

**JOHN CLIMACUS' *LADDER*, RUSSIAN SPIRITUALITY
AND MONASTIC REVIVAL(S):
CONTEXTUALIZING THE *LANKTON CODEx***

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Introduction

In 2011, in order to complement its holdings of three icons of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton, MA acquired a 19th century manuscript of John Climacus' 7th century book of spiritual practice on which the icon is based, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, in the form of 311 folia in Church Slavonic, named the *Lankton Codex*² in honor of the Museum's founder Gordon Lankton. This book is a black leather-bound manuscript with two spade-shaped brass clasps, foliate designs on the front and spine, and a large St. Andrew's cross on the back. The manuscript is copied from a 1647 edition, containing similar but somewhat more crude headpieces, decorations and *The Ladder* icon itself (Figure 1).³ The folia are approximately 4.5" x 6.5" and have no watermarks. The text is written in black ink with red section headings, a common feature of Church Slavonic manuscripts. Analysis of the script thus far suggests the presence of at least two scribes. The first section, which does not appear in the 1647 edition from which this manuscript was copied⁴ but contains a traditional preface, is written in a newer script than the rest. The semiuncial script of this first section, which introduces the manuscript and its contents—the body of Climacus' text as well as a number of other shorter texts traditionally included with *The Ladder*—is smaller than the script that begins on 6 recto, and suggests that perhaps this first section was inserted at a later time. East Slavic recension is uniform throughout. The section that begins on 6 recto generally appears to have a slightly older style, perhaps more imitative of the original, with a larger, more elaborate and more regular uncial script. Lastly, the marginalia throughout the manuscript suggest at least one additional hand, likely a reader at a later time.

The goal of this paper is to contextualize this manuscript within the history of *The Ladder* in Russian monasticism both on its own terms, by tracing the genealogy of John's presentation of desert contemplative practice in monastic Russian texts, and more

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2 In paleography, a codex is a term to refer to a hand-written, bound book.

3 The initial paleographic analysis of this codex was conducted by Dr. Raoul N. Smith of the Museum of Russian Icons. See "The Ladder of Divine Ascent – A Codex and an Icon", available on the Museum's website.

4 A microfilm copy of the 1647 version of the Slavonic *Ladder* was consulted at the Lamont Library at Harvard University.



Figure 1. Ladder of Divine Ascent, *Lankton Codex*, f15v.

in which this text has been disseminated, introduces us to John Climacus' treatise—a manual for spiritual perfection for monks, whose original intent was far more modest than its eventual effect on the development of Eastern Christianity.

In the context of the manuscript at hand, the image also provides us with an apt visual metaphor for what its existence represents in the spiritual landscape of early 19th century Russia, when it was (in 1837) copied by a monk named Joseph in an unknown monastery and for unknown purposes besides the obvious need, for one reason or another, to reproduce this classic.

⁵ See Figure 1.

broadly, by tracing the influence of what is loosely referred to as “Sinaite spirituality.” The aim is to demonstrate the historical importance, both for Russian monasticism and for Russian spirituality more broadly, of the appearance of a manuscript of the 7th-century *The Ladder* in 1837, and to analyze this appearance both within the context of the 19th century monastic revival and within the context of historical Russian Orthodoxy.

Between the introductory texts and the body of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* in the *Lankton Codex*, one finds a somewhat crudely rendered representation of *The Ladder* icon.⁵ This icon became, in the centuries following the dissemination of John Climacus' text throughout the Orthodox East, an eminently recognizable image integral to the perception of Orthodox Christian spiritual life both in the monastic and the lay context. In the icon, John Climacus (b. circa 570) stands at the bottom holding a scroll presumably containing the text of *The Ladder*, emerging from a church and standing on the top step, on his right a group of monks stretching back as far as the eye can see, on his left the eponymous ladder. While at the bottom a monk follows the direction of John's extended index finger and begins to ascend the ladder, closer to the top other monks struggle with the demons who attempt, and often succeed, in pulling them off, plunging them into a fiery pit. But the monk who has ascended to the very top of the ladder is greeted by angels and Christ Himself. With this striking visual representation of spiritual warfare, this manuscript, as many others

For despite the somewhat misleading fiery pit featured in this particular icon, which suggest a finality to falling off—i.e., to experiencing a setback in one’s spiritual progress—the ladder is in fact understood both by John Climacus and by subsequent theologians and practitioners to represent less of a linear progression from absolute sin to absolute virtue than a cyclical process wherein one is constantly falling and rising, repeating the lower steps even as one has advanced to the higher rungs. Spiritual failings are to be just as expected as victories.

Summary

In 1837, Russian monasticism was in the midst of a revival—yet in a sense it was also in the midst of repeating its own history, marked to this day by a continuous string of suppressions and revivals, of cultural centrality and cultural irrelevance, of constant reinvention within the confines of zealously guarded and ostensibly timeless tradition. As will be explained, the idealization and veneration of monks and monasteries as heavenly places on earth coexisted with suspicion of contemplative practices and ever-increasing efforts to bring potentially disruptive aspects of monasticism in line with official structures of Church authority; at the same time, the de-emphasis and suppression of monasticism by ecclesiastical and political authority in the early modern period made way for revival by ensuring only the most sincere postulants. The spread of interest in monastic practices such as eldership among the laity and the rich intellectual exchange between certain monasteries (most prominently Optina Pustyn) and 19th century authors and religious philosophers flourished alongside an association of eldership with hereticism and sectarianism on the one hand and widespread secularization on the other. In this way the individualized self-perfecting practice of contemplative monasticism is simultaneously emblematic of the struggle of the institution and practice itself, not only for survival and relevance but, ultimately, for glory; i.e., for the continual viability of the monastery as the locus of Christian life.

Thus, finally, in terms of this analysis, the icon also provides a visualization of the self-perception of Russian monasticism and the traditionalist framework in which its revivals were understood by their leaders and disciples. The image of generations of monks attempting to follow an unchanging, narrow path to Christ set forth by the early Church Fathers and finding themselves periodically knocked off course by the conditions surrounding the role of monasticism in the larger Church is central to the proclaimed task of recovery and restoration—of sources, of practices—that informs each generation of “revivalists.”

Late Antiquity

As John Chryssaugis observed in his monograph on John Climacus, the latter and his 7th century contemporaries had the sense that they were living “at the end of an epoch” and felt a responsibility to preserve the texts and practices of the early Church, most especially the Fathers, but also, as we observe on John’s part in *The Ladder*, to systematize the teachings. With his particular attention to the “psychological life of the inner being” and, more broadly speaking, to the individual’s progress towards deification, John Climacus provides a crucial bridge between the sacralized texts of the Fathers, primarily oriented towards Trinitarian and Christological doctrine, and the Christian journey of the postulant as an individual striving to fulfill the promise of Christ while engaged in a struggle with

his own imperfection.⁶ At the center of *The Ladder* is prayer, which constitutes both the path and the goal, continual communion with God being the highest form of prayer. In Step 28, “On Prayer,” John characterizes prayer as “a dialogue and union of man with God,” a practice that “achieves a reconciliation with God.”⁷ Through a system of renunciation and self-cultivation, John Climacus formulates a pathway to becoming what Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), a foundational figure in the Eastern Orthodox approach to prayer and its first “codifier,” called a theologian: one who “prays in truth.”⁸ The attainment of a practice of prayer at this level allows the monk, like an angel, to pray for the purification of mankind.

