



Brock Bingaman and Bradley Nassif (eds.), *The Philokalia: A Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 349 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-539026-1.

The *Philokalia*, which in Greek means “love of beauty” or “love of what is good” (p. 3) here designates the collection of mystical texts to be found in the monastic tradition of the early and Medieval Byzantine Church between the fourth to fifteenth centuries, compiled and edited by Sts Nikodimos the Hagiorite (1749-1809) and Makarios of Corinth (1731-1805). Published in 1782, the *Philokalia* was meant to nourish the inner life of those undertaking the Christian path of hesychasm, or “inner quiet” (p. 30), under the guidance of a spiritual father within a traditional Orthodox framework. The book under review is a new collection of critical essays based on the *Philokalia* by renowned scholars from various Christian traditions – Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant – and may seem at first glance to betray the *Philokalia*’s intended purpose; but only superficially. For it is clear from the outset that this ecumenical project was handled with the utmost sensitivity to the ecclesial awareness of not only the original saintly editors of the *Philokalia*, but to the holy authors of the various texts from which it has been compiled. Hence, it can only serve as a witness to a tradition that is of profound existential import to our secular age, filling a lacuna not only in contemporary scholarship, where, it seems, the *Philokalia* and those associated with its compilation are seldom (if ever) noticed (see p. 4), but also in the hearts of those who desire to commit

themselves to a genuine Christian lifestyle. The editors have divided the essays thematically into three parts under the sub-headings ‘History’, ‘Theological Foundations’, and ‘Spiritual Practices’. Because of word constraints, I will limit my review to those essays that are relevant to my own research interests. In doing so, I mean no disrespect to the authors of those articles I have not reviewed, and would like to acknowledge the intrinsic value of each and every contribution in this volume.

*Part One: History*

‘History’ includes the following essays: ‘St Nikodimos and the *Philokalia*’ by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, ‘The Making of the *Philokalia*: A Tale of Monks and Manuscripts’ by Fr John Anthony McGuckin, ‘The Influence of the *Philokalia* in the Orthodox World’ by Fr Andrew Louth, and ‘Conversing with the World by Commemorating the Fathers: Fr Dumitru Stăniloae and the Romanian Edition of the *Philokalia*’ by Mihail Neamtu.

Metropolitan Kallistos’ article begins with a contextualisation of the eighteenth century tensions between the Byzantine/Romaic mind (p. 9) and modern Hellenism (p.10) as somehow fuelling the creative fervour of the “Kollyvades”<sup>1</sup> – who reacted against the latter – and whose commitment to the “hesychast tradition of inner prayer” (p. 11) encouraged them to edit and publish the works of those fathers that were interested in this way of life (p. 12). Despite his predilection for solitude (p. 14), it was to this group – shunned by some fundamentalists on Athos (p. 11) – that St Nikodimos belonged, and it was they who inspired him to translate/edit those patristic texts that advocated hesychasm. Contextualising St Nikodimos’ project within an earlier ‘philokalic’ tradition established by St Paisy Velichkovsky (pp. 21-23), Metropolitan Kallistos turns to the existential dimensions of the collection, assessing the fact that although the *Philokalia* should probably only be read under spiritual guidance (pp. 25-27), nevertheless St Nikodimos felt that anyone who approached it with the right spirit, and in invocation of the Holy Spirit (p. 27), would benefit greatly; its content being founded on the major themes of *nepsis* (or,

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<sup>1</sup> Derived from *kollyva*, “the boiled wheat used at memorial services for the departed (*mnimosyna*)” (p. 11).

“inner sobriety” – p. 29), *hesychia* (“stillness or silence of the heart” – p. 29), and the Jesus prayer (p. 30), the goals of which are meant to draw a Christian into *theosis* (pp. 27-32).

Fr McGuckin’s essay traces the content of this existentially relevant compendium to the beginning of Christianity with the “*Paterika*” (p. 37), beginning with the “*Apophthegmata Patrum*” (p. 38) and the original *Philokalia* on Origen’s works compiled by the Cappadocian saints Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian (p. 36). Working through the Byzantine renditions of the lives and works of saints, Fr McGuckin ends up at St Nikodimos and Makarios’ *Philokalia* and its Slavonic predecessor by St Paisy, the *Dobrotolubiye* (p. 39). Fr McGuckin dedicates an entire section to the latter, delineating the life of the saint (pp. 40-41) and the persecution he endured from some of his “neighboring Athonite higumenoi” (p. 41) who were afflicted by a “sleepy *status quo*” (p. 41) that bred ignorance. Fr McGuckin then describes St Paisy’s move to the Dragomirna monastery of Bucovina (in Romania), where he initiated a revival of interest in philokalic manuscripts that were edited by his followers and disseminated throughout the Orthodox world (p. 41-43). Tracing the continuation of the philokalic tradition initiated by St Paisy (pp. 43-45) in St Theophan the Recluse and the Optina elders, Fr McGuckin gives a brief outline of the lives and achievements of St Makarios of Corinth and St Nikodimos (pp. 45-49); neither of whom ever met St Paisy (p. 45) but who were nevertheless inspired by his achievements.

