

Orthodox Contemplation

Excerpts from Metropolitan Kallistos Ware's *The Orthodox Way*
with commentary questions on using images in prayer
by Brad Jersak

The following is an abridged excerpt from Metropolitan Kallistos Ware's classic work, *The Orthodox Way* (1979). Kallistos (Timothy) Ware is an English bishop within the Eastern Orthodox Church under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and one of the best-known contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologians.

His book includes an outstanding and accessible summary of Orthodox theology and practice, including a clear presentation on Orthodox contemplation. This excerpt is abridged from portions of chapter six.

Following the excerpt, Brad Jersak responds with some commentary / questions regarding the use of the imagination in Orthodox contemplation.

Excerpt from chapter 6 “God as Prayer”

It is customary to divide the spiritual Way into three stages. For St Dionysius the Areopagite these are *purification*, *illumination* and *union*—a scheme adopted in the West. St Gregory of Nyssa, taking as his model the life of Moses, speaks of *light*, *cloud* and *darkness*. But in this chapter (*The Orthodox Way*, ch. 6) we shall follow the somewhat different threefold scheme devised by Origen, rendered more precise by Evagrius, and fully developed by St Maximus the Confessor. The first stage here is *praktiki* or the practice of the virtues; the second stage is *physiki* or the contemplation of nature; the third and final stage, our journey's end, is *theologia* or “theology” in the strict sense of the word, that is, the contemplation of God himself.

The first stage, the practice of the virtues, begins with repentance. ... At the second stage, the contemplation of nature, the Christian sharpens his perception of the “isness” of created things, and so discovers the Creator present in everything. This leads him to the third stage, the direct vision of God, who is not only in everything but above and beyond everything. At this third stage, no longer does the Christian experience God solely through the intermediary of his conscience or of created things, but he meets the Creator face to face in an unmediated union of love. The full vision of the divine glory is reserved for the Age to come, yet even in this present life the saints enjoy the sure pledge and firstfruits of the coming harvest.

Praktiki **The Active Life**

The active life is marked above all by four qualities: repentance, watchfulness, discrimination, and the guarding of the heart.

1. *Repentance.* Repentance marks the starting-point of our journey. The Greek term *metanoia* signifies primarily a “change of mind.” Correctly understood, repentance is not negative but positive. It means not self-pity or remorse but conversion, the re-centering of our whole life upon the Trinity. It is to look not backward with regret but forward with hope—not downwards at our own shortcomings but upwards at God’s love. It is to see, not what we have failed to be, but what by divine grace we can now become; and it is to act upon what we see. To repent is to open our eyes to the light. Repentance is not just a single act, an initial step, but a continuing state, an attitude of heart and will that needs to be ceaselessly renewed up to the end of life.

2. *Watchfulness.* To repent is to wake up. Repentance, change of mind, leads to watchfulness. The Greek term used here, *nepsis*, means literally sobriety and wakefulness. It signifies attentiveness, vigilance, recollection. When the prodigal son repented, it is said, “he came to himself” (Luke 15:17). The “neptic” person is one who has come to himself, who does not daydream, drifting aimlessly under the influence of passing impulses, but possesses a sense of direction and purpose.

Watchfulness means to be *present where we are*—at this specific point in space, at this particular moment in time. The “neptic” person, then, is gathered into the here and the now. He is the one who seizes the *kairos*, the decisive moment of opportunity. God, so C.S. Lewis remarks in *The Screwtape Letters*, wants men to attend chiefly to two things: “to eternity itself, and to that point of time which they call the Present. For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity.” As Meister Eckhart teaches, “He who abides always in a present *now*, in him does God beget his Son without ceasing.”

3. *Discrimination.* Growing in watchfulness and self-knowledge, the traveller upon the Way begins to acquire the power of discrimination or discernment (Gk. *diakrisis*). This acts as a spiritual sense of taste. If developed through ascetic effort and prayer, it enables us to distinguish between the varying thoughts and impulses within ourselves. We learn the difference between the evil and the good, between the superfluous and the meaningful, between the fantasies inspired by the devil and the images marked upon our creative imagination by celestial archetypes.