While specific citations are rare, John, according to convention and reflective of the self-perception of 6th and 7th century desert monasticism, is clear throughout *The Ladder* about his dependence on the Fathers, the “true servants” of God, referring in Step 1 even to the pen and paper as representations of their legacy:

So, then, with unquestioning obedience let us reach out our untrustworthy hand to the true servants of God, to those who devoutly urge us on and in faith compel us by their commands. Let us make a treatise, with their knowledge as the implement of writing, a pen dipped in their subdued yet glorious humility, applied to the smooth white parchments of their hearts, or rather resting on the tablets of the spirit. Let us write on it divine words, or rather seeds, and let us begin like this.⁹

In combination with general references to and stories about the Fathers,¹⁰ John mentions matters of textual monastic formation which they defined, specifically ethical concepts and catalogues of virtues and vices. John marks his allegiance to them, both granting his own work legitimacy and re-inscribing the vitality of their early work for the continuation of monasticism.¹¹ He also inscribes himself into the textual Christian tradition more broadly, drawing on Biblical and authoritative ascetic texts.¹² At the same time, as Johnsen has demonstrated in detail in *Reading John Climacus*, by utilizing stories and quotations from the Fathers to illustrate his own teaching, John also provides a new interpretation of the material.¹³ He is concerned not only to pass down the wisdom of the Fathers but also to set forth, from his own understanding, a framework for a living practice. In this way key components of monastic practice according to the Fathers, such

6 John Chryssaugis, *John Climacus: From the Egyptian Desert to the Sinaite Mountain* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 11.

7 Climacus, 274.

8 Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 111.

9 Climacus, 74-5.

10 Of the Fathers who had the greatest influence on John Climacus, Gregory Nazianzus (329-79) is specifically mentioned as well as referenced in *The Ladder*. Chryssaugis also traces the influence of Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) in John’s treatment of “the human person, the passions, dispassion and salvation, the vision of God, deification, death, as well as the relationship between body and soul,” 34.

11 Henrik Rydell Johnsen, *Reading John Climacus: Rhetorical Argumentation, Literary Convention and the Tradition of Monastic Formation* (Lund: Lund University, 2007), 200.

12 Ibid.

13 Johnsen, 204.

as unceasing prayer,¹⁴ self-consciously become a part of a system of bodily and spiritual practice both rigorous and empathetic to the human struggle against the desires of the fallen flesh. At its root are the convictions that the human being naturally seeks God and that transfiguration and, ultimately, deification are a tangible possibility.

Although *The Ladder* was written for the instruction of monks and dealt with the particular issues pertinent to such an existence,¹⁵ John's treatise, much more than simply a monastic rule, proved to have wide appeal in Eastern (and, eventually, Western¹⁶) Christianity due to its concern for guiding the individual through the difficult path of self-transformation from renunciation of the world to divine communion and its empathy towards constant struggle as well as its ultimate optimism in the possibility, for one of great faith, of attaining the heights of spiritual maturity and transcending the baser aspects of the self. The text also avoids prescriptivism regarding individual paths of renunciation, such as fasting and the details of the mortification of the flesh, focusing instead on the "vital content" of monasticism: unceasing communion with God.¹⁷ John even addresses the topic of salvation outside the monastery, being careful to reassure the reader that while the highest spiritual feats are indeed the special gifts of monks, living in the world must not be considered an absolute obstacle to spiritual development. Yet despite this concession, John affirms that there are gifts associated with the monastic life which are not open to the laity, as in Step 2, "On Detachment":

Who in the outside world has worked wonders, raised the dead, expelled demons? No one. Such deeds are done by monks. It is their reward. People in secular life cannot do these things, for, if they could, what then would be the point of ascetic practice and the solitary life?¹⁸

The fact that John returns to this question of access to the divine several times throughout the text, albeit briefly and sometimes perfunctorily, highlights his awareness that a tension of valuation exists between the two Christian paths (marriage and celibacy) and that a perceived need to avoid alienating Christians living "in the world" must be addressed even in a monastic treatise. In the context of monastic life itself, attention to this question might be attributed to the cultivation of humility; i.e., to the need of the monk to avoid a sense of spiritual superiority vis-a-vis the lay Christian even if he attains the aforementioned gifts. At the same time, as we see in the quotation above, it is just as much a warning to lay Christians who may seek self-perfection that the charisms of the ascetic life cannot be achieved without its sacrifices. Nevertheless, John is careful, both here and throughout the text, to present the monk as a vessel, whose reception of

14 John's writings on unceasing prayer were part of the development of what would eventually become known in Hesychast writings as The Jesus Prayer, its standard version first explicitly referenced in the *Discourse on Abba Philimon* (ca. AD 600). It is also known as the Prayer of the Heart, The Prayer of Remembrance, The Prayer of a Single Thought, or simply The Prayer. Its basic formula was found in a letter to an abbot attributed to John Climacus: "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy." See: See Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 125.

15 John Climacus, as the author came to be known, is a moniker derived from the title of the text, and can be translated as "John of the Ladder."

16 As Henrik Rydell Johnsen points out in *Reading John Climacus*, a Latin translation of *The Ladder* is known as early as the 11th century, and it was more widely read in the West after Angelo Clareno's translation from around 1300.

17 Colm Luibheid, preface to *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), xxvii.

18 Luibheid, 83.

these charisms and whose ultimate communion with God is precisely a gift rather than an “achievement,” gained through a process of renunciation in which much more is gained than lost. As the monk gradually loses his attachments and achieves *hesychia* (stillness), he becomes filled with the Holy Spirit and thereby manifests the “signs” of the true ascetic. Thus the path of *The Ladder* is both open to all in theory, and contingent upon the monastic environment in practice.

From its origins in the Sinai, *The Ladder* spread to other monasteries in the East, as evidenced by the high number of manuscripts and translations, the first Syrian translation already appearing in the 7th century.¹⁹ At Sinai, John’s teachings continued to be highly valued, preserved, and re-inscribed into the monastic tradition, laying the foundations for the Sinaite spiritual “school” attributed to Hesychius (7-8th century) and Philotheus (9-10th century).²⁰ What was particularly important for their use of *The Ladder* and for later Byzantine and Slavic monastic traditions was John’s category of “attention” to sinful thoughts, which became the dominant theme in their Spiritual Chapters and would become associated in the Hesychast movement with “authentic” monastic tradition, becoming integral to Russian monasticism as well.²¹ In Step 28, “On Prayer,” John ties the practice of prayer directly to attention:

The beginning of prayer is the expulsion of distractions from the very start by a single thought; the middle stage is the concentration on what is being said or thought; its conclusion is rapture in the Lord.²²

Throughout the Step, John warns against the interference of thoughts and images in prayer, warning that even one careless word had the power to defile the mind and sap the power of his prayer (279-280). Defiling or distracting thoughts, which become conflated with demons, are said to lessen with the constant practice of prayer. To achieve constant dialogue with God is to develop the power to consistently repel those demons; they may continue their attacks, but they will quickly abandon them when confronted with the strong presence of the divine. Attention is tied closely to discernment, Step 26 and one of the three “higher virtues of the ‘active life’” which make way for union with God, the “contemplative life” which is the final goal, described in Steps 27-30. Discernment of what is truly good (i.e., of God) and what is bad (distracting from God and thereby demonic), the interrogation of each thought and image that materializes in the mind, is fundamental to stillness, which cannot be reached as long as the mind is “polluted.”

