

Holy Men and Modern Minds: The Transformative Power of Hesychast Spirituality

*“If you die before you die, you will not die when you die.”
- proverb on Mount Athos*

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Abstract: Self-transcendence is a fundamental human aspiration, yet its manifestation in Orthodox hesychastic spirituality from a psychological perspective remains underexplored. This study investigates whether hesychasm functions as a theologically grounded and psychologically effective strategy for existential meaning-making through radical self-transformation. Analyzing self-transformation via a threefold framework of calling, transition, and perfection, this paper focuses on the final stage of spiritual perfection. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation with four hermitic Athonite monks, including a 92-year-old elder with over 70 years of monastic experience. Thematic phenomenological analysis reveals that perfection involves cultivated virtues of unconditional love and radical humility, expressed in the mindset “I am worse than anyone”. Additionally, monks reported extraordinary cognitive capacities such as kardiagnosis (knowledge of the heart) and synergetic perception, which are understood as natural outcomes of deep self-transcendence rather than paranormality. The findings parallel psychological constructs of the hypo-egoic state and self-transcendence as defined by Maslow, Frankl, and Yaden. Given the empirical-phenomenological contribution, it fills a gap in both the psychology of religion and Orthodox theological studies.

Keywords: Hesychasm; self-transcendence; theosis; Orthodox monasticism; humility; hypo-egoic state; Mount Athos

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Introduction

The desire for self-transcendence (ST) is a fundamental aspiration for human nature across various sociocultural and religious contexts. Self-transcendence experiences represent higher stages of human development and broader potentials of human flourishing. To achieve self-transcendence, individuals seek meaning beyond self-interest. Although existential/humanistic/positive/integral psychological theories (Frankl, Maslow, Yaden, Wong, Wilber, etc.) have extensively explored self-transcendence and its developmental benefits, the psychological processes involved in the Orthodox monastic path to *theosis* remain under-researched. From a theological perspective, the Orthodox monastic path, rooted in hesychast spirituality, aims to imitate Christ as closely as possible. This ontological imitation is framed in terms of *theosis*, or deification. In simple terms, it is achieved through sustained, consistent effort to overcome weaknesses while cultivating a virtuous life and spiritual well-being.

Against this background, I argue that hesychasm, in Orthodox monastic spirituality, represents both a theologically justified and psychologically effective strategy for existential search and meaning through radical self-transformation and regular pursuit of self-transcendence. More specifically, I consider the process of self-transformation in hesychasm as a complex matrix with supernatural, psychological, and social parameters, structured into threefold categories: calling, transition, and perfection. This article focuses on the final stage, perfection—drawing on qualitative interviews with four hermitic Athonite monks and employing thematic phenomenological analysis. I look at the psychological aspects of self-transformation in the pursuit of *theosis*, with particular attention to key virtues in hesychastic spirituality of humility and love, with extraordinary cognitive and mental capacities, such as *kadriognosis* and synergetic perception, that might accompany high spiritual states. The text also explores how the hesychastic vision of self-transcendence parallels modern existential and positive psychological perspectives.

Literature Review: Self-transcendence

Self-transcendence is a natural striving for human beings, elusive and desirable for thousands of years within various religious and philosophical paths. Its scientific exploration began at the beginning of the 20th century, when Romain Rolland described self-transcendence as an “oceanic feeling.”² William James also noted the significance of self-transcendence in his classic work on religious experiences based on analyses of multiple mystical religious encounters.³ Later, existential and humanistic psychologists, such as Viktor Frankl (1967) and Abraham Maslow (1967, 1969), emphasized self-transcendence as a fundamental aspect of human development and the search for meaning.⁴

In his famous hierarchy of needs, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow defined self-actualization as the pinnacle of human needs. However, in his last posthumous work *Further Reaches of Human Nature* (1971) he defined ST rather than self-actualization, the ultimate aim of human development.⁵ Maslow (1969b) defined transcendence as “the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos.”⁶ Frankl (1967) emphasized that self-actualization is a

² Romain Rolland, “Letter to Sigmund Freud, December 5, 1927,” in *The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Romain Rolland, 1923–1936*, edited by E. Freud and I. Grubrich-Simitis (New York: International Universities Press, 1960), 105–6. (For the “oceanic feeling” reference.) This concept was further popularized by Sigmund Freud, who presented it as a scientific phenomenon with negative connotations.

³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902).

⁴ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); Abraham H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 2nd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1969a).

⁵ Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, “Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification,” *Review of General Psychology* 10, no. 4 (2006): 302–17. Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking Press, 1971).

