



# Aisthetics of Religion and embodied spiritual perception: hermeneutic approaches in Hesychasm, Christian Platonism, and Aesthetics of Idealism, to 'divine light' and 'mystical flight'

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## Abstract

In this essay I show developments in Aisthetics of Religion, a new discipline of Science of Religion, towards the inclusion of the body, and the senses, departing from an approach of naturalistic reductionism towards the integration of the category or dimension of the transcendent". Here, recourse is taken to the philosophical aesthetics of German Idealism, that integrates 'body' and 'soul, by its concept of the faculty of 'imagination' as instrument of aisthesis and divination. Hesychasm is presented as sharing the same principles of spiritual aesthetics of the phenomenology of the divine, including supernatural paradigmatic iconic event, as of Jesus' Transfiguration and St. Paul's mystical flight. The epistemic basis regarding the role of body, soul, and mind, with their specific aisthesis, and their formation towards it, recognised. Affinity between these Aisthetics of Religion, and Hesychastic epistemics are recognised as inspiration for theology and hermeneutics beyond the limits of 'logo-centrism'. The Hesychastic approach towards sensoriform perception of paradigmatic 'iconic' manifestations of the divine, in embodied perception, and preparation to such aisthesis is recognised as inspiration and theological challenge in response to Aisthetics of Religion.

**Keywords:** Aisthetics of religion, hesychasm, embodiment and philosophical aesthetics in science of religion, hermeneutics, transcendent, theology of bodily and intuitive perception, theology of icons.

## Introduction

In recent years, 'Aisthetics of Religion' has been formulated as a programme in science of religion. It responds to the interest in embodiment' that arose in recent decades. This shifts the focus from doctrine of religion, and from sociological aspects to religious experience and perceptions, as they are made in embodied existence. A departure from reductionism in the attribution of religious perception to physiological processes is observable. Proponents of 'Aisthetics of Religion' have become aware of the limitations of a naturalistic approach. Increasingly, recourse is taken theory of aesthetics, as developed in the age of Romanticism, by philosophers of Idealism. In this regard, the conceptualisation of sensoriform spiritual perceptions, - and of the bodily preparation for them -in Christian Orthodox Hesychasm, but also in Vedantic Yoga is of interest. It connects interest in the sensory and embodied modes of such perceptions with appreciation of their perceived 'spiritual' character – in distinction from psychotic or hallucinatory states. Developments in Aesthetics of Religion towards the accommodation of a category of the 'transcendent' in the investigation of the role of the body and the senses – which includes the 'sensoriform' perceptions - is presented. The recourse to the philosophical aesthetics of German Idealism, with its inclusion of bodily, emotional and



intuitive perception of the 'transcendent' is noted. The philosophical background in Platonism and its Christian reception is briefly noted. Agreements with the theology, spirituality, aesthesis and transformative practice of Hesychasm, and its approach towards the phenomenology of the transcendent - as depicted in the Bible - are explored. Consequences for theological hermeneutics are indicated on the basis of both.

### **On the term 'aisthesis' and its adoption or the arts and for religion.**

The Greek word 'aisthesis' covers sensations of a wide range: bodily perceptions by the senses, feelings, perceptions, sensations, understanding, even knowledge, consciousness and understanding. The concept unites physiological, emotional, and intellective aspects. The combination of these elements is specific to aesthetic perception. The word 'aisthesis' is but one term in theory of art of Greek Antiquity. Concepts like to kalòn, 'that which is right or beautiful', were more important. The word 'aisthesis' only gradually came to designate theory of arts. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, A. Baumgarten however discovered that Antiquity indeed used the concept in this sense. It enabled him to adopt it anew, applying it to conceptualise the role of the senses for art. From here on theory of aesthetics developed, to flourish in the age of Romanticism and Idealism, especially after I. Kant, with their interest in symbolic forms of knowledge, intuition, and perception that comprises body, soul and mind, beyond a logocentric understanding. Theories of Aesthetics of Religion refer back to different authors and stages of this tradition. It is applied to conceptualise spiritual perceptions, eidetic manifestations and experiences, beyond propositional statements. In particular sensory and sensoriform perceptions are addressed hereby. To varying extent, the 'body' is included in this perspective, as sentient and as active. A range of positions appear: in the perspective of anthropology and cosmology, from naturalistic positions of materialistic monism, through mind-body-dualisms, the ternary anthropology (and cosmology of the Platonic tradition) and its Christian adoption, and, in the perspective of the spiritual, from atheistic to religious world-views – with various combinations of these, not always made explicit.

For the interest of this essay, paradigmatic events described in the Bible, which have been accepted in tradition as mirroring subsequent experiences, perceptions, and phenomena, shall be discussed at the beginning, as the pose challenges to the theoretical conception of Aisthesis of Religion. It implies the understanding that the hermeneutics at the time, when the canon of the New Testament was finalised, included a 'mystagogic reading' of such events, as a common approach in learned culture of the time. This hermeneutic approach has been recognised as prevalent and widespread in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE in Graeco-Roman Antiquity, among all major religions: Paganism, Christianity and Judaism. Nicole Belayche and Francesco Massa explain, that this reading of such wondrous paradigmatic events as 'mysteries', to be re-experienced in imagination and ritual or spiritual practice, was firmly established in different fields, including rhetoric, poetics, medicine, and philosophy. Christianity, of all, was most open to describe such mystagogic re-experiencing – with less 'arcane discipline' commanding silence. It influenced the Christian conceptualisation of the sacraments as 'mysteries', preserved in Orthodox theology, as expressed, by Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, somewhat later:

“With the aid of the transcendent and most sacred scriptures, I must demonstrate this to those who have been initiated in the sacrament of the sacred mystagogy by our hierarchy’s mysteries and traditions. (...) Keep these things of God unshared and undefiled by the uninitiated. Let your sharing of the sacred befit the sacred things”<sup>1</sup>

The mysteries' vocabulary is significant here. The characteristic arcane discipline is mentioned too. The reading of Holy Scripture as presenting 'mysteries' means that they are to be re-

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, I, 1. (PG III, 372A).



experienced in a spiritual way of participation and enactment.<sup>2</sup> The reports presented in the following are thus not to be understood as documentations of (solely) singular events, wholly out of the order of 'reality' as by an intrusion, but, despite their eminence, as 'mysteries' and thus as 'paradigms, providing access to a dimension of the divine in historical reality,<sup>3</sup> to those, as Ps. Dionysius indicates, who are 'initiated' into their understanding as by mystagogy.