The Rise of Hesychasm

John’s instructions on prayer, the stated purpose of which was to help monks approach the apostles’ experience of the transfigured Christ, became a crucial aspect of an immensely influential monastic movement in Byzantine monasticism and then in Russia—Hesychasm, which is generally described by scholars as having “arrived” in Russia via the South Slavs in the 14th and 15th centuries. It might be said that in 14th century Hesychasm, John Climacus’ anthropology—his over-arching focus on earthly

19 Johnsen, 6.

20 Chryssaugis, 40.

21 Dirk Krausmuller, “The rise of hesychasm,” in *Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 5: Eastern Christianity*, ed. Michael Angold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 104.

22 Luibheid, 276.

self-transformation—gains its fullest expression, being oriented towards the absolute unity of body and soul in prayer. For example, Hesychastic “methodologies” draw on John’s correlations between bodily posture and inward prayer, such as lifting up one’s hands and eyes in reference to the Desert Fathers’ description of the monk as “standing with arms stretched out in the form of a cross to heaven.”²³ *Hesychia* is a central concept for John, defined as “worshipping God unceasingly.”²⁴ Ultimately, these methodologies build upon John’s work of synthesizing Patristic thought as practice.

The first “treatise” associated with the beginnings of Hesychasm as a movement is *The Three Methods of Prayer* also known as *The Method of Sacred Prayer and Attentiveness*, a manual on attaining visions. Now widely regarded as having been wrongly attributed to Symeon the New Theologian (henceforth Pseudo-Symeon), the work can be tentatively dated to the late 12th or early 13th century and describes a “method” to be used by the monk to experience the divine in which “attentiveness” leads to the “detection and seizure of sinful thoughts,” followed by effective prayer to eliminate them.²⁵ The second “treatise,” *On Guarding the Heart*, was composed by Nikephoros the Hesychast (or “the Italian,” as he is called in the *Life* of his student Gregory Palamas) on Mt. Athos in the mid-13th century. In both cases, while drawing heavily on the Sinaite tradition of John Climacus, the authors of these texts stress the need and possibility for every monk to attempt to access the divine, in the case of Nikephoros especially expanding the practice beyond the “select few” whom John envisioned attaining *hesychia*, meaning both solitary life and the advanced forms of inner prayer. This expansion of access is seen in later proponents of Hesychasm as well. For example, Philotheos Kokkinos’ biography of Gregory Palamas includes an episode in which Gregory argues successfully with a monk to prove that Paul’s injunction to “pray without ceasing”²⁶ is a universal one.²⁷ This slight democratization of access in the development of Hesychasm may well account at least partially for the eventual popularity of *The Ladder* among laity. Nevertheless, it was a monastic audience that remained the primary consideration of Hesychastic writers. The perceptible shift in access was likely not directed at laity, but rather at the spiritual hierarchies established by the performance of ascetic feats within monasteries.

Hesychasm became popular in Greece initially through exchange between Athonite and Sinaite monks, including Gregory of Sinai (1260s-1346), who lived on both mountains throughout his life and communicated Sinaite spiritual traditions to Athos. It was in large part through the dissemination of Hesychasm throughout the Orthodox world that *The Ladder* became such an important monastic text in Russia, although it was certainly extant and in use in many monasteries prior to the 14th century²⁸ as part of a body of key works including the writings of Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory the Great, Basil the Great, Ephrem the Syrian, John Chrysostom,

23 Chryssaugis, 106.

24 Kallistos Ware, introduction to *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 50.

25 Krausmuller, 102

26 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

27 Kallistos Ware, “Act out of Stillness”: *The Influence of 14th Century Hesychasm on Byzantine and Slav Civilization* (Toronto: The Thessalonikean Society of Metro Toronto, 1995), 10.

28 While there is no list of extant manuscripts of *The Ladder* in Church Slavonic, there are at least 100, the earliest perhaps from the 12th century, pointing to its influence in shaping the earliest monasteries in the Slavic Orthodox world even before the introduction of a Hesychast “movement.”

John Damascene, Maximus, and Hippolytus of Rome.²⁹ The 14th century did, however, witness a peak in the interest in contemplative monasticism in Russia, and during this time *The Ladder* was one of the most popular texts copied by monks.³⁰ The interest in the original texts of contemplative monasticism also inspired the translation of the books of Isaac the Syrian, Simeon the New Theologian, and Gregory the Sinaite into Slavonic for the first time.³¹ Arguably, the Hesychast movement in Russia can be viewed in the context of the “traditionalist” revivals that mark Russian monastic history. Although Rus’ had officially adopted Orthodox Christianity less than four centuries prior and had thus ostensibly received a “ready-made” tradition that its Church was responsible for preserving, we can already see in the 14th century a search for roots and a desire, at least on the part of monks and some of the few literate members of the devout laity, to access the foundational texts of the faith. While a detailed analysis of the motivations behind this tendency are beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted, as Irina Paert observes in her monograph on spiritual eldership in Russia,³² that the practice of early Russian Hesychasm was congruent with the widespread hermeticism and idiorhythmic³³ monasticism of the period, during which Rus’ was still under Mongol rule and had seen many monasteries looted and destroyed during the initial invasions. By the 14th century the Church, which had filled the need for the production of a national as well as religious identity in the absence of political power, had come to conceptualize the “Mongol Yoke” as a punishment for the sins of Rus’, a notion that could not but inspire the most devout to seek out the spiritual path from which Rus’ had strayed. This search would account not only for the concern with original texts and practices but also for the widespread interest in methods of a more perfect communion with God, through which the monk could perform “purificatory prayers” for the Church at large. As Paert points out, interest in Hesychasm faced a challenge in the dearth of organized monastic communities, as idiorhythmic communities (not to mention hermetic life) did not always provide the structure assumed by Hesychast texts:

The acquisition by Russian monks and hermits of hesychast texts and techniques had a spontaneous character and, although monks and laity in the 13th and 14th century could practice hesychastic prayer, it is unlikely that they received any instruction.³⁴

This seems to indicate that in practice, *The Ladder* continued to play a similar role during the rise of the Hesychast movement as it had in the previous centuries since the Christianization of Rus’ in the 10th century, albeit more widespread and perhaps with a greater awareness of taking part in a pan-Orthodox revival. If Paert’s assertion

29 Sergius Bolshakoff, *Russian Mystics* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1999), xxi.

30 Irina Paert, *Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 25.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Idiorhythmic monasticism refers to hermetic monks living alone, rather than in an organized community. In practice, as stated above, many monks on the idiorhythmic path did live in proximity to other hermits and came together for certain purposes. For John Climacus, pure hermeticism prevented crucial aspects of self-perfection, especially obedience. He recommended “the middle way,” sketic life, in which a small group of monks participates in communal services and shares resources while maintaining their solitary practices. Nil of Sora and Paisii Velichkovsky also favored the “middle way.”

