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A Response to Professor Levering

Marcus Plested (Orthodox)

Let me begin by paying tribute to Professor Levering's profound and perceptive paper. The art of dying is something of a lost art within our contemporary culture. We live in a world that avoids confronting death wherever possible, that treats abortion as a surgical procedure yet prolongs life almost at all costs, that drugs the dying so that they end their days not in repentance but in opiate-fueled hallucination, that sends off its loved ones in closed coffins in a mood of stimulated pseudo-celebration. Our age, as St. Nikolai Velimirovich puts it, is one of "life without aim and death without hope." Professor Levering sketches out a profoundly Christian antidote to all this, taking the gratitude and repentance (personal and communal) of Stephen as a paradigm for the way in which we should approach and prepare for our own deaths. Professor Levering's paper is salutary in the fullest possible sense of the term.

But I shall in the remainder of this paper focus on the Orthodox understanding and appropriation of the narrative of Stephen's martyrdom in the book of Acts. Stephen is, in the first instance, remembered as protomartyr and protodeacon. It goes without saying that Stephen's witness unto death has remained an inspiration and exemplar for the untold numbers of Christian martyrs from the apostolic era down to our own. Stephen is also remembered for his being numbered among the first seven deacons appointed by the apostles. It is as a deacon that he is invariably depicted within the iconographic tradition.

The patristic tradition contains a good deal of reflection on Stephen. A place of honor in this respect belongs to St. Augustine, who writes at length of the glories and miracles attendant upon the translation of the relics of St. Stephen to North Africa. These astonishing scenes prompt Augustine to reflect weightily on the puzzling relationship between death and life. Augustine takes the miracles of healing and conversion worked by the relics

of St. Stephen as a powerful testimony to the power of life over death: "He would not be visiting us as dead if in death he were not alive."⁶² St. Maximus the Confessor, like Professor Levering, takes Stephen as a paradigm of Christina repentance: "A man who has been assiduous in acquiring the fruits of love will not cease loving even if he suffers a thousand calamities. Let Stephen, the disciple of Christ, and others like him persuade you of the truth of this."⁶³

But the most distinctive current of reflection on Stephen within the Orthodox Christian tradition pertains to his role as a paradigm and exemplar of mystical experience. Here I refer to his angelic countenance (Acts 6:15) and his heavenly vision: "But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he (Acts 6:55–56 RSV).

The first great Eastern Christian theologian to center his account of mystical experience on the vision of God as light is Macarius (pseudo-Macarius/Macarius-Symeon). For this fourth-century ascetic and mystic, the vision of God as light is *the* defining characteristic of the Christian life:

The blessed Apostle Paul, the architect of the Church, forever anxious for the truth and not wishing that those who hear the word should be impeded by ignorance, indicated with great exactitude and clarity the goal of the truth and made known the perfect mystery of Christianity in every believing soul, this being to receive through a divine operation the experience of the effulgence of the heavenly light in holy souls in the revelation and power of the Spirit.⁶⁴

This experience, Macarius insists, "is not a revelation of knowledge and concepts but the eternal illumination of the hypostatic light."⁶⁵ This unambiguous teaching on the uncreated character of the divine light witnessed in prayer was to be of incalculable import for the development of Orthodox mystical theology. For Macarius, as for the Byzantine tradition as a whole, St. Paul is chiefly revered as an apostle of mystical experience. His blinding vision of God as light on the road to Damascus and his rapture

62. Augustine, *Sermo* 317.1, quoted in Robert A. Marcus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 94.

63. Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Love* 1.37, in G. E. H. Palmer et al., trans., *The Philokalia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 2:56.

64. Macarius, *Logos* I 58.1.1. Note on references to Macarius: I = Heinz Berthold, ed., *Makarios/Symeon, Reden und Briefe: Die Sammlung I des Vaticanus Graecus 694 (B)*, 2 vols., GCS 55–56 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973); II = Hermann Dörries, Erich Klostermann, and Matthias Kroeger, eds., *Die 50 Geistlichen Homilien des Makarios*, PTS 4 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1964).