⁶ Abraham H. Maslow, “Various Meanings of Transcendence,” *Journal of*

steppingstone towards self-transcendence, which he considered the essence of existence and the specific human mode of being. He believed that ultimately humans are called to transcend themselves, becoming self-transcendent beings.⁷

Moreover, psychologist Maslow (1969b) viewed transcendence as a mystical experience, citing classic examples from various mystical writings. He described transcendence in 35 meanings as overcoming death, pain, sickness, evil, time, past, comparison, etc.⁸ Additionally, he introduced the term *B-values* (Being-values), which are essential for defining “the deepest, most authentic, and constitutionally based aspects of the real self.” *B-cognition*, another term coined by Maslow, implies transcending one's ego, lower needs, and selfish desires. The resulting “illnesses” caused by a deprivation of intrinsic values (*metaneeds*), Maslow titled *metapathologies*. Consequently, the “highest” values: spiritual life and humans' greatest aspirations are therefore ranked as suitable subjects for scientific exploration.⁹

In parallel with Maslow, Viktor Frankl introduced the concept of *existential frustration* as a consequence of a blocked will to meaning, contrasting Freud's and Adler's models of human motivation. Will to meaning represents “the deepest and universal human need to reach beyond oneself and serve something greater.”¹⁰ While Freud and Adler emphasize material or self-centered desires (pleasure/power), Frankl highlights the pursuit of a higher purpose (Frankl, 1985). He believed that when the will to meaning remains unfulfilled, it can lead to psychological issues. Self-transcendence arises when individuals move beyond egocentric desires and align themselves with higher purposes, such as love, spiritual dedication, or a noble cause, which are essential for

Transpersonal Psychology 1, no. 1 (1969b): 56–66.

⁷ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 112, 130.

⁸ Maslow, “Various Meanings of Transcendence.”

⁹ Abraham H. Maslow, “A Theory of Metamotivation: The Biological Rooting of the Value-Life,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 7, no. 2 (1967): 93–127, 106.

¹⁰ Paul T. P. Wong, “Meaning-Seeking, Self-Transcendence, and Well-Being,” in *Logotherapy and Existential Analysis: Proceedings of the Viktor Frankl Institute*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Batthyány (Cham: Springer, 2016), 311–22.

genuine well-being. The more we focus on others or commit to a greater purpose, the more we flourish.¹¹

In the psychology of consciousness, self-transcendence is regarded as a key milestone in psycho-spiritual growth, marking advanced stages of human maturity.¹² Cloninger et al. (1993) incorporated it into the seven-factor model of temperament and character as a measurable personality trait, reflecting how deeply individuals perceive themselves as part of a larger universe.¹³ Levenson et al. (2005) described self-transcendence as a central component of wisdom, associated with ageing and lifelong development.¹⁴ More recently, Yaden et al. defined self-transcendence as having two main characteristics: the “annihilation component” and the “relational component”. The first promotes reduced self-salience, a state complemented by Leary and Guadagno’s (2011) term “hypo-egoic state,”¹⁵ a psychological condition of minimal self-involvement that can enhance optimal functioning. The second characteristic emphasizes connections with others and relationships beyond the self.¹⁶

Theological Background: Theosis and Eudaimonia in Hesychasm

In the hesychastic tradition, ascetic labour, continuous prayer, and sincere repentance (*metanoia*) are considered prerequisites that, under certain conditions, may lead to union with

¹¹ Wong, “Meaning-Seeking, Self-Transcendence, and Well-Being.”

¹² Jenny Wade, *Changes of Mind: A Holonomic Theory of the Evolution of Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). Ken Wilber, *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000).

¹³ C. Robert Cloninger, Dragan M. Svrakic, and Thomas R. Przybeck, “A Psychobiological Model of Temperament and Character,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 50, no. 12 (1993): 975–90.

¹⁴ Michael R. Levenson, Patricia A. Jennings, Carolyn M. Aldwin, and Ray W. Shiraishi, “Self-Transcendence: Conceptualization and Measurement,” *The International Journal of Ageing and Human Development* 60, no. 2 (2005): 127–43.

¹⁵ Mark R. Leary, and Jennifer Guadagno, “The role of hypo-egoic self-processes in optimal functioning and subjective well-being,” *Designing positive psychology: Taking stock and moving forward* (2011): 135-46.

¹⁶ David B. Yaden et al., “The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience,” *Review of General Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2017): 143–60.

God.¹⁷ This union, or *theosis* (deification), corresponds to what I term ‘perfection’ in the threefold monastic path (calling, transition, perfection). Even more than the transitional stage, it is mostly influenced by unpredictable, supernatural factors beyond human control. The intensity of spiritual growth achieved through the synergy of God's grace and personal effort eventually outweighs the burdens of past experiences and the brokenness of human nature, ultimately facilitating the final stage of *apatheia* (passionlessness) or perfection.¹⁸

However, due to the abstract and complex nature of *theosis*, there are no clear indicators that can definitively determine whether, when and how an individual has attained this state. Nevertheless, monks' testimonies often refer to contemporary saints, such as St. Paisios and St. Porphyrios Kavsokalyvite, who are believed to have achieved *theosis*.¹⁹ These saints, whose spiritual gifts are well documented and well exemplify the transformative potential inherent in human nature, reflect the concept of the *Imago Dei* (image of God).