34 Paert 25.

about the dearth of spiritual instruction is correct, then it is likely that *The Ladder's* peak of popularity could be attributed to those aspects that had already given it wide appeal. Because the treatise exhibits a fairly high degree of flexibility in terms of living arrangements and ascetic practices, it was an ideal textual companion to idiorhythmic monastic practice.

Nil Sorsky's Monastic Rule

Yet the first major move towards organization and the institutionalization of spiritual instruction would also come in the 14th century through the activity of Sergius of Radonezh (1314-1392), particularly his direct teaching of disciples. Textually and methodically, it would emerge in the 15th century in the writings of Nilus of Sora (a.k.a. Nil Sorsky, 1433-1508), who composed the first Russian synthesis of patristic teaching and the methodologies of contemplative prayer. If before the rise of Hesychast influence *The Ladder* could be said to exercise a general influence on the development of Russian monasticism, with the work of Nil John's text became an integral part of the developing corpus of uniquely Russian monastic writings, the authors of which strove, like John Climacus, to present themselves not as innovators but as synthesizers and teachers of the Patristic tradition.

Nil Sorsky's monastic *Rule* (Ustav), in which direct citations and references to John Climacus first appeared in Slavonic was, true to John's example, in fact closer to a treatise on contemplative prayer than to a systematic *Rule* of monastic discipline such as that composed by Josif Volotsky (1439-1515) or, in the wider Orthodox tradition, by Basil the Great. Similarly to John before him, Nil exhibits a familiar concern with inscribing his text into the Eastern monastic tradition that was already perceived as sacred wisdom in John's time and, by extension, writing Russian monasticism into the company of Orthodoxy's true heirs. Again like John, Nil's primary contribution to the development of Russian monasticism was systemization. Nil conceived of an organized formulation of the Hesychastic tradition that had been passed along in various guises to early Russian saints including Anthony of Smolensk and Sergei of Radonezh, who had practiced aspects of the hesychast approach to prayer but had lacked the patristic learning necessary to synthesize the tradition and present it in the language of the Russian Church.³⁵ Nil's privilege was his familiarity not only with the Hesychast writings but with their sources, especially the 4th century writings of Evagrius which were also foundational for John.³⁶ Nil depends on *The Ladder* most clearly in the *Rule* in presenting the psychological steps of the development in the mind of an individual thought: the presentation or the arising in the mind of a representation, subject or image; the coupling, conversation or dialogue with the image; consent given to the thought; slavery to it; and passion. Based on these steps, Nil develops an analysis of the eight sources of passions, defined as principal vices of the soul, recalling the struggle against the passions which form the middle steps (8-23) of *The Ladder*.³⁷ Nil's representation of the formulation of a thought and its consequences implicitly references "attentiveness" and "discernment," which are two of John's primary tools in the struggle against the distractions that disrupt progress towards

35 George A. Maloney and John L. Mina, introduction to *The Complete Writings* by Nil Sorsky, trans. Maloney and Mina (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 35.

36 Maloney and Mina, 24.

37 Ibid.

hesychia. John's influence is even more explicit in his *Tradition of Sketic Life*, in which Nil specifically quotes John several times and explicitly focuses on "attention" in the resistance of thoughts and references John's instructions on silence and concentration:

Strive with active concentration on the task of God alone. St. Basil the Great says that the beginning of purity of heart is silence. And St. John Climacus further defines silence as, first of all, detachment from concern with regard to necessary and unnecessary things; second, as assiduous prayer; and third, as the unremitting action of prayer of the heart.³⁸

"Attentiveness," or the undying vigilance against intrusive thoughts (even "virtuous" thoughts) as developed by John, was understood by the proponents of Hesychasm as an integral component of the monastic tradition of the Orthodox East, with themselves as its true heirs and defenders against either intellectualizing or over-asceticizing trends.³⁹ Attention, as previously mentioned, was at the heart of the *Spiritual Chapters* of Hesychius and Philotheus. The identification of "attention" with "authentic" Orthodoxy implicitly invokes *The Ladder* as a text of inviolable authority.

Nil also devotes his eighth chapter of the Tradition to the gift of tears, one of the most influential elements of *The Ladder* (Step 7, "On Sorrow and Weeping"). John's reflection on tears is reflective of his stress on the unity of body and soul in prayer; tears, when directed towards non-worldly things, can become an outward manifestation of the individual's "mourning" his separation from God in prayer, a mourning that must be felt deeply and continually as he attempts to overcome this separation. However, as Chryssaugis points out, John's most original contribution to the theology of tears was his association between mourning and joy. "Tears reflect man's fallen state and express his mourning for sin," yet they also express his realization that he was created for laughter, not tears and can even wash away sins in the manner of a renewed baptism.⁴⁰

Startsy

Other aspects of the "general influence" of *The Ladder* on Russian monasticism include the institution of eldership and the formalized practice of unceasing prayer that invokes the name of Jesus, or the Jesus Prayer, as it would come to be called. As already mentioned, according to Irina Paert the extent to which eldership as a widespread institution existed in the Petrine era is arguable; at the same time, as Paert affirms, it is inarguable that informal eldership did exist, and in fact lead to the formulation of idiorhythmic communities made up of an elder and several disciples:

New hermitages in pre-Petrine Russia would often emerge around *startsy* who had left their 'mother' monastery in a search of a more radical form of withdrawal from the world. *Startsy* were followed by their disciples, who formed new monastic communities.⁴¹

As an integral part of hesychasm, eldership is also practiced in the original idiorhythmic community of Sergius of Radonezh and prescribed in the *Rules* of Nil as well as Josif

38 Maloney and Mina, 23.

39 Krausmuller, 102.

40 Luibheid, 23.

41 Paert, 47.

Volotsky. In Nil's *Rule*, choosing an elder is the second step in the monk's striving from renunciation to self-perfection, a decision of great importance and requiring careful discernment. However, Nil acknowledges the possibility that no guide can be found. In this situation he advises that the monk should search for God directly through the body of holy writings: Scripture, the writings of the Apostles, the commentaries on these writings by the Fathers, and the writings and lives of the holy Fathers.⁴² This advice in fact provides a fascinating insight into how the elder, or spiritual guide, was perceived in the contemplative monastic tradition as Nil (and by all accounts John as well) understood it: as a conduit of the Holy Spirit rather than as a wise man; as one who, by virtue of his practice of stillness, has become a vessel for divine wisdom. This is why, in the absence of such a guide, the contemplation of holy writings—likewise vessels of holy wisdom when approached with discernment and absolute obedience—constitute an acceptable substitute. If, as Paert asserts, the practice of Hesychasm was “learned by many without any supervision, on the basis of written texts,” this certainly goes a long way to explain the large number of Slavonic copies of *The Ladder*.⁴³

Texts in Spiritual Practice

It should be mentioned that the *Lankton Codex* bears the evidence of an anxiety towards the use of texts in spiritual practice, which may point to the scribe's awareness of this situation in Russian monastic history, though it may also be a reflection of a general anxiety in Eastern Orthodoxy concerning the unmediated use of religious texts. One of the few features that differentiate the *Codex* from the 1647 manuscript from which it was copied is the colophon, which reads:

Glory to you, Lord of Lords and King of Kings. To the Creator of the world is rendered glory, thanks, honor and worship; to the All-Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Like a journey, I was very afraid to start this soul-saving Book of Blessed John of the Ladder and to finish it.