4. *Guarding the heart.* Through discrimination, then, we begin to take more careful note of what is happening within us, and so we learn to guard our hearts, shutting the door against temptations and provocations of the enemy. “Guard your heart with all diligence” (Prov. 4:23). The heart is the spiritual center of our being, the human person as made in God’s image—the deepest and truest self, the inner shrine to be entered only through sacrifice and death. The heart is thus closely related to the spiritual intellect [*nous*] and in some contexts the two terms are almost interchangeable.

An essential aspect of guarding the heart is *warfare against the passions*. By “passion” here is meant not just sexual lust, but any disordered appetite or longing that violently takes possession of the soul: anger, jealousy, gluttony, avarice, lust for power, pride, and the rest. Many of the Fathers treat the passions as something intrinsically evil, as inward diseases alien to humanity’s true nature.

Some of them, however, adopt a more positive standpoint, regarding the passions as dynamic impulses originally placed in man by God, and so fundamentally good, although at present distorted by sin. On this second and more subtle view, our aim is not to eliminate the passions but to redirect their energy. Uncontrolled rage must be turned into righteous indignation, spiteful jealousy into zeal for the truth, sexual lust into an *eros* that is pure in its fervor. The passions, then, are to be purified, not eradicated; to be used positively, not negatively. To ourselves and to others we say, not “Supress,” but “Transfigure.”

Purification of the passions leads eventually, by God’s grace, to what Evagrius terms *apatheia* or “dispassion.” By this he means, not a negative condition of indifference or insensitivity in which we no longer *feel* temptation, but a positive state of reintegration and spiritual freedom in which we no longer *yield* to temptation. Perhaps *apatheia* can best be translated “purity of heart”. It signifies advancing from instability to stability, from duplicity to simplicity or singleness of heart, from the immaturity of fear and suspicion to the maturity of innocence and trust. The “dispassioned” person, far from being apathetic, is the one whose heart burns for God, for other humans, for every living creature, for all that God has made.

Physiki **Natural Contemplation**

The second stage upon the threefold Way is the contemplation of nature—more exactly, the contemplation of nature in God, or the contemplation of God in and through nature. The second stage is thus a prelude and means of entry to the third: by contemplating the things that God has made, the person of prayer is brought to the contemplation of God himself. This second stage of *physiki* or “natural contemplation” is not necessarily subsequent to *praktiki* but may be simultaneous with it.

No contemplation of any kind is possible without *nepsis* or watchfulness. I cannot contemplate either nature or God without learning to be present where I am, gathered together at this present moment, in this present place.

Stop, look and listen. The contemplation of nature commences when I open my eyes, literally and spiritually, and start to notice the world around myself—to notice the *real* world, that is to say *God’s* world. Becoming sensitive to God’s world around myself, I grow more conscious also of God’s world *within* myself. Beginning to see nature in God, I begin to see my own place as a human person within the natural order; I begin to understand what it is to be microcosm and mediator.

All things are permeated and maintained in being by the uncreated energies of God, and so all things are a theophany that mediates his presence. At the heart of each thing is its inner principle or *logos*, implanted within it by the Creator Logo; and so through the *logoi* we enter into communion with the Logos. It is to discover through our spiritual

intellect that the whole universe is a cosmic Burning Bush, filled with the divine Fire yet not consumed.

The contemplation of nature has two correlative aspects. First it means appreciating the “thusness” or “thisness” of particular things, persons and moments. “True mysticism,” says Oliver Clement, “is to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary.” Secondly, it means that we see all things, persons and moments as signs and sacraments of God. In our spiritual vision we are not only to see each thing in sharp relief, standing out in all the brilliance of its specific being, but we are also to see each thing as transparent: in and through each created thing we are to discern the Creator.

Natural contemplation signifies finding God not only in all *things* but equally in all *persons*. When reverencing the holy ikons in church or at home, we are to reflect that each man and woman is a living ikon of God. “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). In order to find God, we do not have to leave the world, to isolate ourselves from our fellow humans, and to plunge into some kind of mystical world. On the contrary, Christ is looking at us through the eyes of all those whom we meet.