The *Imago Dei* exists within every person, but most individuals cannot fully realize it on their own without divine grace and personal effort. The whole process of divinization might be likened to leaven gradually permeating dough, symbolizing the evolution of the divine image from latent potential to a profound transformation of being and consciousness (Lk 13:20–21). *Theosis* is neither immediate nor static. Instead, it is a dynamic transformation in which divine energies uniquely interact with each person's specific characteristics, resulting in a personalized manifestation of the *Imago Dei*.²⁰ In this sense, *theosis* represents a

¹⁷ Constantinos Athanassopoulos, “Eudaimonia, Apatheia, Ataraxia and Hesychasm: How St Gregory Palamas’ Views on Hesychasm and Asceticism Solve Problems with the Often-Misunderstood Ancient Greek Moral Concepts of Eudaimonia, Apatheia, and Ataraxia,” *Analogia* 5 (2018): 5–18, 15.

¹⁸ Kyriacos C. Markides, “The healing spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy: A personal journey of discovery,” *Religions* 8, no. 6 (2017).

¹⁹ Great Schema monk (pseudonym), personal communication, April 2–9, 2024.

²⁰ Brother Theophan Miskovic, “Theosis in the Light of Modern Brain and Mind Sciences,” Paper presented at *Ascetic Practices and the Mind: Mental Healing in Eastern Christianity*, The Catholic University of America,

return to the original capacities lost by Adam—a new and different state of awareness, a unique condition of being that cannot be attained by any external means and is unknown to those outside this endeavor.²¹

A further metaphor illuminates this process: the experience of divinization is comparable to a ceramic cup finished in fire: as the color changes, the cup also retains the energy of the fire, acquiring an unnatural dryness and heat.²² In *theosis*, prepared humans experience a unique participation in God's uncreated energies and supernatural inhabitation. Human faculties are so profoundly transformed by divine energy that they no longer function in their natural mode.²³ Importantly, the uncreated Divine component is dominant; however, this is not a fusion but rather a *synergy* that can only occur through the voluntary surrender of the will to the same Source from which that will was received. This leads to the transformation of human beings into channels of divine impulse, in accordance with their nature and mode of existence.²⁴

Also, this dynamic transformation into divine likeness through *theosis* parallels the ancient Greek notion of *eudaimonia*—flourishing through alignment with our highest nature. Athanassopoulos (2018) explores this concept, actively used in positive psychology today, through the lens of the mystical theology of St. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), a key contributor to the theology of *theosis*. *Eudaimonia*, in Aristotelian terms, refers to engaging in the highest activities we can participate in—those that are the most divine and transcendental in the universe—not just for ourselves but for all. We prefer to be involved in these pursuits rather than anything else, as they lead to pure and lasting pleasure, are the most self-sufficient activities, and help define us as

Washington, D.C., March 1–2, 2024.

²¹ Sergej Sergeevič Choružij, “Hermeneutics of the human body according to Hesychast anthropology,” *Thinking modernity*, 93–104.

²² Maximos the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, Vol. 1, edited and translated by Nicholas Constas, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 28 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 48, 224.

²³ Alexander Lévy, “Political Hesychasm’ and the Foundational Structure of the Russian State,” *Analogia* 5 (2018): 133–50.

²⁴ Maximos the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, 90–1.

fundamentally human. In Palamas's approach, within a hesychastic context, *eudaimonia* relates to four elements: incessant prayer and compunction, living in a supportive environment for prayer, participating in the Mysteries of the Church, and receiving guidance from a spiritual father (elder).²⁵

Furthermore, Palamas argues that “divinely inspired *eudaimonia*” is an experiential state that brings a form of pleasure incomparable to anything else. This spiritual pleasure is described as a “sweetness beyond description,”²⁶ which contrasts sharply with the ancient Greek notion of pleasure (*izoni*), largely material and bodily. This transcendent pleasure is a key aspect of *eudaimonia*, as it symbolizes the return to the pre-Fall state and the fulfillment of the soul's deepest desire—to know and unite with God. St. Maximus the Confessor explains that pleasure and sorrow in human relationships stem from the Fall, marking humanity's departure from the Edenic state of Paradise. In this view, God allows pain to regulate the body's pursuit of pleasure, which is beyond our control. Thus, true divine *eudaimonia* not only motivates the overcoming of passions and sins, as a spiritual format of Maslow's metaphalogies but also serves as an indicator of achieving divine illumination on the path to *theosis*.²⁷

Theosis, or divinization, is central to the hesychast tradition and represents the ultimate goal of its spiritual practice.²⁸ In this context, *eudaimonia* serves as a prerequisite for the ultimate goal of *theosis*, which involves not only human flourishing but also a complete transformation into divine likeness. The journey toward *theosis*, which begins in this life and continues into the afterlife, is inseparable from the knowledge of God, a process for hesychasts grounded in lived experience rather than intellectual knowledge. Consequently, true knowledge of God is not only possible but integral to this process.²⁹ Furthermore, as Palamas underscores,

²⁵ Athanassopoulos, “Eudaimonia, Apatheia, Ataraxia and Hesychasm.”