65. Macarius, *Logos* I 58.1.1, 58.2.1.

into heaven loom larger in the Byzantine mindset than his teaching on faith and works or his approach to Jews unable or unwilling to accept Jesus as the Christ. Macarius routinely associates Paul with Stephen as prime examples of the possibility of the vision of God by the saints in this life.⁶⁶ Elsewhere he makes a further connection with Moses and the light that shone from his face on his descent from Sinai (Ex 34:29–35). These three, Moses, Paul, and Stephen, serve for Macarius as a demonstration of the fact that the vision of God as light is not merely a matter of conceptual illumination but represents the “real and substantial shining of the divine light of the Holy Spirit in the worthy and faithful.”⁶⁷ This comes in the context on a meditation on the nature of scriptural exegesis. While Macarius finds it plausible to interpret such a passages on the level of concepts and knowledge, he is adamant that they must first and foremost be interpreted as calls to each and every Christian to seek out and experience this same divine light. The title of the first English translation of the *Macarian Homilies* sums up the nature of this call rather nicely, if not exactly in accordance with the pithier titles demanded by publishers today:

*Primitive Morality or the Spiritual Homilies of St Macarius the Egyptian; Full of very profitable instructions concerning that Perfection which is Expected from Christians and which it is their Duty to Endeavour after. Done out of Greek with several considerable emendations and some enlargements from a Bodleian MS, never before printed.*⁶⁸

Elsewhere, Macarius makes a further connection between the vision of God as light and the light of the Transfiguration.

As the body of the Lord, when he went up onto the mountain, was glorified and transfigured into the divine glory and infinite light, so also are the bodies of the saints glorified and resplendent. For just as the inner glory of Christ covered his body and shone forth, so in the same way, on that day, the power of Christ which the saints [now] have within, will be poured out upon their bodies.⁶⁹

This connection was to be of incalculable importance for the later Byzantine mystical tradition and in particular for the Hesychasts of the fourteenth century.

But before we turn to the fourteenth century, let me stop awhile in the

66. Macarius, *Logos* I 5.3.2.

67. Macarius, *Logos* I 17.1.2

68. *Primitive Morality or the Spiritual Homilies of St Macarius the Egyptian ...*, trans. Thomas Haywood (London, 1721).

69. Macarius, *Homily* II 15.38.

eleventh. St. Symeon the New Theologian stands very much in the tradition of light mysticism inaugurated by Macarius. Symeon, like Macarius, characterizes the vision of God as light as something to which all Christians must aspire. Indeed he comes perilously close to suggesting that those who do not experience God in this way are not really true Christians—a depressing admonition to those of us whose mystical experiences fall somewhat short of those described in such spectacular style by Symeon.

Symeon also shares with Macarius a singular lack of reluctance to speak about his own mystical experiences. Symeon goes so far as to claim a direct affinity with both Paul and Stephen as co-witnesses to the possibility of the vision of God in this life. Of Stephen, Symeon notes that he was stoned principally on account of his claim to see the heavens opened and the “Son of man standing at the right hand of the glory of the Father”:

And as if he were speaking blasphemy,
he was stoned by the teachers of the law.
He died by the law of nature and lives forever.
Although he was an apostle, he was also sanctified
and completely full of the All-Holy Spirit.
But it was the beginning of the proclamation and there was a crowd
of unbelievers
who by trusting in Christ through the apostles
received the grace which is a gift of faith.
Now then, what does this strange thing mean,
this thing happening in me? What would this frightening terror
that is now accomplished signify?⁷⁰

Note that for Symeon the vision of Stephen is “the beginning of the proclamation.” As protomystic, Stephen announces to all the possibility of the vision of God in this life—and indeed the necessity for all Christians to seek out that vision. Symeon claims that that which Stephen saw, he also saw:

I see Christ frightfully opening the heavens for me,
himself stooping to look and to be seen by me
at the same time with the Father and the Spirit, the thrice holy light,
alight that is one and three and three in one.
By all means they are the light, and the one light is the three

70. *Divine Eros: Hymns of St Symeon the New Theologian*, trans. Daniel K. Griggs, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 64–65.

which also enlightens my soul more than the sun,
and illuminates my darkened mind.⁷¹

All this is both terrifying and dizzying. Symeon is in no doubt that he sees but a fragment of God's self-revelation "as the whole of water is displayed in a drop"—but even this glimpse is wholly overpowering, causing Symeon to fear that he might be subsumed into God:

I have passed my time with my mind engaged in these things,
and as though, it seemed, I gazed into heaven,
and I tremble lest I received more and he should absorb me.
I have found him who I saw from afar,
Whom Stephen saw when the heavens opened,
and whom again Paul saw afterward when he was blinded,
truly and entire like a fire in the middle of my heart.

Symeon, it should be acknowledged, is in no doubt as to his absolute unworthiness for such a life-giving and deifying vision:

But I the living corpse, under the earth, covered by a stone (Rev. 1:18),
I have found life, the one who gives life.⁷²

Symeon was most scornful and dismissive of anyone who claimed such visions as were vouchsafed to Stephen or Paul were not in principle open to and incumbent upon all Christians to pursue in every age. Indeed he regarded any skepticism as to the possibility of the vision of God as light as the sin against the Holy Spirit (Mk 3:28–30). Symeon's unsettling and unusual evangelical fervor in this matter goes some way to explaining the sobriquet "new theologian," a descriptor initially intended as a slur but later adopted as a badge of honor. Controversy surrounding the vision of God as light did not disappear with Symeon's rapid canonization. Indeed, the controversy was to erupt spectacularly in the Hesychast controversy of the fourteenth century.

The Macarian tradition of light mysticism was a direct source of inspiration for the Hesychasts of the fourteenth century. By this time, it had become standard in the Christian East to use Paul and Stephen as witnesses to the possibility of the vision of God as light. In figures such as St. Theoleptos of Philadelphia and St. Gregory of Sinai such visions are taken to be visions

71. Symeon, *Divine Eros*, 64–65.

72. Symeon, *Divine Eros*, 68.

of the same light that shone from Christ on Tabor. Pursuit of such defying visions invariably revolved around the practice of the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, the sinner." Concentrated repetition of this prayer often involved particular bodily postures (e.g., crouching on a small stool) and, sometimes, control of breathing. Many Byzantine monks of the Hesychast tradition claimed that such practices prepared them for the experience of the vision of God as light. All this became especially contentious with the eruption of the polemic between St. Gregory Palamas and Barlaam the Calabrian. Barlaam had served as the Orthodox spokesperson in series of debates with two Latin papal legates held in Constantinople in 1334. In these debates, Barlaam had poured scorn on the rationalist excesses of Latin theology and cast doubt on the possibility of any sort of demonstrative or apodictic argumentation in the realm of theology. Gregory Palamas, writing from Athos, objected that such agnosticism was wholly unacceptable and wrote a pair of *Apodictic Treatises* (1335) to prove the point. Seeking to know more about the origin and immediate context of such impertinent critiques, Barlaam took himself to Mount Athos and was appalled by what he found: uneducated and ignorant monks claiming to see God as light. Barlaam attacked such rustics as *omphalopsychoi* (those who have their soul in their navels) and Messalians—an ancient heresy believed to have dispensed with the sacraments of the church and to have taught that prayer alone brings about the vision of God with the physical eyes. The best sort of illumination we can hope for, argued Barlaam, was the kind of epistemological illumination vouchsafed to the classical philosophers of old. Even the Transfiguration is to be understood as a created symbol or sign of Christ's divinity and as such to stand at a lower level than philosophical enlightenment. The monks found a champion in Palamas, who vigorously defended the role of the body in prayer and the possibility of the experience of God as light. Palamas specified that this is an experience operative in the first instance on the level of the spiritual senses but extended by virtue of the psychosomatic unity of the human person also to the body. He went on to affirm that when we speak of the vision of God as light we are not speaking of the divine essence (which remains forever hidden to human sight) but the divine operation or action or energy.