### **Paradigms of transcendent perceptions and their theological conceptualisation**

Experiences of 'rapture', out of the ordinary world, and of visions, whose scope transcends the ordinary, are attested in different cultures and religions. In Christianity, St. Paul's report of his own mystic flight is a paradigm:

"I must go on boasting. (...), I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. And I know that this man ... was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no-one is permitted to tell."<sup>4</sup>

On the distinct mode of perception here, the 14<sup>th</sup> century theoretician of Hesychasm (- the mystical theology and meditation form of the Eastern Orthodox Church), St. Gregory Palamas,<sup>5</sup> comments, that this vision is experienced beyond (bodily) senses and intellectual consciousness, because, when these two faculties are active, there exists some awareness of them being in activity. (Palamas regards St. Paul's rapture not as a unique event but as an eminent one, that has similarly been experienced by others.) Therefore, he declares, in union with God, St. Paul transcended normal human existence, perceiving the invisible by the invisible.<sup>6</sup> Palamas is cautious in his comment, pointing out, firstly, that although such experiences, as of St. Paul, have 'sensoriform' and noetic features, they are nevertheless of a different quality, because no vestiges of awareness of ordinary consciousness remain – comparable to a dreamer's awareness of being in a dream – but that this is experienced as being beyond the ordinary world – "in union towards the divine"<sup>7</sup> – and retaining their quality of being beyond the ordinary, so as to be inexpressible. Interestingly, Palamas is quite cautious about the actual process of an 'out-of-body'-experience.<sup>8</sup> He certainly knew about Christian and Platonic<sup>9</sup> reports of such experiences. That the soul could 'travel', either in ecstatic rapture, in 'out-of-body' experiences, in ecstatic rapture, even in dreams, or upon death, was a generally accepted idea in Antiquity<sup>10</sup> up to the rise of materialistic naturalism, in Modernity. out was a generally accepted. For Palamas, it is important to distinguish the spiritual or divine that manifests itself through such extraordinary experiences from these phenomena themselves, which means that they can convey transcendence by their divine 'element' which he conceptualises as 'divine energies' or 'uncreated energies of God'.<sup>11</sup> Hereby, he means that these are phenomena, perceptions or experiences by which the divine (God) manifests itself – and is recognised as such, through the same 'energies' within us. It does not mean that the 'supernatural' or paranormal as such is divine. (The miraculous may confer the divine, it is not divine itself.) Theologically this is important to dismiss opinions that anything beyond the

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<sup>2</sup> Belayche, N. and Massa, F. (2021), "Introduction", p. 9

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p. 21

<sup>4</sup> 2. *Corinthians* 12:1-4 (*New International Version (NIV)*)

<sup>5</sup> Meyendorff, J. (1998. 1959), *A Study of Gregory Palamas*.

<sup>6</sup> Palamas, *Triads*, 2. 3. 24

<sup>7</sup> idem

<sup>8</sup> Zaleski, C., (1988), *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*, pp. 49ff.

<sup>9</sup> Radcliffe G. E. (2014), "A Lively Afterlife and Beyond: The Soul in Plato, Homer, and the Orphica"

<sup>10</sup> Idem, p. 35

<sup>11</sup> Palamas, *Triads*, 2, 3, 26



bounds of 'nature', as understood in a materialistic sense, is 'religious'. In the same vein, however, the 'divine' is conceptualised as present ubiquitously. This doctrine – and spiritual perception – is expressed in the opening prayer of Vespers in the Orthodox Church:

“O Heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of truth, present in all places and filling all things; treasury of good things and giver of life, come and dwell in us and purify us from every stain, and of your goodness save our souls.”<sup>12</sup>

A second extraordinary (sensoriform) perception of a distinctly transcendent or spiritual quality reported in the New Testament is that called the 'Transfiguration of Christ', reported by St. Mark (with parallels in St. Matthew and St. Luke):

“After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus”.<sup>13</sup>

This event comprised two extraordinary phenomena and 'aesthetic' perceptions: that of the apparition of Moses and Elijah in the time when Jesus was 'transfigured' in a luminosity, that was hard to bear by those who experienced this vision, as the report continues to tell. The luminosity, perceived as being distinctly spiritual or divine and the apparition of the two major figures of prophetic authority of Judaism, occurred and subsided together. (Theologically, they have distinct significance, and their co-occurrence is important too.) Dryly put, it may be safe to paraphrase, that this specific 'intrusion for the otherworld' and the experience of overwhelming 'luminosity' – as aesthetic phenomenon, indicate that two 'dimensions' of the 'transcendent' have manifested themselves together - as experienced alike to the three witnesses – in a lateral view the post-mortal realm of souls, and the 'divine' experienced as 'divine' by its intense and 'energetic' luminosity.<sup>14</sup> This co-occurrence of the 'otherworldly' and the 'divine transcendent' calls facile views of heaven (and hell) as being an essentially post-mortal realm, into question. The issue to be considered here, is not primarily that of the theological meaning of this cooccurrence, which is given by Jesus being perceived as being heir to both Moses and Elijah,<sup>15</sup> as the semiotics and symbolism of this account indicate, that relate the significance to the 'return' of these two prophets.<sup>16</sup>

A typological connection of exists between this event, to the 'divine light' that shone from the countenance of Moses – as the tradition of spiritual re-lecture affirmed over centuries, up to its written form in the book *Exodus* 34:29f.<sup>17</sup> - that implies that such spiritual luminosity is regarded as a rare, but common phenomenon of sensoriform manifestation of an overwhelming 'divine' quality. This 'light' was recognised in mysteries' perspective as having both an external and an internal aspect: Thus, Ps. Dionysius Areopagita writes:

“Jesus who is transcendent mind, utterly divine mind, who is the source ... underlying ... all sanctification, all the workings [energies] of God (...) assimilates them, as much as they are able, to his own light. (...) Formed of

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<sup>12</sup> Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (ed.) (2023), *Liturgical Texts of the Orthodox Church. Vespers for the Preservation of Creation.*

<sup>13</sup> *St. Mark* 9:3-4

<sup>14</sup> Berger, K. (1994), *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums: Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, pp. 267ff.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> Kleinhempel, U. (2022), “Reincarnation: revisiting the transmigration of souls as systematic and pastoral issue”, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Berger, K. (1994), *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums: Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, p. 640



light, initiates in God's work, we shall be perfected and bring about perfection".<sup>18</sup>

The Platonic matrix of this thought is obvious, as presented by Plato in his 'Parable of the Cave', in *Politeia (Republic)*.<sup>19</sup> Here 'light' is a metaphor of the Divine understanding and objective truth, as manifested in the 'ideas' and perceptible to those who awakened their innate 'light' by anamnesis or illumination. (The figure recurs in *St. John* 1:9: "That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." (*King James Version*). In Neoplatonic theology, 'light', and its energetic manifestation as 'fire', are central to the concept of intellectual understanding, and aisthesis of a divinely permeated world.<sup>20</sup>

Palamas states – on the basis of his hermeneutics of the 'paranormal' spiritual perceptions and phenomena in Hesychasm – that the perception of such non-ordinary spiritual light is made by participation in the divine: He defines it as state of being 'Christlike'<sup>21</sup> – i. e. participating in his divine-human union – and thus becoming capable of sensoriform perception of divine luminosity.<sup>22</sup> A unique form of reality emerges here: of phenomena perceived as objective, and 'given', that are not of a hallucinatory, dreamlike or psychic character – that traditions of mysticism know well to distinguish, phenomenologically and experientially – and that yet depend on 'initiation' or preparation, to manifest themselves. It may be conceptualised as 'intermediate' or 'relational' phenomenal reality. As Palamas affirms, such phenomena and perceptions are recognised by features shared by many who perceive them. He also maintains, that while they comprise body, soul and intellectual consciousness, they are yet not of the ordinary mode of their perception.<sup>23</sup>

### **Naturalistic approaches in Aesthetics of Religion and their limitation**

Theoretical drafts of Aesthetics of Religion, and of Embodiment Theory, refer to the 'body' as source of religious aisthesis. This raises considerable difficulties, since the 'body' only exists in the form of 'cultured' entities, as theories of semiotics and structuralism show. This is not taken into consideration deep enough in some cases. One comes across the idea that Aesthetics of Religion should relate to a 'neutral body' in distinction from its formation by culture, as a 'biological entity'. This neglects the complex systemic nature of the human person, that make the idea of bypassing 'culture' – and with it, of religion - questionable. The following may indicate the limitations:

Anne Koch claims that 'aesthetic principles' of the 'body' correlate to sensory experiences rooted in biological constitution.<sup>24</sup> She ascribes specific 'aesthetic situations'<sup>25</sup> to them, which she believes to be quite 'universal'. However, she does not identify what biological 'aesthetic principles' of the 'body', nor what 'aesthetic situations' might be - neither conceptually nor phenomenologically. Nevertheless, she applies these ideas to a comparison of two embodied spiritual practices: The Roman Catholic Prayer of the Rosary, and the Yogic Prāṇāyāma. (Both are of interest for Orthodox Hesychasm too, as it shares the form of incessantly repeated prayer with the Rosary, and the method of deliberate breathing, including breathing stops, with Prāṇāyāma.

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<sup>18</sup> Ps. Dionysius Areopagita, *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, I, 1 (PG, III, 372A-B)

<sup>19</sup> Plato, *Republic* VII.

<sup>20</sup> Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, III, 14

<sup>21</sup> Ps. Dionysius Areopagita, *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, VII, 2 (PG, III, 553 CD)

<sup>22</sup> Palamas, *Triads*, II, 3, 25

<sup>23</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>24</sup> Koch, A., "Epistemology", p. 36

<sup>25</sup> *Idem*, p. 51



As feature of comparison, she takes the breath stops in Prāṇāyāma, and the breaks for inhalation during the recitation of the Rosary, in group settings. (Orthodox Hesychasm's breathing practice resembles that of Yoga.) She assumes that they produce comparable psychological effects.<sup>26</sup> As method in her observations with a group of students, she decides that the 'specific meanings' of both should be excluded in the observation. The students should contribute their own sensations and impressions as basis, to identify the 'real', 'objective' 'psychological' effects. Summing up impressions, she states that both create an "emotional effect of calming, often a strengthened self-confidence".<sup>27</sup> . As to the research process applied, the systematic rejection to take note of the intentions, and felt meanings, of those engaged in Rosary Prayer, or in Prāṇāyāma, is untenable. It takes unchecked projections by 'observers' for 'explanations.' The attitude of 'knowing better' than those observed, implied here, is questionable. (It would be comparable to suggesting that people participate in the Eucharist because they like the taste of the host.)

Taking the research example presented by A. Koch, a transfer of her proposed method to poetry would look about as follows: Here the 'aesthetic situation' would be the reading of a poem. The content of a poem would be methodically declared to be irrelevant. The 'aesthetic situation of the body' would be the experience of reading or listening. The phenomenon of poetry, e. g. of a sonnet, could be explained by the rhythm of its recitation. 'Calming' or 'enhancing' effects, would thus be presented as explanation for the phenomenon of 'poetry'.