²⁶ As one monk noted: “God gives us sweeties”.

²⁷ Athanassopoulos, “Eudaimonia, Apatheia, Ataraxia and Hesychasm,” 5-18.

²⁸ Lévy, “Political Hesychasm,” 133–50.

²⁹ Ivana Noble, “The Authority of Experience in the Hesychast Saints according to St. Gregory Palamas: The Relationship between Ontology and Epistemology Revisited,” *Analogia* 5 (2018): 83–96.

this relationship between the human and the divine is grounded in realism, an actual, personal, experimental encounter with the divine.³⁰ Unlike intellectual or abstract theological understanding, the knowledge of God in the hesychast tradition is relational and rooted in lived experience.³¹ Moreover, the human role in this divine participation is not solely intellectual but also psychosomatic, engaging both body and soul in a dynamic, holistic transformation. As will be shown in the case of Abba, such *eudaimonia* manifests as unwavering cheerfulness, gratitude, and selfless love, which are empirical markers of spiritual perfection.

In summary, the hesychastic stages of purification (reduced self-salience), illumination (expanded awareness), and *theosis* (union with the divine) correspond closely to the psychological ‘annihilation’ and ‘relational’ components of self-transcendence and to Maslow’s B-cognition. This alignment also resonates with Frankl’s understanding of self-transcendence as the essence of existence and with the concept of *eudaimonia* as flourishing through highest purpose, articulated by both Frankl and Maslow. It means that spiritual perfection achieved via self-transcendence is natural highest human need that is recognized on the advanced levels of spiritual and psychological maturation. The theological hesychastic framework of ST offers a richer account of how such states have been cultivated for centuries as a life norm.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological design to explore psychological transformation processes in hesychastic spirituality. Data were collected during a three-day stay at a hermitic brotherhood on Mount Athos, Greece, in April 2024. Participants were four male Orthodox monks among ten living in a hesychastic community: one elder (Abba, 92 years old, over 70 years of monastic experience) and three disciples (Father A, Father B and Father C (no contribution to that article), (anonymous). Semi-structured interviews lasting 30–60 minutes were conducted, focusing on the threefold structure of calling,

³⁰ Noble, “The Authority of Experience in the Hesychast Saints according to St. Gregory Palamas,” 94.

³¹ Norman Russell, “Inventing Palamism,” *Analogia* 3, no. 2 (2017): 1–15.

transition, and perfection. Participant observations were carried out during church services, communal meals, and informal gatherings. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Thematic phenomenological analysis followed the principles of identifying recurring themes across participants' accounts, with particular attention to psychological aspects of perfection: virtues (love, humility) and extraordinary capacities. Ethical considerations included the use of pseudonyms, obtaining informed consent, and respecting monastic practices. The researcher's position as a pilgrim-observer is acknowledged as part of the interpretive process.

Findings

Three-fold classification

Although the three-fold classification of spiritual development in monastic life is widely referenced, no clear scientific delineation exists between these stages,³² which poses challenges for theoretical clarity. To provide a clearer framework for analysis, I propose a variation on the three stages: calling, transition, and perfection. The calling stage begins with an initial inspiration toward monastic life, culminating in the decision to join the monastery as a novice (Greek: δόκιμος, *dótimos*; Church Slavonic: послушникъ, *poslushnik*) and make a permanent relocation. During this stage, individuals engage in introspection, reflecting on their spiritual aspirations and commitment. The transition stage begins with the individual's permanent move to the monastery and continues until the perfection stage is reached, thereby merging classical purification with part of contemplation. Key milestones in this phase include the first monastic vows ("Little Schema"-Stavrophore (Greek: σταυροφόρος, *stavrophoros*; Church Slavonic: крестоносецъ, *krestonosets*), lit. "Cross-bearer") and the second monastic vows (Great Schema (Greek: μεγалоσχημος, *megaloschemos*; Church Slavonic: Схиμα, *Schima*), reflecting a deeper level of commitment to monastic life.³³ The perfection stage

³² Alexis C. Torrance, *Repentance in Late Antiquity: Eastern Asceticism and the Framing of the Christian Life, c. 400–650 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 184–5.