This colophon, while certainly formulaic in its display of deference to the text as a part of Church tradition, gestures more generally towards the perceived dangers of interacting with holy teachings through reading. The monk's fears may be attributed not only to his concern that the text is faithfully transmitted and free from corruption, but also to a concern regarding the future use of the manuscript considering its goals. This was, perhaps, an even greater cause for concern in 1837, the year of its copying, when interest in contemplative prayer had grown beyond the monastery.

Unceasing Prayer

The Jesus Prayer, as it would come to be called by the Hesychasts of the 14th century, is the second realm of what the author refers to as John's “general influence” on Russian monasticism. The importance of unceasing prayer in Step 15 constitutes the focal point of *The Ladder's* spiritual system, which calls upon the individual to become “conscious of the actual presence of Jesus in the interior of his own being,” and is likewise at the center

42 Maloney and Mina, 19.

43 For a detailed discussion of the textual dimensions of ascetic practice see Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

of the Hesychastic practices which evolved from the Evagrian conception of perfect prayer as stillness.⁴⁴ Crucial for its simplicity and the irreducible focus of its repetition, this prayer is instrumental in transforming the monk into a “hesychast,” i.e., one who possesses silence of heart, whose inward journey into stillness leads him to the ultimate encounter with God—an encounter that renders irrelevant all that he has had to “give up” in the worldly sense.⁴⁵ The practice of unceasing prayer is of course not an invention of John Climacus; rather, its origins can be traced to Makarius of Egypt (300-391), Evagrius Ponticus’ master who, according to an account in the *Philokalia*, taught his monks that words beyond “Lord, save me!” were extraneous to “pure prayer.”⁴⁶ Like the rest of the theological concepts and practices in *The Ladder*, John draws on tradition (though he does not cite his specific sources for his reflection on unceasing prayer) and takes the additional step of integrating unceasing prayer into a system of self-perfection, which subsequently becomes a central component of Sinate tradition as a whole and which represents the central method of “attentiveness.”⁴⁷ John’s spiritual heir Philotheus writes:

Sweet memory of God, that is, of Jesus, coupled with heartfelt wrath and beneficent contrition, can always annihilate all the fascination of thoughts, the variety of suggestions ... daringly seeking to devour our souls. Jesus when invoked easily burns up all this. For in no other place can we find salvation except in Jesus Christ And so every hour and every moment let us zealously guard our heart from thoughts obscuring the mirror of the soul, which should contain, drawn and imprinted on it, only the radiant image of Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom and power of God the Father.⁴⁸

Gregory of Sinai, the most prominent disseminator of Hesychast spirituality in the 14th century, also drew on John’s (as well as Pseudo-Simeon’s) conception of the unceasing prayer as a tool of attention that was to become aligned with the beating of the heart and to control the thoughts of the individual, allowing the heart to be in a ceaseless state of prayer.⁴⁹ *The Ladder* is on Gregory of Sinai’s list of essential reading on silence and prayer for the Hesychast.⁵⁰

It was not only Nil Sorsky who directly referenced John Climacus in his monastic *Rule*. His contemporary, Josif Volotsky, also incorporated aspects of *The Ladder* into his own *Rule*, which was adopted by many other Russian monasteries and was widely

44 John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 33.

45 Luibheid, 50.

46 Meyendorff, 18.

47 In his introduction to Luibheid and Russell’s translation of *The Ladder*, Kallistos Ware hypothesizes that Diadochus of Photice is John’s main inspiration in his treatment of the Jesus Prayer. Diadochus observes that the human intellect must be provided with some inner task to satisfy its need for activity. (53)

48 George A Maloney, *The Spirituality of Nil Sorsky* (Rome: Westmalle, 1964), 2.

49 Maloney, 5.

50 Maloney, 6.

influential.⁵¹ As David Goldfrank,⁵² Tom Dykstra⁵³ and others have demonstrated, whatever may have been the extent of the controversy between the approaches to monastic land-holding represented by Nil and Josif in the 15th century, the two were in agreement on the fundamentals of Orthodoxy as well as their approach to monastic prayer including “stillness.” As Goldfrank details in his article “Nil Sorskii’s Following among the Iosifo-Volokolamsk Elders,” there is textual evidence that Josif sent a pair of literate monks to the Trans-Volgan monastery specifically to train in Hesychasm and to bring its textual traditions back to Volokolamsk and that he himself was trained in and could teach this method of prayer. All the same, it is indisputable that Josif’s *Rule*, based as it was specifically on cenobitic monasticism, focused more closely on issues of discipline and obedience within that environment and reflected the increased concerns with monastic discipline that accompanied the movement towards cenobitism in the 14th and 15th centuries. It is not, therefore, surprising that it is those sections of *The Ladder* that deal with training in obedience as a prerequisite for stillness which find their way into Josif’s writings.⁵⁴ In his *Rule*, anxious as his predecessors to inscribe his instruction into Church tradition, Josif describes the relationship between abbot and his subordinates with references to Climacus as well as the Fathers.⁵⁵ More generally, in his *Rule*, Josif expands the concept of the elder (*starets*) by setting up a ruling council of 12 elders whose role it was both to regulate the monks and represent them to the abbot, and to correct the abbot himself if he violated the *Rule*.⁵⁶

It is also fair to point out that the specific disciplines of communal monastic life on which Josif’s rule is overwhelmingly focused, by necessity, deemphasize the centrality of self-transformation to the path of the monk. If Josif’s rule was most widely adopted for its specificity, in this tendency we see a shift away from the anti-prescriptivism of *The Ladder* and its textual heirs. An example of this tendency is Josif’s taxonomy of ascetics based on clothing in his *Rule*, with the most perfect of monks owning one set, in poor condition, and having no protection from the elements.