Many people who find the imageless prayer of silence altogether beyond their present capacity, and for whom the familiar phrases written in Scripture or in the books of prayer have grown dull and dry, can renew their inward life through the practice of natural contemplation. Nature and Scripture complement each other. In the words of St Ephrem the Syrian: “Wherever you turn your eyes, there is God’s symbol; Whatever you read, you will find there his type. Look and see how Nature and Scripture are linked together. Praise for the Lord of Nature. Glory for the Lord of Scripture.”

Theologia **From Words to Silence**

The more a man comes to contemplate God in nature, the more he realizes that God is also above and beyond nature. So the second stage of the spiritual Way leads him, with God’s help, to the third stage, when God is no longer known solely through the medium of what he has made but in direct and unmediated union.

The transition from the second to the third level is effected by applying to the life of prayer the way of negation or *apophatic* approach. In Scripture, in the liturgical texts, and in nature, we are presented with innumerable words, images and symbols of God; and we are taught to give full value to these words, images and symbols, dwelling upon them in our prayer. But, since these things can never express the entire truth about the living God, we are encouraged also to balance this affirmative or cataphatic prayer by apophatic prayer. As Evagrius puts it, “Prayer is a laying-aside of thoughts.” This is not of course to be regarded as the complete definition of prayer, but it does indicate the kind of prayer that leads a man from the second to the third stage of the Way. Reaching out towards the eternal Truth that lies beyond all human words and thoughts, the seeker begins to wait

upon God in quietness and silence, no longer talking about or to God but simply listening. “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10).

This stillness or inward silence is known in Greek as *hesychia*, and he who seeks the prayer of stillness is termed a *hesychast*. *Hesychia* signifies concentration combined with inward tranquility. It is not merely to be understood in a negative sense as the absence of speech and outward activity, but it denotes in a positive way the openness of the human heart towards God’s love. Needless to say, for most people if not all, *hesychia* is not a permanent state. The hesychast, as well as entering into the prayer of stillness, uses other forms of prayer as well, sharing in corporate liturgical worship, reading Scripture, receiving the sacraments. Apophatic prayer coexists with cataphatic, and each strengthens the other. The way of negation and the way of affirmation are not alternatives; they are complementary.

But how are we to stop talking and to start listening? Of all the lessons in prayer, this is the hardest to learn. There is little profit in saying to ourselves, “Do not think,” for suspension of discursive thought is not something we can achieve merely through an exertion of will-power. The ever-restless mind demands from us some task, so as to satisfy its constant need to be active. If our spiritual strategy is simply negative—if we try to eliminate all conscious thinking without offering our mind any alternative activity—we are like to end up with vague day-dreaming. In the Orthodox hesychast tradition, the work that is usually assigned to it is the frequent repetition of some short “arrow prayer,” most commonly the Jesus Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*.

We are taught, when reciting the Jesus Prayer, to avoid so far as possible any specific image or picture. In the words of St Gregory of Nyssa, “The Bridegroom is present, but he is not seen.” The Jesus Prayer is not a form of imaginative meditation upon different incidents in the life of Christ. But while turning aside from such images, we are to concentrate our full attention upon, or rather within, the words. The Jesus Prayer is not just a hypnotic incantation, but a meaningful phrase, an invocation addressed to another Person. Its object is not relaxation but alertness, not waking slumber but living prayer. And so the Jesus Prayer is not to be said mechanically but with inward purpose; yet at the same time the words should be pronounced without tension, violence, or undue emphasis.

Normally three levels or degrees are distinguished in the saying of the Jesus Prayer. It starts with the “prayer of the lips,” oral prayer. Then it grows more inward, becoming “prayer of the intellect” [*nous*], mental prayer. Finally the intellect “descends” into the heart and is united with it, and so the prayer becomes the “prayer of the heart” or more exactly, “prayer of the intellect in the heart.” Its eventual aim is to establish in the one who prays a state of prayer that is unceasing, which continues uninterrupted even in the midst of other activities.

So the Jesus Prayer begins as an oral prayer like any other. But by virtue of the simplicity of the words, the hesychast advances beyond all language and images into the mystery of God. In this way the Jesus Prayer develops, with God’s help, into what Western writers

call “prayer of loving attention” or “prayer of simple gaze,” where the soul rests in God without a constantly varying succession of images, ideas and feelings. Beyond this there is a further stage, when the hesychast’s prayer ceases to be the result of his own efforts, and becomes “self-acting” or “infused.” It ceases to be “my” prayer and becomes the prayer of Christ *in me*.