As to the Rosary, a recent report can illustrate the point, that the intention (of prayer), the perception (of feeling connected to the saint or to God), the 'abandonment of self-concerns and self-centredness (not to pray for one's own comfort), and the experience of effects (transpersonally), are essential features, that cannot be neglected by naturalistic reduction. Portugal's famous and accomplished singer of Fado, Mariza dos Reis Nunes (born 1973), told the following personal experience: Her son was born prematurely, at six months, with a grave defect of the lungs. His condition was critical, with very poor prospects of survival for more than a few days. She went to the sanctuary of Fatima, which up to that point she had considered to be a 'commercial operation'. She prayed her heart out:

"In this event that happened because of my son, in the Sanctuary of Fátima, I sensed that I was talking with a mother, and as a mother to a mother. I said: 'You as a mother will understand what is about to happen to me.'"<sup>28</sup> [my transl.]

Mariza reported that her son did survive, with marked change to improvement, following her pilgrimage, to full health, after a year. About the inner effect of her prayer at Fátima she tells:

"By all this, I discovered that I did not know how to love. I took everything for granted. I did not know to love. [...] I believe that, never before in life I have loved a person so much, as I loved my son. And our Lady of Fátima attended to me. Fátima taught me to love.'Mariza concluded."<sup>29</sup> [my transl.]

In this report, her own experience and the observed effects of healing for her son, cannot seriously be side-lined for an explanation of prayer. Her inner experiences during her prayer to the Mother-of-God, and its transformative effects on her as a person, are essential here. The prayer of the Rosary cannot be understood, by its peripheral psycho-somatic effects, as may be experienced by observers – especially those who do not share in the inner meaning, intentions and experiences of those who do pray the Rosary.

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<sup>26</sup> Idem, p. 48ff.

<sup>27</sup> ibidem

<sup>28</sup> Martins, R. J., (2016) "'Fátima ensinou-me a amar', declara fadista Mariza"

<sup>29</sup> idem



What Koch misses, systematically, is that this prayer is about learning, and exercising, not to mind about oneself, and one's self-esteem, even if the prayer should be one for such. The basis is the readiness and ability for 'transcendence', to forsake self-reliance, and self-referentiality. Apparently, those praying the Rosary were not even asked if they felt the effect attributed to them.

Concerning the other practice in Koch's setting: Prāṇāyāma: A widely-read manual of Prāṇāyāma shows that breath stops are relevant to the understanding of Yoga – and very different from those in the Rosary. B.K.S. Iyengar, a foremost teacher of Yoga, writes:

"In Prāṇāyāma, the prāṇa-vāyu [breath of subtle energy] is activated by the inward breath and the āpana-vāyu [the downward movement of prāṇa] by an outward breath. Udāna [the upward movement of subtle breath] raises the energy from the lower spine to the brain. Vyāna [the pervasive aspect of prāṇa] is essential for the function of prāṇa and āpana [the downward aspect of prāṇa] it is the medium for transferring energy from the one to the other."<sup>30</sup>

Omitting the elements of the subtle anthropology enlisted here, their phenomenological and perceptual correlates, as well as their cosmological connotations, Koch states as effect:

"It is common knowledge - and an easily accessible bodily experience - that slow breathing and deep exhaling has a calming effect."<sup>31</sup> She continues to discuss the effects of different patterns of breathing on the autonomous nervous system. However, the breath stops in Yoga, as in Hesychasm, are no 'slow breathing', but require effort and interrupt the flow of breath. The procedure observable here, is to generalise the descriptions of different phenomena to such an extent that salient features of each are emended, in the first step, then to make comparisons on this basis of 'generalisations' in the next, and to draw conclusions from essentially unrelated, and different cases, and to attribute them to the original phenomena discussed. It is a methodical error of attribution.

Her conclusions leave the issue unaddressed, why such conceptual differentiation, as in B. K. S. Iyengar's text, should be necessary, and have been sustained in Prāṇāyāma. In short: the vague 'generic effects' claimed as 'causes', do not account for the specifics of each practice, nor for their differences. Neither do they explain the why these forms of alleged 'slow breathing' should be performed in such complex ways, with different meanings attributed. The manifold theoretical problems indicated in this brief discussion, may to show that the issues of 'embodiment', and of spiritual 'aisthesis', require to take the theoretical features of systems theory, of semiotics, of philosophy of aesthetics, and of hermeneutics, into consideration.

An approach that excludes foundational theory as '-emic', in the sense of 'unscientific', is questionable. If in the realm of aesthetic theory of the arts, the '-emic' element of the specific aesthetics and content, is the very basis for any '-etic' judgement of critical analysis by the historian of art, or critic, then its exclusion in the realm of religion appears as unfounded. It would be an Aesthetic without aisthesis. In analysis of works of art, as of religious experience, it is indispensable to relate the '-emic' and the '-etic'.

### **A critique of the notion of a 'neutral body' ('uncultured body') as basis for the understanding of religious aisthesis**

Koch modified her approach to embodied religious practices, perceptions and experiences - fortunately. In view of this complexity of factors, she acknowledges the limitations of naturalistic reduction:

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<sup>30</sup> Iyengar, B. K.S. (1981), *Light on Prāṇāyāma: Prāṇāyāma Dipika*, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Koch, A. (2019), "Epistemology," p.48



“Many of the described phenomena are based on a complex interplay of various factors that are not yet fully understood.”<sup>32</sup>

“The aesthetic approach we are suggesting asks, ‘How in the context of religious practice are the senses stimulated, governed, and disciplined? How are religious experiences emotions and attitudes created, memorised and normalised? How do religious perceptual orders interact with those of a larger culture?’”<sup>33</sup>

In this passage, she indicates awareness of the relationship between bodily practices and experiences. Thus, the notion of a ‘cultured body’ comes into view. This comprises religious culture, and meaning. One of the weaknesses of the approach of Aesthetics of Religion, as presented above, is its apparent disregard for the historical dimension of symbolic embodiment. This aspect has been highlighted by John Ayotunde Isola Bewaji, in a chapter dedicated to arts, memory and identity:

“It can be safely insisted that art is the means through which humans express, codify, transmit, preserve and instruct subsequent generations in the ideas, cultural items and modes of existence of humans as cultural beings, deliberately itemizing the rarefied and often ineffable elements of existence. For this reason, civilisations take steps to preserve the arts of/about their existence, memorializing the experiences through words, sculptures, paintings, architecture, music, etc.”<sup>34</sup>

This passage brings the historical aspect of works of art into awareness. Religious rituals and significant practices, like meditation, may be added to them. This applies to their creation, meaning, and their role. Considering that for the understanding of any work of art – applicable to religion too – knowledge about their meanings, taught by culture and communities are indispensable. If this is ignored, a work of art, or a religious ritual, become an object onto which imaginations are projected at random. It would amount to their ‘commodification’ as merely decorative objects, with no concern for their meaning.