³³ Within different Orthodox branches, distinctions between the monastic

is characterized by the attainment of *apatheia* (passionlessness) and considered the pinnacle of monastic spiritual development. Thus, while these schematic models provide useful frameworks for study, individual experiences may vary significantly, and stages may overlap or blur in practice. Also, Makrides (2017) reminds us that human will must be engaged only at the stage of calling and purification, with the subsequent development occurring naturally as God's reward.³⁴

Despite reference to the classical threefold structure, the proposed spiritual development matrix includes differentiation. Firstly, I have introduced a stage of calling that has been overlooked in the traditional schema.³⁵ It is at this stage that the critical decision to become a monk is made, revealing how future monastic identities crystallize from a worldly framework. The subsequent stage of transition represents a unification of purification and contemplation, while perfection consists partly of *illumination and theosis*. Lastly, I consider the milestones of novitiate and tonsure as supportive formal boundaries, as spiritual progress cannot be adequately evaluated and largely depends on supernatural factors.³⁶

Results

Perfection

My personal observations aim to discover the specific characteristics of individuals at advanced spiritual stages. This subject remains underexplored in the scholarly literature, despite early efforts by thinkers such as William James (1902) to analyze mystical and saintly experiences.³⁷ Moreover, the rich corpus of

ranks vary. For example, in Russian Orthodox monastic tradition, there are three monastic ranks: (inok (only temporary vows), monk (permanent vows) and sche-monk (extended permanent vows).

³⁴ Markides, "The healing spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy."

³⁵ One current reference to the calling or initiation state is Ken Wilber's (2007) five stages of spiritual development: initiation, purification/pacification, illumination, the dark night, and unification (p. 59). He also emphasizes the importance of the dark night stage, as elaborated in the mystical apophatic theology of Gregory of Nyssa and St. John of the Cross.

³⁶ Markides, "The healing spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy."

³⁷ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

patristic texts on mystical experiences and hagiographies is another source that has yet to be thoroughly analyzed through the lens of self-transcendence, creating a new gap in the literature.

In practice, even *apatheia*, a passionless spiritual state closely linked to *theosis*, is considered a rare achievement in Orthodox monastic tradition. Therefore, its practical investigation is complicated by the difficulty of finding participants who meet these requirements. Moreover, there is no clear indication that an individual is in an *apatheitic* state. Furthermore, even if a suitable candidate is found, direct disclosure of the nuances of spiritual perfection is not customary. Nevertheless, research observations, personal communication, and evidence from others' work represent the accessible methods for exploring this phenomenon.

Abba, the case study. Abba, the 92-year-old head of the Hesychastic brotherhood where I stayed for three days, has over 70 years of monastic experience. In interviews, his disciples have described him as “the holiest person in the world” and as one of the living elders (*starets*) on Mount Athos with many spiritual children.³⁸ I had a 30-minute personal interaction with Abba and observed him during church services, communal meals, and informal storytelling sessions. He was always smiling, with a kind, gentle smile, and had a cheerful disposition toward everyone, with particular attentiveness to those who approached him. By applying these research tools, I identified three characteristics of spiritual perfection in Abba's example that correlate with a self-transcendence perspective: love, humility, and extraordinary capacities.

Love

Abba's disciples consistently describe him as kind, respectful, and deeply loving. His teachings often take the form of simple, practical examples that emphasize the importance of kindness in everyday interactions. For example, Abba advises: “Do not maintain a stone face when someone smiles at you; smile in return.”³⁹ This simple directive embodies the warmth and

³⁸ Father A, Father C, interviews by author, Mount Athos, Greece, April 4–5, 2024.

³⁹ Father A, interview by author, Mount Athos, Greece, April 4–5, 2024.

attentiveness that characterize his approach to spiritual life. His disciples describe the love he shows them as comparable to the unconditional love of a parent.⁴⁰ I also felt that I had encountered someone who loved me more deeply than anyone ever had before.⁴¹

Moreover, Abba can identify the divine image in every visitor regardless of moral qualities. For example, even guests with negative reputations received the same love and attention as others, reflecting Abba's commitment to love all equally, without exception.⁴² This recognition of others' inherent dignity fosters not only deep love in return from his disciples but also a desire to emulate Abba's behaviour. This relational dynamic can be understood through the lens of the hypoegeic self, one of the components of self-transcendence, a state in which individuals minimize self-focus and instead direct their attention outward. As Leary and Guadagno (2011) explain, this state promotes the development of compassion, altruism, empathy, and forgiveness, while also encouraging openness, wisdom, and broader perspective, exemplifying the transformative potential of hypo-egoic awareness and having a clear parallel with spiritual gifts as understood in Hesychastic spirituality.⁴³

Humility

Humility, often described as "one of the most difficult and central of all virtues,"⁴⁴ plays a central role in the context of Hesychasm, particularly in Abba's spiritual teachings. He frequently stresses the necessity of deep self-criticism, encapsulated in the mindset of "I am worse than anyone; I am the worst of all sinners," which should be practised when you feel yourself better than others, when you criticise someone, when you are offended by someone, etc. Such a view aligns with the Orthodox concept of *kenosis*, or self-forgetfulness, which stands in sharp contrast to modern notions of self-esteem that emphasize personal achievement and societal validation. In Hesychasm, humility is a

⁴⁰ Father A, interview by author, Mount Athos, Greece, April 4–5, 2024.