***Commentary questions by Brad Jersak
re: Orthodox Contemplation and imagination***

Throughout my ten-year journey toward and now into Orthodoxy, a potential roadblock along the way seemed to be my practice and teaching in what we called ‘listening prayer.’ Specifically, I have written extensively and led seminars on the use of imaginative exercises like those prescribed by Bernard and Ignatius or practiced by mystics like Teresa of Avila. The essence of this work was to encourage contemplatives to enter into the Gospel stories with all five senses and engage Christ in that context. Readers and attendees were led to ‘behold’ the Lord in prayer, especially as the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23, to adore Christ on his Cross as described in the Gospels, and to worship Christ on his throne after the pattern of Rev. 4-5.

Of course, I also knew of hesychasm, the prayer of silence beyond words or images. I have prayed the Jesus Prayer for many years since reading *Way of the Pilgrim* and have instructed others in silent listening along the way. But when I was chrismated, I again had to face the question of how Orthodox contemplation views imaginative prayer. In the main, Orthodoxy is wary of the misuse of the imagination and rightfully suspicious of its excesses and distortions. It generally seeks to externalize the imagery of heavenly worship through the Divine Liturgy and to displace imaginal prayer with the imageless contemplation of hesychasm.

Yet my question has always been, is not the imagination also subject to transfiguration? If the Holy Spirit can be trusted to guard the heart and mind, why would the imagination not also undergo deification? Further, having witnessed the good fruit, including profound healings, as contemplative novices quietly beheld the face of Christ *in their hearts* exactly as they would an icon of wood and paint, I wondered whether ‘beholding prayer’ might still have a place, even in Orthodox contemplation.

In *The Orthodox Way*, Metropolitan Ware subtly addressed my questions. Perhaps my commentary and questions around the above excerpt will not allay hesitations among Orthodox believers around ‘beholding prayer.’ But I do hope it will serve as an invitation for those further along the Way to clarify and correct me of misunderstandings. I also hope that those who’ve enjoyed good experiences in ‘beholding prayer’ will be encouraged to move forward into *hesychastic* contemplation, seeking God beyond words and images. Now to the commentary proper:

In Ware’s description of the contemplative way, he certainly appears to include contemplation of *words* and *images* as a *stage* on the way to hesychastic prayer

and complementary to it. He obviously treats contemplation of words and images as finally inferior to silent prayer, but also part of the path to silent prayer. For example:

[Discernment] enables a man to distinguish between the varying thoughts and impulses within him. He learns the difference between the evil and the good, between the superfluous and the meaningful, between the fantasies inspired by the devil and the *images marked upon his creative imagination by celestial archetypes*.

In these sentences, heavenly images marked on the ‘creative imagination’ are good and meaningful, in obvious contrast to evil and superfluous demonically-inspired fantasies. To which celestial archetypes does he refer? I would imagine those primarily mediated through the Gospel and Divine Liturgy. What is the ‘creative imagination’ to which his eminence refers? I would suppose it is the mind-heart saturated with the Gospel and Divine Liturgy—perhaps the same imagination that initially created the texts, liturgies and icons that now return the favor by transforming our minds?

A little later, he states,

In Scripture, in the liturgical texts, and in nature, we are presented with innumerable words, images and symbols of God; and we are taught to give full value to these words, images and symbols, dwelling on them in our prayer. But since these things can never express the entire truth about the living God, we are encouraged to balance this affirmative or cataphatic prayer by apophatic prayer.

Here, Ware again associates images and symbols alongside words. He specifies how these words, symbols and images originate in Scripture, liturgy and nature. And he says we are to give them *full value and dwell on them in prayer*. While he treats these forms as inadequate to express the *entire truth* about God, rather than forbidding images and symbols in prayer, he calls us to *balance them* with hesychast silence. He confirms that even the hesychast does not refrain from the former:

The hesychast, as well as entering into the prayer of stillness, uses other forms of prayer as well, sharing in corporate liturgical worship, reading Scripture, receiving the sacraments. Apophatic prayer coexists with cataphatic, and each strengthens the other. The way of negation and the way of affirmation are not alternatives; they are complementary.