The self-perceived traditionalism of John and his heirs belies the fact that the program of individual transcendence, if in keeping with the wisdom of the early Church Fathers within their particular context, nevertheless presented a challenge for the institutional Orthodox church even as a monastic practice, to say nothing of its relationship to lay piety. The work of Gregory of Sinai (d. 1346), a monk first on Sinai and then on Athos, who holds perhaps the greatest share of credit for propagating the movement of Hesychasm,⁵⁷ is also responsible for neutralizing its possible dangers vis-a-vis the Church by stressing the advanced nature of visionary experiences and the need of beginners to submit to experienced practitioners.⁵⁸ Through these caveats, Gregory addresses possible

51 Dykstra, 27.

52 David Goldfrank, “Recentering Nil Sorski: The Evidence from the Sources,” *Russian Review* 66, no. 2 (2007).

53 Tom Dykstra, *Russian Monastic Culture: “Josephism” and the Iosifo-Volokolamsk Monastery* (Munich: Verlag Otto Agner, 2006).

54 Goldfrank, 362.

55 Paert, 26.

56 Dykstra, 27.

57 This includes Slavdom. According to Kallistos Ware in *The Influence of 14th Century Hesychasm*, the monastery of Kilifarevo, “founded by Gregory’s Bulgarian disciple St. Theodosios of Turnovo, acted as a decisive center for the dissemination of Hesychasm in the Slav world.” (18)

58 Bolshakoff, xxii.

problems arising from an individualized religious practice that identifies as definitively Orthodox while in many cases circumventing the structures of authority in place.⁵⁹ While *The Ladder* and subsequent texts leading up to and including what is considered the Hesychast literary corpus stress the need for an elder and the practice of absolute obedience, this practice is not necessarily incompatible with such circumvention, in theory allowing one erring monk to lead another without the checks of the hierarchy. Equally threatening to the life of the Church was over-fixation on ecstatic visions and other mystical experiences, which threatened to obscure the importance of day-to-day sacramental life.

Gregory Palamas (d. 1360), also of Athos and a propagator of Hesychasm, did his part to reinforce the compatibility of Hesychasm with dogmatic theology in his arguments with the scholar Barlaam of Calabria, who accused the Eastern monks of heresy.⁶⁰ Demonstrating the validity of the Hesychast approach within the doctrine of the Trinity and the Fall, Gregory Palamas defended Hesychasm as a method for the fallen man to reunite with God and reconciled the Hesychast approach with the dogmatic teaching regarding the inaccessibility of God. It should be noted that Gregory's anthropology directly echoes that of John Chryssaugis in fact credits John with the first Eastern Orthodox articulation of anthropology, which the Fathers left ambiguous. John bases the endeavor of *The Ladder* on the premise that the body, directly related to God in the creation, seeks God in its natural condition.⁶¹ The body must thus be "converted into a means of relating to God."⁶² As Chryssaugis notes, "the theme of the glorified body is central to patristic and ascetic spirituality."⁶³ In definitively linking the doctrine of the glorified body to the mature practice of Hesychasm, Gregory's theological foundation for the practice was imposed on the Church at large, reinforcing its claims to a tradition traceable to the Fathers.⁶⁴ Without such grounding, the Hesychast movement was not likely to be established, let alone to gain a strong foothold in 14th century Russia.

Monastery Organization and Its Role

In the Russian context, we can see how the form of desert spirituality expounded by John Climacus both flourished and found itself construed as a threat throughout the development of Russian government and ecclesiastical administration. Until the 17th century, monasteries were not only the spiritual and cultural centers of Russian society, especially during the years of Mongol rule, but were also the centers of literacy in a society where even members of the nobility and the parish clergy could rarely read and write well into the modern period. Texts produced by monks and transmitted through teaching and preaching played a key role in shaping Russian "national self-consciousness," placing the role of the Russian Church in preserving "authentic" Orthodox tradition at its center as well as, increasingly in the 16th century, producing chronicles reflecting the ideological aspirations of princes.⁶⁵ As mentioned earlier, until the 14th century Russian

59 Krausmuller, 109.

60 Bolshakoff, 21.

61 Chryssaugis, 53.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Krausmuller, 124.

65 Dykstra, 9.

monasticism was varied in organizational approach, from idiorhythmic groups of monks living independently and coming together for certain rituals to strictly organized cenobitic communities under the authority of an abbot (*igumen*), with the idiorhythmic style being far more common.⁶⁶ Fundamental changes began in the 14th century with Sergius of Radonezh, who in 1345 founded the Trinity-Sergius monastery that would eventually become the largest and wealthiest in Russia. The monastery functioned idiorhythmically until 1356, and, as a teacher of disciples, Sergius was an important disseminator of hesychast practices, his activities constituting a culmination of the interest in “stillness” and the methods of contemplative prayer and mystical experience that were at the height of popularity in his time. Alongside his instruction of disciples in prayer, however, Sergius was instrumental in the movement towards greater organization in Russian monasticism. He transformed his community into a cenobitic monastery to the strong opposition of monks but with the approval of the hierarchy. Sergius’ transformation started a trend of idiorhythmic communities adopting cenobitic rule and the foundation of new cenobitic monasteries. As Tom E. Dykstra demonstrates in his monograph on “Josephism” and Russian monastic culture, resistance to cenobitic organization, including the departure of monks from formerly idiorhythmic communities, can be understood at least in part by the “democratization” of cenobitic life in terms of its expectations that everyone live and work in common, proving distasteful to higher-born monks.⁶⁷ As always seeking to inscribe current monastic practice into Church tradition, during the 14th and 15th centuries several compilations of the sayings of the Fathers were produced focusing on monastic obedience, no doubt reflecting the difficulties that were either anticipated or encountered by the hierarchs of the Church in their promotion of cenobitism. Nevertheless, sketes and other loosely organized communities continued to form.

Josif Volotsky is considered to be the heir of this over-arching cenobitic trend although, as already mentioned in the discussion of *The Ladder* as reflected in the works of Josif and Nil, scholars of Russian monasticism have demonstrated the misleading nature of dividing 16th century monasticism into warring camps of “possessors” and “non-possessors,” the latter represented by eremitism. Nevertheless, it is true that there was tension between the two monastic traditions even if its leaders were united on wider questions of Orthodoxy. Josif was a proponent of the right of monasteries (not monks) to own landed property, while the Transvolgan Elders, led by Nil, argued that there was no real difference between the two. But more importantly, their visions differed on the role of the monastery within the larger community. Josif’s support of monastic lands and property was rooted in the vision of a monastery as a charitable center, grounded in the tradition of Basil the Great. Nil’s rejection of monastic property was congruent with his vision of monasticism as an endeavor focused solely on personal salvation. Even if the root of the disagreement was at its base about the centrality or extent of the practice of contemplative prayer in a monk’s life, there is no question that Josif’s vision fit more closely with what the kingdom needed from the Church as a whole. In addition to ideological support, Moscow was able to use monasteries such as Josif’s for monetary support by confiscating their resources or for political support by sending prisoners to be forcibly tonsured.⁶⁸

What was at stake for the larger Church was not “possession” or “non-possession” as