⁴¹ Personal observation, April 5, 2024, Mount Athos.

⁴² Father A, interview by author.

⁴³ Leary and Guadagno, "Hypo-egoic Self-Processes," 135–52, 136.

⁴⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The sovereignty of good* (London, 1970).

radical shift in self-perception that occurs when one turns their focus outward, away from the self, towards God and others. Similarly, this shift aligns with contemporary psychological findings on the hypo-egoic state and Frankl's understanding of ST, in which humility facilitates a reorientation towards communal values and transcendent meaning, promoting virtues such as altruism, compassion, and empathy.⁴⁵ In this sense, humility within the Hesychast tradition is not only a personal virtue but a motto for profound spiritual transformation. The repeated self-affirmation 'I am worse than anyone' might appear pathological from a clinical perspective (e.g., low self-esteem, depression). However, in the hesychastic framework, it is not a global self-evaluation but a contextual cognitive use of self-abasement to dismantle egocentric comparison.

The links between humility and self-transcendence have been extensively explored in the literature.⁴⁶ As a psychological construct, humility helps regulate excessive thoughts and behaviours, such as self-righteousness and the exploitation of others, and promotes prosocial actions such as forgiveness, generosity, and cooperation.⁴⁷ Spiritual transcendence, which involves viewing life from a broader, more objective perspective, has been found to correlate strongly with humility, as individuals with higher levels of spirituality demonstrate greater selflessness and empathy.⁴⁸ In the context of Hesychasm, this transcendent humility is closely linked to intellectual humility – the awareness of one's intellectual limitations and the recognition of the possibility of

⁴⁵ Leary and Guadagno, "Hypo-egoic Self-Processes," 135–52, 136.

⁴⁶ James E. McDonald et al., "Impact of self-transcendent and self-enhancement values on compassion, humility, and positivity in marital relationships," *Counselling and Values* 63, no. 2 (2018): 194–209; S. Katherine Nelson-Coffey et al., "The proximal experience of awe," *PloS one* 14, no. 5 (2019): e0216780; Vassilis Saroglou, Coralie Buxant, and Jonathan Tilquin, "Positive emotions lead to religion and spirituality," *The journal of positive psychology* 3, no. 3 (2008): 165–73.

⁴⁷ Christie Powers et al., "Associations between humility, spiritual transcendence, and forgiveness," *Research in the social scientific study of religion* 18 (Brill, 2007), 75–94.

⁴⁸ Ralph L. Piedmont, "Does spirituality represent the sixth factor of personality? Spiritual transcendence and the five-factor model," *Journal of Personality* 67, no. 6 (1999): 985–1013.

being wrong.⁴⁹ This aligns with the Hesychast understanding of human nature's inherent weaknesses and total dependence on God. Furthermore, research confirms that humility's benefits extend beyond interpersonal relationships, contributing to psychological well-being and improved physical health.⁵⁰

Extraordinary gifts

With no clear measurable indicators of reaching spiritual perfection, at a certain stage, a soul engaged in ascetic practices and systematic purification from worldly passions attains profound humility and receives extraordinary Divine gifts. These include contemplation of the "Uncreated Light," prophetic visions, healing abilities, and phenomena such as levitation and bilocation. These gifts are deeply buried in human nature and may manifest after the purification of the soul. Consequently, what might be considered "paranormal" phenomena in other contexts are regarded as entirely normal at advanced spiritual stages. The lives of saints who embody these gifts serve as records of what humanity can achieve through spiritual transformation. However, Elder Joseph cautions that those blessed with such gifts must accept them with profound humility, ensuring they are never used for self-promotion. In fact, these gifts can become significant temptations, leading to spiritual Fall if misused. Therefore, great saints are careful to conceal their extraordinary abilities, revealing them only when absolutely necessary to assist others in their spiritual, psychological, or physical healing.⁵¹ Such deliberate use of extraordinary gifts reveals that even for advanced practitioners, these capacities have potential temptations, a nuance that might be missing in psychological studies of altered states.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth J. Krumrei Mancuso, Janet Trammell, and Jennifer Harriger, "Affective, cognitive, and environmental inductions of humility and intellectual humility that center on self-transcendence," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 19, no. 6 (2024): 947–65.

⁵⁰ Eddie MW Tong et al., "Concurrent and Temporal Relationships Between Humility and Emotional and Psychological Well-Being: EMW Tong et al.," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 20, no. 5 (2019): 1343–58.

⁵¹ Markides, "The healing spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy."