A merely ‘sensory’ approach to objects and enactments of religion and art, based on eclipsing their meaning, ‘de-historises’ them. The individual and collective experiences encoded in them, are not understood, nor their role for initiating into them. Moreover, the spheres of ‘art’ and of ‘religion’ are often not separable. J. A. I. Bewaji writes about African arts, that they:

“encompass the visual and the non-visual, the tangible and the non-tangible elements of artistic representation and presentation such that virtually every aspect of living constitutes a veritable domain for the preservation and application of art.”

This reminds about the mode of understanding and of creation, as representations of meaning and experience, of ‘aisthesis’. It can be applied to Hesychasm too, to its ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’ aspects, permeating each other, encoded in the images, symbols, practices and phenomena, across generations, initiated, communicated, and preserved in tradition. Aesthetics of religion need to take account of this.

### **Aesthetics of Religion and ‘embodiment’: including the cultural and the transcendent in studies of practice and aisthesis**

In the field of Aesthetics, a shift from naturalistic reductionism – to the ‘body’, the ‘biochemistry of the brain’ or the like, towards an acceptance of a category of the ‘transcendent’ is

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<sup>32</sup> Idem, p. 50

<sup>33</sup> Grieser, A. and Johnston, J. (2017), “What is an Aesthetics of Religion? From the Senses to Meaning—and Back Again,” p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Bewaji, J. A. I., (2013), *Black Aesthetics, Beauty and Culture. An Introduction to African and African Diaspora Philosophy of Arts*, p. 311





observable. (Experiences and aisthesis in this dimension interact with the psychological, physiological and mental perceptions and states of a subject, as is recognised.) This also conditions 'epistemological processes – and aisthesis, as may be added. Thus, Koch writes:

“...aesthetics, in the context of the study of religion, should [...] refer[s] back to the epistemological process itself, and to the subjects involved ... It is in this sense that an aesthetics of religion conceptualises its field of investigation through the lens of embodied cognition, that it offers to provide an epistemology that goes along with the core idea of transcendental philosophy ...”<sup>35</sup>

This has consequences for the role and task of an external observer – sharing or not in the religious conviction of the objects of study. A hermeneutic 'merger of horizons' is necessary, within which the 'faculty of imagination' ('Einbildungskraft') can work, intellectually, imaginatively, emotionally and even in bodily ways of perception. It is an indispensable complement to the discursive analysis. This is a 'living process', involving body and soul.

In this approach, the analytical observation is complemented by other modes. Inken Prohl takes the aspect of 'body' as related to 'non-discursive' perception – or 'apophatic' in terms of Orthodox gnoseology – into view:

“Aesthetics of Religion investigates how an assumed Transcendent, which is elusive, is depicted in religions by verbal and non-verbal means of representation. It investigates how religions actively include the body and its organs of sense, involve them in the process, and instigate processes of transformation.” [my transl.]<sup>36</sup>

This involves a readiness to take religious practices and beliefs seriously, because of the meanings of the practices in faith. The descriptive approach thus requires a degree of readiness, to 'understand' the experiences of the practitioners.

This concept can be applied to the study of various religious practices. For the study of Orthodox Hesychasm, this means to refrain from either a merely doctrinal (theological) study, that regards the bodily practices, and the sensory, and sensoriform, aisthesis of practitioners as irrelevant, on the one hand, or from a naturalistic reduction – as in the study of Koch referred to above, that excludes the dimension of meaning and aisthesis.

The study process is thus not unidirectional: solely as of religions “binding” the body and senses to them, and “activating” them, but retro-active, in that these processes provide access to sensoriform perceptions, which are identified trans-religiously and cross-culturally as being of a spiritual and divine nature. This mutually effective relation verifies and stabilizes the meditative prescriptions, for the specific embodied practice as of Hesychasm or Yoga, even re-calibrating them, and renders them mutually intelligible. This definition also maintains a careful neutral stance on the reality of the “assumed transcendent”, defining it as “elusive”. The focus is on thus on how the assumed transcendent is represented and rendered perceptible to the senses and the body, envisioned as means of divination, in perception, experience and representation.

Inken Prohl also mentions the aspect of “processes of transformation”, expressing the recognition, that the body – in Hesychasm as in Yoga - cannot be isolated from its religious context. It makes the idea of a neutral core, which could be isolated from them, appear as outright illusory – a judgement supported by research in psychology of religion.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Koch, A. (2017), “The Governance of Aesthetic Subjects through Body Knowledge and Affect Economies. A Cognitive-Aesthetic Approach”, p.389

<sup>36</sup> Prohl, I. (2018), *Neue Ansätze der Religionsästhetik*

<sup>37</sup> Wulff, D. M., (1991), *Psychology of Religion – Classic and Contemporary Views*, pp. 171ff.



## Application to Hesychasm, the Christian Orthodox embodied mysticism

An integrated approach of Aesthetics of Religion resonates with aims and procedures of Hesychasm - which may be referred to here as the most eminent Christian meditation, with its discernible Yogic features. Hesychasm includes the body and its senses, beginning with the ascetic refraining from consumption, from desires and appetites – that are nevertheless acknowledged - up to the withdrawal from sensory stimulation. They require self-observation of inner emotional impulses (which are regarded as connected to the body), and of inner transformation in the process. This involves the sense of self and leads to heightened sensitivity, both inwardly in self-awareness and proprio-sensitive regard, and outwardly, up to the awakening of ‘spiritual senses’.