### *Part Two: Theological Foundations*

‘Theological Foundations’ contains several articles: ‘The Luminous Word: Scripture in the *Philokalia*’ by Douglas Burton-Christie; ‘*Concerning Those Who Imagine That They are Justified by Works: The Gospel According to St. Mark – the Monk*,’ by co-editor Bradley Nassif; ‘The Theological World of the *Philokalia*,’ by Archbishop Rowan Williams; ‘Tradition and Creativity in the Construction and Reading of the *Philokalia*,’ by J. L. Zecher; ‘Becoming a Spiritual World of God: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor,’ by Brock Binagman; ‘The

Ecclesiology of the *Philokalia*,’ by Krastu Baney, and; ‘Evagrius in the *Philokalia* of Sts. Macarius and Nicodemus’ by Julia Konstantinovsky.

Co-editor Bradley Nassif’s contribution focuses on St Mark the Ascetic (or Monk), whose popularity in Byzantium is matched only by the little-to-no attention paid to him by contemporary scholars or general readers (p. 87). Nassif hones in on a single text entitled *Those Who Imagine That They Are Justified By Works* which explains the relationship between grace, faith and works (p. 88) in a manner directed against the Messalians (pp. 89-92), a movement which, though variegated, disparaged the Church/sacraments which they believed were useless for the ‘righteous’ who had undertaken the ascetical struggle to uproot the evil that resided within them (p. 92). Mark the Ascetic’s opposition to this group is disclosed in Nassif’s unfolding assessment of the saint’s *Justified By Works*, where he looks at its literary characteristics (pp. 92-93), its topical outline (pp. 93-94) and title (pp. 94-96), before turning to lengthy excerpts from the work itself which discloses the Ascetic’s belief that grace is not given as a reward for righteousness (pp. 96-98), but as a free gift within the ecclesial context (i.e. baptism). This entails that we respond to it actively (pp. 98-99), thereby making righteousness, ascetical labours and good works (pp. 99-100) an outcome of grace through a synergetic process that has one ultimate goal – “to love as God loves” (p. 101).

Brock Bingaman, the second co-editor of the present volume, summarises the Maximian worldview in the form of an existential metanarrative beginning with the creation of the cosmos within which he observes eight salient elements; *creatio ex nihilo*, God’s will in the creation process and the *logoi*, the roles of God’s benevolence, Word, prudence, condescension, the fact that all creatures are “a composite of substance and accident,” as well as providence (pp. 138-41). He then moves on to the creation of the human person, wherein he looks at the dichotomous relationship between body and soul (p. 141), as well as the trichotomous mind-soul-body pattern (p. 142) before focusing on the *nous* (νοῦς) as the contemplative part of the human person (p. 142); all of which is followed by a lengthy section on the image of God in humans (p. 143-46). Bingaman then turns to the fall and its consequences (pp. 148-49), which

is followed by a section on salvation that is rather nuanced, exploring themes of the incarnation as an act of love (pp. 150-51), a work of the Trinity (p. 151) and a manifestation of the Son's kenosis (pp. 151-52). Bingaman then relates the salvific acts of Christ to personal deification by speaking of St Maximus' notion of the ongoing incarnation (p. 152) that takes place within Christians as a result of participation in God (p. 153); but is quick to emphasise that this deification is possible only because of the incarnation, which leads to a reciprocity between us and Christ (pp. 154-55), whereby God the Logos becomes human "so that humans might become divine" (p. 155). Completing his portrait of St Maximus' holistic vision are Bingaman's final expositions on the 'Pneumatological and Eschatological Dimensions' of deification (pp. 15-57), the fact that this process includes both body and soul (pp. 157-58) and is granted as a gift that, in turn, requires faith and love on our behalf (pp. 159-60).

### *Part Three: Spiritual Practices*

'Spiritual Practices' contains the following articles: 'The Place of the Jesus Prayer in the *Philokalia*' by Mary B. Cunningham; 'Uses and Abuses of Spiritual Authority in the Writings of St. Symeon the New Theologian' by Hannah Hunt; 'Hope for the Passible Self: The Use and Transformation of the Human Passions in the Fathers of the *Philokalia*' by Paul M. Blowers; 'Healing, Psychotherapy, and the *Philokalia*' by Rev. Christopher C. H. Cook; 'The *Philokalia* and Regulative Virtue Epistemology: A Look at Maximus the Confessor' by Rev. Frederick D. Aquino; 'Women in the *Philokalia*?' by Sr. Verna E. F. Harrison, and; 'Solitude, Silence, and Stillness: Light from the Palestinian Desert' by Fr John Chryssavgis.

Mary B. Cunningham's article explores the assertion by the original editors of the *Philokalia* that "it is the Jesus Prayer that confers unity on the work as a whole" (p. 195). Cunningham traces the history of the prayer, from its first explicit appearance in St Diadochos of Photike in the fifth century, where it comprised merely the name "Lord Jesus" (p. 196) to the elaborated version "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me," which appears in later writers such as St Nikiphoros the Monk (p. 197). Observing the function of the prayer as a weapon against "the

passions and thoughts that assail those who are attempting to pray” (p. 197) she emphasises that for its practitioners, the prayer endowed them with stillness and united them with God (p. 198). Having recourse to St Gregory of Sinai, she quotes his reference to the warmth of the heart that accompanies the prayer as a ‘metaphor’ for a “visionary experience involving the whole human person” (p. 199) – which is antithetical to St Gregory’s quite literal description in this instance. Cunningham ends the article with an inspirational statement on the significance of the Jesus prayer for each and every Christian (p. 202).