So to summarize: While the goal is hesychastic prayer, we also are encouraged to practice other forms of prayer, which includes *giving full value* to the images, symbols and words (derived from Scripture and the Divine Liturgy) by *dwelling on them in prayer*, even while pressing on into the prayer of silence for the greater vision of love-union with the God who cannot be contained by words and images.

Clearly he wants us to engage the images of Scripture but then turn aside from them to the practice of the Jesus Prayer:

The Jesus Prayer is not a form of imaginative meditation upon different incidents in the life of Christ. But while turning aside from such images, we are to concentrate our full attention upon, or rather within, the words.

So hesychastic prayer involves a definite ‘turning aside’ from the active imagination, just as it calls us to turn aside from the words of Scripture and the Divine Liturgy. Obviously this doesn’t mean that *meditating on the images* of Scripture, liturgy or icons in prayer bad ... It’s just that they have their limits and there is a time to turn aside from them in favor of hesychastic prayer without words or images.

That said, Kallistos Ware doesn’t particularly affirm Ignatian-style exercises, not because they involve images so much as that comprise a ‘discursive system.’ So for example, he says,

The real purpose of Bible study is to feed our love for Christ, to kindle our hearts in prayer, and to provide us with guidance in our personal life. “Whenever you read the Gospel,” says St. Tikhon of Zadonsk, “Christ himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking with him.” In this way Orthodox are encouraged to practice a slow and attentive reading of the Bible, in which our study leads directly into prayer, as with the *lectio divina* of Benedictine and Cistercian monasticism.

But usually Orthodox are not given detailed rules or methods for this attentive reading. The Orthodox spiritual tradition makes little use of systems of “discursive meditation” such as are elaborated in the Counter-Reformation West by Ignatius of Loyola or Francois de Sales. One reason why Orthodox have usually felt no need for such methods is that the liturgical services which they are attending, especially at the Great Feasts and during Lent, are very lengthy and contain frequent repetitions of key texts and images. All this is sufficient to *feed the spiritual imagination* of the worshipper, so that he has no need in addition to rethink and develop the message of the church services in a daily period of formal meditation.

Interesting. The problem for Ware, it seems, is not the use of one’s ‘spiritual imagination,’ but rather, how it is fed. I infer from this that the spiritual imagination—vis-à-vis carnal fantasy—is fed and *should* be fed. How? Through the many words *and images* in the liturgy. Thus, the liturgy provides the parameter and content of images and words that feed the spiritual imagination. Why are we feeding the spiritual imagination? *So that* we can dwell on these images and words in prayer. This says to me that he is not superstitiously opposing imagery as intrinsically dangerous because it is imaginative, but rather, because daily rules and systems are unnecessary for the one whose imagination is already nurtured by the Divine Services.

I am fully aware of the dangers, delusions and distortions of an unbridled imagination. I’ve witnessed and experienced how the untethered mind really can take flights hither-thither and be deceived in a thousand ways. Metropolitan Ware addresses this problem in

three ways that I find supremely helpful and would want to bring to the 'listening prayer' table.

- a. First, we allow the Scripture texts and Iconic imagery of the Church and its liturgy to provide parameters for and to do the work of nurturing the spiritual imagination.
- b. Second, we develop discernment through contemplation to distinguish between the fleshly images of the wayward mind from the godly images imprinted by 'celestial archtypes' (heavenly images impressed on our hearts).
- c. Third, we use the Jesus Prayer and apophatic practice to move beyond words and images into the fullness of union with God, who both fills those images but also exceeds them.

That said, the fact is that the great Orthodox texts composing the *Philokalia* are replete with exhortation and instructions on attaining and purifying 'spiritual vision.' In *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, we immediately find a story of how St Anthony models the pursuit of the perfect vision and contemplation of God, and the example is used as proof-texting hesychastic prayer. Thus, it seems that a fruitful survey could be compiled on the mystical theology of spiritual vision in the *Philokalia*, something I hope to undertake in future articles.