last Judgement [...] Remember your last day and you would never sin [...] just as bread is the most needed of all foods to survive, so also remembrance of one’s death is the most required of all virtues” (Nil Sorsky, 2003: 90). In order to keep death always present in our thoughts, it helps, teaches Nil, to recall various shocking types of deaths, which we might have witnessed or have heard of. By bringing to mind the terrifying and sometimes very sudden deaths of others, we are confronted with the fact that our own life may be broken off very unexpectedly, which intensifies our fear of death and triggers us to fight our sins every day: “We must keep ever in our mind what we should be concentrating on if we in this given day were not to live to its end” (Nil Sorsky, 2003: 90). Keeping the thought of death always in our mind is very significant in attaining moral and spiritual perfection, for it reminds us constantly to live according to the Will of God and to be prepared for the moment in which we face Last Judgement.

If put in this perspective, the unforeseen rotting of Zosima’s body receives meaning. While his supporters in the monastery expect that after his death the elder’s body will be miraculously preserved and that this will prove his saintly status, it soon becomes clear during the vigil that his body is subject to the natural laws of decomposition. The monks and the pilgrims in the monastery can no longer ignore the putrid smell emerging from the body. One motive for Dostoevskij to let the elder’s body decompose is to provide a setting in which he can depict the controversy surrounding the elder within the monastery: the rotting of Zosima’s body is by the opponents of the *starec* received with mockery and malicious gloating. A real scandal breaks out at the coffin of the deceased elder, which reveals the latent hostility towards the institution of *starčestvo* among some monks.

As for my own personal opinion, I believe that here much else was at work, a simultaneous conflux of many different causes exerting their influence at the same time. One of these, for example, was even that same old ingrained hostility to the elderhood as being a harmful innovation, a hostility still deeply rooted in the minds of many brethren in the cloister. And then, of course, principally, there was a sense of envy for the sleeper’s holiness so powerfully established in his lifetime that even to contest it seemed forbidden. For although the departed elder had drawn many to his side, and not so much by miracles as by love, and had erected around him almost an entire world of those who loved him, he had nevertheless and even perhaps because of this brought into being those who envied him, and in the time that followed also bitter enemies, both open and

concealed, and not among the monks only, but even among the secular (PSS 14: 299).⁴⁹

In addition, another purpose for describing the elder's rotting corpse and the monks' reaction to it so meticulously, might have been to blend in the Sorskian imperative to keep the thought of death always before us. Although tradition prescribes that the body of a saint should not decompose and that in most cases rays and a nice fragrance emerge from the coffin (PSS 14: 299), the author consciously chose not to mythologize Zosima's death, but instead to describe it in very naturalistic, almost profane terms, as if to remind the reader that death is not a beautiful, but a dreadful phenomenon. Also, in accordance with Nil's teaching, Zosima's rotting corpse might be taken as exemplifying that in the face of death, all humans are equal and the earthly hierarchy has become meaningless.

At the end of the day, we may assume that in this scene of the scandal at Zosima's coffin, Dostoevskij anticipated already within the narrative the criticism on his fictional monk.

For, in his hagiography of Zosima he consciously recreated a spiritual consciousness that then thrived in the periphery of the Russian church and that he wanted to bring back into the orbit of Russian Christianity. In the teachings and discourse of Zosima he revived the ancient tradition of hesychasm, which was a fundamental ingredient of Byzantine Orthodox and Russian medieval spirituality, but was gradually pushed into the margins of the secularized and rationalized Russian church. Dostoevskij fully experienced the spirituality and practice of hesychasm in the Optina Pustyn' hermitage and, as we can gather from the rich collection of spiritual publications in his library, was well-read in this tradition. So, not only did he incorporate in *The Brothers Karamazov* his impressions of the Optina monastery by describing the characteristic monastic customs and monastic type and by embedding the character Zosima in the tradition of elderhood; he also attempted to spread the typical Optina spirituality to 19th-century Russian readership by infusing in Zosima's discourse some

⁴⁹ "Что до меня лично, то полагаю, что тут одновременно сошлось и много другого, много разных причин заодно повлиявших. Из таковых, например, была даже самая эта закоренелая вражда к старчеству, как к зловредному новшеству, глубоко таившаяся в монастыре в умах еще многих иноков. А потом, конечно, и главное, была зависть к святости усопшего, столь сильно установившейся при жизни его, что и возражать как будто было воспрещено. Ибо хотя покойный старец и привлек к себе многих, и не столько чудесами, сколько любовью, и воздвиг крутом себя как бы целый мир его любящих, тем не менее, и даже тем более, сим же самым породил к себе и завистников, а вслед затем и ожесточенных врагов, и явных, и тайных, и не только между монастырскими, но даже и между светскими" (PSS 14: 299).

subtle echoes of the prayer method and associated spiritual ethos of hesychasm. Zosima thus epitomizes an important spiritual tradition in Orthodoxy that was then at the beginning of its revival in Russian religious consciousness, after a long period of being suppressed by the ecclesiastical authorities.

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