This process manifests itself in the aesthetic perceptions of ‘divine light’, both externally – as described for Christ on Mt. Tabor, or for saints, or inwardly, as inner perceptions of luminous sensoriform character. This sequence is recognized in Hesychasm as by no means random, but as a resulting from a sequence of steps which require diligent practice, leading through challenges and crises, and finally to the rare luminous experiences, desired as outcome of this arduous transformation. The paranormal event of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ on Mt. Tabor is thus not viewed as an (erratic) singular event, interpreted, in many cases as the imaginative illustration of a theological statement of the truth (‘light’) of Jesus Christ in a visionary representation (boarding on the dreamlike or hallucinatory), if not conjured up altogether by the evangelist. It is understood, in a hermeneutical approach to divine epiphanies, that includes the body, as an eminent event that resembles inner and outer luminous perceptions, attained through hesychast practice. Following a theory of Aisthesis of Religion, that accommodates the ‘transcendent’ this requires to augment the study of Hesychast practice and beliefs – with that of its somatic, cultural, sociological, and psychological features. This includes to study the theoretical expositions of Hesychasm in its theology and philosophy, and its spiritual literature.

Hesychast literature is about describing, motivating, and explaining these – as coherent and meaningful - in a religious and philosophical discourse remained rather constant over centuries. Interaction with the ‘larger culture’ is also reflected in Hesychast literature, covering the specific spiritual perceptions, their attainment, and the role of those who attain them. Palamas writes about the social and cultural role of the Hesychast monk, whose responsibility of the wider society, and whose role in it is acutely perceived. He depicts Hesychast monasticism as a demanding profession, which fulfils a purpose for the whole society. The arduous training in self-perception and self-understanding, with the attainment of deep understanding of the role and influence of the passions, enables the proficient monk to fulfil a role as counsellor in society, comparable to that of a psychoanalyst of today. This public role has existed in Orthodox cultures, since Antiquity, fulfilled by hermits in ancient Egypt, recognised as ‘elders’, male and female, up to Modernity, with St. Seraphim of Sarov<sup>38</sup> as a prominent example. (The inter-relation between psychological and spiritual factors in spiritual counselling has received renewed interest in the Psychoanalytic community, as publications<sup>39</sup> and conference programmes<sup>40</sup> show.)

An important factor here is the Hesychastic tradition, its knowledge of practice, of processes of transformation, including the psychological crises encountered in the process, its documentation of special experiences, in its hagiography, and its theological – and

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<sup>38</sup> Rose, S. (transl., ed.), (1978), *Saint Seraphim of Sarov – Spiritual Instructions*

<sup>39</sup> Tympas, G. C., (2014), *Carl Jung and Maximus the Confessor on Psychic Development. The dynamics between the ‘psychological’ and the ‘spiritual’*,

<sup>40</sup> International Association for Analytical Psychology (IAAP), (2019), *XXI International Congress for Analytical Psychology. August 25 - 30, 2019. Vienna, Austria: Encountering the Other: Within us, between us and in the world.*



philosophical conceptualisation. These all contribute to the formation of a Hesychast, as basis or such experiences, as of divine luminosity. It supports the core assertion of Palamas that Hesychast practice – with formation of body, soul, and mind - is indeed indispensable. It is the basis for the attainment of the psycho-physical, emotional, and perceptual transformation, which can lead to the perceptions of spiritual light, reported in this tradition, with the concession that these have also and rarely occurred through other pathways of spiritual preparation. Palamas frames this as requirement of 'initiation'.<sup>41</sup> The factors, of culture, belief system, biography interact with intrinsic psychological and physiological factors, thus conditioning the 'body' with its perceptual abilities or spiritual aisthesis.

### **Transcendental philosophy and Idealism as pathways to religious aisthesis, and Aesthetics of Religion**

Authors on Aesthetics of Religion regularly refer to 18<sup>th</sup> century Theory of Aesthetics as source. An essential element of this theory of Aesthetics is to include the content – of poetry, of drama, of theatre, of music, or fine arts – in the interpretation. It is also required to take the specific aesthetics, with their styles, symbolisms, values, perceptions, and intended effects, into consideration. Thirdly, the specific forms of art, with the peculiar features and 'powers of expression' of each genre, are included necessarily in interpretation. (It is usually assumed that the viewer or listener is familiar with the messages that these genres, styles and symbols convey. Rarely is an 'uncultured spectator' assumed.) It could be expected that Aesthetics of Religion takes its cues from here if the reference to this theory of 'Aesthetics' is to have culturally substantial meaning.

Theories of aesthetics and of 'aisthesis' were developed from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century on, with roots in Antiquity, notably of Neoplatonism, since it emphasises the 'apophatic' and symbolic modes of perception of the 'transcendent'. They have received renewed attention in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the appreciation of non-discursive cognition. Since then, aesthetic perception has been understood as a significant and symbolic mode of understanding.<sup>42</sup> According to the concept of 'imagination' ('Einbildungskraft'), as developed in late Idealism and Romanticism, which became influential in theories of art, and of psychoanalysis, any aesthetic perception contains elements of unconscious or preconscious projection as well as of eidetic perception – in body and soul. This necessarily combines elements from the inner realm of the embodied subject with those of an embodied perception of the outer world in 'productive aesthetic perception'.<sup>43</sup>

To regard the perceptions of spiritual light in Hesychasm as product of 'imagination' (in this sense) takes account of both aspects, of perception as well as of projection. This suits the conviction of Hesychasm that the perception of spiritual light has both external and internal aspects. The assertions of Hesychast doctrine that these perceptions are beyond rational definition, and that they require suitable embodied preparation to appear to the senses, support the application of this notion of aesthetic experience, according to which aspects of projection and of perception are united in the perceived phenomenon. This resonates with the notion of a pre-reflective embodied perception.