Hannah Hunt’s article addresses spiritual fatherhood in the three treatises attributed to St Symeon the New Theologian in the *Philokalia*, of which only the first – *On Faith* – was actually written by him (p. 203). Hunt gives some background to St Symeon’s life, especially regarding his relationship with his own spiritual father Symeon the Elder (pp. 203-4) before affirming that the saint’s disposition to Byzantine society was marked by the fact that he espoused “an alternative hierarchy to that of emperor and patriarch – namely, the charismatic ‘golden chain’ of the illuminated spiritual athlete who passes his mystical insight from one generation of spiritual child to the next, a chain of guidance which based its authenticity solely on mystical, light-filled visions of God” (p. 205). Whilst not criticising it directly, as the article progresses Hunt portrays this ‘golden chain’ in a cynical tone, presenting various ‘historical’ approaches which construe spiritual fatherhood “as a mark of social distinction” (p. 206) and cult-like (p. 207, 210), polarising it to the mainstream Church authority (p. 208). Hunt should have made it clear that although St Symeon did prioritise his relationship with his spiritual father to the pharisaic behaviour of the hierarchy of his day, he was not opposed to hierarchy *per se*. This, along with an appreciation of his canonical position as an abbot of St Mammias, his liturgical mentality and penchant for charity,<sup>2</sup> would have alleviated the implication present throughout the article that Symeon was anti-Church. The article ends with an elaboration on St Symeon’s

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. George Maloney S.J. ‘Introduction’ in *Symeon the New Theologian: The Discourses*, trans. C.J. deCatanzaro, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 6, 8, 32-33.

criticism of those spiritual fathers who “teach or direct from a position of ignorance” (p. 210) by drawing our attention to a dubious example in the modern day United States involving subterfuge and mental illness (p. 211); but this tacit connection between the holy Symeon’s views of spiritual fatherhood/discipleship and such contemporary aberrations seems contrived (p. 210-12), especially since Hunt makes very little effort to differentiate between them.

Paul M. Blowers’ essay addresses the philokalic ascetical doctrine on the passions, which, despite containing frequent references to their obliteration through dispassion, also exhorts their proper use, healing and transformation in the process of deification (p. 216). Beginning with Greco-Roman philosophical concepts on the ‘Moral Psychology of the Passions and Passible Faculties’ (pp. 217-18) and their use/re-interpretation by the Alexandrians (Clement, Origen and Didymus the Blind), Blowers shows how these figures, along with the Cappadocians, believed in the utilisation and transformation of the passions/emotions in the soul by its reorientation towards God (pp. 218-20). Blowers mentions that the writings contained in the *Philokalia* presuppose the concepts and general approach put forward by the aforementioned figures (p. 220), but also traces a trajectory through St Gregory of Nyssa to Maximus the Confessor (pp. 220-22) – who appears in the *Philokalia* – before turning to the compendium itself, within which he evaluates at length its exhortations concerning ‘Trumping Thoughts with Thoughts’ (pp. 222-23) as well as ‘The Virtuous Use of Ire and Desire’ (pp. 224-25) and the affections of ‘Godly Fear, Sorrow, Joy, and Hope’ (pp. 226-27). Blowers concludes by emphasising ‘The Passionate face of *Apatheia* in the *Philokalia*’ (pp. 227-29).

The relevance of this volume for both philokalic studies and Christian scholarship in general is unquestionable. The erudite research presented herein, from some of world’s leading scholars in theology and its related disciplines, is complemented by a profound sensitivity towards the material under investigation; a general acknowledgement that the *Philokalia* is an existentially relevant, formative manual, which deserves to be promoted through scholarship but which should never be dissociated from its ecclesial context. That this is in line with the purpose of the original

editors, Sts Nikodimos and Makarios, is attested to by the editors of the present volume, Bingaman and Nassif, whose wish to engender further interest in the *Philokalia* is motivated by a clearly Christian goal: “to discover the transformative power of the gospel of the kingdom” (p. 5). Moreover, the publication of such emphatically Christian material by an academic press of Oxford University means that the general expectation, if not demand, for Christian scholars to conform to secular norms has, in this case, been mitigated on account of the high quality of the research contained in this book. This is indicated by the fact that throughout the essays contained herein one will find “St” in front of the names of those holy persons that continue to be venerated as such amongst the mainstream Churches. This further testifies to the high esteem in which the contributors of this volume, along with its editors, hold those saints represented in the *Philokalia*; saints whose experience of God constituted the principal inspiration for Sts Nikodimos’ and Makarios’ original project – a fact which this volume, by evaluating in various ways the context and content of the *Philokalia*, makes abundantly clear.

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