66 Dykstra, 18.

67 Dykstra, 19.

68 Ibid..

such. The overarching concern was the future of Russian monasticism as a predominantly cenobitic or idiorhythmic institution and, on a larger scale, the role of monasticism in the Church and in the development of Russian society, with the lands of Rus' undergoing unification and centralization in the 15th century. The tension present between monasticism and the larger Church, which had accompanied the development of monasticism as a practice long before its introduction in Russia was, it seems to the author, primarily a tension about what it meant for the Christian to separate oneself from the world and the extent of the responsibility that the monk had to ecclesiastical hierarchy, to laity, and to the sovereign. Devotion to contemplative monasticism and “stillness”—which, as we have seen, was not absent from cenobiticism—would become conflated with eremitism or sketic life, which both threatened heresy and prevented monks from charitable activities as well as state-serving endeavors such as the composition of chronicles and the collection of donations and land taxes. Despite the interests of the Church, however, attempts to institutionalize cenobiticism as the standard monastic model were not wholly successful; as Scott Kenworthy points out in *Heart of Russia*, the idiorhythmic rule had again become dominant by the 17th century:

The idiorhythmic rule seems to have devolved from a skete rule, except that it no longer applied to a semi-eremitical form of monastic life but to large monasteries; according to this way of life, the monks could keep some personal property and sometimes owned their own cells and provided their own meals. Because of their relative independence, strict discipline became difficult to enforce. Despite repeated efforts to tackle this problem, it persisted not only throughout the eighteenth century but even until the Revolution.⁶⁹

These tensions are not surprising, as we cannot forget that the roots of Hesychasm lie with the “first hermits who fled into the barren deserts of Egypt and Syria during the 4th century.”⁷⁰ Moreover, by many accounts, the roots of monasticism lie in the reaction to the perceived worldly corruption of the Church that accompanied the legitimization of Christianity in late Roman society. While in the Russian context the initial popularity of Hesychasm as well as its “revival” in the 18th century correlates in both cases with a renewed interest in “roots” and “authenticity,” and the foundational works of Hesychasm are always cited as the locus of unbreakable tradition which Russian Christianity ostensibly strives to preserve and propagate. There exists a history of the evolution of these writings within the contexts of new interpretative strategies that exhibit a growing necessity to balance the goals of contemplative prayer with the demands of a hierarchically structured church.

The Golden Age of Russian Mysticism

When Paisii Velichkovsky (1722-1794), a name synonymous with the “golden age” of Russian mysticism, embarked on his monastic journey, his desire for the contemplative life by necessity took him outside of his native Ukraine, where according to tradition he rejected the Jesuit-inspired curriculum of the Kiev Mogila Academy, to Mt. Athos (1746) and eventually to Neamt, Moldavia (1763), where he established a thriving monastic

69 Scott M. Kenworthy, *The Heart of Russia: Trinity-Sergius, Monasticism and Society after 1825* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.

70 Maloney and Mina, 21.

community that boasted over 700 monks by the time of his death.⁷¹ Paisii spent his early monastic career on a search for the roots of Orthodoxy and his mature career as a spiritual authority in the practice of what he and his disciples considered “authentic” Eastern Christianity, which was inseparable from contemplative prayer. While still a novice in the Lubech monastery, he hand-copied *The Ladder*; he searched for, transcribed and translated ancient manuscripts to correct inaccurate Slavonic translations of the Fathers.⁷² Although Hesychasm was a forgotten spiritual practice on Athos by the 18th century, Paisii discovered patristic writings on prayer, including those of Basil the Great.

The fact that Paisii embraced Hesychasm as an integral part of authentic Orthodox monasticism at a time when it was neglected in Greece is, in the author’s view, vitally important for the “traditionalist” conceptualization of the revival of contemplative monasticism for several reasons. First, in the previous century the Nikonian reforms, which had precipitated a schism in the Russian Orthodox Church, were presented in the framework of traditionalism and returning to the roots of Orthodox Christianity by bringing “corrupted” Russian ritual and liturgy in line with the Greek. As many works concerning the schism have demonstrated, the reforms met with a great deal of resistance not only because they explicitly anathematized Russian Orthodox traditions and condemned accepted practices as heretical, but more vitally because Russian Orthodoxy had, since the Council of Florence and the fall of Constantinople, come to be conceptualized in ecclesiastical literature, sermons and, accordingly, in the minds of the faithful, as the guardian of authentic Orthodoxy in contrast to the Greeks, who had themselves become “corrupted” and experienced divine wrath as a result. Paisii’s position here is two-sided. In a sense, Paisii’s work does not affirm the existence of a gulf between Greek and Russian practice either as it was expressed by reformers or by the Old Believers. On the one hand, his focus on original sources and his translation and dissemination of books from Athos echoed the already established practice of using Greek texts to get at the “essence” of Orthodoxy which had become “clouded,” either by the “ineptitude” of Russian clergy and scribes, as Nikon and his supporters would have it, or by the creeping influence of scholasticism and other Catholic trends, as Paisii and his disciples held. On the other hand, Paisii’s work to revive Hesychasm hearkens back to a flourishing age of Russian monasticism and mysticism and, perhaps more importantly, cultivates a form of monasticism that was, in fact, preserved in Russia even throughout the 17th century, albeit in increasingly smaller and less visible communities or as a de-emphasized component of cenobitic life, as we see in Josif’s widespread *Rule*.⁷³

Paisii was forced to leave Russia in his search of “authentic” Orthodoxy as the result of a range of forces generally grouped under the heading “Westernization” and, more concretely in the 17th and 18th centuries, “Petrine reforms.” In the Church, the reforms were preceded by the growing influence of Jesuit scholasticism on Orthodox education, first in Kiev and then in Moscow, originally rooted in fears of Russian conversions to the Roman Church in the Slavic borderlands between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. The new

71 Simon Dixon, “The Russian Orthodox Church in Imperial Russia 1721-1917,” in *Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 5: Eastern Christianity*, ed. Michael Angold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 339.

72 Paert, 35.

73 Of the 220 monasteries that were founded in Russia in 17th century, some, such as the Zelenetsky Monastery founded by St. Martirius, continued the monastic life prescribed by Nil Sorsky, in which “stillness” and contemplative prayer were the focus.

approach to Orthodox education greatly de-emphasized the Fathers and aimed to arm the Orthodox believer with a defense against the “heretical” reasoning of Catholics, a task that had little to do with cultivating a contemplative practice. Likewise, the very existence of these new centers of Orthodox education were demonstrative of an integral social role for monks, who had formed brotherhoods for the establishment of the academies and presses; such monks had taught Paisii at the Kiev-Mohila Academy and, as mentioned, according to tradition their “corrupt” Latin theology had sent him to Athos.