Kardiognosis and Clairvoyance

Furthermore, in the context of spiritual perfection, individuals are believed to develop extraordinary cognitive and mental capacities.⁵² Fr. B reported that both Abba and his assistant Fr. D (I had a conversation with Fr. D but did not directly interview him) can access hidden information about individuals. This gift includes *kardiognosis* (knowledge of the heart) and, in some cases, what might be called clairvoyance. In hesychastic tradition, these are distinct but related spiritual gifts. For example, Fr. A explained that when he first visited the brotherhood as a tourist, Abba already saw him as a monk.⁵³ This spiritual vision does not involve perceiving special colors or visual phenomena, but rather understanding the inner struggles, temptations, and spiritual state of others.⁵⁴ According to Palamas, *kardiognosis* is one of the indicators of true participation in God (*theosis*): “The saints who transcend themselves, with the help of the Spirit, perceive not only God but also the inner principles of created things through simple and indivisible knowledge.”⁵⁵ This knowledge is “supernatural and superessential” above all things.⁵⁶

Synergia

These gifts, rare as they are, arise from a fundamental transformation of the human person, a transformation that hesychasm terms *synergia*, where human energies come into contact with Divine energies. In this profound state, the individual develops a new mode of perception – *synergetic perception* - which has a clear parallel with Maslow’s B-cognition, which might be considered its initial psychological container. Synergetic perception, as defined by Choružij (2010), is a transformed mode of awareness that arises when human faculties become integrated with divine energies. This process entails a profound integration of body and

⁵² Inbar Graiver, *Asceticism of the Mind: Forms of Attention and Self-Transformation in Late Antique Monasticism*, Studies and Texts 213 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2018).

⁵³ Father A, interview by author, Mount Athos, Greece, April 4-5, 2024.

⁵⁴ Father B, interview by author, Mount Athos, Greece, April 5, 2024.

⁵⁵ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, ed. Nicholas Gendle (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 107.

⁵⁶ Palamas, *Triads*, 108.

spirit, whereby traditional sensory modalities are transformed to align with this new spiritual perception, which leads to the emergence of a new perceptive system.⁵⁷ This paradigm frames the experience of *theosis* and the higher spiritual stage as the highest degree of self-transcendence, in which reaching the limits of the self results in superabilities and transforms sensory interaction with the inner and outer environments.

Spiritual senses

In the hesychast tradition, this new mode of perception is part of a broader term of *spiritual senses*, which include sight, hearing, touch (often experienced as *spiritual warmth*), and, in rare cases, phenomena like levitation.⁵⁸ St. Maximus the Confessor connects the occurrence of spiritual senses to the deeper cognitive human functions: sight with the synthetic function of the mind, hearing with the workings of reason, smell with the spirit, taste with desire, and touch with the vivifying faculty.⁵⁹ The developed spiritual senses differ fundamentally from the ordinary sensory faculties and mark the first stages of an individual's ontological transformation. This transformation demonstrates the richness of self-transcendent potential revealed through the hesychastic path. It also shows that the spiritual development of a higher echelon not only enhances cognitive abilities but also brings a tangible transformation to the sensory faculties of the human body.

Nous-episkopos

The development of special modes of senses and extraordinary cognitive capacities is connected to the spiritual centre of humans, the *nous*⁶⁰, playing a pivotal managing function in this level of self-transformation.⁶¹ The special capacity of the

⁵⁷ Choružij, "Hermeneutics of the human body according to Hesychast anthropology."

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Frederick D. Aquino, "Maximus the Confessor," *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology* (2017): 369.

⁶⁰ Often used translation of *nous* as 'mind' or 'heart' from Greek to English is incorrect and should be translated directly in Latin transliteration as *nous* (from an interview with Father E.).

⁶¹ Contemporary studies, e.g., of brother Theophan Mickovic and Andrew

mind, developed in a high level of spiritual development, as first described by St. Gregory Palamas, known as the mind-bishop (*nous-episkopos*).⁶² Palamas supports the words of Nilus the Ascetic (5th century), who claims that when prayer is genuine and filled with compunction, the Holy Spirit stops mental disturbances and brings peace to the mind and soul.⁶³ This capacity of the mind activates *the noetic law*, a new paradigm that contrasts with the previous ways of thinking and perceiving the world. This paradigm integrates all human energies into a unified whole, where the *nous* becomes a central directive guiding the individual's spiritual ascent toward the divine.⁶⁴

Discussion

In this study, I investigated hesychasm in Orthodox monastic spirituality as a strategy for existential search and meaning through radical self-transformation and the regular pursuit of self-transcendence. Using qualitative methods, including direct observation and semi-structured interviews with Athonite monks, I explored the process of self-transformation in hesychasm during the phase of perfection. The major findings reveal that hesychasm leads to a renewal of the self, highlighting its effectiveness as both a theologically justified and psychologically effective strategy for existential search and meaning.