Ever since Immanuel Kant's critiques of perception and judgement, the limitations to recourse to the 'senses' has been brought to awareness in aesthetics. In view of strivings of contemporary theoreticians of aesthetics, like Alexander Baumgarten, to take recourse to the outer and inner 'senses' in his Aesthetics, he pointed to the semiotic aspects in the organisation

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<sup>41</sup> Palamas, *Triads*, 2, 2, 14

<sup>42</sup> Otabe, T. (2005), "Das Exoterische und das Esoterische: Zur Rechtfertigung des Ästhetischen gegenüber dem Wissenschaftlichen in der modernen Ästhetik", p. 67f.

<sup>43</sup> Loock, R. (2007), *Schwebende Einbildungskraft – Konzeptionen theoretischer Freiheit in der Philosophie Kants, Fichtes und Schellings*, pp. 446ff.



and interpretation of 'sensory' experience. Like his contemporaries, and the successors who adopted his renewed concept of a 'theory of aesthetics', he was aware of the role of feelings and emotions in 'aesthetic' experiences, as whose 'organs' he defined the outer and inner 'senses' – in opposition to the conceptual and logic powers of intellect in 'rational' understanding. Thus, he paved the way for I. Kant's critique, that re-emphasised the role of intellect in the organisation and interpretation of 'sense impressions'.

With his affirmation of 'aisthesis' as a non-conceptual, intuitive, and 'holistic' mode of reception and understanding, that includes 'feeling', he and his successors like Gottfried Herder, laid the ground for the post-Kantian aesthetics of Idealism and Romanticism. They were acutely aware of the limitations of 'rational', conceptual perception. They defended the conception of 'aisthesis', as distinct modes of perception and understanding, that include the 'body' and the 'soul', with their 'feeling', as complementary but not inferior modes. In this tradition, mystical experience received renewed attention. Baumgarten's assertions, that aesthetic experience complements the rational, and includes the emotional, inspired subsequent developments in the field.<sup>44</sup> The aspects of receptivity and of unconscious creativity in the sensitive and emotional process are emphasised by Friedrich Schleiermacher in his interpretation of religion as result of an 'intuitive perception' (*Anschauung*) and 'feeling' (*Gefühl*) of the 'Universe' which leads to symbolic representations, in this process.<sup>45</sup>

### **The role of 'soul' for religious aisthesis - connecting the body and consciousness**

Hesychasm, as expounded by Palamas, can also be read as an aesthetics of religion whose epistemic concepts are genetically related to those of aesthetic theory of the early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in a continuum of European philosophical discourse. Romanticism's aesthetics paved the way for a realization of the manifold ways in which the 'body' – including the realm of emotions, desires, as bodily aspects of psyche - expressed itself symbolically in images. This was applied by Sigmund Freud to the interpretation of dreams, as in his *Traumdeutung*,<sup>46</sup> as well as of symptoms. He recalled the theories on dreams and the sources of their images in Antiquity. So instead of demanding "to be able to go beyond a symbolic understanding of aesthetic forms ... without transposing text hermeneutics and semiotics onto the realm of the sensual"<sup>47</sup> it might be necessary to arrive there through a differentiated understanding of the ways of these processes of 'semeiosis' or symbolization. Consequently, the indelibly semiotic nature of the expression of the body in its widest sense must be acknowledged. The inter-relation between pre-conceptual perception by the body and the culturally conditioned and mediated forms of symbolic expression are of concern. This is at the centre of aesthetics of religion as developed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with its subsequent developments, in psychology and theory of art since.

Palamas' philosophy of Hesychast aisthesis is based on common Neoplatonic ground with the philosophical theory of aesthetics in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The ternary anthropology and cosmology both assign a special role to the 'soul' and to its aesthetic faculties. The descriptions of Hesychast phenomena and their interpretation are determined most strongly by the ternary anthropology of Neoplatonic tradition,<sup>48</sup> which became the system of reference for Patristic theology too, regardless of some divergences. Palamas is firmly rooted in this ternary anthropology and cosmology of Neoplatonic thought, as received by the Orthodox Church Fathers from the first centuries of the Christian era on.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Guyer, P. (2020), "18th Century German Aesthetics"

<sup>45</sup> Lanwerd, S. (2002), *Religionsästhetik – Studien zum Verhältnis von Symbol und Sinnlichkeit*, p. 104

<sup>46</sup> Freud, S. (1922), *Die Traumdeutung*, p. 15.

<sup>47</sup> Grieser, A. and Johnston, J. (2017), "What is an Aesthetics of Religion? From Senses to Meaning – and Back Again", p. 2

<sup>48</sup> Perkams, M. (2008), *Selbstbewusstsein in der Spätantike. Die neuplatonischen Kommentare zu Aristoteles' De Anima*, pp. 51ff.

<sup>49</sup> Corrigan, K. (2009), *Evagrius and Gregory: mind, soul and body in the 4th century*, p. 37f.



The eminent role of 'soul', of its special mode of aisthesis by 'feeling' (Gefühl), by symbolic perception, and non-discursive perception, its appraisal of 'non-ordinary' and 'transcendent' phenomena and experiences, its esteem for intuition etc. is based on the special role of 'soul', with its relations to the 'living body' and 'mind', nature, and to the 'transcendent', divine, as it presents itself in experience. In this way his treatises on Hesychasm can also be read as a spiritual aesthetics. This is relevant to this investigations, since it may be shown, that Hesychast and Neoplatonic theories of spiritual aisthesis, are not simply a random application of a 'system of meaning' to a self-contained 'natural' phenomenon – although such spontaneous occurrences are acknowledged – but that they are connected to them by formulating and motivating a transformative, embodied, initiatory culture of meditation, that sustains and facilitates the spiritual luminous phenomena at the core of their aisthesis. Theory, practice, and experience are thus intrinsically connected.