The vision of Stephen was quite literally a God-send for Palamas in his efforts to demonstrate the biblical basis of all that he had to say in defense of Hesychast practices of prayer. It is a passage to which he returns time and time again. For Palamas, the narrative of Stephen's vision neatly conveyed

three things: (1) the possibility of the vision of God; (2) the role of the body in that vision through the intermediary of the spiritual senses; and (3) the principle that the vision of God as light is a vision of the energy and not the essence of God. I give just a few examples in what follows.

The first mention in Palamas's *Triads in Defense of Holy Hesychasts* emphasizes that Stephen's vision was "not sensible, nor was it intellectual, nor did it take place by abstraction, but in some ineffable manner."⁷³ It was a spiritual illumination apprehended by the spiritual or intellectual senses and communicated to the body. Sometimes—as in the case of Moses and of Stephen—this inner illumination can even be physically manifested upon the body. This is why Moses's face shone as he came down from Sinai and why Stephen's face shone like that of an angel—being in both cases the result of an inward participation in the divine light.⁷⁴ Elsewhere, Palamas affirms that the vision of Stephen was not a vision of God in glory but a vision of the glory of God—that is to say a vision of God himself in his divine glory or energy. This is in essence the same glory as was revealed to the disciples as light on Tabor and indeed to Paul on the road to Damascus. These visions are to be understood as unifying and deifying in accordance with the declaration of the psalmist: "In thy light shall we see light" (Ps 36:9).⁷⁵ Time and time again, argues Gregory, Scripture witnesses to the fact that the vision of God as light is indeed a vision of God himself if, to be sure, a vision of God's energy and not of his essence.⁷⁶ The essence will remain forever hidden to us even as God manifests himself in his self-giving revelation or energy.

For St. Gregory Palamas, the vision of the apostle Stephen becomes a central reference point in his ultimately successful effort to establish the reality of the possibility of the vision of God as light, the role of the body in that vision (if only in a secondary sense), and the principle that God is seen and experienced not according to essence, or indeed hypostasis, but according to energy. The apostle Stephen is in this once again not only protomartyr and protodeacon but also protomystic—a herald and witness to the reality of salvation understood as deification, or *theosis*. And while Gregory's efforts yielded some decisive achievements in the realm of dogmatic theology (most notably the essence-energies distinction), his treatment of the

73. Palamas, *Triads* 1.3.30–31.

74. Palamas, *Triads* 1.3.30–31; cf. *Triads* 2.2.12–13.

75. Palamas, *Triads* 2.3.27.

76. See also Palamas, *Triads* 2.3.66; 3.3.4–5.

vision of Stephen also serves to express and recapitulate the long-standing emphasis on mystical experience characteristic of the Orthodox Christian tradition and consistently evident in its treatment of narrative of the martyrdom of St. Stephen.

None of this is to condone any sort of world-denying mysticism or indeed to detract from Stephen's place as perennial inspiration of martyrs (and indeed deacons). Nor does it detract from the value of the narrative of his martyrdom as a practice of Christian dying as so eloquently expressed by Professor Levering. Nor, certainly, is it to shirk Christian responsibility for the propagation of the gospel. On the contrary, the long tradition of Orthodox reflection on Stephen as protomystic (and indeed its analogous reflection on Paul) serves as a sign of its belief that direct experience of God in the fullness of the Holy Spirit must lie at the heart of any properly apostolic effort.