While psychological frameworks of self-transcendence (annihilation and relational components) offer insight into individual self-transcendence, the hesychast tradition also exemplifies both components: hesychasts withdraw from the ego and unite with God, aligning with the broader self-transcendence framework. Just as a raindrop becomes part of the ocean, the two components of self-transcendence are interconnected.⁶⁵ However,

Newberg, might provide a further comprehensive neuropsychological justification for that perspective.

⁶² Choruzij, "Hermeneutics of Human Body According to Hesychast Anthropology."

⁶³ Athanassopoulos, "Eudaimonia, Apatheia, Ataraxia and Hesychasm," 5-18, 15.

⁶⁴ Choruzij, "Hermeneutics of Human Body According to Hesychast Anthropology."

⁶⁵ Yaden et al., "Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience," 143–60, 150.

the hesychastic model adds two novel dimensions: duration and embodiment. Unlike transient STEs induced by psychedelics or meditation retreats, Athonite monks cultivate these states continuously for decades, leading to apparently permanent perceptual changes (spiritual senses, *nous-episkopos*). This exemplifies how ST may transfer on a spectrum from momentary experiences to stable personality traits (cf. Maslow's 'plateau experiences').

The findings on love and humility directly support the hypo-egoic state model: For instance, Abba's simple directive to 'smile in return' and his disciples' description of his unconditional love exemplify how everyday interactions become vehicles of self-transcendence. Likewise, his insistence on "I am worse than anyone" functions as an effective but shocking tool for ego dissolution – contrasting sharply with modern norms of self-efficiency and acceleration.

Nevertheless, the study also acknowledges potential risks, as discussed in the Limitations section below. The extraordinary capacities reported by monks (clairvoyance, *kardiognosis*, synergetic perception) should be interpreted within their theological framework: as natural outcomes of deep self-transcendence. Furthermore, the hesychastic concepts of synergia (the integration of human and divine energies) and the awakening of 'spiritual senses' (sight, hearing, touch) demonstrate that self-transcendence transforms not only behaviour but also perceptual and cognitive faculties – a finding with implications for the psychology of consciousness. This perspective aligns with Yaden et al. (2017), who view self-loss as an alteration of consciousness that can have positive or pathological effects depending on context.⁶⁶

Limitations

Because the study relied on interviews and participant observation within a specific male monastic community, the findings may not fully represent all Orthodox monastic traditions. One limitation of this research is the difficulty of accessing certain

⁶⁶ Yaden et al., "Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience," 143–60.

spiritual leaders, often referred to as “invisible elders,” whose insights could have greatly enriched the study. Additionally, some monks were reluctant to share their personal experiences, affecting the depth of the interview data. While some of the monks' statements may seem radical or overly simplistic, their views are not personal interpretations of Orthodox and Hesychast spirituality, but rather are deeply rooted in patristic and Orthodox theological traditions. My position as a pilgrim researcher may have affected access to participants and the interpretation of their experiences. Finally, the small sample size ($N = 4$) limits the generalizability of the findings, but given the rarity of individuals at advanced spiritual stages, this sample still provides valuable insight.

Conclusions

This study offers the first empirical, phenomenological examination of spiritual perfection among hesychast monks. The main contribution is threefold: First, it validates the psychological constructs of self-transcendence (annihilation, relational, and hypogeoic states) within a real-world, long-term hesychastic setting. Second, it documents virtues (e.g., love and humility) and extraordinary capacities (e.g., *kardiognosis* and synergetic perception) as natural outcomes of deep self-transcendence. Third, it challenges modern self-actualization culture by presenting a model in which ego dissolution (“I am worse than anyone”) is a non-traditional functional tool for spiritual flourishing. Limitations include besides small sample size, gender specificity, and reliance on self-report. Future research should explore whether similar patterns occur in coenobitic and female monastic communities to verify the given conclusions.

As a pilgrim, I was profoundly moved by the pervasive sense of *agape*, the selfless and altruistic love, that best characterizes life on Mount Athos and the sense of transcendence that permeates the whole place, specifically Athonite spiritual self-transcendence. Despite these caveats, the case of Abba and his brotherhood demonstrates that radical self-transcendence is not only theologically possible but psychologically real – a finding that

invites further dialogue between Orthodox spirituality and the science of human flourishing. Similarly, with popular now positive psychology 2.0 approach it recalls uncover the full extent of human potential and become fully human.⁶⁷ Hesychastic spirituality, rich in metaphors and longing for perfection, guides us toward spiritual vertical self-transcendence in the form of *theosis*, as an ontological transformation of human nature. This transformation cultivates extraordinary abilities and profound virtues, ultimately resulting in a superhuman mode of existence grounded in the evangelical ideal of divine likeness (2 *Pet* 1:4).

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⁶⁷ Wong, “Meaning-Seeking, Self-Transcendence,” 311–22, 316.

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