This also applies to the communication about these phenomena and practices. Hereby the aesthetic phenomena facilitate trans-religious and transcultural communication. Whereas the compatibility of spiritual philosophies between Hesychasm, Neoplatonism, and Yoga, facilitates the reception of meditation practices along this line, as is to be shown and substantiated in detail in the following chapters.

The theory of 'soul', its relation to God, of its connection to the 'body', and its role in spiritual aisthesis, will receive special attention here, as essential to the genesis and theory of Hesychasm, in complement to the historical analyses. In a theological perspective, the special role of mediating and intermediate 'entities' in this system of anthropology and cosmology, relates to the role of the Holy Spirit, as to 'soul' and its 'embodiment' as well as 'ascent', whereas the concept of the 'uncreated energies' has a special epistemological and aesthetic significance - the two concepts being complementary. The resonances to cultural conceptions about the role of the 'mediating entities' of 'spirit' and 'soul' to the transcendent, established in cultural discourse,<sup>50</sup> and to psychoanalytic theory, with its reappraisal of the role of 'soul' in relation to 'body' and 'mind', are noted. References by Neo-Palamitic authors to psychoanalytical ideas confirm this view.

### **Non-discursive meanings in theory of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: apophaticism and the role of icons and images**

Aesthetics of art covers the meaning of images and of dramatic experience. This is addressed by Susanne K. Langer in her theory of art as a 'symbolic form'. Taking her cue from S. Freud's theory of dreams as condensed and polyvalent images brought forth by the mechanisms of 'dream work' (Traumarbeit), described in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*<sup>51</sup>, Langer goes on to define non-discursive forms of art in distinction therefrom:

"The Freudian conception of art is a theory of 'significant motif.' Non-discursive form in art has a different office, namely, to articulate knowledge that cannot be rendered discursively because it concerns experiences that are not formally amenable to the discursive projection. Such experiences are the rhythms of life, organic, emotional and mental (the rhythm of attention is an interesting link among them all), which are not simply periodic, but endlessly complex, and sensitive to every sort of influence. All together they compose the dynamic pattern of feeling. It is this pattern that only non-discursive symbolic forms can present, and that is the point and purpose of artistic construction."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ellenberger, H. F., (1994), *The Discovery of the Unconscious. The History and Development of Dynamic Psychiatry*, p. 202

<sup>51</sup> Freud, S. (1913), *The Interpretation of Dreams*

<sup>52</sup> Langer, S. K. (1953), *Feeling and Form – A Theory of Art*, New York, p. 240f.



The key phrase of ‘non-discursive symbolic forms’ has become influential and is important for our investigation of Hesychasm, since its chief theoretician, Gregory Palamas, confirmed the common conviction of the Hesychast community, that the essential perception of spiritual light was apophatic, that is non-discursive in nature, yet not imaginary but of a unique eidetic and experiential empirical quality. Hesychasm, does not consist solely of a set of doctrines and propositions, but (extensively) of images, presented in ‘icons’, such as of Jesus’ Transfiguration’, and of corresponding perceptions and experiences. This means that those who do not have such perceptions themselves, will have to rely on their faculty of ‘imagination’. The same goes for communication between people about such perceptions, within a religious community, and between followers of different religions. It applies to the understanding of the icons that re-present the archetypal Transfiguration of Jesus. It applies to the communication about comparable perceptions from different contexts. In all these cases the power of ‘imagination’ (‘Einbildungskraft’) goes beyond the mere capacity to eidetic representations to fathom the spiritual and transcendent reality conveyed by the icon: It is also ‘inner aisthesis’.

### **Conclusion: Hermeneutical and Theological consequences**

This goes to show that anthropology is not external to theology, nor is cosmology, and their relation. The body and the soul are organs of the perception of the divine on par with the mind – according to this ‘Aisthesis of Religion’, that emerges in the field of Science of Religion, with some authors, but also theologically as indicated with reference to Hesychasm, and philosophically, as references to the aesthetics of Idealism, that includes the Transcendent, as shown. This has consequences for hermeneutics. St. Gregory Palamas unfolds them in his interpretation of divine light as phenomenon, metaphor and organ of perception.

Alluding to *Psalm 36:10 (35:10 VXX)*: “*In thy light shall we see light.*” He connects several luminous phenomena, epiphanies and perceptions depicted in the Bible – connecting different modes of aisthesis:

“God ... is himself light to the eternal beings’ [Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. II in Hexaem.* 8 (PG XXIX,52B). ...This light is also a divine fire, and immaterial, whose nature is to illuminate the souls. This light acted – to speak with the great Basil – in the apostles, when they spoke in tongues of fire. When it illuminated Paul, it obscured his faculty of vision, but made the vision of the eyes of his soul brilliant; physical vision does not support the power of this light. It is this fire that appeared to Moses in the bush; it assumed the form of a chariot to uplift Elijah from the earth (...) angels and spirits prepared to serve God also participate in this fire. (...) it cleanses the eyes and restores the purity of the human mind, to regain its natural power of perception”<sup>53</sup>

In this passage Palamas combines the divine light, with its attributes of truth, clarity of perception, and divine illumination, with the energetic and transformative attributes of ‘fire’, with regard to intellectual understanding, perception, sensoriform aisthesis, and transformation, in body, soul, and mind, inwardly and in outer phenomena. This equation also implies an anthropology that comprises body, soul, and mind, as interrelated, - and in common relation to the epiphanies of God. This implies a corresponding anthropology. Palamas also affirms hereby, that religious aisthesis, sensoriform, as in iconic images, experiential, as in transformations of the body, the soul, and mind, are part of the perception of the divine. This corresponds to the interest of Aisthesis of Religion. It also has theological consequences, for a more comprehensive understanding of divine truth, than what is conveyed by words, and expressed in propositional statement, to include the iconic, the experiential and the aesthetic, with their corresponding modes of perception. In it, ‘the assumed transcendent’ becomes manifest and remains elusive – and inspiring for Aesthetics of Religion.

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<sup>53</sup> Palamas, *Triads*, III, 1.40



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