Suppression of Monasteries

It was during Peter’s reign that the tension between contemplative monasticism and the demands of the contemporary Church in terms of its social role became a full-blown conflict. The leading religious legislator of Peter’s era, Feofan Prokopovich (1681-1736), himself educated at the Kiev-Mohila Academy and subsequently in Poland and Rome, declared contemplative monasticism to be antithetical to the needs of the state and gave expression to Peter’s conviction that monks—but especially hermits, ascetics and mystics—served no useful purpose in society. Prokopovich also warned that hermeticism posed spiritual dangers, isolating the individual from proper teaching and guidance, and the law treated hermits as potentially dangerous leaders of dissent.⁷⁴ The Supplement to the Ecclesiastical Regulation, which imposed the cenobitic rule on all Russian monasteries, dictated that no monastery should have fewer than thirty monks, decreed that monks would not be allowed to build hermitages in the wilderness, and forbade the formation of new monastic communities without express permission from the Synod, all measures to combat anchoritic and sketic monasticism as well as to limit the growth of monastic ranks as a whole.⁷⁵

Because monasteries were sites of dissent against the reforms, they also became sites of state suppression. Laws against freedom of movement and against the keeping of pens and paper were instituted to prevent monks and nuns from fomenting discontent and, in practice, relegated monks to the status of non-privileged groups such as serfs.⁷⁶ The 1721 Ecclesiastical Regulation and subsequent decrees aimed to centralize the monasteries and limit the growth of the monastic ranks as much as possible. Between 1724 and 1738, the span of fourteen years, the number of monks and nuns dropped almost 50 percent, from 25,207 to 14,282.⁷⁷

In 1764, Catherine II expropriated the monastic lands and their peasants, abolishing an additional 496 houses.⁷⁸ Those monasteries that remained struggled to fill their ranks due to the extreme restrictions on tonsure. Nevertheless, throughout the 18th century “unsanctioned or semi-legal” monasteries of various sorts continuously appeared, in some cases as conscious protest.⁷⁹ As mentioned in the introduction, the paradoxical outcome of the suppression of monasticism was that it began to attract only the most devout postulants. As Scott Kenworthy observes in *The Heart of Russia: Trinity-Sergius, Monasticism, and Society after 1825*,

74 Paert, 48.

75 Kenworthy, 15.

76 Paert, 42.

77 Dixon, 338.

78 Ibid.

79 Paert, 48.

By confiscating their estates and depriving the monasteries of their wealth, and by curtailing the number of monks, Catherine had ensured that those who were drawn to the monastery came for different reasons than in the past. If the monasteries had remained feudal landowners into the nineteenth century, they would likely have been as much the objects of popular resentment as of veneration, but they were largely free of popular anticlericalism because of Catherine's reforms. Monasteries drew their support and their recruits mostly from commoners, and these changes helped to reinvent monasticism as an institution in the social and economic landscape of the nineteenth century by foregrounding its withdrawal from the world and primarily spiritual nature.⁸⁰

Monastic Reform

Like their predecessors, Paisii and his followers were anxious to inscribe themselves into Christian Orthodox monastic tradition and to portray their activity as one of the revival of an unchanging tradition that had been neglected or forgotten, a goal accomplished by the "copying, translation, publication and dissemination of 'forgotten' ancient and medieval texts" and the "introduction of 'forgotten' forms of spiritual guidance," especially eldership.⁸¹ However, the cultural conditions of Russian Orthodoxy at this time resulted in a fundamental disagreement over "ownership," as it were, of Church tradition and anxieties on the part of Synodal authorities regarding the appropriate role of elders and of mystical texts and practices vis-a-vis ecclesiastical hierarchy and the ordered sacramental life of the Christian. Even Peter, an unabashed reformer, cast his criticism of contemplative monasticism in traditionalist terms: In a decree in 1701, he used the rhetoric of tradition and corruption, stating that "ancient monks were industrious, produced their food with their own hands ... and fed many poor from their own hands," while contemporary monks who not only did not work, but relied on the labor of others.⁸² Generally, however, it was under the banner of reform and Westernization, rather than traditionalism, that the suppression of monasticism was carried out, both by Peter and by subsequent monarchs in the 18th century.

By the end of the 18th century, however, a traditionalist "reorientation" was beginning to take place, marked by a growing antipathy towards the "Latinizing" trends of the Kievan academies and their proponents. In 1815 the Jesuits were banned from Moscow and St. Petersburg, and in 1820 they were forbidden to enter the empire altogether.⁸³ The reign of Alexander I (1801-25), while seeing a proliferation of "fashionable mysticism that blurred denominational distinctions under the umbrella of universal Christianity" among the aristocracy, also witnessed a more widespread hostility towards these challenges or alternatives to dogmatic Orthodoxy.⁸⁴ Many Russian monks who had emigrated to Moldavia to join Paisii's community returned during Alexander I's reign, when state policy toward monasticism had changed, bringing back to Russia the principles of contemplative

80 Kenworthy, 4.

81 Paert, 7.

82 Kenworthy, 15.

83 Dixon, 329.

84 Ibid.

prayer and reviving (or reinventing, as the case may be) the institution of eldership.⁸⁵

The work of Paisii and his disciples ushered in a new generation of monks seeking the revived ideals of contemplative prayer. Yet there was undoubtedly a reinvention occurring as well. The Optina Pustyn monastery, which was revived at the end of the 18th century after having fallen into ruin under Catherine, became both the focal point of the new Russian contemplative monasticism and a spiritual center for laity.⁸⁶ Perhaps even more than in the pre-modern period, the monastery in the early 19th century was becoming “the locus par excellence of encounter with the divine.”⁸⁷ Between 1808 and 1861, monasteries and religious communities again spread throughout Russia, with a 77 percent increase in the number of monks, nuns and novices.⁸⁸ As McGuckin convincingly argues in *The Life and Mission of St. Paisii Velichkovsky*, perhaps Paisii’s greatest achievement, for our purposes, was his work to reconcile cenobitic monasticism with contemplative prayer after a perceived artificial divide had solidified between them in contemporary Russian monasticism, working to “bring the lifestyles more closely back together; as distinctive, but not separate, spiritual paths.”⁸⁹ Like Gregory of Sinai before him, Paisii was careful to anticipate and answer accusations of hereticism. He stressed the fulfillment of the official structure of daily prayer and labor, but his focus was on the constant life of the Jesus Prayer that transcended all else. Although Paisii himself rejected the notion of “social usefulness” for a monastery, resisting attempts to involve his community in teaching or charity work, his legacy was the new Russian monastery of the 19th century, in which practitioners of contemplative prayer came to guide laymen and revive interest in Patristic writings among the faithful, the latter also a direct result of Paisii’s translation of the *Philokalia*.

It is thus the work of Paisii that can perhaps be most directly traced to the production of the *Lankton Codex*, a manuscript that signals the continued demand for the original sources of the methods of contemplative prayer and spiritual self-perfection in the early 19th century monastery two centuries after the Fathers began to fade from focus in mainstream Russian Orthodox theology. Its production represents a new era of Russian monasticism, one in which Westernization, secularization and modernization not only coexisted with flourishing monastic communities but in which these communities and their leaders actively informed literary, philosophical, and political trends.

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85 Paert, 52.

86 Laura Engelstein, *Slavophile Empire: Imperial Russia's Illiberal Path* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 110.

87 Kenworthy, 6.

88 Paert, 74

89 John A McGuckin, “The Life and Mission of St. Paisius Velichkovsky. An Early Modern Master of the Orthodox Spiritual Life.” *Spiritus* 9, no. 2 (2009):170.

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